

## Erasmus by Leo Rosten

<sup>1</sup>FAITH WAS ENCASED in ceremonials and debased by superstition. Inquisitors tortured heretics and burned “witches.” Theologians babbled incantations to fend off the Devil. Churchmen cynically sold absolutions from sin and hawked tickets to eternity. It was the 15th century, into which Erasmus of Rotterdam was born. And after him, our world was not the same—for this Augustinian monk illuminated Europe with his learning, regaled it with his wit, transformed it by his wisdom, tolerance and unflinching good sense.

<sup>2</sup>Erasmus was not a philosopher or theologian. He was a writer—one of the first men in over a thousand years, since the fall of Rome, that is, to earn his living by his pen. His 3,000 (!) letters remain a matchless record of the life and customs and morals, the intellectual lemmas and dilemmas, of his age. His *The Praise of Folly* and *Colloquies* were huge best-sellers that attacked the clergy with deadly irreverence and delicious irony. He galvanized scholarship by his commentaries on Augustine, Chrysostom, Origen. He was a major force in resurrecting the classics of Greece from centuries of neglect. His publications of the original Greek text of the New Testament revealed many errors in St. Jerome’s Vulgate, which had been almost unchallenged for 1,100 years, and revolutionized men’s very approach to Holy Scripture. His scholarship was so respected that his *Paraphrases* of the Gospels were placed next to the Bible in England’s churches. His Latin was so lucid, so muscular and direct that it offered men a new model of literary style. His *Adages* salvaged countless phrases from antiquity: “As plain as the nose on your face...Call a spade a spade...Caught in his own snare....One swallow does not make spring...In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.”

<sup>3</sup>Humorous, fastidious, urbane, this sickly priest with the quizzical smile crisscrossed Europe by horse, with a secretary on another,

to study and teach and talk. He often read or dictated as he rode—even across the Alps. He corresponded with kings, popes, princes, scholars in England, Italy, Holland, France, Switzerland, Germany, who revered him, sought his advice, chortled over his witticisms. Pope Paul III offered him a cardinal’s hat. Martin Luther called him “our glory and our hope.” Churchmen wanted him to be a mediator in a council that might unify Christendom.

<sup>4</sup>And from this dazzling eminence, Erasmus’s reputation fell so far and so fast that even friends cursed his name: Catholics, for betraying the Church, Protestants, for deserting the Reformation he played so measureless a role in inspiring. He was “John the Baptist and Judas Iscariot in one.”

<sup>5</sup>Erasmus was a bastard, like Leonardo and Clement VII. Born in Holland, probably in 1469 (he kept pushing the date back to precede his father’s taking of holy orders), he added Desiderius to Erasmus to make the combination “desired beloved.” At 19, or 20, he entered an Augustine monastery. Ordained in 1492, he went to Paris and began to support himself by tutoring—and by pensions from patrons he did not hesitate to flatter. In 1499, he first visited England, where Thomas More and John Colet became life-long friends. A pilgrimage to Canterbury later produced a withering description of “miraculous oils,” the exhibition of “the Virgin’s milk for money,” “the portions of the true cross, enough, if collected, to freight a large ship.”

<sup>6</sup>Erasmus believed in the simple worship of God. He saw no conflict between pagan Greek thought and Catholic creed, between Roman literature and Christian belief. “A heathen wrote this to a heathen,” he once wrote, “and yet his moral principles [contain] justice, sanctity, truth...I can hardly refrain from saying, ‘Saint Socrates, pray for me!’” He excited men with his passion for knowledge, his sense of the infinite promise of intellectual

freedom, his championing of reason against blind reiterations of ritual.

<sup>7</sup>Even the princes of the Church applauded his sardonic remarks about priests who “compute the time of each soul’s residence in Purgatory and assign them longer or shorter [stays] according as they purchase more or fewer... pardons,” his strictures on monks “allowed to fornicate, but not to marry,” his contempt for “religious imposters” who “play upon the credulity of the people” and promise “a seat at the right hand of the Saviour.” He drew the rasp of his scorn across the Scholastics, who determined “in what manner...our Saviour was conceived in the Virgin’s womb.” He mockingly asked whether “the first person of the Trinity [could] hate the second?” and “whether God who took our nature upon Him in the form of a man, could as well have become a woman, a devil, an ass?”

<sup>8</sup>Among those who read him was Martin Luther. Erasmus defended Luther (“you may rid your bookshelves of him, but...not men’s minds.”) but he was dismayed by Luther’s fury, coarseness and vituperations against “all of the offscourings of the Roman Sodom...why should we not wash our hands in their blood?” For Erasmus sought no break with Rome. He was a reformer; Luther was a revolutionary. Erasmus thought the papacy would cleanse itself; Luther thought the pope anti-Christ. Erasmus sensed that virulent nationalism and economic prizes (church lands and incomes) marched behind the new religious slogans: “The monarchy of the pope...is a pestilence to Christendom, but [it is not] expedient to touch that sore openly.” Above all, he abhorred fanaticism and violence. He shrank before Luther’s impassioned incitements of the mob. But he had “laid the egg that Luther hatched” and now was caught between conflicting zealotries.

<sup>9</sup>The Pope, Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey urged Erasmus to attack Luther openly—and Luther wrote him a plea for support. Erasmus’s answer was chilling: “I...neither

approve nor disapprove anything...I try to keep neutral, so as to help the revival of learning.” He confessed he could not “risk my life for the truth. All men have not strength for martyrdom...I follow the just decrees of popes and emperors because it is right; I endure their evil laws because it is safe...Christ will look after me.”

<sup>10</sup>Erasmus yearned for peace and union in Christendom. He could not weather the hurricanes of hate that now swept Europe. He fled Basel when Protestant mobs went on a rampage of destruction. He died in 1536. His will contained no provision for a Mass. Pope Paul IV condemned all of his writings, “even if they contain nothing against religion.” The Council of Trent put many of his works on the Index of books Catholics were forbidden to read.

<sup>11</sup>Erasmus was no martyr; he was not even a hero. He was an intellectual, a liberal who would have been more at home in the 18th century than the 16th. “He, almost alone in his age,” says Preserved Smith, “knew that truth had many facets...Thomas More would die for his faith and would have you punished for yours: Erasmus would be...courteous...even to an infidel.” His humanistic vision of the human condition taught men that to celebrate Man need not derogate God. He moved Europe out of medievalism. The Encyclopedia Britannica says he “contributed more to the liberation of the human mind...than all the uproar and rage of Luther’s pamphlets.” In his last years, men despised him; today, Holland, England, Switzerland, Germany claim him as one of their glories. —LEO ROSTEN

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