Introduction

Cultural and Religious Life Before the Reformation

The years during which the young Melanchthon's basic views took shape were filled with those currents of Western cultural life which mark the end of the Middle Ages. These streams, which ran side by side and frequently mingled with one another, were the aftereffects of the great Scholastic systems, of the various mystical and ascetic tendencies, and of the German humanism with which they were in contact.

Long past was the age when men approached the church's doctrine with boldness and verve, and tried to establish its foundations before the forum of reason. No longer did men seek proofs of their truth and correctness. It was clear that faith and knowledge did not lie on the same plane. The achievements of medieval dialectics had long since advanced beyond this initial stage. Scholasticism had also promoted doubt and had produced other solutions than those which the church's doctrine demanded. True, the followers of Thomas Aquinas attempted to maintain his world-embracing system, but for the most part they contented themselves with a narrower theme. Their attempted unification of ecclesiastical doctrine and Aristotelian philosophy could not withstand the critique of a Duns Scotus. The acute Englishman had shaken men's

confidence in ecclesiastical science and its results. The church could not prevent Scotists from appearing side by side with Thomists at the universities, and it had to concede them equal rights. Although Thomas wished to derive everything from the intellect, Scotus on the contrary regarded the divine will as the source from which all things proceed. He no longer acknowledged governing laws controlling the world. Even God's will is known only where he wishes it to be known. The harmony of thought and being is dissolved. Advancing along the same lines as Scotus, his fellow countryman and fellow Franciscan, William of Ockham had shaken realism still more, and had made it clear to his contemporaries that the doctrine of the church cannot be proved on the basis of reason, but can only be believed.

Scholasticism had dominated not only theology but all intellectual life. Its methods, its art of dialectics, prevailed in all realms in the universities and schools. Submission to the church's doctrine was demanded of each field of knowledge. Scientific endeavor was not allowed to oppose it, but had to seek conformity with it. If Scholasticism, on the one hand, gave the church a consciousness of decisive power, on the other hand, it also was destined to undermine this foundation. No one dared to renounce the church's doctrine, even if many a person felt it as a fetter upon his mind. Thus we see the Scholasticism of the waning Middle Ages accommodating itself to human abilities, and on its own initiative restricting its earlier positions.

An attempt was made in Cologne and Heidelberg at the turn of the century to revive the great traditions and to prove Thomism the dominant school. "The Old Way" (*via antiqua*), however, could not prevail in the face of nominalism with its more modern critique of knowledge.

Cologne theologians from the Dominican Order, of whom Konrad Köllin is representative, tried to promote exclusively the teaching of their order's theologian, and other universities, such as the recently founded one at Frankfurt an der Oder, through the person of Konrad Wimpina, joined in these efforts. Most of the German schools, however, allowed both parties to exist side by side, in spite of this restoration movement. The newly revived Thomism was unable to bring forth new life. Only the antithetical views were occasionally sharpened. Hence, at several universities the adherents of each party were lodged in a special house (*bursa*) in order to stop the battle of opinions among the students. Nevertheless, at the end of the Middle Ages the rivalry of philosophical views was a feature of the German university, as it was customarily depicted, especially by Wimpfeling and other humanists.

In Tübingen, where Melanchthon attended theological lectures, he was stimulated by Ockhamism. These influences, however, were limited chiefly to psychology. The leading representative of this party, Jacob Lemp, was unable to impart to his students anything for their life, and he was regarded by them with a little pity. His dogmatic deductions impressed a Melanchthon as trivialities. The one thing that Melanchthon remembered from the lecture room of Lemp, and later recounted to his students, was the fact that the professor attempted to explain on a blackboard the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation. This recollection Melanchthon narrated with ironical remarks. To the preceptor of Germany, Lemp was the embodiment of Scholastic science: old, stunted, dead in its dry formalism. It seemed no longer equal to the life of the new age, so that men turned away from it, and instead emulated those who could offer worthy goals for life.

Melanchthon's parents had reared him in strict conformity to the church. The ideas of Geiler of Kaisersberg, the celebrated preacher of the Strassburg Cathedral, had influenced his family. Geiler's sermons were read, and they strongly affected the behavior of the members of the family. In spite of his Scholastic schooling, Geiler knew the world, and he had a taste for that piety which was touched by the *Devotio Moderna* (Modern Devotion). His sermons stirred both head and heart. Contemporaries who sought the genuine and the true were receptive to them. This pious attitude coupled itself with a natural outlook and searched for a secure way through life. Geiler had also espoused the cause of ecclesiastical reforms, and like his friend the city clerk, Sebastian Brant, had sharply criticized conditions in the church. We see how deeply Melanchthon was attached to him during his early years from the fact that in 1510, on the death of the famous preacher, he composed a Latin poem, which is characteristic not only of the youthful student but also of the intellectual milieu in which he was growing up.

At the university, Melanchthon did not become acquainted with ecclesiastical learning at its best. This had long since passed its prime, and only here and there did it show a modest late bloom. Scarcely any significant exponents of the church's doctrine were still to be found. True, in Heidelberg the young Melanchthon had the opportunity of making the acquaintance of an amiable representative of Scholasticism in the person of his housefather, Pallas Spangel, and in Tübingen he walked in the footsteps of " the last Scholastic," Gabriel Biel. The latter's theology had a mild, conciliatory tone, but it did not succeed in pointing out new ways and goals. Nothing about the current forms was upset; his intent was simply to gain from them an intrinsic meaning and to give them a deeper inter-

pretation. Biel contented himself with preserving the tradition, cultivating the pious spirit, and striving after the original meaning of ideas.

With the mystical tendencies that in many places attempted to deepen theology and church life, Melanchthon obviously had no connections. Although Gabriel Biel in his old age had joined the Brethren of the Common Life and tried to introduce their way of life in Württemberg, similar efforts were not known in the Palatinate. Nor does it seem likely that young Master Philip was led along this path in Tübingen. Moreover, his older friend, Ambrose Blaurer, at this time joined not the Brethren but the Benedictines in Alpirsbach. The Modern Devotion with its Lower Rhenish character was not particularly popular in Upper Germany. The once significant mystical circles of the highlands had no influence any longer. The Friends of God plodded along in quiet inwardness, without further pondering the great thoughts of their founders. For the most part they were satisfied with rigorous admonitions in the manner of the "imitation of Christ," which afforded them support and comfort. This mood indeed brought fulfillment to some individuals, but no longer set great movements afoot. Important figures no longer arose in their midst. Only in attenuated fashion did the mystical mood persist in the broad strata of the populace, in Beguine houses, brotherhoods, and monasteries. Here, men continued to strive for an emotional, warm sincerity. But while Luther was later moved deeply by the sermons of Tauler and by the writing of the Frankfurt author, which he named "A German Theology," we hear of nothing similar from Melanchthon. On the way which he traveled, he did not come into contact with this world of spiritualization and inwardness.

Instead, his great-uncle, the famous humanist John

Reuchlin, had directed him toward other influences. Reuchlin apparently was familiar with the intimate questions in the mind of his grand-nephew. He referred him to Wessel Gansfort, whom he himself had once known in Paris and Basel. The latter maintained a critical attitude toward the church. He was prepared to regard the layman as highly as the priest and to concede authority to the word of Scripture alone. This critic, who closed his restless itinerant life with the Brethren in Deventer, had once affected Reuchlin strongly. Reuchlin also knew Nicholas of Cusa from his writings, and he had been with Gabriel Biel in Italy. The free attitude of Wessel Gansfort, and of his friend Rudolf Agricola, had imparted itself to Reuchlin. Their type of piety was thoroughly congenial to him. In Upper Germany others besides himself had adopted this outlook. Reuchlin now directed his model pupil Melanchthon to this piety. Though he allowed the lad to read only Wessel's writings, the older religious humanism nevertheless bore its fruit here.

During the very years when Melanchthon entered the world of scholarship, Reuchlin's controversy with the Cologne theologians ran its course. Although the converted Jew, John Pfefferkorn, demanded that the rabbis hand over the Hebrew sacred writings, especially the Talmud, Reuchlin had voiced his opposition in a memorandum. The controversy dragged out over many years, since both parties found supporters. There followed a legal action in Mainz and Speyer before the ecclesiastical court, and the publication of acts and opinions. The high point of this controversy was reached with Reuchlin's *Letters of Obscure Men,* published in 1515, in which the Cologne adversaries of Reuchlin were brought into ridicule in a caricature of the monks' Latin. The entire educated world of

that day burst into laughter over Cologne's obscurantism. Reuchlin was the man of the hour. Understandably, Melanchthon stood at his side.

He owed it chiefly to Reuchlin that the world of humanism was opened to him. To be sure, he did not hold to the ways of Reuchlin. Erasmus meant more to him. Throughout his life the young humanist confessed himself grateful to Erasmus. He felt a sense of liberation to be led by Erasmus to an outlook which he could enjoy. Erasmian humanism was built upon the foundation of the Sermon on the Mount. In his *Manual of a Christian Soldier* (1501), the prince of the humanists had set down and confirmed his position. No longer confined by the Scholastic pattern, he was able to unfold his ideas freely. The older German humanists, of course, had also made a contribution in opening up new paths, but Erasmus was the first to throw open the door for all. Through him the new realms of knowledge were made accessible. With him men returned not only to the old, but also to the simple and natural. In connection with scholarship, education came strongly to the fore. Erasmus had succeeded in winning the younger generation for a new ideal of scholarship. It devoured his writings and followed his guidance not only to imitate the ancients in beautiful style but also to gain new contents. Now the German humanist could compete with the Italian. Now he had something of his own to offer, after Alexander Hegius, Rudolf Agricola, and finally Reuchlin had pioneered in this direction. In part through Erasmus' influence, the German humanist was shaped to a considerable degree by a religious outlook, though this characteristic was noticeable at the same time also in Italy and England.

It must not be overlooked that German humanism in its

initial stage had close contact with the earnest way of life of the Brethren of the Common Life. Under the influence of this spirit several German universities were founded and regulated; aggressive men succeeded in putting through many of its demands. For decades, it is true, the "poets" had to fight with the "barbarians and sophists," before they could claim the final victory. The majority of them devoted themselves chiefly to education, and emphasized knowledge of the Bible and a moral life. Agricola had already succeeded in making the thought relevant: "Only the Holy Scriptures can lead us on a safe, reliable, proper way. They drive away every cloud, and they allow no one who follows their guidance to be deceived or destroyed."

Erasmus, however, was the first to gain widespread authority through his writing. He was often asked for advice, and he was able to exert influence on the political and ecclesiastical situation. Not only directly, but also through his numerous pupils and followers, he wielded power throughout all Europe. This influence stood in sharp contrast to his outward appearance. A short, timid man, always worried about his health, he nevertheless contrived to become a dominant power everywhere. He was frankly acknowledged as the spokesman of his age; he sensed the secret thoughts of his contemporaries; he furthered their desires and clothed their endeavors in proper form. If he was a man of piety, on the one hand, he left, on the other, the widest possible room for reason. He called his contemporaries back to clarity from everything extravagant and exaggerated. His brilliant style was a means to put across important ideas for the advancement of education and of life. Nothing escaped his sharp observation. Like other humanists, he often pointed out the

abuses in the church. He ridiculed the work saints as " the new race of Judah," and strove to set up over against them his new ideal for man. Pure Christianity, the " philosophy of Christ," was based on the Sermon on the Mount. The ballast of tradition should be dropped in order that the original teaching of Christ and the apostles might shine forth. Erasmus pointed again and again to the Scriptures, for whose scientific study he created the foundation and whose interpretation he defined in his *Paraphrases.* True, in this effort he often failed to advance beyond pallid generalities, so that many regarded him as a mere stylist who had no conviction of his own. On most men, however, he knew how to impress the thought that the supreme happiness of all human beings is the cultivation of the mind, and the moral behavior that follows from it. Erasmus was the cultural aristocrat who felt a call to arouse the few and to lead them to truth. Melanchthon considered himself fortunate during his Tübingen period to receive personal recognition from Erasmus. Like all his companions of the same age, he was at first an Erasmian. In his attitude toward the church, of course, the traditional training from his home also played a role, but increasingly the religious outlook represented by Erasmus became his own. Like the majority of his generation, he regarded even Luther as in line with Erasmus. We do not know how he received Luther's Ninety-five Theses or whether he read Luther's tracts with the same excitement as Martin Bucer and John Brentz did. Nor do we hear why he did not rush to the Heidelberg Disputation. Apparently the distance between Luther and him was still great, and could be overcome only gradually.