Competing Visions of Christian Reform: 
Noël Béda and Erasmus*

by Mark Crane

By the time of their deaths (1536 and 1537 respectively), the two great rivals Erasmus of Rotterdam and Noël Béda shared something in common: a fall from their former glory. Erasmus, once praised as the brightest star in the humanist constellation, was attacked bitterly by Catholics and Protestants alike. Béda, once the champion of orthodoxy among Paris theologians, lived out his last years in exile from the Faculty of Theology he had provided with leadership since 1520. This was not the only thing these often-bitter enemies shared; both believed that Christian society was in need of serious reform.

Where they disagreed on a fundamental level was in their ideas on how that reform should and could be brought about. Béda's vision of reform was institutional in scope and looked back to traditions that had developed in the Middle Ages for inspiration. Despite the efforts of scholars like Walter Bense and James Farge, there has yet to develop a critical appreciation for the image of Noël Béda the reformer. To modern scholars the conservative tenor of his efforts as leader of the Paris theologians reveals him as nothing more than a reactionary of the worst kind—closed-minded, unable to keep up with the times, and ultimately backing the losing side. To the modern mind these

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qualities are inimical to reform, and so scholars have been uncritically sympathetic to the criticisms Erasmus makes of him. But a critical appreciation of Béda the reformer is needed to understand fully the quintessential role that Béda played in the unfolding of the humanist-scholastic debate as it moved into its final and most heated phase with the onset of the Reformation.

Erika Rummel has characterized the humanist-scholastic debate as passing through three distinct phases. The first, beginning with Petrarch, was a literary phase in which the merits of pagan poetry for Christian society were debated. The second, beginning in the sixteenth century, was played out mainly in the northern universities and revolved around issues of academic qualifications and competence to teach the Bible. In the third and final phase, of which the dispute between Béda and Erasmus stands as the "ideal type," the issues of the earlier phases persisted but were subsumed in the polemics of the Reformation.

James Overfield, reacting against an earlier scholarly tradition that he argued made too much of the humanist-scholastic debate, characterized it as academic turf wars that were fuelled more by personality conflict than fundamental differences of opinion. But this conclusion cannot be extended to the conflict between Béda and Erasmus. In this phase the terms of the debate were transformed from the value of a humanist education to a full-fledged battle over the method and practice of Catholic theology in the wake of the Protestant break. Erasmus promoted the return to earlier times, to an apostolic purity made accessible through the study of language and texts. Béda, on the other hand argued for the progress of church doctrine since apostolic times, which gathered strength (as opposed to the humanist topos of decay) over the centuries through the continual elimination of errors. Their difference of opinion on this fundamental point may well have determined the predilection of the one for humanistic studies, and the other for the scholas-

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2See Farge, "Text and Context of a Mentalité: The Parisian University Milieu in the Age of Erasmus," in Editing Texts from the Age of Erasmus: Papers Given at the Thirtieth Annual Conference on Editorial Problems, University of Toronto, 4-5 November, 1994, ed Erika Rummel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996): "The predilection of historians for humanists and reformers is not surprising, since these latter seemed to open up fresh perspectives on learning and living, while the scholastic doctors seemed to be entangled with the past" (12).
