

ERASMUS'  
*V*ISION  
*of*  
*the* CHURCH

HILMAR M. PABEL  
editor

foreword by  
ERIKA RUMMEL

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# DEDICATION



THE ESSAYS IN THIS BOOK are based on papers given at a conference in April 1992 to mark the five hundredth anniversary of Erasmus' ordination to the priesthood. The conference, which took place at the Warburg Institute in London, was organized by Richard L. DeMolen, the founder of the Erasmus of Rotterdam Society and its moving spirit during the first thirteen years of its existence. DeMolen established the Erasmus Society in January of 1980 at Oxon Hill, Maryland. His purpose was to honor the Dutch scholar, whose dedication to humanism, patristics, and Scripture he admired and shared. His interest in Erasmus was kindled by Albert Hyma, professor of history at the University of Michigan, where he was an undergraduate in the 1960s. In 1969, when DeMolen was assistant professor of history at Ithaca College, he organized a symposium to commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of Erasmus' birth. The appeal of Erasmus persisted, and DeMolen devoted much of his scholarship to him in the decades that followed. In his organization of the Erasmus Society, DeMolen had the active support of prominent Erasmians: Roland H. Bainton served as first president of the Society; Margaret Mann Phillips and Jean-Claude Margolin were Bainton's successors; and Léon-E. Halkin and Clarence H. Miller are providing ongoing leadership.

On DeMolen's initiative, the Erasmus Society undertook the publication of an annual *Yearbook* whose aim is to promote Erasmus scholarship. He also led the drive to establish three lecture series that are now held annually in

London at the Warburg Institute, in Leiden at the Sir Thomas Browne Institute, and in Toronto at the Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies (formerly in Washington at the Folger Library and at the Royal Netherlands Embassy). In the beginning DeMolen's home served as the Society's office and library. For many years he personally served as editor of the *Yearbook*, librarian, director of public relations, fund-raiser, and accountant. He regularly attended and chaired the Society's lectures and as an affable host promoted scholarly relations in an atmosphere of conviviality. In September 1993, DeMolen became a postulant with the Barnabite Fathers. He resigned his many functions at the Society to devote himself to spiritual concerns and a life of ministry. It is eloquent testimony to DeMolen's energy and dedication that the tasks he performed single-handedly have now been taken over by three people: Jane Phillips, editor of the *Yearbook* since 1993, Erika Rummel and Richard Graham, secretary and treasurer, respectively, since 1994.

Richard DeMolen remains an active supporter and a generous patron of the Society. In dedicating this book to the founder of the Society, we express our appreciation for his service and pay tribute to his achievements.

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Erasmus

# FOREWORD



THE ESSAYS IN THIS COLLECTION provide a composite picture of Erasmus' ecclesiology. James Tracy leads into the subject by asking the fundamental question: can we hope to understand Erasmus' meaning, given the rhetorical makeup of his writings and the complexity and fluidity of the concepts involved? He answers in the affirmative, suggesting approaches to overcome the difficulty of discovering the authorial meaning. Tracy's introductory essay is followed by four essays that examine various aspects of Erasmus' vision of the church. They deal with the notion of piety (Erika Rummel); the elements of concord and consensus as touchstones of the true church (Hilmar Pabel); the perceived latitudinarianism of the early church (Irena Backus); and the ideal of priesthood (Germain Marc'hadour).

In his essay "Erasmus among the Postmodernists: *Dissimulatio*, *Bonae Literae*, and *Docta Pietas* Revisited," James Tracy views Erasmus' writings against the foil of contemporary literary theories. The humanists' call *ad fontes* and their belief that the admired past could be recaptured through the study of ancient authors invites comparison, on the one hand, with Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism and, on the other, with Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of the hermeneutic circle. In view of the challenging questions raised by Derrida and Gadamer and the difficulties caused by glaring inconsistencies in Erasmus' writings, Tracy wonders aloud: "Can such a man be understood?"

He suggests constructing a perspective in which what Erasmus says “makes sense.” This can be done by examining the editing process to which he subjected his writings. Additions, deletions, and the very decision to publish or withhold what he had jotted down for his private use or communicated in letters to personal friends may serve as a guidepost for reading Erasmian texts in a way that “makes sense.” Turning to the specific task of interpreting the terms *bonae literae* and *docta pietas* in Erasmus’ writings, Tracy places the two ideals in the context of the humanistic endeavor to achieve a cultural synthesis between classical and Christian values. For Erasmus *bonae literae* represented the source of moral education, intellectual training, and aesthetic sensibilities; *docta pietas* crowned these achievements by adding a pedagogy of the soul. Just as *bonae literae* represented a desirable alternative to logic, the central subject of the scholastic curriculum, *docta pietas* counteracted the useless speculation and legalism associated with scholastic theology.

Here Tracy pauses to consider the Marxist school of thought which challenges the ideal of harmonizing disparate cultures, labeling such efforts an attempt to conceal social antagonisms under the illusionary cover of harmony. He refers us more particularly to Pierre Bourdieu’s argument that cultural preferences serve as markers of social class and the application (by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine) of this argument to the cultural ideals promoted by Renaissance humanists. Tracy further examines Grafton and Jardine’s claim that the connection between *bonae literae* and *pietas* was an “intellectual sleight of hand” and that Erasmus could offer no method for progressing from classical learning to piety. Tracy challenges this claim, noting that humanist philology played an ancillary role in establishing the literal sense of the scriptural text, a necessary step to a spiritually fruitful reading.

But does it follow that a discerning and meditative perusal of the text will make the reader pious? Obviously we have no yardstick to measure the success of such a “method.” Instead, Tracy suggests that we consider the degree to which the conjunction of *bonae literae* and *docta pietas* had meaning to Erasmus’ contemporaries and represented a tension genuinely felt by them. He argues that the idea of the civilizing effect of a humanistic education was widely accepted. Reading *bonae literae* was thought to give the youthful reader a sense of responsibility, to cultivate in the child a sense of what was shameful and what was decorous. The ideal of *docta pietas* is an extension of these notions, or rather, it represents “an effort to build a bridge between what we might now call acculturation in shame and acculturation in guilt.”



Tracy completes his study of the relationship between humanistic pedagogy and the inhibition of undesirable behavior with a comparison between three contemporary educational tracts: Erasmus' *De pueris instituendis*, Luther's *Eine Predigt, daß man Kinder zur Schule halten sollte*, and della Casa's *Galateo*. He notes that Luther plays on the reader's guilt and fear; della Casa appeals to the practical implications of self-esteem; and Erasmus rests his pedagogical efforts on a strong belief in the malleability of human nature joined with a plea for gentle Christian nurture. Tracy concludes that the Erasmian ideal of *docta pietas* was no intellectual sleight of hand but a viable response to the cultural tensions felt by his contemporaries.

In my own essay, "*Monachatus non est pietas*: Interpretations and Misinterpretations of a Dictum," I adopt a philological or—as Erasmus' Scholastic critics would have said contemptuously—a "grammatical" approach to an Erasmian text. The phrase *monachatus non est pietas*, which appeared in the preface to the *Enchiridion*, shocked many readers. But were the words *per se* radical enough to warrant such a reaction or did readers invest them with a radical meaning because of their own cultural affiliations?

Examining Erasmus' use of the term *pietas* sheds light on this question. In his writings, *pietas* encompasses four aspects: love of God and charity toward our neighbor; the monastic ideal of otherworldliness; *docta pietas*, the fusion of piety and learning; and the inner devotion complementing the observance of rites. These concepts were traditional and in themselves unexceptional. It was Erasmus' polemical use of these concepts that aroused opposition and caused controversy. He frequently coupled praise of piety with criticism of the church. He routinely contrasted *docta pietas* with the dialectical quibbles of scholastic theologians; inner devotion with the superstitious observance of rules and regulations among the members of religious orders; otherworldliness with the greed and corruption of representatives of the church.

Erasmus' attitude toward monasticism was shaped by his personal experience as well as the communal experience of the Reformation. He had been obliged by his guardians to enter a monastery against his will and, although he never renounced his vows, he felt that he was not suited for the monastic life and eventually obtained a papal dispensation that allowed him to live the life of a secular priest. His attitude toward monasticism underwent several distinct phases. After an initial period of determined optimism, he went through a period of negativism in which he sought release from his obligations. In the wake of the Reformation, however, his attitude softened, as he was watching

the dissolution of monasteries and the resulting social upheaval. "I don't see anyone improved.... I find everyone worse," he observed. He went as far as expressing regret over championing spiritual freedom in his books: "I wished for a little curtailment of ceremonies and a great increase in piety," he wrote, "but now, instead of spiritual freedom we have uncontrolled carnal license."

A better understanding of the controversial phrase *Monachatus non est pietas* (literally "Monasticism is not piety") is gained by examining in more detail the outraged responses of two critics, the Spanish Franciscan Luis Carvajal and the Louvain Dominican Eustachius Sichem. Carvajal objected to the Erasmian phrase as an improper definition. His insistence on a definition conforming to dialectical rules appears out of place in dealing with a rhetorical composition such as the *Enchiridion*, but the principle behind Carvajal's objection was strongly supported by his fellow theologians. It is expressed in unequivocal terms by a member of the committee examining Erasmus' works for the Spanish Inquisition. "In theological matters," the examiner noted, "one must write and speak theologically." Such criticism is characteristic of the debate between humanists and theologians concerning the methodology and the professional training required from anyone dealing with *res sacrae*. Sichem objected to Erasmus' provocative phrase on different grounds. He linked the Erasmian words "Monasticism is not piety" to the Lutheran statement "Monasticism is impiety." Although this conversion did not follow logical rules, Sichem postulated a subtle emotional connection. Luther, he said, had merely verbalized Erasmus' "tacit message." In the charged atmosphere of the Reformation, then, Erasmus' statement was given a more radical meaning than it had per se. At the same time, the explanatory phrase appended to it was ignored. The full statement read: "Monasticism is not piety, but a way of life which may or may not be beneficial to the person in pursuit of piety." In this form the statement hardly justifies Carvajal's and Sichem's outrage or the hackneyed claim that "Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched the chicken."

In "The Peaceful People of Christ," Hilmar Pabel examines Erasmus' irenic ecclesiology, establishing the idea of concord and consensus as integral to his notion of the church. Erasmus' pacifism has been studied extensively in the context of his political ideas. In this essay Pabel examines pacifism as a cornerstone of Erasmus' religious beliefs. His irenic ecclesiology is rooted in the Pauline concept of the church as the body of Christ and the believer as a member of Christ's body. The "*Sakramentengemeinschaft*" links Christians to each other and to God. Through baptism they are grafted onto the body of Christ; through the eucharistic sacrifice they become "one spirit with the

spirit of Christ.” In describing the Christian commonwealth in the 1518 preface to his *Enchiridion*, Erasmus uses the image of Christ seated in the center, surrounded by three concentric circles containing clergy, secular princes, and common people respectively. Although a spatial hierarchy—which places the clergy closest to Christ and the common people farthest away—is maintained, it is significant that the church embraces, not merely the anointed, but the entire people of Christ. Indeed, this inclusive definition of the church is echoed in a number of Erasmus’ works: the *Ratio*, the adage *Sileni Alcibiadis*, and *Julius Exclusus* (the last one is of uncertain authorship, but certainly breathes the Erasmian spirit).

Pabel demonstrates that Erasmus’ irenic ecclesiology informed and ultimately determined his attitude toward the Reformation. From 1520 on, Erasmus frequently asserts his unwillingness to be “torn away from the society of the Catholic Church.” The formation of new churches was irreconcilable with the notion of the Christian people as a people of concord. He urged that doctrinal differences be settled by a process of arbitration or by a general council. It follows that his *Diatribes on Free Will* cannot be construed as a declaration of war on Luther. Rather, it was an effort to appease the Reformer with “a more accommodating view,” and with a rhetorical strategy that stressed an inclusive rather than disjunctive mode of reasoning. Pabel argues that Erasmus was not adogmatic, as claimed by some scholars, but disapproved of dogmatism and the multiplication of articles of faith which carried with them the danger of dissent.

In Erasmus’ view, consensus was the sign of the true church. Its body of doctrine was corroborated by the agreement of all Christians or a majority of Christians, and over an extended period of time, yet it was not merely an agreement between humans sanctioned by tradition. Christ himself was the guarantor of the consensus. Erasmus used this touchstone also in judging the validity of the doctrines promoted by the Reformers. Noting that they were unable to reach consensus among themselves, he concluded that they did not have the truth on their side. In two late works, *De sarcienda ecclesiae concordia* and *De puritate tabernaculi*, he calls for a restoration of unity through spiritual renewal, prayer, and mutual forbearance until “the healing relief of the synod will work for peace.” In the *Ecclesiastes*, his last major work, he closely links the church to the Trinity, the archetype of concord: “Through faith and charity the members of Christ are taken up ... into the unity of the Trinity.” Where concord is absent, sin is present. The purity of the tabernacle, that is, the church,

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# ABBREVIATIONS



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- ASD *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. C. Reedijk et al., (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1969—).
- CW *Complete Works of Sir Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963—).
- CWE *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974—). Correspondence is cited by volume, epistle, and line nos.
- Godin Desiderius Erasmus. *Vies de Jean Vitrier et de John Colet*, ed. André Godin (Angers: Editions Moreana, 1982).
- Holborn *Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus: Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Hajo Holborn and Annemarie Holborn (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1933).
- LB *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Leclerc, 10 vols. (Leiden: 1703–1706).
- Lupton Desiderius Erasmus. *The Lives of Jehan Vitrier, Warden of the Franciscan Convent of Saint-Omer, and John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's*, trans. J. H. Lupton (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1883).

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