EARLY REFORMATION AND SCHOLASTICISM

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1. Introduction

The theme of this paper is the relation between the early Reformation and scholasticism. We can do no more than make a few remarks on the subject, but to start with we have to determine what is the terminus a quo and the terminus ad quem. We shall consider the beginning of the sixteenth century as the time of the early Reformation. We shall not take into consideration earlier concepts of Reformation.¹ This period of early Reformation ends in the beginning of the 1530s, when positions are consolidated, thanks to diverse circumstances. About 1525 there is a parting of the ways, after which the new evangelical movement starts to establish itself. The Peasants' War played a part in this,² but even more important was the split between Reformation and humanism: Luther and Erasmus, it becomes clear, cannot act together anymore.³ Before this, a reform of worship had established itself. The abolition of Mass, in many places preceded by iconoclastic attacks,⁴ resulted in institutionalising of Protestant forms of worship. In the beginning of the 1540s it became clear that, on the ecclesiastical and the theological level, the split between Rome and Reformation had become irreparable.

So we will deal with the two decennia that really were the early period of the Reformation. The second term in the title of this paper,

⁴ Margarete Stirm, Die Bilderfrage in der Reformation (Gütersloh, 1977); Phyllis Mack Crew, Calvinistic Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands 1544-1569 (Cambridge/London/New York/Melbourne, 1978); Cécile Dupeux, Peter Jezler, Jean Wirth, Bilderssturm. Wahnsinn oder Gottes Wille (Bern, 2000).

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Scholasticism, we will take to refer to the theological movement that was dominant in the church from the thirteenth century onwards. Its power seemed to be weakened. Especially Aristotelian Thomism was the object of severe criticism. Other theological systems seemed to have lost their vigour as well. The early Reformation said farewell to what was seen as 'defunct' theology. The parting was proclaimed with much intensity and very radically, partly because of the fervour of the rediscovery of the gospel. In historical research, however, it has become obvious that this farewell to scholasticism as a method was not decisive or final. The reappearance of Aristotle in the 1530s is one of the developments that added something to the character of the Reformation. We cannot assess this development here. We shall limit ourselves to a few observations, first on the significance of humanism, and then we shall try to arrive at a picture of the early Reformation as it occurred in Wittenberg, and after that in Zurich and Strasbourg.

2. Humanism

The enthusiasm that is so characteristic of the early Reformation is mainly to be attributed to the influence of the religious humanism, especially of Erasmus. Of course, he is not the only one who exerted a stimulating power. There were many associations of like-minded people, sodalitates, fraternities, who functioned as a source of inspiration for the renewal of church and theology. In his extensive correspondence, in the introductions he wrote, as well as in personal meetings, Erasmus only formulated what were widespread views. He managed to transform a sense of
