

Desiderius Erasmus

In the summer of 1514, Desiderius Erasmus (c.1467-1536) was beginning to establish his name as the leading humanist scholar of his age, when he was recalled to his monastery in his native Holland. Orphaned at the age of seven, Erasmus had been pressured into monastic life by his guardians, and had only escaped in his mid-twenties. He refused to return, as the idea filled him with dread. “Whenever I consider it, the jealousy and lack of learning of the priests come to mind” he wrote his prior. “Those cold, useless conversations! I am not fit for that life, as I have a horror of ceremony and a love of freedom. The study of humane letters alone attracts my spirit.”

These “humane letters” were the literature of classical antiquity. The study and dissemination of these works was the aim of the Renaissance humanists. They opposed the established study of Aristotelian philosophy and science, and Scholastic speculative metaphysics. Instead, they focused on the practical arts of social life: rhetoric, grammar, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. Reflecting the needs of an increasingly urban and literate society, the humanists were preoccupied with the place and potential of the individual in this world. In classical antiquity they found a culture which appeared to have answers to the questions they faced regarding man’s relation to the community. To the humanists, the stylistic training of the ancients, as well as their discourses on citizenship, offered a course in civic virtue. Their principal ideal was the eloquent, informed and moral person who could be a persuasive civilizing presence in Christian society. Erasmus was the embodiment of this ideal.

Orthodox theologians accused humanists of exposing the young to “heathen, lascivious authors”. Erasmus dealt with this objection in his first important work *Antibarbari* (Against the Barbarians). He argued that though the Fall had darkened the human intellect and undermined human potential for virtue, it had not eradicated them altogether. Consequently, not all knowledge was laid down in the New Testament. Excellent classical authors had achieved the highest form of secular wisdom, and the aim should be to use the best of classical and Christian teaching to restore man to his prelapsarian nature. Erasmus’s life was devoted to this aim, through, among others, his popular collection of classical sayings, the *Adagia*, and his great theological work, the first Greek printing of the New Testament, with his new Latin translation and annotations.

Erasmus also aimed to educate people by revealing their weaknesses. He exposed the contrast between the behaviour of society’s leaders and their professed standards of behaviour in his best-

known work, *In Praise of Folly*, in which Folly lauds herself as the source of human happiness. For without madness “what man or woman would offer their necks to the halter of matrimony?” And what of the philosophers and teachers, “the most disaster-stricken of people, who stand dishevelled in their classrooms, wasting away because of their labours, deafened by their students’ shouting”, who wouldn’t last another day without their illusions of grand learning? Folly also mercilessly exposes the delusions of warring princes, and pompous cardinals and popes.

These works inspired many leaders of the Reformation. Erasmus’s scepticism about individual powers of reason, however, led him to distance himself from their conception of a wholly personal relationship with God. The frail judgement of the individual, he believed, needed support from the judgement of others in the community represented by the Church. This disagreement found expression in his exchange with Luther on free will. Luther had argued that individuals were incapable of choosing the right life freely, being wholly dependent on divine grace. Erasmus contended that the subject was too complicated, and the bible too difficult to interpret on the topic. He therefore recommended that one suspend judgment while accepting the traditional Church view, that humans were capable of choosing the path to salvation with the help of grace. Luther answered that Erasmus could remain a sceptic if he wished, but should be aware that Judgment Day was coming and that “The Holy Ghost is not a sceptic”.

Erasmus’s stress on the need for a cosmopolitan community of discourse, along with a vivid awareness of the horrors of war, led him to fiercely oppose armed conflict. His moving *Dulce Bellum Inexpertis* (War is Sweet to the Inexperienced) still inspires pacifists.

To present-day believers, Erasmus offers an example of how faith can be combined with a sceptical and cosmopolitan outlook. And to those “disaster-stricken” scholars, his writing represents an inspiring faith in the humanising power of the humanities.

Reading

Erasmus. James McConica. OUP.