

# Liberation through the Philosophia Christi

Erasmus as a Reformer of Doctrina, 1514-1521

By James D. Tracy

To illustrate what Erasmus understood by liberation through Christ I will begin with two quotations from the year 1519. The first, in a letter to John Fisher, bishop of Rochester (1469, 1504-1535), hints at fiscal motives behind Cardinal Thomas Wolsey's (circa 1474, 1515-1530) planned visitation of English monasteries:

»As to the proceedings in your part of the world for the reform, as the story goes, of the clergy, I fear your reformers may be following too closely the example of physicians, who first reduce to a shadow the patient they have undertaken to cure. O that Christ would at long last arise and liberate [liberet] his people from *tyranny* of so many kinds. For the end seems likely to be, unless steps are taken, that it would be more tolerable to live under the tyranny of the Turks.«<sup>1</sup>

The second quotation comes from a young man who would fain have been Erasmus' disciple, Lambertus Hollonius of Liège († before 25 May 1522). From Basel, where he worked as a corrector at the Froben press, Hollonius reported that Johann Froben (circa 1460-1527) was sending Erasmus a volume of works by Martin Luther:

- CE CONTEMPORARIES OF ERASMUS: a biographical register of the Renaissance and Reformation/ ed. by Peter G. Bietenholz. 3 Vol. Toronto; Buffalo; LO 1985-1987.
- CWE COLLECTED WORKS OF ERASMUS. Vol. 1 ff. Toronto; Buffalo; LO 1974 ff.
- ErAW Desiderius ERASMUS ROTERODAMUS: Ausgewählte Werke/ hrsg. von Hajo und Annemarie Holborn. M 1933.
- ErOEp ERASMUS ROTERODAMUS: Opus epistolarum/ denuo recognitum et auctum per P[ercy] S[tafford] Allen ... 12 Vol. Oxonii 1906-1958.
- ErOpO Desiderius ERASMUS ROTERODAMUS: Opera omnia .../ recognovit Johannes Clericus [Le Clerc]. 10. Vol. Reprint of the edition Lugduni Batavorum, 1703-1796. Hildesheim 1961-1962; LO 1962.
- ErOpOA Desiderius ERASMUS ROTERODAMUS: Opera omnia ... Vol. 1 ff. Amsterdam 1969 ff.

<sup>1</sup> ErOE p 3, 524, 77-82 (936) ≅ CWE 6, 291, 85-91 (936). CWE links the reference to reform in England to Wolsey's project. The original latin word »tyrannide« – which I changed to »tyranny« – is translated »tyrants« in CWE.



»I cannot tell you how well it has been received by those who are keen on the subject; I at least, who am a mere nobody, have felt my mind set free [mentem redidit liberiorem] from its former enslavement to all the most frigid details of ceremonial.«<sup>2</sup>

Thus Erasmus believed that Christendom groaned under a tyranny that had both civil and ecclesiastical forms, and Hollonius understood Erasmus as seeing the root of that servitude in slavish devotion to a purely ceremonial religion. The connecting link between these two disparate observations was that Erasmus believed that certain men had for their own selfish reasons deliberately fostered among Christians an anxious fixation on »ceremonies«. In commenting on the grandiloquent titles by which princes now insisted on being addressed, he could move easily to the sphere of piety:

»Who introduced this superstition about titles into the world? Doubtless that pharisaical race of men who by other ceremonies and by the deception of false teaching [doctrina] and false religion have long tricked the gullible human race.«<sup>3</sup>

The antidote to this poison spread into the world by false religious teaching was of course true doctrina, the philosophia Christi, as Erasmus called it, by which human hearts and minds could be freed from superstitious fear. In this paper I will first consider Erasmus' diagnosis of a Christendom groaning under the tyranny of ceremonies. Then I will take up his analysis of the remedy, the philosophia Christi. My focus will be limited to the years between 1514 and 1521, when Erasmus was most explicit about what he saw as the ills of Christian society, and most hopeful about the prospects of reform.

### *I »This Generation is Far the Most Corrupt There Has Ever Been«*

Preachers and reformers are by tradition pessimists in one sense, optimists in another. If there is the promise of betterment even for the most hardened sinner, there is also the belief that no age has been more sorely in need of betterment than the present. The underlying psychological truth seems to be that it is not

2 ErOE 3, 445, 18 - 446, 25 (904) ≙ CWE 6, 191, 20 - 193, 27 (904); Franz BIERLAIRE: Lambertus Hollonius. CE 2 (1986), 197f. Of the two collections of Luther's writings that Froben printed before Erasmus intervened to stop him from publishing more, both ErOE and CWE believe the reference here is to the first, a volume headed by the »Ad Leonem X... resolutiones disputationum de virtute indulgentiarum« (Oct. 1518).

3 ErOpOA 1, 2, 93 ≙ CWE 25, 61.



humanly possibly to muster the energy to attack a problem unless one takes a view of its seriousness that dispassionate observers might consider exaggerated. In any case one cannot understand Erasmus' remedy for the ills of Christendom unless one first sees the disease as it were through his eyes:

»Is there any religious man who does not see with sorrow that this generation is far the most corrupt there has ever been? When did tyranny and greed lord it thus widely and go thus unpunished? When was so much importance ever attached to ceremonies? When did iniquity abound with so little to restrain it? When did charity wax colder? All we appeal to, all we read, all we hear, all our decisions – what do they taste of except of ambition and greed?«<sup>4</sup>

It might be objected that one must always allow for rhetorical effect in denunciations of the present age. But specific illustrations of this general point may be found throughout Erasmus' writings, especially the »Adages«, where comparisons with an admired ancient world occur naturally. For example, the Christian religion, »once flourishing far and wide, has contracted into a narrow space« (he has in mind North Africa and the Middle East, lost to the spread of Islam) because, »referring all things to our own glory and convenience«, modern Christians have abandoned the simple and true apostolic way of preaching: »We do not teach, we terrify, we threaten, we coerce.« Worse still for Erasmus, lover of peace, is the mercenary warfare of modern times. A propos of Jesus' words to the soldiers at Luke 3, 14 (»Plunder no one«), he remarks, »we read that the Hebrews went to war, but not that they served for pay under foreign captains«. Pope Gregory I (circa 540, 590-604) reckoned the merchant's trade as one of those not worthy of being pursued by baptized Christians, »yet we count among Christians those who, tempted by any wage whatever, fly off to battle and the slaughter of Christians«. Even the printing press, the one modern invention an Erasmus surely ought to appreciate, portended a decline of culture, because printers were flooding the world with »useless rubbish«, to the detriment of »honorable fields of study«. Speaking in the accents of a townsman in the Low Countries, where provinces that had enjoyed substantial independence now faced a powerful Habsburg dynasty, he went on to suggest that a decline in the learned professions would undermine the authority of all those bodies or estates of society that stood in the way of tyranny: »legislatures, councils, universities, lawyers, and theologians.« Owing to a progressive concentration of power in

4 ErOE 3, 366, 164-170 (858) ≙ CWE 6, 77, 175 - 78, 181 (858).



fewer and fewer hands, there is danger that »we shall see in our midst the same sort of barbarous tyranny that exists among the Turks«.<sup>5</sup>

This willingness to believe the worst about his own age may explain why Erasmus, perhaps the greatest critical scholar of the century, snapped up scurrilous rumors about certain groups with a readiness that can only be described as gullible. I have written elsewhere about the wild rumors concerning the Habsburg government of the Netherlands to which Erasmus gave credence: he was convinced that wars were due to »collusion« among princes and evil councillors who did not scruple to connive at the invasion of their own territories, so that the provincial assemblies of the Low Countries would be quicker to consent to taxation in the next round of bargaining. This picture of events is of course not supported by any shred of documentary evidence, but it was nonetheless echoed by other contemporary authors; one might even say that Erasmus was never more a Netherlander than in his deep suspicion of the government in Brussels.<sup>6</sup> One could also discuss the devilish machinations that Erasmus attributed to the papal court, especially under Popes Julius II (1443, 1503-1513) and Leo X (1475, 1513-1521). In its portrayal of the warrior pope, whose campaigns had deeply offended Erasmus, the anonymous »Julius exclusus e coelo« may be described as a blend of factual distortions and slanderous gossip, rather like the satirical verses or pasquillae that Roman wits were wont to hang from statues. Leo X, initially a pope of peace, became for Erasmus, as for pamphleteers in Germany, the evil genius behind a plot to gouge money from the Christian populace under the pretext of a Crusade against the Turks.<sup>7</sup> I have chosen here to look at

5 ErAW, 225, 17-27 (*Ratio verae theologiae*); from the 1519 »*Novum Testamentum*« ERASMUS' ANNOTATIONS ON THE NEW TESTAMENT: facsimile of the final Latin text (1535) with all earlier variants (1516, 1519, 1522 and 1527)/ ed. by Anne Reeve; introduction by M. A. Screech; calligraphy by Patricia Payn. Vol. 1: Gospels. LO 1986, 171f (for similar views about modern warfare and its evil weapons, CWE 27, 305  $\triangle$  ERASMUS VON ROTTERDAM: *Ausgewählte Schriften: lateinisch und deutsch*/ ed. by Werner Welzig. Vol. 5 DA 1968, 398-400 (*Querela pacis*); and »Make haste slowly«, (*Adages*), CWE 33, 12 (II i 1)  $\triangle$  ErOpO 2, 404 A-C (passage added 1526).

6 James D. TRACY: *The politics of Erasmus: a pacifist intellectual and his political milieu*. Toronto 1978, 71-107 (chapter 4); James D. TRACY: *Holland under Habsburg rule: the formation of a body politic*, 1506-1566. Berkeley; Los Angeles 1990, 65-74.

7 Tracy: *The politics of Erasmus*, 109-123 (chapter 5); Kurt Werner STADTWARD: »When, o Rome, will you cease to hiss?«: the image of the pope in the politics of German Humanism. MP 1991, 50-59 (chapter 2) – MP, University of Minnesota, Ph. D., 1991.



Erasmus' suspicions about two other groups, first the mendicant orders, and second Christian Europe's despised Jewish minority.

After a slow start in the Low Countries, Dominicans and Franciscans, especially in the stricter Observant congregations, had flourished during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but by Erasmus' generation they were also provoking strong opposition, especially in towns that already had a surfeit of tax-exempt religious property and could not readily tolerate another convent or friary.<sup>8</sup> In his suspicions of the friars, as in his suspicions of popes and princes, Erasmus was hardly unique. Moreover, he was certainly correct in thinking that many of those who attacked him for daring to correct the Vulgate New Testament were friars, particularly from certain orders: »The Dominicans and some of the Carmelites are beginning actually to call on the mob to start throwing stones, and nowhere do these pestilent folk flourish more than in my native country.«<sup>9</sup> But if he was indeed the target of venomous assaults by real clerical obscurantists, his vision of a mendicant-led »conspiracy« to suppress *bonae literae*, like all conspiracy theories, tells us more about the theorist than about the alleged conspirators.<sup>10</sup> As the son of a secular priest, who for some years had dressed as a secular priest, Erasmus bemoaned the fact that the seculars were no less an *ordo* or estate of Christendom than the mendicants, the latter were much quicker than the former to defend their collective honor if attacked.<sup>11</sup> He also hoped to see the mendicants deprived of their income, if people would refuse them admission to decent homes, and confess to their parish priests rather than the friars.<sup>12</sup> Thus despite his vision of a Christendom in which bitterness and division would be dissolved in common allegiance to the philosophy of Christ, Erasmus was himself very much a part of a contentiously corporate social framework, in which »orders« within the Church (e.g. seculars and mendicants) complained among themselves about their rivals' devious tricks, just like rival

8 Tracy: Holland under Habsburg rule, 148-152. ErOEp 4, 447, 8-19 (1188)  $\triangle$  CWE 8, 160, 11-20 (1188).

9 ErOEp 3, 3, 3-17; 6, 55-59 (597)  $\triangle$  CWE 5, 8, 4-9, 16; 12, 63-13, 66 (597).

10 ErOEp 3, 514, 5-8 (931); 542, 27-30 (948); 4, 73, 6-9 (1016); 149, 388-406 (1053); 315, 242f (1126)  $\triangle$  CWE 6, 277, 6-9 (931); 311, 28-31 (948); 7, 81, 9-14 (1016); 159, 423-435 (1053); 8, 14, 255f (1126).

11 ErOEp 4, 314, 222-315, 236 (1126)  $\triangle$  CWE 8, 14, 246-262 (1126).

12 ErOEp 4, 447, 8-19 (1186)  $\triangle$  CWE 8, 160, 17-20 (1186).



»orders« (e. g. humanists and scholastics) within the smaller world of the university.

From this perspective the influence of the friars among lay folk could be seen a sinister light. For Erasmus the fact that devout lay folk were drawn to monastic practices, like the books of hours in the vernacular, of which there were so many editions, was a matter not of imitation but of entrapment. Though he did not condemn all mendicant friars, he was certain there were »very many« who »for gain and despotic power, deliberately ensnare the consciences of men«. For example, as to auricular confession, a specialty of the friars, he believed it should not matter whether the practice was thought to have been instituted by the early Church, rather than by Christ himself, »unless certain men among us are afraid lest their profit [quaestus] be taken away«. Similarly, the tumult associated with Luther was actually due to the fact that »certain men saw their profit [quaestus] threatened by the purer doctrine of Christ«, which had no room for indulgences and dispensations, »nor for consciences falsely ensnared«.

For proof, one need only look to the cult of preposterous relics, like milk from the Virgin Mary, or fragments of the true cross »which if piled in a heap could scarcely be accommodated by a freight ship«. Such things were not just tolerated as a way of indulging the religious feelings of simple folk [plebecula], but rather »described as the peak of religious devotion, because of the greed of priests, and the hypocrisy of certain monks, who are nourished by the foolishness of the people«. <sup>13</sup> Yet their influence with common folk made the mendicants dangerous. From his days in Italy Erasmus he remembered a bit of gossip that had Pope Alexander VI (1430, 1492-1503) saying it was less dangerous to offend some powerful monarch »than any one individual among the troops of mendicants, who under the pretext of a humble name ruled Christendom, he said, with a tyrant's rod«. <sup>14</sup> »Mendicant tyrants« henceforth became his pet name for the chief enemies of good letters, and for the renewal of Christian life that good letters could make possible. <sup>15</sup> The Dominicans in particular were »always

<sup>13</sup> ErOEp 3, 103, 119-128 (1033)  $\triangle$  CWE 7, 112, 131-113, 150 (1033); ErAW, 205, 28-206, 5; 247, 8-11; Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament – at Mt 23,3 (also 1519) – 1, 91f (in such contexts Erasmus often uses the diminutive »plebecula«, as if to emphasize the passive innocence of the laity and thus the greater guilt of their clerical deceivers).

<sup>14</sup> ErOEp 3, 117, 26-33 (694)  $\triangle$  CWE 5, 167, 28-34 (694); cf. ErOEp 4, 103, 119-137 (1033)  $\triangle$  CWE 7, 112, 131-113, 150 (1033).

<sup>15</sup> E. g. ErOEp 4, 157, 15f (1060); 208, 12-15 (1082)  $\triangle$  CWE 7, 170, 20-27 (1060); 228, 15-18 (1082).



setting on foot some mischief in the world«, whether in Savonarola's Florence, in the recent scandal at Bern, or in the assault on Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), led by Dominicans of Cologne.<sup>16</sup> In short, the »mendicant tyrants« were not just enemies of good letters, they were enemies of Christ.

To what such men might do to hide their wickedness there was no limit. Since most men who joined religious orders were in his view »moved by folly or ignorance or desperation or a desire for idleness and good dinners«, it was hardly surprising if the low state of discipline in most monasteries was such that »in comparison with them there is more sobriety and more innocence in a brothel«. Yet »they pride themselves on their ceremonies like the Pharisees, locating the whole of religion in externals and for the sake of ceremonial whipping boys to death every day«. Swiss Cardinal Matthäus Schiner of Sion (Valais – circa 1465, 1511-1522), then in Brussels on a mission in Habsburg service, was Erasmus' source for the story about a friary where »the Dominicans buried a man alive, because his father, who was a knight, was demanding the return of the son whom they had carried off by stealth«. The Cardinal may also have been his source for the claim that »in Poland a certain nobleman, who in his cups had fallen asleep in a church, saw two Franciscans after the nightly office buried alive«. Schiner, through his involvement in the notorious trial of the four Dominicans at Bern, accused of faking an apparition by the Blessed Mother and then poisoning an inconvenient witness, was undoubtedly well versed in such matters.<sup>17</sup> But one must remember that accusations of poisoning and other devilish tricks were rather thick on the ground in this era, and, as in the case of the fabled crimes of Cesare Borgia (1475-1507) and his sister Lucrezia (1480-1519), have often not withstood critical scrutiny. As for the Bern Dominicans, burned at the stake in 1509, some scholars now believe that they themselves were the victims of a plot hatched in a feud among kin groups. Moreover, though Erasmus himself showed little taste for the growing interest in witchcraft, there is in these reports about Franciscans and Dominicans, seemingly anchored by

16 ErOEp 4, 103, 249f (1033); 400, 113-116 (1166); 423, 127-148 (1173) ≙ CWE 7, 116, 273-276 (1033); 8, 108, 127-129 (1166); 133, 141-153 (1173).

17 ErOEp 2, 294, 40-46; 305, 496-511; 307, 563-570; 308, 594-602 (447) ≙ CWE 4, 9, 48-55; 25, 622-639; 28, 700-707; 29, 730-737 (447). Kaspar von GREYERZ: Matthäus Schiner. CE 3 (1987), 221-223. Cf. the story of what happened to Erasmus' admired mentor, the Franciscan Jean Vitrier (circa 1456 - circa 1521), attributed to a Dominican conspiracy; ErOEp 4, 509, 79-100, 95 (1211) ≙ CWE 8, 228, 86-104 (1211).



factual specificity (e.g., »a knight«, »in Poland«) a disquieting similarity to the highly detailed reports presented in witchcraft treatises of the later sixteenth century, some by the greatest scholars of that era, like Jean Bodin (1529/30-1596).<sup>18</sup> The truth is that learned folk, like everyone else, believe what they want to believe.

During the fall of 1517 Erasmus learned of a new book published in German in Cologne by Johann Pfefferkorn (1469 - after 1519), who was both Reuchlin's chief adversary and a fanatic opponent of Jewish learning. The book contained a slighting reference to Erasmus, though without mentioning his name; he had it translated into Latin and sent to John Fisher, an admirer of Reuchlin.<sup>19</sup> Letters from this period (November 1517) to German humanist friends, none of which Erasmus later published, are replete with vicious attacks on Pfefferkorn as a converted Jew: »he had no other motive in getting himself dipped in the font than to be able to deliver more dangerous attacks on Christianity, and by mixing with us to infect the entire folk with his Jewish poison«; »what could these [circumcised] wretches hope for more, or Satan their leader, than to see the unity of simple Christians rent in twain« by the Reuchlin affair; and »if only the only saying were not true, that a bad Jew makes a worse Christian«.<sup>20</sup> It has been noted that Erasmus' correspondence contains no previous outburst of this kind, but the principle that a bad Jew makes a worse Christian is evident also in his disdain for the New Christians, Spaniards whose ancestors had converted from Judaism. In his arguments for peace between France and the Low Countries, he liked to point out that France was the only Christian country not »infected« by heretics or schismatics, nor by »Jews« and »half-Jewish marraños« (an insulting term for New Christians). Even in supporting Reuchlin for trying to see to it that »the Jews should not *suffer more than is just*«, Erasmus takes it for granted that

18 Susanne SCHULLER-PIROLI: Borgia: die Zerstörung einer Legende. Olten 1963. For Erasmus' views on witchcraft EOEp 1, 336, 68 - 339, 185 (143), to Antoon van Bergen; Eusebius HIERONYMUS: Opera. Vol. I. BL 1516, 110v (an account of demonic possession in a convent in Hainaut, where Erasmus' patron, Bishop Hendrik van Bergen, was called on to intervene); and EOEp 10, 324, 27-35 (2880); Jean BODIN: De la demonomanie des Sorcières. P 1580.

19 ErOE 3, 122, 11-15 (697); 143, 19f (713) ≅ CWE 5, 175, 14-20 (697); 204, 8-13 (713); Ilse GUENTHER: Johann Pfefferkorn. CE 3 (1987), 76f.

20 ErOE 3, 117, 34 - 118, 47 (694); 125, 16 - 126, 41 (700); 127, 13-37 (701); 128, 5 - 129, 24 (702); 143, 6-12 (713) ≅ CWE 5, 167, 35 - 169, 58 (694); 179, 18 - 180, 45 (700); 181, 28-43 (701); 204, 8-13 (702).



no Christian will have a good word for Jews: »If it is Christian to detest the Jews, on this count we are all good Christians, and to spare.«<sup>21</sup>

In an essay published in 1969, Swiss historian Guido Kisch opened a scholarly debate on Anti-Semitism in Erasmus, finding in passages like those just quoted a »deep-rooted and boundless hatred of Jews« that aligned Erasmus with decidedly anti-Jewish writers of the time, rather than with more tolerant Christian authors like Reuchlin. The issue is complicated by the fact that Erasmus persistently describes the »religion of ceremonies« that he so opposes as »Jewish«, or as a new form of Judaism. This was because »Judaism« for Erasmus meant not the living religion, of which sixteenth century Christians were wholly ignorant, but the self-righteous punctiliousness of the ancient Pharisees, denounced by Jesus in the gospels. Seizing on this ambiguity, a defender of Erasmus has argued that even remarks that seem directed against Jews are in fact expressions of a religious »Anti-Mosaism« that has nothing to do with actual Jews. At the other end of the scale of opinion, one scholar, discounting the theological context, takes passages dealing with the »religion of ceremonies« as evidence that Erasmus' hatred of Jews had become an »obsession«. Heiko A. Oberman strikes a proper balance, but one that is hardly favorable to Erasmus: he indeed hated Jews, and his thought was also permeated by a »virulent theological anti-Judaism« that was consistent with contemporary Christian fears of actual Judaism, even if it targeted Christian legalism rather than Jews.<sup>22</sup>

Scholars have been reluctant to recognize Erasmus' hatred of the Jews for what it was because it seems so out of keeping with the role he played as an apostle of tolerance amid the nascent intra-Christian polemics of the Reforma-

21 CEW 5, 164 (preface to letter 694); ErOEp 2, 501, 11-14 (549)  $\triangle$  CWE 4, 279, 13-17 (549); Erasmus von Rotterdam: Ausgewählte Schriften 5, 402  $\triangle$  CWE 27, 306 (Querela pacis); cf. »Novum Testamentum« (1519), at Mt 23, 15 (a convert made by the Pharisees is »twofold more a son of hell than yourselves«), Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament 1, 93: »In the same way it happens that from a criminous Jew we get a more criminous Christian, as the Spaniards can testify«; ErOEp 4, 46, 136-143 (1006)  $\triangle$  CWE 7, 49, 143-150 (1006). For the phrase »ne quid praeter aequum patiantur« CWE has »should not be unfairly treated«.

22 Guido Kisch: Erasmus' Stellung zu Juden und Judentum. Tü 1969; Harry S. May: The tragedy of Erasmus. St. Charles, Missouri 1975; Shimon Markish: Erasmus and the Jews/ tr. by Anthony Olcott. Chicago 1986; Heiko A. Oberman: The roots of antisemitism in the age of Renaissance and Reformation/ tr. by James I. Porter. Phil 1984, 38-41.



tion era. But the discussion here has shown that the apostle of tolerance was also a great hater of the evil designs he saw lurking beneath the self-professed good intentions of mendicant friars, princes, and popes. This readiness to believe the worst of certain kinds of people provides a context in which Anti-Semitism seems, alas, perfectly natural. Erasmus' comments about Pfefferkorn make it clear that, in his mind, »Jews« in some general sense were, through Pfefferkorn, conspiring to sow dissension among Christians, possibly even to subject Christians to the tyranny of »Jewish« ceremonies. To be sure, his hatred of Jews was more global than his hatred of hypocritical friars and princes and popes; he never qualified his remarks by saying that he was only speaking about evil Jews, not the good ones. Still, Anti-Semitism may be counted as not the least but certainly the saddest example of Erasmus' tendency to identify certain groups as sources of evil, then to give credence to rumors about their devilish machinations.

In the various kinds of fear or suspicion that have been mentioned here – directed at secular governments, at the papal court, at mendicant friars, or at Jews – Erasmus was in no sense an original thinker setting out his own vision of the world. Rather, he was in each of these cases a barometer for different segments of contemporary opinion. He showed his creative powers by fusing these disparate conventional themes into the idea of a single pattern of belief and behavior, by which Christians were alienated from their true spiritual heritage, and set on a path of wickedness: this he called the religion of ceremonies. He defined »ceremonies« in the »Education of the Christian prince« (1516) when he warned against identifying the Christian religion with »mere ceremonies, that is, *the precepts observed in any fashion whatever*, and the *constitutions* of the Church«. <sup>23</sup> As he wrote to Servatius Rogerus († 1540), his erstwhile friend and now the prior of the monastery to which he refused to return, »this belief [in monastic ceremonies] deceives and imposes on you, and not you alone, but almost all other men«. His annotation at Mt 11, 30, »My yoke is light«, points a finger at the popes who proclaim regulations on external behavior as

23 ErOpP 4 I, 147, 338-341 (Institutio principis christiani): »At rursum ne putaris Christum situm esse in cerimoniais, hoc est, in praeceptis dumtaxat utcumque servatis et Ecclesiae constitutionibus« ≙ CWE 27, 216 (with »no longer seriously observed« and »institutions« for the parts in italics); on courtly life, »Querela pacis«, ErOpO 4, II, 66 ≙ CWE 27, 297; on epithets, »De conscribendis epistolis«, ErOpOA 1 II, 93 ≙ CWE 25, 61.



laws of the Church as well as at the mendicant orders who spread among men the poisonous belief that such »ceremonies« are the heart of religion: »What would St. Augustine say could he see the free Christian people« caught up in »so many laws, ceremonies, and snares«, oppressed by the tyranny not just of secular princes, but of cardinals and popes, »and beyond that of their hangers-on [satellites, that is, the friars], who having put on the mask of religious life serve the interests of their bellies?« As for »Judaism«, when »certain men abuse even the sacraments instituted for our salvation for their own profit, for pomp, for tyranny, for oppressing simple folk [plebecula]«, the result is that Christians are more anxious even than Jews in the observance of laws relating to such things as fasting and the keeping of feast days.<sup>24</sup> Erasmus was of course not the only reformer who spoke with feeling about a perceived excess of religious guilt.<sup>25</sup> But he touches on this profound problem in his own way, filtering it through the lens of a personal experience in which a certain kind of monastic religion stood as the principal obstacle to true piety as well as to genuine learning. Moreover, by posing the question of religious guilt in precisely this way, he was able to trace the wicked behavior of Christians to a false version of Christian doctrina. »The religion of ceremonies« was only too efficacious in people's lives because it had been taught only too well. The implication was that Christian doctrina truly understood and rightly taught would have a very different result. His most extensive critiques of »ceremonies« usually come as part of his exposition of that true and saving doctrina, the philosophia Christi,<sup>26</sup> the only remedy for the ills of Christendom.

24 ErOE p 1, 567, 70-79 (296)  $\triangle$  CWE 2, 296, 73-81 (296); Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament, at Mt 12,29 (1519) 1, 53-56 (for the term »satellites« to describe the mendicants' relation to the papacy, above, note 123).

25 Hans TREINEN: Studien zur Idee der Gemeinschaft bei Erasmus, und zu ihrer Stellung in der Entwicklung des humanistischen Universalismus. Saarlouis 1955, 66 (Erfüllungswahn); Jean DELUMEAU: Sin and fear: the emergence of a Western guilt culture, 13th-18th century/ tr. by Eric Nicholson. NY 1990.

26 For example, the passage quoted above at note 4 is from a major statement of the philosophia Christi, the letter to Paul Volz, prefaced to the 1518 edition of his Enchiridion; see Georges CHANTRAINE: »Mystère« et »Philosophie du Christ« selon Erasme. Namur 1971.



## II The Philosophy of Christ

Erasmus began speaking of the »philosophy of Christ« (sometimes »Christian philosophy«) in works of about 1515. For example, in »The Sileni of Alcibiades«, one of the 1515 »Adagia«, he says that Christ forswore riches and power in keeping with »the philosophy of His choice, worlds away from the principles laid down by philosophers and by the reasoning of the world«.<sup>27</sup> »The education of a Christian prince« (1516) insists that the Christian prince is held to a standard unknown even to the best of pagan rulers: »You cannot defend your realm without a violation of justice, without a great waste of human blood and great damage to religion – rather lay down your title, and yield to the necessity of the moment.«<sup>28</sup> Yet if Christian charity demanded things very different from »the accepted tradition of centuries and the conduct laid down by princes in their laws«, princes should not be condemned for doing their duty as they saw it. What mattered was to preserve the integrity of the Gospel as a standard against which the world of power and privilege could be measured: one must not »sully that heavenly philosophy of Christ by confusing it with the decrees of man«.<sup>29</sup>

The concept of a philosophia Christi was pointed not just against power and wealth, but also against the intellectual arrogance of the universities, where amid all the talk about philosophy and theology »religious minds heard scarcely a word« about gospel teaching [doctrina Evangelica]. St. Augustine's »De doctri-

27 ERASMUS: *Opuscula: a supplement to the Opera omnia*/ ed. by Wallace K. Ferguson. The Hague 1933, 120 ≙ CWE 27, 194; »Sileni Alcibiadis«, CWE 34, 264 f (III iii 1) ≙ ErOPO 2, 722 A. There are precedents for »philosophy of Christ« in the Greek Fathers, who appropriated the classical sense of »philosophy« as a way of life, not just a quest for enlightenment. Léon-E. HALKIN: *Erasmus' a critical biography*/ tr. by John Tonkin. Oxford 1993, 284; Louis BOUYER: *Autour d'Erasmus: études sur le christianisme des humanistes catholiques*. P 1955, 95-135; Werner JAEGER: *Early Christianity and Greek paideia*. Cambridge, Mass. 1961, 130f. Cornelis AUGUSTIJN: *Erasmus von Rotterdam: Leben, Werk, Wirkung/ aus dem Niederländ. übers. von Marga E. Baumer*. M 1986, 70, believes the term »philosophy of Christ« was first used in the 1515 *Adagia* (»The Sileni of Alcibiades«).

28 ErOPO 4 I, 146, 327 - 146, 336; 148, 367-387 (*Institutio principis christiani*). It is possible that during his stay in Italy Erasmus had heard tell of Federigo de Montefeltre († 1487), Duke of Urbino, condottiere, and celebrated patron of humanist learning, who on one occasion withdrew before an invader rather than inflict a war on his subjects, only to return a few years later and have the populace rally to him as soon as he crossed the frontier.

29 To Paul Volz (1518); ErOEp 3, 337, 226 - 238, 232 (858) ≙ CWE 6, 79, 238-244 (858).



na christiana«, the classic exposition of a doctrina meant to change the lives of those who profess it, was a vital text for humanist critics of scholastic theology, including Erasmus.<sup>30</sup> At the outset of »Methodus verae theologiae«, his initial outline of a theology based on Scripture and the Fathers rather than on Aristotle, he borrowed a metaphor from the »De doctrina christiana«: »celestial philosophy«, unlike that of the Stoics or Aristotelians, requires a soul purified of vices, »so that the image of that eternal truth may shine forth as if in a quit pool or a shining mirror«. For him the study of theology really meant the following of Christ: »to philosophize devoutly« in the New Testament, »praying rather than arguing, and seeking to be transformed rather than to be armed for combat«. »This kind of philosophy« was expressed »more in the emotions [affectibus] than in syllogisms«, it was a matter of »inspiration more than learning, transformation more than reasoning«.<sup>31</sup>

Erasmus often spoke of the need for brief »compendium« for easier understanding of the »philosophy« that Christ wished to be »accessible to all men, not beset with impenetrable labyrinths of argument«. Passages where he sketches out in a few lines what such a compendium should include reinforce the motif of inner transformation, familiar in his writings since the »Enchiridion militis christiani«<sup>32</sup>:

»Christ the heavenly teacher has founded a new people on earth, who depending wholly on heaven, and having put no trust in this world's defenses [huius mundi praesidiis], are rich in a different way, also wise, noble and happy in different ways ... Having eyes without guile, these folk know no spite or envy; having freely castrated themselves, and aiming at a life of angels while in the flesh, they know no unchaste lust; they know not divorce, since there is no evil they will not endure or turn to the good; they have not the use of oaths, since they neither distrust nor deceive anyone; they know not the hunger for money, since their treasure is in heaven, nor do they itch for empty

30 Charles BÉNÉ: *Erasmus et Saint Augustin ou l'influence de Saint Augustin sur l'Humanisme d'Erasmus*. Genève 1969, 64-66.

31 ErOEp 4, 104, 154-157 (1033); 3, 338, 285-288 (844) ≅ CWE 7, 113, 169-171 (1033); 6, 36, 304-311 (844); Chantraine: Op. cit., 157f, citing »Methodus verae theologiae«, in ErAW, 150, 25-32 and »De doctrina Christiana« 1, 10, 10; »Paraclesis« (also prefaced to the 1516 »Novum instrumentum«), 146, 3-12; 144, 35-145, 1.

32 Chantraine: Op. cit., 205, notes that the metaphors of spiritual progress in the »Enchiridion militis christiani« are vertical, suggesting a Platonic inspiration, while those of the »Ratio verae theologiae« (1518) are horizontal (e.g. initiation, advance), suggesting a firmer anchoring in the theological tradition.



glory, since they refer all things to the glory of Christ ... These are the new teachings of our founder, such as no school of philosophy has ever brought forth.«<sup>33</sup>

Thus the philosophy of Christ focuses on how Christians live, not on the credal statements they may subscribe to. But Christ himself is always in the forefront, whether as the goal or target [*scopus*] to which Christians aspire, as the founder of a new people, as a »source of eternal fire« that »kindles and purifies [the order of priests] from all earthly contagion«, as the Bridegroom leading the soul into His chamber, or as »that solid rock« in whom the believer can place his trust even in the most perilous of times.<sup>34</sup>

Yet the *philosophia Christi* is in many ways strikingly different from the spiritual tradition that produced »The imitation of Christ«. In particular, there is no trace in Erasmus of the great devotion to the monastic virtue of humility in the writings of the Brethren of the Common Life. To be sure, one cannot imagine a *doctrina* focussed on the gospels that fails to contrast the humble circumstances of Jesus' life with the pomp and splendor of the world. But in Erasmus' understanding of gospel doctrine this function is served by the concept of »human defenses« [*praesidia humana*] or »defenses of this world« [*huius mundi praesidia*], terms that encompass every form of strength and power in which human beings find pride and security. Thus Christ won men and women to himself »not by engines of war«, nor by »the syllogisms of philosophers or the rhetorical figures of the orators«, for »He did not wish any kind of human defenses to be involved in this affair«. St. Paul wrote his »Epistle to the Romans« to »take away the Jews' trust in themselves« and call them to rely only »on the defenses of Christ«, for »no one can truly trust in God unless he has abandoned trust in his own defenses«. In God's providence it was »the simple and popular doctrine of the gospel« that renewed the world, as previously no school of philosophy had been able to do, »lest any of the praise be ascribed to human defenses«.<sup>35</sup>

33 *Ratio verae theologiae*, in ErAW, 193, 24 - 194, 27; cf. ErOEp 3, 363, 60-63; 365, 139-148 (858) ≙ CWE 6, 74, 67-70; 77, 153-162 (858).

34 On Christ as *scopus*, an image borrowed from Origen, André GODIN: *Erasmus lecteur d'Origène*. Genève 1982, 45-48; ErOEp 3, 368, 245-247 (858) ≙ CWE 7, 80, 245-252 (858); on the interpretation of ErOEp 4, 442, 133-138 (1183) ≙ CWE 8, 153, 147-150 (cf. ErOEp 8, 74, 14-16 [2114]): »I shall plant my feet firmly on that solid rock«; see Chantraine: *Op. cit.* 114f.

35 ErAW, 221, 21f; 231, 4-21; 234, 39 - 235, 7 (*Ratio verae theologiae*, 1518); Paraphrase of 1 K I, 25, ErOpO 7, 863 C; see ErAW 143, 3-10 (*Paraclesis*).



The other great difference between Erasmus' *doctrina* and the spirituality of the Brethren is the ideal of learned piety [*docta pietas*], as expressed when he praises abbot Paul Volz (1480-1544) and others like him: »Being yourselves endowed with pious learning and with learned piety, I know that you would approve of nothing that is not equally pious and learned.« For Erasmus, true piety had to be »learned« in the sense that it drank in Christian *doctrina* »from the purest springs [*fontes*]«, that is, from Scripture understood and expounded according to the best scholarly norms. In his usage of terms »*philosophia Christi*« is linked again and again to this common but compelling humanist metaphor: »all the springs and sources of Christian philosophy are enshrined in the books of the evangelists and the apostles«; the philosophy of Christ is drawn »from these few books, as if from the purest springs«, much more easily than Aristotle's philosophy is extracted from spiny tomes, »and I dare say with much more profit«; so as not to taint »the heavenly philosophy of Christ« with the laws and disciplines of men, »let that one spring remain uncorrupted, let that true sheet anchor of evangelical doctrine be preserved«. <sup>36</sup>

Erasmus often cited the story of how Isaac reopened wells dug in the days of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up and filled with dirt (Gn 26, 14-19), as an allegory for the larger significance of »opening the sources« of saving doctrine:

»Judaism would have imposed on us the whole of Moses and even the crowning indignity of circumcision and would have reduced that heavenly philosophy to a matter of coarse and lifeless ritual, had not this valiant Isaac of ours [St. Paul] opened so many wells of the authentic Gospel, so many springs of living water against the Philistines that would fill all with dirt.« <sup>37</sup>

This secondary metaphor – the wells of Abraham that have to be cleansed of Philistine dirt – provides a warrant for Erasmus' combative stance over against his critics and detractors. With his patient textual labors he was not merely cleansing the »springs« of Christian philosophy from the unconscious errors of

<sup>36</sup> ErOEp 3, 365, 134-136 (858) ≅ CWE 6, 77, 144-146 (858). ErAW, 141, 12-27; cf. 146, 3-12 (Paraclesis); 204, 11-14 (Ratio verae theologiae); see also ErOEp 3, 486, 224-229 (916) ≅ CWE 6, 244, 256-261 (916). Dietrich HARTH: *Humanistische Philologie und Praktische Philosophie: Untersuchungen zum Sprach- und Traditionsverständnis des Erasmus von Rotterdam*. M 1970, 144f.

<sup>37</sup> ErOEp 3, 486, 216-229 (916) ≅ CWE 6, 244, 247-261 (916); for the same idea, ErOEp 4, 181, 35-44 (1062) ≅ CWE 7, 197, 39-49 (1062); »*Novum instrumentum*« – L 22, 36 – in Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament 1, 209-213; and ErAW, 260, 35 - 261, 5 (Ratio verae theologiae).



copyists, he was also removing impurities deliberately introduced into the well, for »we are [not] quite free of Philistines nowadays«, who »tip earth into the Gospel springs«. <sup>38</sup>

In the first instance, these enemies of truth were all proponents of a religion of ceremonies, ranging from the Judeo-Christians of the early Church (Paul's adversaries) to the monks and friars of modern times. Erasmus' New Testament annotations offered a platform for showing how particular passages had been »twisted« to provide justification for modern »ceremonies«, as may be illustrated here by a few examples from Matthew. Perhaps best known to readers of the »Lutherjahrbuch« is the comment at Mt 3, 2 (»Do penance« in the Vulgate) where he points out that the Greek verb »metanoieite« (»repent« or »be changed in your heart«) has nothing to do with »the prescribed penalties by which one atones for sins« after receiving the sacrament of confession, regardless what the »common herd« of theologians may think«. At Mt 6, 7 (»in praying, do not multiply words«), he inveighs against the »little chants, clamors, murmurs and bombast« that have invaded the liturgy of the Church, and especially against certain prayers resembling »maunderings of old men or the foolishness of old women« that have been mixed in with the divine office that priests were obliged to recite daily. At Mt 11, 30 (»my yoke is easy«), a passage quoted above, he concludes that »a general council« of the Church is the only remedy for the »tyranny« of laws and ceremonies that has so infested the lives of the faithful. At Mt 16, 18 (»Thou art Peter«), he marvels that certain theologians have »twisted« the reference to the rock on which Christ will build his church, »making it refer to the Roman Pontiff«, rather than to all Christians, or to Peter's faith, or to Christ himself, as the ancient interpreters suggest. Finally, at Mt 23, 2 (»The Scribes and Pharisees have sat on the chair of Moses«), he reads Christ as saying that only those who teach the law truly deserve respect: »But who will bear [bishops] measuring everything by their own profit and majesty, legislating for their own convenience, against the doctrine of Christ, exercising plain tyranny over the people.« <sup>39</sup>

Dirt was also »tipped in Gospel wells« by palliating or explaining away the stringent moral demands of Christ in the Gospel. Here too Erasmus' annota-

38 ErOEp 3, 366, 185 - 367, 212 (858) ≙ CWE 7, 78, 196 - 79, 224 (858).

39 Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament 1, 13 (from 1516). 33f (1519). 53-56 (1519). 70f (1516 and 1519). 91 (1519).



tions on Matthew, especially for the Sermon on the Mount, may provide illustrations. At Mt 5, 22 (»everyone who is angry with his brother«), he noted that some Greek manuscripts read »without cause«, but he accepted Jerome's opinion that the addition had come from »some temerious scribe who wished to mitigate a saying that seemed too harsh«. At Mt 5, 37 (»Let your speech be, ›Yes, yes; ›No, no; and whatever is beyond this comes from the evil one.«), he marvelled how theologians had »twisted« the passage to mean that »evil« came from those who swore an oath falsely: »I think Christ intended that those who would be perfect should not swear at all, even on those occasions when people usually take oaths.«<sup>40</sup>

The worst distortion of all was to blunt Christ's injunction to suffer persecution in his name (Mt 5, 10f), a command that stood squarely athwart the quarreling and war-making proclivities of sinful humankind. It was amazing how Christians turned a cold shoulder to such »dogmas of Christ's most holy philosophy«,

»for even those professing perfect religion are not ashamed to evade this commandment, as if it were antiquated and obsolete. They think it impious not to have made a successful career, no matter what it takes. Thus war is praised even in the churches by bishops, by theologians, by monks. I know certain men who have made themselves bishops by singing the praises of war.«

He had equally harsh words for medieval commentators who read L 22, 36 (»let him who has no sword sell his tunic and buy one«) as a charter for undertaking wars in a just cause:

»To me no heresy is more pernicious, no blasphemy more criminal, than when someone following the example of the Philistines fills with dirt the wells of the Gospel field, converting the spiritual sense to a carnal one, and corrupting heavenly teaching [doctrina] into something earthly ... It troubles me not a whit that some are worried lest the right of making war be taken away from princes, for it is hardly necessary to teach princes what they do anyway far too eagerly. I will not go into how princes fight wars nowadays, if indeed they do fight wars, instead of colluding among themselves for the destruction of the people, using the pretext of war to consolidate their own tyranny.«<sup>41</sup>

40 Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament 1, 27 (1516). 30 (1516); cf. ErOE 3, 48, 220-227 (1006) ≅ CWE 7, 51, 232-240 (1006). The Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5-6 (Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament 1, 25-39), occupies more space in the annotations than any comparable section of the gospels.

41 Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament 1, 26 (1519). 209-213 (1516, 1519).



This passage neatly illustrates how the philosophia Christi was calibrated to Erasmus' perception of the deep and secret evils that afflicted Christendom. The shameless effrontery of wicked men could cast off all restraint only because the wells of Gospel doctrina had been filled with dirt.

But if these same wells could be cleansed of dirt and error, as Erasmus strove mightily to do, their life-giving power promised hope of renewal for the whole Christian world. The »Exhortation« (»Paraclesis«) prefaced to his 1516 »Novum Instrumentum« has a bright vision of the future. Although »it would perhaps be better to keep the mysteries of kings hidden from view, Christ wants his mysteries made known as widely as possible«. Thus Erasmus urged that the New Testament be translated into all vernacular languages, to be read »not just by Scots and Irishmen but even by Turks and Saracens«, so that snatches of the Gospel story could be sung by farmers at the plow, or weavers at their looms, or told among travellers to enliven a tedious journey, »for these are the occasions when Christians talk with one another, and we are such as our daily conversations make us«. As a dyed-in-the-wool Latinist Erasmus could not follow through on his own suggestion about translating Scripture, but he did his part through the New Testament »Paraphrases«, intended to explicate difficult passages and thus make the text more accessible to the Latin reading public.<sup>42</sup> But mere spreading of the Gospel was not the only thing required. There would be within not too many years »a more genuine kind of Christian« if »the three estates of men whose task it is to establish and promote the Christian religion« were of one mind in promulgating the pure Gospel:

»If princes would stand by this seemingly ordinary philosophy [of Christ], if preachers would inculcate it in their sermons, if schoolmasters would instill it in their pupils, instead of a more learned philosophy drawn from the springs of Aristotle or Averroes, the Christian republic would not be troubled in this way by nearly unceasing wars, we would not see everywhere such a mad zeal for amassing riches by means fair or foul, we would not hear everywhere the echo of civil and ecclesiastical litigation, and we would not differ only in name and in ceremonies from those who do not profess the philosophy of Christ.«<sup>43</sup>

42 ErAW, 142, 14-25 (Paraclesis); on the »Paraphrases«, see the introduction to CWE; for the ideas that »we are such as our daily conversations make us«, see »Evil [conversations] corrupt good manners« (1508), CWE 32, 266 f (I x 73)  $\triangle$  ErOPO 2, 288 D - 289 D (Adagia).

43 ErAW 143, 32 - 144, 12 (Paraclesis).



This in a nutshell was Erasmus' vision of a reform of the liberating power of the philosophia Christi, ramifying outward from a cleansing of the Gospel springs, with the cooperation of civil and religious authorities, as well as of those who taught from lectern or pulpit, and over time bearing fruit in a world in which the Christian people would be spared much litigation and many wars.

The great hope that the »Paraclesis« expresses seems to rest on several disparate premises. Erasmus was all of his life fascinated by the charm and the power of language, and for him the divine speech of Scripture was the most compelling of all: »that heavenly Word which once came down to us from the heart of the Father still lives and breathes for us and acts and speaks with more efficacy« in the writings of the evangelists and apostles »than in any other way«. <sup>44</sup> In addition, he drew encouragement from what he saw as the congruence between the philosophy of Christ and the inherent goodness of human nature:

»That which is most in keeping with nature will easily take root in the souls of all. For what is the philosophy of Christ, which he calls a rebirth [renascentia], but the renewal of a human nature that was created good?«

Gospel doctrine was »in keeping with nature« because »the consciousness of having done no wrong is the wellspring of true pleasure, as even Epicurus admits«. Erasmus explains Christ's statement that his yoke is light by saying that »he prescribed nothing except mutual love«, adding that »whatever is according to nature is easily borne«; to grasp what he means, one may connect this passion from the New Testament »Annotations« with another in »Querela pacis« (1517), where, borrowing from Cicero, he speaks of nature implanting in man »a mild and gentle disposition which is inclined towards good will between him and his fellows, so that he delights in being loved for himself and takes pleasure in being of service to others – so long as he has not been corrupted by base desires«. <sup>45</sup> St. Augustine (354-430) would not have suggested that base and quarrelsome desires are a corruption of man's true nature, but Erasmus was in

44 To Leo X, preface to the »Novum instrumentum«, ErOEp 2, 185, 42-49 (384) ≙ CWE 3, 222, 44-51 (384). These words are also an indication that for Erasmus the presence of Christ in the sacraments of the Church was less important than his presence in Scripture; see John B. PAYNE: Erasmus: his theology of the sacraments. Richmond 1970.

45 ErAW, 145, 4-7. 23-25 (Paraclesis); Erasmus' annotations on the New Testament 1, 53-56 (Mt 11, 30, 519), and »Querela pacis« (1517), ErOpO 4, 627 B-C ≙ CWE 27, 295, with note 15.



many ways more fond of the »De doctrina christiana« than he was of its author. When criticized for neglecting Augustine, he replied that »I learn more of the philosophy of Christ [philosophia Christi] from one page of Origen than from ten of Augustine«. Elsewhere he asserted that Augustine was not to be compared with any of the Greek Fathers, and that among the Latins Ambrose (339-397) and Hilary (circa 315-367) and Cyprian († 258) were »more learned than he ... but they wrote less«. <sup>46</sup> Here again one sees the profound congruity between Erasmus' diagnosis of the ills of Christian society and his understanding of the philosophia Christi. If a political and religious elite »corrupted by base desires« had for its own selfish purposes »tipped dirt in the Gospel wells«, one could indeed hope that the springs of truth, flowing fresh, might indeed produce »a more genuine kind of Christian«. In effect, Erasmus' program for the renewal of Christendom was his own unique version of the ancient Christian principle that where evil abounds, there grace abounds more fully.

<sup>46</sup> ErOE p 3, 333, III – 337, 271 (769) ≅ CWE 6, 31-35 (769), and the brief letter 898.