

# Erasmus

*Robert M. Thornton*

THERE ARE GREAT FIGURES in history we delight in reading about but might not enjoy as houseguests. One exception about whom Henrik Van Loon wrote about so charmingly in his *Lives*, is Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). Of all the outstanding personalities in Reformation history, he is by far the most appealing. This Dutch priest and scholar, unlike his contemporaries, carried his religion lightly but nonetheless seriously. He "was the cultivated man with a wide range of interests," but he was also the Christian man ready to "sacrifice the rounding out of his personality in order to meet the needs of his fellows." For his fellow scholars, Erasmus was "the exponent of the fusion of the Christian man and the cultivated man, the foe of the barbarians, of the logic choppers, of the stolid legalists. He was the prophet of simplicity, urbanity, and piety."

Erasmus is, of course, not so well known as the other great figures of the Reformation. But even before Martin Luther appeared on the scene in the early sixteenth century, Erasmus had for some years been speaking out about the shortcomings of the church and the decline in true Christian living among both lay folk and clergy.

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ROBERT M. THORNTON is a retired businessman who serves as *Honorable Secretary of The Nockian Society*.

However, when both sides in the Reformation vainly sought his favor and open support, he refused to come out unequivocally for either party. Consequently, he was denounced as a heretic or as a coward. After his death in 1536, when strong feelings had subsided, he once again was embraced by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. But Erasmus is not the kind of man who may be claimed as the exclusive property of any organization. "I tried to find out," wrote one of his contemporaries, "whether Erasmus of Rotterdam was adherent of the party, but a certain merchant said to me: 'Erasmus stands alone.'" Newton B. Baker, in his Introduction to *The Letters and Journals of Brand Whitlock*, wrote that Erasmus, witty, charming, cultured to his fingertips, "never could quite make up his mind in the controversy between Luther and Rome and would have been disposed to quote Shakespeare's phrase, if it had been written in time, 'a plague on both your houses.'" Apparently, Erasmus was so made that he preferred to "fight with both extremes rather than espouse either."

Erasmus's dream was a return to the early Christianity of practice, not of opinion, where the church would no longer insist on particular forms of belief and hence men would cease to hate and slaughter each other because they differed on points of theology. To Erasmus,

religion meant purity and justice and mercy, with the keeping of moral commandments, and to him these Graces were not the privilege of any particular creed.

Erasmus helped to produce a new birth in the life of Europe for he had a kindling power which set alight persons who were to become saints and transmitters of new life. Although he himself was neither mystic nor saint, his greatest influence was on the lives and writings of that remarkable group of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century men called Spiritual Reformers, who scorned the emphasis on ritual and dogma to the exclusion of true religion. As one of them, Hans Denck, wrote, "There is no salvation to be found, which does not involve a change in heart, a new attitude of will, an awakened and purified inner self."

This statement echoes Erasmus's insistence that in the Christian experience something had to happen to a man's heart and mind. Another member of this group, Sebastian Franck, declared that "the true Church is not a separate mass of people, not a particular sect to be pointed out with the finger, not confirmed to one time or one place. It is rather a spiritual and invisible body of all members of Christ, born of God, of one mind, spirit, and faith, but not gathered [*i.e.*, organized] in any one external city. It is a Fellowship, which only a spiritual eye would see. It is the assembly and communion of all truly God-fearing, good-hearted, newborn persons in the world, both together by the Holy Spirit in the peace of God and the bonds of love."

Erasmus had the vision of an inward religion and he wanted to offer a corrective for what he had come to see as the common error of all those who were turning religion into empty ceremonialism. He believed that religion consists primarily not of outward signs and devotions but of the inward love of God and neighbor. He urged that the essential dogmas of Christianity be reduced to as few as pos-

sible, thus leaving opinion free of the rest. If we want truth, he said, every man ought to be free to say what he thinks without fear; and wherever you encounter truth, look upon it as Christianity. If Protestantism may be defined as a claim to liberty for the individual to reach his own conclusions about religion in his own way and express them freely without interference, Erasmus was in this sense closer to Protestantism than many who are now assigned the mantle.

Erasmus realized that waging the Christian battle required vigor of mind more than intensity of feeling. Detesting fanaticism and bigotry, as do reasonable and cultivated men of all ages, he rejected the either/or zealotry and passion; in his work there is an awareness that truth must be sought in humility. While many men of his time were concerned with proving that their adversaries were wicked or heretical, Erasmus, ever sensitive to the human situation, was concerned with *winning* others to piety and to Christ. He was convinced that neither side in any argument can completely express the truth, and he did not suffer the delusion which makes a man feel he can at one blow destroy all that is bad upon this earth. "Old institutions," he said, "cannot be rooted up in an instant, and quiet argument may do more than wholesale condemnation."

His primary concern was "the reform of Christian life and practice in the Church": to reveal the sham and hypocrisy of human affairs, and to recall men to their higher folly of which St. Paul speaks, "the folly of the Christian." He does this "with the wit, irony and the guile of a mischievous jester," laughing at humbug: "his perfect clearness and ease of expression, his liveliness, wit, imagination, gusto and humor have lent a charm to all he wrote...." Though aware of "the limitations of human learning," he insisted that "it is knowledge, not ignorance, that will reveal God's truth and God's way." The goal was to fuse the culture of classical times with the

sound virtues of Christianity, as they had originally been preached “unto the disciplines of Christ himself.” He wished to “bring clarity and frankness into the realm of thought.” And he believed that the quality of what you know is more important than how much you know. It is “better to understand a simple verse of the psalms,” and “by this means to deepen one’s understanding of God and oneself, and to draw a moral and a line of conduct from it, than to read the whole Psalter without attention.”

For Erasmus, “the only valid goal of the Christian faith was one which reciprocal martyrdoms would not reach.” Many of those willing to be burned for their cause were much more willing to burn others for it. The things Erasmus strove for could not be reached by the route of martyrdom; still less by making martyrs. “If his life did not furnish another example of supreme self-sacrifice and heroism, still less did it have in it anything vulgar, or angry.”

“His eyelids, veiling his eyes demurely, do not keep him from keen vision, but only from fierce glances; his mouth is curved in kindly irony, which is perhaps the ripest of all moods in which poor humanity can look at itself.” This is the face of a man with the power of seeing things as they are, without the cynicism of many keen students of the human situation. Roland Bainton has written:

As I compare his portrait with that of Sir Thomas More, I find that More’s face is the one on which I love to look for occasional inspiration, but Erasmus’s is the face of the man I should prefer to live with. More would die for his faith and would have you punished for yours; Erasmus would be companionable and chatty and courteous and tolerant even to an infidel. What anecdotes the man could tell, what pictures he could call up, what wit he could scintillate! And, above all, how much one might have learned from him, both in matters of mere erudition and in the conduct of life!

Erasmus, then, practiced what has been called “a kind of ‘low-tension’ Christianity.” Unfortunately, there are relatively few who can understand a person whose “faith may indeed be so real, so present, and so homely, that one jests with and about it, as if it were a friend or a brother.” Erasmus, Bainton emphasizes,

Bids us hold our convictions with some lightness, and to add grace to life. Our best work will be done in a critical spirit, which turns upon ourselves and itself the same keen gaze and feasting irony with which it views the world. We like to think that some such spirit informs our universities. But it belongs also to this spirit not to talk about itself. Perhaps too much has been said already.

The Erasmian concept of reform was a scholar’s conception, which in his day and in ours is “set aside by ruder and more drastic methods,” although it seems likely the slow way is in the long run the surest and that culture is the best agent of human progress. Although reform in the manner and temper of an Erasmus is usually cast aside, “his word of moderation and kindness did not pass by unheard or undeeded on either side.” And “the ground irrigated by his spirit bloomed with a freedom of thought not found elsewhere.” The Erasmian will never be successful in any worldly way, but he can perform that very necessary task of leaving society with the Spirit as one of the remnant:

Even that which in the concrete world can never be victorious remains in that other as a dynamic force, and unfulfilled ideals often prove the most unconquerable. An idea, which does not take on material shape is not necessarily a conquered idea or a false idea; it may represent a need which, though its gratification be postponed, is and remains a need. Nay, more: An ideal which, because it has failed to secure embodiment in action, is neither worn out nor compressed in any way, continues to work as a ferment in

subsequent generations, urging them to the achievement of a higher morality. Those ideals only which have failed to put on concrete form are capable of everlasting resurrection.

We may learn much from Erasmus how best to conduct ourselves in our relations with those with whom we have intellectual differences. These differences of opinion and belief we shall always have, but, following the lead of Erasmus, we could perhaps avoid the ill will and violence that so often surround a clash of views.

Too many persons see themselves as self-appointed keepers of the truth, with the duty of attacking those they believe to be in error. The history of intolerance is a long and unpleasant story. How much bloodshed and misfortune could have been avoided if we were spared the not-so-gentle ministrations of the fanatics, who doubt not for a minute the rightness of their cause and hence set about destroying what they see as wrong or evil. Woe to those who suggest patience and moderation! They will be crushed underfoot if they refuse to put aside their desire for concord.

The way of Erasmus was, of course, the opposite of the fanatic. He clearly discerned the nature of evil and he too hoped to see truth replace error and right triumph over wrong. But he showed discretion in his choice of tactics. If you wish to bring about peacefully true and lasting reforms, you do not, like the fanatics, indiscriminately attack not only the ideas you oppose but also the honesty, integrity, and sincerity of those who hold them. If you wish to convince a person he should change his ways, for instance, you do not hit him on the head with a bat. "Courtesy rather than invective is a better way to win over an opponent." Erasmus declared, "He who accuses another of heresy ought to exhibit charity in admonition, kindness in correcting, candor in judging, latitude in pronouncing. Why do we prefer to

conquer rather than to cure?"

The Erasmian method of bringing about reform was to win persons over to the right by gentle persuasion and sweet reason. No cracking of heads, no assumption of infallibility, no intolerance for the other fellow's views, but a wooing that cannot possibly stir up resentments that cause one to close one's ears to what you have to say. "It is no great feat to burn a little man," wrote Erasmus. "It is a great achievement to persuade him." Two hundred years after Erasmus, John Wesley gave some advice the great Christian humanist would agree with wholeheartedly:

Condemn no man for not thinking as you think. Let everyone enjoy the full and free liberty of thinking for himself. Let every man use his own judgment, since every man must give an account of himself to God. Abhor every approach, in any kind or degree, to the spirit of persecution. If you cannot reason or persuade a man into truth, never attempt to force a man into it. If love will not compel him to come, leave him to God, the judge of all.

Here we might do well to ponder Roland Bainton's remark on martyrdom that would surely please Erasmus. "By dying for a cause, a man proves only that he is sincere, not that he is right. The truth of his claim must be established by a rigorous examination of its validity. The scholars have, therefore, benefited the Church more than the martyrs."

In *Dawn to Decadence*, Jacques Barzun has noted that some persons make Erasmus out as a "cautious, middle-of-the-road academic character who, in the battle of his time, took the line of compromise." They claim that Luther is, in effect, the strong man and that the good that came out of the rebellion we owe to him, not Erasmus.

No summary could be falsier, according to Barzun, because Erasmus was a courageous, independent fighter, as easily roused to anger—if anger is a revolutionary virtue—as Luther himself. He was im-

petuous in pushing his cause well before Luther thought of having one. Erasmus was the greater scholar, had more wit, and a different kind of literary genius. From his earliest days, he denounced the monks, discredited the saints, and declared, "almost all Christians wretchedly enslaved by blindness and ignorance."

Erasmus observed all the common religious usages that were not repugnant to the Holy Scriptures, but he complained when relics were presented not as innocent aids to religion, but as the substance of religion itself. He "was the first humanist to earn his living by his writing" and he saw that "his power lay in his pen, not in titles or partisan activities." He was also a humorist "which to the earnest means one who trifles with serious things." He

was serious, however, "when he refuted Luther's doctrine that most of mankind was damned from all eternity and would not accept Luther's denial of Free Will." As Albert Jay Nock has observed, he was "incapable of taking up with any but a sound cause." Martin Luther's "proposal to substitute the authority of a book for the authority of a Pope was merely a proposal to change masters." On the other hand, Erasmus was "for great reforms, fundamental reforms," but these were not to be had, and "so there was no place for him in the fighting front of either army...." Indeed, Nock contended that Desiderius Erasmus was no game for professors or run-of-the-mill parsons and bishops and that "the less one reads *about* Erasmus, the better."

## *Stefan Zweig and Franz Kafka: A Study in Contrast*

*Mordecai Roshwald*

STEFAN ZWEIG (1881-1942) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924) could have been expected to have much in common and to belong to the same category in modern literature. Born only two years apart, they belong to the same epoch. Although Zweig was born in Vienna and Kafka in Prague, both wrote in German, and Prague, though the center of the Czech region, was till 1918 a city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both authors happened to be Jewish and retained a positive attitude to Judaism,

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MORDECAI ROSHWALD taught for twenty-five years at the University of Minnesota.

which may have influenced their writing, even if it did not dominate it.

Yet, anybody examining any of the writings of the two authors, let alone anybody familiar with their respective works, cannot but be struck by the profound difference between the two. They appear to have lived not merely in different centuries, but in divergent worlds. They seem to belong not merely to different ages, but to epochs disjointed by apocalyptic events.

Zweig, as he admirably explains in his autobiographical work, *The World of Yesterday* (1944), grew up in a social environ-