

ERASMUS, THE ENGLISH REFORMATION AND THE CHURCH FATHERS:
A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

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It is also worth noting that in the seventeenth century, Thomas Bodley, when commissioning the historical friezes for the library reading room at Oxford, included Erasmus with other figures who established Protestantism in England. — Gregory D. Dodds¹

I am constantly more and more impressed, when I see Erasmus growing greater as he advances in years, and showing himself every day in a new and more exalted character . . . Therefore, wherever you are, you so live as to seem everywhere in Christendom, and will continue to live by the immortality of your fame and the noble monuments you will leave behind you. — John Watson, lecturer at Cambridge²

I would that even the lowliest women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but by Turks and Saracens . . . Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at his plow, the weaver some part of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveller lighten the weariness of his journey with stories of this kind! — *Desiderius Erasmus*³

There has been a historic tendency, when reading and interpreting the political form of the long English Reformation of the sixteenth century, to excessively focus on Henry VIII, Mary, Edward VI and Elizabeth. There has also been a tendency, from a theological perspective, to keep the eyes fixed on Bilney, Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer, Jewel, Hooker and lesser thinkers and activists of reform. Then, there has been much work done on the various prayer books that shaped emerging Anglican liturgical life. Needless to say, much fine research has been done on the various denominations that came into being at the time, also. There has also been a commitment by many protestant reformers to see John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384) as ‘the morning star of the reformation’. There is a serious blind spot in approaching the English Reformation from these various angles and perspectives, though.

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466–1536) has been consistently ignored by many historians of the reformation in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and yet, in many ways, he is the hidden king of the era, shaping and guiding much, both when he was alive and afterwards. Erasmus made his first visit to England in 1499, returned in 1505, then spent five

¹ Gregory D. Dodds, ‘An Accidental Historian: Erasmus and the English History of the Reformation’, *Church History*, vol. 82, no. 2, June 2013, pp. 273–292, at p. 280, n. 27.

² John Watson, letter to Desiderius Erasmus, August 1516. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Epistles of Erasmus, from His Earliest Letters to His Fifty-First Year, Arranged in Order of Time: English Translations from the Early Correspondence, with a Commentary Confirming the Chronological Arrangement and Supplying Further Biographical Matter*, ed. Francis Morgan Nichols, 2 vols., London, Longmans, Green, and Company, 1904, vol. 2, pp. 334–335.

³ From the *Paraclesis*—see the English version of Olin in Desiderius Erasmus, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*, ed. John C. Olin, 3rd edition, New York, Fordham University Press, 1987, p. 101.

years teaching at Cambridge, refining his Biblical and exegetical skills from 1509–1514. Erasmus was back in England again in 1517 (significantly enough, the year the young Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the church door at Wittenberg). When in England, Erasmus met many of the leading Catholic reformers, bishops, priests, activists, scholars and peace theologians of the time, such as John Colet (1467–1519) and Thomas More (1478–1535), who were part of a group called the London or Oxford Reformers. The impact of Erasmus reached far beyond his engagement as a much maligned yet much appreciated reformer of the Roman Catholic Church. Although many of his writings were put on the Index (the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*—forbidden books to read as Roman Catholics) at the Council of Trent, the English Anglican, Presbyterian and free church reformers continued to read Erasmus as a light that illuminated much that was dark. Needless to say, there are many ways to read Erasmus (the early prophetic critic of the Roman Catholic Church, the mature Erasmus as a sane voice of church unity), but there can be no doubt, he did much to shape the English reformation via his faithful work on the New Testament, his varied annotations of it and his commitment to the Church Fathers (East and West). Erika Rummel’s beauty of a book, *Erasmus’ Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian*,⁴ is a superb overview of Erasmus’ layered and nuanced approach to Biblical Studies from within the Christian Tradition.

The publication in 1867 of Frederic Seebohm’s, *The Oxford Reformers*,⁵ made it abundantly clear that John Colet was a key reformer in the early decades of sixteenth century England, and it was Colet that played a significant role in drawing both Erasmus and Thomas More (and many others) into the reforming path. The weakness of *The Oxford Reformers* is that it ends with Colet’s death in 1519—the protestant reformation was scarcely underway in 1519. The point to note, though, is that a thriving reformation of church and society was taking place in England in the latter years of the fifteenth century-early decades of the sixteenth century, and Colet, More and Erasmus were integral to such a reformation.

The Oxford Reformers, as I mentioned above, came to a halt with Colet’s death in 1519. Erasmus had emerged, at this period of time, as a prominent peace theologian, Biblical translator and exegete, critic of the Roman Catholic Church and social commentator in such texts as the *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*⁶ (obviously to be read in a spiritual sense, Erasmus hardly being a committed hawk), *Adages*⁷ and *Colloquies*.⁸ Erasmus had learned much from his time in England and the support he had been given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a variety of bishops, priests, activists and academics. It should also be added, of course, Erasmus was very

⁴ Erika Rummel, *Erasmus’ Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986.

⁵ Frederic Seebohm, *The Oxford Reformers: John Colet, Erasmus, and Thomas More*, London, Longmans, Green, 1867.

⁶ *The Enchiridion militis Christiani*—see Desiderius Erasmus, *Lucubratiunculae aliquot Erasmi Canonici ordinis divi Augustini perq. utiles adolescentibus*, Theodore Martens, Antwerp, 1503.

⁷ *The Collectanea Adagiorum*—Desiderius Erasmus, *Desiderii Erasmi Roterdami veterum maximeque insignium paroemiarum id est adagiorum collectanea*, Paris, J. Philippi, 1500.

⁸ *The Colloquia*—Desiderius Erasmus, *Familiarium colloquiorum formulae*, Basel, Johann Forben, 1518.

much a keen supporter of Martin Luther (1483–1546) in Luther’s initial phase, and Luther, as much as John Calvin (1509–1564), had a substantive impact on the English Reformation.

Robert Adams’ *The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, Colet, Vives, on Humanism, War and Peace, 1496–1535*,⁹ published in 1962, built on many of Seebohm’s insights but traced the English Reformation beyond 1519, to 1535. Adams made it abundantly clear that Erasmus continued to play a significant role in the English Reformation—More was executed by Henry VIII in 1535 and Erasmus died in 1536. There is a misguided tendency to assume Erasmus disappeared from English Reformation life by 1536 as Henry became more warlike and less inclined to the Roman Catholic humanist perspectives. If Seebohm only walked the reader to the role of Erasmus and the English Reformation until 1519, Adams only carried the tale to 1535. Was this the end of Erasmus and England or is there more to the tale? And, what difference does it make? The strength of Adams book is the way, unlike Seebohm, he highlights the contribution of Erasmus and friends to English public and political life as the situation heated up in England between Henry and the Continent.

It was just a matter of time before another book was to roll off the press on the significance of Erasmus and the English Reformation. This time the impact of Erasmus was further extended in time. *English Humanists and Reformation Politics under Henry VIII and Edward VI*¹⁰ by James McConica, yet again, brought to the fore the role of Erasmus in the English Reformation. McConica traced and tracked the impact Erasmus had at the universities, policy, on Thomas Cromwell (from 1535 to 1540), the final years of Henry VIII’s reign, Catherine Parr and Edward VI. The various interpretive phases by those who used Erasmus must be noted. Erasmus was a Roman Catholic, but the ripple effect of his life had a serious impact on the varied forms of reformation in England after his death, through the reign of Mary and, interestingly enough, in the few years of Edward’s more protestant rule (from 1547 to 1553). In fact, the four main texts that most parishes in England were expected to have and read were the Bible, Book of Common Prayer, Book of Homilies and Erasmus’ *Paraphrases* on the New Testament.¹¹ This is an important point for the simple reason that Erasmus did not fit well into the reformed tradition that was dominating aspects of the English Reformation and his *Paraphrases* and annotations illuminate the complex nature of Biblical translation and interpretation. In short, there was a breadth and diversity in the English Reformation as embodied in Erasmus that is often ignored by those that attempt to reduce it to some sort of variation of Luther, Calvin and the Continental protestant reformation. Erasmus was, in many ways, a critic of a reductionistic way of reading the Bible and its application it to personal, ecclesial, university and public life. The meticulous insights of *English Humanists and*

⁹ Robert P. Adams, *The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, Colet, Vives, on Humanism, War and Peace, 1496–1535*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1962.

¹⁰ James McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics under Henry VIII and Edward VI*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965.

¹¹ The Latin originals were published between 1517 and 1524. The authorized English translation of these was published in two volumes: Desiderius Erasmus, *The First Tome or Volume of the Paraphrase of Erasmus vpon the Newe Testamente*, London, Edward Whitchurche, 1548, and Desiderius Erasmus, *The Seconde Tome or Volume of the Paraphrase of Erasmus vpon the Newe Testament*, London, Edward Whitchurche, 1549.

Reformation Politics Under Henry VIII and Edward VI is the way McConica illustrates how the English Reformation was Erasmian. Edward VI died in 1553. Did the impact of Erasmus continue after the death of Edward and what difference does it make in defining the English and Anglican way (and, the other forms of English theological, exegetical, ecclesial and public reformations)?

The 2009 publication of Gregory D. Dodds' *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England*¹² decidedly and definitely broadened and deepened our understanding of the impact of Erasmus' life and writings in the ongoing reformation of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There can be no doubt that Dodds has done his meticulous homework well, and his insights go much further than Seebohm, Adams and McConica. *Exploiting Erasmus* burrows deep and carves out well the historic impact of Erasmus on English exegetical, theological, ecclesial, educational and political life. The eight compact and detailed chapters tell the tale in compelling and convincing detail: 1) The Englishing of the *Paraphrases*, 2) Theology and Rhetoric in the English *Paraphrases*, 3) Transmitting Erasmus in Elizabethan England, 4) The Erasmian Perspective in the Elizabethan Church, 5) The Malleable Erasmus, 1603–1649, 6) Constructing the Moderate Middle in Early Stuart England, 7) Erasmian Rhetoric and Religious Wars, and 8) The Erasmian Legacy. Dodds lingered for an ample amount of time in both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by tracking the significance of Erasmus at various phases and decades in each century, he clearly demonstrated the considerable impact of Erasmus on English religious and political life. *Exploiting Erasmus* is, in many ways, a plough-to-soil breakthrough book. The main thesis and content of the book is simple: the impact of Erasmus on English life in the early modern period has been largely ignored, but to ignore the importance of Erasmus on English public and religious life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is to misread significant aspects of both English puritan and catholic faith on the Island.

Dodds has taken his work on Erasmus and the English Church much further in his fine essay, 'An Accidental Historian: Erasmus and the English History of the Reformation'. The sheer beauty and strength of Dodds' convincing missive is the way, again and again, he amply illustrates, through a variety of sources, how and why Erasmus was mined by a diversity of English reformers, as a Roman Catholic, to undermine the Roman Catholic heritage in England. Dodds makes it abundantly clear that such Erasmian classics as *Praise of Folly*¹³ and the *Colloquies* were standard reading for most English students and many English historians referred to Erasmus as a beacon of light. The fact that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) placed many of Erasmus' books on the *Index* meant that his reputation soared yet further with many advocates of church reform in England during, as mentioned above, the long English Reformation. The fact Bodley included Erasmus in the Oxford reading room as a contributor to the reformation in

¹² Gregory D. Dodds *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2009.

¹³ The *Moriae Encomium*—Desiderius Erasmus, *Moriae encomium Erasmi Roterodami declamatio*, Strassburg, Matthias Schurer, 1511.

England speaks much about the role Erasmus played in bringing into being a reformation in England that was quite different than the diverse and schismatic reformations on the Continent.

It is one thing to track and trace the impact and influence of Erasmus on the English Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but what is it about Erasmus' vision of faith, church and public life that is so compelling? The Anglican notion of faith, church and politics was neither as schismatic as the European Protestant Reformation nor as reactionary and authoritarian as the Roman Catholic Tridentine position. The *via media* (middle path) of the Anglican way was indebted to Erasmus, but what was and is the significance of Erasmus, then and now? There are six points I'd like to briefly note and discuss.

First, it is impossible to read and study Erasmus without being taken, in the latter season of his life, by his commitment to the unity of the church. The overarching theme of concord and unity runs through Erasmus' writings like a golden thread. The theme is implicit yet real in his earliest writings and as the protestant reformation heated up and led to increasing schism after schism in the 1520s-1530s, the motif of unity became even more explicit and overt in his life and writings. Erasmus was committed to maintaining the unity of the body of Christ within Western Christendom at a spiritual, material and formal level, but his understanding of unity was held in delicate tension with his commitment to holiness and integrity of faith at a lived level—Erasmus never took a position of *pax et concordia* at any price. In fact, he was, probably, the foremost critic of the Roman Catholic Church from 1500 to 1520. This leads to the next point.

Second, Erasmus was loyal to the Great Tradition but, prophetic-like, also critical of many of the abuses and distortions of it in his day at ecclesial, political, economic, clerical and military levels. The most cursory reading of Erasmus' ever expanding, popular and readable *Adages* and *Colloquies* highlight Erasmus' commitment to face, without flinching, the gap between the high ideals of the church and the sordid reality that many lived with at the time. This is why many of the early protestant reformers were drawn to Erasmus, and many assumed he would become a leader in the break from Rome. The fact that Erasmus was so critical of Rome meant that, as the conservative elite took control of Rome in the sixteenth century, most of Erasmus' books were put on the *Index* at Trent. There can be no denying, therefore, that Erasmus was both loyal to Rome but her foremost critic. The *Adages*, *Colloquies* and *Praise of Folly* were incisive and probing commentaries on the foibles and folly of the times, but, for most thoughtful thinkers, deeper and older sources of authority were needed to convince them. This is where Erasmus, yet again, was on front and centre stage.

Third, Erasmus was a leading pioneer in the early decades of the sixteenth century in the area of Biblical and Patristic Studies—needless to say, this appealed a great deal to the emerging protestant reformers with their turn to 'sola scriptura'. Erasmus walked the extra mile to bring together the best Greek and Latin manuscripts of the New Testament, and in his many translations, annotations and paraphrases, he initiated a serious turn to New Testament scholarship and the application of learning to life. It was, in fact, Erasmus' finer translations of the Bible that created the conditions and possibilities for a better text for the reformers to draw from, and it was his nuanced and subtle annotations and paraphrases of the New Testament that

targeted the gap between the early church and the sixteenth century church. It does not take a great deal of thought to see why the protestant reformers of the 1520s were drawn to Erasmus. The hard and disciplined work that Erasmus put into the New Testament was also applied to the Fathers of the Church (East and West). The approach that Erasmus used with the Bible was also used with the Fathers. He brought together the finest manuscripts available, translated such texts, and used the insights of the Fathers via the literary means of annotations and paraphrases to critique the abuses of the time. In short, both the New Testament and the Fathers of the West and East were used as voices of historic and prophetic authority to denounce the waywardness of the Roman Catholic Church and the emerging Protestant Magisterial Reformation. The turn to the sources (*ad fontes*) of the New Testament and the Fathers of the Church was central to the larger project of Erasmus. Needless to say, the Bible and the Fathers had greater authority for both Roman Catholics and Protestants than the Classics or the more popular commentaries in the *Adages*, *Colloquies* and *Praise of Folly*. Erasmus knew when he entered the interpretive world of the Bible and Fathers he was venturing into a hotly contested zone. Erasmus was no museum culture scholar—he constantly applied his insights to the travails of the time. But, whose interpretive and applied version of the Bible and Fathers should be accepted and why? This was and remains a hornet's nest question and answers to such a question often leave painful stingers in the skin of those unaware or not alert to the exegetical hornets. This takes us to our next point.

Fourth, it is one thing to suggest, in principle, that the Bible or Bible-Fathers are the primary deposit of the faith, but there exists a subtler and deeper level of authority that, in most ways, is the real authority that separates the church again and again. This is the underlying and often implicit reality of interpretation. This is what can be called the hermeneutical dilemma or the deuterocanonical level of authority. Most in the Church do not butt horns and heads over the authority (and this is understood in different ways) of the Bible or Bible-Fathers. The real fragmentation begins as different tribes and clans, schisms and denominations emerge along interpretive fault lines. Erasmus was acutely aware of this trying problem, and his read of the New Testament and the Fathers often brought him into conflict with the Roman Catholic conservative elite and the Protestant Reformers. Luther and Calvin turned on Erasmus as did the Council of Trent. There could, of course, be scholarly quibbles about Erasmus' translations of the New Testament and the Fathers, but it was often his interpretations and applications of the texts that walked him onto the interpretive front stage. Erasmus was keenly alert to the interpretive problem, and this is why he urged one and all to be tolerant of one another rather than turning on one another over one-dimensional and single-vision reads of the text. We could say about Erasmus that there was a certain hermeneutical generosity about him, but in an age (we find the same thing today) when only one read of the text was permitted, Erasmus stood against such a form of reductionism. The irony is this: Erasmus was, probably, the finest Biblical scholar of the early decades of the sixteenth century, and this meant he was aware of the nuances and complex nature of the interpretive tradition, but it was lesser scholars and activists that turned on him. Erasmus urged caution and tolerance, and welcomed an interpretive community to make sense of Bible and Bible-Fathers. But in an emerging age of ecclesial confessionalism and

denominational homogeneity, Erasmus was often driven to the margins by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. It is quite understandable why many more moderate sixteenth and seventeenth century Anglicans were drawn to Erasmus' middle path.

Fifth, it has been sometimes suggested, and wrongly so, that Erasmus was more interested in Christian life and practise than theology, creeds and dogmas. The fact that Erasmus was committed to the 'Philosophia Christi' often means, for many, the committed life of Jesus was that which held and sustained Erasmus. Needless to say, this rather trendy yet reactionary theory versus practise, spirituality versus religion, belief contra faith distinction is much too dualistic for the subtle mind of Erasmus. The integrated mind and imagination of Erasmus carefully knit all these essential elements and aspects of the faith journey intricately together in an attractive and compelling vision of what the Christian faith could and should be. Sadly so, many shrunk and dimmed the larger epic vision and much of Western intellectual, religious and political history since the sixteenth century is a fragmented commentary of Christianity divided in thought, word and deed. Western and Eastern Christianity would have been much different if Erasmus' lone voice had been heard and heeded. When tribalism dominates, the moderate, sane and wise are often silenced.

Sixth, Erasmus is often viewed as a pietist who drew his thinking from the interior spirituality of Thomas Kempis (c. 1379–1471) and the Brethren of the Common Life. There can be no doubt that Erasmus was committed to the significance of inner transformation and his understanding of spirituality, eucharist, baptism, liturgy, and pilgrimages, among other matters, had a moral bite to it. Erasmus knew that if there was not interior transformation, all the externals of the faith journey could and often did deflect and distort the meaning of faith. But, when and where there was internal purity of heart, the outer journey of peace making and justice seeking would be light filled. Erasmus was, probably, the most important peacemaker of the sixteenth century, and his commitment to peace dealt, again and again, with inner, ecclesial and political peace. There was probably no greater critic of war in the sixteenth century than Erasmus. Erasmus walked a delicate middle way as a wisdom loving peace owl between the pacifist doves and warlike hawks both in the church and competing city states that were emerging at the time. There is much that has been written on Erasmus' track record as a peace owl who, it can be argued, was a just war theorist of the highest and most principled calibre.

In conclusion, Erasmus has often been ignored as a significant light and leavening presence in the English Reformation and the ongoing English ecclesial tradition. Erasmus shaped and formed, in implicit and explicit ways, the English Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The circle came full circle. Erasmus, as a young man, was affirmed and encouraged by leading English clerics and intellectuals. Erasmus, as a mature man, gave back more than he was given, and after Erasmus' death, his writings were front and centre in English theological, exegetical and political life well into the seventeenth century. There is a sense in which Erasmus embodied the deepest and most significant aspects of Patristic catholicity that can be found in the best of the Anglican way. A line can be drawn, without too much exaggeration, from Erasmus to the pre-eminent Anglican divine of the nineteenth century, F. D.

Maurice (1805–1872). Maurice was, in many ways, much more catholic than John Henry Newman (who became Roman Catholic) or the Oxford Movement (which reduced the meaning of catholicity into a reactionary term contra liberalism and evangelical–reformed thought). Erasmus and Maurice offer a fuller and more comprehensive, a subtler and more nuanced way of interpreting the Bible, applying such an interpretation to personal and church life, and, in a needful and necessary way, articulating how and why the life of faith is perennially relevant to public life in the areas of justice seeking and peace making. Erasmus is, indeed, a man for all seasons and the more this is recognized, the richer and more mature the faith journey.