Desiderius Erasmus



Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) was an influential Dutch Renaissance philosopher. He was both a Catholic Priest and a renowned humanist. His criticisms of church practises lay the seeds of the Protestant Reformation, though Erasmus never subscribed to the direction of Luther’s Reformation and he remained a committed Catholic throughout his life.

Erasmus was a devoted scholar, rejecting many well-paid positions to continue his work as an independent scholar. He wrote influential new Latin and Greek editions of the New Testament; he was also a prolific writer in many other fields, becoming the dominant author of his generation.

Erasmus was born in Rotterdam, 1466. He was born out of wedlock to a Catholic priest, Gerard and his mother Margaretha Rogerius. He was brought up by his parents until they died from the plague in 1483.

Erasmus was given a semi-monastic education, learning Latin and Greek at the ‘Brothers of the Common Life’ church school in Deventer.

In 1492, under pressure from his guardians, Erasmus took the consecrated vows of monk at the canonry of Stein in Holland. By the age of 25 he was ordained as a Catholic Priest.

However, Erasmus was never committed to the rules of the monastery or Priesthood. He disliked life in the monastery and spent the remainder of his life criticising several aspects of the rules of Religious Orders. For Erasmus the importance of religious faith was founded upon a personal relationship with God, and individual good conduct. He saw outer symbols and rituals of religion as unimportant.

In ‘Handbook of the Christian Soldier’ (1502) Erasmus expands this view that a great folly is to merely go through formalistic rituals without understanding the underlying spirituality behind it. In Enchiridion, he writes on the importance of reading scripture to help Christians follow the exemplary life of Christ.

“There are monasteries where there is no discipline, and which are worse than brothels —ut prae his lupanaria sint et magis sobria et magis pudica. There are others where religion is nothing but ritual; and these are worse than the first, for the Spirit of God is not in them, and they are inflated with self-righteousness.”

Letter to Lambertus Grunnius (August 1516),

In Praise of Marriage (1519) He criticised the tendency to moralise about sex.

“I have no patience with those who say that sexual excitement is shameful and that venereal stimuli have their origin not in nature, but in sin. Nothing is so far from the truth.”

While at Stein in Holland, Erasmus wrote several impassioned letters to a young monk Servatius Rogerus. Even for the standards of the time, the letters were emotional – expressing a love for his fellow monk. Whether this relationship was ever consummated is a matter of debate. It may have been a platonic relationship; there is no evidence either way.

Erasmus was a noted scholar. He spent hours reading and writing and became well known for his scholarship. In 1495, he received a stipend for the post of secretary to the Bishop of Cambrai. Erasmus received a special dispensation from the pope to give up his monastic vows. This dispensation was later made permanent by Pope Leo X, a rare privilege for the time.

This new post enabled Erasmus to travel to the University of Paris, which was a centre for a new, humanist, Renaissance thinking. Erasmus became acquainted with the leading thinkers and writers of the age. He also travelled extensively to England, Italy and Basel in Switzerland. In England, he stayed in Queens’ College, Cambridge. Despite suffering from the cold weather, Erasmus had a productive time, becoming friends with leading intellectuals, such as Thomas More. Erasmus worked as a lecturer in Greek and was able to spend much time writing.

In England, he gained increased inspiration to concentrate on a closer study of original Bible transcripts. This involved learning Greek so that he could study the Greek New Testament versions.

Erasmus viewed himself as a committed Catholic. He never intended to reject Catholic theology, however, he believed that a good Catholic was able to criticise aspects of the church’s teachings by an appeal to both reason and a return to the original source of the Biblical scriptures.

He contrasts that with Christ and the apostles, who were often outwardly poor and ridiculed, but inwardly led to pure, devoted lives.

In 1519, he published his Colloquia, this is regarded as his great masterpiece and is full of strident criticism of the abuses of the church. In this regard, it helped to lay the foundations for the subsequent work of Martin Luther.

A year after Erasmus’ publication of his Instrumentum, [Martin Luther](http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/martin-luther.html)published his famous Ninety-Five Theses criticising many aspects of the Catholic Church. Luther was emphasising many criticisms of Erasmus and they shared many similar beliefs about the need for the reform of the Church. Initially, Erasmus had great respect for Luther, saying he was a “mighty trumpet of gospel truth.”

However, Erasmus could not support Luther’s movement to create a new church. For Erasmus this was too much. Erasmus was concerned about the growing rebellious nature of the Protestant reformation. Erasmus argued many who were joining the criticism of the church, were ignoring the importance of personal piety.

He wrote to another Reformation figure Philip Melanchthon in 1524 :

“I know nothing of your church; at the very least it contains people who will, I fear, overturn the whole system and drive the princes into using force to restrain good men and bad alike. The gospel, the word of God, faith, Christ, and Holy Spirit – these words are always on their lips; look at their lives and they speak quite another language.”

In other tracts, he criticises the new religious movements for the incitement of anger and rage. He argued that many were turning away from the church, but not to be more holy, but to pursue a life of pleasure.

Erasmus was a figure who straddled both divergent religious movements; he supported aspects of both, whilst at the same time being criticised by both.

In 1529, Basel was officially termed ‘reformed’. Although Basel had long been a shelter for Erasmus’ independence of thought, he decided to move to the Imperial German town of Freiburg I’m Breisgau. This was symbolic of Eramus’ rejection of the Protestant movement.

Erasmus has become one of the best known authors. His reputation after his death was mixed, with both Reformed Protestants and the Catholic Counter Reformation being critical of Erasmus. However, his reputation was enhanced during the Age of Enlightenment with many seeing Erasmus as a model of humanist reason. Erasmus is now venerated by both Catholics, and humanists who admire his appeal to reason and also his independence of thought.

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