As a rule, the authors of tracts dealing with religious subjects adopt a serious tone. Occasionally, however, we encounter a change of voice and are treated to humorous or witty asides. In this paper I propose to examine a number of unexpectedly humorous passages and discuss, first, the author's purpose, and secondly, the audience reaction, as far as it can be gauged. The author's purpose appears to be twofold: to engage the readers' sympathy and win their approval; or to discharge pent-up emotions. We find the first purpose stated already in the rhetorical handbooks of classical antiquity. Quintilian, for example, points out that humor rekindles the readers' interest, engages them emotionally, and can sometimes be a more effective means of persuasion than reasoning. Secondly, humor, especially irony, may serve as an emotional outlet in moments of inner conflict. In this case, humor opens a fault line in the author's argumentation. It indicates a change of role and often reveals a facet of the author's character that is at odds with the persona adopted by him in the rest of the tract.

The following examples from religious writings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries will illustrate these two points. My first example comes from a polemic between Desiderius Erasmus and the Paris theologian Noël Béda. Béda saw Erasmus as a humanist meddling in theological matters of which he understood little and accused him of promulgating heterodox views. He initiated an investigation into Erasmus' works, which resulted in their formal censure by the Faculty of Theology. Béda's allegations, confirmed by the Faculty's verdict, were a matter of serious concern to Erasmus, and the tone of
the apologiae he issued in the years 1526–29 was correspondingly grave. His purpose was to prove that he was a competent theologian and that the humanistic method had merit. But in his *Responsio ad notulas Beddaicas* (1529), he interrupts a serious argument to introduce a hypothetical case: If Béda were to examine the prayer “Our Father,” would he find as much fault with it as with Erasmus’ writings?

With your leave, I’ll play Béda for you: “Father”—oh dear, that verges on the heresy of Arianism. It sounds as if we prayed to the Father as the only true God, since there is no mention of the Son and the Holy Spirit; and it is Lutheran as well, since it suggests that it is not right to pray to the saints.

“Our”—there is a risk of someone thinking that the disciples were natural sons of God, like Christ. It would be better to pray “Our Father by adoption, not by nature.”

“Who art in Heaven”—comes close to blasphemy. This sounds as if God were definitely and exclusively in one place, whereas by his divine nature he is no more in one place than in another.

“Hallowed be thy name”—that doesn’t sound right. It looks like one did not respect the glory of the saints.

“Thy kingdom come”—dangerously worded, sounds as if you wanted to take away the kingdom from the princes . . .

Are you laughing, reader? Who would not laugh? But that’s what Béda’s slanders are like.3

Why does Erasmus insert this humorous passage in an otherwise serious discourse about theological matters? On one level, he was applying a rhetorical technique. That is at any rate how he justifies the use of humor in *The Praise of Folly*. He explains that he has stated his *philosophia Christi* in playful terms, “because truth by itself is a trifle astringent, and when thus made palatable will make its way more easily into the mind.”4

The theory did not always work in practice. Erasmus’ humor, which was of a caustic and satirical kind, did not make his message more palatable. Instead, it gave offense to some of his readers. Far from recommending Erasmus’ *philosophia Christi*, *The Praise of Folly* served to make him extremely unpopular in theological circles. By 1529, when he wrote his apologia against Béda, Erasmus should have learned that lesson. He should have known that his

3 LB 9:719A–C.
4 Ep. 337, lines 109–11 CWE.