Historians of the Radical Reformation in general and the Antitrinitarian movement in particular tend to consider Erasmus, if not the father of the Antitrinitarians, then at least their source of appeal. Thus Delio Cantimori showed that Erasmus' New Testament and especially his use of *sermo* for *verbum* at John 1:1 was adopted by Lelio Sozzini who considered it the only correct translation, referring the term *sermo* to the human Christ and not to the divine Son. In his seminal work *The Radical Reformation*, George Huntston Williams echoed Cantimori's judgement and affirmed that "not only in his stress upon the New Testament and ancient Christian sources and in his casualness about the Nicene-Lateran formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, but also in other doctrines and attitudes, Erasmus would be presently appealed to by diverse leaders of the Radical Reformation." It should also be borne in mind that Erasmus himself had to counter accusations of Arianism levelled against him, notably by Spanish theologians.

It is not my intention to resuscitate the now somewhat worn problem of why and how Erasmus' translation of λόγος appealed to radical theologians. The object of this paper is to examine the use made by the Antitrinitarians of those of Erasmus' NT Annotations which do not touch directly on the *verbum*/sermo question. Rather than search for scattered examples in the works of this or that theologian, I have chosen one compilation which, shortly after its publication, assumed the status of an official statement of Antitrinitarian doctrines. The small volume, entitled *De falsa et vera unius Dei Patris, Filii et Spiritus sancti cognitione libri duo*, appeared in Alba Julia (that

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1 Delio Cantimori, *Italienische Haeretiker der Spätrenaissance*, trsl. by Werner Kaegi, Basel 1949, p. 421. It is worth noting that *sermo* was also retained by Theodore Beza in his *Novum Testamentum* published in Geneva in 1598. Beza states quite categorically (p. 343 col. B): "*Vulgata verbum . . . quod recte mutavit Erasmus.*"


is Gyulafehérvar) in 1568. The authors have not been identified. Although some of the chapters have been attributed to Giorgio Biandrata and to Ferenc David, other chapters could well be the work of Valentin Gentile or of the Polish Antitrinitarians who took part in the Alba Julia Disputation between Protestants and Antitrinitarians round about the time that the volume appeared.

Before posing the question that this paper will attempt to answer, a brief description of the contents of *De vera et falsa* is in order. The book is divided into two parts, the first of which describes the heretical Trinitarian knowledge of God and the second the true Antitrinitarian knowledge of Him. The first two chapters set out to prove that the Trinity was the invention of the Antichrist. The following three chapters show that the early Fathers, e.g. Origen, believed in one God and in one God only, and that the Arian controversy was directly responsible for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Antitrinitarians are in no way to be identified with Arians. Greek philosophy comes in for much criticism as providing the concepts used in the elaboration of the Trinitarian doctrine. The latter is in fact seen as the doctrine of the Quaternity, comprising the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, and the divine essence (or substance). The seventh chapter is a summary of Augustine's *De Trinitate* with its author (perhaps Valentin Gentile?) trying to show that Augustine's teaching on the Substance as Begetter is very similar to that of Gentile.

It is the seventh chapter of the first part of *De vera et falsa* that will particularly concern us here, consisting as it does of several extracts from Erasmus' *Annotations*. All of those, claim the authors, show conclusively that the biblical passages commonly used to defend the Trinity have no textual basis whatsoever. Moreover, there has never been a uniform interpretation of them, not even in the early church. Chapters eight and nine contain listings of "inappropriate" Trinitarian expressions.

Lack of biblical support for the Trinity is strongly emphasised in the second part of the volume, where it is also affirmed that the renewal of Antitrinitarianism is due to direct intervention of Christ. The authors stress the difference between the Old and the New Testaments and state that the Old Testament patriarchs could not have foreseen Christ who was revealed only in the New Testament and therefore could not conceivably be identified with

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5 See *De vera et falsa* (reprint 1988), pp. LXVII-LXXVI.