CHAPTER THREE

MEDIEVAL HISTORY: THE SCHOLASTIC PERIOD

Beatus Rhenanus, a close friend of Erasmus and the most famous humanist historian of Germany, dated the rise of scholasticism (and hence the decay of theology) at “around the year of grace 1140”, when men like Peter Lombard (1095/1100–1160), Peter Abelard (1079–1142), and Gratian († c. 1150) were active. Erasmus, who cared relatively little about chronology, never gave such a precise indication, but one may assume that he did not disagree with Beatus, whose views may have directly influenced him. As we have seen, he believed that the fervour of the gospel had grown cold among most Christians during the previous four hundred years. Although his statement pertained to public morality rather than to theology, other passages from his work confirm that in Erasmus’ eyes those four centuries represented the age of scholasticism. In his biography of Jerome, he complained that for the scholastics nobody “who had lived before the last four hundred years” was a theologian, and in a work against Noël Bédier he pointed to a tradition of “four hundred years during which scholastic theology, gravely burdened by the decrees of the philosophers and the contrivances of the sophists, has wielded its reign”. In one other case he assigned to scholasticism a tradition of three centuries. Thus by the second half of the twelfth century, Western Christendom, in Erasmus’ conception, had entered the most distressing phase of its history, even though the

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2 CWE Ep. 1333:345–8/Allen 322–5. D’Amico, “Beatus Rhenanus”, 48 shows that Erasmus’ survey of history in Ep. 1334 (see above p. 40) was probably indebted to Beatus’ views. Beatus may thus also have influenced Ep. 1333, which bears the same date as Ep. 1334.
3 Cf. Erasmus’ claim at Divinationes ad notata Bedae LB IX 481B.
4 CWE 61 52/Ferguson 179.
5 Supputatio LB IX 624C.
6 Adagia IV v 1 ASD II-7 241:204–6; cf. also Reeve 270 on John 21:22 “Sic eum volo manere”: the corruption of the passage in question seems to have become accepted during the last 300 or 400 years.
example of Francis shows that the traditions of the preceding monastic period had not expired immediately.

In Erasmus’ view Peter Lombard, the compiler of the *Sententiae* (a textbook on which university teaching of theology was based and on which every advanced student had to write a commentary), stood at the beginning of the scholastic tradition of theology, even though he might not have been a full-fledged scholastic himself. Introducing Lombard in his annotations on the New Testament, Erasmus described him as a theologian who was far from despicable, honest, and learned with regard to the times he lived in. Lombard undertook his work with pious diligence, assembling all material relevant to his subjects without asking trifling questions. Unfortunately, his work was received by posterity in an altogether different spirit: an ocean of never-ending questions had burst forth from it.\(^7\)

The *Sententiae* epitomised the decline of literary culture which had accompanied the rise of scholasticism. Lombard’s imperfections, Erasmus explained, had primarily to be blamed on his times. What could one expect from an author living in an age in which Greek, Hebrew, and, to a large extent, Latin as well were extinguished, and almost all ancient authors were forgotten, so that for all problems Isidore was treated as the ultimate authority? True enough, many authors made still use of commentaries by the Greeks that had been translated, as well as possible, into Latin. However—and here Erasmus repeated an accusation expressed earlier in his edition of Jerome—many scholastics concealed the names of the authors from whom they profited and even suppressed the works they consulted.\(^8\) Thomas Aquinas quoted Greek authors like Theophylact in his *Catena aurea*, who afterwards had altogether disappeared, “which would hardly seem to have happened by chance”.\(^9\) Some commentaries on Acts

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\(^7\) Reeve 6–7 on Matt. 1:19 “Nollet eam traducere” (also advancing the possibility that copiers added much nonsense to Lombard’s work); cf. CWE Ep. 1334: 168–71/Allen 158–61 where Lombard is praised for his care in reproducing the opinions of others instead of enforcing his own views (which Erasmus considered a scholastic habit). Erasmus’ moderate judgement may again be due to Beatus Rhenanus, who had a much higher opinion of Lombard than of his followers. Nevertheless, Erasmus included Lombard among the scholastics at, e.g., *Responsio ad annotationes Leibnitz* LB IX 187E, *Supputatio* LB IX 521B–C, Allen Ep. 2284:45–7, while he once disposed of Lombard as “coacervator Sententiarum”, see Reeve 7 on Matt. 1:19 “Nollet eam traducere” (change of 1522).

\(^8\) Reeve 7 on Matt. 1:19 “Nollet eam traducere”, cf. above p. 38.

\(^9\) Ibid. 142 on Mark 14:3 “Nardi spicati”. In the 1527 edition Erasmus blamed Bede for not mentioning his source, in contrast to Thomas, who carefully mentioned