CHAPTER EIGHT

PUBLIC CONVERSION: RICHARD SMYTH'S 'RETRACTATION' AT PAUL'S CROSS IN 1547

Torrance Kirby

One of the key ‘forms of conversion’ that contributed substantially to the intellectual transformation of Europe and its world during the early modern period is the purposeful turn of humanist scholars and reforming theologians alike towards the Forms themselves. I refer to the conscious, indeed fervent embrace of the Platonic epistemology of illumination exemplified by Erasmian reform. Underpinning many of the early-modern forms of conversion is a conversion in the deep assumptions of the theory of cognition. In a blistering attack on the egregious moral abuses of the late-medieval Church in his *Enchiridion militis Christiani* of 1503, Erasmus draws a telling parallel between Plato's theory of knowledge and his own *philosophia Christi*.\(^1\) The philosopher’s turning away from the fleeting images of sensuous ‘phantasy’ on coming out of the Cave, and facing toward the brilliant luminosity of the intellectual Sun—Plato's Form of the Good—represents for Erasmus a humanist model of conversion to what he terms ‘quick and vigorous adulthood in Christ,’ that is a religious life characterized by inward clarity of cognition strongly contrasted with perfunctory observance of external ceremony and arcane ritual. In the peroration of the fifth rule of the *Enchiridion*, an especially vivid passage reminiscent of Pico della Mirandola's *Oration* fuses the epistemological imagery of *Republic* and the erotic metaphor of the soul's ascent to the intellectual heaven in *Phaedrus* with Jacob's dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder between heaven and earth;\(^2\) with a characteristic nod in the direction of Lucretius, Erasmus sums up his case for religious reform as consisting first and foremost in *metanoia*, a radical conversion of the mind, rendered here in the translation published

---

in 1533 commonly attributed to William Tyndale, but more probably by Nicholas Udall:

Thou therefore my brother / leest with sorrowfull laboures thou shuldest not moche preuayle / but that with meane exercyse myghtest shortly waxe bygge in Christe and lusty / dyligently embrace this rule / & crepe not alwaye on the grounde with the vnclene beestes / but always sustayned with those wyngis which Plato beleueth to springe euer a fresshe / through the heat of loue in the mynde of men. Lyfte vp thy selfe as it were with certayne steppes of the ladder of Iacob / from the body to the spyrit / from ye visyble worlde vnto the inuysible / from the letter to the mystery / from thynges sencyble to thynges intellygible / from thyngis grosse and compounde vnto thynges sngle and pure. Who so euuer after this maner shall approche and drawe nere to the lorde / the lorde of his parte shall agayne approche and drawe nyghe to hym. And if thou for thy parte shalte endeouoyre to aryse out of the darknesse and troubles of the sensuall powers / he wyll come agaynste the plesauntly & for thy profyte / out of his lyght inaccessible / and out of that noble scyrence incogytable: In whiche not only all rage of sensuall powers / but also simlytudes or ymagynacions of all the intellygyble powers dothe cease and kepe scyrence.  

In 1504 Erasmus sent a copy of his Handbook to his humanist colleague John Colet, the Dean of St Paul’s, together with an account of his general purpose: ‘I composed it not in order to show off my cleverness or my style, but solely in order to counteract the error of those who make religion in general consist in rituals and observances ... but who are astonishingly indifferent to matters that have to do with true goodness. What I have tried to do, in fact, is to teach a method of morals, as it were, in the manner of those who have originated fixed procedures in the branches of learning.’ Erasmus’s call to ethical and religious reform is founded upon a radical epistemological conversion. ‘I could see,’ he states,
