

The Early Reformation
on the Continent



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SCHOLARSHIP AND RELIGION

It is not to be controverted that scholarship was a reason for the Reformation and the way in which it went. But that does not mean that all scholars were reformers.

As institutions universities by their nature divide in tension between persons who wish to hand to posterity the best of knowledge as they have so far received it, and those whose interest is to move into new fields. There are new findings and new fashions and new demands from students and these excitements affect what is expected of the curriculum. And there is a great body of existing knowledge acquired by tried methods, and the new lecturers need to persuade their colleagues that what they do is of the same weight and importance as the existing curriculum. The chief study of the older schools was philosophy, especially as applied to problems in divinity. The new schools discovered the excitement of classical literature and history and poetry and deplored the narrowness of the reigning syllabus. Older minds might resent the demand that time and lectures should be given to poetry, which is a matter of taste, and taken away from a hard mental training in logic. This normal division of opinion was made bitter because it was entangled with three debates, of which two were academic and the third had powerful social consequences.

The Renaissance discovered the beauty of Greek language and literature. Medieval universities taught ancient Greek thought, especially the science and philosophy of Aristotle, through the medium of Latin translations, some of which had passed through Arabic. The humanist cry was back to the sources, learn Greek, study the texts. This demand made older lecturers in philosophy uncomfortable. The texts which they knew were now less easy to think correct.

Humanists had also discovered the quality of the best of Latin classical prose. The Latin which university lecturers used for their courses, for teaching and examining and philosophical enquiry, had developed into a language which was effective for its academic purpose, but which was not Cicero's Latin and which he would have despised. Classical scholars found it ridiculous, professors lecturing in 'bad Latin'. This was part of the scorn which humanists felt for their predecessors. The conservatives attacked these

newcomers, literature is a lightweight study, standards are lower, lectures are thin, minds are not trained toughly, why should we need Greek which unlike Latin is a dead language? Yet if they did not conform to what students wanted or needed they lost their audience and the university fell into trouble over its budget.

The tension with consequences was the conviction that the old syllabus was a waste of time. We send our young people to listen to lectures where someone discusses an obscure point of divinity to which no one knows or ever could know the answer; when their growing minds must be led to find the glory of literature with its high moral content. The humanists did not think theology bad but as then practised in universities they were sure it was wasted time because dry and remote from the world that mattered. This attitude must lead towards a reconstruction of religious teaching in universities, quickly if humanists won government of the faculties, slowly if conservatives hung on to their methods until they or their successors found that they no longer attracted audiences of students because those students now had no interest in learning the logic and theology of the schools.

When the world came to religious change, the old theologians stood firm. But the scholars were not all for the new. They divided. There is a theory that they divided by age; if older, conservative; if in middle years, wavering; if young, ardent for reformation. The humanist Pirckheimer of Nuremberg was strong for Luther and named when Luther was excommunicated, and afterwards rejected the reform. Melanchthon, the most famous professor of Greek in Germany, was only twenty-one when he became a professor and turned into one of the most celebrated of reformers. The theory has a measure of truth. Yet other reasons affected the way by which humanists went. Pirckheimer was affected by the troubles of his sister, who was an abbess while nunneries were being closed or emptied. Many others held professorial posts in states which refused to go with religious change and if they wanted to keep their pay needed to conform and withdraw into the purely academic area of their lives.

There is a mystery here which historians do not easily solve. Printing, and more books, and more information, helped to cause the Reformation, no one doubts it. The leaders of reform were intellectuals, professors of the university like Luther and Melanchthon in Saxony, leaders in academies of a high standard like Zwingli and Bullinger and Peter Martyr in Zurich, pastors of a rare distinction in learning like Calvin in Geneva or Bucer in Strasbourg. Yet not all learned persons were on the side of change. Padua was the great school of medicine in Europe and remained it after all the changes, Bologna was the great school of law and never lost its Catholic spirit. The universities of Louvain and Cologne and Paris had members so far to the conservative side that they were laughed at as dyed-in-the-wool, but they had rare

scholars among their ranks. The university of Ingolstadt in Bavaria had the most unattractive of all conservatives among its professors, yet it held in a chair, despite pressure on him to move to somewhere more forward-looking in its ideas, Reuchlin, who inaugurated the modern study of the Hebrew language.

But we find that in various parts, and not infrequently, the impulse to religious change came not from the teacher, nor from the government, but from the people; not from men or women who were reading their new-printed Bibles with care and diligence and surprise, but from a crowd who suddenly felt nausea towards what was happening in their church. It often started with a cry, not to find better truth than they had, but to rid themselves of a pollution felt to be a stain upon the community. This is what made the unsolved historical question. Was it more that the people felt in their guts that things were wrong and would take action in the only way they knew, by demonstration, to get change? and then when they acted the teachers must step in to guide change and eventually to control it? Or was it more because the teachers said that truth was not being taught from Catholic pulpits and demand for change fitted certain gut-feelings which already existed among the common men and women?

Many academics took time to know where they stood, perhaps most of them. Later we shall meet sudden changes, experiences like conversion. But the humanists were after all academics.

Mosellanus was such a one, not quite sure what the future held. His career was unparalleled as an example of the rustic boy who turned into one of the leading scholars of the age. A choirboy in Trier cathedral, he attended a course at Cologne and learnt Greek; went to teach in a secondary school and then at the age of twenty matriculated in the university of Leipzig, where the professor of Greek was Richard Croke, the famous Englishman who later taught Greek to King Henry VIII. Through Croke Mosellanus mastered the language, and simultaneously published a very humanist book, *Paedologia*, dialogues in Latin for use in school, a best-seller in sixty-five editions during that century alone. For an hour he won a European fame that was more than academic; for when Martin Luther came to Leipzig to defend himself against the attacks of Johann Eck, Duke George ordered Mosellanus to open that historic debate. Mosellanus never showed any sign of being drawn to Luther. His prince, Duke George of the other Saxony, disliked everything Luther stood for and Mosellanus was loyal. And yet he was not comfortable in the university of Leipzig. He thought very little of the historic structure of a university. It pained him that he must call himself by the ridiculous title of Master of Arts. He probably minded that his colleague in the chief Leipzig chair of theology (Hieronymus Dungersheim) thought it his duty to confute Luther with such vehemence. Mosellanus argued for the necessity of Greek

and Latin because only so can we understand the Bible. He admired Erasmus. But he did not move. His friends were moving towards opposite sides—one friend was Pflug, who finished as a Catholic bishop, another was Joachim Camerarius, who later created the repute of the university of Leipzig and who became the close friend, and afterwards the biographer, of Melanchthon. Mosellanus died when he was only thirty and it is an interesting guess what he would have done if he had lived to the age of forty-four when Duke George died and the succeeding princes took ducal Saxony, as its people mostly now wanted, under the aegis of the north German Reformation.

When Mosellanus died, a death widely seen as a disaster for his university, two things happened which shed light on the problem. Erasmus wrote a letter (no. 1526) to express his sorrow at the loss and said that to find a worthy successor in the chair of Greek would be no easy task because Duke George would allow no one into the chair unless he was against Luther. But, wrote Erasmus, most of the people who knew enough Greek to be respectable as professors were not against Luther. Then Duke George invited Erasmus himself to recommend the successor. He selected his fellow Dutchman Ceratinus, of whose scholarship he had a high opinion. Ceratinus came, but left for his native land after only three months. It was suspected that he could not be so strong against Luther as his prince desired. Greek studies at Leipzig languished for a few years, until after Duke George's death and the coming back of a truly big Greek philologist, Melanchthon's friend Joachim Camerarius.

Guillaume Budé, Latinized as Budaeus, was the best of French scholars in his age; and though the tradition of the Sorbonne was suspect as too conservative for a humanist generation, Paris was full of scholars. He taught himself Greek and came to be looked upon as the expert in the Greek language. He was patronized by the king and was made royal librarian and helped to create the first piece of what was later to be the great Bibliothèque Nationale. In that office he was able to help the humanists by his influence on the king. He made a profound study of Roman law, later on Roman coinage; and despite the academic nature of these subjects his Roman law contained an onslaught on the scholastic system of jurisprudence and his coinage treated economics and even a communist theory. Did such studies have any effect on what was slowly happening to European religion? All his life he remained a loyal Catholic with sympathies for moderate reformation. Yet, as change began to happen, or those who wished for change became more public, conservative France grew narrower in mind; and after he died in 1540, his wife and children did not feel safe and fled to Calvin's Geneva.

Of these humanist scholars, whose essential interest was classical antiquity, two became symbols of a new reformation. One was Melanchthon, lecturer in Greek at Tübingen university when almost a juvenile and then professor

of Greek at the university of Wittenberg from the age of twenty-one. Here it was the place of the chair rather than the work which made him a symbol; for it put him at the right hand of Martin Luther, gave an international academic weight to Luther's university, and placed a steady loyal mind at the side of what Luther wanted to achieve. Melanchthon came to the heart of the Reformation because he went to that special chair. The other was Erasmus. It mattered where he went. It was not a little part of his ability to be a symbol that he changed his place of work from conservative Louvain to a Basel which grew more hostile towards conservatives during the time that he resided there. But it was not his place that mattered most. It was because he was recognized everywhere as a scholar of international fame.

His personal history mattered to the rare psychology which is found in the mature adult. The son of a Dutchman who could not marry his woman because he was related to her within the prohibited degrees, and so illegitimate by birth, he was likely to think from childhood that the rules of the Church were not perfect. The circumstance made him, who later in life was prolific in the freedom with which he expressed his personal emotions, reticent about his early years and for long there was guessing about his youth. He went to a good school at Deventer, good enough to make him like learning Latin and want to know it well. At eighteen, with father dead and the family unable to afford a university, he joined the Augustinian monks at Steyn. For eight years he lived the usual life of a monk, and they won him dispensation from the rule that an illegitimate cannot be ordained priest and he was ordained. But the library of the monastery was important to him. He used it well; there he went on perfecting his Latin, partly by much reading and partly by writing essays. He discovered that he loved writing. The discovery led him to his first sense of mission in life, which was to last all his days. There were devout persons who said that learning was nothing to do with goodness. He determined to show the contrary. His first book, *Antibarbari* (*Against the Barbarians*), had the militancy of youth in this sense. He produced apostolic authority for his case. 'Paul, who was snatched up to the third heaven, sent letters that he might be sent the books in parchment and then argued with Peter about Christian doctrine.' He studied hard; the Fathers of the early Church naturally, but what fascinated him was the ancient Roman world and its literature, now being made available by the new printers. He read Italian humanists, leaders in that Renaissance love of classical literature. In maturity this sense of mission turned into a very intelligent longing that he might help to reconcile the best of literature with the best of religious thought.

In pursuit of books he made the acquaintance on paper of a real scholar, the Italian Lorenzo Valla, the powerful critical mind of the fifteenth century. This meeting was important enough to make Erasmus start an index of Valla's

writings. Valla gave him an ideal of ‘eloquence’; that is, how to persuade people to the truth through the right use of words and accurate information.

His fellow monks could see that he was not happy in his little world and needed bigger libraries and a wider sphere. Here there is a difficulty, and no small one because it affects the view of the place of Erasmus in the origins of the Reformation. Erasmus had an optimistic view of the human race and what they can achieve morally if they try. That suggests an unbullied childhood and a contented youth and an admiration for at least a few of those among whom he grew up. In his maturity, when he had long abandoned his monastic vows, he still accepted that there were monks who were good and did good. But with that avowal was evident a deep-seated resentment that he was forced as a child into a way of life for which he was not suited. ‘They tied a halter round my neck.’¹ This resentment turned into a criticism of the vows which monks take, and the way of life, the quarrelling between religious orders, the petty disputes inside monastic houses, the hypocrisy of people in habits who pretend to be revered by the world but behave worse than ordinary men and women. When Erasmus began to write the repute of monks was not high. By the time he had finished it was far lower still and his satire was no small contribution to that descent. Something in the house at Steyn helped to cause this campaign, but we cannot yet know what. When he was accused of being an apostate monk, he once said that no one blames a man who flees from captivity by pirates.²

They released him on leave of absence to become secretary to the bishop of Cambrai, presumably in the false belief that one who was so good at writing letters would make a good secretary. Erasmus had no interest in administration and the bishop soon freed him for study at the university of Paris—and at last, at the age of twenty-nine, he was where, if his family had any money, he should have been ten years earlier. Henceforth he was in a world which had everything he wanted except money to live on and comforts to enjoy—the bed was hard and he was afraid of disease through lack of calories. Still wearing his monk’s habit, still on leave from his monastery, he made ends meet, though not easily, by coaching in Latin the sons of the rich. Later in life he was accused of being too intent on money and this struggle for existence in Paris may have been part of the cause. But he had good libraries, touch with leading academics like Budé, entry into a leading theological faculty of Europe.

He studied the scholastic philosophy and qualified himself to be an expert in theology. But there was something odd about the result. ‘Scholastics’, ‘schoolmen’—these were words which he used with contempt for the rest of his life. And since that world identified theology with the faculties of

¹ *Ep.* 1581 a.

² To Lambertus Grunnius (a pseudonym), *Ep.* 447.

universities and their use of logic and syllogism and authoritative texts, there were those afterwards, even into modern times, who defined Erasmus as a scholar but no theologian. Occasionally he thought this of himself. That was misleading. Underneath the apparent doubt of ‘theology’, there was now a mind expert in the New Testament (but not yet in Greek), and qualified in the early Christian Fathers.

Since he made ends meet by coaching the young, it was the nature of education about which he first wrote. Literature should revive education and through schools transform the culture of Europe. From this time he already had misty ideals of a better society because more cultivated. It was an ideal which assumed the dignity and sacredness of the human being.

Every member of the species should treat every other member with respect, and strive for peace and harmony, and settle disputes by reasonable argument and not by violence. Revolution could never be his ideal. This sweet reasonableness was fostered by religious sensibility, the Christian ideal of gentleness and pity and forgiveness, and of not pushing the self forward. This is the kind of person whom the educator must seek to help grow. The child should discover the wisdom of the centuries and so must know Latin as the key to unlock literature, and must learn the gospel and the truths which it inculcates as the key to moral right and piety. And as children develop they must be led to practise ‘eloquence’, how to use words that persuade towards the truth, how to see the relationship between the use of words and the perception of truth. It brings precision of mind because words have different meanings in different contexts, and this habit of exactness it is of the first importance to learn at school. He even wrote a book of etiquette for boys—on not blowing the nose on the sleeve, on covering the mouth for a yawn, the ugliness of excessive laughter. No other great scholar, no other serious religious leader, ever wrote a book on the etiquette of polite behaviour. He was not a realist, he said that normally classes must be not more than five in number.³

He believed in men and women and what they can do—‘as a bird is born to fly, a human being is born to wisdom and an upright life’—‘every human can be taught virtue without any hardship’. Such optimism meant that it was hard for him to understand the multitude who knew about original sin, the disciples of St Paul and St Augustine, Martin Luther among them, who believed that humanity can only come to good by a great act of God. His first love for study of the early Fathers was St Jerome the translator of the Bible, and Jerome’s theology was not close to St Augustine’s.

In 1500 he made his academic name with a publication nothing to do with theology: *Adagiorum Collectanea*, which was a collection of the proverbs he

³ *De pueris instituendis*, in *Opera Omnia*, i, 2, 21 ff.

could find among the Greek and Latin authors, 818 of them, with short explanations. It could not have been done, even at 818, without a vast range of reading. No one thought of the author yet as a possible rebel in the Church. It was just a useful instrument for classical studies. But most proverbs are wise sayings about morality, so that the book contained, in a new and subtle way, the best ethical insights of the ancient world. To each new edition he added proverbs, until there were more than 4,000 of them by the end of his life. And during his last few years when he was controversial, he used his comments for satires on society—kings and their folly, tyrants and wickedness, clergy and their hypocrisy, the need for a purer religion, the futility of war, the stupidity that priests are not allowed to marry. But this was a long way ahead, in the years after his New Testament and into the time when leading Catholic theologians held him up as a rebel. With reverence for the core of religion and for the best of literature, he could be irreverent about everything else from Homer's heroes downwards, and it was impossible for him to be dull.

But the religion of the man came out in something bigger than satire. In 1501, perhaps in Paris perhaps on a visit to the Netherlands, he drafted the first of his devotional books and printed it two years later: *Enchiridion militis christiani*, which was a play on words for it could be translated either as the handbook of a Christian soldier or as the dagger of a Christian soldier. Later in life when he was famous this became a much read book. At first it was read by hardly anyone.

It is a very religious book. Its theology is of the simplest. Let the Christian truly resolve to reform the moral way, to give up the adulteries, decide to be brave instead of timid, look upwards towards the eternal. The fight is hard because of our blindness and our passions and the ease with which we surrender. But we must fight on in the knowledge that this battle cannot be lost because God stands at the side. Parts are platitude. Try hard to do good and you can succeed and God will help. 'No attack by a demon is so overwhelming, no temptation so pressing, that the hard study of the Bible cannot easily defeat them'—'a main part of Christian life is to wish with all one's heart to be a Christian'.

But the conventional morality was turned into something bigger for that generation by the appeal from external rites to the inward spirit—your religion is images and pilgrimages and dressing as a monk and going to mass?—but true religion is of the heart and its way is the gentle following of Christ's precepts, and we must beware of superstitions which many attach to ceremonies.

It was not common to find a moralist whom it was such pleasure to read.

He spent the years from 1506 to 1509 in Italy, mainly at Venice with the great printer Aldus Manutius, and perfecting his Greek. He became, oddly, a

doctor of divinity at the university of Turin, which he did not attend. At the house of Manutius it was a rule that all conversation must be carried on in Greek. This Greekizing fraternity in Venice and then in Padua was indispensable to Erasmus's later expertise and to his reforming achievement.

He went on to Rome, where cardinals were kind to him, and then, wondering what to do next, accepted another invitation to England. He stayed in the house of Sir Thomas More and whiled away the time by writing *Encomium Moriae*, which can mean either praise of More or praise of Folly, and it was as the praise of Folly that it infinitely amused the world.⁴

It is folly that keeps the world in being. Unless men were fools they would not marry and chain themselves to women. Unless women were fools they would not marry and face childbirth and little children. Unless powerful men were fools they would not engage in great buildings or causes or trading which carry high risks but which when they come off help humanity. Human beings have a touch of the fraud, and it is better so, we only get along with each other if we pretend in our social relationships, we ought not to strip people of their illusions, those who live with what they hope to be true are happier than those who see things as they are really. How happy the fool who knows nothing and is content to know nothing, contrast the scholar who wastes time and eyesight and health in a profitless assembly of knowledge. What a lot of fools there are—the tribe of theologians writing useless notes on other people's books, men and women who think they will cure toothache by invoking a favourite saint, useless statues, monks who will not touch money but are ready to touch women, censors poring over harmless books to pick a passage as irreverent or scandalous, preachers who paint what happens in hell when they have no knowledge of it whatever, kings who oppress the poor and spend the taxes on their horses, popes who think prayer useless and poverty a sin and to be beaten in war disgraceful and to die on a cross very bad for the Church. And yet the truest and greatest fools are to be honoured—the folly of giving away what one has, and fasting for the sake of God, and forgiving enemies, and the simplicity of the child. The little book was popular because it was daring, because it was written with charm and bite, and because in jest it said things about society which many people now thought needed to be said.

The charm did not conceal, though for some readers it extenuated, the revolutionary innuendoes in the book. It was so amusing that at first not everyone realized its power. Pope Leo X smiled at it. Sir Thomas More

⁴ *Encomium Moriae* only started to be written in More's house 1509, pirated edition 1511, first proper edition 1512; revised 1514 Strasbourg which contains much material on religion; 1516 from Froben at Basel with more additions. The first part is banter, the second bitterer. New edition in *Opera Omnia* iv. 3. 1999.

defended it. But from 1515 it began to be attacked, and later was formally condemned. Condemnations only added to the sale, there were thirty-six Latin editions before Erasmus died, and translations into French, German, and Czech. It could not be translated into English until after King Henry VIII died, and could only be printed among Erasmus's works in Protestant countries. It did much to help the mood of the educated—the Church affords so much matter for satire that it must be mended.⁵

Then came his New Testament of 1516 and bigger fame and soon far bigger controversy. The few years after that were the summit of his celebrity and his happiness. His name stood for the Bible and the best of its study; for the wish that its texts should be better known, and by working men and women not only by academics; that Greek and Latin and Hebrew should be more studied than they were. Morally his name stood for better education for everyone; for getting away from external religion to a religion of the heart and spirit; for the belief that all is possible and none need despair; for the conviction that humane literature and the best of religion are not opposed but are allies; and for the peace of Europe.

In that year he was regarded not only as a great scholar but as a great religious leader. It mattered to the churches of Europe what his opinions were on how to reform. The elector Frederick of Saxony, a devout Catholic but soon to be the one person whose shield stood between Martin Luther and death, bought every book by Erasmus for his private library.⁶

He was full of hope for society in these years when he was so valued. Telling his friend Wolfgang Capito that he was getting old now (he was about fifty), he would be content to be young again because he thought that they could shortly see the beginning of a new golden age. The great princes have turned to foster peace, there is a rebirth of literature which governments encourage, medical research is making progress, and the study of law led by such as Budé, and mathematics. It will be harder to find progress in theology, so conservative are theologians, but as the knowledge of the three languages (Latin, Greek, and Hebrew) advances so theology will progress in

⁵ In 1516 someone wrote the antipapal pamphlet *Julius Exclusus*. In this Pope Julius is represented as knocking at the gate of heaven and indignant that he is not let in. The beginning is funny, the later part less interesting than the *Praise of Folly*. Because it seems to have come from Erasmus's circle, many in Europe believed him to be the author, and if so it could not do his Catholic repute anything but much harm. Luther thought he wrote it, so did his Catholic academic foes. He always denied that he was the author. As late as the scholarly Toronto translation of 1986 by Michael J. Heath there was probability that he was not truthful in his denial. Subsequently there has been more inclination to accept Erasmus's denial and it is unsafe to use the *Julius* as 'typical' of Erasmus's less public views on popes. In the year when we know that it was written (though not printed till the next year, 1517) he was engaged on the enormous work connected with the New Testament and it is hard to imagine him finding the time, or changing so radically his mood, to write the *Julius*.

⁶ Spalatin to Erasmus, December 1516, in Erasmus, *Ep.* 501.

the universities; an achievement in which he allowed that even he bore a humble part.⁷

Only eight years after he wrote this portrait of a halcyon future, his then beau idéal the French King Francis I crashed in the battle of Pavia and went to a Spanish prison, only ten years later the Renaissance in Rome was ended and the city sacked and almost destroyed by a wild unpaid army of German and Spanish mercenaries.

He lived comfortably at Louvain, with confidence in his powers, no duties to distract him from study and writing, and an international reputation which meant that anything he published would be bought by many. His correspondence was vast, he was made an official adviser to the future emperor Charles V. He won freedom from the pope not to be a monk under a monk's vows (he left off his monk's habit nine years before but went on dressing as a priest) and so was again respectable in his ecclesiastical position—the dispensation did not save him from malicious gossip that he was an apostate monk.⁸ Liberal-minded bishops wanted their clergy to read his books and adopt his ideals, kings sought to win a name for culture by persuading him into their court or university.

He did not reflect how many enemies he was making. It was not only the satires like the *Praise of Folly*. He had now published a large volume on a subject where there were experts—his Annotations on the New Testament. Professors in their chairs in France or Italy or Spain or Germany despised this amateur theologian and used the language of scorn; at Alcalá the most formidable, Stunica; in Paris Noel Béda, less extreme than Stunica and less expert, but rough and the mouthpiece of the most famous of universities; Béda's lieutenant at Paris, a Carthusian Sutor (real name, Cousturier); at Louvain Latomus, who published his first shafts against Erasmus by putting them forward as criticisms of Mosellanus of Leipzig; Edward Lee, to be the new archbishop of York, academically not much but far from the most reticent of critics.

The criticisms were of three kinds: technical scholarship, general doubt of Erasmus's proposals, and disloyalty to the authority of the Catholic Church.

Stunica (=Diego Zúñiga) had been working for a few years on the Complutensian text of the New Testament. As soon as he read Erasmus's New Testament he told Cardinal Cisneros that it was full of mistakes. The cardinal preferred to have no public attack on Erasmus but died and so released Stunica. He was a better Hebraist and theologian than Erasmus, and

⁷ Erasmus to Wolfgang Capito from Antwerp, 26 February 1517, *Ep.* 541.

⁸ Julius II in 1506 released him from the authority of his monastic superior. It was a help but not enough. So he applied further to Rome—Leo X, 1517, and again for more freedom from Clement VII, 1525, which ensured that he was so free from monastic vows that he could leave his property by will.

nearly as good in Latin and Greek. But he was arrogant and plausible as well as learned. Erasmus's 1522 edition of his New Testament was better work partly because he profited from Stunica's corrections.

Stunica published *Annotations against Erasmus* and after Erasmus answered he published *Blasphemies of Erasmus* (Rome, 1522). He did not damage Erasmus except with a few of those who mattered at Rome, partly because Erasmus was too big to damage (though that was not Erasmus's opinion of himself), partly because he felt that he must defend the Vulgate on all counts, and partly because he believed Erasmus to have published his New Testament for the sake of personal gain and without any religious motive; than which no charge could be more untrue. He said that he had proved Erasmus to be 'the standard-bearer and head of the Lutheran rebels who were overturning the Church'. '*Erasmus lutherissat.*' And in a letter: 'You'll find him openly sharing the opinions of Arius, Apollinaris, Jovinian, Wycliffites and Hussites, and finally with Luther himself. Erasmus single-handed taught him his heresies and blasphemies, and armed him. Let them call him sun, and moon, and the glory of Germany; Italy calls him impious, Rome mistress of the world judges him a blasphemer, worthy of Luther's fate, i.e. as a Public Enemy of the Church of Rome'.⁹

Rome disliked the tone and delayed publication. But Stunica's campaign began a movement which slowly turned into a heresy-hunt and ended nearly fifty years later when the censors achieved a triumph more overwhelming than Stunica could have predicted.

From the beginning of 1518 Luther's pamphlets appeared in Germany and divided opinion. Erasmus did not read them systematically but what he saw and heard of them he thought to contain much truth. They assailed the ills of the monks which needed assailing. They accused Rome of abusing its authority, which he thought a right charge. They were expressed too sharply for his taste. But he believed it a great error to silence Luther.

In that year he published a new edition of the *Enchiridion* and it was now that the book became famous. For it he wrote a new preface, in which the main part was an attack upon monks for departing from the ideals with which monasteries were founded. In it there was an oblique reference to Luther, though without naming him; and it was clear both that Erasmus approved of him and that he warned him not to be in such a hurry but to go more cautiously.

⁹ Stunica to Vergara, Rome, 4 May 1522, *Ep.* iv. 630; appendix. Vergara was another from Alcalá in Spain, in Erasmus, *Ep.* 1581. The alleged heresies were not all compatible. Jovinian was against valuing the monastic life above the married, and against an excess of Mary-cult. Arius could not accept the Nicene creed because for him Jesus though divine was lesser than his Father. Apollinaris was the opposite, he believed Jesus so far divine that he did not share all human nature.

The Colloquies

When he was a young tutor at Paris teaching Latin to students, he designed an excellent textbook for learning conversational Latin; debates, but the speakers talked interestingly and were sometimes funny. He did not publish it but pupils were not used to being amused when learning Latin and liked it much. One at least kept a copy. In 1518, at the height of his fame, when the market would buy anything that he wrote, a small group published them through Froben at Basel and did him a disservice, as he thought at first (publishing juvenilia without asking the author's permission), but a service in that it put before the world what became one of his two most popular books. It was given the title *Familiarum colloquiorum formulae*, or rules for intimate conversation in Latin. When he found how the public leapt at them, he took them seriously; to add each time, to make funnier and more satirical, less of a textbook for Latin and more of a literary event, and at last more hostile in its commentary on how churchmen misbehaved, in his last years once or twice scurrilous (the last edition was 1533). The Church had a bad time in the *Praise of Folly*. It had a worse time in the later *Colloquies*—its rules of marriage, cult of saints and superstitions, monks and clergy pretending virtue. Of religious, Franciscans had the worst time. He gave large new handles to critics and did not mind. The *Colloquies* were the second of his books weighty in the background to the Reformation—a hundred editions in his lifetime.

It made a problem for censors. Schoolmasters liked them, boys and girls enjoyed learning Latin, not an invariable experience with textbooks. Adult readers enjoyed them as moderns enjoy a humorous but not scandalous magazine. They were truly useful, for the many people who not only needed to write Latin but to speak it in conversation, how to greet with courtesy or refuse without offence, or even make a common sentence without error. They also presented a vivid lively portrait of social life. More than one Catholic-minded friend asked him to produce a bowdlerized edition of the *Colloquies*. An enterprising Dominican printed a much-altered *Colloquies* without mentioning that anything was changed, and took out every bit that assailed monks and their vows, or clergy, indulgences, or pilgrimages. The faculty of theology at Paris censured sixty-nine texts of the *Colloquies* as either in error or likely to hurt the morals of young people. Catholic moralists alleged that the behaviour of young people brought up on this book grew worse. 'Erasmus scattered weeds everywhere and then said "It was a game, just a joke. I was only teaching Latin."' ¹⁰

It is just a question whether he meant his more outrageous dagger-strokes to be taken seriously. Yet the reader feels about them that underneath the

¹⁰ *Ep.* 1581 and 1804 note.

author had a serious purpose to which he was dedicated. He might declare that it was just fun, and he well knew what was humour, but no one could think the humour to be aimless.

In 1533 the school at Wittenberg talked of using the *Colloquies* as a textbook in class. Luther was totally hostile to the plan. 'When I am dying I shall order my children never to read the *Colloquies*. He puts godless opinions into people's mouths.'¹¹ Nevertheless the Wittenberg school adopted it, they found it too valuable to be without.

Erasmus, always bad at refraining from defending himself, wrote an essay *On the usefulness of the Colloquies*, a catalogue of those which had so far appeared (1526) with the moral which could be drawn from each. Then he added the essay to the next editions of the book. It included a typical sentence: 'Nowadays no one can write a book unless he is surrounded by bodyguards.'¹²

Here was a person whom more than half the world thought to be the leader of everyone who wanted reform in the best sense—that is, reform with loyalty to the Catholic Church and its authority including the pope; and about whom a smaller but potent fraction of the world thought to pursue an impossible task, that the reforms which he wanted would destroy the unity of the Church, and several of his teachings were those of a heretic.

Erasmus was sure that he was a loyal Catholic; was faithful to the authority of the pope even while he assailed the behaviour of popes; disapproved of such clamour for reform so loud that it was bound to divide the Church.

Erasmus quarrelled with opponents—that is, tract-writers who published hostile treatises against him. But one of the most attractive sides of his nature was loyalty to friends even when they disagreed with him. And this was bad for his reputation. What must the Curia of Rome think when they found how he stood by Melancthon, who was Luther's chief aide? Such friendships became impossible to keep if he was to preserve his reputation as a Catholic. But he was not willing to throw over friends whom he valued even when he thought them wrong.

He regarded the Basel printer Froben as his most intimate friend. Froben was a first-class professional who used Holbein to illuminate his texts. He printed many of the early Christian Fathers as well as Erasmus's New Testament but was not prepared to refuse to publish a scholarly work because its author was thought to be evangelical. He published Luther during the first two years when he was at his controversial fame. Erasmus begged him not to go on publishing Luther, and Froben gave way, but unwillingly. Erasmus felt it a calamity when Froben died in 1527 and mourned him as though he were a member of his family and wrote that everyone who cared about scholarship ought to wear mourning clothes.

¹¹ TR i. 397.

¹² *De utilitate Coll.* ad init.

Then there was Paul Volz, the Benedictine abbot of Hugshofen near Sélestat in Alsace. He much admired Erasmus, and the admiration was reciprocated for Erasmus dedicated to him the 1518 edition of the *Enchiridion*. In the Peasants' War raiding peasants sacked and burnt his abbey and the fire destroyed his unpublished books. He was left with nothing but his habit. He sought help from the Austrian authorities in Sélestat but they refused on a charge that he was 'one of Luther's followers'. To survive he had no alternative but to move into a reforming town and went to Strasbourg, where he was accepted as one of the preachers. Yet Erasmus continued to regard him as a friend and, worse for his Catholic repute, kept the dedicatory letter to him in the many later editions of the *Enchiridion*.

There was a friendship still graver—with Oecolampadius. By origin a south-west German Heusgen, turned into Hausschein (so that the English called him Huskin) and then into Greek as a humanist, Oecolampadius had the special experience of the Catholic system of confession and penitence by being the canon penitentiary at Basel cathedral. Froben invited him to Basel to help Erasmus with the New Testament because he was excellent in Greek and Hebrew. He made the index for Erasmus's nine-volume edition of St Jerome. This made a close bond between him and Erasmus. Troubled in mind by administering the system of confession and then by the indulgence controversy and what he read of Luther, he became a Brigittine monk near Augsburg with the odd desire that the religious life would settle his mind and prevent him falling from the Catholic faith. When he published a book against the penitentiary system (1521) the Brigittines refused to keep him. After a dramatic wandering he sought refuge in Basel which he already knew so well and where his friend Erasmus now lived.

In June 1523 they made him a professor of the university, where he expounded books of the Old Testament. By the end of the same year he was also a preacher at St Martin's church, where they soon had reforming sermons and services. Only two years later he was convinced that in the holy communion the bread and wine did not become the Body and Blood of Christ; though Christ is given in the holy communion, the bread and wine were not the gift but symbols of the gift. Catholics, and Martin Luther, regarded this as a gross anti-Catholic heresy. Erasmus's attitude was, rationality suggests that Oecolampadius and Zwingli are right; but rationality goes very little way in this mystery and the right thing was to stand by the teaching of the Catholic Church of the centuries.

Oecolampadius argued with him but he stuck to his position. The disagreement could not but make for coolness between them. Yet Erasmus kept the friendship, not so intimately perhaps. He protested if Oecolampadius praised him publicly as though they agreed; he heard that in the pulpit Oecolampadius criticized his opinions about free will. But he never forgot

what he owed to him. Conrad Pellican said to Erasmus, so late as 1525, that their close link was a blessing which glorified God. For the Curia in Rome it was something that Erasmus dissented publicly from such a heretic. But it was very bad that they were evidently still friends. Erasmus was long before his time in trying not to allow differences of doctrine to end kind relations; even though he knew that this complicated his life and endangered his happiness.¹³

More remarkably he applied this toleration to books. He did not apply it to books which attacked himself for both in Rome and in Brussels he negotiated that government should step in to stop Stunica and Sutor and the others. But he regarded such tracts as offensive propaganda, not as serious scholarship.

The Basel town council sometimes asked him whether they should allow a book to be published. Though against Luther he did not wish them to censor Luther's books which contained good things. The town council asked him what to do when Oecolampadius wrote his book¹⁴ about the holy communion, and published it in Strasbourg not to embarrass the Basel council; should they license it for Basel? Erasmus gave them civilized advice. 'This is a scholarly book. The writing is good. I should regard it as truly religious if one could say that of anything so far from the tradition of the Catholic Church, from which I think it dangerous to go.'¹⁵ The Basel council refused the licence. In September 1525 a Catholic friend pleaded with him to write an answer to the book. He simply replied, without blaming either side in the argument, that he had neither time nor knowledge to do what was wanted.¹⁶

A little later there was another such friendship. Simon Grynaeus was a dedicated adherent of the Reformation when he came to teach Greek at Basel just after Erasmus fled from it (1529). He had been educated at school with Melancthon and the two were always friends. As a scholar he was spectacular because he discovered in the library at the abbey of Lorsch five lost books of the Roman historian Livy.¹⁷ He was rather like Erasmus in moderation and good nature but was a devout Protestant. The two scholars corresponded with respect and friendliness. Yet by 1525 Grynaeus believed that Oecolampadius was right about the presence in the eucharist, a view which Rome thought the worst of heresies. There was a moment when Erasmus almost quarrelled with Grynaeus but the coolness was nothing to do with his

¹³ For the difficulty with Oecolampadius in 1525 see *Ep.* 1538.

¹⁴ *De genuina verborum Domini, Hoc est corpus meum, iuxta vetustissimos auctores expositione.*

Ep. 1636; cf. 1618, 1620, 1624. ¹⁶ *Ep.* 1616.

¹⁷ These were Livy, books 41–5. Lorsch was one of the oldest monasteries in Germany, originally Benedictine and once rich, during the ninth century it housed probably the best library in western Europe; then with a chequered history and Premonstratensian. When Grynaeus studied in the library it still had monks; but it came under the Palatinate, which when it became Protestant closed the monastery 1563. It was burnt down by Spanish troops during the Thirty Years War.

opinions, Erasmus thought that on a visit to England Grynæus did not do what he could to clear up a trouble over Erasmus's money. This friendship could not help Erasmus's reputation with the Roman Curia.

Erasmus was honest in his own defence. He said that he did not condemn the cult of the saints, but people made superstitious prayers to saints and addressed to them requests which they would never make to an ordinarily good person. He was accused of mocking the services of the Church when all he had done was to blame the importing of secular airs of music into churches. He said that we hardly regard as essential to worship a noise which no one can understand. He did not attack ceremonies, he attacked ceremonies as a substitute for true inward religion. He did not attack pilgrimages, he attacked the abuses of pilgrimage, like husbands deserting wives and children to go to Rome or Jerusalem. He did not blame the reciting of psalms, he blamed the compulsory reciting of so many psalms that they became formal and all meaning was lost. He is not a rebel against bishops, he has taught everyone to respect their authority, unless they push their impieties at the faithful. He has not attacked rules, he has attacked too many and too detailed rules, whether of fasting or feasts. He is not banned from putting forward an opinion that private confession was not founded by Christ. He will hold marriage to be a sacrament if the Church holds it to be so, but this is not clear, because great Christian authorities have disagreed. He does not condemn all the schoolmen of the Middle Ages but their learning had become a sophistry and it is right to think afresh from the Bible.

He was accused of denouncing war. He freely confessed the charge. War may be fun for fighters but is no fun for the people. Is it right for a pope to encourage war as he has? to enter into military alliances as he has?

He did not have a particular theology to advocate, it was rather a type of piety. Ancient literature must be part of education and be used to explain Christianity, both in history and in morality. That was to unite the best of literature with the study of the Bible, to make a harmony of the best of religion with the best of culture, for this will prevent the remoteness of religion from the highest of natural aspirations. During the years 1516 to 1520 he expressed what many people thought and gave them a programme of vast influence. Most of the leading reformers came out of an Erasmian background of ideas and hopes.

He allowed that there were reasons why he should be attracted to Luther's camp. 'They want me there, their opponents push me off. If they succeed in suppressing Luther they would not omit to suppress me and all good literature at the same time.' But, he said, he did not want to be a partisan. He wished to stand above the parties in the hope of being a mediator between them. There were parts of Luther which he did not understand and parts with which he disagreed profoundly. And yet—'who in the beginning was

not for Luther? It is obvious that the world is full of abuses which will no longer be borne; and destiny draws the world towards purity . . . ?.

When Luther was excommunicated, he thought the bull merciless and not the way of a gentle Pope Leo and due to his henchmen.¹⁸ He wanted to postpone such thunder so that the lines of division be not tidy and there would still be room for debate. He thought the bull risked everything for which he stood—literature and culture and the renewal of theology and the true interpretation of the Bible. ‘I am grieved to see the gospel doctrine attacked. All they do is silence us, not teach us better. And they teach things totally contrary to the Bible and common sense.’¹⁹ He wrote a letter of protest to Pope Leo: that there was a conspiracy of obscurantists, that he had never approved of Luther’s violent language, had asked the printer Froben not to publish Luther’s works, advised him not to trouble the peace of the Church, and recognized his own duty to the pope. But it is better to teach people than to burn them.²⁰

That 8 October, 1520, a pile of Luther’s books was publicly burnt at Louvain. This manifestation edified less than was intended because students threw onto it books of the school-theologians. We do not know whether Erasmus watched the fire nor with what feelings he heard of it. The bull ordered the clergy to preach against the errors of Luther and his disciples. Had they not in their town and university the chief ally of Luther? A Carmelite mounted the pulpit in St Peter’s church and preached a sermon which was supposed to be about charity but which declared with force that Erasmus was Luther’s man.²¹

To live in a town under a conservative government and be denounced by name from a pulpit was to be in peril. From Germany the firebrand Ulrich von Hutten, who wanted to use Luther to spark a nationalist German revolution, warned Erasmus that his life was in danger from poison or dagger and that he must escape from Louvain. ‘If they damn Luther they won’t forgive you. Flee, we need you . . . They say that you began all the trouble . . . and that it was you who stirred us up to long for freedom.’²² Yet Erasmus now uttered the opinion that the bull against Luther was cruel.

The outlawing of Luther at the Diet of Worms, which turned Luther from a monk about whom Germans quarrelled into a religious leader whose name was as famous in Europe as the name of Erasmus, made a crisis in the life of Erasmus. He thought the behaviour of Luther’s enemies deplorable, and even touched with madness. He could see now that Luther

¹⁸ *Ep.* 1153 to the rector of Louvain university.

¹⁹ *Ep.* 1141. ²⁰ *Ep.* 1143 from Louvain, 13 September 1520.

²¹ *Ep.* 1153, ‘dixit me magnopere favisse Luthero’. The speaker was Nicolaas Baachem.

²² In Erasmus, *Ep.* 1161, 13 November 1520. It is possible that the postman was detained and that this letter never reached Erasmus.

could only succeed if he smashed the unity of the Church and he knew that he could not go that way. He would be loyal to the pope, but he would not attack Luther. He would help each side to be reasonable if he could, he believed in the Catholic Church. This moderate viewpoint, as parties moved towards force, and books were burnt, and preachers in Belgian pulpits were shrill, was impossible for a famous scholar living in Louvain. Erasmus's life was not safe, and his social life was troubled, and his work affected. He said that if he went on living in the Netherlands he would have had to become an executioner.

In 1521 he went to live in Basel. He told Louvain they would see him again in the spring. He was forced out of Louvain, he was not forced to settle in Basel, he had many invitations. A cardinal wanted him at Rome, the French court pressed him to Paris, Zurich offered him citizenship, Saxony suggested a professor's chair at the university of Wittenberg, he even decided to go to Italy. But Basel it was, he was a friend of their printers, and the choice had long consequences for his future, set between Protestants and Catholics.

It was a part-retirement from the campaign to reform Church and society. He could not tell what was about to happen, but he realized that he could not stop it when it was bad nor help it when it was good, and resigned himself with the three words, *fata viam inuenient*, 'fate will take us the way it decides'. He was not very comfortable in Basel. He disliked the cost of living.

For the first time he began to regret paragraphs he had written. 'If I had foreseen what would happen to this generation, there are passages in my books which I would not have written or would have written differently.' Evidently he wondered whether to become polemical and partisan and knew that he was not that sort of person. 'Not everyone has strength to become a martyr. I am afraid that if violence came I should follow St Peter's example. When popes and emperors make good edicts, I obey them because it is my religious duty. When they make bad edicts, I put up with it because that is the safe way to behave.'²³

When he went from Louvain to settle in Basel, the worship of the town was still Catholic. It was a university town, the only university in Switzerland till the modern age. Above all it had Froben his printer to welcome him and for several months to give him hospitality. It had more freedom, to say and write as he wished. The first few years were a serene time despite the clashes of the world outside. No one in Basel would rise in a pulpit to denounce him. (But Guillaume Farel did, not because he was alleged to be a follower of Luther but because he was not Protestant, and as a result Farel was thrown out of the town.) He wrote now his best Catholic devotional books. But he also went on satirizing the abuses of church life, in *Colloquies* which

²³ Ep. 1202, 1218.

grew more and more outspoken (useless ceremonies, war, too many saints' days, order to clergy to be unmarried though this had no authority in Scripture or early Church, turning opinions about theology into articles of faith, begging friars, why do not they work instead of begging?—and so on). He lived quietly among his books and costly furniture, not as a hermit but among a pleasant circle of humanist friends. There were local worshippers. Several secretaries travelled for books and papers.

Moderate persons in an immoderate world cannot be at ease. Despite the pleasures of his Basel life, he was under fire from both sides. German reformers could not understand why he did not back them when so many of his opinions agreed with theirs, and accused him of being a coward not prepared to stand up and be counted, or as too intent on his income, a person with a foot in both camps, 'an amphibian'. But by the date when Luther called him the king of amphibians, Luther's objection was no longer that Erasmus vacillated about being a Catholic, but in the opposite direction, that he was a friend of Oecolampadius, of whom Luther and the pope equally disapproved.²⁴ The savage attack upon him as a compromiser came from his former admirer Ulrich von Hutten, in a pamphlet so virulent that it was hardly to be explained except by Hutten's severe illness—Erasmus has a fine intelligence but no guts. Erasmus made the mistake of answering.²⁵

His conservative friends believed that the only way he could rescue his reputation as a Catholic was by writing a book against Luther, a *Contra Lutherum*. They pressed, entreated, almost went on their knees to him—for the Church's sake, for his soul's sake, for the sake of friendship. He said that he had better ways of using his time. Or that his studies had not given him the equipment. Or that Luther wrote in German and he did not read German fluently. Sometimes he was bolder. 'These accusations of Luther,' he wrote to the pope's chaplain, 'these accusations about the greed and corruption of the Roman Curia—would to God they were not true!'²⁶

Whatever he did for religion seemed to go wrong in conservative opinion. On Palm Sunday 1522 there was a demonstration in Basel against the rules of fasting. Erasmus wrote a book on the apparently trivial subject, 'On the Ban on Eating Meat on Fast Days'.²⁷ It was a popular book, for a time one of his most popular. Good aspirations always develop into rules. Then the rules get stuck. They need to keep up with the times and with what general opinion accepts. The law of celibacy is like that. But changes must not be made by demonstrations and mobs, the leaders of the Church must sanction them.

²⁴ TR 3392b, rex amphibolarum.

²⁵ Hutten, *Expostulatio* (1523); reply by Erasmus, *Spongia*, same year.

²⁶ Ep. 1358 from Basel, 17 April 1523. This pope was the reformer Adrian VI, which made such a sentence less shocking to Catholics who wanted reform.

²⁷ *De interdicto esu carniū*, in *Opera Omnia*, ix. i. 19 ff.

Within only a few years Catholic opinion regarded this as one of his most unCatholic books. He had not intended it to be offensive.

The Roman Curia, after repeatedly inviting him and then pressing him to write against Luther, demanded that he explain his faith. He replied that in his books one might surely find errors but he never doubted any accepted doctrines and claimed to have done better than Luther's public assailants to weaken the cause of Luther. Yet this pressure finally decided him that he must write against Luther. The decision pained him.

There was a story that when the last crusaders were forced to leave Palestine, angels picked up the house of Mary and Joseph at Nazareth, to save it from Muslim hurt, and put it down at Loreto in the Marches of Italy. Much later, and after a cult grew up there, the pope said that this was true and that this house at Loreto was indeed the house of the Holy Family. Pope Julius II confirmed the cult and the best artists of the day adorned the sanctuary. Erasmus believed not at all in the legend. He was against dubious devotion to saints. He mocked pilgrimages to spurious relics. But now, in autumn 1523, he published a mass in honour of Our Lady of Loreto. The mass said nothing about the legend. The rite was simplified. The archbishop of Besançon, who was one of Erasmus's pupils, gave the mass an indulgence of forty days and when Erasmus printed a second edition it included the indulgence—yet he was almost as hostile to indulgences as Luther and thought them bad for morality. Friends were shocked, Luther's men thought it only to be expected of a compromiser.

The moralist in him realized that there was a doctrine of Luther which he thought very wrong. He believed that Luther denied free will. Luther said that God's mercy in saving the soul is overwhelming and he sometimes gave the impression that the individual has no room to choose. To express St Paul's doctrine of grace he used language which could sound extreme—even when the will does the best it can, it is still guilty of mortal sin—if you do good with the aim of getting merit with God, what you do is a sin worthy of hell—and more of the same. Erasmus did not believe that such expressions were helpful or true. He misunderstood Luther to say that people have no free choice in the ordinary conduct of their lives; which was far from Luther's teaching. But Luther's expressions caused distress to others besides Erasmus, because the language sounded fatalistic, as though we can do no good however hard we try, and then God is the author of evil.

He still preferred not to write against Luther. Free will was one of the thorniest areas in philosophy. He did not expect to convert anyone so he had no faith that his writing was useful to anyone but himself. He consoled himself for the ungrateful labour by the thought that henceforth those who accused him of being a Lutheran would have to shut their mouths. But if he must write, here was an area where he could write with a clear conscience.

To the moralist in him a freedom to choose between right and wrong had to be defended at all costs if any belief in right and wrong was to be maintained. He could meet the wishes of his conservative friends, and simultaneously say something which he thought to need saying, and conduct a controversy not on the level of mutual abuse which he had so often preached against, but on a plane of intellectual argument, if he published a book *On the Freedom of the Will* (*De libero arbitrio*). He told Pope Clement VII that he was writing against Luther on this theme. Almost at the same time he published an edition of the *Colloquies* which mocked monks and theologians, magic, popular superstition, absurd relics.

De libero arbitrio was printed by Froben at Basel and was in the shops in September 1524. He sent copies to many people including Henry VIII and Melancthon but not to Luther. Here, he said, is one of the insoluble problems of philosophy, about which we can know little. What we do know is that we *ought* to live a life that is good because this *ought* is in our conscience. To talk paradoxes about God predestining us is useless—such a subject should only be argued inside lecture-rooms. In the Bible some texts are for free will, some for a chained will, and we are agreed that Scripture cannot contradict itself. What is certain is that we must decide for penitence and ask the mercy of God, and attribute whatever is good in us to God and whatever is bad in us to ourselves. But this means, we can decide.

Luther was then busy with writing a commentary on the book of Deuteronomy and did not read Erasmus's book for more than a year and then only replied because friends told him that he must answer someone who was thought to be a great reformer and yet preferred classical morality to St Paul. When he studied Erasmus's book he found that he agreed with almost none of it and answered, as always when he wound himself up, with vehemence, *De servo arbitrio* (*On the Will that is Not Free*). It was not at all a moderate book and Erasmus rose in wrath and answered it with an equally immoderate book *Hyperaspistes* (*The Champion*).

There was no chance of these two understanding each other on this theme. Erasmus knew that he came to truth, piece by piece, with long years of hard study. Luther had in his background an experience, a Damascus Road. By 'free will' they could not begin to mean the same.

Luther did not answer *Hyperaspistes*. In spring 1526 Erasmus, still reluctant, wrote a second part. This was a wordier but better book, which went back to his ideal of a Christian humanism. Realizing that he persuaded neither side, he wrote what he believed, in a more serene atmosphere, of the soul as free to answer its call. In our sense of God's overwhelming majesty we cannot make him unjust or cruel. We cannot say that revelation alone brings the truths about God because truth is found among pre-Christians like Socrates or Epictetus, it is blind not to recognize that pagan wisdom as a gift of God.

Reason is not always corrupt. Pagan virtue is still virtue. The original sin of nature is not the only source of sin. We are made moral or immoral partly by our childhood, and by the way we are brought up, and by the environment.

The two or rather three books on free will achieved no object. To reformers they did not understand the human predicament. The pope's disciples wanted attacks on Luther and less academic discussion. A few humanist members of the Curia were pleased. But what more of the Curia wanted was aggression against everything Luther stood for, a loud declaration of faith in the pope's authority, and an assertion of the seven sacraments.

Luther and Erasmus were two reformers who wanted many of the same things. Their personalities and methods could hardly have been more different: irony and satire versus passionate appeal; detached scholarship, where the commitment of the heart is almost hidden, versus engagement of the heart, where the underlying scholarship is almost hidden; charming style versus the hammer; fear of politics versus care-nothing for politics; moralist versus theologian; humanist versus ex-schoolman; ex-monk whose study was still a cell, versus ex-monk whose family home was open to all the world. They could hardly be allies even when their goals were the same. Erasmus thought Luther to risk success by extremism, Luther doubted whether so funny a man could be serious. When he met the *Julius Exclusus* and was sure that Erasmus had written it, the most anti-papal satire of the age, he said only that Erasmus is so elegant and so witty that he makes you laugh about the ills of the Church when you ought to weep. Erasmus sighed when the world would not decide to be better, he was sure that it could decide, it only had to take a hold of its will-power, and it is a pity that it fails; Luther saw the world as so corrupt that it could never decide to be better, without an intervention from outside it. He wrongly imagined Erasmus not to be 'engaged'. The chief link between them was the scholar Melancthon, who revered both and wanted each to understand the other.

As the 1520s moved on, leading scholars at Basel moved also, towards reformation, and with radical suggestions. The best mind in Basel after his own was Oecolampadius. The city now had mass in Latin at several churches and the reformed communion in Swiss-German at others and citizens were free to go to which they liked. In those days no city could remain in so modern an attitude without violence blowing up—attacks on priests from one side, attacks on pastors from the other. Oecolampadius thought it obvious that it was right to abolish the mass and that anyone who thought the contrary rejected gospel truth. The city began to be disturbed and Erasmus hated disturbance. He loved to sit in Froben's garden (this is Jerome Froben, son of his great friend now dead and an heir to the printing firm) and worked there if the weather was fine, but now rough parades were in the street outside to destroy his peace. On 9 February 1529 a crowd of working men seized the

market square, and then went round the churches destroying images. In face of this popular movement the city council banned the mass.

The entire personal problem of the origins of the Reformation is encapsulated in the predicament of Erasmus at this moment, the pain of deciding what to do, the decision and its extraordinary consequences.

He was against revolutions, against violence. He was unhappy with a sacrament which departed from the old doctrine of the mass. He could never say that he regarded the Church of Rome as wholly evil though he accepted that much in it needed changing. His place in Basel was hard to keep. It was like living in Louvain before 1521, being the odd man out in a society, though society was now on the other side of him, and here his life was in no danger. What was in danger was his acceptance by Catholics across Europe as a writer whom they could read with profit.

His 'agitation in mind' was what now he called it. He was happy in Basel; liked the community of learned people; enjoyed close friendships; knew he was valued; had access to his favourite printers; and had no need to go. Yet he felt he must go. It took him a month to decide to move and where, and his Basel friends did not know till a week later.

Catholic faculties of theology were still out for his blood. He could not return to Louvain, nor try Paris, nor Cologne. He felt a need to be not far from Basel. He must find a conservative university not too conservative. His preferred place was Speyer on the Rhine, a historic free city with a noble romance cathedral, and then the seat of the Reich supreme court. Curiously it was the place where not many days after Erasmus left Basel, the five German princes lodged the Protest (against the effort to suppress their religious liberties) which created the word Protestant. But Erasmus believed that the place would be noisy with the Rhine trade and decided against. Then King Ferdinand, the Habsburg archduke of Austria, who ruled the Black Forest and was Catholic, proposed a safe shelter at the university of Freiburg im Breisgau, and even offered him a half-finished palace to live in.

The offer did not attract him. He heard that the place was cramped, provincial, and that the inhabitants were superstitious; but this was probably talk by Basel friends trying to stop him from going. Freiburg was nearer, and he had stone, and gout, and travel was painful. He wanted to leave the town without publicity but it was a vain hope and the only result of his desire was to breed the rumour that he was trying to avoid saying goodbye to Oecolampadius. The last thing he wanted was to trample on the long friendship. He invited Oecolampadius to talk in Froben's garden. One side begged the other not to leave, the other side told the one that he was wrong about the presence in the Holy Communion. But it was a friendly and civilized talk. Erasmus confessed to having enjoyed the talk. He said he was sorry to go

but he could not seem to approve what was done here in religion.²⁸ At the quay on the Rhine a few friends came to see him off. It was silent. There was neither abuse nor cheers. Oecolampadius told Simon Grynaeus, 'I think he won't be gone for ever.'²⁹

He stayed at Freiburg longer than his friends expected, six years. The new Pope Paul III showed his pleasure at what he thought was a public refusal of Protestantism by conferring upon him the income of a Dutch prebend. Yet he was not happy. He missed the Basel academics and scholarly printers, and found it remote. It was not a bad university, then over seventy years old, small in numbers and with buildings which lasted till the Second World War. Among the Catholic professors were some who approved of him. But there were disadvantages. The grand unfinished house was not comfortable, he preferred to build another for himself. He was burgled, losing his best furniture, and money from cupboards. His health worsened. The faculty of theology was not uncomfortable, yet he felt 'a tumult of theologians'. The local monks 'barked' at him and kept saying that he was a Lutheran.³⁰

He went on quietly with his scholarship, editing Augustine and Chrysostom.

At Freiburg he wrote his only direct attack on the Reformation. A Dutch monk Geldenhouwer, who had been a close friend in earlier life, went over to Luther and claimed Erasmus as on his side and used a little-known letter from Erasmus to prove it.³¹ *Against the Pseudo-evangelicals* was a true anti-Protestant tract. Much that is called reform is only change. Society can never be perfect. The Church can never be perfect. So let us be moderate. The Church must be mended, the clergy's standards raised; but to say that we must make the Church like that of the apostles is like saying that we must put an adult back into the cradle. 'It is silly to change what is bad into what is bad, it is mad to change what is bad into what is worse'—where he was speaking of bad monks becoming worse ex-monks.

Protestants thought that the purpose was only to persuade Catholics that he was still Catholic. The reader feels more sincerity than that; an old man's sense of tragedy that a movement which he had helped to idealism was failing. If the object was to make Catholics trust him, it did not succeed.

In 1533 from Freiburg he sent a letter to the king of Scotland. It commended to him the mortal enemy of Luther, Cochlaeus, who sought to prevent William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament from being buyable in Scotland.³² The heart of his reforming plea was that the

²⁸ Erasmus to Pirckheimer, *Ep.* 2158.

²⁹ In Erasmus, *Ep.* viii, 2147 note.

³⁰ *Ep.* 2328 and 2868.

³¹ Geldenhouwer used Erasmus's *Apologia ad monachos Hispanos*, in *Opera Omnia*, ix. i. 270; cf. preface at *Ep.* 1879.

³² *Ep.* 2886.

New Testament should be read by the simplest persons. This letter was not a recantation. But it commended personally a Catholic scholar who was trying to stop the sale of a famous translation.

In the same year he made a serious effort, of the kind we should now call ecumenical, for reconciliation between the sharply dividing Churches: *De sarcienda Ecclesiae Concordia* (*On How to Make Peace in the Church*). It asked for a Catholic Church of tradition which should make the necessary concessions to Protestants. Much of it was devotional meditation, how beautiful is peace and unity in a Church. But it said many things unpalatable to Catholic readers—the hunt for gold, the ambitions of clergymen.

The cult of saints has superstition but we ought to bear with a people's affection. Statues and pictures are silent poetry and you do not blame a bride who kisses her new ring—we ought to bear with people who kiss bones and relics—still, in church it would be better to have no pictures but stories from the Bible. There are doctrines which are mere human opinion but we can put up with them till a council decides. Let the two sides abandon points of doctrine that can lead to no solution. We have too many feast days, and rules of fasting ought not to be rigid, infant baptism is *probably* apostolic. The pope will soon make fair conditions of peace for the Protestants and then the harmony of the Church will be secured.

This book only added to the charges of heresy which conservatives pushed at him. As a result Freiburg was never home as Basel was.

He went on writing; a devotional book on the preparation for death; and then one of his best books, *Ecclesiastes*, a book on how to preach sermons. He had thought about the subject for sixteen years before he published. Since he had never entered pulpits to preach, this was based on reading rather than experience. But it is one of the books which disproves the contention that this was not a theologian.

He was glad to receive honouring letters from the new Pope Paul III, who said, for he had not read much of Erasmus, that he highly praised his excellent doctrine, and addressed him as his beloved son;³³ Erasmus took care to circulate a rumour that the Curia was considering his name as a possible cardinal; still rueful and yet half-proud that he was able to quote to friends the absurdity, which he said was common among friars, that 'Erasmus is the father of Luther; Erasmus laid the eggs and Luther hatched the chickens; Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Erasmus are the soldiers of Pilate who crucified Christ.'³⁴ He was afraid of what the radicals would do if they flooded the earth.

In 1535 he moved back to Basel, to live in the house of Froben the younger. He once said that his home was where his library was—he had sold

³³ Ep. 3021. Erasmus printed the letter in *De Puritate*.

³⁴ Ep. 2956.

his books to his Polish admirer John a Lasco on condition he could keep them during life. But in old age this was not true. He felt that in coming back to Basel he came home. Basel was quiet now. The city was well-run. Oecolampadius died five years before and Erasmus did not need to face arguments about doctrine. Another close friend Bonifacius Amerbach, who was the chief executor of his will, had become a member of the Reformed Church while Erasmus was at Freiburg and was now the rector of the reviving university and pleaded with Erasmus to come and help its restoration. He told some friends that he went back to see to the printing of *Ecclesiastes*; others that he went back for reasons of health. In Basel they rejoiced at his return and he took a pride in their pleasure. It had long been his home and he was happy to be back.

This did not mean that he identified himself with the Protestants.

In June 1536 he wrote a friendly letter to Philip Melancthon, blaming Luther for abusing him and saying how everyone threw rocks at him as they did at King David, but addressing this Lutheran leader, whom he had always admired, as 'religious and learned'; and then his last known letter, to the Catholic Goclenius: 'my health forces me to stay in Basel. I have very sincere friends here, which I did not have in Freiburg. Yet, because of the disagreements over doctrine, I would prefer to die somewhere else.'

So he died, at home in a Protestant city on 12 July 1536 and was buried honourably in a Protestant cathedral with a Protestant service and a Protestant sermon by his old pupil Oswald Myconius of whom he did not approve.³⁵ A Catholic writer could not bear it that he died without a priest to attend him so he later faked evidence for the priest. Protestants also made legends, that monks buzzed throughout the sermon at his funeral, and that night desecrated the new soil of the burial.

He died rich and left his money to help the old and infirm, or promising students, or respectable women who needed work. Amerbach organized the trust, which did excellent work in helping needy students at the university.

It became a question whether Erasmus was a Catholic or a Protestant. Posterity may see that between those names there was less difference than might at first appear, and that a person could have something of both in the heart without a sense of tension. That was not how Europe saw things in the years after Erasmus died. In the battles soon to rage it mattered to propaganda whether either side could claim him. Controversialists of both parties wanted the name of such learning on their side. But both sides hesitated. How could Protestants claim a mocker who attacked Luther so personally and whom

³⁵ When Oecolampadius died they tried to get Simon Grynaeus to succeed him as chief minister but he preferred to remain the professor of Greek so they chose Myconius, who had a good record as a teacher.

Luther denounced and who uttered thoughts on the power of humanity to do good which were not to be reconciled with evangelical conviction of the power of God and the littleness of humanity? Catholics could justly claim that he never separated from the Catholic Church and provided texts indispensable for the study of Catholic tradition. But they could not claim one who attacked popes and doubted doctrines and ruined the prestige of monks and friars. The question was whether an author who did so much to start reformation could be claimed as a critic of that reformation.

At once there were biographies. His humanist friend Beatus Rhenanus, who helped publish the first unsanctioned edition of the *Colloquies*, and aided Froben in accurate printing,³⁶ wrote an account of the last weeks of which he knew nothing first-hand; but two years later Froben began the *Collected Works* of Erasmus and to this Rhenanus wrote a short life for a preface. Dedicated to the emperor Charles V, it magnified the links between Erasmus and the Catholic emperor. It was open on his good relations with popes, silent on the *Colloquies* and the *Praise of Folly*, drew an affectionate picture of a loyal friend, a kind generous scholar, and Christian of quiet devotion. It observed that he passed severe judgements, especially on superstition and ambition, but did not mention monks nor clergy.

Friedrich Nausea was a lover of Erasmus and mourned his death as though he was his father. He was court chaplain at Vienna and wanted to open the eyes of the world to what they had lost. Within a month of the death he published a *Monodia* of lamentation for a pure life, a master of literature and a mind so free from superstition. Erasmus brought the gospel to ploughmen and weavers, the first to restore the gospel to our age and so did the work of an apostle; the dazzling ornament of the Church; his death was predicted by this year's eclipse. For this stout Catholic, soon to be a bishop, Erasmus was not only equal to the wisest sages of antiquity, he was a saint; with a majestic face, a temperate and moral life, the right ethical standards in what he wrote. Probably the pope will soon give him the title of Blessed. 'Praise for the dead should be without adulation but we can scarcely praise him enough.' All this in 1536. Twenty years later no Catholic bishop could write in such terms.

For this was not the view uppermost in the Curia. Professors said that this was a good man who sometimes did harm, others said that no author who did so much harm could be a good man. In Italy he was still read widely. When the Council of Trent met to make the Church better, more than one speaker argued that it was wrong to condemn all Erasmus or even parts because he did such good to the Catholic Church. This was not the general view of fathers

³⁶ Rhenanus was a true scholar who discovered the text of Velleius Paterculus in the library of a monastery in Alsace and gave it its first edition. At first he welcomed Luther but then reacted. To escape the reform he left Basel four years before Erasmus.

at the Council. Speakers, usually Spanish or Italian, were vocal in condemnation. They said that his faith in human goodness weakened the doctrine of original sin, that he put marriage above virginity and doubted whether marriage is a sacrament, he mocked monks and ridiculed popes, and hesitated about the cult of saints and images. He had the same ideas as Luther but made them sound like pious Catholicism.

In 1555 Paul IV the Inquisitor was elected pope and put all the books of Erasmus on the Index of Prohibited Books whether they were to do with religion or not. This was a shattering victory for the Stunicas, until then several of Erasmus's books were widely used, they were needed in schoolrooms. In Catholic countries they were read by people who did not dare to read Luther but wanted to read a reformer of the Church. They were also read because they were good to read—the New Testament for example, or the Paraphrases, or the *Enchiridion*, and sometimes because they were funny like the *Colloquies*. In places they continued to be read with the author's name removed from the title page.

Selective condemnations, in Spain or Italy or the Netherlands, show what censors really minded. The *Adages* were usually left free for school use and the general reader. The patristic texts were still used. The books on methods of education grew obsolete but were not banned. The *Enchiridion* and the Paraphrases usually escaped. One censor at Antwerp said that Erasmus gave them more trouble and used up more of their time than anyone else.

The blanket condemnation could not survive. Forbidden were *Colloquies*, *Praise of Folly*, the book of marriage, the book about the ban on eating meat, *Lingua*, and the Paraphrase of St Matthew in its Italian translation. *Lingua* needs an explanation because it was far from being an important book. It posed as an ethical study of the tongue and its vices and how to use it well and of the importance of not using it too often, and one is reminded of Thomas Carlyle speaking for hours in praise of silence. There is a passage on how it is better to keep silence when one is attacked, and hardly anyone was less qualified than Erasmus to forbear in that way. There was classical learning with examples. It was written in 1525 when he resented the attacks on him from theologians of Louvain and Paris; and illustrated the crimes which the tongue can commit by examples of slander and calumny drawn openly, though not by name, from his opponents—even using what was heard at their tables—'he is the worst of heretics', 'he is a fellow-conspirator with Luther', 'he knows no theology', 'he is the son of immoral parents'. This was the most devastating attack on friars which he ever wrote—poisonous words from friars posing as good—'has the Holy Spirit ceased to guide? is God's name now a nothing?' There were reasons why they should wish to prohibit this book, though it was never popular like the *Colloquies* or the *Praise of Folly*.

But all other works *on religion* were also banned until they were given expurgated editions approved by the faculties at Louvain or Paris, and they must not carry the name of the author on the title page. So much for that uncontroversial book of devotion the *Enchiridion*. They thought it made physical acts so unimportant that it led devotion away from sacraments and even from certain doctrines.

While Ignatius Loyola was studying at Alcalá, the *Enchiridion* was published in Spain and the university argued about it. The convert student was recommended to read it as a helpful work of devotion. He found it cold and undevotional. After he founded the Jesuits he made a rule that they should not read Erasmus.³⁷

In eastern Europe Erasmus gained a strange authority which lowered his reputation further in the West. In his preface to the works of St Hilary he taught how the earliest Christian Fathers had not recognized the Holy Spirit to be divine in the same way that they recognized the Father and the Son. This correct historical observation was seized upon by the groups in Poland and Transylvania who rejected the word Trinity because it did not come in the New Testament. His enemies in the West accused him of reviving the heresy of Arius, who would not allow Jesus to be God in the sense of being equal to his Father. Antonio Possevino was the pope's agent in the eastern lands. He said how many of his works were forbidden, and others only allowed in expurgated versions; how his Arianism had a disastrous effect in Poland; how he ran from his vows and monastery after eight years and became a wanderer for the sake of a career; how he was no solid theologian and his overproduction of books led to many errors; how his salt and bitter wit put into print things indecorous for a clergyman; how Luther drank from his well—and then, sixty years after Erasmus himself quoted it, Possevino cited in a new form the famous *mot* of the egg and the hatching: *Erasmus innuit, Luther irruit. Erasmus parit ova, Luther excludit pullos. Erasmus dubitat, Luther asseverat.* Or, Erasmus did the doubting and then Luther went dogmatic.³⁸

To be popular among Protestant thinkers on religion (as distinct from teachers in schools interesting their pupils) was impossible for Erasmus until some of them allowed that he was right about free will. With the school of St Augustine, even of St Paul, Catholic or Protestant, strong against him, with Luther and Zwingli and Calvin and Bucer dominant, this admission

³⁷ The story has been doubted, on the ground that we owe it to Ribadeneira, who wrote his life of Ignatius as late as the end of the 1560s, and in any case says that it happened earlier when he was learning grammar at Barcelona. But Gonzalez in 1555 said it was at Alcalá, and that is the more probable because just then the university was discussing the book. For the ban in the Society see *MHSJ* iv. 359; v. 95 and elsewhere.

³⁸ Possevino, *Judicium de Erasmo* (Lyons, 1593) repeated in *Apparatus Sacer* (Venice, 1606), i. 388–9.

took time, and hardly happened until near the end of the sixteenth century, and in his native Holland.

He had led scholarship towards reform of the Church, that was undeniable. The Catholic Church had condemned his writings, that was undeniable. Against practices of the Catholic Church he had written much they wanted to say (indulgences, ceremonies, certain sacraments), that was undeniable. He had done great things for the propagation of the reading of the Bible, that was undeniable. But Luther called him an emissary of Satan. His books on free will showed him to be a semi-Pelagian heretic, he thought that the human race could climb to heaven partly by its climbing agility. He seemed to be more a jester than a sober reformer. They doubted whether the tone of the *Colloquies* was the way to make a Church better. Though obviously a reformer he had refused to come out on the Protestant side, he was Mr Facing-Both-Ways. Saner critics did not explain his neutrality by bad motives like miserliness. But they were apt to impugn him for lack of courage. Everyone knew how close a friend he was of Sir Thomas More who died for the pope's authority. On the Catholic side this friendship was awkward for the first biographers of More.

There were three places where criticisms were brushed aside.

Basel was proud that he had felt himself at home there. Citizens knew him personally and enjoyed him. His executors Amerbach and Froben and Episcopius put up a Latin plaque for his grave—'To Erasmus of Rotterdam, a man in every way great, who married to prudence a peerless learning in every sort of discipline; his posterity admires and imitates. We place this to the best of patrons, not to remember his name which is immortal in so many editions and books, a name which will not be forgotten in any company of the educated; but to his mortal body which is laid here.'

Several Swiss leaders of the Reformation kept this high opinion. But not all. In September 1557 Farel, then chief pastor for Vaud, and Beza, then professor of Greek at Lausanne, both colleagues of Calvin, passed through Basel and stopped at an inn. Before a large audience they abused Erasmus, Farel said he was wicked and a heretic, Beza said he was a disciple of the heretic Arius. The news was brought to Amerbach and Froben, who made a solemn protest and declared that it was calumny and even civil law protects the dead from libel.³⁹

Twenty-three years later Beza mellowed. In his *Icones*, which were portraits of the leading reformers with short notes on what they did, there was first the list of forerunners beginning with Wyclif, and then the list of those who reformed Germany and the name of Erasmus came second; his 'inexhaustible fertility of genius', and his fame. But he was content to mock

³⁹ Literati Basileenses Farello et Bezae. Calvin, CR xvi. 2728.

superstition and refused to come out for the right cause. Yet 'good scholarship was restored; so let his name stand in this religious place'. Beza did not think he need mention the New Testament.

The second place which had private reasons to revere the memory was Holland, especially Rotterdam. They knew that they had begotten a great Dutchman. Their Church as it became Protestant was Calvinist so this was not without doubt.

While it was still a Catholic country, Prince Philip, soon to be King Philip II of Spain, came to visit Rotterdam in 1549. The municipality erected a wooden statue of Erasmus dressed as a clergyman in homage to the royal visitor. Eight years later, still Catholic, they made a stone statue on the bridge by the market.

In the Dutch war of independence Spanish soldiers used this statue as a target and the pieces fell into the river. The now Protestant city fathers soon made a new statue in wood to replace the stone, with Erasmus preaching (an inappropriate design) and in his hand a Paraphrase. In the 1590s they replaced this with stone, no longer a preacher or clergyman, but now in the gown of a scholar, and the book looks more like the *Colloquies* than a Paraphrase. This again was replaced, in 1622, by the statue that still stands, with a youthful face and a big folio volume.

Pastors objected. One said he was a scoffer at religion, another observed genuflection to the statue as though this was the cult of a saint. The German air raid of May 1940 destroyed the plaque on the house where he was born but missed the statue.⁴⁰

The third place where Protestants felt little doubt was among disciples of Melancthon. Most Lutherans followed Luther in having small use for Erasmus. Melancthon, with the same ideals of a harmony of scholarship and religion, had kept his friendship to the end. After Luther died he even wrote an essay in praise of Erasmus. This was a great teacher and great teachers are a gift from God. He admitted there were arguments with Luther but all good men have differences of judgement. The letters of Erasmus in praise of the earlier Luther were often reprinted by evangelical publishers. In the church at Nordhausen Lukas Cranach painted the leading reformers and Erasmus stands among them.

In 1928 the body believed to be that of Erasmus was exhumed. The skeleton was found to have traces of syphilis. This discovery suggested incongruity. We know the personality of Erasmus and much in his mentality, including distaste, would hate anything liable to lead to venereal disease. Nearly half a century later it was discovered that the wrong body had been exhumed.

⁴⁰ Nicolaas van der Blom, 'The Erasmus Statues in Rotterdam', *Erasmus in English*, 6 (Toronto, 1973), 5 ff.

UNBELIEF

The unbelief of the sixteenth century was not unbelief in the modern western European sense. People breathed religion even if their parents went to church as little as possible or only to avoid fines, and even if in public houses drinking men and in brothels fornicating men made comments which ordinary folk regarded as blasphemous. The anti-clerical ditty of the bar was historic in the custom of the Middle Ages and was not silent because reformers tried to abolish brothels or bars. Meeting in the bar often came after meeting in church.

The weightiest of axioms were rather social than intellectual. No education can be of any use unless it brings to the young person a knowledge of the highest of moral imperatives, God. No atheist (if such exist) can have a conscience, therefore atheists are moral dangers to society, with them our daughters and spoons and freedom are not safe. The new registration books of births and deaths and marriages were kept in the church cupboard. The only place to be married was in church (but many people avoided marriage). Holidays were only on holy days. A majority of the educated men in the state were still parsons—who therefore influenced legislation and the civil service as well as universities and schools. The best places to learn what happened in town and world were in front of the church noticeboard and under the pulpit. If they needed an alarm clock they used a cock, even in the army. The easiest way to know the time of day, for most the only way, was to hear the church bell. The church clock if there was one did not sound out the hours except within the tower, people learnt the time because a church watchman rang the bell when he heard the clock. But they did not mind about the exact time, only the more-or-less time, which they judged by dawn and sun and gloaming; except in sermons when they could see the sand dripping through the funnel on the edge of the pulpit. The only building in a village which could be called well-built was the church (though it often needed repair). If they held a meeting they held it in church usually, their children went to school more often than not in part of the church building.

It has been argued that the ditties of bars were trivial, that if a wassailer shouted 'God's a bloody tyrant' in his cups that had not the slightest importance for the beliefs or unbeliefs of society. The explosion was a meaningless

release of emotion by swearing which could have no effect upon other toppers in the bar and no influence in propagating a non-Christian view of the world. Yet this is not quite certain. Erasmus was persuaded that proverbs enshrine a truth from the long experience of humanity, and one proverb is *in vino veritas*, people blurt what they really think when drunk.

A preacher is not upon oath in describing from the pulpit the state of mind of the flock; since the object of the words is to propel to action as well as instruct, one-sidedness is not worse than a pardonable sin in the speaker, and experts in persuasion, a Cicero or a Quintilian, would have thought it virtue. This makes the evidence of sermons harder to use. Postulate that a preacher, shocked and depressed by immoralities in his village, thumped the ledge and thundered that they were all atheists, he made no accurate metaphysical statement about their beliefs or non-beliefs, he reproached them that their behaviour was more lamentable than it ought to be.

One thing that came out of the parishes to Luther was the simplest form of practical materialism. He needed good parsons. These needed reasonable stipends, the more because now they had (socially accepted) wives and children. The parish folk should help and give money. In former times they paid out bags for indulgences or private masses or pilgrim shrines, now they grudged paying money to help the pastor. Why? Luther was given blunt answers—the money must go to what is indispensable, we can get on without any pastor in the parish, we cannot get on at all unless we have a parish shepherd and a parish swineherd and a parish policeman. So our money must go to pay the herds and if you close the church we can still live.¹ Or a peasant heard his pastor talking about heaven, and said, like a German Social Democrat three hundred and fifty years later, ‘What’s the good of heaven so long as we have flour!’²

The next doubt reported to Luther from the parishes was that over suffering. If God rules the world, why do agonies happen? They said that if God were sovereign he would not allow the oppression and the injustices that we see about us. Therefore one of two things is true, either God does not exist or God does not care what goes on among mankind.³ This was the old question with which St Augustine wrestled. But it did not come now as the puzzle of a philosopher (perhaps it never had) but as a gut-feeling from those who saw suffering.

The next doubt which he found among the people was a more bourgeois kind of doubt. The Reformation gave the Bible to the people. But what extraordinary events the Bible is found to contain when it was read by the people! The ark of Noah—now we have it in front of us in German we can

¹ Luther, *Comm. in Genesim*, ch. 31, vv. 14–16, *WA* xliv. 15.

² Luther, in *Psalm.*, 90, v. 11, *WA* xl. 3. 565.

³ Luther, in *Psalm.*, 110, v. 1, *WA* xli. 108–9.

work out the consequences and the measurements are not practicable. The dimensions of the ark can only be a miracle. What behaviour is approved in the books of Moses, deeds by Reuben, or by the daughters of Lot, or even by the hero and patriarch Abraham? What trivialities the Holy Spirit thinks it worthwhile to record—why should God waste his time and ours by bothering to insert into his revelation so many details which fascinate but can have no influence on our perception of truth or our conscience in its moral judgement? Can it be possible that the Holy Spirit is the author of everything in the Bible?

Such questions were easy to answer because Luther for one, and many another in his generation, had a more continuous sense of miracle in the world than their later successors. Why do not the clouds drop upon us? How is the River Elbe held on its course through Wittenberg and Saxony? How is it that birds vanish in the autumn, and swallows die and are reborn, and hens can lay an egg and create a chicken, and women bring babies into the world, and dung beetles are generated by horse manure, and carp are generated by pools and lakes, and trees sprout leaves and suddenly flowers are lovely with blossom, and the eye can so magically reproduce a distant vision? So Luther asked as he gloried in the power that upholds the universe. In that context the measurements of the ark were no intellectual problem. The measurements must be wrong. But God did it.⁴

Men who drank in bars were not only the illiterate. Artists, writers, architects, even academic clergymen, were known to solace their solitude in bars. The Middle Ages showed that the anti-clerical ditty could at times be the verse of an authentic poet. What was new about the sixteenth century was due to printing. We have songs from a tipsy world in which now lurched real scholars with information. 'He sets a bad example' recorded the registers of Grenoble in 1540 about one of their lecturers. 'He is a blasphemer against God. He is drunk most of the time. He sets a bad example to students, who carry swords because he is always in a fight with one or other of them.'⁵ It was a question whether blasphemy did not promote what it was against. If this language meant anything God must matter.

The enemy of the Catholic Church or of the traditional faith usually ended as a Protestant. But it was possible to hate the Catholic Church and hate Protestants or have nothing to do with them. At moments Erasmus was not far from strongly criticizing Catholic practice but being as hostile to Protestant religious practice. Such minds are not commonly found in historical sources because usually they preferred to neglect religion and get on with

⁴ See especially in *Genesim*, ch. 1, vv. 21–2, *WA* xlii. 38–40; in *Psalm.*, 111, v. 2, *WA* xxxi. 1. 407–8.

⁵ Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l'incroyance au xvi^e siècle: la religion de Rabelais*, rev. edn. (Paris, 1947), 69–70.

other aspects of life and so were not visible in their anti-religion. But on occasion there were natures which enjoyed pricking their neighbours by shock, or by provoking, or, less commonly, had a desire to help the world by getting rid of untruth even at the risk of their comfort—or even their life.

Etienne Dolet was celebrated by atheists during the nineteenth century as a Reformation martyr for their cause. He was condemned and died at the Place Maubert in Paris on 3 August 1546. Precisely three centuries afterwards a monument was unveiled there to his memory as an atheist martyr, not without a demonstration against the ceremony. But was it true? or was it like the vehement preacher, enemies using the word ‘atheist’ as a term of abuse which bore little relation to what the condemned really thought? Four years after his death John Calvin wrote a treatise *De Scandalis* in which Etienne Dolet was denounced as an atheist. Then others searched for signs in his writings which would justify this verdict and discovered unbelief where a modern critic does not see it. Dolet was a good scholar and produced a Latin dictionary in two beautiful folio volumes which he expected to make him a European name but it was so badly organized, contained such inflated self-laudation and abuse of critics, that it dropped half-dead in the market and he was much hurt and abandoned a planned third volume.

Critics seized on certain definitions, for example Miracle. ‘Miracle means any happening at which people are astonished.’⁶ In truth the definition had no relation to Dolet’s faith or lack of it. He showed the classical meaning of the word, as was evident from his non-quoted next sentence—‘While now Christians call miracles events where they marvel, the ancients used the word to mean foul events—like monsters or what gives us horror.’

Under the word *Literae* he inserted a dissertation on the history of literature and its revival in the Renaissance; with a long list of authors from the various countries; and the German list included Reuchlin, Erasmus, Melanchthon, Hutten, Simon Grynaeus and some lesser writers whose names gave the orthodox pause; but the context is about scholarship not about faith.

Dolet’s complex mind needs study. Aged twenty-three he came to the university of Toulouse then in such a state of riots as to be compared with the university of Vincennes in the 1970s, and was elected a student leader and found the customs of the place ludicrous, like horses trotting nine times round the inside of St Etienne’s church on St George’s day to protect their health, or hurling a cross into the River Garonne to protect the town from floods.

In the battle of contending student speeches he was accused of being a Lutheran, but only because that was a general word of abuse. He took up the

⁶ *Commentariorum linguae latinae*, ii (Lyons, 1536), 1300.

charge: 'You all know that it is only unquiet and irreligious and inquisitive minds which approve of Luther's ideas. You also know that if anyone shows signs of genius and originality he is at once thought by bigots to be a Lutheran and is hated. Have the Toulouse courts ever acquitted a scholar?' In violent language he denounced the recent burning of a member of the university as gross injustice. He denied the charge on himself. 'I revere nothing but that faith and those rites which have come down to us from the ancient world.'⁷

His provocations brought expulsion. He went to the common resource of the scholarly ejected, proofreading for a printer, and made his home at Lyons. His next step on the road to European unpopularity was to publish a book against Erasmus's Latin style⁸ which could have been harmless but contained abuse of Erasmus which only hurt its author. When Melanchthon said that the book should be answered, Dolet's name was more notorious than well known. But Melanchthon had a reason not literary, for Dolet's attack on Erasmus shaded into vituperation of Luther and his followers. All these words—this verbosity—what does it do to religion?—reverence is taken away, opinions are divided, religion is vulgarized—'what of Luther? or Zwingli? or Oecolampadius? or Bucer? or Erasmus? or Melanchthon? or Lambert? or Farel? What religious bilge has been brought by these clear acute commentaries on the Bible . . .?'⁹

More than one of his abusers used of him the word atheist. One said 'impious, Godless, faithless, religionless'—the words were but pebbles in an abusive list of epithets. Nothing that Dolet had yet written gave ground for the judgement; except that he criticized both Catholics and Protestants. When he met the book by Erasmus on patching up peace between Catholics and Protestants, *De sarciendo*, he called it *nugae*, nonsense.

The next year he stabbed an artist to death in the street. They accepted a plea of self-defence. But as his reputation sank, this was a bad memory and not forgotten. At his final trial the artist's widow played a part.

In that city of many printers he became a publisher in his own right, after a time with a privilege from the government. He made money, with textbooks of medicine and Latin texts. But he did not care what he published if it sold; Marot's psalter, a French Bible from Geneva, and Rabelais's *Gargantua* carefully including the passages which Rabelais had omitted out of prudence in his second edition and so earning Rabelais's undying hatred. He liked to ask for trouble, and was one of those characters who enjoys alienating close friends. He was denounced as one who imported banned books from Geneva and when they searched his house they found copies of Calvin's *Institutes*, which he said he possessed only out of curiosity. For a time he had

⁷ *Orationes duae in Tholosam* (Lyons, 1534), 2.

⁸ *Dialogus de Imitatione Ciceronis adversus Erasmus* (Lyons, 1535).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36. The absence of Calvin's name is because he had not yet published on religion.

to flee to Piedmont but soon came back. He went on printing unlicensed books, and finally was strangled on the Place Maubert. In law courts he cheerfully professed Catholic orthodoxy. The evidence shows that he was not an atheist but that he cared very little about religion. He died because he made the world his enemy; by folly, pride, self-satisfaction, willingness for any illegality if it made a profit, abuse of people with high reputations.

Protestant leaders refused to recognize him as a martyr for their cause.

The word atheist misled historians of ideas. Latin had no word for atheist, when Cicero wanted the word he used Greek. When Greeks used the word it did not mean what moderns mean. Socrates was accused of atheism, because he did not believe in the gods of Athens. Sophocles used it to mean a person whom the gods have abandoned. When during the 1550s the word came in as a term of abuse, it could be more moral condemnation than statement of philosophy. When English authors used the word, it was imported. Coverdale (1568) wrote of 'the Italian atheoi'; or they translated Calvin's French.

By the 1550s no one met an atheist and yet the word was commoner as abuse. In 1564, when the Huguenots were in control of Lyons, Pierre Viret was its pastor. He said that he was disturbed at the number of atheists and deists in the place—deists a new word, persons not sure they believe in Christ. He discovered several who said they believed in God as Jews and Muslims do, but the witness of the Gospels they thought fable. They go to church to please their neighbours or avoid fines, but in the heart they despise religion. It is worse because such are among the intelligent and well-educated. Viret found it odd to live in an age when it was more needful to defend against unbelief than superstition.¹⁰

The Renaissance revived the classics and created speculation by modern historians that classical morality, found inspiring in Aeschylus or Cicero or Seneca or Plutarch, lessened the force of Christian morality; that an educated person who once looked for the source of the moral law in the Commandments and the Gospels, now looked for it in the best morals of the pre-Christian world. Luther misjudged Erasmus by thinking that this was his weakness in understanding faith; but Erasmus could have qualms that the new knowledge of Latin literature, pumped into the heads of schoolboys and schoolgirls, would introduce the young to a paganism with which at their age they were not fitted to cope. In the *Enchiridion* he advised that they should only be introduced to such literature when they were mature and then only with discretion.

Among the ancient texts came Lucretius; noble poetry to declare that gods, though existing and serene, did not affect human beings, that superstitious religion is a calamity for society and that souls are mortal. His book did

¹⁰ Viret, *Instruction chrestienne*, vol. ii, preface, 'Epistle to the church at Montpellier'. Febvre, *Problème de l'incroyance*, 69–70.

not please Christian leaders and the Huguenot scholar Ramus was blamed for introducing him to young people. His defenders said that if poetry is literature we ought not to be discouraged from reading it because it contains a philosophy which no one is likely to accept.

Gerolamo Cardano

His father was interested in geometry and had been consulted by Leonardo da Vinci. Gerolamo was brought up with an interest in mathematics and medicine and a good though chaotic mind, not helped by an illegitimate birth and early experiences which helped to explain a deviant psychology. In Milan, though at the time a city much troubled by the wars of Italy, he taught mathematics and won fame as a general practitioner; was for eight years professor of medicine at Pavia and was even hired to go to Edinburgh to cure of his asthma Hamilton who had been made the archbishop of St Andrews after the murder of Cardinal Beaton and was himself later to be hanged on a charge of murder. Though Cardano was no orthodox Catholic, the Inquisition did not begin to take serious notice of him till after 1564 and he was not arrested till 1570. He submitted, destroyed 120 of his books and died in retirement at Rome in 1576, after writing a too frank autobiography not published for nearly seventy years.

It could hardly be expected that an Italian physician and mathematician would affect the ideas of the Protestant north. But he published many of his books at Nuremberg or Basel. He was cheerfully ready to print praise of Protestant theologians—‘Oslander of Nuremberg, learned in many languages, a theologian and my friend’¹¹—‘Philip Melanchthon, a learned man and trustworthy’; or even a Protestant monarch—Edward VI of England—‘would that he had lived!’ for it is good when philosophers are kings.

His *De subtilitate* was an encyclopaedia of the natural sciences and was successful in both Protestant and Catholic Europe. It was a mixture of information on a range of subjects, in such a way as to cause thought, with credulity. The miracles are wonderful things like animals generated from putrefying carcasses, and tightrope walkers and breaking a stone with the fist and candles that no one can put out and Icelanders who see the dead and the demons; and with it all a critical doubt—‘if oracles were not ambiguous they would not be oracles’—‘everything well-known is despised—so priests have wanted to keep their ceremonies obscure and they would be nothing unless they were shrouded in a cloud of obscurity’.¹² Miracles that are believed are often caused

¹¹ Cardano, *De subtilitate* (Basel, 1557), xviii. 523; xix. 534; *De Rerum Varietate* (Basel, 1557), viii. cap. 40, 286.

¹² *De subtilitate*, xiv. 405; xix. 534.

by pretence or tricks. But at the end he professed faith in God as the creator of all and he thanks God for his help in what he has written.

We cannot say with any certainty that such a book by an Italian had an influence upon the doubts of Protestants. But these books were read in the north. Their effect could hardly be other than to force persons interested in the study of physics to consider the relation between the normal laws of nature and the evidence for these exceptional happenings. On the other hand the attitude of Cardano was an intellectualized form of Luther's conviction—there are so many wonderful things happening all about us in the natural world that we can almost expect miracles to happen. A highly educated and sceptical mind like the Huguenot Jean Bodin was convinced of the reality of the powers of sorcerers and demons. Reformers mocked Catholic miracles as illusions or tricks that promoted superstition. But they accepted biblical miracles and expected wonderful things to happen now though the wonders which they expected were more in conformity with the laws of nature. In the earlier years of the Reformation their Catholic opponents did not dream of accusing Protestant leaders of promoting atheism. Before the end of the century this accusation began to be heard. *If you want to be an atheist start as a Calvinist*—it was a text (before 1583) of the Jesuit Maldonado who had himself been accused of heresy by the university of Paris.¹³ The force of this charge is not that Geneva was supposed to be plagued by atheists. It was observation that atheists now existed and were not suppressed.

Of these rare intellectuals one only, François Rabelais, gained a European fame and some rueful affection, because he was a writer of genius and helped to form the French language, but not only for that reason. He took the ribald ditty and used it for messages more profound, so that students have treated his work as though it was a philosophy instead of a joke. For some he was a mocking indifferent disbeliever who conformed to the Catholic Church because there lay his bread and butter. For others he was a hater of Christianity, not at all indifferent, who dare not say what he thought except in veiled form, because he must not risk the stake. For others he was a vulgarized Erasmus, and his onslaught on the Church from his gin-palace, or from the less than sanitary arrangements of the gin-palace, was intended to drive it to reform itself. It must be true that he wanted to make readers laugh but that cannot be all that was true about his purposes.

At the age of nine he was a Franciscan near Angers to get education and remained a Franciscan long enough to be ordained and study Greek. As adult he petitioned the pope to transfer to the Benedictines but soon left their monastery and turned up at the university of Montpellier to read medicine.

¹³ *Commentarius in S. Matthaeum* (Pont-à-Mousson, 1596, but at least thirteen years posthumous), ch. 26, col. 630.

His copy of Galen in five volumes is held by the university library at Sheffield. The Paris humanists thought of him as a leader in reviving medical science and he is known to have been a good doctor.

In 1532 or 1533, when he was physician to the hospital in Lyons, and aged just over forty, he published *Pantagruel*, like *Gargantua* the name of a giant in folklore. The author's name was not mentioned. Calvin said the book was obscene. He was diverted from his medical career by becoming assistant to Bishop Jean du Bellay who won him papal absolution for his flight from the Benedictines, and a canonry of Saint Maur. Meanwhile *Gargantua*, which probably appeared in 1534, was now republished with *Pantagruel* and he must have thought of respectability because he omitted various passages.

But by 1546 he was notorious and even fled to the hospital at Metz to be over the French frontier, but soon was the incumbent of two French parishes, in neither of which he did anything. He died in 1553 but left additions to *Gargantua* which were published posthumously. This part is fiercer in its anti-clericalism and it has been argued though unconvincingly that he was not the author.

Despite scurrilities, it was reformers who first patronized it for it contained an attack on the Catholic Church in a form never seen before. The Sorbonne at Paris condemned Rabelais's books but associated them with the books of famous Protestants.

In 1550 Calvin published *De scandalis*¹⁴ and gave 'Rabelaysus' a mention as a person 'who took a pleasure in the gospel and then went blind about it'. But five years later, in his course of sermons on Deuteronomy, when he reached chapter 13 verses 6–9 where the author orders the Israelites to kill even a friend or kinsman if they secretly try to entice towards other gods, his experience of Servetus two years before made him more militant.¹⁵ He felt the world to be under attack from unbelief. 'People who mock talk of God—people who mock the Bible as if it is absurd—clowns who put out squibs against the Bible, like the demon Pantagruel—such don't push for a new religion, they are against all religion . . . They have cardinals to back them, we even see the names of cardinals blazoned on their books.' It was a year when Calvin grew gloomier than he needed to be.

Yet reformers hardly minded Rabelais's skit on monasteries. An ex-Franciscan and an ex-Benedictine, he never forgave the system. He treated his past, not like Luther with a rueful respect, but like Erasmus with mockery, though a more salacious and less persuasive humour than Erasmus's. Monasteries have a head and a strict obedience. Rabelais's abbey of Thélème has no one in charge and everyone does what he or she likes. Monasteries have walls and hours of visiting. Thélème has no walls and everyone comes

¹⁴ CR viii. 44.

¹⁵ CR xxvii. 262.

in and goes out at will. Monasteries have a regular timetable. At Thélème they climbed out of bed when they liked and ate meals and went to bed when they liked—and could not go to church at a set time for a common service but each had a private chapel. On Sundays and holidays they dress in fashionable clothes. If a monk or a nun enters the house they regard it as a pollution and afterwards cleaned the room. No nuns could be admitted who were not beautiful and sweet-natured nor monks who were not good-looking and courteous. Anyone could leave. No vows to be taken, or if so the opposite of the three old vows, they were to be rich and married and anarchic. Gargantua mocked the old targets of Erasmus—lawyers, etiquette-makers, theologians, universities, confessors, relics, descriptions of purgatory, cardinals, schoolmen, the breviary, pilgrims, indulgences, inquisitors, alchemists, drunken bishops, astrologers, and finally popes. He visited hell and found four famous popes doing menial service.

More important were the skits to make pieces of the Old Testament incredible; genealogies, or the several-centuries ages of the patriarchs, or the measurements of the ark (enough room inside?) and once at least a miracle of the Old Testament, the recovery of the axe from the water, in an air of scepticism hardly paralleled before the eighteenth century. He did not scorn the idea of life after death for there is evidence that he held to this hope. He was strong in the sense for worship, of the individual on the knees before the divine. But this worship was solitary, the soul before its Maker, priests saying their masses are contemptible. Later the pope-mongers were bad but the Calvins were as bad—‘demoniacal Calvins, impostors of Geneva’, put with herb-stinking hermits and priest-ridden bigots.¹⁶

Hidden in the comedy is a plea for toleration. God needs no protection from human beings. Chapter 29 of *Pantagruel* was a mockery of the self-contradictions of half-toleration—faith must not be forced but we exterminate those who assail it.

Columbus discovered new lands and peoples in the west. Vasco da Gama and his successors found new lands and people in the east. What light was shed upon the faith by these discoveries? It is odd, but the question was hardly asked during the sixteenth century. Aztecs or Incas seemed to have no means of communication to Europe or Asia. The Europeans might have asked whether it was so easy to attribute a descent from Adam and Eve to peoples so far across the ocean; and if all mankind were not descended from a single pair, it made a difference in theology, for example to the idea of original sin. But they asked no such question. They continued to assume that the Garden of Eden was the first home of all the human race.

¹⁶ *Pantagruel*, bk. 4, ch. 32, end.

They might have asked another question. If Christian faith was the way to salvation, was there anything unjust in God that for centuries or millennia so many souls in the Americas or the East had no chance of hearing the good news? This question was asked but only by an exceptional person and in an unusual form.

Francesco Guicciardini was a Florentine with eminent political experience. He had served Florence as an ambassador, the pope as a governor in north Italy, and commanded a papal army which suffered the fatal invasion that sacked the city of Rome. If it were true that the best historians are persons who have made history and know how it is made—a Julius Caesar, a Guizot, a Winston Churchill—Guicciardini was qualified to be a historian. Forced out of power in Florence by a change of government, he dedicated his retirement to writing various papers on his age—a history and a political study of Florence, and what he felt about Spain, and personal reminiscences. In his last years he turned to the history of Italy during his time. He was intimate with his native city, well understood the popes and their Curia, had governed much of north Italy, and held high office in the tragic wars of Italy.

He had not time to finish this book, but left at death in 1540 a bulky manuscript and fragments. According to his wife he had thought of burning it. His family circulated it, cousins printed it, readers found it packed but dramatic.

Two years after the *History* was published, a Latin translation appeared at Basel, by the Italian radical Protestant Curione. The Index of Prohibited Books placed this upon its list. There was nothing that affected fundamental theology. But the popes, for thirty years before Luther won fame, had not lived as model popes and in the book appeared the conviction of the historian that popes were corrupted because they ruled a secular state. Though he was a Catholic and held high papal office, the seventeenth century listed him as a heretic of the first class. Protestant printers enjoyed publishing edition after edition of his history.

In the eighteenth century they studied the manuscript of his history, by then in the library at Florence. They found that the censors suppressed other passages, till then not known. One excised passage bore upon the voyages of discovery and raised the question of theology:

These discoveries put geographers into trouble. They caused anxiety in the minds of interpreters of the Bible. The Psalm (19 verse 4, on the heavens declaring the glory of God) says that *their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words into the ends of the world*. They always said that this meant how the gospel went out into all the world. They must be wrong. No one knew about these lands. Among these newly discovered peoples no sign of a knowledge of the Christian message can be found.¹⁷

¹⁷ Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia* (Bari, 1929), ii, 132.

Here are two signs of the discoveries affecting divinity, and within the first fifty years after they began. The first is the text of Guicciardini; the second is the act of the Florentine censors in suppressing the passage so that it was not known until near the end of the eighteenth century. That is weighty. Censors would only act if they feared the passage would hurt readers' faith.

Copernicus

The meanest intelligence knew that the sun went round the earth. Anyone who said the contrary was insane for he denied the evidence of everyone's eyes.

But astronomers said that common sense had its difficulties because it did not account for odd movements in the sky which we could observe. There came the first tentative suggestions that perhaps the earth itself also moves. Biblical witness was the only truth about this matter accessible to anyone who was not a mathematician of rare learning. Catholic laymen seldom studied the Old Testament. But the psalms were used in every monastery and often outside and the psalms were clear. Psalm 93: 2, 'The Lord hath made the round world so sure that it cannot be moved.' Psalm 19: 5, 'The sun cometh forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a giant to run his course. It goeth forth from the uttermost part of the heaven, and runneth about unto the end of it again.' When the evangelicals promoted the study of the Old Testament and the more frequent use of the psalms by laypeople, such texts were well known. And when they promoted the knowledge by laypeople of the Old Testament, even children learnt in catechism classes how Hezekiah king of Judah lay dying and turned his face to the wall and was given a sign of healing that the shadow cast by the sun on the staircase went back ten degrees; and how when Joshua was pursuing the enemies of Israel and there was not enough time in the day to slaughter the retreating Amorites, Jehovah made the sun stand still in the sky and halted the moon. But these scriptural texts meant nothing important in astronomy to those who read them. For it was obvious to all their eyes that the sun went round the earth.

Copernicus was born at Torun on the Prussian-Polish border and after he was famous both Prussians and Poles claimed him but the world has given the advantage to the Poles. His father, who was a merchant, died when he was ten and he was brought up by a priest uncle—who became the bishop of Ermland. He went to the university of Cracow in 1491-6, where they talked Latin and he lived in a humanist atmosphere—and where he collected books on astronomy. Then like so many Poles he went to north Italy for higher education, to Bologna to study canon law, which was the training for a high post in the ecclesiastical administration—but even there he spent a lot of time

on astronomy. In 1500 he was in Rome for the jubilee and stayed for a year lecturing on mathematics and astronomy. Then his uncle got him and his brother canonries at Frauenburg, intended as grants to enable them to continue their studies. In Padua he studied medicine and learned Greek, in Ferrara he renewed the study of canon law, and in 1506 was back at Ermland, a highly educated person, qualified to be an administrator in the diocese. He became private physician to his uncle-bishop until 1512 until his uncle died and he occupied his canonry. He was a capable man of affairs not at all a boffin. Among his contemporaries he was more respected as physician than astronomer. He was never ordained priest to qualify for his canonry.

It was during these years that he started redesigning astronomy. In 1512 he wrote down a short and simple account of the difficulties which he met in the traditional scheme. Pope Leo X sent out an appeal for people to help reform the calendar, for there was obvious discrepancy between the way the sun and the moon behaved and the way that they were supposed to behave in the reigning Julian calendar. Looking round for astronomers, the pope appealed to Copernicus, who refused to help. But he began to work at the calendar—and later justified his book because it would further the reform of the calendar and that was why he dedicated it to Pope Paul III.

He made no new discovery, no new observation. There were no telescopes till the early seventeenth century. His instruments and his observations were cruder than those of the old Greeks. He simply worked on the old materials of Ptolemy and his successors in the ancient world, and was not content with what he found and tried to find a more elegant solution for the mathematical problems. What he did have, thanks to the invention of printing, was far easier access to the older treatments of astronomy than any of his predecessors. He had no more material from the naked eye. His object was to take Ptolemy and see how far his system worked and how far his system was self-contradictory. His achievement was not only to offer a less contradictory answer to what was observed but to provide a theory which enabled his successors to make new observations. But the better tables which he produced did help the reform of the calendar and were used in that reform when it came several decades later.

Still the book was unpublished. George Joachim Rheticus (from the Tyrol, for which the Latin was Rhaetia) was well educated by Myconius in Zurich and sent as an undergraduate to Wittenberg where in 1536 at the age of twenty-two, spotted by Melanchthon, he was made professor of astronomy. Three years later, hearing of the work of Copernicus, he arrived at Frauenburg to find out what was happening. Within a few weeks the young Protestant and the ageing Catholic were close friends. Rheticus went with Copernicus on his journeys and as a side-occupation mapped East Prussia and the Baltic coast.

Within a few weeks Rheticus was an ardent advocate of the doctrine that the earth moves round the sun. He studied the unpublished manuscript, asked for explanations, took up points, with the leave of the author he wrote down a short version of the theory, the *First Account* (*Narratio Prima*). This was printed in Danzig at the end of 1539 and so gave the first authentic knowledge which the learned world received of what Copernicus was trying to prove, though acquaintances knew something already and there was talk. Osiander, then still in Nuremberg, and much interested in astronomy, begged him to publish and received a refusal. Osiander tried again and said that it would be possible to pacify objectors by putting forward the theory as hypothesis only. He made the same suggestion in a letter to Rheticus.

Finally Rheticus persuaded Copernicus to prepare the full version for the press. It is probable that but for Rheticus the manuscript would have disappeared.

Copernicus gave it to Rheticus to publish. Rheticus took the book to that centre of printing Nuremberg and gave it to a friend who was a publisher, Johann Petrejus.¹⁸ He did not stay to see the manuscript through the press, because he had to leave to take up a post at the university of Leipzig; but he handed this duty to Osiander, who had corresponded with Copernicus about the question.

In a letter to Copernicus Osiander had given the advice that the book should be given a preface which said that it was only a hypothesis. Since he now had charge of publication he added a short preface along these lines to the book. It was unsigned but could not be taken as written by Copernicus because it praised Copernicus.

This mistaken addition was well-meaning rather than corrupting. It said that astronomers have their special work in observing the movements of the bodies in the sky. We can never know the true cause of these movements. But astronomers must make theories to enable correct mathematical calculations to be made. For this purpose Copernicus's work is distinguished (*egregie*) and shows what follies earlier calculators have committed. The astronomer will go for the best calculations, the philosopher will go for truth. Nothing is revealed about all this by the Bible. It is right that people should look at the new theory as fairly as they look at the older theories which are in no way more probable. And this book contains an admirable treasure of learned observation.

It is a certain inference that Osiander was nervous; that he wanted to smooth the way for the fair treatment of Copernicus's book; and that he much valued it himself. To say of the book that astronomers could not get

¹⁸ Petrejus, MA at Wittenberg, became chief among Nuremberg printers, always a friend of Melancthon, and much valued by the learned, died 1550.

truth, they could only provide working theories, was sure to make Copernicus cross. It also angered Rheticus. But it appeared at the beginning of the first printed edition of *De Revolutionibus*. The edition was brought to Copernicus on his deathbed but by then his memory had gone and he can hardly have understood what had been done.

In many works of history it has been asserted that the Protestant leaders delayed the reception of Copernicus's theory. In this doctrine there is no truth. Oslander by his preface wished to foster the theory, not to resist it.

Melanchthon, who knew mostly about Greek and the New Testament, taught nearly everything at the university of Wittenberg. He was no natural scientist by inclination and accepted only what he found in the works of Aristotle. In 1549 he published a little book on physics, designed for beginners and Aristotelian, *Elements of Physics (Initia doctrinae physicae)*.¹⁹ He did not believe that the earth went round the sun and mocked those who did. The problem is too difficult, he said, for human minds and in such darkness it is good to consult the Scriptures which refer to a movement of the sun and not the earth; but partly, and this was the weight of his objection, because the arguments of Ptolemy against it are persuasive. He thought that Copernicus was only a restatement of the old error of Aristarchus which Ptolemy refuted. In his later editions he took out the mockery. Melanchthon did not mention Copernicus by name and the only four times he mentioned him he did so with compliments. His colleague as professor of theology, Caspar Cruciger,²⁰ an intimate friend of Melanchthon, and the founder of Wittenberg's botanic garden, became a dedicated Copernican without any trouble from the faculty as a whole or from Melanchthon.

This is not surprising because both the professors of astronomy at Wittenberg were Copernicans; Rheticus who went off to Leipzig, and Erasmus Reinhold who remained in Wittenberg. There was a historical legend that Reinhold taught Ptolemy to the undergraduates in his lectures and Copernicus to the public in his printed books. For this story there is no contemporary evidence. It is certain that the professor of astronomy all through Luther's later years in the faculty was a Copernican.²¹ It is also certain that Melanchthon approved of his work; for the weightiest part was to take the tables of Copernicus and improve them. These tables (1551), called

¹⁹ CR vii. 472; xiii. 179ff.

²⁰ Cruciger, 1504–48: born Leipzig of a Czech family in the Hussite tradition; by 1523 he was studying at Wittenberg and when he was only twenty Luther married him to an ex-nun. He taught at the school in Magdeburg but from 1533 he was a member of the Wittenberg theological faculty, and one of its Melanchthonian wing. He went with Melanchthon to the ecumenical meetings with the Catholics during 1540–1. With Georg Rörer he started the Wittenberg edition of Luther's works and was one of the revisers of Luther's Bible translation.

²¹ For Reinhold, 1511–53, see *ADB*. He studied mathematics as an undergraduate at Wittenberg. He died so young because he caught the plague.

the *Prussian Tables* (*Tabulae Prutenicae*) because Duke Albert of Prussia paid for their publication, were the best tables known till then. They spoke of Copernicus in terms of high praise. Melanchthon persuaded Duke Albert to give Reinhold grants of money.

Four years before the book of Copernicus was published, the sun's movement round the earth came up in conversation at Luther's table. Luther mocked people who thought the earth went round the sun. It was contrary to common sense. 'It is like someone sitting on a moving wagon and thinking he is stationary and that the trees are moving past him; or someone on a ship thinking that the ship is motionless while the coast moves by.'²² He quoted Joshua and how the sun stood still.

This text of the Table Talk was often cited by persons who supposed that the Protestant leaders were against Copernicus on religious grounds. It does not bear the weight. It was talk thrown out at a private dinner, before Copernicus printed his book. In no book nor letter nor lecture did Luther criticize Copernicus in print.

In the year 1943 Germany celebrated the fourth centenary of the death of Copernicus and the publication of his book. The tone of the celebrations was hostile to Luther and his contemporaries, as religious troglodytes stemming the advance of science. This tone was not scholarly for the managers of the celebration, at that moment of extreme Nazi supremacy, had public reasons for wishing to hold up the churches to scorn as out of date and anti-intellectual. One of the best of Lutheran scholars, Heinrich Bornkamm, answered. He made no open attack upon the nature of the celebrations which would have been neither wise nor possible. But he took the evidence of the sixteenth century and proved how false was the belief, or the propaganda, that the Wittenberg of that day tried to suppress the ideas of Copernicus. He put his article into the last number (before the crash of a war's end and before a later resurrection) of the indispensable journal on Reformation history.²³

The theory of the earth's motion took about a century to win a way in Europe; that is, it had no effect upon the world-outlook of the Reformation era. In the development of the debate about the firmament the biblical arguments were not important. No one, Catholic or Protestant, wanted to treat Copernicus as Galileo was later troubled. But in 1585 the ex-Dominican from Naples Giordano Bruno, restlessly moving from country to country and university to university, printing book after book as he went, lectured on Copernicus at the university of Oxford. Then for two years after that he lectured at Wittenberg on astronomy, and from there to the new-founded

²² *TR* iv. 4638 (4 June 1539).

²³ Heinrich Bornkamm, 'Kopernikus im Urteil der Reformatoren', *ARG* 40 (1943), 171 ff.

Brunswick university of Helmstedt, and was grateful to the Germans because they let him say what he liked. The end of his wanderings was Venice, probably because he felt that despite his long experience of the Protestants he was still at heart a Catholic. The Inquisition arrested him. They did not charge him with teaching the doctrine of Copernicus, they had no need, they could use several denials in theology—the Trinity, transubstantiation, virginity of Mary, etc. He defended himself that he accepted all orthodox doctrines in theology but in philosophy he was free. Though Galileo took no notice of him, his execution in 1600 helped to promote the great debate in the seventeenth century about the structure of the universe.