Eleventh-Annual Margaret Mann Phillips Lecture: 

Martin Luther’s Erasmus, and How He Got that Way*

by Richard Marius

Martin Luther in his later years despised Desiderius Erasmus more than anyone else except possibly the pope at Rome. Since his loathing for the pope was somewhat abstract, directed towards the papacy more than at any one supreme pontiff, we can probably say that Luther’s hatred for Erasmus exceeded his loathing for all other targets. Given Luther’s boundless capacity for vitriol and the number of people he despised, Erasmus may deserve some sort of honor for being Luther’s public enemy number one.

The evidence is abundant enough, scattered through Luther’s letters, his voluminous table talk, and above all in his contemptuous assault on Erasmus in his treatise On the Bondage of the Will of 1525 in answer to Erasmus’ genial Discourse on Free Will published a year earlier. As best I can see, in the Table Talk Erasmus’ name came up more often than that of any other of Luther’s contemporaries, usually inspiring Luther to excesses of vituperation. At various times he called Erasmus a Lucian, the enemy of Christ, a Caiaphas, and an Arian. Erasmus was, he said, like Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ with a kiss.2

He attacked Erasmus on two broad fronts. One was to claim that Erasmus was an atheist and no true Christian. (Luther used the word “Epicurean” as an epithet meaning atheist; the term was used for those who did not believe the soul survived death, not for those who lived voluptuous lives.) The other was to say that Erasmus would not admit what he really thought about any-

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*This is a slightly revised text of the Erasmus of Rotterdam Society’s annual M. M. Phillips lecture, delivered at the meeting of the Renaissance Society of America, College Park, Maryland, in March 1998.

1Abbreviations to Luther’s German works are as follows:

TR = Martin Luther: Werke: Tischreden, vols. 1–6 (Weimar 1912–1921).

thing. I suppose the two coalesce. If Erasmus had admitted that he was an atheist, Luther might have conceded that Erasmus for once said what he thought.

Sometimes Luther sounds almost apoplectic: "Erasmus does not do anything in open battle; his works are poisonous. If I were dying I would prohibit my children from reading his colloquies, where under fictitious names and in the voices of other persons he said the most impious things and teaches opposition to the church and the Christian faith. . . . Let him ridicule me and all other men; Let him not ridicule God. That I counsel him. I praise Lucian before I praise Erasmus. He at least attacked openly. . . ."3 According to Erasmus, the pope, and the cardinals, said Luther, "All religion is a fable (fabula)."4

On yet another occasion Luther said, "Erasmus is the king of the ambiguous people whom I shall challenge in the arena. . . . If I live, I shall purge the church of his uncleanness. . . . I will not know him in the church."5 In reading the prefaces to the Erasmian New Testament in the spring of 1533, Luther said of Erasmus, "He is as slippery as a snake that one cannot catch. We shall damn him and his writings, we and our church. . . . Erasmus edited these prefaces but softened them to the point that he makes no difference between Christ and Solon. Then he so obscures the authority of Paul and John, as his prefaces to Romans and 1 John demonstrate, as if these epistles had no importance and [says] that the Epistle to the Romans does not pertain to our time, and that the difficulties of the epistle are greater than its usefulness, etc."6

Even when we suppose that Luther might agree with Erasmus, we find that he does not. In the colloquy on "A Pilgrimage for the Sake of Religion," Erasmus pokes fun at relic-mongering at shrines such as that of Thomas Becket at Canterbury. Surely the Luther who wrote the Ninety-Five Theses against papal indulgences would share Erasmus' distaste for old bones of dubious provenance. But no. Luther thundered that all who took the glory of the Christ and the propagation of the gospel seriously should be enemies to Erasmus. "For he is the destroyer of religion. Read his dialogue on pilgrimages that mocks all religion and from particular abominations finally concludes that all religion should be rejected."7

And what of the Julius Excluded and the Praise of Folly? Apparently looking at the Holbein woodcut of Erasmus, Luther said, "Erasmus in both mien and style makes himself seem warm. But he laughs at God and religion. Indeed he

3TR 1, no. 817.
4TR 1, no. 37.
5TR 3, no. 3392b.
6TR 3, no. 3033b.
7TR 3, no. 3144b.