2. Erasmus’ Praise of Folly

Although born near Rotterdam and known as ‘Erasmus of Rotterdam’, Desiderius Erasmus (c.1466-1536) lived only four years in the city and spent most of his life outside the Netherlands. By the 1530s his writings accounted for about 25% of all book sales and earned him the sobriquet, ‘Prince of the Humanists’.

His real name was Gerrit Gerritszoon (Gerard Gerardson), being the illegitimate son of a priest called Roger Gerard and Margaret, a washerwoman. He later adopted the tautological double Latin/Greek name meaning ‘the desired one’, by which he is known. When he was about 15, both his parents died from the Plague, and his guardians eventually sent him to the Augustinian college of Stein near Gouda, where he spent the next six years training for the priesthood. He was ordained in 1492, but he never assumed an active role in priestly functions and never had a parish of his own.

Erasmus studied and taught in most of the European cultural centres, including Paris, Leuven, Turin, Basle, Oxford and Cambridge, where he was Professor of Divinity and of Greek. He was, in many ways, the model intellectual, living for reading and writing and the company of other intellectuals. He once remarked: “When I get a little money I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes”. His own works were widely read, including Adagia (Adages, 1500), a collection of sayings, and a translation of the New Testament from Greek into Latin (1516).

In his writings, Erasmus recommended collating arguments on both sides of a question but suspending judgment, except on religion which he believed was not rational but a matter of the heart. With his conciliatory and moderate attitude and his non-dogmatic and basically ethical type of Christianity, he had a major influence on the development of Humanism, not only in Holland but throughout the western world. He was a major inspiration of Martin Luther and the Reformation—he was the man who ‘laid the egg that Luther hatched’.

After his death, his writings were placed on the Catholic Index, which is partly surprising; for example, in 1514 he anonymously published a satiric dialogue, Julius Exclusus, in which Pope Julius II is turned away from the gates of Heaven by St. Peter. The Education of a Christian Prince was published in 1516, 26 years before Machiavelli’s The Prince. Whereas Machiavelli states that to maintain control it is better for a prince to be feared than loved, Erasmus prefers for the prince to be loved, and suggests that he needs a well-rounded education in order to govern justly and benevolently and avoid becoming a source of oppression.

Erasmus’ best-known work was The Praise of Folly (Moriae Encomium), a vitriolic satire on the traditions of the Catholic Church, clerical corruptions and popular superstitions, written in 1509 at the house of Sir Thomas More, published in 1511 and dedicated to his host and fellow Humanist (its title is a pun on More’s name). Using the familiar device of the ‘wise fool’ and speaking in the name of Folly, a Greek goddess begat by Plutus and Youth, and also the term used in the Middle Ages as a synonym for human nature, he satirises priests, popes, pardons and indulgences, the worship of saints, transubstantiation, theological disputes, scholasticism, and indeed spares no one and nothing inherent in the Christian religion of his day.

Of course, since Folly says these things, who can take her seriously? But the device goes deeper than that, because for Erasmus it is important to distinguish follies to be praised from those to be condemned. For, he argues, truth can be foolish, folly. Everything is two-sided and it is only in a tolerant, irrational love that truth can be discovered. Religion, like life itself, is a folly but we should embrace both with all our heart and soul.

The work is divided into four parts: ‘Folly Herself’, ‘The Powers and Pleasures of Folly’, ‘The Followers of Folly’, and ‘The Christian Fool’. Folly names herself as the cause of all folly, then lists the foolish people, and ends by contrasting them with the truly Christian Fool.

The pleasures of folly, which make life worth living, include marriage, childhood and old age. Without her, the human race would die out, for who can marry without folly? Again, “Folly is the one thing that holds fast to fleeting youth and wards off hateful old age”. The happiest man is the one who is the most thoroughly deluded because he is free from care. Who can be happy without flattery or self-love?

The third chapter lists some prominent foolish people, including: merchants, who lie, cheat and steal but still maintain a respectable reputation; grammarians, who teach useless information, yet feel self-important; philosophers, who declare that only they themselves are

“When I get a little money I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes”
wise but are too blind to see what is in front of them; and, finally, the clergy, who are special targets of her vitriol. Here Erasmus delivers his strongest inventive against the ecclesiastical abuses of his day.

Pardons and indulgences, the worship of saints, the abstract disputes of theologians and the doctrine of transsubstantiation are all ridiculed. Theologians are attacked for explaining the mysteries of life and the Bible to suit themselves and for creating subtleties in doctrine that even the apostles would not understand. They describe Hell in minute detail, "just as if they had lived there for years".

As for the monks—whom he calls 'brainstick fools'—they invent rules to be kept with mathematical precision but do not keep them themselves. They are 'highly in love with themselves, and fond admirers of their own happiness'. They detest money but have the vices of wine and women. They use their religious authority to tyrannise. As for popes, cardinals, bishops and priests, if they were to live their lives as the apostles, in poverty and purity, they would give up their positions.

In the final section, Erasmus as Folly argues that the true Christian appears foolish at first, yet actually possesses real wisdom. Folly uses the Bible extensively to back up her argument, particularly quoting from the Apostle Paul: "The foolishness of God is wiser than men"; and "We are fools for Christ". Christianity may look like madness to the world, as even Christ was a fool to sacrifice himself for humanity, but it contains a deeper, spiritual wisdom. Erasmus is essentially arguing that in religion, as in life, there are two kinds of folly: one which he has praised ironically, and the other seriously. The latter is a rejection of Hellenic intellectualism in favour of a simple religion of the heart. It is this faith which is popular today among those who attack the so-called 'New Atheists' for missing the point, which is that true religion is felt rather than argued about.

_The Praise of Folly_ points up a significant difference between the northern Humanists and their Italian predecessors. Most Italian Humanists—the civic Humanists—spoke to and for the upper-class elements in their city-states. They urged political leaders to become more statesmanlike, businessmen to become more generous with their wealth, and all to become more moral. They did not dis-sent or speak out in opposition; in urging the elite groups to assume their responsibilities, they were actually trying to defend, not condemn, them. Italian Humanism focused on the liberality or parsimony of princes, on the moral worth of riches, and on the question of how to define true nobility. The northern Humanists like Erasmus, however, spoke out against a broad range of political, social, economic, and religious evils. They faced reality and became ardent reformers of society's ills.

The northern Humanists also went further than the Italians in broadening their interest in ancient literature to include early Christian writings—the Scriptures and the works of the Church Fathers. This led to the production of new and more accurate editions of the Scriptures: Erasmus' Greek edition of the New Testament became famous and was used by Luther. It also led them to compare unfavourably the corruption and complexity of the Church in their own day with the simplicity of early Christianity. Since they held that the essence of religion was morality and rational piety—what Erasmus called the 'philosophy of Christ'—rather than ceremony and dogma, it is hardly surprising that the Church became a major target of their reforming zeal.

Although a reformer and a liberal, Erasmus remained a Catholic. He disliked the religious warfare of the time because of the intolerant atmosphere it induced. Luther's stand, like that of the Church itself, was rigid and inflexible, and Erasmus preferred the road of moderation and conciliation. He was finally brought into conflict with Luther and attacked his position on predestination in his work _A Diatribe or Sermon on the Freedom of the Will_ (1524). His arguments include that whoever denies the freedom of the will makes God responsible for sin which would be inconsistent with God's righteousness and goodness and that the demands of God upon man assume his freedom, otherwise God would be a tyrant. He takes the view that man is free to accept or reject the grace of God. He writes: "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them".

Erasmus steers a middle course, advocating a hybrid of grace and free will so that salvation is both by merit and grace. God cooperates with man, and man with God. It is a joint venture, a partnership. Erasmus believed man was bound to sin, but had a right to the forgiving mercy of God, if only he would seek this through the means offered him by the Church itself.

In _What is Good_, A.C. Grayling explains that what makes Erasmus a Humanist, albeit a Christian Humanist, "is not simply his love of the classics and his application of them in his life and thought, but more importantly his belief in man's rationality and his ability to take moral responsibility for himself". The Catholic Church, with its emphasis on man as a weak, irrational, fallen creature, eventually disowned him.

Ironically, in some of these respects reformers like Luther and Calvin were closer to the Catholic Church than to Humanists like Erasmus. Luther, who had been educated in scholastic theology with little humanist influence, didn't believe in free will and replied to Erasmus' work in 1525 with _On Enforced Will_. Indeed, both Luther and Calvin were dogmat-ic and absolutist theologians who could not remotely be described as Humanists.

So, while on a broad historical scale the Reformation was a step towards secularism, in its early years it proved to be a mirror image of the Catholic hegemony beforehand. It is not Luther who is the real champion of free thought, however brave his "Here I stand, I can do no other" speech at the Diet of Worms, but Erasmus and the other Humanists of the Renaissance.