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Erasmus and the German Reformation

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E R A S M U S

AND THE GERMAN REFORMATION

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PART I

BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCE ON THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF ERASMUS

Erasmus of Rotterdam, as he chose to call himself, may be called a key figure in the history of thought and education. He has been called "the greatest humanist of the Renaissance"[1] and the "greatest and most brilliant star of his century."[2] It is true, his revival of the classics, his independent spirit, and his struggle for intellectual freedom may merit for him the title "the greatest humanist of the Remaissance."

But Erasmus of Rotterdam interests us particularly, because in him there is combined something of the spirit of the two leading movements during the sixteenth century - that of the Renaissance and that of the Reformation. Though primarily a humanist, with a purely intellectual interest, he yet is a type of reformer, one who sees abuses and corruption, and yet lacks thespiritual insight to penetrate

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1. Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. VIII, p. 676.
2. Zweig, Stefan, Erasmus of Rotterdam, p. 3.

into the depth of the causes of such evil conditions. "Splendid was the heritage of the classic poets and the philosophers; precious was the message of the gospels; could not the two possessions, so different in spirit and in quality, beunited in one rich synthesis, cleared from the rust and accretions of a thousand years, and turned to the profit of a new civilization?"3 This became the life work of Erasmus, and therefore he is not so much interested in spiritual regeneration as in intellectual emancipation. His reform work is not to make it possible for man to learn the truth of the Gospel, so that hemight be made one with God, but his objective is to free mankind from the dogmatic shackles of Roman traditionalism, to enable man to utilize his natural right to express his own opinion.

To understand the attitude of Erasmus, it is necessary to look into the background of his times and to study the early influences upon his life. The life span of Erasmus covered a period of events which was a time of great flux and change. It was in this period that the Middle Ages gave way to modern times. Feudalism and serfdom were losing their prominence. Humanism spread over Europe from its cradle in Italy. Scholastic philosophy was losing its hold, bowing to the efforts of the humanists, mystics, and reformers. The invention of printing made possible the dissemination of ideas with greater speed. Spain, Portugal,

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3. Smith, Preserved, Erasmus, p. 3.

France, and England were emerging as strong national states. The Turks were at Europe's back door, occupying the Balkan regions and threatening the gates of Vienna. The discovery of the Americas shifted the principal trade routes from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, causing the rise of such great commercial centers as Amsterdam and London.

The universal Church was by far the mightiest institution of the Middle Ages. But its position was also in a state of change. The Church had grown in material possessions. The gifts of nobles and princes had accumulated over the centuries. Themonks had found methods of improving the agricultural production, thus increasing the yield of the lands belonging to the Church. But at the close of the thirteenth century, the papal power waned. The Babylonian Captivity of the Pope, the great schism when both the bishop of Rome and the bishop of Avignon were popes, the assertion of power by the various councils, all proved distressing to the Church. The temporal power of the papacy declined, especially in England and France.

Although in certain externals the papacy and the Church seemed to decline, yet the Church retained its hold on its subjects through its doctrine. Nearly everyone believed that there was no salvation outside the Church. "For every individual in the Middle Ages the burning issue of his whole life was understood to be the possible salvation of his soul

from eternal damnation. The only mediation between man and God was the Church. Such was the belief of the vast majority of people....Hence the influence of the clergy and the importance of the seven sacraments."[4] Yet, while it is true that the great masses of the people were still in the grip of the sacramental and sacerdotal system, there were forces which tended to weaken the blind acceptance of all church dogmas. Church councils were trying to limit the power of the Pope. Heretics, as Hus, Savanarola, and Wycliffe had arisen. Though they were eliminated by death, their followers tacitly continued in the work of their masters. A number of mystics had sought salvation without benefit of clergy.

In considering the attacks on the papacy a little more fully, we mention first the humanists, though we shall consider them below in a different connection again. The humanist attacks were far reaching. For centuries, one of the claims of the Pope for temporal power was based on the "Donation of Constantine." The Emperor Constantine, who lived in the fourth century, was supposed to have presented the bishop of Rome with the western half of his empire, when he moved his capital to Constantinople. Lorenzo Valla, a humanist of the first half of the fifteenth century, had proved that the document "Donation of Constantine" was forged. Valla and others instilled in the minds of the people an

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4. Hyma, Albert, The Youth of Erasmus, p. 7.

attitude of scepticism and disrespect for authority. Many humanists ridiculed monasticism and the efficacy of the sacraments. They belittled the value of the soul and the importance of life after physical death, and put less emphasis on the purpose of people to save their souls. They opposed asceticism, and some of them were almost pagan in their outlook. Though this did not lead up to the Reformation, it certainly prepared some of the groundwork for later reform work.

A movement related to that of the humanists is that of the mystics. They attacked the power of the Church, basing their attack on the observation that the Church had become too materialistic, and "that there was in the Church too much empty formalism, with too little emphasis on personal piety. The mystics, in particular, strove to warn their pupils against the reliance on what they called 'outward deeds', as contrasted with inner faith, feelings, and emotions."[5] An example of this is the Imitation of Christ, by Thomas a' Kempis, which emphasized the need of love and faith rather than works. The mystics tried to establish direct communion with God by individual and personal contemplation, thus rendering the sacramental system of the Church unnecessary.

But aside from these organized movements in learned circles, there were general movements among the common laity

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5. Ibid., p. 8.

which tended to weaken the power of the Church. Hyma correctly says that "there was scarcely a thinking person to be found anywhere in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages who felt that the Church was a perfect institution."[6] People had begun to question the right of having such a large number of feast days. They questioned the authenticity of relics and the meritoriousness of such good works as pilgrimages, and others. Cardinal Nicholas Cusa had taught Augustine's doctrine of justification. John Wessel of Groenigen fired a number of followers with an attitude of scepticism regarding the doctrines of purgatory, indulgences, and the efficacy of the sacraments. Later, Luther found much joy in reading the statements of Wessel, for in many respects they were much like his own.[7] Some of the Brethren of the Common Life preached the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. But all people joined in lamenting over the indolence, ignorance, and immorality of many of the monks, priests, and bishops.

One of the notable attacks on the Church is that of the Waldensians. Led by Peter Waldo, who was moved by the sudden death of a friend to give up his business and devote his life to the service of Christ, this band grew for several hundred years, always enlarging its following by allying

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6. Ibid.
7. Lindsay, A History of the Reformation, p. 58.

itself with other groups who were interested in similar reform. Peter Waldo "strove to know and to make known Christianity as taught by Christ and the apostles."[8] He soon won a great following, which was attracted by his preaching of the Gospel. His followers, in turn, went throughout all Europe, preaching as lay evangelists. Through their study of the Word of God itself, they also branched into other reforms. MacKinnon gives us a summary of their beliefs and practices. "They emphasized voluntary poverty, the reading of the Scriptures in the vernacular as the norm of faith and the religious life, obedience to God, as revealed in the law of Christ, above submission to ecclesiastical authority, and free preaching. Like the Cathari, they rejected the doctrine of purgatory, the taking of oaths, and the death penalty, and maintained a puritan standard of life, coupled with a practical Christianity. If they accepted transubstantiation, they maintained that it could only be effected by persons of pure life. Similarly, the power to loose and bind depends, not on ordination, but on Christian character, and confession to a layman of good life is as valid as that to a priest. Indulgences, pilgrimages, prayers to the saints are inadmissible."[9] This movement spread throughout Europe, into France, Germany, and northern Italy.

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8. MacKinnon, James, Origins of the Reformation, p. 313.
9. Ibid., p. 315

The Waldensians were a party of mild reformers. They did not openly revolt against the Church and its hierarchy, but remained in its realm, if not as devoted subjects, at least as nominal members. But perhaps the work of Wyclif is more noteworthy, because he became more explicit and openly contested the power of the clergy and its domineering authority over the individual. Because of his outstanding work, he has often been called "the Morning Star of the Reformation."[10] He was both student and teacher at Oxford University in England, and also a parish priest. Wyclif opposed the Pope's meddling in English affairs of State and Church. He was a preacher of his reforms, and besides trained other men to spread his message. He issued tracts and books against the doctrines of the Church. He issued the first English Bible in 1382. He bitterly attacked the doctrine of substantiation, and at times expressed belief in the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper as we know it in the Lutheran Church. He considered confirmation and extreme unction as human institutions without divine command. "Enforced auricular confession he termed 'a sacrament of the devil' and denounced purgatory as 'a blasphemous swindle.'"[11] He opposed enforced celibacy as immoral. For Wyclif, the only Head of the Church is Christ, and the Pope is Anti-Christ.

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10. Concordia Cyclopedia, p. 828.
11. Ibid.

Although he was silenced by death in 1384, his influence was felt ever after, for in England his followers remained behind him.

The work of Wyclif produced an influence on the continent as well as in England. Bohemian students at Oxford carried the doctrines of Wyclif back to the University of Prague in Bohemia. John Hus, a professor at Prague, openly taught some of the tenets of Wyclif, being influenced by the writings of Wyclif. He reached the conclusion that Christians should not be forced to obey those who were living in mortal sin and were apparently destined never to reach heaven themselves. The Church authorities were very much alarmed, and pointed out that the hierarchy should be obeyed, not because they are good men, but because they are representatives of the law. It became evident that Hus not only defended the heresies of Wyclif, but also spread a doctrine dangerous both to the power of the civil government and to the Church. As a result, Hus was condemned to die at the stake by the Council of Constance in 1415. "The death of Hus rather promoted than checked the spread of heresy in Bohemia."[12] His execution only antagonized his followers into greater zeal. The Hussites kept his views alive long after his death. Even during the time of Luther, the Hussites were an active group.

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12. Robinson, J. H., History of Western Europe, Vol. I,380

All these attacks on and discontentments with the papacy show the trend to more emphasis on the individual. Besides being a movement for the revival of learning, it stressed humanity for its own sake. In the Middle Ages, a person was regarded only in relation to his usefulness to the Church or State. Now the humanists taught that "man has a right to enjoy himself in this world, that human nature is not fundamentally bad and that human beings have great innate power, for which reason they need not be self-depreciating. They exalted human nature, but were less interested in pure theology. They were opposed to asceticism, which is a system of thought directed toward the suppression of physical enjoyment. The ascetic loathes human nature and believes that the flesh is the ally of the devil. The humanist entertains a very different opinion concerning human nature."[13] This spirit of individualism is reflected in Erasmus, who, as we shall see later, early came under the influence of the leading humanists of his day.

In summarizing the times and their trend during the lifetime of Erasmus, we cite Smith:[14]

> "For the sake of clarity it should be pointed out that the vast change which came over the human spirit in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, marking the transition from mediaeval to modern times, can be analyzed into at least three very distinct factors. In the first place, there was the Social Shift,

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13. Hyma, Albert, op. cit., p. 11.
14. Smith, Preserved, Erasmus, p. 2.

> manifesting itself in politics in the rise of the national state and in economics in the change from the gild system of production to the capitalistic method. Secondly, there was a large number of new discoveries--geographical exploration, the invention of printing, gunpowder, glass lenses, and the compass, and the revival of natural science with Copernicus and his fellows. Thirdly, there was the Rebirth of Antiquity, manifesting itself, according to the view here set forth, in the Renaissance and in the Reformation. All three great lines of progress interacted, as for example, nationalism in the rise of vernacular literature, and the discovery of printing in the spread of culture, but each is separable in thought, and might conceivably have acted independently. The Renaissance and the Reformation were, therefore, really one. The conscious opposition of the champions of each, the intense warfare arising from their propinquity and concern with the same interests, have concealed the real similarity of their natures."

It is to be expected that such a mind as Erasmus should be influenced by the changes which were taking place in the world at the time of his life. But of all the movements and their leaders who wielded an influence on him, perhaps the most outstanding is that of the "Devotio Moderna." Erasmus first met this movement when he entered the school in the city of Deventer as a little boy. "The term, which means 'present-day devotion', originated in the fifteenth century, and was applied to the th ughts and labors of a large group of mystics and educators, mostly belonging to the Brethren of the Co mon Life and the Augustinian Canons Regular of the Congregation of Windesheim. The movement may be said to have originated with the life-work of Gerard Groote of Deventer (1340-1384) and it was extinguished early in the

sixteenth century when the storm of the Reformation submerged with the spirit of Groote's teachings."[15]

To understand the movement "Devotio Moderna", and later its emergence into the organization called "Brethren of the Common Life", we must investigate the work of Gerard Groote, the inaugurator. He was a great student, a graduate of the University of Paris. In his early days he was a worldly youth. He delighted in the rather nebulous sciences of astrology and the fascinating magic of his day. However, a sudden change came over him during a long illness in which he lost hope for recovery. He suddenly realized the vanity of his life, and the waste of his time and talents. Before his eye he could visualize the days of his lost youth. He ordered his books on magic to be burned, and shortly after his illness, he was converted. He entered the Carthusian order of monks, and subjected himself to a severe life. After a deep soul struggle, he preached the gospel of repentance in many cities in the low countries. Clergy and laity alike were moved by his message, and everywhere he went, large numbers of people reformed their lives. In this way, the Devotio Moderna originated.

At Deventer he gathered around himself a band of twelve disciples, one of whom was Florentius Radewijns, who was also to exert an influence on Erasmus. Various meetings were held

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15. Hyma, Albert, Youth of Erasmus, p. 21.

in Groote's abode in Deventer, which were the beginnings of the Brethren of the Common Life.[16] His enemies silenced him for a time, but this did not prevent him from writing and continuing his work out of sight of the public eye. He would gather young men and boys around him to instruct them on matters of religious life and faith. He was intensely interested in bringing an understanding of religion and a general education to all people. "In 1383 Groote entered also upon a new task. It was not enough, he said, that the clergy be educated. The people too must read and decide for themselves. Religion should be personal for all men and women. What good does it do, he reasoned, for a layman merely to go to church? Will that cure his spiritual ills? Certainly not. He must do more than listen to his preacher; he must read and think for himself. And in order to make this possible, he began to translate portions of the Bible and a great many church hymns into the vernacular, at the same time providing these translations with glosses and other explanations."[17]

Groote was a reformer. He clearly saw many evils in the Church, and tried to eradicate them. But he remained a true son of the Church. The possibility of breaking away from the Church never occurred to him. His reforms were, however, of far-reaching influence in the church. As a mystic, he

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16. Hyma, Albert, Christian Renaissance, p. 15.
17. Ibid., pp. 16.17.

was anxiou to reform the religious life of the people. As an educator, he wanted to train the minds of all to be able to reason things out for themselves. As a philosopher, he carried on a campaign against the dying scholasticism of his day. As a moral reformer, he assailed the physical and mental indolence of the mendicant orders. "What Groote wanted was more Christianity, plain and simple. To follow in the footsteps of Christ, to bear his cross in humble submission, that was Groote's aim."[18]

Groote was respected by many as a great man. As an expression of this respect and as a summary of his activities, we cite a letter written to Pope Urban VI by William de Sarvarvilla, cantor of the University of Paris shortly before Groote's death:[19]

> "Truly he was 'The Great', for in his knowledge of all the liberal sciences, both natural and moral, of civil law, canon law, and of theology, he was second to no one in the world, and all these branches of learning were united in him. He was a man of such saintliness and gave so good an example of mortification of the flesh, his contempt for the world, his brotherly love for all, his zeal for the salvation of souls, his effectual preaching, his reprobation and hatred of wickedness, his withstanding of heretics, his enforcement of the canon law against those that broke the vow of chastity, his conversion to the spiritual life of divers men and women who had formerly lived according to the world, and his loyalty to our Lord Urban VI, --in all those things I say he gave so good an example, that many thousands of men testify to the belief that is in them that he was not less great in these virtues than he was in the aforesaid sciences."

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18. Ibid., p. 24.
19. Quoted in Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 37.38.

The influence of Groote is most felt and lasted longest in the Brethren of the Common Life. The oldest institution was that of the Sisters of the Common Life at Deventer. Later the first house of the Brethren of the Common Life was founded near the city of Zwolle, about ten miles from Deventer. But since this institution failed to develop for nine years, the first real house of the Brethren of the Common Life was founded at Deventer shortly after the death of Groote.[20]

The work of Groote was carried on by Florentius Radewyns. Groote appointed him to become the leader of the disciples of the "Devotio Moderna" at Deventer. Radewyns was vicar in the church of St. Lebwin's at Deventer, and for seven years was the teacher of Thomas a' Kempis. Radewyns was of a kindly nature, and often deprived himself of food in order to feed the hungry. "Among all the men Thomas a' Kempis had met before he wrote the Imitation, Radewyns, he thought, was the one who had taught him most about the Cross of Christ. We should learn of Him, Christ had said, by imitating Him. and how could we imitate Him best? By taking His yoke upon us, the yoke of humility and charity. One should try to sympathize with the poor and afflicted. visit the sick, comfort orphans and widows, and be ready to

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20. Hyma, Albert, Youth of Erasmus, p. 23.

perform the most humble tasks at home. We should never seek our own good, Radewyns used to say, but rather consider our neighbor's welfare. Thus one might become a Christian, in his opinion."[21] Radewyns was rector of the house at Deventer for fifteen years, until his death in 1400.

The two leading houses of the Brethren were those of Deventer and Zwolle until the year 1520. All other houses were founded by these two. There were several houses scattered over Germany and the Netherlands, but in France none were established. The purpose of the Brethren institutions may be seen from the preface to the constitution of the houses at Deventer and Zwolle. "Our house was founded with the intention that, in imitation of the Primitive Christian Church, priests and clerics might live there, supported by their own labor, namely, the copying of books, and by the returns from certain estates."[22] The constitution also contained a number of rules, including the time for devotions and the hour of retirement, and provision for reading and discussion of the Scriptures. During the meals they maintained silence to listen to the reading of a passage of Scripture.

The Brethren turned their attention to the field of

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21. Ibid., p. 24.
22. Quoted in Hyma, Youth of Erasmus, p. 27.

education, as one might expect, since the labor of the leader behind the movement, Gerard Groote, had been in this field of activity. They noticed the difficulty of making an impression on adults, particularly those of the clergy who were leading lives of vice and corruption. This led them to train young men, who would gradually replace the corrupt clergy. Before the invention of printing, the emphasis was laid on the copying of manuscripts. But after the invention of printing, manuscripts became less expensive, and the brethren were forced to make their living by other work. This circumstance more than any other led them to become teachers. At first their efforts at education were medieval in method and their textbooks were the common ones of the day. But towards the end of the fifteenth century, some of the brethren learned the humanistic principles of education and became devoted followers of such outspoken humanists as Valla and Marsiglio Ficino of Padua.

Perhaps the best example of the spirit of the Devotio Moderna is to be found in Thomas a' Kempis. He was a student at the Brethren house at Deventer. Scholars disagree on the authorship of the famous Imitation of Christ, which has gone down in history as the work of Thomas a' Kempis. Hyma says, "Nearly all scholars who have devoted careful study to the subject agree that the book must have been composed

in or near Deventer by Groote and his followers or by Thomas a' Kempis alone. There is not the slightest doubt that the Imitation was the direct outcome of Groote's labors and that it is, so to speak, the Gospel of the Devotio Moderna."[23] This book has influenced generations of Christians throughout the world. To be sure, it was of no small importance in the shaping of the life of Erasmus.

The Imitation expresses the principle that man is but a pilgrim on earth. He lives on this earth as a prisoner of his evil flesh, which is always standing in the way of his happiness and perfection. The utter hopelessness of man's sinful condition is expressed numerous times, although there seems to be somewhat of a contradiction here. The depravity of human nature is shown in the following references. "O how great is human frailty, which is always prone to evil. Today thou confessest thy sins, and tomorrow thou committest the very same thou hast confessed....Good cause have we therefore to humble ourselves, and never to have any conceit of ourselves: since we are so frail and so inconstant."[24] "There is need of Thy Grace, yea, of great grace, that Nature may be overcome, which is ever prone to evil from her youth. For through the first man, Adam, Nature being fallen and corrupted by sin, the penalty of this stain

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23. Ibid., p. 32.
24. Thomas a' Kempis, Imitation of Christ, I, 22, p. 62.

hath descended upon all mankind, so that Nature itself, which by Thee was created good and upright, is now represented as the sin and infirmity of corrupted nature; because the inclination thereof left unto itself draweth to evil and to lower things."[25]

These two references are the only two statements concerning the total corruption of human nature. These do not represent the true teaching of Devotio Moderna nor of Thomas a' Kempis, as we shall see in the following references. There is yet a spark of good in men, acco ding to Thomas. "For the small power which remaineth is as it were a spark lying hid in the ashes."[26] The idea is that the Spirit of God should enter the heart of the person and enlighten this hidden spark, so that love should replace all sin and corruption. The system of sanctification always provides for measures of cooperation between man and God. "For I feel in my flesh the law of sin contradicting the law of my mind, and leading me captive to the obeying of sensuality in many things; neither can I resist the passions thereof, unless Thy most holy Grace fervently infused into my heart do assist me."[27] It was this cooperation, and the belief that in man there still remained a spark of good which caused the controversy between Erasmus and Luther in 1524-1525. With Luther,

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25. Ibid., III, 55, p. 249.
26. Ibid., III, 55, p. 250.
27. Ibid., III, 55, p. 249.

the process of justification in man took place purely by grace through faith which was created in the heart by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. With Erasmus, who learned it from the Brethren of the Common Life, the process of making man holy began with man himself, assisted by the infusa gratia. Erasmus remained in harmony with these thoughts to the end of his life.

Although the Devotio Moderna wielded a great influence on Erasmus, especially in his earlier years before his experiences in England, probably the greatest development was produced by the intellectual humanism which was gaining strength north of the Alps at about this time. We must remember that there were really two movements in the humanistic Renaissance - the Alpine, or Italian, and the Transalpine. Allen gives a sketch of the fundamental difference between the two:[28]

> "Awakened Italy felt itself the heiress of Rome, and thus patriotism coloured its enthusiasm for the past. To the rest of Western Europe this source of inspiration was not open. They were compelled to examine more closely the aims before them; and thus attained to a calmer and truer estimate of what they might hope to gain from the study of the classics. It was not the revival of lost glories, thoughts of a world held in the bonds of peace: in those dreams the Transalpines had only the part of the conquered. Rather the classics led them back to an age before Christianity; and pious souls though they were, the scholar's instinct told

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28. Allen, P. S., The Age of Erasmus, pp. 252-253.

> them that they would find there something to learn Christianity had fixed men's eyes on the future, on their own salvation in the life to come; and had trained all knowledge, even Aristotle, to serve that end. In the great days of Greece and Rome the world was free from this absorbing preoccupation; and inquiring spirits were at liberty to find such truth as they could, not merely the truth that they wished or must."

Erasmus in a way represents the Transalpine Renaissance, and yet, even before he went to Italy, he was influenced by the Italian Renaissance.

The Italian humanists, who both directly and indirectly influenced Erasmus, were, to a great extent, irreligious in attitude and conduct. They recognized no laws except their own. Their judgment was the supreme authority. They worshipped the Greek classicists, even rating Socrates on the level with Jesus. Dante even went so far as to put Socrates and other heathen in heaven in his Divine Comedy. Their enthusiastic love for pagan antiquity "undermined their Christianity without substituting the religion or the ethics of the old world. They ceased to fear God; but they did not acquire either the self-restraint of the Greek or the patriotic virtues of the Roman. It is not, therefore, a marvel that, while professing stoicism, they wallowed in sensuality, openly affected the worst habits of pagan society, and devoted their ingenuity to the explanation of foulness that might have been

passed by in silence. Licentiousness became a special branch of humanistic literature. Under the thin mask of humane refinement leered the untamed savage; and an age that boasted not unreasonably of its mental progress, was at the same time notorious for the vices that disgrace mankind. These disorders of the scholars, hidden for a time beneath a learned language, ended by contaminating the genius of the nation."[29]

Although this criticism by Symonds is generally true of the humanists, there were, however, many who were honest and self-respecting. Three of these men, Valla, Ficino, and Pico interest us particularly, since they represented the Italian humanism beyond the Alps, and show us the spread of humanism to the northern countries.

None of the Italian humanists seems to have affected the mind of Erasmus as much as did Lorenzo Valla. He was born in Rome in 1406, the son of a lawyer. At an early age he learned Greek and Latin. He left Rome in 1430 and became a professor in the University of Pavia, where he attracted attention through his attacks on the teachers of law. Smith says of him:

> "As a stylist, a critic, an anticlerical, and an exponent of a completely undogmatic Christianity,

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29. Symonds, J. A., Italian Renaissance, Vol. II, p. 251.

> the Dutchman was the Italian's truest disciple. For Valla was an incarnation of the intellectual Renaissance, a critic and iconoclast of the caliber almost of Voltaire, unparalleled as yet in modern Europe for the daring, acumen, force, irreverence, and brilliance of his attacks on religion. True, Valla called himself a Christian, and probably without hyprocrisy, but his ideal was of a purely moral, humanitarian religion, unhampered either by creed or by ritual. Interested in theology, of which he was a master, he insisted on the genuine old theology of the Gospel and the Fathers over against the spurious new scholasticism and asceticism. The old doctors of the church he compared to bees making honey, the new to wasps stealing grain from others. In exposing the Donation of Constantine as a forgery he put into the hands of the Protestants who came after him one of their most trenchant weapons."[30]

One of the early outstanding books of Valla is his On Pleasure and the True Good. This work has three books. The first part of the first book contains a speech by a stoic philosopher. The second half of the first book and the second book contain the view of an epicurean philosopher. The third book states the beliefs of a Christian philosopher. All defend their deals. In the end, the first two admit defeat to the third, but Valla does not altogether repudiate "the scandalous suggestions of the epicurean philosopher."[31] This apparent contradiction between epicureanism and Christianity which is found in Valla has been explained as the result of traditional Catholicism in Italy. While

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30. Smith, Preserved, Erasmus, p. 15.
31. Hyma, Albert, Youth of Erasmus, p. 41.

nominally belonging to the Church and accepting its dogmas, many humanists, as Valla, and other men held views diametrically opposite to those of the Church, and yet called themselves Christians and remained sons of the Church. This was a characteristic of the time.

The next work of Valla was De Libero Arbitrio. This became the title of the book of Erasmus against Luther. It was probably the chief source and inspiration of the work of Erasmus. In work on the monastic life, De Professione Religiosorum, Valla attacked the clergy by calling in question the worth of asceticism. His treatise on the Donation of Constantine is called the first example of modern criticism. His work On the Elegance of the Latin Language condemns the brand of Latin used by most of his contemporaries. In a dialogue On Pleasure, one speaker represents the epicurean philosophy. He maintains that a prostitute is a more useful member of society than is a nun. "Valla's own opinions, represented neither by the Epicurean nor by his Christian opponent, but by the arbitrating Niccoli, cannot be characterized as atheistic and hedonistic, but the very fact that canvassed such ideas was significant of his free spirit."[32] Although Valla still placed Christianity above epicureanism, one cannot assume that in his work as a humanist he aimed to restore apostolic Christianity. He could not comprehend

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32. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., pp. 15.16.

the ideals of the apostles and his life is no testimony of his imitating them. His Notes on the New Testament are not theological, but are no more than a philological achievement, as his translations of classical Greek authors. One can immediately see the parallel between the life and ideas of Valla and Erasmus. Both men missed the mark of Christianity - the core which is supplied by faith. Both men were merely intellectuals, and lacked the vibrant, solid quality of a Christian scholar, who interprets all learning in the light of his faith. Both tried to reform institutions of the Church by external methods of ridicule and reason, without first replacing the warped work-righteousness of the heart with the free grace of forgiveness through Christ.

Another Italian humanist of note was Marsiglio Ficino of Padua. He has been credited with work towards the restoration of primitive Christianity. In view of his actual work however, this position is hardly tenable. He was a member of the Platonic Academy in Florence and translated the works of Plato for the rich Cosmo de' Medici. In 1475 he wrote De Christiana Religione, in which he endeavored to harmonize Platonism with Christianity. "Although he fairly worshipped Plato, he never comprehended Platonic philosophy, and as for the Platonic Academy, it has been pointed out...that here an

attempt was made to combine paganism with Christianity so as to form a system of philosophy identical with Platonism. To Ficino and his associates everything said by Plato and Aristotle, as well as by Confucius and Zoroaster, seemed sacred. Christianity was based on the Platonic doctrines, and it was argued that the teachings of Socrates were the same as those of Christ."[33] Erasmus, inhis Enchiridion, is guilty of the same confusion between Platonism and Christianity.

A successor to Ficino, and one who likewise confuses paganism and Christianity is John Pico of Mirandola. He was born in 1463 and died in 1494. He was a nobleman and received an excellent education. He studied in Bologna, Ferrara, Florence, and at the Sorbonne in Paris. He became famous for his idea that Aristotle taught the same doctrines as Plato, and that Avicenna taught the same as Averroes. He composed nine hundred theses in 1486, which he intended to defend publicly. But he was prevented from this defense, because thirteen of the theses were heretical in the eyes of the Church authorities. In one of them he states that there is no source of knowledge which convinces us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and the cabala. For a time he was imprisoned, then released. In Italy, Lorenzo de Medici protected him. The sermons of Savonarola caused him to be

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33. Hyma, Albert, Youth of Erasmus, pp. 45.46.

converted. He turned from oriental philosophy to Christian mysticism. He believed that every word in the Bible had a hidden meaning.[34]

That these men influenced the thinking of the northern scholars, there is no doubt. Some men became personally acquainted with them, as did Colet of England. Others absorbed their thought by reading and by indirect associations. The latter is true of Erasmus, who almost worshipped the leaders of Italian humanism.

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34. Ibid., p. 48.

PART II

LIFE SKETCH OF ERASMUS

TO THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION

In order to understand the position of Erasmus in regard to the Reformation in Germany, we shall sketch his life activity up to the time of his direct contacts with the Lutheran reformers in Germany.

"Erasmus was born in the night of October 27-28, but the year of his birth is not certain. Although most biographers have agreed on the year 1466, the available evidence at the present time points to the year 1469 as being more nearly correct."[35] This is the judgment of Hyma, who has written the most recent treatise on the life of Erasmus. Smith says, "The older he became, the earlier he put the year of his birth. It has been suggested, with much plausibility, that, whereas he knew the true year of his birth to be 1469, he made himself appear older in order to save the reputation of his father and to make it easier to get for himself certain ecclesiastical dispensations."[36]

As the date, so the place of his birth is somewhat in doubt. In his Compendium Vitae Erasmus said he was born in Rotterdam, and even called himself "Roterodamus", but since his parents lived near Gouda, it is quite possible

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35. Hyma, Albert, Youth of Erasmus, p. 51.
36. Smith, Preserved, Erasmus, p. 8.

that Erasmus was born there. The authenticity of the facts contained in the Compendium Vitae, which was composed in 1524, has often been contested. Yet, it remains an important source, and as long as other evidence does not contradict it, it may be considered a fair account. There are, however, some reservations. "If we judge the Compendium, not by its style, or want of style, but by its matter, the statements of fact which it contains appear for the most part to be such as might not improbably proceed from Erasmus himself. The account of the relation existing between his parents and of the circumstances of his origin agrees both in its allegations and in its omissions with what he might well have thought it expedient under certain conditions to publish."[37] However, for some facts, we must rely almost wholly on his autobiographical sketch.

Erasmus writes of his early life in very abrupt phrases and expressions. The translation of Nichols preserves this abruptness in his translation of the Compendium Vitae, of which we quote some sayings of Erasmus concerning his parentage. "Born at Rotterdam on the vigil of Simon and Jude. Numbers about fifty-seven years. Mother was called

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37. Nichols, Epistles of Erasmus, Vol. I, p. 3

Margaret, daughter of a physician named Peter.[38] She was of Zevenberge....Father was named Gerard; he had secret intercourse with Margaret in anticipation of marriage; some say that words of betrothal had passed between them. This affair gave great offence to the parents and brothers of Gerard. His father was Helias, his mother Catherine; both lived to a great age, Catherine to near ninety five. There were ten brothers,--no sister,--by the same father and mother; all the brothers married. Gerard was the youngest but one. It was the general wish that out of so great a number one should be consecrated to God.... Gerard, finding himself quite debarred frommarriage by the opposition of all, took a desperate course; he secretely left the country, and sent on his way a letter to his parents and brothers, with a hand clasping a hand and the sentence, Farewell, I shall never see you more. The woman he had hoped to make his wife was left with child. The boy was nursed at his grandmother's. Gerard betook himself to Rome.... When his parents were informed that he was in Rome, they wrote to him that the young woman whom he had wished to

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38. Note Erasmus says "about fifty-seven years." This vagueness substantiates the theory that he wanted to push back the date of his birth as far as possible, so as to clear his father from the stigma of having a child while in the priesthood. Penalty and popular opinion for being a parent out of wedlock was greater for a priest than for a layman.

marry was dead. He, taking this to be true, was so grieved that he became a priest and applied his whole mind to religion. When he returned home, he found out the deception; but she never afterwards had any wish to marry, nor did he ever touch her again."[39]

No one knows just how much of his autobiography is true. Rotterdam has always claimed Erasmus as its son. As early as 1540, his alleged birthplace was shown to visitors.[40]

Because Erasmus was preceded by another child, Peter, it is assumed by Mangan and Hyma that Gerard had already become a priest at the time of the birth of Erasmus. The name given to the child was Erasmus from the very beginning. Later Erasmus added Desiderius (1497) and in 1506 affixed Roterodamus also.

Erasmus was often chagrined because of his illegitimate birth. "There are cases on record of scholars who hated or envied Erasmus, stooping to fling the unpleasant circumstances into his face and made him writhe with shame. Even so brilliant a man as J. C. Scaliger used the terms "Concubinage, sordid parents, prostitution," and implied that his father had frequently been punished by the pope for his misdemeanors."[41] While other men could throw off such maledictions, Erasmus could not. His illegitimate birth

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39. From Compendium Vitae, translated by Nichols, in Epistles of Erasmus, pp. 5-7.
40. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 7.
41. Hyma, Youth of Erasmus, p. 57.

threw a blight on his early career, although all the world knew that his was not the responsibility for his unfortunate birth.

There is little definite knowledge about the first school he attended. Erasmus does mention that Peter Winckel was his teacher, and it is known that Winckel taught at Gouda. From the letter to Grunnius, in which Erasmus mentions some historical facts of his life, we learn that both he and his brother Peter were taught by Peter Winckel at an early age. The school was rather poor, since it was controlled by St. John's Church. Though the Brethren of the Common Life were building large schools in other places, they were handicapped by severe poverty in Gouda. "The home of the brethren at Gouda used to belong to the Franciscan monks, who in 1419 moved outside the walls to a spot near the Yssel (River), located less than a mile from the city and on the same bank of the river. Here they founded a new monastery, not under the rule of St. Francis but that of St. Augustine. They named their monastery Emmaus, but since it was located in the principality of Steyn, it was later generally called Steyn."[42] In 1443 the Brethren of the Common Life at Delft founded their own house at Gouda, but it was not recognized until 1456.

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42. Ibid., p. 65.

Something seemed to be lacking in the school at Gouda, for Gerard and Margaret decided to send their boys to Deventer. Here the Brethren had living quarters for the pupils. In about the year 1475 Margaret took Erasmus to Deventer, which was at this time a wealthy center of commerce. While at Gouda he may have advanced slowly, at Deventer he made progress. He memorized Horace and Terence, read widely, and wrote verses.

He may have stayed two or three years at Deventer. Then his parents decided to have him sing under the great choirmaster and musician Obrecht in the city of Utrecht. The plan was good. If he should have a satisfactory voice, he would receive a free education in the cathedral school there. The Brethren were charitable in Deventer, but they did not provide all the needs of their pupils. We may see the reason for the transfer to Utrecht.

Little is known about his life in Utrecht. It is known that Obrecht was considered the greatest master of counterpoint in his day. The instruction given in the cathedral school was about the same as that provided in other schools of the type. Erasmus called it "barbarous." Scholastic methods and lack of classical knowledge marked the education of this school. Nevertheless, Erasmus did not stay in

Utrecht long. Never in his life did Erasmus manifest an interest in music, and probably the same attitude ruled him here. Hyma thinks that Erasmus remained in Utrecht two years, because in the eight years between 1475 and 1484, he passed through only six grades in the school at Deventer, and it was customary for the pupils to complete one grade each year. Hyma thinks that Erasmus never referred to his chorister career later, because his teachers might have been disappointed with his voice.[43]

After the unsuccessful stay in Utrecht, it is probable that Erasmus was again sent to Deventer. At any rate, Deventer was the school which really gave Erasmus his primary and some of his secondary education. Beatus Rhenanus writes, "The ability of Erasmus was soon shown by the quickness with which he understood and the fidelity with which he retained whatever he was taught, surpassing all the other boys of his age."[44] The school at Deventer was that of St. Lebwin, which belonged to the local church of that name. Erasmus mentions Sinthius as a teacher in this school. The methods of John Cele were in use at this school. This method gives us a fair picture of the education Erasmus received here.

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43. Ibid., p. 77.
44. Nichols, op. cit., Vol. I., p. 23.

In the lower grades the trivium of the Middle Ages was taught. The quadrivium was also given some attention, although this was not completed until the pupil should matriculate in the universities. In the two higher grades specialists taught. Sinthius was one of these specialists. In short, the studies included grammar, rhetoric, logic, philosophy, arithmetic, music, astronomy, and something of ethics and medicine. The teachers at Deventer "strongly emphasized the value of practical religion, and they did criticize the impractical scholastic disputes engaged in by the learned doctors in Paris and Cologne. Cele's maxim was, 'The kingdom of heaven consisteth not in knowledge and speech, but in work and virtue.' Cele taught his pupils the value of humility, modesty, and obedience, and urged them to study the Bible and the Fathers."[45] Of the many men who had graduated from this school, three influenced Erasmus. They were Gansfort, Hegius, and Agricola. They were active while Erasmus attended school at Deventer. Erasmus gleaned many of his ideals from them, although he did not admit it until years.

When Erasmus arrived at Deventer, the Brethren of the Common Life were ruled by Egbert ter Beek (1450-1483). He

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45. Hyma, Youth of Erasmus, p. 85.

was a pious rector, who guarded his Order against the other monasteries.

It is not known where Erasmus lived while his mother lived with him at Deventer. His mother may have been a servant somewhere. But after his mother died in 1483, he lived in one of the houses of the Brethren of the Common Life, and he may have lived there even before that time. During his stay there, it is certain that the Brethren trained him to come close to God by much praying, reading of the Bible and other devotional books.

A word is in place here concerning the three leaders, Hegius, Agricola, and Gansfort. They were "the pioneers of humanism in the Netherlands."[46] They were all in close touch with the Brethren and as such influenced Erasmus. Hegius was rector of the school at Deventer during the last year of Erasmus at that school. Erasmus called Hegius his teacher. Hegius was not a humanist of the Italian type. He was a true member of the Brethren chapter at Deventer. He cared not for worldly things, as property and the reputation of being a great scholar. Nevertheless, he was a humanist. Due to his influence, between 1480 and 1500 a large number of classics was printed on the presses at Deventer. Erasmus first admired his former teacher Hegius, but as he advanced

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46. Ibid., p. 105.

in learning and years, his praise of him decreased.

A man who preceded Hegius in the humanistic studies was Agricola. His chief work is the De Inventione Dialectica. Another is De Formando Studio, which deals with the reforms in the curricula. True study has three aims, according to Agricola: (1) to understand the subject matter, (2) to remember it, (3) to assimilate and reproduce it.[47] Erasmus profited from the reading of this work.

The influence of Agricola on Erasmus before 1490 was indirect. Erasmus probably saw Agricola for the first time at Deventer, when he was twelve years old. Erasmus praised Agricola much more than he did Hegius. The reason is that Agricola was more of the worldly humanist, who disliked simple virtues of the Brethren and who loved classical literature. He knew the humanists of Italy. Nevertheless, he remained a friend of the Brethren of the Common Life.

Another such man who made an impression on Erasmus is Wessel Gansfort. Erasmus was not directly influenced by Gansfort when he studied at Deventer, but he was affected by Gansfort's views. Gansfort interpreted Bible passages in a way which differed from the usual one. He applied a spiritual meaning to concrete statements. His opinion on the faith without works referred to by Paul and the works

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47. Ibid., p. 115.

without which faith is dead as taught by James is worth noting. Gansfort felt there was no difference between the two teachings. He felt that good works would be rewarded, because Christ had taught in the Beatitudes that Christian acts would be rewarded, as also in the parable of the judgment. Not more faith,but love is also needed. He ridiculed the abuses of the clergy. He compared the clergy at his time with the Pharisees at the time of Christ, who had asked why Christ allowed his disciples to transgress the old laws. In accordance with this, Gansfort protested against the sale of office by the clergy for personal gain.

In considering Gansfort's influence on Erasmus, we note that Erasmus was a product of the Devotio Moderna, and treasured some of the ideas he received from it. He attacked the abuses of the Church. He corrected the editions of the Bible and of the Church Fathers in the original. Though is is claimed that this impulse came from Italy, it is probable that it came from the followers of Groote. Gansfort had studied Greek and Hebrew. Gansfort had persuaded Agricola and other men to study the original Bible languages. Then came Erasmus, with his work on the Church Fathers. He found humanity in their writings. While the Italian humanists were concerned only with the pagan classics, Erasmus devoted much time to religious classic writings.

All this is due to the movement led by Gansfort, Agricola, Hegius, and their followers. But a wordof caution is proper here. Erasmus was influenced by many scholars. He learned something from all, and disagreed in some respects from all. He was not dependent on the humanists named above nor on the Brethren of the Common Life for his opinions. He molded his own opinions in the alembic of his own mind.

Erasmus mentions the circumstances of his leaving Deventer in his Compendium Vitae.[48] A plague which broke out in that city caused Erasmus and his brother Peter to leave. This was probably in 1484. They went to Gouda. Gerard, their father, died soon after the mother had died in Deventer. Erasmus was about fifteen years old, and Peter about eighteen. They were both old enough to enter a university, for they had covered the preparatory course at Deventer. Gerard had appointed three guardians, one of whom was Peter Winckel from the school at Gouda. Winckel did not send them to a university, probably because Gerard had wished that his sons be priests. At any rate, the boys were sent to the school of the Brethren of the Common Life at 's-Hertogenbosch. This school, according to a later opinion of Erasmus, was inferior to the one at Deventer. Erasmus

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48. See Nichols, op. cit., pp. 7-9.

was in advance of his teachers, who asked him to "make an epitome, for school use, of Lorenzo Valla's excellent textbook of style, the Elegancies of Latin."[49]

Erasmus probably remained at 's-Hertogenbosch for about two and one half years, and returned to Gouda at the end of 1486. One of his three guardians had died of the plague, and the other two were looking for a monastery. The one chosen was that of the Augustinian Canons Regular at Sion, near Delft. But it seems that Erasmus was not forced to enter the order, but was given time for consideration, especially since he was suffering from a fever. He writes in his Compendium Vitae, "The fever was pressing. Nevertheless, no monastery was acceptable to him (Erasmus) until by mere chance he was making a visit to one of the same order (Augustinian Canons Regular) at Emmaus or Steyn, near Gouda. There he fell in with Cornelius, formerly his chamber-fellow at Deventer, who had not yet put on the religious habit; he had seen Italy, but had come back without having learnt much. This young man, for a purpose of his own, began to depict with marvelous fluency that holy sort of life, the abundance of books, the ease, the quiest the angelic companionship, and what not? A childish affection drew Erasmus toward his old school-fellow. Some friends

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49. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 12.

enticed and some pushed him on. The fever weighed upon him. He chose this spot, having no taste for the other (the one at Sion, near Delft). He was tenderly treated for a time, until he should put on the sacred robe. Meanwhile, young as he was, he felt the absence of real piety there. And yet, the whole flock were led by his influence to study. Before profession he was preparing to go away, but was detained partly by human shame, partly by threats, and partly by necessity."[50]

In the biographical account which is contained in the letter to Grunnius, composed in 1517, he gives the impression that he was tricked into entering the monastery. The truth of this account cannot be absolutely accepted. It reflects on the character of Erasmus already at this time, a vagueness which motivated him also in his religious controversies. "In the year 1517 he was trying to obtain a dispensation which would free him forever from the monastic vows and from the monastic habit. It was to his interest to describe his entrance in the monastery of Steyn in such a way as to prove that he had been fairly compelled to enter against his will. He thereby displays a trait in his character which removed him entirely from the principles of the

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50. Nichols, op. cit., pp. 8.9.

Devotio Moderna, for selfishness and duplicity were extremely rare habits among the followers of Gerard Groote."[51] Nevertheless, during his stay at Steyn, he seems to have been fairly satisfied with monasticism. During this time he wrote his Praise of Monasticism, which we shall consider below. It was not until afterwards that he experiences an ever-increasing aversion to monastic life.

The question of the reason for his becoming a monk comes to our attention. His account in the Grunnius letter cannot be altogether true, but there is probably much truth nevertheless. His guardian, Peter Winckel of Gouda, undoubtedly exerted some pressure on him. His brother Peter had been persuaded to enter the monastery earlier, but Erasmus held out until the winter of 1486 or 1487. There was really no alternative. With the inheritance from Gerard, his father, nearly exhausted, some way of providing a living had to be found. Since Erasmus was too weak physically to work, the monastery seemed the logical place to keep the body alive. Consequently, the account of Erasmus is somewhat colored, for a whole chain of circumstances led to his entering the monastery, together with the chance meeting with his old friend, Cornelius. Erasmus was about

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51. Hyma, op. cit., p. 148.

eighteen years old at this time, old enough to understand what he was doing. Besides, he enjoyed a year's probation. And there can be no doubt that in 1488, when he took the monastic vows, he knew the full implications of monastic life.

Erasmus gives a description of his life amid monastic surroundings. Speaking of himself in the letter to Grunnius in the third person, he says, "He did what imprisoned captives are wont to do: he solaced himself with his studies as far as this was allowed, for it had to be done secretly, though it was allowable to get drunk openly. Accordingly, he relieved the tedium of his captivity with literature until some unlooked for chance--some god from the machine (deus ex machina)--should show him a hope of deliverance."[52] Some of the monastic observances did not agree with him. Being frail of body, he could never accustom himself to the fasting and eating habits of the Order. Besides this, he reports that he could not sleep until late at night. By the time he would gain sleep, he would be roused for special spiritual exercises, and then he could not sleep again. From these descriptions of his health, Mangan concludes that Erasmus suffered from a type of nervous exhaustion. Because this may be a partial cause for his warped character

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52. Mangan, J.J., Life, Character, and Influence of Erasmus, Vol. I, p. 19.

in later life, we cite Mangan's opinion. "Surely never was any boy more exposed to the causes which make for neurasthenia--the prenatal anxiety of his mother, due to her uncertain relations with his father, the early loss of his parents, mental overwork, lack of exercise from sedentary occupation, unfavorable psychic influences due to the uncertainty of his future--all these were well calculated to undermine his emotional control. Hence his intense likes and dislikes, his morbid sensitiveness, his selfishness, his constant demands for sympathy, his self-centered attitude, his egotism, his readiness to speak ill of his nearest and dearest for some real or imaginary injury, all these and other defects not here mentioned point to the fact that he was a victim of chronic nerve exhaustion, which has been so often the curse of men of genius."[53]

While all of these circumstances made life constantly unpleasant, yet between 1486 and 1490 he seems to have been moderately happy. He was willing to forego the pleasures of the body in order to study the old masters and to improve his Latin. With several of the more intellectual monks, he often discussed the works of Valla. But during the last three years of his stay at Steyn, he became more and more dissatisfied. The library had some good books, but not the

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53. Ibid., p. 38.

ones which his soul burned to read. His interest lay in the classical writers. Although he had read and enjoyed the works of Jerome and Augustine at Deventer and 's-Hertogenbosch, he now wanted to revive classical scholarship. He now no longer delighted in the ascetic life of a monk, but longed for time to study, and pleasant surroundings in which to carry on his work.[54]

At this point one must consider the first written work of Erasmus. It is his De Contemptu Mundi, a work in praise of monastic life, presumably written in 1489 or 1490, soon after his entrance into the monastery at Steyn. The composition of such a work was the natural outgrowth of associations with the ascetic Brethren of the Common Life in the schools at Deventer and 's-Hertogenbosch. It is interesting to note the complete reversal of opinion in later years.

The work is addressed to a certain Jodocus, who is addressed as his nephew. It is unknown whether such a person ever lived, and it is more doubtful whether he was his nephew, since Peter was a monk, only slightly older than Erasmus, and unmarried. An illegitimate son of his brother Peter, supposing that such a person was born, could hardly be more than in infant at this time. At any rate, Erasmus

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54. See Hyma, op. cit., pp. 158-166.

expresses great love for Jodocus by showing interest in his welfare. "I am writing this letter in order to draw you away from the clamor of the world and into the monastery, that is, into a life of solitude and quiet."[55] He proceeds to show that it is dangerous for one's spiritual life to remain in the world. Temporal possessions are shown to be worthless. In the vein of the Imitation of Christ, he paints a sordid picture of the consequences of a life of the flesh. The monastic life is described as the greatest happiness, for one who remains in the world is still constantly beset by misery. All this woe and commiseration is forgotten in the solitude of a monastic life.

The life of Erasmus contradicts the principles of self-negation which he lays down here in his De Contemptu Mundi. Hyma places a correct estimation on the monastic opinions of Erasmus. "What did Erasmus renounce when he entered Steyn? Parental affection, love of brothers and sisters, friendship, temporal possessions? How did he try to offer sacrifices? Not a single letter written by him at Steyn reveals real love of God or Christ. Instead of speaking about the cross of Christ, he enumerates advantages gained for oneself. The cross, which saves through pain and death,

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55. Ibid., p. 175.

seems to have had practically no significance for Erasmus at Steyn. Humanism had obscured the real meaning of Christianity for him. The Italian humanists, although they outwardly accepted the tenets of the Christian faith, tried to harmonize this faith with the teachings of Greek, Roman, and even Oriental philosophers. We see Erasmus under the influence of humanism and drifting rapidly away from the principles of the Devotio Moderna. Perhaps we can now understand why Erasmus experienced such a sad fate after Luther grew famous. It may have been his selfishness that caused him so much bitter disappointment in the end. He wanted always to serve his own interests, never to suffer for a great cause. Perhaps this explains much in his later life which otherwise must seem an unsolved puzzle."[56]

Another work which was conceived and written largely during the monastery period in his life was The Book Against the Barbarians. Around the year 1490 Erasmus was strongly imbued with the love for humanism. This prompted him to begin the abovenamed work as an attack on scholastic philosophers and theologians. Erasmus left the monastery in October of 1493 to serve as secretary to the Bishop of Cambray. At that time, this work was nearly finished, but it was not completed in final form until the spring of 1494. It was

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56. Ibid., pp. 180-181.

not published until 1520, when Erasmus was associated with the famous printer, Froben, in Basle. Hyma says of the book, "It confirms very plainly the impression gained previously that Erasmus knew almost nothing about mysticism....He, an Augustinian monk, was prating about the holiest things in the universe (for him and his associates) in a bantering, jesting fashion, as if it were a matter of little consequence. We can see now why he became restless in the monastery and later derided monasticism. For him research counted more than faith and inspiration.... Primitive Christianity lost its charm for him. Not charity, but learning he sought, not self-denial, but fame, not humility, but honor."[57]

As stated above Erasmus did not find the life in the monastery very pleasant during his last three years at Steyn. Hence, when an escape presented itself, Erasmus was only too happy to accept it. The opportunity for escape from the ascetic life occurred when the Bishop of Cambray, Henry of Bergen, offered him the position of secretary. It is not known just how this offer was brought about, but Mangan suggests that "we are permitted to conjecture that his fame as a Latin scholar had traveled far and wide, and it was this accomplishment of his which made the Bishop of

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57. Ibid., p. 204.

Cambray offer him the position."[58] The Bishop was expecting to made a Cardinal, and therefore felt the need for a secretary who could help him in some of his literary activity. Either shortly after his entry into the Bishop's service,[59] or shortly before,[60] he was ordained a priest by the Bishop of Utrecht. All sources concur on the date of his ordination - April 25, 1492.

Thus the Bishop of Cambray became the first of a long line of patrons which Erasmus was to have in the course of his parasitic life. Through him, Erasmus made a number of influential friends. Henry of Bergen was the oldest living son of the lord of Bergen-op-Zoom. John, a younger brother, was a courtier in the court of Brussels. Anthony, another younger brother, became a close friend of Erasmus. He was Abbot of the great monastery of St. Bertin at St. Omer. Erasmus lost no time to use this position to his own interests and for his own ambitions.

Little is recorded of life with the Bishop, but his letters reveal that Erasmus held his patron in high regard. Besides being a member of the noble house of Brabant, he was also a man of high education and high character. He had performed the marriage ceremony between Philip the Fair

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58. Mangan, J.J., op. cit., p. 47.
59. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 18.
60. Mangan, J.J., op. cit., p. 48.

and Joanna of Spain, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. Perhaps the best and most obedient friend to the wishes of Erasmus whom he met at the court of the Bishop was James Batt. He had studied at the University of Paris. That his acquaintance was more than a friendship may be seem from Mangan's judgment of the relations between the two. "Never was there a more devoted, energetic, self-sacrificing friend than Batt; and never was there a more patient, abused, flattered, cajoled, wheedled, but always faithful and willing, victim."[61] This was typical of all Erasmus' friendships. He always had a purpose in making friends, viz., to advance his own ambitions.

A bright spot in his work at Bergen was the hope that he could see Italy when he should journey thence with his patron. However, this was not to be realized, for the Bishop cancelled his trip, presumably because of the lack of money. However, there must have been another reason, for the royal and influential contacts of the Bishop should have made it possible for him to obtain the nessessary funds. Whatever the reason, the Bishop no longer needed a Latin secretary for his delicate correspondence with the Church authorities. This became apparent to Erasmus, who now devised ways whereby the Bishop and his friends could advance

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61. Ibid., p. 50.

him in some other way. After consultation and pleading, the Bishop consented to permit Erasmus to enroll in the University of Paris. The Bishop gave him a moderate allowance to enable him to take a degree in Theology at Paris.

In 1494[62] or 1495[63] he departed to Paris, the most famous school north of the Alps. Through the Bishop of Cambray, he was admitted to the College of Montaigu, which was a charitable foundation connection to the University. The life here was more ascetic than at the palace of the Bishop. The food was bad, sanitary conditions were poor, and conveniences were at a minimum. This evoked critical comments from the pen of Erasmus, who seemed to have no sense of gratitude. "Men of genius are apt to take what they can get as a mere instalment of the debts which society owes to them."[64] Nevertheless, just as in the monastery at Steyn, the physical comforts were compensated by a wealth of intellectual acquaintances. Erasmus made friends with Gaguin, who was a French humanist and diplomat. Erasmus had the privilege of Gaguin's house and library, a great asset to the thirsty scholar.

After an illness, he returned to the Bishop's mansion for a time, visited Steyn, and then returned to Paris.

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62. Nichols, op. cit., p. 104.
63. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 19.
64. Froude, J. A., Life and Letters of Erasmus, p. 26.

This time he stayed in the town and took in pupils, to add to his income. Although he had made promises to the authorities of Steyn that he would study for the degree in Theology, he neglected these studies, in order to devote more time to literary studies and to making money to meet his increasing expenses. Among the first pupils were Thomas Grey and Robert Fisher, both young men of wealth and social status. He now began to study Greek, and used all his money for the purchase of Greek classics.[65] Through his attendance at the classes in which Greek was taught, he met many intellectuals.

One friend of this period was to exert a definite influence on his life. This mas was William Blunt, or Blount, later Lord Mountjoy, who was later made tutor of Henry VIII. Throughout his life, Mountjoy was one of the best patrons of Erasmus.[66] Erasmus became his private tutor in Paris. It was through him that he later was introduced to England, and to King Henry VIII.

Another person whom Erasmus, through proficient flattery, used to help him fulfil his ambitions was Anne of Veere, a

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65. "As he very succinctly puts it, 'I have devoted my whole energy to Greek literature, and, as fast as I shall receive money, I shall first buy Greek authors, and afterwards clothes.'" Mangan, op. cit., p. 75.
66. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 30.

daughter of a great noble from Holland and widow of Philip of Burgundy. James Batt had become the tutor of her son Adolph, and at Batt's invitation, Erasmus visited her at her castle of Tournehem. As usual, Erasmus hoped to get something from the kind and courteous lady. This time he hoped to secure money for a trip to Italy. This is shown in a letter written later, in 1501 to James Batt. "If you are heartily interested in my fortune, this is what you must do. You will make a fair excuse to my lady, that I cannot for very shame expose my own destitution before her, but that I am now in deepest poverty...; that a Doctor's degree cannot be so properly taken as in Italy; that Italy cannot be visited by so delicate a man without a considerable sum of money, especially as my reputation, whatever it be worth, as a man of learning, forbids my living in an altogether mean fashion. You will point out how much more credit I shall do her by my learning than the other divines whom she maintains.... Of course I am aware that there are many applicants for livings, but you can say that I am the one person, whom if she compares me with the rest, etc. etc. You know your old way of lying profusely in praise of your Erasmus."[67] Erasmus stopped to anything to satisfy his wishes.

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67. Nichols, op. cit., pp. 299-300.

Erasmus received the degree bachelor of theology in April, 1498. It was after this that he visited Anne of Veere. Mountjoy was planning a trip to Italy, but this did not materialize. Instead, Mountjoy took Erasmus to England in June, 1499.[68]

In many respects, this first visit to England was "the great turning point in his life."[69] He was in his early thirties at this time. At this time he moved in circles of men who were his intellectual equals, and who had definite goals and fixed objects in life. On the first visit, he met such illustrious men as Colet, More, Warham, and Fisher. He stayed with Lord Mountjoy at an English country estate, and found life there much to his liking as his letter show.[70]

At Mountjoy's country home at Greenwich, Erasmus met More for the first time, who also was responsible for his introduction into the Royal household at Eltham Palace. Here he met the children of Henry VII. Erasmus writes of this experience, "In the midst of the group stood Prince Henry, then nine years old, and having already

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68. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 59. Mangan and Smith both adduce 1499 as the first visit to England. Froude says it is "certain that Erasmus was in London at the beginning of December, 1497." Op. cit., p. 36. However, this is impossible, since the letter to Batt, which tells of final preparations for departure, was not written till May, 1499.
69. Mangan, op. cit., p. 94.
70. Nichols, op. cit., p. 203.

something royal in his demeanor, in which loftiness of mind was combined with singular culture. On his right was Margaret, about eleven years old, afterward married to James, King of Scots, and on his left played Mary, a child of four."[71] In the autumn of that year, Erasmus stayed at St. Mary's College at Oxford. The prior was the famous Richard Charnock. Here he met the famous John Colet, with whom he had corresponded several times before the meeting. This meeting budded into an admiration which lasted until the time of Colet's death.

In December Erasmus returned to London, and on January 27, 1500, he was at Dover, ready to cross the channel back to the continent. This date is established by the fact that Erasmus was not allowed to carry with him the English money that had been bestowed upon him.[72] He landed at Boulogne, and immediately went to his friend Batt at Tournehem. Then he departed for Paris.

When he arrived at Paris, he at once undertook arduous literary work. He now wrote his Adages, of which he says in the preface, "I was induced to undertake the work, partly at your kind urging, together with the flattering entreaties of Prior Richard,..and partly by the hope that my labor, if not a source of glory to the author, might be profitable

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71. Ibid., p. 201.
72. Ibid., p. 227.

and gratifying to its readers--to those surely who are disgusted with a commonplace style of conversation, and are desirous of a more graceful and polished mode of expression...."[73] Of course, Erasmus had other reasons for writing the work at this time. Van Loon as an interesting section on this subject:[74]

> "Impressed by such high-sounding titles as Adagia (from the Classics), and Erasmus' Colloquies, we are apt to overlook the fact that these volumes belonged to that curious category of books which today are known as 'How to' literature. The sixteenth century publishers, being just as bright as our own, had long since discovered that there were fortunes to be made out of those handy reference books which saved the average citizen the trouble of going to the original sources.
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> "The Renaissance had made everybody conscious of the necessity of being considered a pretty good scholar. In our own commercial world, if one hopes to succeed, one must learn 'how to make friends' or how to handle one's income tax. In the year of grace 1500, the ambitious young man who hoped to make his way must quote the Classics with ease and eloquence, must know at least ten different ways of writing a bread-and-butter letter, and must have a fitting proverb for any situation that might arise. Such volumes therefore were bound to be best sellers and that was the reason Erasmus wrote them, and while they never made him rich, they at least kept him in that decent amount of comfort which he had to enjoy if he were to function to the best of his ability."

Of the success of the Adages, Smith says, "The Adages soon became a standard work, used and quoted by everyone with any

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73. Mangan, op. cit., p. 124. This was addressed to Mountjoy, to whom the book was dedicated.
74. Van Loon, Hendrik Willem, Concerning the Background and Personality of the Famous Scholar and Author of the Praise of Folly, Dr. Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, p. 51.

pretension to scholarship. Luther quoted it thirteen times within a single year in his correspondence, and from this compilation derived some of his political axioms. The style and thought of Montaigne and La Boetie were nourished on it. Conrad Gesner richly decked his "Natural History of Animals" with proverbs about brute nature culled from the humanist. The great Elizabethans, Bacon and Shakespeare, knew it and used it."[75]

During the time in which he composed the Adages, he was also busily occupied with the study of Greek. Hebrew, also interested him for a time, but he soon gave it up, probably because it would not be an instrument for the reading of the classics which he so much admired.

After a short stay in Orleans, he probably returned to Paris. Then he resided in his home country for about three years. In autumn of 1502, he settled at Louvain, and remained for about two years.

Sometime during his stay in the Netherlands, he wrote his work, Enchiridion Militis Christiani, "which, more than any other, gave a complete and rounded exposition of 'the philosophy of Christ,' as he loved to call the form of religion taught by him throughout life."[76] In this work, Erasmus may be said to have shown his colors for the first time. One can

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75. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 46.
76. Ibid., p. 52.

already see at this time, about twenty years before the actual Lutheran Reformation began, the type of compromise Erasmus was adopting between paganism and Christianity. As a child of the church and of the Renaissance, he was faced with the problems of "cult and dogma." Smith shows how Erasmus tried to mold the two into a consistent system:[77]

> "In working out a consisten system, Erasmus was confronted by two problems, that of cult and that of dogma. His attitude to the former was to let it alone, relying on holiness of character to purify and vivify it. 'External worship is not condemned,' he wrote in his Enchiridion, 'but God is pleased only be the inward piety of the worshipper.' Luther, and still more Calvin, reformed the ceremonies and rites of the Church according to their conceptions of Biblical precedent and precept; Erasmus had no such design, and for many reasons. In the first place he was too historical-minded not to cherish traditional forms. Secondly, he was under no bibliolatrous prepossession, such as would lead him to regard everything not sanctioned by a specific text as wrong. Thirdly, he was unwilling to give offense, and finally, he regarded the whole matter of cult as one of subordinate concern. Fasting, sacerdotal celibacy, the communion in one kind, and all the rest of the Church law did not harm, if stress were not put upon such matters.
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> "In the face of dogma, Erasmus was a child of the Renaissance. It is too much to say either that he neglected it or regarded it as of minor importance; but it is conspicuously true that with him dogma had not the supreme place that it had with the Reformers and with the inquisitors. While at times he hovered on the verge of doubt of some doctrines, or admitted the possibility of doubt in others without the brand of heresy, yet he always sought and finally yielded to the authority of the Bible, and, in the second place, to that of the Church, as the voice of

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77. Ibid., pp. 54.55.

> either could be reasonably interpreted. As with other men, so with Erasmus, we find slight inconsistencies and variations in his statements. But on the whole his attitude is plain, and it is far more modern than was that of the Reformers. He welcomed criticism and philosophy as aids to religion; they dreaded reason as a foe to faith."

The Enchiridion depicts the warfare of Christian life, describing the weapons of the Christian, and shows what is the true wisdom. He sketches the conflict between flesh and spirit, between the sensual and the moral. Luther knew this work, and a comparison between the Liberty of a Christian Man and the Enchiridion will show some resemblance. This should not, however, be overemphasized.

Soon after this, probably in the summer of 1505, Erasmus journeyed to England a second time. Henry VII had promised him a benefice, as we see from a letter to Servatius.[78] On this visit, he made new friends. Archbishop Warham of Canterbury proved to be a munificent patron, and often presented Erasmus with gifts in money to sustain him. With John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, Erasmus formed an intimacy which lasted throughout his life. He renewed his acquaintance with Colet, whom he had met on the first visit.

Yet Erasmus would not be satisfied until he could make a trip to Italy. One of his reasons for coming to England a second time was probably to amass funds to take this trip. With this end in view, he worked feverishly at translating

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78. Nichols, op. cit., p. 399.

Greek authors. The most important of these was the translation of Lucian.[79] But in addition, a stroke of fortune came his way when he had the opportunity to accompany the two sons of John Baptista Boerio, the King's physician, to Italy, and supervise their education. This facilitated the journey, enabling him to travel in comparative luxury. After a stay in Paris, the party journeyed on. At Turin, he received his degree as Doctor of Theology on September 4, 1506.

Most of the time in Italy was spent at Bologna, where he studied and remained with his pupils. While here, he was attracted by the fame of the printer Aldus Manutius, of Venice, who was not only a printer, but also a scholar in the classical languages. Erasmus wrote him, requesting that he publish some of his works. In November, 1507, Erasmus moved there, remaining for about a year. Here a new edition of Adages was published.[80] At Venice he moved in scholarly circles, and became acquainted with Jerome Aleander, who was later to be the papal delegate to the Diet of Worms. After about a year at Venice, Erasmus went to the university town of Padua, where he tutored Alexander Stuart, son of James IV of Scotland. In December, 1508, he went to Ferrara, taking the royal son with him. In the spring of 1509, Erasmus went to

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79. Mangan, op. cit., p. 206.
80. Smith, op. cit., p. 107.

Rome. Here he met Cardinal de' Medici, who later became Clement VII. He was received with acclaim, and enjoyed life in Rome, for he praised the liberty, the libraries, and the friendships of writers and scholars.[81]

The stay in Rome came to an end soon after the accession of Henry VIII to the throne of England on May 22, 1509. A letter from Mountjoy, dated May 27 of the same year, praises the new prince. Mountjoy stated that the Archbishop of Canterbury promised Erasmus a benefice, if he should return.[82] The praise heaped upon him by Mountjoy and the Archbishop, and the hope that his former friendship with Henry VIII would prove beneficial to him were factors which guided his decision to return to England.

Another point which Mangan makes is that the illegitimate birth of Erasmus barred him from any office "within the gift of the Roman Curia."[83] Another possible reason for his leaving Italy is the book which was probably taking shape in his mind, The Praise of Folly. This was "little calculated to delight the souls of the Roman Court as at that time constituted."[84]

Thus we find Erasmus in England for the third time. He arrived there late in 1509. For about two years his life is

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81. Ibid., p. 115.
82. Nichols, op. cit., pp. 457-460.
83. Mangan, op. cit., p. 288.
84. Ibid.

shrouded in mystery. Soon after his return from Italy, the Praise of Folly was written. Erasmus writes in the Preface to this work, that the idea for the book came when he was leaving Italy. As he tells Thomas More, to whom the work is dedicated, he thought of his English friends, and wanted to write something for them in honor of his return to England. The name More associated in his mind the word Moria, which means folly. Thus the name Moriae Encomium was born.[85]

Smith says that this work gave Erasmus an international reputation.[86] It was widely read in his day, and remained popular also years after his death. In it, Folly is represented as the impulse of a child. She is a gossip, without whom society would disintegrate. He bases this on the assumption that a wise person would not take the risk of marrying and rearing children. This is the role of Folly. Folly is responsible for many of the arts and for superstition. Folly is the responsibility also for the stupidity and ignorance of the monks, kings, cardinals, and popes. He implies that the Church has its deadliest enemies within itself. "As if the Church had any deadlier enemies than wicked Prelates, who not only suffer Christ to run out of request for want of preaching him, but hinder his spreading by their multitudes of Laws, merely

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85. Erasmus, Praise of Folly, ed. by Van Loon, pp. 91-92.
86. Smith, op. cit., p. 117.

contriv'd for their own profit, corrupt him by their forc'd Expositions, and murder him by the evil example of their pestilent life."[87] He goes on to show that Folly and Christianity have something in common, and adduces as proof this, that there are more boys and girls and women who are devout in their religious life than men.

Though the work was finished in 1509, it was not published until 1511, when Erasmus went to Paris to see it through the press. He was to see forty editions of this work come off the press during his lifetime.[88]

After his return from Paris, he was installed at Queen's College, Cambridge, probably upon the invitation of Bishop Fisher, who was Chancellor. Here Erasmus taught Greek, and later accepted the chair of divinity, lecturing on Jerome and probably other subjects. Between the years 1511 and 1514, he completed his work on the New Testament, the Letters of Jerome, and Seneca. He then left England, and after some traveling, he went to Basle, where he had his New Testament published by Froben. It came out in March, 1516. Besides the original Greek, notes and comments were added. Accompanying it was a new Latin translation, which was a correction of the Vulgate.

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87. Erasmus, Praise of Folly, p. 219.
88. Smith, op. cit., p. 124.

When the New Testament was finished, he returned to England. Here he obtained his final dispensation from wearing the canonical dress from Pope Leo X. Then he again went to Basle, where he saw his second edition of the Greek New Testament through the press in 1519. After living at Louvain for a time, he settled in Basle in 1521. Here he was active in working with the printer, Froben, on editions of the Church Fathers, including Jerome, Cyprian, Augustine, Chrysostom, Basil, Origen, Hilarius, Irenaeus, and Ambrose. In 1529 he left Basle and lived at Freiburg until 1525, when he returned to Basle, where he died in 1525.[89] (1536?)

89. Encyclopedia Brittannica, Vol. VIII, p. 678.

PART III

ERASMUS AND THE GERMAN REFORMATION

For some years, especially since the publication of The Praise of Folly, Erasmus was considered the leader in reform movements in the Church. His fame had spread throughout Europe as a leader in purifying the learning of the Church and in abolishing the abuses which had crept in. The attitude of Erasmus had been one of an intellectual nature, aimed at the educated class of people, rather than at the masses of merchants and peasants. The type of reform advocated by Erasmus was not one of a religious nature, as was that of Luther's. Though Erasmus knew well Thomas a' Kempis, Groote, Gansfort, and other mystics and their works, he remained a humanistic rationalist in his attitude. Again, Erasmus would never have consented to take part in a reform movement which might have meant a split with the Church. He always frowned upon heresy, as that of Wyclif and Hus, because it was not consistent with common sense. Erasmus favored more compromising in difficult situations, especially if danger of of life and limb was an issue.

Now a new reformer enters upon the scene. It has been disputed among scholars that Erasmus had any influence upon Luther. That he did have some influence upon the German Reformer, however secondary in importance that may seem, one cannot deny. Luther read the works of the most popular writer in the early part of the sixteenth century. Luther read the Adagia, and probably quoted from it.[90] The Enchiridion may have given the impulse to the campaign in Wittenberg against the worship of saints. Luther read the Praise of Folly, as well as the volumes of Erasmus' letters which appeared from time to time.[91]

The greatest influence of Erasmus upon Luther was exerted by the Greek New Testament, which became the guide in New Testament interpretation for Luther for some years to come. This work of Erasmus was the chief factor in pointing Luther back to the original in seeking the truth of Scripture. It was a criticism of Luther concerning the editing of Rom. 1, 17 that probably brought Luther to the attention of Erasmus for the first time. Luther asked Spalatin, the secretary and chaplain of Elector Frederick, to communicate his criticism to Erasmus. Luther wrote, "I fear he does not sufficiently reveal Christ and the grace of

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90. Smith, Preserved, op. cit., p. 213.
91. Ibid.

God,...for human considerations prevail with him much more than divine."[92] Luther knew that for Erasmus the doctrine of justification by the free grace of God was still obscured. This took place in the early part of 1517.

Erasmus took no note of the letter from Spalatin concerning so obscure a man as the lowly Augustinian monk at Wittenberg. But this attitude could not abide for long, because the printing and nailing of Luther's Ninety Five Theses soon caused a stir in all of Europe. There is some evidence concerning the early reaction of Erasmus to the work of Luther. In July, 1518, he writes, "Luther has given many admirable admonitions, but I would that he had expressed himself more courteously....Still, so far, he has certainly done good."[93] To John Lang, the friend of Luther, Erasmus wrote on October 17, 1518, "I hear that Eleutherius is approved of all good men, but it is said that his writings are unequal. I think his Theses will please all, except a few about Purgatory, which they who make their living from it don't want taken from them. I have seen Prierias's bungling answer. I see that the monarchy of the Roman high priest, (as that see now is), is the plague of Christendom, though it is praised through thick and thin by

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92. Ibid., p. 215.
93. Lilly, Renaissance Types, p. 152.

shameless preachers. Yet I hardly know whether it is expedient to touch upon this open sore, for that is the duty of princes. But I fear they conspire with the pontiff for part of the spoils. I wonder what has come over Eck to begin a battle with Eleutherius."[94]

Inspired by the zeal of Luther, a number of humanists now published through Froben in Basle a collection of the Reformer's writings. The anthology was sold through several editions, and eventually reached Erasmus. Because of the strong terms used, Erasmus asked Froben not to publish any more of Luther's writings.[95]

Luther probably did not know this. He had no reason at all to suspect that Erasmus was in any way questioning his activity in Wittenberg. "Erasmus kept inciting Luther by little bits of praise and commendation, which were unquestionably very grateful to the younger man. Luther speaks with evident pleasure of a letter which he had received from a friend in France, in which Erasmus was quoted as saying: 'I fear Martin will be the victim of his own uprightness.' This continued praise of himself aroused in Luther a desire to be on more intimate terms with Erasmus, deeming that his friendship was worth cultivating."[96] Luther, probably en-

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94. Smith, op. cit., p. 217.
95. Ibid., p. 219.
96. Mangan, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 114.

couraged by the bits of praise which he had received from Erasmus, and motivated also by a desire to know just what the attitude of Erasmus was, wrote him a letter on March 18, 1519. Because of its great historical importance, we cite it here:[97]

> "Martin Luther to Erasmus of Rotterdam, Greeting. Many times have I spoken with you and you with me, Erasmus, our glory and our hope, and as yet we are not mutually acquainted. Is not this a marvel, or rather instead of a marvel, is it not an every-day occurrence? For who is there whose entire inmost thoughts are not dominated by Erasmus, who is not instructed and controlled by Erasmus? Of course, I speak of those who esteem literature rightly. And I derive much satisfaction from the fact that, among the other gifts with which Christ has endowed you, this also is to be counted, namely, that you displease many; and hence I am wont to argue that we may thus discern the gifts of a loving from those of an angry God. Therefore I congratulate you because, while you please all good men in the highest degree, you none the less displease those who desire to be the only great ones, and who have excessive wish to please.
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> "But how foolish am I who approach such a man as you are with my hands unwashed, and without any reverent and decorous preface, as if I were one of your most familiar acquaintances, when in reality I am speaking as one stranger to another. But out of your kindness you will attribute this either to my love for you, or my inexperience, since, having spent my days among the sophists, I have not learned how to write to a really learned man. Otherwise with how many letters already would I have wearied you! Nor would I have permitted it that you should always converse with me by letter only.
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> "Now, since I have learned from that most worthy man Fabricius Capito that my name was known to you through those trifles of mine on indulgences, and from your most recent preface to the Enchiridion

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97. Ibid., pp. 114-116.

that my essays have not only been seen but also accepted by you, I am compelled to acknowledge, even by this most uncouth letter, that wondrous spirit of yours, which enriches my mind and the minds of all; although I am aware that you will hold it of the very slightest moment that I thus in a letter show you that I am loving and grateful, since you are amply content that my mind shall glow in your regard gratefully and affectionately, but privily and before God, just as we deem it sufficient to glean your thoughts and your good offices from your books without your being aware of it, and without either letter or personal speech from you. Neither my modesty nor my conscience will suffer me not to express my gratitude to you even in words, especially since my own name has ceased to be obscure, lest my silence might be deemed malevolent by someone, or be thought to augur disastrously for the future. And so, dear Erasmus, amiable man that you are, recognize me if you see fit as your little brother in Christ, one who is truly most devoted and attached to you, but meriting by his ignorance nothing more than to be buried in a corner, and to be unacquainted with the same sun and sky as you, a thing which with no tardy longing I have desired, since I am fittingly conscious of my poor powers. But I know not by what mischance things have fallen out to the contrary, and I am compelled to my deep shame to have my ignominies and my unfortunate ignorance exposed and paraded even before learned men.

"Philip Melanchthon is doing finely, except that our combined efforts hardly suffice to keep him from destroying his health in his excessive craze for literature. He burns with the fervor of youth to be all and to do all for everybody. You will be doing a kindness if you admonish him to save himself for us and good literature, for with him safe and sound I know nothing from which we shall derive greater hope. Father Andreas Carlstadt wishes to be remembered to you, venerating Christ in you. May the Lord Jesus preserve you for all eternity, dearest Erasmus. Amen.

"I have been verbose, but you will consider that it does not behoove you to be ever reading learned epistles; at times you must become weak with the weak.

Brother Martin Luther."

This letter must have shown Erasmus that both he and Luther had some common ideas. Yet, he realized that he must tread carefully, for the work of Luther might lead to a conflict with Rome. Erasmus had also learned that the Elector of Saxony, who was a key figure in the election of the successor to Emperor Maximilian, was protecting Luther from the disciplinary measures of the Roman Curia. To win the Elector's favor, Erasmus dedicated to him an edition of the historian Suetonius which he was publishing. The Elector was pleased, and Erasmus felt that he could say that what he had heard of Luther was to his credit, although he could not make a safe estimate of Luther, because he had not read all his writings. Soon after the correspondence with the Elector, on May 30, 1519, Erasmus answered Luther's letter:[98]

> "Erasmus of Rotterdam to Father Martin Luther, Greeting. Dearest brother in Christ. Your letter was most pleasing to me, showing as it does the keenness of your mind and your Christian spirit. I can hardly tell you in words what commotion your writings have occasioned here. So far, I have been unable to pluck that most unfounded suspicion from the minds of some that your works have been written with my assistance, and that I am the ringleader of your faction as they style it. They deemed this a good excuse for stifling good literature which they regard with a deadly hatred as something which might detract from the majesty of theology, for of this they make more account than they do of Christ, and at the same time make it an opportunity to assail me whom they regard as influential in advancing the cause of learning. The whole movement is carried on by clamor, brazenness, trickery, detraction, and calumny, as that had I myself not seen it, nay, felt it myself, I should never have believed anyone who said theologians could become so insane. You might say that it was a deadly pestilence. And yet

98. Mangan, op. cit., II, pp. 116-118.

this poisonous thing, though springing from a few, has crept into many, so that a great part of this crowded University is infected with the malady.

"I have asserted that you are the veriest stranger to me, that I have not yet read your books, and that as a consequence I have neither censured nor approved anything that may be in them. I have only advised some not to be so spitefully vehement in public about books which they have not read, but to leave the decisions to those whose judgment is of the most value. And I have warned them to reflect whether it was expedient to bring before promiscuous assemblies such matters as these which could be better refuted in books or discussed among scholars, especially when with unanimous consent the author's personal character was commended. But it was all to no purpose, for up to the present they rant and rave with their onesided and notorious disputes. How often has peace been agreed upon between us! How often have they on the most groundless suspicion excited fresh disturbances! And they think they are theologians. Those who are attached to the court here hate these theologians, and that is blamed upon me. All the bishops are well disposed towards me. They (the theologians) place no trust in books; their only hope of victory lies in their calumnies, which I disregard, relying on the consciousness of my own rectitude. Towards you they are becoming a little milder. They fear my pen, a fact which is indicative of their evil consciences, for I would certainly paint them in their native hues, and serve them right, did not the teaching and example of Christ restrain me. Wild beasts are made gentle by kindness; these men are rendered savage by good deeds.

"There are those in England who think highly of your writings, men of the highest rank. There are some here too who favor you, among them being the Bishop of Liege. As for me, I keep myself uncompromised, to what extent I can, in order the better to help the revival of learning. And it seems to me that more is to be gained by such courteous restraint than by violence. It was thus that Christ brought the world to His sway. It was thus that Paul abrogated the Jewish law by drawing out all things unto allegory. It is more expedient to inveigh against

those who abuse the Pope's authority than against the Popes themselves, and I hold the same opinion with regard to kings. The Schools are not so much to be despised as recalled to sensible studies. Of beliefs which are too well accepted to be abruptly torn from the people's minds, it is better to use in debate reasons which are strong and convincing rather than to make dogmatic affirmations. It is better to disregard the violent contentions of some people than to refute them. We must everywhere be careful not to say or do anything tending to arrogance or partisanship, for that I deem acceptable to the spirit of Christ. Meanwhile we must guard our minds from being corrupted by anger, hatred, or vainglory, for such defects are wont to lie hidden in the very heart of piety. I do not however admonish you to do these things, but advise you to do always what you are doing.

"I have turned over a few pages of your Commentaries on the Psalms; they please me exceedingly, and I trust they will prove very useful....Farewell."

One thing about this letter strikes us immediately. Erasmus is steering the middle course. He does not support Luther with an active enthusiasm, but merely lauds him for his reform endeavors. In polite terms he warns Luther against violence against the powers that be, both kings and popes. Erasmus was guided by his own personal interest in taking this attitude. "He well knew that this letter of his to Luther would be printed and closely scanned by friend and foe, and that though written for Luther, it would go the rounds of an ever-increasing circle. So he perceived that he must be on his guard."[99] But Luther was not deceived by the tone of the letter. He ceased correspondence with Erasmus, and did

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99. Ibid., p. 119.

not look for support from him.

"Even at this time it is plain that Erasmus was trying to steer a straight course between the Lutheran Scylla and the Roman Charybdis."[100] Some thought that he was turning against the Reform, and his colleagues at Louvain believed that he was becoming a Lutheran. This made life uncomfortable for Erasmus. In addition to this, he became even more involved when his letter to Luther was published. The Bishop of Liege was angered by the statement of Erasmus that he favored Luther. The inquisitor, James Hochstraten, found the letter, and on its basis was ready to convict Erasmus of favoring Luther.[101]

Erasmus could see that conditions were nearing a crisis. He was interested mainly in keeping his cause of sound learning out of the religious quarrel. But he was sufficiently interested to help protect Luther in a measure, because he felt a certain sympathy with a man who, as he himself had done, was fighting against the Roman papacy. His plan was one of silencing both sides. For support in this mediating policy, he turned to Albert of Hohenzollern, the Cardinal Archbishop of Mainz. He wrote him a letter on October 19, 1519, stating that he was a stranger to Luther, and that he had tried to prevent the publication of Luther's works. He voices the opinion that it would be better to have a Christian, as Luther,

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100. Smith, op. cit., p. 223.
101. Ibid., p. 224.

corrected, than to destroy him. Instead, the enemies of Luther had acted in extreme ways, for they called him a heretic because he did not properly evaluate the indulgences and the church fathers.[102]

This letter was intrusted to Ulrich von Hutten, who was at that time attached to the court of the Archbishop of Mains as secretary. He allowed it to be printed, an action which displeased Erasmus. "He even went so far as to accuse Hutten of tampering with the wording of the letter to the extent of inserting the word 'our' before the name of Luther, in order to give to the world a better idea of the intimacy of the relation in which Erasmus stood with regard to Luther."[103]

Another factor which brought the issue closer to a decision for Erasmus was the bull, Exsurge Domine, which was signed on June 15, 1520. This was a threat to excommunicate Luther, if he would not recant sixty days after its arrival in Germany. In September of 1520 Eck posted the bull in Brandenburg and Merseburg. At the same time, the papal envoy Aleander was sent from Rome to the Netherlands to meet Charles, who was coming from Spain to be crowned emperor, to obtain his support in suppressing Luther. This intensification of suppresive action against Luther caused Erasmus to use all his power to prevent extreme measures. He met King Henry VIII of England

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102. Mangan, op. cit., p. 152-153.
103. Ibid., p. 154.

during the summer, and "talked some of writing against Luther, but more of means of making peace in the Church."[104] This conference was not successful.

A bitter blow came when Charles V issued a decree against Lutherans in the Netherlands, as a result of the machinations of papal envoy Alcander. Still greater was the blow which came at Louvain, where the papal legate burned Luther's books and attacked Erasmus publicly. Another came with the denunciation of Ulrich von Hutten. Hutten was in favor of supporting Luther violently, and could not condone the mediating measure of Erasmus, which he termed "cowardly."[105]

While in Cologne for his conference with Hutten, he had an opportunity to confer with Elector Frederick at the occasion of the coronation of the Emperor. An account of the meeting is given by Seckendorf, the Lutheran historian, of which we quote in part:[106]

> "The Elector desired that Erasmus should speak in his own language, that is Belgian, but he preferred to use Latin; this the Prince understood, but replied through Spalatin. He then tells that the Elector sought the opinion of Erasmus concerning Luther; Erasmus, first closing his lips with a smack, and hesitating, put off his reply. The Elector, as he had the custom of doing if he were engaged with some serious matter, regarded him with wide-open eyes, gravely; then Erasmus burst forth in these words: 'Luther has sinned in two things: namely, because he has touched the Pontiff's crown and the monks' bellies.'"

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104. Smith, op. cit., p. 230.
105. Seckendorf, Commentarius historicus et apologeticus de Lutheranismo, I, trans. by Mangan, op. cit., p. 159.
106. Smith, Ibid., p. 233.

Almost immediately after this interview, Erasmus drew up his Axioms, in which he showed some sympathy with Luther and his desire to be of service in the reform work. He wrote, "That the origin of the persecution was hatred of learning and love of tyranny; that the method of procedure corresponded with the origin, consisting, namely, of clamor, conspiracy, bitter hatred, and virulent writing; that the agents put in charge of the prosecution were suspect; that all good men and lovers of the Gospel were very little offended with Luther, that certain men had abused the easy-going kindness of the pope."[107] Frederick is reported as saying after he had seen the Axioms, "What sort of a man is Erasmus anyway? One can never know where he is."[108]

Yet, in spite of his seeming agreement with Luther, he tried to remain neutral. To Reuchlin he wrote, "I prefer to be a spectator rather than an actor, not because I refuse to incur the risks of battle for the cause of Christ, but because I see the work is above my mediocrity....I always try to separate your case and that of learning from that of Luther."[109]

Now, however, the history of the events between Luther and the Pope was soon to bring about the showing of the true colors of Erasmus. Luther did not recant; instead, he publicly

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107. Smith, op. cit., p. 236.
108. Ibid.
109. Ibid., p. 238.

burned the papal bull, Exsurge Domine, on December 10. On January 6, 1521, the bull of excommunication was signed, and was brought to Worms on May 6, "The failure of Erasmus's plan of arbitration, made evident by the course of events during the winter of 1520-1521, marks a turning-point in the humanist's attitude toward the Reformation. Though he could never have been called a follower of Luther, he had hitherto labored to protect him from unjust persecution and to give him a fair hearing. He believed that if the Saxon would only be moderate he might accomplish much good, and, for the sake of peace, he wrote him no less than five personal letters, and appealed also to his friends, to urge him to apply himself to the cause of reform with a mind uncorrupted by hatred or violence."[110]

The rash action of Luther in the burning of the papal bull, and the violent language, typical of Luther, found in the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, were too much for the sensitive scholar. Always of a gentle nature, and antipathetic to dogmatic determination, this does not surprise us. He writes to Everard, of Holland:[111]

> "With what odium Luther burdens the cause of learning and that of Christianity! As far as he can he involves all men in his business. Everyone confessed

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110. Smith, op. cit., p. 240
111. Ibid., p. 241.

> that the Church suffered under the tyranny of certain men, and many were taking counsel to remedy this state of affairs. Not this man has arisen to treat the matter in such a way that he fastens the yoke on us more firmly, and that no one dares to defend even what he has said well. Six months ago I warned him to beware of hatred. The Babylonian Captivity has alienated many from him, and he daily puts forth more atrocious things."

While Erasmus ostentatiously criticizes Luther because he is interfering with the public good by damaging the cause of good and sound learning, he felt the peculiar position in which he was placed. An open defense of Luther would mean the Inquisition. Opposition to Luther would mean opposition from the powerful German princes, who were behind Luther, in particular, the powerful Elector Frederick of Saxony. Knowing this, we can appreciate the following letter written to Richard Pace in 1521:[112]

> "Would that some deus ex machina might make a happy ending to this drama so inauspiciously begun by Luther! He himself gives his enemies the ear by which they transfix him, and acts as if he did not wish to be saved, though frequently warned by me and his friends to tone down the sharpness of his style.... I cannot sufficiently wonder at the spirit in which he has written. Certainly he has loaded the cultivators of literature with heavy odium. Many of his teachings and admonitions were splendid, but would that he had not vitiated these good things by mixing intolerable evils! If he had written all things piously, yet I should not have courage to risk my life for the truth. All men have not strength for martyrdom. I fear lest, if any tumult should arise, I should imitate Peter (in denying the Lord). I

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112. Ibid., p. 243.

> follow the just decrees of popes and emperors because it is right; I endure their evil laws because it is safe. I think this is allowable to good men, if they have no hope of successful resistance. Christ, whose cause my little writings have ever served, will look after me. After Luther has been burned to ashes, and when some not too sincere inquisitors and theologians shall take glory to themselves for having burned him, good princes should take care not to allow these gentlemen to rage against the innocent and meritorious, and let us not be so carried away with hatred for Luther's bad writings that we lose the fruit of his good ones."

When the Emperor opened the Diet of Worms in January, 1521, Erasmus declined an invitation to attend. He still tried to use his influence in favor of moderation, when he heard that Aleander wanted to condemn Luther unheard. He wrote to influential men, among them a Cardinal and a Bishop. During the sessions of the Diet, Erasmus stayed at Louvain, and later at Antwerp. He was very cautious regarding his personal safety, and had good reason to be careful, especially after May 6, when Aleander published the bull Decet Pontificem Romanum, which placed Luther under the ban of the Church, and after May 26, when the Emperor signed the Edict of Worms, which placed a ban on Luther, his works, and his followers. This caused Erasmus to move to Anderlecht.

"The parting of the ways had now come; one must be either with the Reform or against it. Erasmus' continued efforts to keep on good terms with both sides only brought him the ill [113]

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113. Ibid., p. 249.

will of both." Now, in order to clear himself of any connection with Luther, he wrote to powerful friends throughout the summer and autumn. To his opponents at Louvain, he started a dialogue On Ending the Lutheran Affair, which was not finished. In it he tried to apologize for any impressions he might have given for having ever supported Luther.

Erasmus feared most Aleander, who was supervising the persecution of the Protestants in the Netherlands. Aleander was denouncing Erasmus as a heretic and as a rabble rouser. Aleander accused Erasmus of having written Luther's Babylonian Captivity. Yet, the papal legate offered to Erasmus a bishopric, if he would write against Luther.[114] This did not convince Erasmus, for he still retained the inner fear that Aleander would engineer a way to destroy him. This fear increased when he heard of the arrest of a heretic at Antwerp, who had implicated Erasmus in the sale of Luther's books.[115] Therefore, under the protection of Franz von Sickingen and his soldiers, he moved to Basle. On this journey, he met his friend Capito, who was still trying to induce Luther to write more mildly.

The break between Erasmus and Luther was apparent at the publication of the Epistolae ad diversos, in November, 1521.

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114. Ibid., p. 253.
115. Ibid.

This collection of letters was to give the impression that Erasmus stood entirely apart from the Reformation in Germany. When Luther saw the volume, he wrote, "In this book of letters Erasmus now at length shows that he is the hearty enemy of Luther and his doctrine though with wily words he pretends to be a friend."[116]

After Erasmus moved to Basle, the course of events was such that each one led Erasmus to turn more and more against Luther and to aline himself with the Roman Church. The first incident was the election of Adrian VI to the throne of the papacy. He had been an acauaintance of Erasmus at Utrecht, when both were attending the cathedral school there, in the days of their boyhood. "Erasmus heard the news of Adrian's election, we are led to believe, with mingled pleasure and apprehension--pleasure in that the new Pope was a fellow-countryman and a sort of old acauaintance, apprehension in that Adrian might insist on his writing against Luther, and at the same time give a hint to the Emperor to compel a quick obedience."[117] Adrian became Pope in January, 1522. Erasmus became fearful during the following six months that some of his enemies might whisper things into the ear of the new Pope concerning his former associations with the Reformers, and therefore

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116. Ibid., p. 256.
117. Mangan, op. cit., p. 197.

wrote him in September, 1522, telling him that he had dedicated an edition of Arnobius to the Pope. "As a pledge of my zeal and affection towards you, I send you my edition of Arnobius, which happened to be the work I had in hand when this most joyful news was brought to me about the elevation of Adrian VI to be our ruler and guide....The sincerity of my conscience and your own wise judgment are well known to me; but, since I observe what influence evil tongues possess in this age, it seems right for me to furnish your Holiness with a sure antidote against their virulence, so that, if anything has been told you about Erasmus, you will flatly reject it, or, if you have your doubts, that you will suspend judgment until you have received my defense."[118]

To this the Pope answered December 1 of the same year, exorting Erasmus to use his gifts to suppress Luther. "Rise, rise in aid of God's cause, and employ the distinguished gifts of your mind in His behalf, as you have done hitherto. Think of this, that it is in your power, with the help of God, to restore to the path of rectitude a large part of those who have been corrupted by Luther, and to confirm in the Faith those who have not yet fallen away, while those who are vacillating and near to falling may be completely preserved therefrom."[119]

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118. Ibid., p. 198.
119. Mangan, op. cit., p. 202.
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Again the Pope wrote, on January 23, 1523, urging Erasmus to come to Rome, and intensifying his request that Erasmus take up the cudgel against Luther. To this Erasmus answered in a lengthy way, explaining that his health and age would make it impossible for him to come to Rome. At the same time, Erasmus points out that the Lutheran heresy cannot be destroyed by violence. Erasmus is still trying to achieve his policy of mediation and reconciliation, which plan he reveals to Adrian in the following letter. He writes: "I observe it to be favored by many that this evil should be remedied by severity, but I fear that the event may hereafter prove this to have been an unwise counsel. I see a greater chance than I could wish that the matter may end in an atrocious slaughter....The malady has spread too deeply to be cured either by knife or cautery. I admit that formerly among the English the faction of Wickliffe was thus stifled by the power of the kings, but that sect was really stifled rather than eradicated."[120] On September 14, 1523, Pope Adrian died, without having succeeded in obtaining the services of Erasmus in defense of the position of the Church.

Another man of power who urged Erasmus to take up arms against Luther was Duke George of Albertine Saxony, who had turned against the Reformers at the conclusion of the

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120. Ibid., p. 207.

Leipzig Debate. Erasmus had dedicated an edition of Suetonius to the Duke, and had written him from Basle, explaining his migration there. The Duke answered by sending him two works of Luther for refutation. Erasmus evaded this request with the excuse that he could not read German, also stating that silence was the best policy, for it would not provoke the enemy.[121]

The actual course of events at Wittenberg must have made quite an impression on Erasmus. The fanaticism of the Zwickau prophets, which arose during Luther's stay on the Wartburg, must have been distasteful to Erasmus. Among the fanatical ideas and acts were the iconoclastic policy, marriage of the clergy, use of mob violence. This enthusiastic faction spread throughout Germany. Order was not restored until Luther returned from the Wartburg. While Luther's success in quieting the mob may have made Erasmus think a little better of him, yet, to be sure, Erasmus could not be sympathetic to a movement which would break out in such utter violence.

Another factor which helped cause the break with Luther was the Inquisition in the Netherlands. As mentioned above, the Dominican Hochstraten had condemned Luther's books in the Netherlands. Capito, friend of Erasmus, had written that it was not safe to try to remain neutral.[122] Two Lutheran

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121. Smith, op. cit., p. 329.
122. Ibid., p. 331.

supporters were burned in July, 1523.

Smith says, "More than to any other one person Erasmus' final decision to break with the Reformation was due to Ulrich von Hutten."[123] This is correct, for the controversy with Hutten was but the prelude to the greater controversy with Luther, although the subject of the dissertations was different. Ulrich von Hutten had been a humanistic enthusiast, and as such was a friend of Erasmus. Then Hutten had joined with Luther, thinking that Luther would best answer his aims of opposing the priests and prelates of the Roman Church by force of arms. Early in 1522, Hutten, and his military leader, Franz von Sickingen, attacked the Archbishop of Treve. Defeat and the deathof Sickingen in May caused Hutten to flee to Basle, where he sought help from Erasmus. But Erasmus would not see him for Hutten was a dangerous character. To become the protector of Hutten would mean to arouse the opposition of the many princes which Hutten had opposed. When the Town Council of Basle expelled Hutten, he removed to Muehlhausen where he composed the Expostulation.[124]

In the Expostulation, Hutten accuses Erasmus of having a certain opinion, and yet going against his own conscience in his action. "Although I am myself and independent and

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123. Ibid., p. 332.
124. Holborn, Hajo, Ulrich von Hutten, p. 188.

hate passionately to be reckoned to a party, nevertheless I will always belong to those who are opposed to the tyranny of the Roman Pope, who defend the truth and reject man-made precepts for the teaching of the Gospel. Because such people are commonly called Lutherans, I will suffer with equanimity the injustice of the name lest I seem in the end to deny the justice of the cause. Here you have the explanation why I suffer myself to be nicknamed 'a Lutheran'. And in this sense it is easy to persuade every one that you are a Lutheran, too,--the more so because you are a better writer and a more persuasive speaker."[125] Hutten knew that Erasmus had been in favor of many reforms. Now to see him sitting on the side without helping to achieve these reforms was an inconsistency. Hence he writes in the Expostulation, "You say we should dissimulate for the moment. Such words scarcely beseem any Christian let alone a scholar and a theologian, when a pagan author condemns dissimulation in friendship as corrupting judgment of the true. How much less are simulation and dissimulation appropriate to one in your station. To do and to suffer all things arduous and adverse on behalf of liberty is our concern. But every one sees that your thought is to avoid offense and to labor without suspicion. If victory crowned such efforts no one would strive."[126] With such savage attacks, Hutten sought

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125. Hutten's Expostulation, Cf. Holborn, op. cit., p. 193
126. Ibid., p. 194.

to draw out the true opinion of Erasmus, so that he could be judged in the light of his writings.

In his reply, The Sponge to Wipe out the Aspersions of Hutten, Erasmus "was prompted by a hate born of repressed fear."[127] In it, he tries to prove his consistency, which Hutten had attacked. Erasmus had attacked the vices of the Church, not to destroy her, but to amend her. "Erasmus cannot persuade himself that the meek spirit of Christ dwells in bosom from which flows so much bitterness."[128] This, in general, is the content of the Sponge. Again, it is the peace-loving Erasmus against the fighting reformers, who are willing to suffer all for the sake of the pure Gospel. Erasmus seems to be willing to concede anything, in order to avoid quarrels and conflicts.

When the work of Erasmus was published by Froben's press, Hutten's days were nearly over. He died in a remote corner of Switzerland August 29, 1523, after he expressed regret for having written the Expostulation. Hutten's death threw unfavorable light on the three thousand copies of the Sponge, which prompted Erasmus to apologize for having written it.

On the day after the Sponge was published, Erasmus wrote Henry VIII that he was preparing an attack on the

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127. Ibid., p. 195.
128. Drummond, R. B., Erasmus, Vol. II, p. 136.

new teachings of Luther.[129] Since he had been called a secret Lutheran by many of his opponents, this seemed the logical thing to do. And yet, he had received no direct attack from Luther himself. But though many indirect references to Erasmus had been made in his letters, in which Luther showed his dissatisfaction with the unclear position of Erasmus, Erasmus had no conclusive evidence of Luther's attack upon himself. Luther wrote Spalatin that he would rather attack an open enemy than one who vacillated between the position of a friend and that of any enemy.[130] In June, 1523, Luther wrote to Oecolampadius, "What Erasmus holds or feigns to believe in spiritual things both his early and his recent books abundantly testify. Although I feel his pricks here and there, nevertheless because he publicly pretends not to be an enemy, I also make-believe that I do not perceive his craftiness, although others see through him more than he reckons. He has performed the work for which he was destined. He has furthered the study of the classics and recalled men from impious sophistry. Perhaps like Moses he will die in the land of Moab, for to the higher pursuit of spiritual things he cannot lead. I could wish that he would refrain from writing of Holy Scripture, because

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129. MackKinnon, Luther and the Reformation, III, p. 238.
130. Ibid.

he is not equal to this work, and only misleads his readers and hinders their advance in scriptural knowledge. He has done enough in exposing the evil. To show the good and lead men to the promised land is beyond his capacity."[131]

Such expressions of opinion by Luther caused Erasmus much anger. Zwingli and others tried to prevent any catastrophe, but this was soon given up for impossible. In February, 1524, Erasmus wrote the new Pope, Clement VII, seeking his approval and favor. In this letter Erasmus also mentioned that he was working on a book, On Freewill, directed against Luther.[132] Early in the year 1524, Erasmus sent manuscripts of his Diatribe on the Free Will to Pope Clement VII and to King Henry VIII of England.

When the news that Erasmus was working on a treatise against him reached Luther, he knew that it might mean harm to his cause. However, he was not afraid of anything Erasmus might write, as he wrote in a letter to Erasmus in April, 1524. From this rather lengthy letter we quote a few parts: "Since we see that the Lord has not given you courage and sense to assail those monsters openly and confidently with us, we are not the men to exact what is beyond your power and measure....We only fear that you may be induced by our enemies to fall upon our doctrine with some publication,

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131. Ibid., p. 239.
132. Mangan, op. cit., p. 234.

in which case we should be obliged to resist you to your face....Hitherto I have controlled my pen as often as you prick me, and have written in letters to friends, which you have seen, that I would control it until you publish something openly. For although you will not side with us, and although you injure and make skeptical many pious men by your impiety and hypocrisy, yet I cannot and do not accuse you of willful obstinacy....We have fought long enough; we must take care not to eat each other up. This would be a terrible catastrophe, as neither of us wishes to harm religion, and without judging each other both may do good."[133]

Erasmus answered on May 8, stating that he was just as interested in the cause of religion as were the Wittenbergers, and that he had as yet not written anything against Luther, although he might have won great applause by doing so. Five days after this letter, on May 13, the Diatribe was finished. At first he hesitated to publish it, but on July 21, he sent it to the printer, and in September, 1524, it was off Froben's press.

The subject which Erasmus had chosen for the controversy with Luther was "a subject in which he would have the support of the Romish Church and the Scholastic theology,

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133. Smith, op. cit., p. 344.

and yet might represent his own convictions and, at the same time, pose as the champion of a freer, humanistic and philosophical school of thought."[134] But at the same time, he was attacking a central position of Luther's theology, for if salvation were by grace alone, then man could not have the moral power of his own will to be saved. This will explain, in part, why Luther answered the work of Erasmus in such a vigorous manner, although Erasmus was comparatively mild.

Erasmus starts his work by saying that he will not be dogmatic, but that he just wants to arrive at the truth. MacKinnon gives us a good summary of the theme of the work. "Free will, from the theological point of view, he defines, following Lombardus, as the power by which man may apply himself to those things which lead to eternal life, or turn away from them. According to Scripture, man was created free. But in consequence of the misuse of his freedom he lost it and became the slave of sin. The light of reason and the power of the will, which is derived from reason, were, however, not thereby completely extinguished, though the will was rendered inefficacious to do the good. He retained a certain knowledge of God and power of virtuous living, as the life and teaching of the philosophers show,

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134. Koestlin-Hay, Theology of Luther, I, p. 479.

though he could not attain to eternal salvation without the grace which comes through faith. The fact of the law and man's responsibility for its transgression prove that he retained the power of choosing between good and evil. If the will was not free, sin could not be imputed to him. Sin involves free will. Though the will received a wound through the fall, and man became more prone to the evil than the good, it was not completely destroyed."[135]

Erasmus really has two main arguments which he adduces to prove the freedom of the will. The one is that repentance would be senseless and that punishment for sin would be unjust, if the will were in bondage. The other, which is really the weightier of the two, mentions biblical texts that imply man's freedom of choice. "The opinion of those who attribute much to grace but something to free will pleases me best," said Erasmus.[136]

One may well imagine the dismay of Luther upon reading this work. "He had not read far, he tells us, before he felt inclined to pitch the volume under the table. But the reputation of Erasmus and the impression it made on both friends and foes, if not its intrinsic importance, made it necessary to reply to it." 137 But because of the

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135. MacKinnon, op. cit., p. 245.
136. Smith, op. cit., p. 438.
137. MacKinnon, op. cit., p. 252.

great pressure of his work and the complications of the Peasants' Revolt, Luther did not begin work on an answer until September 1525. After two months of unceasing labor on his answer, it came from the press in December under the title De Servo Arbitrio.

Luther's work is much longer and much more purposeful than that of Erasmus. Erasmus had chosen the subject for the controversy, not because of any particular personal feeling, but merely for the sake of the controversy. With Luther it was a matter of polemics. He was in earnest, because the pure Gospel would rise or fall just on the doctrine of the role of the human will in the salvation of man. "The true scope of De Servo Arbitrio is to prove that man is saved, not by any ability or efforts of his own, but solely by grace."[138] It is the Holy Spirit alone who converts and who sustains us in faith in the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Whether or not Luther was a determinist, or whether he expresses a deterministic theology in the work De Servo Arbitrio, we need not discuss here. While it may seem that Luther does teach a strict determinism like that of Calvin, as MacKinnon and Smith hold, yet, we must bear in mind the circumstances in which Luther

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138. Concordia Triglotta, p. 211.

wrote this work. He was using every available means of combating Erasmus, and in expressing himself, he may have gone too far, for we know from other writings that Luther nefer accused God of being the determining cause of evil.

When Erasmus received a copy of the De Servo Arbitrio, he was very much offended by Luther's stern tone. Now he was moved to begin immediately a defense of his own work, which he entitled Hyperaspistes. In it he launches forth "into invective and denunciation, satire and ridicule, sarcasm and derision, sparing no artifice of language to cover Luther with obloquy and confusion."[139] A second part, called Hyperaspistes II, Erasmus wrote after considerable urging by Henry VIII and Emser. This latter work is a refutation of the De Servo Arbitrio, in which "Erasmus definitely breaks with the reform at last and predicts that no name will be more hated by posterity than will Luther's....For himself he is a humanist, who believes that reason reveals truth as well as Scripture."[140]

Luther never wrote a reply to the Hyperaspistes, and the paths of Erasmus and Luther never met again. Although Erasmus was never again in the limelight as the great leader of Europe, yet he was often consulted. He kept up with the progress of the Reformation, and followed the work of Luther

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139. Mangan, op. cit., p. 253.
140. Smith, op. cit., pp. 257-258.

until his death in 1536. He was asked to attend the Diet of Augsburg, but he desisted. He wrote to friends, however, urging a peaceful settlement.

All during the stormy period of early Lutheranism, Erasmus and Melanchthon, friends for years, continued to correspond. It is certain that Erasmus had some influence with Melanchthon, both being humanists in their approach to learning. It was, no doubt, due to the influence of Erasmus that Melanchthon later changed his attitude on the doctrine of the will, although there were many other factors which enter the picture. That is in itself a problem which entails considerable study!

In conclusion, we should like to point out several factors which determined the role of Erasmus in the German Reformation. It is true, Erasmus was, in a sense, the forerunner of Luther. While he remained loyal to the Church, yet he was not satisfied with conditions as they existed in education and in religion. He was interested in the promotion of learning in the hope that the religious ills of his day might be cured. To that end, his earlier writings, especially his work in editing the Greek New Testament, were written. It was in this sense only that he may be considered a forerunner of Luther, namely, that he advocated reforms and criticized existing abuses, and suggested the remedy by learning.

His attitude toward the German Reformation was, in part, shaped by his personality. He was by nature a cautious and peace-loving man. While Luther was strong and emphatic in his objective and would rather die than have his work fail, Erasmus was more timid, and would compromise rather than create a turmoil. Along with his timidity, existed his fear that the Reformation would kill learning. He could not be bound by any dogmatic systems. For him, to be bound to a religion which was absolutely grounded in the words of Scripture only was a shackling of the mind. To a man of the freedom-loving, humanistic type, this was impossible.

Another factor which might have kept him aloof from the Reformation was his dislike of Germany. Being a Dutchman by birth, there was an ingrained dislike for the German people, traditional with the nation which claimed him. He described Germany as a place of discomfort and filth.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to union with Luther was Erasmus' misunderstanding of the basic concept of religion. On this he was diametrically opposed to Luther. "The irreconcilable contradiction, which never permits a compromise, between Luther and Erasmus appears at three points: their way of understanding the New Testament,

their view of Jesus, and their conception of salvation."[141]

Regarding the first difference, in the way of understanding the New Testament, we say that Erasmus was a critical scholar, and Luther was a sinner in search of salvation, and as such found the grace and comfort needed for his own soul. Erasmus went back through all available sources. He was in search of a philosophy of life better than that which the Roman Church offered him. Luther was not interested in such an intellectual philosophy of life. He wanted salvation for his soul, forgiveness for the sins which weighed upon him. When Erasmus went back to the New Testament, he found a teacher, an example in the Christ who preached the Sermon on the Mount. Luther found the Savior who brought life through grace and faith, as taught in the epistle to the Romans. Luther considered the Christianity as taught in the New Testament as the only way of salvation and would not compromise with the religions of the world. Erasmus regarded Christianity as one among many religions, claiming, however, that it taught the best philosophy of life and therefore was the highest form of religion.

The second difference is similar to the first - their view of Jesus. In a letter written to Nicolas von Amsdorf

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141. Richards, Geo. W., "Was Troeltsch Right?", in Church History, Vol. II, p. 124.

concerning Erasmus, Luther mentions the line which separated him from Erasmus. "Erasmus asks the question: 'Why Christ, so great a teacher, descended from heaven, when there are many things taught even among heathens, which are precisely the same, if not more perfect?' Erasmus answers his own question by saying: 'Christ came from heaven, that He might exemplify those things more perfectly and more fully than any of the saints before Him.' Luther indignantly replies: 'Thus, this miserable renewer of all things, Christ,(for so he reproaches the Lord of glory) has lost the glory of a Redeemer, and becomes only one more holy than others....This was the sentiment that first alienated my mind from Erasmus. From that moment, I began to suspect him of being a plain Democritus or Epicurus, and a crafty derider of Christ.'"[142]

The third great difference between Erasmus and Luther was their concept of salvation. According to Luther, man can do nothing, because he is totally depraved through sin. Salvation is a work of God, through grace and faith by means of the Word alone. Man has nothing to do with salvation, for to admit this would be Pelagianism. The only assurance of salvation is in God. If one depends on his own will to be saved, all assurance is lost. Erasmus held that Christianity is an ethical system, based on the works of man.

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142. Ibid., p. 125.

Man must conform to the rules laid down by the example of Christ. These works manifest themselves in love, sympathy, and charity for mankind.

Because of these fundamental differences between the humanism of Erasmus and the personal religion of Luther on the other hand, they could never have agreed. While Erasmus did have some influence on the Reformation in its preparation, he certainly cannot be hailed as a figure, as were the Wittenberg reformers, in the Reformation itself, for the Reformation grew out of Luther's personal soul struggle, out of his search for salvation. It was not until he realized the full implication of the answer to his question of salvation that he finally decided to break with the Pope and the Church. Rather than calling Erasmus an influence in the Reformation we should call him the father of modern critical theology, for the principles which he used in his approach to theology are the basis of modernistic theology today, which, like that of Erasmus, cannot be bound by any absolute and dogmatic standard as the Word of God.

F I N I S