

## The Continental Reformation.

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### III.—THE RENAISSANCE: ERASMUS.

A SHALLOW philosophy has suggested the principle that "ridicule is the test of truth."<sup>1</sup> The suggestion is hardly worthy of discussion, and we have no time to discuss it here. But it is worth while to raise the question how far ridicule helped the work of the Reformation. It may be said, with confidence, that satire and banter did a good deal in preparing the way for the Reformation; whether it did not do as much harm as good, when the conflict had actually begun, is not so easy to decide. The work of the Humanists, and especially of those Humanists who largely employed satire in preparing for the Reformation, was in the main destructive: ridicule, as a reforming force, can hardly be anything else. They challenged the usurped and tyrannical power of the hierarchy; they mercilessly exposed the folly and stupidity of the greater part of the teaching given not only from the pulpit, but even from University chairs; and they taught people to see the debasing character of the numerous superstitions which monks and friars professed (either ignorantly or fraudulently) to regard as efficacious and edifying. Religion, as taught by those in authority, and as accepted by those who had any religion at all, had become mainly external, such as the performing of certain acts, being present at services, going on pilgrimages, performing of penances, veneration of relics, and the like; and every one of these, however helpful, or at least innocent, in their origin, had become in practice little better than paganism revived. Services appealed simply to eye and ear, even when they were decently performed; and they were often grossly irreverent. Pilgrimages were picnics, accompanied by drunkenness and lewdness. Penances were often senseless in character, and could be compounded

<sup>1</sup> The saying is attributed to Lord Shaftesbury, but it is not found in his writings. See Carlyle on Voltaire, in the *Foreign Review*, 1829.

for by payment. Relics were sometimes of the most ludicrous and impossible kind ; straw from the manger at Bethlehem, and feathers from Archangels' wings.<sup>1</sup> All this kind of superstition supplied boundless material for satire, and satire might be useful in putting a stop to it.

The ignorance of the clergy was another topic which gave many openings to the satirist ; and, as is commonly the case in corrupt times, it was those whose duty it was to put an end to such ignorance who were least aware of its existence. Bishops did not visit their clergy ; they did not know, and they did not care to know, what kind of priests were ministering to the people. Luther suspected that things were bad in Saxony, and at his suggestion a Visitation was held, and he was one of the visitors. He has left us a report, which shows us how well grounded his suspicions were. Some villagers did not know the Lord's Prayer ; they said that it was too long to learn by heart. In one village not a single peasant knew any prayer whatever. In another there was an old priest who could scarcely repeat either the Lord's Prayer or the Creed, but who made a good income by counteracting the spells of witches. And this view of the functions of a priest was common enough, especially in Italy. He might be utterly ignorant or grossly immoral ; but he had control of unseen powers. His blessings were worth having for oneself, and his curses for the confusion of one's enemies.

Is this ignorance of the clergy a point which might have been mentioned among the differences between the English and the Continental Reformations ? There is not much reason for thinking so. In 1551, Bishop Hooper held a Visitation of the diocese of Gloucester. He asked his clergy these questions : How many Commandments are there ? Where are they found ? Repeat them. What are the Articles of the Faith ? Repeat them. Prove them from Scripture. Repeat the Lord's Prayer.

<sup>1</sup> In the collection at Wittenberg there were 5,005 relics ; among them pieces of the rods of Moses and Aaron, and ashes of the burning bush. At Halle there were 8,933 relics ; among them wine from the wedding-feast at Cana, and some of the earth out of which Adam was made.

Where is it found? Out of 311 clergy, only fifty answered all these simple questions, and of these fifty there were nineteen who answered only *mediocriter*. Eight could not answer a single question, and one knew that there were ten Commandments, but knew nothing else. There was plenty of material for gibes and jokes in such a condition of things as this, especially as the New Learning spread and knowledge was increased.

The Renaissance opened up a promising sphere of activity for the *condottieri* of literature. It has been pointed out that one tendency of the Renaissance was to exalt the dignity of the individual as distinct from the body to which he might belong, and to reveal the natural value of each single person. Everyone who had a gift, if it was only a fluent tongue, could attract attention by proposing startling innovations or attacking venerable institutions: and it might easily happen that the individual combatants were far more interesting than the subjects about which they disputed. Whether it was on the dispensing power of the Pope or the sacrifice of the Mass, the value of indulgences or the necessity of fasting, the realism of the new art or the worthlessness of the old philosophy, any man could get a hearing, if only he could put his points with some cleverness; and anybody could raise a laugh, if only he could make established things look ridiculous.

In Italy, the Renaissance was unproductive in the religious sphere. Excepting Laurentius Valla, hardly any of the Italian Humanists did anything for the recovery or illumination of religious truth. He showed that the Donation of Constantine was a fable, that there were faults in the Vulgate, and that the Apostles' Creed could hardly have been composed by the Apostles; and he wrote notes on the New Testament. But neither he nor any of the early Humanists used the New Learning either to defend or to attack the doctrines of the Church. Their attitude towards the Christian faith was one of well-bred reserve. It was gratuitous *gaucherie* to pose as an unbeliever, when no one supposed that you were serious in

professing to believe. Erudition and classical elegance were the things to be cultivated, and to study the Vulgate or the Latin Fathers was fatal to the acquisition of a Ciceronian style. How very little interest the Italian Humanists had in Christianity is shown by the fact that printing had been going on for sixty years, and some works (it is said) had been published eighty or a hundred times, before anyone thought of publishing a Greek Testament.

Beyond all question the best representative of the most fruitful elements in the Renaissance is Erasmus. He sums up in himself its love of the past, its devotion to literature, its enthusiasm for culture, its scorn of ignorance and superstition, its appreciation of ideas, and its indifference to niceties of doctrine. Wisdom and morality were to him of far more account than speculative dogmas or scholastic subtleties ; and this was the case with nearly all the best Humanists. He knew that doctrine was a powerful aid to living a godly life, and he saw no reason for preferring other doctrines to those which were taught by the Church ; but these must be freed from the contemptible excrescences with which the ignorance, avarice, and pride of priests and monks had overlaid them. It is here that Erasmus was such a puzzle, and seemed to be such a timid time-server, to the men of his own generation, and that he remains much the same to ourselves. Erasmus was resolved to remain a loyal Catholic ; yet he must denounce stupid and debasing superstitions. But how much of what the medieval Church taught was Catholic truth, and how much was superstitious perversion of it or pagan addition to it ? It was difficult to attack the latter without seeming to attack the former, and the critic might easily make mistakes in drawing the line between them. Few men, even among Protestants or sceptics, have assailed the vices and follies of monks and priests with more incisive ridicule than Erasmus, and to the ordinary reader he seemed to be assailing the whole ecclesiastical system. As regards effects, although not as regards intention, the ordinary reader was not far wrong. Erasmus was quite sincere in

declaring, more and more decidedly and loudly as time went on and as Luther's attitude became more pronounced, that he was not a Lutheran, and had no intention of becoming one. But his writings as a whole, and especially those which were most widely read, told far more against the Church of Rome than for it; and, according to the principles and policy of the time, Paul IV. was quite right in placing the writings on the Index.

In this matter Erasmus was not unlike the historian Guicciardini. Guicciardini was the younger contemporary of Erasmus, and, as the unscrupulous factotum of Leo X. and Clement VII., he knew the dark corners of ecclesiastical policy and practice far better. His father had not allowed him to gratify his insatiable ambition by becoming an ecclesiastic, because of the unutterable corruption of the Papacy and the Curia. So Guicciardini entered the Law, and became a diplomatist and statesman in the service of the Popes. In conviction and profession he remained an adherent of the Roman Church; but he loathed, even more intensely than Erasmus did, the clergy and the Papal Court, whose dirty work he cynically executed with consummate industry and skill. This is how he writes of his employers:

“It would be impossible to speak so ill of the Roman Court as it deserves, so that more abuse would not be merited, seeing that it is an infamy—an example of all the shames and scandals of the world. I do not know a man that is more disgusted than I am with the ambition, greed, and unmanliness of the priests.”

And this is his own shameless excuse for scheming and working in the interests of a government which he so justly despised and abhorred:

“My position under several Popes has compelled me to desire their aggrandizement *for the sake of my own profit*. Otherwise, I should have loved Martin Luther as myself—not that I might break loose from the laws which Christianity imposes on us, but that I might see that gang of scoundrels stripped either of their vices or of their power.”

Guicciardini was a little younger than Machiavelli, whom he criticized as an amiable enthusiast, because, although, like

himself, he regarded moral principles as having as little to do with the art of government as with the art of navigation, yet in Machiavelli there still survived some glow of patriotism. The "Principe" of Machiavelli has often been condemned in strong terms; but the "Ricordi Politici" of Guicciardini has been described as "Italian corruption reduced to a code and raised into a rule of life."

It is here that the parallel between Erasmus and Guicciardini ends and becomes a contrast. Both of them hated the wickedness and folly of priests and Papalists, and both of them resolved to remain in the Roman Church in spite of these things, which Erasmus believed to be curable, though Guicciardini, perhaps, did not. But what is certain is that Guicciardini was willing, for the sake of his own profit and power, to work hard in support of the system which he abhorred; while Erasmus, at the risk of liberty, and, perhaps, of life, continued to ridicule and condemn it. But we will not part from Guicciardini without two more quotations, one of which excites our pity, and the other our admiration:

"All states," he says, "are mortal; everything, either by nature or by accident, comes to a close. Hence, a citizen who finds himself witnessing the dissolution of his country need not so much groan over this misfortune as over his own lot, in having been born in a time when the hour of his country's doom has struck."

That is sad and selfish rather than heroic. Seneca, or Epictetus, or Marcus Aurelius would give us better counsel than that. But here is something which is worthy of the best Stoicism, and not unworthy of a Christian:

"Do not be afraid of benefiting man, simply because you see that ingratitude is so common; for, besides the fact that a temper of benevolence (in itself, and without any other object) is a generous quality, and in a way divine, you now and again find someone exhibiting such gratitude as richly to compensate for the ingratitude of all the rest."<sup>1</sup>

Where Machiavelli and Guicciardini went wrong was in supposing that moral principles—that is, just those forces by means of which societies are held together and nations are

<sup>1</sup> See Morley's *Essays on Guicciardini and Machiavelli*.

exalted—can be set aside in politics. What is required for strong government, they said, is acute intelligence backed by remorseless vigour. The cunning to plan and the force to strike—these are essential ; perfidy and cruelty are admissible if required ; truth and equity are irrelevant. In statesmanship there are no crimes, only blunders. Let the ruler be loved if he can, but it is absolutely essential that he should be feared. “ Praised be those who love their country more than the safety of their souls !”<sup>1</sup>

It is this ignoring of moral principles, to say nothing of Providence, which makes these two writers unsafe guides in estimating the forces which determined the course of the Reformation. We are in safer hands when we follow the guidance of Erasmus, although he requires some supplementing and correcting if we are to arrive at a fair judgment.

The words of Drummond respecting him will bear quoting once more :

“ Erasmus was, in his own age, the apostle of common sense and of rational religion. He did not care for dogma, and accordingly, the dogmas of Rome, which had the consent of the Christian world, were, in his eyes, preferable to the dogmas of Protestantism. . . . From the beginning to the end of his career he remained true to the purpose of his life, which was to fight the battle of sound learning and plain common sense against the powers of ignorance and superstition ; and amid all the convulsions of that period he never once lost his mental balance.”<sup>2</sup>

There were other good qualities which he did not lose, and some which he acquired or improved. But there were also some which he did not possess, and which he never acquired. He himself confessed that he lacked the spirit of a martyr ; and we may say that he lacked the strength of mind which is required for the work of a reformer at a crisis in which reforms, on a large scale and without much delay, were righteously and clamorously demanded. There was hardly a practice or a

<sup>1</sup> In his essay on Ranke's “ Popes,” Macaulay says : “ Neither the spirit of Savonarola, nor the spirit of Machiavelli, had anything in common with the spirit of the religious or political Protestants of the North.” That is true of Machiavelli ; but in 1523 Luther republished Savonarola's “ Commentary on the Psalms.”

<sup>2</sup> “ Life of Erasmus,” ii., pp. 355 *et seq.*

doctrine of the Roman clergy that Luther endeavoured to reform which had not previously been criticized or ridiculed by Erasmus. Erasmus, like Luther, contends for the individual responsibility of man to God without intermediate agency, and he denies the mediatorial function of a sacerdotal order. He declares that much of the religion which priests and monks teach the people is mere paganism, with the names of saints and angels substituted for those of gods and goddesses. And although the "Praise of Folly" is on the surface (what the "Ship of Fools" is in reality) a skit on human follies in general, yet it is in fact a satirical exposure of the follies and frauds of those who professed to represent the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> In the sphere of religion the whole hierarchy of Rome, from the Pope downwards, together with the majority of the laity, are shown to be egregious fools.

The Spaniard Stunica sent to Leo X. a list of thousands of heretical expressions collected out of the writings of Erasmus. To such as Stunica it was no doubt shocking to read exposures of the ridiculous and irreverent problems which theologians sometimes discussed; such as, whether any time was required for the Divine Generation; whether God could have taken the form of a woman, or an ass, or a pumpkin; whether a pumpkin could have preached and worked miracles. And it was unpleasant to be told that theologians were rather dangerous persons to deal with in dispute, because they come down on their opponents with hundreds of proved conclusions, and call on them to recant; and then, if one refuses to recant, one is denounced as a heretic. This was exactly what Stunica did. But Leo X. was not a rigorous champion of orthodoxy, and perhaps Stunica's private denunciation of Erasmus did not do the latter much harm. There was a little more peril when the University of Paris publicly condemned the "Colloquies." Yet, in spite of his audacious utterances, Erasmus was never molested by either inquisitor or prince, and the University's condemnation was really a magnificent advertisement.

<sup>1</sup> Pennington, "Life and Character of Erasmus," pp. 77-102.



But, in spite of this large amount of agreement with Luther, Erasmus was quite unable to take the same line as Luther. Luther felt that they were not in harmony, yet he tried to make himself the humble ally of a scholar, whose reputation already stood so high in Europe. As early as March 1, 1517, Luther had written to John Lange: "I am at present reading our Erasmus, *but my heart recoils from him more and more.*"<sup>1</sup> In 1518, he wrote to John Reuchlin, another great light of the Renaissance, saying that he did not possess Reuchlin's learning or ability, but they were fighting for the same cause. Luther no doubt believed this, but it was only partly true, for Luther was not a Humanist, and Reuchlin was not a Reformer. The next year, 1519, Luther wrote a similar letter to Erasmus, who from the first was not much more than stiffly neutral, and ended in being bitterly hostile. Erasmus took time to answer him. At last came a frigid letter, in which he gently declined to take sides. He had read Luther's "Notes on the Psalms" and had liked them, but he had not read any of his other writings, and therefore could express no opinion about them, but they seemed to be causing a great deal of excitement. His own view was that these discussions should be confined to the learned, who would be able to debate such matters without heat. Erasmus frequently excused himself from giving any judgment respecting Luther, by saying that he had read so few of his writings. Luther made no reply, but he did read the writings of Erasmus, and as late as April, 1524, he could still write affectionately to him, while lamenting his timidity: "We have borne your weakness patiently and highly appreciate your gifts." Five years later, however, he writes very bitterly about him, as raging against the Lutherans: "He is a thoughtless Indifferentist, who ridicules all religion in his Lucian fashion."<sup>2</sup>

Their estrangement was not very wonderful. They agreed

<sup>1</sup> M. A. Currie, "Letters of Martin Luther," pp. 13, 38 *et seq.* The words in italics are too strong for *et indies decrescit mihi animus erga eum.* See B. J. Kidd, "Documents illustrative of the Continental Reformation," p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Currie, pp. 123, 191.

chiefly in what they condemned and wished to destroy—immorality, greed, fraud, ignorance, and superstition, especially in the lives of monks and clergy. What Erasmus ridiculed, Luther denounced. With regard to reconstruction they had not much in common; nor could they have, for Erasmus did not want to reconstruct anything. He wished to retain the existing edifice and to free it from overgrowths and filth. Moreover, he was content to work slowly, and to trust a great deal to the gradual spread of knowledge. He had nothing of the burning zeal which made Luther so vehement and so courageous. He was naturally, if not exactly timid, yet very much averse to violent language and violent measures, indeed to everything which might provoke what he called a *tumultus*, and which we may perhaps translate “a beastly row.” He was a lover of peace and of gentle methods, and he declared that he so abhorred all sorts of quarrels, that, if he had a large estate to defend at law, he would sooner lose it than litigate it. Luther said of him, “Erasmus knows very well how to expose error, but he does not know how to teach the truth.” In 1536, when he had quite broken with Erasmus, Luther thus compared him with himself, Melanchthon, and Carlstadt; “Erasmus has good words to no purpose; Luther has good purpose, but good words won’t come; Melanchthon has both, and Carlstadt neither.”<sup>1</sup>

But Erasmus deserves a better estimate than that. He was the greatest figure of the Renaissance, the best representative of the New Learning that any country produced. And he was the most cosmopolitan. Born, educated, and ordained in Holland, he had lived in France, Belgium, England, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany; and, although he derived something from every one of these nationalities, yet he did not belong to any one of them more than to the rest, and (what is rather remarkable in such a scholar) he seems to have mastered the language of none of them. The language which Erasmus wrote and spoke was Latin; not the Latin of the classics or of the

<sup>1</sup> “Res et verba Philippus; verba sine re Erasmus; res sine verbis Lutherus; nec res nec verba Carlostadius.”

Fathers, but a Latin of his own ; neither Ciceronian nor elegant, but conversational, pointed, and vigorous, and intelligible to everyone who knew Latin of any kind. Mark Pattison says that the Latin style of Erasmus is "the most delightful which the Renaissance has left us." And Erasmus talked with so many influential persons in Europe that he would have been an international force, if he had written only a quarter of his actual works.

In the early days of his brilliant career, he was much more of a scholar than a theologian, and even in his later years he cared much more for religion than for theology. This was one of the things which checked sympathy between him and Luther. Luther cared little for literary culture, and Erasmus cared still less for Lutheran theology. If one must have theology in addition to the simple teaching of the Bible, he preferred that which had the sanction of time and of the Church. The essence of Christianity, according to him, is the love of God and the love of one's neighbour manifesting itself in sympathy and forbearance. Love was the motive power in the life of Christ, and it ought to be the motive power in the life of every Christian. In an excellent letter to the Bohemian, John Schlechta, he says : "Many might be reconciled to the Church of Rome, if we did not define everything exactly, and were contented with those doctrines which are laid down in the Holy Scriptures and are necessary to salvation. These are few in number."<sup>1</sup> His "Dagger of the Christian Soldier"—*Enchiridion Militis Christiani*<sup>2</sup>—written in 1501, and republished in 1518 with a letter defending its contents, shows us both his earlier and his riper thoughts on Christianity, which is held to consist, not so much in the belief of certain doctrines, as in the practice of patience, purity, and love. He says that he wrote the *Enchiridion* to correct those who make religion consist in external observances, while they neglect inward piety.

<sup>1</sup> Pennington, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> "Dagger," not "handbook," is right; Erasmus himself calls it *pugniunculus*.

Like his younger contemporary, Zwingli, who was another enthusiastic Humanist, Erasmus had no such contempt for the human reason as Luther had. Natural religion, though inferior to the Gospel, is acceptable with the Father of all; and Cicero and Socrates may win salvation as well as St. Paul. Erasmus was convinced that such moral teachers as these had the true spirit of Christianity and might be called Christians before Christ. Cicero had as much right to a high place in heaven as many a canonized saint, and when one thought of the Athenian martyr, one felt inclined to pray, *Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis.*

That Erasmus should select just these two heathen teachers is of interest, for both of them have points of contact with himself—Cicero with regard to his subsequent fame, and Socrates with regard to a leading feature in his teaching. The reputation of both Cicero and Erasmus would probably be less disputed and more generally accepted as excellent, if not quite such a large number of their letters had survived. Men, who might otherwise have seemed to be almost heroic, have written themselves down as very human indeed. Again, the moral teaching of Socrates is built upon the principle that "virtue is knowledge." If a man knows what is really good for him, he is sure to seek it. Men go wrong through ignorance; they think that vice is good for them. Prove to them that this is an error, and they will cease to follow vice. Erasmus was just as firmly persuaded that the remedy for the frightful evils, which disgraced the Church and dismayed all serious persons, was to be found in increase of knowledge. He believed that these evils could be gradually driven out under the influence of ridicule and common sense. "Give light," he said, "and the darkness will disperse of itself." That is a comfortable metaphor; but to suppose that mankind will always seek what is good for them when they know it, and that to expose abuses and make them look ridiculous will suffice to effect their reform, is to leave out of the account the unruly wills and affections of sinful men. And Erasmus seems to have been not alone in this

opinion. There were other Humanists who were disposed to think that sarcasm, elegantly expressed and accompanied by culture and good taste, would heal the running sores of society and bring back the beauties of a Christian life. It is true that some of these Humanists had somewhat defective conceptions of what a Christian life meant ; they thought of it as refinement freed from superstition. But Erasmus knew better than this ; and, although he had not had Luther's terrible experiences, he must have been aware that something more than banter and culture was needed to give relief to the stricken conscience and strength to the enfeebled will.

