

Erasmus of Rotterdam:

The Educator's Educator



The Granger Collection, New York

Desiderius Erasmus

At the beginning of this year, an influential member of the British ruling class, Lord Rees-Mogg, publicly called for limiting education to the top five percent of the population, the same level of literacy as existed before the Fifteenth-century Renaissance. His *Times of London* article of January 5, 1995, was unabashedly entitled, “It’s the Elites Who Matter.”

Lord Rees-Mogg’s desire to turn back the clock of history is not an idle threat. In the United States, Conservative Republicans, led by Newt Gingrich, have already proposed to massively slash educational programs. Lord

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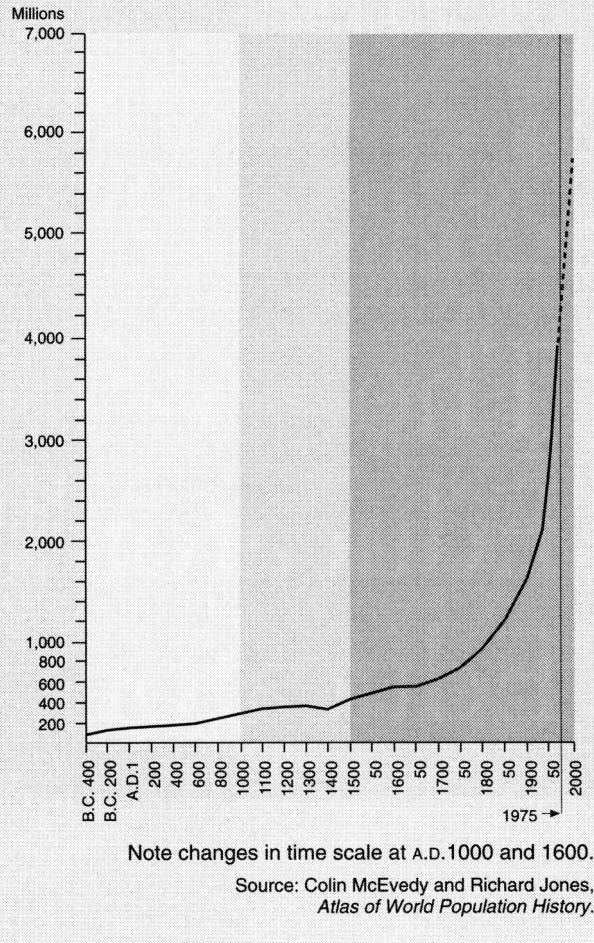
by Donald Phau

Rees-Mogg and his friends would like to return to the age of feudalism, when rulers had little to fear from their subjects—the remaining ninety-five percent of the population, mainly ignorant peasants, who slaved in the fields from dawn to dusk.

The foundations for Lord Rees-Mogg and Gingrich’s so-called “Conservative Revolution” can be found in the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. For example, in the *Politics*, Aristotle asserted that some men were born to be the masters, with access to education, while others would be their slaves. For the first half of this millennium, the citadel of Aristotelian thought was Venice; and thus it was that Venice, following Aristotle’s teachings, became Europe’s center for trafficking in human slaves.

The Fifteenth-century Golden Renaissance in Italy overthrew the hegemony of Aristotle, leading to the cre-

FIGURE 1. *World population, 400 B.C.—A.D. 2000 (projected).*



ation of France as the first true nation-state, or *commonwealth*, under the leadership of Louis XI. This “Christian humanist” revolution was led by adherents of Aristotle’s enemy Plato, including such figures as Petrarch, Nicolaus of Cusa, Leonardo da Vinci, and Erasmus of Rotterdam. Beginning in the Fourteenth century, this Platonic Christian outlook was reflected in northern Europe by the work of the Brotherhood of the Common Life, and later by the Oratorian Order.¹ The Brotherhood, founded by Gerhard Groote (1340-84), was dedicated to mass education—including education of the poor—from an early age. Both Nicolaus of Cusa and Erasmus of Rotterdam were educated in schools established by the Brotherhood.

This article will focus on the Christian humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, who played a critical role in shaping events from the end of the Renaissance to the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. His lifetime, from 1469 to 1536, places him in the center of both events.

There was little of significance that occurred in Europe

at the time, which Erasmus did not influence. Most readers have heard, or have used themselves, such phrases as, “He has one foot in the grave,” or “He’s fighting with his own shadow.” Few people today know that these, and many other everyday sayings, were first made popular in *The Adages*, a book written by Erasmus in 1500. Erasmus wrote at the time that printing was just becoming widespread; Gutenberg had printed the first book, the Bible, just fifty years earlier, and next to the Bible, *The Adages* was likely the best known book of the time.

The printing and mass circulation of Erasmus’ books led to an unprecedented leap in literacy throughout Europe. In addition, he collaborated with leading intellectuals in England and Spain to begin a revolution in teaching methods, by developing a school curriculum which remains to this day a foundation for education. In the area of statecraft, Erasmus was in personal contact with most of the monarchs of Europe. He dedicated many of his works to them, explicitly calling upon them to emulate Plato’s “philosopher king.” Simultaneously, his works addressed the wider population on the issue of “national sovereignty,” and following Nicolaus of Cusa, who had lived a half-century before him, he foresaw the necessity for an educated population to freely elect its own government. Lastly, he was in the forefront of a movement to reform the institution of the Catholic Church, and end its corruption and toleration of superstition. And when Venice pitted Luther’s Reformation and the Church against one another in their effort to destroy the heritage of the Renaissance, Erasmus, virtually alone, fought for a reconciliation based on a Platonic Christian dialogue.²

If the reader looks at a graph of world population (SEE FIGURE 1), you will see that until the Fifteenth century, population levels remained below 500 million. It has only been in the last approximately 550 years, since the Renaissance, that man has developed the means to enable him to sustain a growth in population to the level of over five billion today.

There were two key developments during the Renaissance which made this growth possible. The first was the 1439 Council of Florence, organized by Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, at which Cusa succeeded in uniting the eastern and western divisions of the Church in an agreement

2. William F. Wertz, Jr., in his article “Man Measures His Intellect Through the Power of His Works,” (*Fidelio*, Vol. III, No. 4, Winter 1994) uses the term “Platonic Christian.” He writes: “For the purpose of this study I intend to focus, first, on the concept of Natural Law as it was developed in St. Augustine and elaborated by St. Thomas Aquinas. This school of Natural Law can best be described as Platonic Christian, because, following Plato, it derives Natural Law from Eternal Law, based on the idea that since man is created in the image of God, through the right use of reason he can bring his practice into harmony with God’s eternal law.”

1. SEE the Appendix: “The Oratorian Movement and the Expansion of Christian Humanist Education,” p. 31.

around the doctrine of the *Filioque*—that the Holy Spirit proceeds equally from the Father and the Son—which expressed and reaffirmed for Christianity the essential idea of man’s creation *in the image of God (imago viva Dei)*, separate and above the beasts. The Council was a recognition of the creative potential unique to man, and paved the way for the breakthroughs in art, literature, science, and music, as represented by such geniuses as Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, that were followed in the next century by Erasmus.

The second key development was the creation of the first sovereign nation-state, or *commonwealth*, under France’s Louis XI, who reigned from 1461 to 1483.³ Physical economist Lyndon LaRouche, in numerous locations, has emphasized the importance of Louis XI’s France for the development of modern civilization. LaRouche writes that the nation-state, for the first time in history:

1. Fostered and protected the development of the family;
2. Took responsibility for education of the citizenry, according to the principle that all men are equally created *in the image of God*; and
3. Promoted the advancement of science and technology.

Erasmus the Educator

Erasmus was born in 1469, when Louis XI still reigned in France, and when one of the Brotherhood’s most important teachers, Thomas à Kempis, was still alive. During Erasmus’ lifetime, Leonardo da Vinci was creating his great masterpieces and discovering laws of physics which would later lead to such inventions as the airplane and submarine. Also during Erasmus’ lifetime, led by the nation-states of France and England, growing numbers of the population benefitted from higher levels of education and increasing standards of living. And yet, by the time of his death, the Protestant Reformation and the

Erasmus’ Translation Project

At the beginning of the Sixteenth century, Erasmus was universally considered to be the primary spokesman for the Christian humanist movement which had been transforming Europe since the Golden Renaissance.

The battle cry of these Christian humanists was “*ad fontes*” (“to the sources”): to find, translate, and disseminate the ideas upon which Western civilization had been based. Thus, in addition to his many polemical and philosophical works, Erasmus spent much of his time producing accurate, well-annotated, comprehensive editions of the early Church Fathers and many classical writers (including works by Augustine, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Irenaeus, Jerome, Origen, and Cicero, Seneca, Ptolemy, Suetonius, and Aristotle). Erasmus believed, and stated repeatedly, that he could end the tyranny of Aristotelian Scholasticism—with its endless debates about who might have said what when, and what it meant—by mass-producing clear copies of important works for an increasingly literate population; hence, the selection and vast number of his editions.

In addition, Erasmus did his own, quite popular translation of the Greek New Testament. He followed that up by supervising his friend Cardinal Ximenes’ project for the *Complutesian Bible*, the world’s first polyglot edition. By printing the Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin versions of Scripture on the same page, the humanists hoped to enable the scholarly reader to draw the last ounce of knowledge from this most important book of the Christian religion, while at the same time giving a reader with knowledge only of Latin, the tools to learn Greek and Hebrew.

When Erasmus started writing, the newly invented printing press was largely producing corrupted versions of the Bible, and political/theological propaganda sheets. Erasmus made the printing presses produce *books*, good books, necessary books, and lots of them. Although Erasmus did not himself make any scientific discoveries, he disseminated them at perhaps a greater rate than any man in history. In so doing, he literally gave Judeo-Christian civilization back its own past.

—Michael Minnicino

3. Erasmus well understood the key role that France played in setting the example for future nation-states. In *The Education of A Christian Prince*, he defends France, by writing, “what has moved or will move so many to tear at the Kingdom of France except that it is prospering? There is no larger kingdom. Nowhere is there a nobler Senate. No country has such a famous university. Nowhere is there greater concord and therefore greater power. Nowhere is law more respected. Religion itself is pure and free from corruption. It is not infected by the proximity of the Turks or Moors, as is Hungary and Spain. Germany (excluding Bohemia) is divided among so many princes that there is not even the semblance of a kingdom. France is the undefiled flower of the Christian commonwealth.”

Catholic Counter-Reformation that followed it—both masterminded by the Venetians—had split the Church, emptied the universities, and opened the doors to civil and national wars. The Venetian oligarchy, which had been nearly defeated by the 1508 League of Cambrai, had by the end of the century re-established itself with a new center of political and financial power in its new outpost in the British Isles [SEE “Venice’s War Against Western Civilization,” this issue, p. 9].

Erasmus was an educator of educators. Throughout his life he encouraged his followers to dedicate themselves to teaching. His students established dozens of schools throughout Europe, and his voluminous writings addressed a wide variety of subjects, from manuals for teaching young children to translations of classical Greek writers.

A letter to a young teacher, written in 1516, exemplifies Erasmus’ commitment to lift Europe’s “ninety-five percent” out of ignorance. The teacher, Johann Witz, had written Erasmus, explaining that he was considering quitting teaching and moving instead to a higher paying and more influential position, perhaps at court. Erasmus vehemently objected:

To be a school master is an office second in importance to a king. Do you think it a mean task to take your fellow-citizens in their earliest years, to instill into them from the beginning sound learning and Christ himself, and return them to your country as so many honorable upright men? Fools may think this is a humble office; in reality, it is very splendid. For if even among Gentiles it was always an excellent and noble thing to deserve well of one’s country, I will not mince my words: no one does more for it than the man who shapes its unformed young people, provided he himself is learned and honorable—and you are both, so equally that I do not know in which of them you surpass yourself. . . . An upright man who is above all temptation is what that office needed, a man devoted to his duties even if he is paid nothing.

Erasmus had been born in Holland, then part of the Holy Roman Empire, which included Germany, Spain, and part of France. His father was a learned man, a copier of manuscripts, but he never married, and became a priest before Erasmus was born. Despite having little money, Erasmus’ parents were determined to see him and his older brother educated. At an early age, perhaps seven or eight, Erasmus was a chorister at the city of Utrecht and, as one historian reports, was trained by a famous organist by the name of Obrecht.

At the age of nine, under their father’s direction, Erasmus’ mother took him and his brother 150 miles from home, to enroll them in the Brotherhood of the Common Life school in Deventer. Deventer was famous for its school, which had been the home of the

Brotherhood’s founder, Gerhard Groote, over a hundred years earlier.

Author William Wertz describes the teaching at one of the Brotherhood schools, as designed by Groote: “Imitating Christ themselves, the teachers . . . preferred loving warnings to harsh punishments, sought to inculcate a love for individual research by letting pupils delve among the classics rather than confine themselves to text books, and taught the boys the use of their vernacular language. Poor pupils were given money for books, ink, and paper they needed in school. . . . It was the practice of the Brotherhood in their educational work, which centered on the Bible, to write down sayings or excerpts from the Bible or from various Fathers of the Church. The collection of such sayings was called a *rapiarium*. The basic idea is that the way to self-improvement is to think about an appropriate saying which helps one to overcome whatever obstacle to creative thinking arises in one’s mind at the moment it occurs.”⁴

The Brotherhood’s teaching method encouraged their students to study the original writings and discoveries of the ancient Greeks. Rather than using formalisms to be learned by rote, the child was urged to replicate the actual creative thinking of the original authors. Erasmus’ schooling by the Brotherhood would be reflected in his writings throughout his life.

The Brotherhood’s method was known as the “New Devotion,” or “Modern Piety.” It included translating Greek and Hebrew writings into Latin and the vernacular languages, then copying them by hand or, as the technology developed, by printing. From 1460 to 1500, 450 books were printed at Deventer alone. (One of Erasmus’ adult friends, Georgius Agricola, would discover new technologies in metallurgy, allowing for the rapid advancement in printing.)

The Brotherhood schools sought out promising young boys from poor families, such as Erasmus. One of their teaching methods for learning the alphabet was to use a short parable from the Bible beginning with each letter. This manner of learning is reflected in Erasmus’ first major work, *The Adages*, which when printed in 1500 contained eight hundred sayings and proverbs, many translated from the Bible. By 1521, Erasmus had expanded the work to 3,411 proverbs, and it had had an incredible sixty-two separate printings. Popular sayings in *The Adages*, in addition to those mentioned earlier, included: “As many men, as many minds; To chomp at the bit; To leave no stone unturned; Where there is smoke there is fire; A necessary evil; Know thyself; Many hands make light work; To mix fire and water.”

4. William F. Wertz, Jr., “The Brotherhood of the Common Life,” *Fidelio*, Vol. III, No. 2, Summer 1994.

Erasmus did not limit his educational concerns to teachers only, but he included parents and children as well. He wrote a short book, *On the Civility of Children's Conduct*, actually addressed to children—the first such effort by a major author in the history of literature. Although *On Civility* contains such admonitions as, “A dripping nose is filthy. To wipe it on a cap or sleeve betokens a peasant, to put it off on the arm or elbow is the mark of a vendor of salt herring. Better to use a handkerchief and turn away the head,” it is not merely a manual of etiquette or discipline. Instead, it is a discussion of how children must learn to live in a world of adults. With great gentleness, Erasmus teaches that although adults may coerce without real understanding, nevertheless discipline is important, because your outward demeanor reflects the *inner state of your mind*. And, of course, Erasmus engages the children with characteristic irony, as when he tells them not to stare, and then reports how Socrates was thought to be stupid, because he stared all the time. Or when he instructs that, “To laugh at everything is silly. To laugh at nothing is stupid” [SEE Box, p. 21].

Metaphor

Erasmus' early writings, such as *The Adages*, were directed to educating the population in how to use language to communicate higher ideas. Just as Classical composers use simple folk themes as the basis for more complex musical composition, Erasmus took parables and sayings to develop the language. Lyndon LaRouche, in an article on metaphor, has emphasized that creativity can never be communicated by a mere exchange of information.⁵ Today's adoration of the computer and the “information superhighway” is totally unfounded, since information alone can never explain how one individual can express a new discovery to another. One must seek through ambiguity to create a crisis in the mind of the reader or listener, such that he is provoked into conceptualizing as a conscious “thought-object” the new idea being conveyed.

For Erasmus, truth was not in the literal meaning of words, but always lay outside the obvious. For example, when one says that “he is chomping at the bit,” an Aristotelian might believe that the person is actually biting on a bit, as horses do. Yet, even a peasant could understand that the expression has nothing to do with actual horses or bits.⁶

Plato's use of the Socratic method as a means to provoke such “crises in thinking,” is seen in his use of the dialogue form. In a work which followed soon after *The Adages*, entitled *The Colloquies*, Erasmus adopted the method of dialogue, in order to give the reader greater access to the creative process. This was directly opposed to the common Aristotelian method then practiced in the schools, which taught by diatribe and invective, literally hitting the student over the head until he “learned” something.

Erasmus' writings, printed in the thousands, reached new layers of the population, who, for the first time, discovered how—in the words of the Nineteenth-century poet Percy Shelley—language can convey “profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature.” Erasmus would later come under fire from academic circles, for daring to address his efforts to this new audience. Responding to his friend but oftentime critic, Guillaume Budé, on Oct. 28, 1515, Erasmus wrote:

Again, the risk you display before me, that by publishing so many minor works I shall get myself a bad name, does not move me in the least. Whatever in the way of notoriety rather than glory has been won for me by my publications, I would peacefully and willingly dispense with, if I could. Men's spheres of interest differ and their strength lies in different fields, nor have all men the same natural bent. For my own part, these superficial subjects are the field in which it suits me to philosophize, and I see in them less frivolity and somewhat more profit than in those themes which the professional philosophers find so pre-eminent. Finally, the man whose sole object is not to advertise himself but to help other people, asks not so much is it grand, my chosen field: As it is useful? . . . I write these things not for your Persius or your Laelius but for children and dullards.

Both Erasmus' parents died when he was fourteen years of age. His guardians, immediately seeking to rid themselves of the expense and responsibility of raising him, decided that he should become a priest, and withdrew him from the Deventer school. He entered a monastery not at all to his liking. He then moved to a sec-

nothing more than a metaphor writ large. . . . Metaphor taken alone, adds everything in fuller measure, while all other kinds of ornament add one thing each. Do you wish to entertain? Nothing adds more sparkle. Are you concerned to convey information? Nothing else makes your point so convincingly, so clearly. Do you intend to persuade? Nothing gives you greater penetration. . . . I have not chosen what was ready to hand, nor picked up pebbles on the beach. I have brought forth precious stones from the inner treasure house of the Muses. The barber shop, the tawdry conversation of the marketplace, are no source for what is to be worth the attention of the ears and eyes of educated men. Such things must be on earth, in the innermost secrets of nature, in the inner shrine of the arts and sciences, in the recondite narrative of the best poets or the records of eminent historians. . . .”

5. See Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “On the Subject of Metaphor,” *Fidelio*, Vol. I, No. 3, Fall 1992.

6. Erasmus well understood the power of metaphor. In a letter written in 1514 to Pieter Gilles, who was a close associate of Thomas More, he wrote: “Knowing as I did everyone's natural bent towards elegance of expression and perceiving that not polish alone but almost all the dignity of language stems from its metaphors, for the Greek *parabola*, which Cicero Latinizes as *oratio*, a sort of comparison is

ond, Augustinian monastery (although both monasteries were run by the Brotherhood), which he found more congenial. In a letter he wrote: “To a man of learning, what felicity the monastery affords.” Here he discovered manuscripts of St. Augustine, and he became the butt of jokes by his fellow monks when he took a stack of the manuscripts with him to bed every night to read. Many years later, Erasmus would edit the first complete works of St. Augustine.

Erasmus took his vows and was ordained in 1492. Later in life, he requested and received a Papal dispensation releasing him from his monastic obligations, as well as allowing him to wear secular dress. Yet, despite the savage attacks later launched against him from the Venetians within the Church, he never violated his vows. Like Nicolaus of Cusa, he publicly criticized the Church for its corruption, but never abandoned his loyalty to the Church and the Papacy.⁷

In 1499, Erasmus traveled to England, where he became close friends with a group of humanists around John Colet, a trusted adviser to King Henry VII and a teacher of the soon-to-be famous writer and statesman, Thomas More. Colet inspired Erasmus to begin an intensive study of Plato and other ancient Greeks. In a letter, Erasmus wrote that upon attending a lecture of Colet on St. Paul’s *Epistles*, he “could hear Plato himself speaking.” With this comment, Erasmus acknowledges that Plato’s philosophy laid the foundation for Christianity. (Erasmus was known to refer to Plato’s teacher on occasion as “St. Socrates.”)

Colet had earlier traveled to Italy, where he studied the writings of Plato at the Academy of Florence under the sponsorship of the Medici family. When he returned to England, he gathered a circle of friends, including Thomas More and John Fisher, of whom some, such as Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn, had also been to Italy and studied Greek. Linacre, who was the physician to Henry VII, founded the Royal College of Surgeons, translated medical texts, and wrote a text on Greek grammar. More would become one of Erasmus’ closest friends. Erasmus dedicated his *In Praise of Folly* to the English statesman: the word “folly” is a pun on More’s name, which in Greek is “moria.”

The ‘Genius Project’

Erasmus traveled to England numerous times, including for one extended stay of six years. While in England, he joined forces with Colet to develop a methodology of

teaching which would revolutionize all future children’s education. Their method would virtually guarantee that any young boy or girl would become a genius. The “experiment” was conducted in a school established at the house of Thomas More, and was later disseminated more widely by Colet’s founding of St. Paul’s School in London.

Erasmus, Colet, and More were joined in England by the Spaniard, Juan Vives. Vives, a student of the great Spanish reformer Cardinal Ximenes, was counselor to Catherine of Aragon, the wife of Henry VIII. Vives was an educator, and an avid anti-Aristotelian. He was one of the first people to call for a public tax to fund education, and for every township to have a school with salaries for teachers paid from the public treasury.

The efforts of this European-wide network focussed, in particular, on the education of women. Up until this time few women—even the daughters of monarchs—were educated in anything more than simple domestic tasks, such as sewing. According to author Pearl Hogrefe in her book entitled *The Sir Thomas More Circle*,⁸ More established “the first practical experiment to educate women.” This was not “home schooling”: More sought out and brought into his house the best scholars representing his own worldview. His own daughter Mary, for example, was tutored by Erasmus. Later, she would produce the first English translation of one of Erasmus’ Latin writings.⁹

This network was welded together by their explicit belief that all human beings, no matter what rank or background, could be successfully educated. As Erasmus wrote in the *The Education of A Christian Prince*, it is the duty of the prince to see that “all youth, both boys and girls” are educated in either a public or private school.

Erasmus, reflecting the influence of Brotherhood teachings, was against the prevailing use in schools of blame and punishment, e.g., floggings, as a means to educate. We see his insight into child development in the following:

8. Pearl Hogrefe, *The Sir Thomas More Circle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1959).

9. Other products of this educational network were the daughters of Henry VIII, the princesses Mary and Elizabeth. First educated under the guidance of her mother, Vives, and Queen Isabella in Spain, Princess Mary came to England and studied Greek, Latin, astronomy, geography, and mathematics. At the age of eleven she entertained French commissioners who had come to England to entreat her to marry Francis I, the future King, answering them in Italian, French, and Latin. Elizabeth, educated by a student of Colet, was able to speak Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, and some Greek; as an adult, she was said to have translated the whole of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* from the Greek in a single afternoon.

7. See Wertz, “Brotherhood,” *op. cit.*



Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England under King Henry VIII, was among Erasmus' closest friends. Their collaboration resulted in new schools based upon a Classical curriculum. Erasmus dedicated "In Praise of Folly" to More.

More wrote "Utopia" as a political organizing document for the new commonwealth movement. An immediate bestseller, it was translated into a dozen languages and has been continuously in print since its publication in 1516.

Right: The fictional Raphael Hythloday describes his discovery of Utopia to More (second from right), in a 1518 illustration.



Io. Clemens. Hythlodæus. Tho. Morus. Pet. Aegid.

By the nature of man, we mean, as a rule, that which is common to man as such: the characteristic . . . of being guided by reason. But we may mean something less broad than this: the characteristic peculiar to each personality, which we call individuality. Thus one child may show a native bent to mathematics, another to divinity, another to rhetoric or poetry, another to war. So strongly disposed are certain types of mind to certain studies that they cannot be won to others; the very attempt . . . sets up a positive repulsion . . . The master will be wise to observe such natural inclinations, such individuality in the early stages . . . since we learn most easily the things which conform to it.

In Erasmus' works on education,¹⁰ author Hogrefe says he makes a number of suggestions which would become standard in modern classrooms, such as teaching based on "kindness, praise, judicious recreation, play and games, teaching by stories, fables, jokes and graphic

devices of all kinds." Erasmus' proposed classroom was full of charts and tables, with quotations in large print on the walls. Proverbs would be on cups and written over the doors and windows. He considered pictures especially helpful. Games were played with older children as judges. He proposed baking biscuits in the form of letters of the alphabet for the younger children, who could only eat them when they knew the letter.

Colet asked Erasmus to write the curriculum for a new school—St. Paul's—which was granted a license from the King in 1510, and still exists today. Erasmus responded to Colet's request with *De Ratione Studii*. In it, Erasmus says that both Latin and Greek must be mastered so that the student can read the authors in the original, rather than a summary or translation.

Colet also asked Erasmus to be the first headmaster of St. Paul's, but Erasmus declined, and William Lily became headmaster instead. Lily, Colet, and Erasmus then jointly collaborated in writing a grammar text, which continued to be used in English schools through the Eighteenth century. It was used by the school Shakespeare attended as a boy.

10. See *Desiderius Erasmus, Concerning the Aim and Method of Education* (1904), ed. and trans. by W.H. Woodward (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971). Translations include *De Ratione Studii* and *Convivium Religiosum*.

Both More and Erasmus were explicit in their rejection of the “drill and grill” method of learning. Erasmus insisted that the student first read and speak the language, and that the grammatical rules were secondary. In his *De Ratione Studii*, he wrote:

whilst a knowledge of the rules of accident and syntax is more necessary to every student, still they should be as few, as simple and as carefully framed as possible. I have no patience with the stupidity of the average teacher of grammar who wastes precious time in hammering rules into children’s heads. For it is not by learning rules that we acquire the power of speaking a language, but by daily intercourse with those accustomed to expressing themselves with exactness and refinement, and by copious reading of the best authors.

Three hundred years after Erasmus wrote his curriculum calling for the study of languages, astronomy, mathematics, history, and poetry, similar ideas would form the basis of the Humboldt educational reforms of the Weimar Classical period in Germany, which were the basis for the development of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century science.

In 1521, Erasmus wrote to his friend Budé, conscious of the tremendous impact his ideas were having:

Although a short time ago, love of literature was considered useless in any practical life or as an ornament, now there is hardly a man who considers his children worthy of his ancestors unless they are trained in the good letters. Even in monarchs themselves a great part of royal splendor is lacking when skill in literature is lacking.

The Aristotelian forces wedded to the feudality in England did not idly accept the education “revolution” occurring in their midst. A letter to Erasmus from Colet in 1512 reveals that the teaching methods at St. Paul had come under fire:

A certain bishop (Fitzjames of London) who is held to be one of the wiser sort, has been blaspheming our school before a large concourse of people, declaring that I have erected a worthless thing, yea, a bad thing—yea (more to give his own works) a temple of idolatry, which, indeed, I fancy he called it because the poets are to be taught there. At this, Erasmus, I am not angry, but laugh heartily.

In another letter during this period, Thomas More writes Colet on the impact of St. Paul’s School:

I am not surprised that your excellent school is arousing envy. For, as the Greeks came forth from the Trojan horse and destroyed barbarous Troy, so scholars are seen to come forth from your school to show up and overthrow the ignorance of others.

It was during Erasmus’ first trip to England in 1499 that Colet urged him to learn ancient Greek. By the time Erasmus returned to England in 1509, he had mastered the language so well that he taught Greek at Cambridge. Throughout his later life, Erasmus sought to spread the learning of the classical languages, especially Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and traveled throughout Europe setting up colleges dedicated to their study.

‘The Militant Christian’

On returning from England, Erasmus wrote his second most popular work, the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (*Handbook for the Militant Christian*), modelled in part on the *Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, and Charity* of St. Augustine. This book is his direct intervention into the new “middle class” that was developing in the cities, and was one of the first secular works designed to teach the basics of Christian morality. The initiative for the book came from a friend, a woman, whose weapons-merchant husband had become a profligate womanizer. She asked Erasmus to write something to put her husband back on the straight path. The word “Enchiridion” has a double meaning, meaning both a “manual” but also a short sword, or dagger, symbolizing the book should be used as a weapon to fight off evil.

The *Enchiridion* established Erasmus as a leading Christian spokesman. It summarized his beliefs, including: (1) his love of Plato and contempt for the works of Aristotle; (2) his belief that faith in God must always be combined with doing good works for your fellow man, and (3) that man, as differentiated from the beasts, was created *in the image of God*.

In the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus attacks the heart of the problems in the Church: its adherence to Aristotle and its rejection of Plato. Thus, he writes, regarding the “pagan” philosophers, “a sensible of the pagan poets and philosophers is a good preparation for the Christian life. . . . Of all philosophical writings I would recommend the Platonists most highly.” Later, he writes of Aristotle and the problems Aristotle’s writings had caused the Church:

I find that in comparison with the Fathers of the Church, our present-day theologians are a pathetic group. Most of them lack the elegance of language, and the style of the Fathers. Content with Aristotle, they treat the mysteries of revelation in the tangled fashion of the logician. Excluding the Platonists from their commentaries, they strangle the beauty of revelation. Yet no less an authority than St. Augustine prefers to express himself in the flowing style that so enhanced the lovely writings of this Platonist school.

Between 1514 and 1518, eight Latin editions of the *Enchiridion* were printed. It was translated into Eng-

lish in 1519, German in 1520, Dutch in 1526, and Polish in 1535. The book was especially celebrated in Spain.

Erasmus' attacks on Aristotle would earn him the deep hatred of the Venetians, who, beginning in 1526, used their influence to have parts of his works banned in Catholic and Protestant countries alike. One of the last holdouts was Rome itself, which, however, placed sections of his works on the Church's "Index of Prohibited Books" in 1559, after Erasmus' death.

In the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus fully expresses his faith in the goodness of his fellow man and, as always, the necessity to teach: "In regard to the soul we are capable of divinity, that is, we may climb in flight above the minds of the very angels themselves and become one with God." Later, he criticizes the Church:

Charity does not consist in many visits to churches, in many prostrations before the statues of saints, in the lighting of candles, or in the repetition of a number of designated prayers. Of all these things, God has no need. Paul declares charity to be the edification of one's neighbor, the attempt to integrate all men into one body so that all men may become one in Christ, the loving of one's neighbor as one's self. Charity for Paul has many facets; he is charitable who rebukes the erring, who teaches the ignorant, who lifts up the fallen, who consoles the downhearted, who supports the needy. If a man is truly charitable, he will devote, if needs be, all his wealth, all his zeal, all his care to the benefit of others.

Keep all this in mind, my brother in Christ, and accept this advice; Have only contempt for the changeable crowd with its ways. To be holy, ignore demands of your senses. . . . Do not fear the crowd to the extent that you dare not defend the truth.

You say that you love your wife simply because she is your spouse. There is no merit in this. Even the pagans do this, and the love can be based on physical pleasure alone. But, on the other hand, if you love her you see the image of Christ, because you perceive in her His reverence, modesty and purity, then you do not love her in herself but in Christ. You love Christ in her. This is what we mean by spiritual love.

In 1509, Erasmus traveled to England for the second time, where he would stay for five years, much of it at the home of his friend Thomas More. Erasmus had been introduced to then-Prince Henry, the future Henry VIII, during his first trip to England. More had brought him, unannounced, to the palace, where he met the King's whole family and later wrote a poem to the Prince.

When Erasmus finally returned to continental Europe in 1514, he was pressed to become a counselor to the then-sixteen-year-old Prince Charles, the future Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. After a year of hesitation, he accepted the position, which was his only court appointment. His

Erasmus and Public Education

Between 1530 and 1600, Erasmus' *On the Civility of Children's Conduct* went through eighty editions in fourteen different languages. The revolutionary character of the work is given in the Preface, where Erasmus proclaims: "Let others paint on their escutcheons lions, eagles, bulls, leopards. *The possessors of true nobility are those who can use on their coat of arms ideas which they have thoroughly learned from the liberal arts.*" Thus, expanding even further the ideas of his *Education of A Christian Prince*, Erasmus portrays the value of the hereditary nobility as meaningless compared to that of the educated commoner. Teaching a child to act gracefully, to speak eloquently, and to use his or her mind to perfect reason, says Erasmus in so many words, will finally obliterate class distinctions.

"We cannot stress enough that the first years of life are of utmost importance," he writes, because childhood "is the seed-bed and planting-ground of the *commonwealth*." Rulers of states must understand, he says, that mass education "is a public obligation in no way inferior to the ordering of the army." It comes as no surprise that it was Erasmus' student Vives who made the first proposal in history for free, universal education (for girls as well as boys). The positive influence of *On the Civility of Children's Conduct* was so widespread, that the book can fairly be called the founding document of modern public education.

—Michael Minnicino

acceptance, however, was on condition that he was neither obliged to travel with the King nor to attend regular court functions. Erasmus feared intimate involvement with court life; instead, his approach was to give the monarch the highest moral example to follow, principally through his writings, and, no doubt, by direct conversation when possible. In doing this, he kept aloof from day-to-day court intrigues, an area in which the Venetians were so adept at manipulation. When his friend, Thomas More, rose to prominence in Henry VIII's government, Erasmus criticized him for dropping his humanist studies. Erasmus continued this criticism even after More's death.

It was during that intervening year, that Erasmus wrote *On the Education of A Christian Prince*, dedicated to Prince Charles.

This work confirms that during his time in England, Erasmus had decided with More to embark on a plan to shape the future of Europe, by both educating its future monarchs as well as the general population.¹¹ Recognizing the limitations of hereditary rule, Erasmus wrote in *The Education*: “[T]he chief hope for a good prince is from his education, which should be especially looked to. In this way, the interest in his education will compensate for the loss of the right of election,” and continued:

Nothing remains so deeply and tenaciously rooted as those things learned in the first years. . . . It is fruitless to attempt advice on the theory of government until you have freed the prince’s mind from those most common, and yet most truly false opinions of the common man.

Although he dedicated the book to Prince Charles, Erasmus’ real audience would be the population of Europe. *The Education* was printed and sold throughout Europe. Like Nicolaus of Cusa before him, Erasmus sought to give the population an understanding of their own responsibility for the nation as a whole. This meant that they first must know the requirements of leadership, as a prerequisite of government by popular election. In a future book, Erasmus, like Cusa, would openly state that “succession should be . . . by general election by the people.”¹²

In *The Education*, Erasmus utilizes the prince as a model for the type of individual the reader himself must strive to become. He writes:

The happiest man is not the one who has lived the longest, but the one who has made the most of his life. The span of life should be measured not by years but by our deeds well performed. . . . It is the duty of a good prince to consider the welfare of his people, even at the cost of his own life if need be. But that prince does not really lose his life in such a cause.

Erasmus then more fully develops the concept of the “philosopher king,” citing Plato directly and attacking Aristotle (although without naming him):

11. More wrote his *Utopia* at about the same time. This “bestseller” was begun by More in 1515, while he was in Flanders as a representative of Henry VIII, and finished shortly after his return to England. It was published in Latin in 1516, translated into more than a dozen languages before the middle of the 1520’s, and has remained in print continuously since then. *Utopia* was a powerful organizing document for the establishment of a Christian-humanist order of sovereign and economically progressive nation-states. See Christina Nelson Huth, “The Life and Death of Saint Thomas More,” part 1, *New Federalist*, Vol. II, No. 13, March 29, 1989, pp. 6-7.

12. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Complaint of Peace*, in *The Essential Erasmus*, ed. and trans. by John P. Dolan (New York: Mentor Books/New American Library, 1964).

You cannot be a prince, if you are not a philosopher; you will be a tyrant. . . . And so Plato is nowhere more meticulous than in the education of the guardians of his Republic, whom he would have surpass all the rest not in riches and jewels and dress and ancestry and retainers, but in wisdom only, maintaining that no commonwealth can be happy unless either philosophers are put at the helm, or those to whose lot the rule happens to have fallen embrace philosophy—not that philosophy I mean which argues about elements and primal matter and motion and the infinite, but that which frees the mind from the false opinions of the multitude and from wrong desires and demonstrates the principles of right government by reference to the example set by the eternal powers.

Sovereignty

Erasmus had, diabolically, dedicated his book not to the head of a nation-state—such as the King of France—but to the future Emperor Charles V, whose empire extended over vast territories, including peoples with many different languages and customs. Yet, his purpose was to teach Charles and the population the superiority of the nation-state over empire. Erasmus proposes some practical means whereby wars could be prevented and the sovereignty of nations fortified:

One suggestion in this regard would be to have royal families marry within their realms or at least within adjoining territories. This would lessen the problem of royal succession. It should be illegal to sell or alienate territories, as if free cities were up for sale. Kingship does not imply absolute ownership. . . . There should be some kind of an agreement that once the borders of an empire have been determined, they must remain inviolate and no alliance can be allowed to alter or destroy them. Once this has been established, each rule shall be extended toward the improvement of the realm, to the end that the ruler’s successors shall find it a richer and better place in which to dwell. In this way each and every territory will prosper.

Erasmus goes further, challenging the reader and the prince alike to reject the principles of empire, presenting arguments that actually undermine the very Hapsburg empire which Charles would shortly lead. He explains to Charles:

[T]he prince should first know his own Kingdom. This knowledge is best gained from a study of geography and history and from frequent visits through his provinces and cities. Let him first be eager to learn the location of his districts and cities with their beginnings, their nature, institutions, customs, laws, annals, and privileges. . . . Next, the prince should love the land over which he rules, just as a farmer loves the fields of his ancestors, or as a good man feels affection toward his household. He should make it his



England's John Colet (right) inspired Erasmus to study Greek and the works of Plato, as he had done in Renaissance Italy. Their circle included, in addition to Thomas More, the Englishmen Thomas Linacre and John Lily, and leading continental scholars, including the Spaniard Juan Vives (left), who had studied with the great Spanish reformer, Cardinal Ximenes (below).



especial interest to hand it over to his successor, whosoever he may be, better than he received it. If he has any children, devotion toward them should urge him on; if he has no family, he should be guided by devotion to his country. . . . He should keep constantly in mind the example of those rulers to whom the welfare of their people was dearer than their own lives.

He then elaborates a series of proposals for economic development and infrastructure, as the means whereby the prince could improve his country. He writes that a prince should visit

his cities (*civitates*) with a mind to improving them. He should strengthen the places that are unsafe; adorn the city (*civitas*) with public buildings, bridges, colonnades, churches, river walls, and aqueducts. He should purify places filled with deadly pestilence either by changing the build-

ings or by draining the swamps. Streams that flow in places of no advantage he should change to other courses; he should let in or shut out the sea as the need of his people demands; he should see that abandoned fields are cultivated so that the food supply is increased and that fields which are being cultivated to little advantage are farmed in other ways—for example, by forbidding vineyards where the wine does not warrant the trouble of the farming, but where grain could be grown.

His last proposal, that vineyards should be forbidden “where grain could be grown,” is an undisguised slap in the face to the oligarchs, who prided themselves on growing the grapes for vintage wines. Erasmus, who was himself well known as a connoisseur of good wine, obviously thought that it was more important to grow food for a hungry population than to have a few aristocrats sipping wine at their castle banquets.

Plato vs. Aristotle

To this day, there are perhaps merely a handful of people who have any understanding of what the Sixteenth-century Reformation and Counter-Reformation were all about. The period is usually characterized as “the Catholics versus the Protestants,” as if the study of history were like choosing football teams in the Superbowl. Needless to say, any student of history who accepts this

premise will never understand what really happened, because the division of the population along religious lines was a planned Venetian conspiracy. A real division did, indeed, exist—but it was not the religious one. Instead, the real fight was between an evil Venetian oligarchy, on the one hand, and Christian humanists such as Erasmus, who believed all men to be created *in the image of God*, on the other.

Erasmus was a threat to Venetian power, because he saw that by developing its powers of reason, mankind could rightfully assume responsibility for self-government. The monarch's right to rule would then be derived solely from the consent of the governed. This same idea had been voiced eighty years earlier by Nicolaus of Cusa.¹³

In *The Education*, Erasmus clearly sketches the two alternatives. Citing from Aristotle's *Politics*, he attacks the idea of the master-slave relationship:

[Y]et Aristotle believes that the rule of the King is finest of all, and calls it especially favored of the gods because it seems to possess a certain something which is greater than mortal. But if it is divine to play the part of the King, then nothing more suits the tyrant than to follow the ways of him who is most unlike God. . . . But a prince should excel in every kind of wisdom. That is the theory behind good government. It is the part of the master to order, of the servant to obey. The tyrant directs whatever suits his pleasure, the prince only thinks what is best for the state.

Erasmus then states the principle which, 250 years later, would be the basis for our American Declaration of Independence: "Nature created all men equal, and slavery was superimposed on nature, which fact the laws of even the pagans recognized." He then cites the *Gospel of Matthew* 23:10: "There is only one Master of Christian men."

Finally, Erasmus introduces the concept of "free will," to further demolish Aristotle's endorsement of the master-slave relationship. Addressing the young Prince Charles directly, he writes:

[W]hoever protects the liberty and standing of your subjects, is the one that helps your sovereign power. God gave the angels and men free will, so that He would not be rul-

ing over bondsmen, and so that they might glorify and add further grandeur to His Kingdom. And who, now, would swell with pride because he rules over men cowed down by fear, like so many cattle?

Reform

Unbeknownst to most people, there were actually two "Reformations." The history books tell us of the Venetian-sponsored "Reformation" led by Martin Luther. This "Reformation," however, was actually intended to, and did destroy, the real reform movement that was ongoing within the Church. This real "reformation," was led by Erasmus and a group of collaborators throughout Europe, and in many ways was a continuation of the attempts at reform undertaken by Nicolaus of Cusa at the onset of the Renaissance. In England, there was John Colet and Thomas More, in Spain, Cardinal Ximenes and Juan Vives, in France, the first publisher of the collected works of Nicolaus of Cusa, Lefebvre D'Estaples, and many others.

Erasmus' works, such as *The Colloquies* and *In Praise of Folly*, were aimed at freeing the population from the grip of pagan superstition which had become rampant throughout the Catholic Church, and especially within various religious orders of the Church.

One of Erasmus' most popular early works, *The Colloquies*,¹⁴ was written in the form of Socratic dialogues modeled on the writings of Plato. In the dialogue entitled "The Religious Pilgrimage," for example, he pokes fun at the worship of relics. He writes of the visit of pilgrims to a holy shrine, where each one is given, for a small contribution, a small fragment of wood from the original cross on which Jesus was crucified. The pilgrims, Ogygius ("Og") and Menedemus ("Me"), at first naively accept the fragment as real, but in further discussion they begin to question their own thinking. Erasmus writes:

OG: And so they tell us of the Cross, which is shew'd up and down both in publick and in private, in so many Reliques, that if all the Fragments were laid together, they would load an East India Ship and yet our Saviour carry'd the whole Cross upon his shoulders.

ME: And is not this a wonderful thing too?

OG: It is extraordinary I must confess; but nothing is wonderful to an Almighty Power; that can increase everything to his own pleasure.

ME: 'Tis well done however to make the best on't; but I'm afraid we have many a trick out upon us, under the Masque of Piety, and Religion.

13. Nicolaus of Cusa wrote *The Catholic Concordance* in 1433, proposing that rulers be elected—a revolutionary concept for the time. Cusa states that even rulers have no power to violate Natural Law. He writes: "For if by nature men are equal in power and equally free, the true properly ordered authority of one common ruler who is their equal in power cannot be naturally established except by the election and consent of others and law is also established by consent." See William F. Wertz, Jr., "The Christian Roots of the 'Ideas of 1776,'" *Fidelio*, Vol. I, No. 2, Spring 1992.

14. Desiderius Erasmus, *Twenty Select Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. by Sir Roger L'Estrange (1680) (London: Chapman and Dodd, Abbey Classics, 1923).

OG: I cannot think that God himself would suffer such Mockeries to pass unpunished.

ME: And yet what's more common than for the Sacrilegious themselves (such is the Tenderness of God) to scape in this World without so much as the least check for their Impieties . . .

In another dialogue, "The Abbot and The Learned Woman," the reader is introduced to Magdalia, a woman who has in her library many books in Greek and Latin, which she has taught herself to read. Visiting her is an Abbot, Antronius, who is against the education of women, and, for that matter, is also against the education of the monks under his supervision, for fear that they might learn to counter his orders. Through the dialogue, Erasmus develops for the reader an understanding of why literacy of the population, and especially of women, is necessary. At first the Abbot expresses doubt, but Magdalia turns the tables on him by engaging him in a beautiful Platonic dialogue on the question of the pursuit of wisdom.

In 1511, Erasmus wrote the book that would get him into the most trouble with the Aristotelians within the Church. The book, *In Praise of Folly*, is a devastating attack on every level of the Church hierarchy. No one is spared, from the Pope, to the bishops, to the scholars and monks, down to even the common parishioner. Speaking through the voice of "Folly," Erasmus saves his most savage criticisms for the scholastic theologians, writing:

They are protected by a wall of scholastic definitions, arguments, corollaries, implicit and explicit propositions; they have so many hideaways that they could not be caught even by the net of Vulcan; for they slip out of their distinctions, by which they also cut through all knots as easily as with a double-bitted axe from Tenedos; and they abound with newly invented terms and prodigious vocables . . . they explain . . . the most arcane matters, such as by what method the world was founded and set in order, through what conduit original sin has been passed down along the generations, by what means, in what measure, and how long the perfect Christ was in the Virgin's womb, and how accidents subsist in the Eucharist without their subjects.

And of the monks, Folly says:

For one thing, they reckon it the highest degree of piety to have no contact with literature, and hence they see to it that they do not know how to read . . . they do everything by rule, employing . . . the methods of mathematics . . . There must be just so many knots for each shoe and the shoe-string must be a certain color; the habit must be decked with just so much trimming . . . and one must sleep so many hours. Who does not see that all this equality is very unequal, in view of the great diversity of bodies and temperaments . . .

Of course, Erasmus could use humor as an even more devastating weapon against his targets. In a dialogue, a youth visits a whore, in order to convert her by means of Erasmus' teachings:

"Erasmus!" says she. "He is half a heretic, I hear."

"From whom did you hear that?"

"From my clerical customers!"

Before Luther made his appearance, Erasmus' attacks on the Aristotelians had drawn the ire of men in high positions both within the Church and the universities. His method of dealing with formal, pedantic scholarship, was to hold it up for ridicule and scorn, as his young correspondent and admirer in France, François Rabelais, also did.¹⁵

At Louvain University, a stronghold of Venetian influence in Church layers, Erasmus received a warning from the University director Martin Van Dorp in 1514, which foreshadowed the troubles ahead. Wrote Dorp:

Astringent pleasantries, even when there is much truth mingled with them, leave a bitter taste behind. In the old days, everyone admired you, they all read you eagerly, our leading theologians and lawyers longed to have you here in person, and now, lo and behold, this wretched Folly, like Davus, has upset everything. Your style, your fancy, and your wit they like, your mockery they do not like at all, not even those of them who are bred in the humanities. And that is the point, Erasmus my most learned friend: I cannot see what you mean by wishing to please only those who are steeped in humane studies. Is it not better to be approved rather than rejected, even by rustic readers?

In his response, Erasmus displayed his contempt for what he called the "modern" theologians—the Aristotelians:

15. According to historian Arthur Tilley, François Rabelais returned a Greek manuscript of Josephus to Erasmus for the Bishop of Rodez, George d'Armagnac, who was also a cardinal. Tilley also quotes the following letter from Rabelais to Erasmus, dated Nov. 30, 1532, which was affixed to the manuscript. The letter, in Latin, addresses Erasmus as his "most humane father," and continues: "I have called you father, I would also say mother, if your indulgence would allow it. . . . You have educated me, although unknown to you in face, unknown also in fame, and have ever nurtured me with the purest milk of your divine learning, so that did I not put down as owing to you alone all that I am and all that I am worth, I should be the most thankless of all men living or hereafter to live." Rabelais was thirty-seven years old, and Erasmus sixty-three, when this letter was written. By then, Erasmus' books had been widely circulated throughout Europe. The similarity in method between Rabelais' *Gargantua* and some of Erasmus' early works, especially *In Praise of Folly*, is evident.

But the modern kind [of theology] (to say nothing of the portentous filth of its barbarous and artificial style, its ignorance of all sound learning, and its lack of any knowledge of the tongues), is so much adulterated with Aristotle, with trivial human fantasies, and even the laws of the Gentiles, that I doubt whether any trace remains, genuine and unmixed, of Christ. What happens is that it diverts its attention over much to consider the traditions of men, and is less faithful to its pattern. Hence the more intelligent theologians are often obliged to express before the public something different from what they feel in their own hearts or say when among friends. . . . What can Christ have in common with Aristotle? What have these quibbling sophistries to do with the mysteries of eternal wisdom?

When Luther first came to Erasmus' attention, around 1517, Erasmus greeted his calls for reform of the Church warmly. Initially, he thought that Luther's efforts at reform were similar to his own. Even as Luther's attacks on the Church grew more violent, Erasmus continued to seek a dialogue around reform between Catholics and Luther's followers. It was only in 1524, more than seven years after Luther began to publicly attack the Church, that Erasmus published his first criticism of Lutheranism with his book *On the Freedom of the Will*. By this time, there was no doubt that Luther was not interested in reforming the institution of the Church, but in destroying it, as Venice had intended from the beginning.

The end result was that the humanists' reform movement was hopelessly splintered. Erasmus' future attempts at reform caused him to be branded a "heretic" by the Catholics, and when he sought to have an open discussion within the Church, Protestants accused him of being a "Papist," defending Papal repression.

A Golden Age?

By the close of the second decade of the Sixteenth century, Erasmus' name was a household word. His advice was sought after in every court in Europe. In Germany, his student had become the Emperor Charles V. In France, King Francis sent him personal letters pleading for him to reside at his court. In Spain, Queen Isabella's top adviser and ruler in her absence, Cardinal Ximenes, was in regular correspondence with him. And lastly, in England, his friend Thomas More would soon rise to be Lord Chancellor, second in power to King Henry VIII alone.

The nations of Europe were also at peace, under the Treaty of Noyon signed in 1516. To Erasmus, the world was entering a "Golden Age" and in a letter to his friend the scholar Wolfgang Capito, he said just this, writing:

I should almost be willing to grow young again, for a space, for this sole reason that I perceive we may shortly behold the rise of a new kind of golden age. So great is the heaven-sent change we see in the minds of the princes. . . . So it is to their piety that we owe the spectacle of the best minds everywhere rising as though at a signal given and shaking off their sloth, as they set themselves in concert to restore the humanities. . . .

Within a very few years, however, Erasmus' hopes for the future were shattered. What had been a clear battle between the opposing philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, had become totally obfuscated by the Venetian promotion of Martin Luther. With Luther, the Aristotelians could hide behind the cross, wearing either the scarlet robe of a Catholic cardinal or the simple habit of a Protestant monk. Erasmus' friends, as well as his enemies, lined up on either side, and each side demanded that Erasmus come out publicly and join them.

In 1517, Luther nailed his "Ninety-five Theses" on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, and soon the Venetian operation to split the Church and destroy the humanist movement went into full operation. Erasmus' reputation had already drawn the attention of Luther's chief controller, the Venetian agent Georgius Spalatinus.¹⁶ Spalatinus was tutor and secretary to Luther's future protector, Frederick Duke of Saxony. As early as December 11, 1516, Spalatinus had written to Erasmus, asking him to "correct" his views and join with Luther (although he failed to mention Luther by name).

Venice's key player within the Church, meanwhile, was Jerome Aleander. Aleander, a Venetian, had met Erasmus ten years earlier when they had roomed together in Venice at the house of the father-in-law of the famous Venetian printer Aldus Manutius. Aleander later became one of the most powerful cardinals in the Catholic Church, directing the Pope to enforce the excommunication of Luther and thus provoking the full-scale Reformation. Later, Venice's "double agent," Cardinal Gasparo Contarini¹⁷—the real founder of Protestantism—would continue Aleander's plan and help set up the Counter-Reformation. Aleander was to

16. Spalatinus was appointed by Frederick the Great as chief librarian at the University of Wittenberg. He used this position to maintain close contact with the Venetian printer Aldus Manutius, through whom various Protestant texts could be obtained. Spalatinus befriended Luther while they both resided at an Augustinian monastery, became his adviser, and, through Frederick, his protector. See Webster Tarpley, "The Role of the Venetian Oligarchy in the Reformation, Enlightenment, and Thirty Years War," *New Federalist*, Vol. III, Nos. 11 and 12, March 30 and April 5, 1993.

17. It was Gasparo Contarini, not Martin Luther, who was the real founder of the Protestant movement. As a member of one of Venice's oldest ruling families, it was under Contarini's leadership

become Erasmus' most determined foe.

As Luther and his followers became more bold, Erasmus attempted to intervene, calling for moderation and reason to prevail. Writing to both the Pope and Luther, and through meetings with other leaders, Erasmus warned both sides of the incalculable slaughter and destruction that would follow from a split in the Church. By refusing to support either side, he sought to use his reputation as Europe's leading intellectual, to force an open dialogue and reconciliation. He called upon both sides to unite on the Christian principles they shared in common, and to "discover how the evil rose" which divided them.

The following summary of the events between 1519 and 1521, starkly illustrates the role of Venice's two key agents—Spalatinus and Aleander—in sabotaging Erasmus' efforts at reconciliation, even to the point of threatening his life. During this time, two extraordinary meetings took place in the German city of Cologne. Erasmus had come to Cologne as counselor to the newly crowned Emperor Charles V. Venice needed to know just what Erasmus' influence over the new emperor was. Within a short time period, Venice's key Catholic and Protestant agents, Aleander and Spalatinus, would set up separate face-to-face meetings with Erasmus, to probe him for the answer to that question.

- In spring of 1519, Erasmus writes to the princes Albert and Frederick of Germany. He asks them to deal with Luther from the standpoint of reason, not anger. He writes, "He who accuses another of heresy ought to exhibit charity in admonition, kindness in correcting, candor in judging, latitude in pronouncing. Why do we prefer conquest rather than to cure? Let him that is without error not break a bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax."
- Erasmus writes Luther: "Why don't you cry out against the bad Popes rather than all the Popes? Let us

not be arrogant or fractious, but rather devoid of ire and vaunting of oneself. . . ."

- On the prompting of Aleander, Pope Leo X issues the Papal bull "Exsurge," giving Luther sixty days to submit to the Church. Erasmus is against the bull, and says the Pope is badly advised.
- On July 16, 1520, Aleander, now a cardinal, is given a commission by the Pope to go to the court of the Emperor Charles V and call upon him, as well as the princes, barons, and prelates, to enforce the bull should Luther prove recalcitrant. Aleander wants Luther burned at the stake.
- October 8, 1520: The first great *auto da f * of Luther's books occurs in Louvain.
- Radical Protestant leader Ulrich von Hutten writes Erasmus, telling him to "flee" Louvain where he is staying. He warns him that Aleander "is incensed against you," and may even try to poison him.
- On Nov. 20, 1520, Aleander meets with the Emperor in Cologne, to ensure that he does not waiver in his resolve to crush Luther. Erasmus, as imperial counselor, is present also. Aleander invites Erasmus to dinner as an "old friend." Erasmus meets him, but mindful of von Hutten's warning, declines dinner.
- Luther's protector Frederick Duke of Saxony, is also visiting Cologne with his chaplain, the Venetian agent Spalatinus. Frederick asks Erasmus to advise him on how to deal with Luther. The meeting occurs with Spalatinus translating between Erasmus' Latin and Frederick's German. The meeting ends with Erasmus agreeing to write a memorandum on the Luther controversy. His memo, titled "Axiomata," recommends the question be put before an impartial panel of judges, but his advice is not heeded.
- Aleander goes to the Emperor's court in Brussels, where he convinces Charles to burn a half-dozen Lutherans alive. Hundreds of books are burned in Antwerp also.
- Pope Leo dies in 1521, and another of Erasmus' friends becomes Pope Adrian VI. Adrian is old and his reign is short. He orders Luther to recant and his books to be burned. He invites Erasmus to come live in Rome.
- Erasmus writes the new Pope, asking him to rise above the religious factionalization, and look to the causes which have generated the conflict. He writes: "Some advise you to cure this malady by toughness. This course would be very imprudent and might end in frightful slaughter. The disease has gone too far for

that Venice became a virtual "breeding ground" for a myriad of Protestant sects. Although a review of Contarini's early writings places him squarely as an evangelical Protestant, pre-dating Luther by at least five years, by 1535 he had become one of the most powerful cardinals in the Catholic Church in Rome, a position he occupied after leaving his post as a member of Venice's secret ruling body, the Council of Three. In 1541, he was Papal legate to the Diet of Regensburg, where he sabotaged the final attempt to prevent the total split of the Protestants from the Roman Catholic Church. Contarini's treasonous role ensured that the Diet ended in failure. Contarini also sponsored the founder of the Jesuit Order, Ignatius Loyola. The Jesuits dominated the Council of Trent, which spearheaded the Counter-Reformation. SEE Webster Tarpley, "Venice's War Against Western Civilization, this issue, p. 4. See also, Donald Phau and Christina Nelson Huth, "Venice: The Methodology of Evil," *New Federalist*, Vol. VIII, Nos. 18, 19, and 21, May 9, May 16, and June 13, 1994.

surgery. . . . If the proper method is to eradicate this evil by prisons, floggings, confiscations, exiles, censures, and executions, you have no need of my counsel. But this course is not consonant with your gentle nature. *First you should try to discover how this evil arose*” [emphasis added—DP].

- Erasmus’ attempts to break the Pope out of the grip of Venetian agents such as Aleander are met with open hostility on the Protestant side. Erasmus’ now former friend, von Hutten, writes him angrily: “You now turn completely around and join the enemy.” Erasmus replies: “I do not deny that I seek peace wherever possible. I believe in listening to both sides with openness. I love liberty. I will not, I cannot serve any faction.”
- In 1521, the Diet of Worms officially excommunicates Luther. Erasmus meets for one last time with his arch-nemesis, Aleander. The meeting is reported to have lasted three days. During the discussions, Aleander tries to convince Erasmus to publicly refute Luther, going so far as to offer Erasmus such bribes as a bishopric and a cardinal’s hat, just to write one page against him. According to the biographer Charles Mee, when Erasmus declines, “Aleander erupted in rage and said that the Pope would have no trouble in ruining a ‘lousy man of letters.’” Aleander then tries to turn the Pope against Erasmus, writing to Rome that Erasmus had “brought forth opinions of confession, indulgences, ex-communication, divorce, the power of the Pope, and many other matters, which Luther has merely to adopt—except that *Erasmus’ poison is much more dangerous*” [emphasis added—DP]. Erasmus, however, is still much admired by the Pope, and no action is taken against him.

‘Freedom of the Will’

It was not until 1524 that Erasmus finally wrote a work critical of Luther. This was titled, loosely translated, *Diatribes Concerning Free Will*. In it, Erasmus ignores all of Luther’s charges concerning Church corruption, but instead addresses Luther’s adoption of the fundamental world outlook of Aristotle. Erasmus, the Platonist, writes that all men were created equal, and were endowed by their creator to use their free will to act in God’s image, and it is based on this freedom that men could elect leaders to govern. Luther, Erasmus wrote, denied man his free will by leaving everything in the hands of God. Luther’s argument was straight out of Aristotle, since government would be left in the hands of those few who were the “elect.” For Erasmus, this was merely the justification for the continued rule of an oligarchy.

Erasmus develops his conception that man’s free will is not something independent of God, but is actually a gift from God. This is a key point he will elaborate on. He writes:

The mercy of God offers everyone favorable opportunities for repentance. One needs only to attach the rest of one’s will to God’s help, which merely invites to, but does not compel to, betterment. Furthermore, one finds the opinion, that it is within our power to turn our will towards or away from grace—just as it is our pleasure to open or close our eyes against light. It is incompatible with the infinite love of God for man, that a man’s striving with all his might for grace should be frustrated.

Erasmus, referring to Luther, continues:

Yet, worst of all is obviously the opinion of those, who maintain that the free will is an empty name, and that neither among the angels, nor Adam, nor us, nor before or after receiving grace did it or could it accomplish anything; that rather God causes us evil as well as good, and that everything happens of mere necessity.

In his arguments, Erasmus solves the false paradox between man’s will and God’s. Very simply, man acts with God’s aid. He concludes this chapter by stating:

We oppose those who conclude like this: “Man is unable to accomplish anything unless God’s grace helps him. Therefore there are no good works of man.” We propose the rather more acceptable conclusion: Man is able to accomplish all things, if God’s grace aids him. Therefore it is possible that all works of man be good.

Erasmus says he has “many doubts” when he hears “that there is no merit in man, all his works even the pious ones are sin.” He asks, are even the works of the saints sinful? Could even the saints be condemned to Hell, were it not for God’s mercy? On the other hand, he asks, would it be justified to condemn others to the eternal tortures of Hell, since “God did not deign to cause good.” Erasmus then seeks to educate the reader with a beautiful parable:

A father raises his child, which is yet unable to walk, which has fallen and which exerts himself, and shows him an apple, placed in front of him. The boy likes to go and get it, but due to his weak bones would soon have fallen again, if the father had not supported him by his hand and guided his steps. Thus the child comes, led by the father, to the apple which the father places willingly into his hand, like a reward for his walking. The child could not have raised himself without the father’s helping his weak little steps; would not have reached the apple without the father’s placing it in his hand. What can the child claim for himself?

Martin Luther (right) scorned Erasmus' efforts to foster dialogue, based upon reason, to prevent a split in the Church—which Erasmus recognized would devastate Europe.



The Bettmann Archive



Left: Martin Luther nails his “Ninety-five Theses” to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, provoking the open confrontation with the Church sought by his Venetian sponsors. Venice created the Reformation, and then the Counter-Reformation, as it maneuvered to weaken its enemies and control Europe from behind the scenes.

Yet, he did something, but he must not glory on his own strength, since he owes everything to his father.

About one year later, Luther responded to Erasmus in a work entitled *The Bondage of the Will*. In his introduction, Luther is quite blunt about what he thinks of Erasmus' *Diatribes*:

Your book is, in my opinion, so contemptible and worthless that I feel great pity for you for having defiled your beautiful and skilled manner of speaking with such vile dirt. . . . Hence, you see, I lost all desire to answer you, not because I was busy, or because it would have been a difficult task, nor on account of your great eloquence, nor for fear of you, but simply because of disgust, indignation, and contempt, which if I say so, expresses my judgement of your *Diatribes*.

At the outset, Luther says, “I must speak like Aristotle, when arguing with his mentor Plato: Plato is my friend, but truth must be honored above all.” Luther insists that he is “saved,” and that whatever “works” he does is of no matter in attaining God's grace. In so doing, Luther denies God's greatest gift—man's creative capacity to act in the world. He writes:

But now God has put my salvation out of the control of my own will and put it under the control of His, and has promised to *save* me [emphasis added—DP], not according to my effort or running, but . . . according to his own grace and mercy, I rest fully assured that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and that moreover He is great and powerful, so that no devils and no adversities can destroy Him or pluck me out of His hand. . . . I am certain that I please God, not by the merit of my works, but by God, not by the merit of my works, but by reason of his merciful favor promised to me.

Erasmus answered Luther in a lengthy work, *Hyperaspistes*, but by 1524, the year of their public clash, events had already overtaken any possibility of reconciliation. That same year, thousands of German peasants were killed in a massacre encouraged by Luther. In 1527, Rome was sacked by the troops of Charles V, and by 1529, Erasmus was forced to flee his home town of Basel, as rioting broke out and churches were set aflame. Erasmus' friend and translator Bergquin, along with other “heretics,” were burned at the stake by the Church in Paris during the same year.

Venice's subversion had touched off an outbreak of

wars between the nations of Europe. France and England remained at war from 1521 to 1524. As Christian fought Christian, the Turkish empire, itself acting as a tool of the Venetian oligarchy, took advantage of the situation, and expanded its conquests west to the gates of Vienna.

With Western Civilization threatened with dissolution, Erasmus devoted his writings to the subject of peace, writing the following on the necessity of peace among Christians, in order to prevent conquest by the Turks:

The Scripture does not forbid a just war. Paul said that the magistrate bears not the sword in vain to protect the good and punish the bad. . . . I do not dissuade from war, but I am concerned that it be fought favorably. The best way to subdue the Turks would be to conquer them as the Apostles did the Roman empire. If by arms the Turks are conquered, they should enjoy all the benefit of our laws, and we should seek gradually to bring them to our faith.

A Tragedy?

In 1535, having been tried for conspiracy and treason and found guilty in Henry VIII's kangaroo court, Thomas More was executed on orders of the King, who had been his former student and friend. Henry had heeded the advice of Venetian agent Francesco Zorzi to break with Rome, so he could divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon, and marry the court strumpet Anne Boleyn.¹⁸ Henry then created the Church of England, with himself as its head. More was executed for refusing to take an oath of allegiance to Henry.¹⁹

On hearing the news of More's death, Erasmus said, "In More's death I seem to have died myself; we have but

one soul between us." Six weeks later, in a letter to the German scholar Bartholomew Latonus, Erasmus wrote: "Would that [More] had never embroiled himself in this perilous business, and had left the theological cause to the theologians."

One year later, on July 12, Erasmus died.

In contrast to the "Golden Age" he had foreseen earlier, in the closing years of his life Erasmus would often refer to the unfolding events in Europe as a "great tragedy." His comment after More's death, that More should have left "theological" issues alone, raises a key question: How much did Erasmus and the humanists recognize Venice's role as the behind-the-scenes puppet-master orchestrating the events that overwhelmed them?

There is ample historical evidence that humanist networks understood that Venice was evil.²⁰ Nearly two hundred years earlier, Francesco Petrarch had written that Venice was "an enemy of philosophy." Later, Pope Pius II, Nicolaus of Cusa's sponsor, denounced Venice for believing "[a]ll right and law may be violated for the sake of power." Erasmus' contemporary, the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli, was adept at uncovering Venetian plots. In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, William Shakespeare and Friedrich Schiller, respectively, would hold Venice up as the exemplar of evil, greed, and duplicity. Yet, it has only been in the last fifteen years, through research directed by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., that the depth of Venice's manipulation of events has been exposed.²¹ (Publication of articles revealing how Venice staged both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation has been unique to the Schiller Institute and LaRouche-associated periodicals, for example.)

After More's death, Venice moved the center of oligarchic power to England, where it remains today. Now *we* have the responsibility to see that the ideas of Erasmus live on: the present survival of Western Civilization depends upon them still.

18. Franciscan friar Francesco Zorzi was invited to England in the early 1530's by Venetian agent Thomas Cromwell, successor to Sir Thomas More as Chancellor of England. Zorzi, nicknamed the "Cabbalist Friar of Venice" by the Warburg Institute's late occult-specialist Frances Yates, brought with him armfuls of manuscripts, letters, and other documents supporting the King's arguments for divorce from the Queen, Catherine of Aragon. Zorzi remained in England for more than five years, gaining the King's ear and entry into the inner court circle. He is best known for his 1525 textbook of the occult, *De harmonia mundi (The Harmony of the World)*. SEE Webster Tarpley, "Venice's War," this issue, p. 9.

19. Thomas More was imprisoned and beheaded by the government of Henry VIII for refusing to swear an oath of support for the Act of Succession pushed through Parliament by Thomas Cromwell in the spring of 1534. This legislation outlawed as treason any criticism of Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn, awarded the succession to Henry and Anne's infant daughter Elizabeth, and required that every English subject over age twenty-one, of both sexes, swear an oath to uphold the Act. On April 17, 1535, Cromwell ordered More to appear before a roy-

al commission in London. There, the ex-Chancellor was asked to swear. After seeing a copy of the oath, More declared himself willing to accept the line of succession as laid down by Parliament, but refused to swear the oath. He was immediately jailed in the Tower of London. More's old friend, Bishop John Fisher, was the only other public figure to refuse to take the oath. More and Fischer were tried for conspiracy and treason in July 1535, found guilty by a packed jury on the basis of perjured testimony, and executed July 6, 1535. See Christina Nelson Huth, *op. cit.*

20. Michael Minnicino (private communication), April 30, 1995.

21. See Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "How Bertrand Russell Became an Evil Man," *Fidelio*, Vol. III, No. 3, Fall 1994, for the most comprehensive presentation of the historical, scientific, and philosophical issues involved.