DESIDERIUS ERASMUS ROTTERODAMUS.
Obit Basileae. Etatis suae Anno 70. 30 die Iulii. Anno Domini 1576.

Erga ingentem quern proximam seque ERASMUM.

Et car non tam Huic? Hanc a se leges:

Juliana nam tamen terra nec ego servit.

W. M. Halli, sculptor.
A good part of contemporary Erasmus interpretation still maintains that the prince of humanists did not think much of the church, to put it mildly. More or less tracing the blueprint of eighteenth and nineteenth century Erasmus portraits, many scholars depict him as an at least tolerant if not free-thinking liberal who, anticipating the modern ethos, sided with neither the Catholic nor the Protestant party. Of

* Presented at the Folger Shakespeare Library (Washington, D.C.) on April 25, 1986.

1 According to C. Augustijn, “The Ecclesiology of Erasmus,” *Scrinium Erasmianum*, ed. J. Coppens (Leiden, 1969), 2, pp. 135–155, Erasmus put up with the institutional church only insofar as it prepares individuals for the true religion, that is, a personal life of freedom and responsibility. Although externally loyal to the church, he did not consider it essential for Christian living. He tolerated it just as one bears a ‘necessary evil,’ as something one neither can do with nor without. His heart was in reality with the religious fellowship of the spiritual world. Like his compatriot J. Lindeboom, Erasmus, *Onderzoek naar zijne theologie en zijn godsdienstig gemoedsbestaan* (Leiden, 1909), pp. 82–116, Augustijn finds Erasmus much more congenial with an invisible affiliation of love than with the visible church.

H. A. Enno van Gelder, *The Two Reformations in the 16th Century. A Study of the Religious Aspects and Consequences of Renaissance and Humanism* (The Hague, 1961) goes so far as to maintain that Erasmus was led to condemn altogether the institution and office of the church (p. 139). By its inner momentum his religious movement had to issue in a philosophical ethic. For J. Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland I* (Freiburg, 1939), Erasmus’ relativism was a clear and present danger to both the church and its doctrine. Instead of teaching grace and redemption, he advocated a general Christian religion raised to higher power by Stoic moralism (pp. 131 f.). Even more critical are Lortz’s *ad hominem* remarks in: “Erasmus kirchengeschichtlich,” *Aus Theologie und Philosophie. Festschrift F. Tillmann*, ed. T. Steinbüchel and T. Müncker (Düsseldorf, 1950), pp. 271–326. Erasmus fails entirely to qualify as a Catholic Christian. He not only preferred a moral life to church dogma but also disdained the sacraments—a fault which made his piety spurious and his morality suspect even in sexual matters, as his *Colloquies* amply demonstrate.

The interpretation of Erasmus in terms of a skeptic, undogmatic, liberal, rational, and moral humanist has been advanced, respectively, by scholars like J. Huizinga, *Erasmus*