

Philosophy and Religion in service of the *Philosophia Christi*

Introduction

Desiderius Erasmus proposed a *philosophia Christi*, in which – at least to the Renaissance humanist – both religion and philosophy dictate the Christian way of living. The very term implies that philosophy and religion share a common ground. It fails, however, to acknowledge the unyielding conflict that arises from the differences between these two fields as conceived by Erasmus. The *philosophia Christi* is in fact intrinsically biased by its overruling dogmatic assumption of truth as dictated by Scripture. By default, it seems to be incompatible with the unbiased disposition that lies at the heart of philosophy itself. In this paper, I aim to show that this incompatibility becomes apparent through the fundamental difference between Erasmus' use of Christian sources and his use of philosophical sources from antiquity, even if both of these sources equally condition the idea of a *philosophia Christi*. To illustrate this difference, I will compare the occurrences of Augustine and Epicurus in Erasmus' study of proper Christian conduct, and address the question of the extent to which he abides by their opinions in order to form his own.

It will then become clear that while ancient philosophy was invaluable to Erasmus, pagan material was always to be considered conditional to religious doctrine. I will thus highlight some of the neglected aspects of Erasmus' humanist approach to the study of antiquity, in particular the ambiguous way in which he advocated a return to the classics. We will see that Erasmus claimed to profess only truths directly extracted from those ancient texts, but a closer notice will show that his conceptions of philosophy and religion could not form a perfect synthesis, and Erasmus must have made some concessions in processing them. To Erasmus, Christianity and philosophy should sooner be seen as each other's

opponents, both aiming to dictate the best way of living. To spin his idea of the *philosophia Christi*, Erasmus would have to put one teaching above the other, and the standard of his era left him little choice in deciding which one.

This makes Erasmus' use of Augustine and Epicurus particularly interesting. Erasmus did little to conceal his criticism of Augustine, yet relied on Augustine's words as unquestionably authoritative when he was in need of their support. To demonstrate Erasmus' use of religious sources, I will investigate how he studied the appropriate treatment of heretics, based on ancient Christian material. From here I will observe how and when Augustine was mentioned by Erasmus as a significant source. His defense of heretics will offer a stark contrast with the notion of pleasure which Erasmus wished to introduce to the Christian mind. We will find that Erasmus held considerable admiration for Epicurus and his philosophy of pleasure, but his appreciation of Epicurean ideas did not reach further than what was compatible with Christianity. Erasmus' devotion to ancient philosophical sources would grind to a halt at the borders presented by his religion. Nevertheless, Erasmus took considerable trouble to reintroduce and support Epicureanism as part of the *philosophia Christi*.

Below I will explore how and why Erasmus was inspired to do so. Most significant for our purposes is the extent to which he stayed true to Epicurus' original work. This will be best illustrated by comparing his evasive tactics when using Epicurus to the diligence of his use of Augustine. Erasmus did not particularly favor this saint, and a short introduction to his influence on western Christianity will show us why. Erasmus nevertheless approached Augustine as his fellow Christian, for all his errors, while Epicurus remained at an arm's length for all his brilliance.

The divine gift of philosophy

Erasmus observed that Christ came into the world when it was at its peak of culture and arts. The pagans of antiquity had been able to discover these arts by themselves as a divine gift from God, intended to support them until the arrival of the Messiah. God carefully orchestrated the circumstances of Christ's arrival, so that the world would be fit to support the supreme religion he would introduce on earth. When Christ finally came, his followers no longer needed to take the trouble of discovering these arts: they had already been finalized in the teachings of their leader. They could now focus on spreading Christianity, while enjoying the philosophical knowledge that had already been discovered in the past (Bejczy, 2001: 19).

Erasmus reflected on Scripture as a collection of historical documents. He believed that the New Testament, just as well as the Old Testament, should be read in its proper context. However, Erasmus saw Christ as a transhistorical teacher of the *philosophia Christi*, which called for a commitment to moral and spiritual principles. The interpretation of this commitment, would change throughout history and conform to the needs of evolving societies. In Erasmus' reflection on the history of Christianity, he finds that at the very beginning, the faith was still pure, while classical learning lay forgotten. The very first Christians, in such close proximity to their teacher, may have been able to afford to neglect the intellectual gifts bestowed upon humanity before the First Coming. But for later generations, who would have to study and learn to apply the Gospel by themselves, literary education was indispensable. When later Christians sought to revive knowledge from antiquity, Christianity was already corrupt and Latin was barbarized (Bejczy, 2001: 24).

The church fathers tried to combine the Gospel with the classical intellectual heritage. The latter was literary rather than philosophical heritage, as ancient philosophers held no theological authority. Erasmus therefore did not view the time of the church fathers as the golden age in which Christianity and ancient philosophy reigned together; rather, the decline of literary culture had already set in. Latin had already lost its purity, and the church fathers could not help but have this affect their theological writings. In comparison, the Greek church fathers were

unaffected by this problem. Erasmus was therefore concerned with the civilization of the West (Bejczy, 2001: 25-26). Erasmus greatly valued Greek religious sources for their purity and we will see that he relied heavily on these works.

The Augustinian crossroad

Among the Latin church fathers was Augustine. He was born into a humble family in what is now known as Algeria, in 354. He studied to be a professor in Latin rhetoric, which led him to Rome, and later Milan. From his *Confessions*, we learn that he spent most of his life searching for a philosophy or theology he could believe in, before finally converting to Catholicism in 386. His return to the Christian faith drove him to write on religion instead of rhetoric. Augustine's work grew successful among the Christians in his circle, and he was appointed as bishop of their diocese (McCracken, 1981: introduction).

His attention shifted from philosophy to theology, and authority became an increasingly important theme to him. By this time, the church had fixed the canon of Scripture to comprise what are now the books of the Old and New Testament. Augustine contributed to this stasis by establishing that no historical event occurring after Christ's life would have any sacred significance. North-African Christians regarded themselves as defenders of the true Christian religion, and this conviction of being in the right would explain Augustine's intolerance towards deviation from the dogmas he introduced (Coleman, 2005: 310-313).

Augustine argued that man did not live in a world of knowledge, but of beliefs. We are incapable of teaching anyone anything, as God alone can teach. Also, without God, we can do no good. Believing that we can act out of our own independent will is the pride of the original sin. Augustine believed that when cast from Eden, Adam lost his original capacity to reason. Yet Adam thought that he knew himself and knew how to realize his interests, when he should have surrendered to God and relied on belief. Augustine saw his own life play out in this same universal way. He saw that humans do not have first-hand experience of the historical past or of the future. We may understand testimonies of others, but understanding is

believing rather than knowing. Thus humans cannot know, but must trust. Trusting authorities comes from plausible, rather than demonstrably true arguments. Life in a social or political community is marked by the search for grounds to trust its authorities, which bind people together to serve peace and stability. If we are to live in a Christian community, Augustine asserted that the church should be such an authority (Coleman, 2005: 313-319).

While man was originally created in the likeness of God, after the original sin he was created in the likeness of the fallen rather than the original Adam. This fallen man is still free in the choices he makes, but his choices are not motivated by a desire to do good. We therefore cannot suppress our passions and make ourselves live virtuously through philosophy – the goals of ancient teaching. Man is too proud, and wishes to be nothing other than his autonomous self. Only those who understand their dependence on God will no longer suffer from their passions.

Augustine's rejection of man's capacity to reason can be seen as a fundamental breaking point from ancient philosophical tradition. Augustine was a North-African Roman who lived around the turn of the fifth century, and was therefore entrenched in a culture with an unquestioned view on hierarchies of power. Whereas Plato and Aristotle believed in the power of citizenship, this notion was empty for an inhabitant of imperial North Africa at the time. Augustine's views on the human need for absolute authority traveled fast, and were particularly pressed in the Early Modern era with its crisis of authority (Coleman, 2005: 320-336).

Augustine remained to be an – possibly the most – influential church father throughout the Middle Ages and into Early Modern times. Erasmus, wishing to break with contemporary scholastic tradition and advocating humanism instead, did not adhere to Augustine's popularity. From a historical perspective, Erasmus classified Augustine as a church father of Middle Antiquity. This period was characterized by the introduction of dogmas, as a reaction to the alarming expansion of heretic deviants of Christianity at the time (Bejczy, 2001: 30). The dogmatic character of Augustine's preaching was also a means of creating a schism between Christianity and paganism. The transition from paganism to Christianity, for many new believers, was only a few generations apart, and remnants of

pagan culture were still entrenched in society. Christians oftentimes found it difficult to completely separate their beloved and glamorous pagan traditions from their new Christian lifestyles. Augustine had no influence on the public practice of paganism and could only aim to keep his followers away from its temptations. By stigmatizing the participation in such traditions, Augustine encouraged converted Christians to break with their pagan roots. Many Christians were unaware of the pagan background of their traditions and Augustine was therefore firm in setting ample rules and regulations regarding the practice of Christianity (Cameron, 2011: 790-796).

To Erasmus, however, the introduction of dogmas meant that the Christian faith became debatable, and presented the onset of religious decline. Augustine in particular tried to support his Christian beliefs through reason. Thus he confidently laid down the laws of Christian faith, much to the appeal of medieval theologians. Erasmus saw that Augustine's work contained the foundations of scholastic theology and the very character of the Middle Ages (Bejczy, 2001: 30-31).

Renaissance headway

Contrary to popular belief, not all of antiquity was lost in the Middle Ages. Many classical sources were thoroughly studied and valued throughout this period. The history of the Roman Empire in particular has always been the subject of much attention and praise. In the court of Charles the Great, classical sources were vigorously restored. As part of the cultural rebirth that Charles encouraged, a new art of copying and binding was developed (Romagosa, 2003: 146). It was the preservation of these sources to which the Renaissance owed its realization. Remnants of antiquity, it must be noted, were considered practical and useful to medieval men – rather than products of a great, lost civilization. They did not consider there to be a fracture between the classical age and their own, as we do now. There was indeed a difference in religion, but even ancient pagan art was appreciated within pious circles. Aside from Christianity, they found that all that separated them from the ancients was a number of centuries in time (Weiss, 1969: 1-4).

Erasmus, however, was among the humanists who believed that the neglect of ancient writings had caused the darkness of the Middle Ages. He asserted that the revival of Latin and Greek classics, the New Testament and writings of the church fathers, would restore mankind's moral and spiritual values. Studying such original sources would provide a more minimalistic, and therefore pure, understanding of Christianity. Coupled with the study of classical knowledge, this understanding could be enhanced, as it had done in Christ's time. Erasmus' humanistic goals were all geared towards the improvement of understanding Christianity, and consequently the advancement of society (Bejczy, 2001: xiv).

In his *Enchiridion*, we find Erasmus lamenting the decline of proper education and piety since civilization's break from antiquity. He announced his departure from contemporary culture and started anew, criticizing the scores of repetitive theological writings from which people could not learn anything anyway because reading them would take a lifetime. Erasmus was not alone in his claim of novelty, as this was a popular statement for many other humanists of his time. Each of these enlightened authors bemoaned the loss of ancient wisdom during the Dark Ages, which they sharply contrasted with their own illuminating influence on society through the study of antiquity. They were reluctant to recognize the medieval inheritance that often formed the foundations of their works, resulting in a discredit that contemporary medievalists struggle to correct (Roest, 2003: 115-120).

Erasmus is most likely to have been well aware of his exaggeration of the gloom of the Dark Ages, and his criticism of scholasticism added little originality to what was already the scholastic stereotype. While it is important to recognize the boastful nature of Renaissance authors, Humanism was nevertheless the driving force behind the pursuit of culture and civilization after the Middle Ages (Roest, 2003: 118).

In his pedagogical work, Erasmus also stressed the importance of studying ancient literature and philosophy. Mastery of classical Latin and Greek would facilitate the study of biblical texts and those of the church fathers, while classical moral philosophy opened the mind for a better understanding of the Christian religion. The ancient authors, Erasmus found, held all knowledge that was essential to society. Together, they

offered all there was to be known in all fields of mankind – from law to the sciences and religion alike. These reversible tendencies can be discovered in the writings of many humanist authors; as a result, they ignored many of the medieval innovations in the sciences and philosophy. Significant here is Erasmus' optimism that stemmed from his abandonment of the deficiencies of original sin, so much emphasized in the late Middle Ages. From the ancients Erasmus learned to believe in exploiting man's natural talents to the fullest, rather than emphasizing his incapability of grasping intellectual and moral reasoning (Roest, 2003: 141).

Erasmus believed that civilization had greatly improved since adopting the Christian religion, but that it had also taken leaps back with regard to secular culture. Luckily, he believed, the Renaissance man was now trying to restore society to its glory days of antiquity. Until now, no period had been dominated by a perfect synthesis of Christianity and classical learning (Bejczy, 2001: 107). The question that arises here is whether Erasmus aimed to restore classical knowledge or admired it only for its ability to enhance Christianity.

Spudaeus and Hedonius

Erasmus believed that the study of ancient moral philosophy would greatly benefit the understanding of Christian religion and would aid the believer in living according to the *philosophia Christi*. In the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus explains the message of the Bible in terms of ancient philosophy. He identifies the detachment from the worldly passions with the Stoic teachings, which concur with Plato and Socrates. Aristotle however would argue that the passions are to be restricted when they pass the point of their usefulness. These classics teach philosophies that agree with the piety of a Christian. Erasmus' opinion on the compatibility of a Stoic and pious lifestyle appears to have taken a turn whilst writing the *Praise of Folly*, in which he offers an unconventional alternative to the classical philosophies: Epicureanism (Van Ruler, 2006).

It is likely that the work of his idol, Lorenzo Valla, inspired Erasmus to consider Epicureanism. In Valla's *De Voluptate*, Christian Epicureanism was faintly suggested by one of the participants in the dialogue as a way

of living better than Christian asceticism. Valla showed his understanding of a worldly Epicureanism, but Erasmus directed the Epicurean pleasure towards that which we will experience through the joys of Christian piety instead. Furthermore, Erasmus was a close friend of Thomas More, who was the author of *Utopia*, which touched upon the Epicurean philosophy as well by discussing the realization of happiness through pleasure. Finally, in Erasmus' *Colloquies* we find a dialogue between Spudaeus and Hedonius, respectively named after soberness and pleasure, in which Erasmus himself discussed the compatibility of the philosophy of pleasure with a pious Christian lifestyle (Erasmus, 1965: 535-537).

In this dialogue, Erasmus gives a clear account of his interpretation of Epicureanism. Erasmus aimed to convey a positive Christian account of Epicureanism. He had to do so carefully. His famous adversary, Luther, often accused Erasmus of being an Epicurean in an attempt to discredit his piety. Erasmus therefore had to speak very cautiously when defending Epicureanism or risk accusations of heresy (Verstraete, 2006: 42).

Epicurus was a controversial figure among humanists because of his strictly materialistic conception of the world. His universe of mere atoms left no room for the supernatural. Erasmus, in order to defend him, therefore had to ignore Epicurus' physics and focus only on his ethics. In his dialogue, Erasmus gently introduces two pious figures, discussing the ends of truth and the good.

Hedonius suggests exploring the work of Epicurus. Well aware of the peculiarity of his choice, he needs to persuade Spudaeus to reconsider his bias towards Epicurus. When prejudice is cast aside, he would see that a good Christian is in essence an Epicurean. Hedonius explains that a Christian seeking pleasure may seem to be suffering, but is in fact on his way to happiness by pleasing God. A true Christian, after all, does not find happiness in simple pleasures. He does not seek worldly, but spiritual pleasures. Worldly pleasures are short-lived, while spiritual happiness lasts all of eternity. Additionally, simple pleasures often lead to discomforts, even in this world, and are not worth enjoying. Worse still is suffering from a bad conscience, and even that must be borne, as it is preferable to having no conscience at all.

A poor, unfortunate man could therefore easily be much happier than a rich, powerful one. While it is perhaps difficult to grasp how the poor man could be happier despite of his ailments, the rich man cannot make himself spiritually happy through worldly means. Neither has any control over his fate in this life, but the man who has suffered from misfortune knows how to endure his ailments and is more likely to gladly accept the will of God, while the successful man is more likely to be in search of carnal pleasures and is ungrateful for the things he might enjoy.

A good Christian would therefore seek to abandon his worldly pleasures, and seek to live righteously instead. When such a man falls into the good grace of God, he will find true and ultimate happiness. Thus Hedonius convinced Spudaeus of the true meaning of Epicureanism: finding pleasure in living righteously and godly, knowing and rejoicing that it will lead to happiness (Erasmus, 1965: 538-551).

Epicureanism according to the ancient

The above offers a philosophy that is compatible, even supportive of Christian religion. It does not, however, tell the entire story. Much of the essentials of Epicureanism are delicately avoided or excused in order for this philosophy to suit Christianity. While Erasmus tiptoed around Epicurus' philosophy, the ancient himself wished to promote his doctrine as straightforwardly as possible. In this section, we will see that Epicurean philosophy was indeed better suitable – at least without generous modification – for the pagans of antiquity than for the Christians of the Renaissance. Epicurus' *four-part cure* to humanity's greatest obstacle to happiness, anxiety, could easily serve as a short and sweet summary to his philosophy: 'Don't fear god; don't worry about death; what is good is easy to get, and; what is terrible is easy to endure.' (Epicurus, 1994: iii)

Epicurus did believe in gods, but taught they were not to be feared. Gods, he believed, were much too happy to concern themselves with what we mortals do to want to reward or punish those who do or do not act in their favor. Their constant state of happiness was what Epicurus aimed for man to achieve. He believed in a world in which people had arrived by chance, unindebted to a god, free to live and be happy. Still, we should

abide by moral laws. Not because a god commands them, but because they serve a good purpose. Breaking the rules only leads to anxiety, while leading a moral life leads to friendships which, next to philosophy, are essential to a happy life.

Another concern that tends to grip human minds enough to put them in a state of anxiety is the fear of death. Epicurus did differentiate between body and soul, but as soon as the two part ways, as happens in death, the pair no longer exists. In his *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus explains how the soul is involved in sense perception. This is possible because the soul is connected to the body, and also the reason why the body dies when the soul parts from it. Without the body, the soul will lose its sense perception and will cease to exist (Epicurus, 1994: 13). Death itself should not worry us because it is not something we will be aware of, let alone have to endure.

Instead, we should focus on the good things we can get in this life. Luckily, these good things are easy to acquire. Epicurus explains his understanding of pleasure in his *Letter to Menoecus*. Our goal in life should be to make every choice in life in favor of the health of our bodies and peace of our minds, since we would do everything in our ability to avoid pain and fear. Our seeking of pleasure serves to alleviate our suffering, and this is why Epicurus found pleasure to be the leading principle of life.

We should nevertheless choose our pleasures wisely, and sometimes even choose pain if the pleasure following it would be worth its while. Pleasures should therefore be measured relative to the trouble they might cause. From this follows that a prudent lifestyle offers more happiness than an extravagant one, as simple needs are easier to fulfill. Our bodies only need very basic things to survive, and our mind only needs to be confident that our bodies will be supplied with them. Wanting more than we need only awakens the anxiety that we might not fulfill these additional desires. Overindulgence will not lead to a pleasant life, but prudence will. It allows us to sensibly calculate our choices in order to avoid pain. Prudence leads us to live virtuously, to make just and honorable choices, and teaches us that these are inherent to a pleasant life (Epicurus, 1994: 28-31).

Should we run into the unpleasant things in life, we should remind ourselves that by nature, pain is either extreme or chronic; never both. We would then realize that our suffering will not last long, and otherwise be only of a mild nature, and therefore easy to endure.

Epicurus expounded his doctrine through longer letters and texts, but his four basic truths remain the fundamentals of living a good and happy life. The promise of happiness and the simplicity of his phrasings earned Epicurus many followers in the ancient world. Yet from the beginning Epicureanism had also been heavily criticized, mostly on the basis of misinterpretation, and eventually faded into the shadows of academic philosophies, until it was completely drowned out by Christianity (Hutchinson, 1994).

Limited authority of the ancient philosopher

Epicureanism has thus often been rejected first-hand due to prejudice and misinterpretation. Erasmus aimed to sweep these aside and give Epicurean philosophy a fair chance among the newly arising appreciation of ancient teachings during the Renaissance. It is not difficult to understand what attracted Erasmus to Epicureanism and led him to include it as a part of the *philosophia Christi*. Epicurus promoted a life of prudence and virtue, and in turn we would receive what we all seek in life: happiness. Christ promoted a similar reward for a similar lifestyle. In concurrence with Christian philosophy, Epicurus claimed that in order to live well, we must live virtuously – not because it is demanded of us but because we know it is rewarding in the long run.

Epicureans would seek the simple life and fulfill their longings sensibly, carefully calculating how to maximize their happiness in life. While they contentedly eat their barley cakes in their Garden, pious Christians submit to water fasts in their chambers. Though their sober lifestyles seem similar at first glance, Epicureans and Christians part ways when we start to consider their motivations. Christians keep to their water fasts because they want to restrict their mortal bodies from the worldly pleasure of food and strengthen their spirit, not because they take pleasure in drinking water. In the *Colloquies*, Erasmus explains that a Franciscan, vowed to poverty, may lead a happier life than a man living in luxury. If he has a good conscience,

his happiness surpasses that of those who possess everything that worldly pleasure has to offer. He might seem unfortunate, but is in fact 'smeared all over with honey' (Erasmus, 1965: 539). This poor man, free of conscience, pure of heart, is close to God – the very fountain of happiness. Erasmus does not make the additional claim that a man living in luxury has any less of a chance of being pure of heart, given that he does not live impiously.

The sober Epicurean on the other hand, would be sure to enjoy his water, and would not limit his food for the sake of restricting his body. Quite the contrary: he is happy to know that his simple pleasures are easily fulfilled and does not have to long for them in their absence. He abstains from simple luxuries to keep his mind at peace, rather than to please a god judging his virtues. The Epicurean would avoid certain pleasures if he knew they would lead to a greater pain, and would endure pain if he knew it would lead to a greater pleasure (Epicurus, 1994: 28-31). Erasmus makes a similar calculation, but relates these decisions to the final verdict it will lead to: heaven or hell.

Considering Erasmus' perspective, the soul leads an eternal life. The Christian endures suffering in this world, not because pleasure will follow soon, but in his next life. Still, this does not mean that this Christian, who denies himself a simple pleasure, is unhappier than the Epicurean who restricts his pleasure. The cheerfulness they both get from their choices and acceptance of fate makes them equally grateful for the state they find themselves in. The Christian, clear of conscience, does not have any more reason to fear God than the godless Epicurean. However, the absence of this fear cannot be held equal to that of the Epicurean, as it would take away the essential freedom that Epicurus believed relieved us from anxiety.

After all, Epicurus believed we do not exist after this world. One of the fundamental teachings in the Epicurean guide to happiness is to not be concerned with, let alone fear, death. It is pointless because we are not dead yet and therefore do not have to deal with it, and when we are dead, we no longer exist and therefore do not need to ever deal with it at all (Epicurus, 1994: 13). To Christians, death is the beginning of eternal life. Their prospect of eternal life is exactly what motivates the choices they make in this earthly life. Their goal is not to calculate which choices lead towards a pleasant life, but to abide by the guidelines that have been set in stone.

While Epicureans avoid pain and disruption of their peace of mind, Christians are taught to avoid sin. Epicurus himself taught that there are no bad pleasures, only pleasures that are not worth the pain they produce. There is no harm in the occasional luxury, but it is the dependence on luxuries that will make us unhappy, because it awakens the anxiety that we might not get them. This is entirely different from the Christian's abstinence of overindulging, who avoids gluttony because it is a sin. Sinful behavior will be punished in the afterlife. It is God's judgment Christians fear rather than the effects their actions have on the natural course of creating a pleasant life on earth.

It is this fear, the belief that someone might punish us for the decisions we make, that Epicurus fundamentally rejected. The anxiety that this fear awakens stands in the way of happiness, and makes Christianity incompatible with the Epicurean doctrine. It is therefore striking that Erasmus advocated Epicureanism, when he must have been well aware of this divergence. Erasmus must have regarded this as Epicurus' inevitable but forgivable shortcomings, considering a pagan could not have known any better.

Humanism in the study of Christianity

In order to compare Erasmus' use of Epicurus with his use of Augustine, we must first consider the novel way in which Erasmus applied a humanistic method to the interpretation of religious sources. He applied the humanistic method because he thought that the church should be reformed, and the only way to do it properly was to go back to its origins. He asserted that we can find what God truly means to tell us in the primary biblical sources (Jarrott, 1970: 119).

Erasmus believed that Humanism was key to restoring the church to its pure and intended form. He was adamant in following the true biblical and church father's orders. These sources serve to explain the intensity and the unwavering nature of Erasmus' opinions to which we will return. After all, Erasmus lived in a society in which truths and ideologies were taken to be more trustworthy if they could be derived from authoritative texts than when they were the product of one's own reasonings (Coleman,

2000: 29). He was not afraid to challenge contemporary scholastics in defense of his ideal by restoring the beginnings of Christianity. He refused point-blank to the contemporary trend, and instead looked to the works of the ancient church fathers. Below we will see that when attacked, Erasmus would point out that it was unreasonable to disapprove of certain views in his work when the same statements had been made by church fathers before him, and would have been accepted when the very same would have been read in an authoritative source.

Such vindications can be readily studied through Erasmus' letters. From the fifteenth century onwards, it was perfectly acceptable that humanists invested a considerable amount of time in maintaining their reputation. They professed pride in their achievements, and vehemently defended themselves in public polemics (Enenkel, 2003: 94). Through many of such self-representative letters we can observe some of Erasmus' attitudes and motivations. Here we find that Erasmus had a sharp pen when responding to his critics. In his *Confessions*, Erasmus sharply remarks that those who criticize his works apparently do not understand what he means to say in them. He claims that they are offended by his refusal to trouble with scholastic jargon, and then stumble over his superior use of Latin. Erasmus then continues to criticize the opinions of modern scholastics, doubting the validity of their work, and finding that they cannot even agree amongst themselves. Erasmus verifies the validity of his own beliefs by comparing them to the works of the ancient church fathers. If his contemporaries would do the same, they would find much more controversy in those ancient works than what his critics want to censure in his (Erasmus, 2012: 9).

The parable of the tares

To illustrate the tenacity with which Erasmus stood by his humanist ideology of redefining Christianity, I shall study his defense of his paraphrase of Matthew 13, which offered an interpretation different from what was accepted at the time. Erasmus' response to the controversy that arose from this paraphrase exemplifies his use of religious sources. Erasmus came to his opinion through his own interpretation of the passage. He also heavily relied on the explanation of this chapter by Chrysostom, whose writings

validated his interpretation of Matthew. Both of these elements speak volumes on what Erasmus believed to be fundamental to truly knowing Christianity: truth extracted from Scripture and its interpretation by the church fathers.

Matthew 13 contains the parable of the tares. It is often shortly referred to as *sinite utraque crescere* (Hoffmann, 1982; Bainton, 1932: 67), ringing with the emphasis on allowing both wheat and tares to grow together. Specifically, in Matthew 13:24-30, Christ tells a surrounding crowd a parable of a farmer whose field had been tampered with by his enemy, causing weeds to grow amidst his growing wheat. When his servants asked him whether they were to remove the weeds from the field, the farmer answered that they should not, lest they harm the wheat in the process. The weeds should be allowed to grow until harvest day, after which they would be burnt by the master himself. This very passage had been used over and over again to support the position that heretics should be tolerated. The most significant statements extracted from this parable are that we cannot distinguish wheat from tares in this life, that we can and should tolerate the tares because God will deal with them in the end, or simply – that we are to leave the tares be, as that was what Christ commanded us to do. This passage was nevertheless also used by those with a less liberal agenda. In these cases, the tares were not taken to symbolize heretics, but offending members of the church. Also, the servants who are forbidden to remove the tares were sometimes interpreted as instructions solely for ministers, which meant that they did not apply to magistrates (Bainton, 1932: 67).

Throughout the history of Christianity, the parable of the tares was interpreted and applied differently. In the early centuries of Christianity, the church was not yet in any position to persecute heretics. Thomas Aquinas later merged the existing interpretations of the parable, including those of the church fathers, into one that suited the policy of the church in his time. The tares may be rooted out, lest the wheat suffer the consequences. The heretics may therefore be coerced by the church, as long as the members of the church are not harmed in the process. This was to be the leading theory throughout the Middle Ages. In the time of the Reformation, the parable was again used in favor of leniency (Bainton, 1932: 76-83).

When the parable was newly evaluated by Erasmus, he asserted that the tares are to be tolerated. They might one day become wheat; and even if they do not, they will meet their fate on Judgment Day. In his paraphrases, Erasmus adds particulars to the original Gospel with his own interpretations, often concurring with those of Chrysostom (Erasmus, 2008: 214). Erasmus for instance identifies the wheat not just with ‘the children of the kingdom’ (Matt. 13:38), but also with those who, through Gospel teaching, ‘become worthy of the heavenly kingdom’ (Erasmus, 2008: 215) by practicing what they preach. The tares are not only ‘the children of the wicked one’ (Matt. 13:38), but also those who teach false gospels (Erasmus, 2008: 215). Matthew does not offer an explanation for the servants who asked their master whether they were to remove the tares from among the wheat, but Erasmus interprets the servants as people who believe that heretics should be punished by death.

Just as the farmer does not wish for the tares to be removed until harvest so that the wheat would not be harmed in the process, Erasmus states that the tares should not be removed, should they repent and turn into wheat. This is nowhere stated in Matthew, but this implication had been made earlier by Chrysostom. Erasmus goes on to say that even if they do not repent in their lifetime among the wheat, the tares should be saved for their Judge and allowed to meet their fate then. When this final day comes, Christ will send his angels to separate the good from the bad – judged according to their deeds. Those tares that lived among the wheat but did not better themselves in their presence, or harmed them instead, will be separated from them and cast into the furnace of hell (Erasmus, 2008: 215-216).

This paraphrase of the parable of the tares exposed Erasmus to much criticism. It was understood as a denial of the right of authorities to use force against heretics. Criticism came from Noel Beda, Spanish monks and several theologians from Paris (Erasmus, 2008: 215). When his works were pronounced dangerous by the Faculty of the University of Paris, Erasmus responded by stating that his own interpretations of the Scriptures are of no significance, but it must be conceded that those of Jerome, Chrysostom and Augustine certainly are. These church fathers held similar opinions to his, and their authority is unquestioned (Erasmus, 2012a: 216). Erasmus believed that his opinions were therefore unreasonably condemned.

Nevertheless, the paraphrase was perceived as an unacceptable defense of heretics, whilst Erasmus was also expected to defend the Catholic Church during a confessionally turbulent time due to the onset of the Reformation. Erasmus fortified his interpretation by echoing the words of Augustine, who did not disapprove of secular authorities coercing heretics, but felt that church figures had no business using violence against its offenders, nor should they call upon these authorities to commit these acts of violence for them. When they ask authorities to murder on their behalf, the members of the church carry the responsibility of the act themselves (Bainton, 1932: 84).

In addition to the above example, Erasmus oftentimes cited the works of Augustine, despite his criticism of the near-medieval church father. Erasmus appealed to this church father, who he regarded as the champion of scholasticism, to come to his aid when he needed to defend his own points. He was well aware that his contemporaries were more likely to agree with more widespread writers, especially Augustine (Bejczy, 2001: 31). Erasmus often flaunted his knowledge of Augustine, and praised him when appropriate, to counter any accusations of heresy.

One might wonder whether Erasmus’ insistence on tolerance, as derived from the parable of the tares, was a result of his own virtue, or a byproduct of his characteristic pursuit of returning the church to the original and pure form of Christianity. It could just as well be the other way around, if Erasmus knew just which excerpts to quote to support his own views. Yet in an intimate letter to his friend Thomas More (Erasmus, Ep 1804), Erasmus lamented that he had grown tired of the ceaseless criticism that he had to deal with. Still, his convictions stood unwavering. Though sharp of pen, he assured Moore that he did not seek to win a debate on his own accord, but to profess what he believed to be the truth as presented by Scripture and the church fathers.

Indisputable Christian sources

Having studied his paraphrase of the parable of the tares, we can observe the value Erasmus placed in the biblical scriptures and the works of the church fathers. Christ is no longer with us and we can only know

his wishes through studying the sacred Gospels. Nevertheless, Erasmus viewed the Bible as a collection of historical texts. They must therefore be taken and understood in relation to the times in which they were written, instead of being applied directly to contemporary societies. Similarly, he acknowledged the humanity of the church fathers, knowing that they too were only able to learn the will of God through the inheritance of the ancient Scriptures (Bejczy, 2001: 24).

Erasmus was therefore able to show both favoritism and criticism of the ancient church fathers. In relation to the linguistic decline of the West, Erasmus saw the limitations that the Latin church fathers could not overcome. This is why Erasmus often stressed the importance of studying the ancient Greek language in addition to Latin. Indeed, the unadulterated Greek sources made it possible for Erasmus to revise the old Vulgate translation of the Bible. His knowledge of Greek had also put Erasmus in touch with the writings of the Eastern church fathers, which he considered invaluable to anyone studying Christianity.

As we have seen above, Erasmus seems to have relied on both church fathers and Scripture in interpreting the parable of the tares. To the account of Matthew, Erasmus added details that were not found in the Bible itself, but had been mentioned by Chrysostom. Apparently, Erasmus took this Eastern church father's word to supplement the Gospel. Later, when the paraphrases on Matthew were published, Erasmus sought support from the writings of Augustine. Erasmus undoubtedly sought validation from this particular church father to ensure the approval of his contemporaries. Chrysostom would have been less known and therefore less useful in warding off the attacks Erasmus faced as a result of his deviation from scholastic tradition.

Still, Augustine was used as an unquestionable figure of authority, even though Erasmus saw him as the symbol of the medieval decline of ancient knowledge and the end of the church's purity. Everything Augustine said could be repeated out in the open, because he was such an accepted figure in the Christian community. Every single word he had written could be analyzed, even carefully criticized, without fear of being unorthodox. Herein lies the difference in Erasmus' study of Epicurus. Erasmus could not divulge the unchristian details of Epicureanism. At the

same time, it would do Erasmus no good to profess his dislike of Epicurus when he wanted to promote a Christian Epicurean philosophy. Instead, he left out the essentials, which Epicurus would have never forgiven him, but Erasmus ascribed all of the ancient's pagan faults to his unfortunate lack of Christian knowledge.

To conclude

Erasmus never failed to appreciate the historical context of his sources. We have seen that he believed that the arts of ancient philosophy and language were gifts from God to sustain humanity until the coming of Christ. For this reason, he held great admiration for the ancients and their work, and was understanding of their helplessly pagan ways. Furthermore, he took the Gospels as the nearest, purest knowledge of Christianity. Erasmus saw Christ as the ultimate teacher of the *philosophia Christi*, and his direct followers as those who were privileged to truly know Christ's direct teachings. The generations that followed fell victim to their forefathers' neglect of ancient wisdom and slowly lost touch with the original purity of Christianity and at the same pace, the decline of the purity of Latin increasingly affected their competence. Fortunately for the Eastern church fathers, the latter did not affect them, and Erasmus admired them for it. This was especially demonstrated by the formidable task he had taken upon him to study the Greek language, acquiring the ability to offer a new translation of original ancient Greek texts of the New Testament. He could not hide, on the other hand, his bitter resentment of the Latin church's failure to protect the orthodoxy of the Western church.

Among the Western church fathers was Augustine, and in him Erasmus saw the father of scholasticism. Erasmus made it no secret that he despised the scholastic tradition. Yet while he aimed to reform the church, he only did so through the theological authorities that were already present. As can be observed from his interpretation of the parable of the tares and his defense of it, Erasmus was an exemplary humanist by returning to original sources. He did not fear being controversial, as shown by his refusal to back down from his opinions when they came under fire. Erasmus defended the truth of Scripture and the teachings of the church fathers as vehemently

and relentlessly as his lifespan allowed. Theologically, Augustine was an unquestioned church father and Erasmus himself asserted that he had no interest in professing his own opinions, but only those of the founders of the absolute religion of Christianity.

Essential to Erasmus' idea of the *philosophia Christi* appears to be the recognition that God gave mankind the gift of philosophy, before crowning it with the final truth of the words of Christ. Christians must therefore recognize the value of the ancients, including Epicurus, and make their classical philosophies part of their Christian lifestyles. Nevertheless, his defense of the ancient pales in comparison to Erasmus' relentless vindication of what he considered to be forgotten Christian truths. Pagan philosophies were helpful aids in the understanding of Christian religion, but could never oppose anything that Christ had taught. While we have definitely seen Erasmus' appreciation of Epicurus, it was also clear that censorship was employed in translating Epicureanism into Christian terms. If Erasmus would have truly considered Epicureanism in its entirety, he would have addressed the possibility of its first fundamental convictions: to not fear God and to disregard the afterlife. Instead, Erasmus censored these essentials for the pagan mistakes that they were. He reduced the ancient philosophy to the pursuit of happiness, and from there on bent its meaning to fit the virtues of Christianity.

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