

VU Research Portal

Forward to the Past: a Study of the Development of the Liberal Arts in the Context of Confessional Lutheran Education with Special Reference to a Contemporary Application of Liberal Education

Korcok, T.J.

2009

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Korcok, T. J. (2009). *Forward to the Past: a Study of the Development of the Liberal Arts in the Context of Confessional Lutheran Education with Special Reference to a Contemporary Application of Liberal Education*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. Eigen Beheer.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Abstract

In 1847, under the guidance of Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (1811-1887), 14 congregations joined together to form *Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio, und andern Staaten*. This synod became the progenitor of the largest protestant school system in North America. It could be argued that the founding theologians of the Missouri Synod gave more thought and attention to the nature of the liberal arts and its place in the theology of the confessional Lutheran church than did any other group of theologians since the time of the Reformation. Without a doubt, Walther was most influential in this regard.

This dissertation argues that Walther, along with other 19th-century Lutherans, attempted to create a unique pedagogical model that would meet their theological and sociological needs by developing a confessional liberal arts curriculum to serve the Lutheran church in America. While their work is the central focus of this dissertation, it is important to realize that much of their inspiration came from Lutheran pedagogues of the early 16th century. Martin Luther (1483-1546), Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558), and Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560) were all extremely influential in shaping the American Lutherans' understanding of the arts.

At the same time, the 16th-century Lutheran educators understood themselves as part of an ancient, living tradition that employed liberal arts in religious schools. And so, as Walther and his associates drew inspiration from Luther and his contemporaries, they were also tapping into a history of thought that extended back to Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

In order to properly evaluate Walther's work, it is important to understand the historical context in which he worked; therefore the dissertation begins with a brief historical overview of their development, first under early Christian pedagogues such as Augustine, and then under the northern European humanists of the late 15th and early 16th century. Special attention is given to Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) who is representative of that group.

Having established the influence of the earlier educators on the 16th-century Lutherans, the dissertation then examines the specific theological concerns of the 16th-century Evangelicals as it related to education: namely, the doctrines of baptism, vocation, and catechesis. The dissertation then explores some of the curricular changes that these Lutheran educators proposed in order to bring it in line with the aims of Evangelical theology.

Based on this historical survey, the following definition is established: A confessional liberal arts curriculum is a fluid, theologically based model in which the most essential arts of the liberal arts – grammar, logic and rhetoric – served to give students the necessary tools to discover divine knowledge and truth. It is to this definition that the work of Walther and others is compared.

Walther came of age in Saxony at a time when Rationalism dominated the established theological and educational institutions, and Pietism was popular with university students and the laity. Like most of his associates, Walther had direct involvement with both of these movements. He received his Rationalistically oriented education; but, while at university, he became involved in a fervent Pietist conventicle. However, there was a third movement that, in time, would exert the greatest influence on Walther and his group – Neo-confessionalism which sought to reinstitute what was considered to be the pure teachings of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. The dissertation examines the influence of these theologies on Walther's group and discusses the role that they played in the group's decision to emigrate to America. It concludes that, while the Saxons had relative theological freedom in their congregations, they did not enjoy the same freedom in the schools. In the classroom, their Pietistic and Confessional convictions caused conflict with school officials who were influenced by Rationalism. The Confessionals perceived that true Lutheranism could not thrive without a supportive educational model. Thus, their decision to emigrate was, in large part, motivated by a desire to establish a new confessional curriculum.

Prior to the arrival of these Saxons in America, there was a well-established system of Lutheran schools in the United States, particularly in states with a large German population such as Pennsylvania. Established according to

Pietistic ideals, these schools developed largely as a result of the work of Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg (1711-1787) and the Pennsylvania Ministerium. A brief historical survey determines that their pedagogical model was found wanting by Walther's group because of a lack of commitment to Confessional Lutheranism and the liberal arts.

Walther's group arrived in St. Louis, Missouri in 1839 and promptly established schools that would support their confessional theology. In time, this group would include educators and theologians such as Friedrich Conrad Dietrich Wyneken (1810-1881), Wilhelm Sihler (1801-1885) and Johann Christoph Wilhelm Lindemann (1827-1879). The group formed *Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio, und andern Staaten* (or "Missouri Synod") and soon had a sizable network of elementary, secondary and post-secondary institutions. The development of these schools necessitated an educational philosophy for which the American theologians turned to Luther and other approved orthodox Lutheran theologians in order to establish a version of an Evangelical liberal arts curriculum that was appropriate to the environment of 19th-century America. In its analysis of this curriculum, this dissertation first examines how the particular relevant doctrines – baptism, vocation and catechesis – shaped the Missouri Lutheran's understanding of the liberal arts. It then compares this conception with that of their 16th century counterparts. Finally, the dissertation analyzes the Confessionalists' treatment of various subjects – specifically, languages, literature, music and the sciences – and concludes that, while there were distinct differences between the curriculum produced by the Evangelicals of the 16th century and that of the 19th century, both groups understood the arts in essentially the same way. The arts provided a theologically based model of education that could be changed to meet the prevailing educational needs of the time in which they lived, while remaining a guide to divine truth. The study also looks at some of the deficiencies in the Missourians' curriculum, including their inability to fully incorporate the sciences into the daily curriculum, and the fact that their understanding of catechesis was more influenced by Pietism than they realized.

With a historical survey of the Evangelical arts curriculum completed, the dissertation then examines its viability in a contemporary classroom. Attention is given to a movement among some religious educators to institute a model of education called “Classical Education”. While this model presents some interesting concepts, much more study is required in order to determine whether this indeed meets the criteria for a true liberal arts program.

Currently, liberal education, the descendant of the liberal arts tradition, is one of the dominant paradigms in educational research. This paradigm seems to be the most distinct from Lutheran views on education; therefore, it is important to investigate the central concepts and educational claims to determine if they are indeed as opposed as they seem to be. For Evangelical educators to have a relevant voice in pedagogical discourse, it is essential that they be prepared to address these concerns. Thus some key themes of liberal education are analyzed in light of the Confessional understanding of the arts. The dissertation compares the chief aim of Liberal Education – autonomy – with Lutheran Confessionalism to see if these two systems are mutually exclusive. It then examines the Lutheran understanding of catechesis to discover if it should be regarded as an agent of, or defender against, indoctrination. The conclusion is that, properly understood, Evangelical pedagogy is not only compatible with liberal education, but, in many ways, essential for the development of a healthy sense of individual autonomy.

Finally, the dissertation briefly explores the incorporation of modern day subjects into a contemporary version of a confessional liberal arts curriculum. This includes an exploration of the roles given to modern and ancient languages, the inclusion of the modern sciences, and the relevancy of the historic trivium: that is grammar, logic and rhetoric.