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## ERASMUS AND THE BEGINNING OF THE REFORMATION.

The universality of the famous Humanist still compels our admiration. Nowhere is it more distinctly revealed than in his correspondence. It is this (now most available in the huge folios of the Leyden edition, 1703) which presents the generation of 1517 as it speaks to us nowhere else. With scholars, statesmen, churchmen (such as cardinals, archbishops, bishops), with authors, his relations were fairly all-extending. Among his correspondents were the archbishops of Canterbury and of York, Wolsey, Thomas More, John Colet, dean of St. Paul's, Budaeus (Budé) of Paris, the foremost classicist of France, with whom he sometimes even exchanged Greek epistles, Wilibald Pirckheimer of Nuremberg, Henry VIII of England, Spalatin and Frederick the Wise of Saxony, Melancthon, Justus Jonas, Cardinal Campeggio, the bishops of Basle, Breslau, and Olmuetz, and many others,—mainly the great ones of the world. Many of the letters are really essays and disquisitions, and the purity and elegance of their Latinity still makes the classicist marvel.

But in this year of 1917 and in this epoch we must rigidly limit ourselves to the concerns of our great anniversary. And so I shall make certain selections from the original text of certain of his missives, avoiding, in the main, influences and generalizations which the readers of these documentary data can very easily make for themselves.

In a letter of January 26, 1517 (or should it be 1518?)<sup>1</sup> he writes to Pireckheimer (No. 234): "I am here being stoned in the daily sermons by the preachers, and am being coupled with Luther, with whom I have nothing to do. But so stupidly are they managing the matter that even the most unintelligent of the common folk understand [their motives]. They will not be able more to antagonize the Roman pontiff, nor more to commend Luther to the affections of mankind. Now at last they begin to favor him. Would that *Leo* knew how things are going here. He would be a *Lion* in dealing with them first."

In a letter of June 5, 1517 (No. 256), he informs the bishop of Rochester, John Fisher, *inter alia*, that the bishops of Basle gave him a horse, which, on leaving that city (where all his works thenceforward were published by the Trobens), he almost immediately sold for fifty gold florins; also, that Duke Ernest of Bavaria sent a delegate to Basle to offer Erasmus 200 gold pieces annually, besides rich prebends, if only he were to choose the Bavarian university town of Ingolstadt as a residence. We must firmly keep in mind that all material and worldly boons in the life of that Humanist were bound up with those who stood for the old order. Such offers came to him in abundance: "Sed desino gloriari, cum huiusmodi per multa verissime queam referre." At the same time he expresses his satisfaction that many were studying the New Testament (which he had recently edited) who otherwise, as they themselves declared, would never have done so; he rejoices that many have begun to study Greek.

Archbishop Wareham writes to him from Oxford, July 20, 1517, that he has forwarded 60 ducats to him (No. 261), and that he is making interest for Erasmus's edition of the New Testament among the prelates of Britain. From a letter dated Antwerp, September 9, 1517 (268), we learn that Erasmus has recently dedicated his *Education of a Prince* to King Charles, the youthful heir of Spain (later Charles V of Ger-

1) The internal evidence would be for the later date. Perhaps the editors read MDXVII instead of MDXVIII.

many). He knew how to flatter or conciliate the great with consummate tact and skill.

From Louvain, November 2, 1517 (No. 275), he writes that his paraphrase to the Epistle to the Romans is in the press, and intimates that *his own* Latinization will be found to be superior to Jerome's Vulgate: "Par est, ut *Paulus Romanis* paulo magis Romane loquatur." He often puns. Spalatin (Altenburg, November 13, 1517, No. 278) calls him "*unicum totius Germaniae communis patriae decus*," and hopes the great scholar will answer this note for the Elector Frederick's sake.—Nothing as yet of Wittenberg. He hopes to complete his new edition of the New Testament by Quadragesima, 1518. (Louvain, January 7, 1518, No. 297.) John Eck (Ingolstadt, February 2, 1518) criticised a passage in Erasmus's notes on Matt. 2 (No. 303), placing Augustine as next in authority to the Bible.

Erasmus congratulates (Antwerp, May 18, 1518, No. 317) Cardinal Wolsey on academic improvements at Oxford, and further on, in the same letter, he says: "I have written to Reuchlin,—I do not even know him by sight,—and urged him to refrain from open abuse. . . . Luther is so unknown to me as the most absolute stranger can be, and I have not had time as yet to read the man's books except a page or two (*nec adhuc vacavit hominis libros evolvere praeter unam et alteram pagellam*). Not that I entertained any disdain, but that I have had no time on account of the pressure of my studies. And still they make the fanciful assertion (*confingunt*) that he was aided by my activities. If he wrote correctly, no praise is due to me; if otherwise, I deserve no taunt, since in all his studies not even an iota is my own. Whoever will desire to investigate, will find this to be absolutely true. *The life and conduct of the man is approved with universal unanimity*. Now, this is no slight element of preliminary judgment that his moral character is so irreproachable that not even his enemies find anything to calumniate. If I had had ever so much leisure, I do not assume so much that I should

wish to pronounce on the writings of so great a man (ut de tanti viri scriptis velim pronuntiare), although now everywhere mere boys (pueri) with great assurance pass judgment on this point as erroneous, on that, as heretical. *Nay, I have at some time been rather unfair towards Luther, lest some unpopularity fall on Good Letters, which I did not wish to be burdened any farther; nor do I fail to see how unpopular a thing it is to undermine those things whence a rich harvest is gathered for priests or monks. There had been published first a number of theses about the indulgences of the Pope; soon there was added a treatise or two on Confession, or Penitence. While I was aware that certain men were eager to publish, I earnestly urged against it, lest they might add this unpopularity to Good Letters. . . . At last there was published a survey of his treatises. Nobody saw me reading [them]; nobody heard me approving [them] or disapproving."*

Erasmus goes on to express his own affection for German Humanists, such as Eobanus Hessus, Beatus Rhenanus, Hutten, Mosellanus, and professes himself a Humanist in the main purposes of his life, which, he claims, has been vastly more irreproachable than that of the representatives of the Renaissance in Italy and France. "*Christum mihi semper iratum imprecor, nisi hoc, quicquid est ingenii, quicquid eloquentiae, id totum gloriae Christi, Ecclesiae Catholicae sanctisque studiis dedicatum esse volo.*" (A British merchant had told Erasmus that men in England had attempted to calumniate Erasmus to Wolsey.) "*Immo, si quando dignabitur cominus facere periculum, experietur Erasmum toto pectore servientem dignitati Sedis Romanae, praesertim Leonis decimi.*"

Often he calls the Gospel "*Philosophia Christi*" (e. g., in No. 329), and his aversion for the scholastic leaders remained intense, together with a keen sense of the supreme worldliness of actual ecclesiasticism. To be consistent herein, however, he lacked deeper spiritual character. Few men exhibited more conspicuously the worldliness of Leo X's generation than Albrecht of Brandenburg, cardinal, archbishop, Elector of

Mayence, the Humanist prelate, whose costly passions made him the lifelong servitor of the great bankers of Augsburg, the Fuggers. Charles of Spain gave him an annuity of 10,000 florins for his electoral vote. And he was—save the mark!—the ecclesiastical superior of—Martin Luther, whose junior, too, he was by seven years. Erasmus stood higher in Albrecht's estimation perhaps than any other eminent man of that generation, for at bottom the latter was a Humanist rather than a theologian.<sup>2)</sup>

This important letter of Erasmus is dated Louvain, Nov. 1, 1519 (No. 477). Erasmus had just received a costly drinking-cup from the elector. The Humanist had suffered much from the preachers and theologians of his residential town of Louvain, but finally arranged with them a kind of compromise or treaty of mutual cessation of strife. But this truce had proved but short-lived. Erasmus now takes this opportunity to set forth to his princely patron, who was then but twenty-nine, his own attitude towards Luther and the Wittenberg movement. To some extent the points in the letter resemble those in the missive sent to Cardinal Wolsey, often even in an identity of phrase. "Luther is an absolute stranger to me, whose books I have not yet had any leisure to read. . . . If he has written well, no praise is due to me; if otherwise, there is no reason for making charges against me. This I see, that, the better men are, the less do they find fault with that man's writings; not that they approve of everything, but that they read him with such a spirit as that in which we read Cyprian and Jerome, nay, even Peter the Lombard, closing

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2) Even on March 28, 1519, Luther wrote to Erasmus from Wittenberg (No. 399), addressing him as "decus nostrum et spes nostra, necdum mutuos nos cognoscimus. . . . Quis enim est, cuius penetralia non penitus occupat Erasmus, quem non doceat Erasmus, in quo non regnet Erasmus? De iis loquor, qui literas recte amant." Erasmus answered (Loewen, May 30, 1519) in the spirit of his cautious and characteristic reserve: "Ego me quod licet *integrum servo* quo magis prosim bonis literis re-florescentibus. Et mihi videtur plus profici civili modestia quam impetu. . . . Magis expedit clamare in eos, qui Pontificum auctoritate abutuntur, quam in ipsos Pontifices; idem de Regibus faciendum censeo."

an eye to many things. I am neither the accuser of Luther, nor the defender, nor the judge."

On the whole, therefore, Erasmus professes himself as decidedly out of sympathy with Luther's public antagonists, of whom many, he claims, had not even seen Luther's publications, and strive hard to foist upon Luther odious consequences from his reforms. He, Erasmus, had warned Luther's foes to practise equity and moderation in their polemics; the ordinary Christian folk, too, had a deep repugnance towards auricular confession. Still, he, Erasmus had been charged at Louvain with being the author of many of Luther's books, though in them not even an iota was his own. The Louvain theologians were bent on Luther's destruction. Why did they not direct their energies toward converting Jews or Turks?

Then follows a bitter attack on the Franciscan order, to whom the Pope was more than God when he sided with them, but less than a dream when he opposed them. The depravation of the Gospel through indulgences had stirred Luther to come out into the open, and there, too, he sought no honors nor money. On the whole, Erasmus finds good authorities or precedents for Luther's position. With all this Erasmus goes on to say: "Hæc eo liberius dico, quod modis omnibus sum a *Reuchlini Lutherique* causa alienissimus."

The enemies of Luther are, in fact, also enemies of classical scholarship and of the classical authors, whose codices were moldering in libraries, covered with dust, and even being gnawed by the bookworms. Dominicans and Carmelites had been hostile to classicism even before Luther arose. What Luther's adversaries particularly reprobate is that Luther has no respect for Thomas Aquinas; that he has lessened the income from indulgences; that he does not yield to the Franciscans; that he does not bestow as much authority on the Scholastics as on the Evangelists; everything *they* dislike is at once branded *heresy*, including the study of Greek or writing good Latin.

September 13, 1520, Erasmus wrote to Leo X from Lou-

vain to clear himself from the imputation of Lutheranism (No. 529). "I do not know Luther, have never read his books, except ten or twelve pages." Also he had warned his own publisher, Froben of Basle, not to publish any of Luther's productions. He had directly and indirectly warned Luther to practise moderation. A copy of the letter which Erasmus had written to Luther had been actually laid before the eyes of Leo X, which epistle Erasmus now explains and defends. As for the kernel and substance of Luther's publications, Erasmus makes a frank admission: "Videbam rem esse supra modulum eruditionis et ingenii mei" (beyond me). The preacher-foes of Luther have really made his works famous, and made common folk eager to read Luther himself.

Similarly, though more at length, Erasmus wrote to Cardinal Campeggio, from Louvain, December 6, 1520 (No. 547). Then, too, we read an allusion to Leo's condemnatory bull (which Luther burned on December 10, 1520): "Prodiit Bulla terrifica Romani Pontificis titulo. Exusti sunt codices" (*viz.*, Luther's). "Clamatum est apud populum. Res odiosius agi vix potuit."

In the end Erasmus felt himself to be in a false position at Louvain and removed to Basle. His last letter from Louvain is dated May 14, 1521. He lived at Anderlach, Bruges, and elsewhere. The first definite date of Basle is November 22, 1521. In December the third edition of his New Testament is expected. At Louvain, in 1522, the fugitive was called a Lutheran outright, the quickest way they considered there to ruin his reputation. He was rapidly becoming ailing and weaker in body—his mind sorely in unrest between Papism and Lutheranism (letter to Pirckheimer, March 30, 1522, No. 618). In this same month, December, 1521, Leo X passed away. His successor, Adrian VI, mature of age, a compatriot of Erasmus, a native of Utrecht, and former preceptor of Charles V, was elected on January 9, 1522. Erasmus congratulates him from Basle, August 1, 1522, with close regard for the new pontiff's sober and serious personality, dedicating

to him at the same time his edition of Arnobius, then issued. On December 1, 1522, the new Pope answered the great Humanist. Adrian bids him be of good cheer as to the imputations of Lutheranism. But he goes further—he calls upon him outright to write against Lutheranism (No. 639), better to transcribe the original text. “Te hortari non omittimus, ut contra novas istas haereses stylum istum, qui tibi Dei benignitate felicissimus contigit, exerceas, cum multis de causis tu provinciam hanc tibi potissimum a Deo reservatam refutare merito debeas.” Thus, too, Erasmus, so Adrian urged, could most quickly silence those theologians who would brand Erasmus a Lutheran; and thus, too, as a defender of the Catholic faith, he could rival the Fathers of old, a Jerome or an Augustine. The task was greater and more glorious and more universally important than anything Erasmus had penned before. Having received the Arnobius, the Pope (January 23, 1523, Rome, No. 648) urged the same matter, and also invited Erasmus to come to Rome to counsel about the task of checking the Lutheran movement.

We can only touch upon the Humanist's answer concisely. The letter (No. 649) bears no date. He deprecates his own powers, his own prestige, and this quite correctly. As far as checking the Reformation was concerned, Erasmus knew *he* could not do it: “An apud hos valeat auctoritas Erasmi, apud quos nihil habet ponderis auctoritas tot academiarum, tot principum ac summi denique Pontificis?” E. G. SHILLER.

University Heights, New York City, June 29, 1917.

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