

AP Euro – Chapter 12 Civic Humanism: The Writings of Erasmus [Source: Renaissance Writers, Robert Freeman, 2013]

Excerpts from the writings of Erasmus Desiderius Erasmus was born in Rotterdam in Holland in 1466. He was ordained a priest in 1492 but left the monastic life two years later. He went to Paris to study theology in 1495, and to England in 1499, where he became a close friend of the humanist Thomas More. He published the Enchiridion Militie Christiani in 1501, an appeal for a return to the spirit of early Christianity, with its emphasis on mutual love, sharing, and rejection of the pursuit of material riches. In 1509, Erasmus wrote In Praise of Folly, which proved one of the most widely published and influential of all Renaissance humanist books. The book deals with all manner of secular and religious follies, both types of which he mercilessly mocked. In 1516, Erasmus published another hugely influential book, a new edition of the New Testament based on his translation from the original Greek. It was this edition that would serve as the basis for King James' version of the Bible in 1605. Erasmus' sharp criticism of Church practices was influential in the early development of Martin Luther's thought. During the early years of the Reformation, it was written that "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched." As Luther developed his theology, however, he grew disenchanted with what he saw as Erasmus' equivocation over Church failings. Erasmus would not fundamentally condemn or leave the Catholic Church, choosing to stay and work for reform from within. He warned that Luther's agitation would lead to mass bloodshed, a prophecy that proved all too true. Their relationship became very bitter toward the ends of their lives. Erasmus died in 1536.

On War:

I often wonder what thing it is that drives men to such a degree of madness as to rush with so much pain, so much cost, so much risk, to the destruction of one another. For what are we doing all our lives but making war? The brute beasts do not all engage in war, but only some wild kinds, and those do not fight among themselves, but with animals of a different species. They fight too with their natural arms, and not like us with machines, upon which we expend an ingenuity worthy of devils. Consider too how many crimes are committed under pretext of war, when as they say in the midst of arms, laws are silent; how many thefts, how many acts of sacrilege, how many rapes, how many other abuses which one is ashamed even to name; and this moral contagion cannot but last for many years, even when the war is over. What kingdom can you set against the lives and blood of so many thousand men? And it is followed by such a train of calamities, that there is good reason, in the fiction of poets, that war comes to us from hell and is sent by the furies. But you will say suppose there is a real dispute, to whom some sovereignty belongs? It is not a question concerning a nation's welfare, but only whether it is bound to call this or that personage it's sovereign. If you look a little closely, you will find that it is generally the private interests of those in power that give occasion to war. And I would ask you, do you think it consistent with humanity that the world should be disturbed by war when this or that sovereign has some pretended complaint against another?

Excerpts from In Praise of Folly by Erasmus

Of hunters:

Among these to be ranked as the greatest of fools such as take an immoderate delight in hunting, and think no music comparable to the sounding of horns and the yelping of beagles and were they to require medication, would no doubt think the most supreme virtues to be in the dried shit on a dog's tail. When they have run down their game, what strange pleasure they take in cutting off it up! Cows and sheep may be dropped by common butchers, but what is killed in hunting must be dismembered by none under the rank of a gentleman, who shall fall devoutly on his knees, and drawing out a fancy sword after several ceremonies shall dissect all the parts as artificially as the best skilled anatomist, while all that stand round shall watch this intently. And he that can but dip his finger, and taste of the blood, shall think his own blood improved by it.

Of philosophers:

Next to these come the philosophers in their long beards and short cloaks, who esteem themselves the only possessors of wisdom, and look upon the rest of mankind as the dirt and rubbish of the creation. Yet these men's happiness is only a frantic craziness of brain. They build castles in the air, and infinite worlds in a vacuum. They will give you to a hair's

breadth the dimensions of the sun, moon, and stars, as easily as they would do that of a flagon or saucepan. They will give punctual account of the creation of thunder, of the origin of winds, of the nature of eclipses, and of all the other abstrusest difficulties in physics, without the least demur or hesitation, as if they had been admitted into the inner council of creation. Alas, nature does but laugh at all their puny conjectures. For they never yet made one worthwhile discovery on which they are unanimously agreed in each point of the smallest moment.

Of national pride:

Where conceit has dealt with private persons, so has it given a particular swatch of self-love to each country and nation. Upon this account the English claim to have the most handsome women, of the being most accomplished in the skill of music, and of keeping the best tables. The Scotch brag of their gentility, and pretend the genius of their native soil inclines them to be good disputants. The French think themselves remarkable for complaisance and good breeding, pretending to the greatest proficiency in polemic divinity. The Italians value themselves for learning and eloquence. Of princes and now I have a mind to give some small touches of princes and courts. He would consider that he that takes a scepter in his hand should manage the public, not his private, interest; study nothing but the common good. But now they are only taken up with themselves, not admitting anyone to their ear but such as know how to speak pleasant things and not trouble them with business. They believe they have discharged all the duty of a prince if they hunt every day, keep a stable of fine horses, sell dignities, and invent new ways of draining the citizens' purses and bringing it into their own exchequer

Of popes, cardinals, and bishops:

Nor are princes by themselves in their manner of life, since popes, cardinals, and bishops have so diligently followed their steps. For they feed themselves only, and for the care of their flock either put it over to Christ or lay it all on their poor vicars. Nor do they so much as remember their name, or what the word bishop signifies, to wit: labor, care, and trouble. But in racking to gather money they truly act the part. And for popes, that supply the place of Christ, they should endeavor to imitate His life, to wit His poverty, labor, doctrine, cross, and contempt of life. But in truth, they gather about themselves so many dispensations, so much tribute, so many pardons; such horses, mules, guards, and so much pleasure. You see how much I have comprehended here. Instead of so many watchings, fastings, tears, prayers, sermons, good endeavors, and a thousand the like troublesome exercises, they have so many scribes, copying clerks, notaries, advocates, promoters, secretaries, muleteers, grooms, bankers.

Of courts:

And as to the court lords, what should I mention of them? That most of whom though there be nothing more indented, more servile, more contemptible, yet they would seem as they were the most excellent of all others. And yet they are contented to wear about them gold, jewels, purple, and those other marks of virtue and wisdom, but for the study of the things themselves, they remit it to others, thinking it happiness enough for them that they can call the king master, Your Grace, My Lord; in a word that they are past all shame and can flatter pleasantly. For these are the arts that speak a man truly noble. But if you look into their manner of life you'll find them mere sots, as debauched as Penelope's wooers.

Of the fraud of indulgences:

What shall I say of such as advertise and practice the fraud of pardons and indulgences? Those that will compute the time of each soul's residence in purgatory, and assign them a longer or shorter stay there, according as they purchase more or fewer of these palfrey pardons and saleable exemptions? Or what can be said bad enough of others who pretend that by the force of such magical charms (which some religious impostors invented either for amusement or, what is more likely, for gain) they shall procure riches, honor, health, pleasure, long life, a lusty old age, and even, after death sitting at the right hand of God.

Of religious monks:

And next these come those that commonly call themselves the religious and monks, most false in both titles, when both a great part of them are farthest from religion, and no men swarn thicker in all places than themselves. They call themselves Cordeliers, Colettes, Benedictines, Bernardines, Carmelites, Augustines, Williamites, and Jacobines. They reckon it one of the main points of piety if they are so illiterate that they can't so much as read. And yet, like pleasant fellows, with all this vileness, ignorance, rudeness, and impudence, they represent to us the lives of the apostles. And of these, a great part build so much on their ceremonies and petty traditions of men that they think one heaven is too poor a reward for so great merit, little dreaming that the time will come when Christ, not regarding any of these trifles, will call them to account for His precept of charity.

Of begging friars:

And yet these kind of people no man dares despise, especially those begging friars, because they are privy to all men's secrets by means of confessions, as they call them. Which yet were no less than treason to discover, unless, being got drunk, they have a mind to be pleasant, and then all comes out, that is to say by hints and conjectures but suppressing the names. But if anyone should anger these wasps, they'll revenge themselves in their public sermons and so point out their enemy by circumlocutions that there's no one but understands whom 'tis they mean, unless he understand nothing at all; nor will they give over their barking till you throw the dogs a bone.

On the Philosophy of Christ:

The teaching of Christ demands a heart wholly purged of the influence of worldly anxieties for it is not a carefree or tranquil profession to be a Christian. And yet, the means to this philosophy are easy and at hand. Do only thy diligence to bring a godly and ready mind chiefly endowed with plain and pure faith. Thy master and instructor (that is the spirit of God) will not from thee be absent, which is never more gladly present with any than with simple and plain hearts. Men's doctrines [Ed's Note: he's referring here to Aristotle and Scholasticism] so confound many men's wits and make them cling to despair because they are so crafty, and contentious, but this delectable doctrine doth apply equally to all men, feeding us with milk, forbearing, nourishing, suffering, and doing all things until we may increase and wax greater in Christ. Him do I count a true divine which, not with crafty and subtle reasons, but that in heart, countenance, eyes, and life doth despise riches. And that a Christian ought not to put confidence in the succor, and help of this world but only whole to hang on heaven. Not to avenge injury. To pray for them that say evil by us. To do good against evil. That all good men should be loved and nourished indifferently, as the members of one body. That evil men if they cannot be reformed and brought into a good order ought to be suffered. That they which are despoiled of their goods, and put from their possessions, and mourn in this world, are very blessed and not to be lamented. If any man being inspired with the Holy Ghost do preach and teach these and such other things, if any man exhort, entice, and bidden his neighbor unto these things, be ye a very and true divine, though he be a weaver, yea though he dig and delve. But he that accomplishes and fulfills these things in his life and manners, he really is a great doctor. And to lead an angelic life, that is the office and beauty of a Christian and divine. If any man would object of these things, to him would I otherwise answer that Christ chiefly hath taught these things. And that the Apostles to these have us exhorted... Do you think that the Scriptures are fit only for the perfumed? Did Christ teach such a complex doctrine that only learned theologians could understand it? I venture to think that anyone who read them [Scriptures] will profit thereby. And truly I do dissent from those men, which would see the scripture of Christ translated in to all tongues, that it might be read diligently by even secular men and women. Christ would that his counsels and mysteries should be spread abroad as much as is possible. I would desire that even women read the gospel, and they were translated into the tongues of all men, so that they might not be known, of the Scots and Irishmen, but also of the Turks and Saracens. If schoolmasters would instruct their children with this simple science than with the witty traditions of Aristotle and Averroes [Ed's Note: Again, he's referring to scholasticism] then should Christianity be more at quietness and not be disturbed with such perpetual storms of dissension and war. Then should this unreasonable desire of avarice, which desires riches insatiably, be some deal assuaged, and cease of his rage. By this armor should we much sooner prevail against the unfaithful, and enemies of Christ, than with strength, violence, and threatenings for there is nothing stronger than the truth...

On the Ideal of Christian Civility:

It does not savor of Christianity that a general animosity should exist between courier and townsman, countryman and city-dweller, patrician and plebeian, magistrate and private citizen, rich man and poor man, the powerful and the weak, the Italian and the German, the Frenchman and the Englishman, the Englishman and the Scot, the grammarian and the theologian, the logician and the rhetorician, the doctor and the lawyer, the learned man and the illiterate, the eloquent and the inarticulate, the bachelor and the husband, the young man and the old man, the cleric and the layman, the priest and the monk, the Franciscan and the Coletine, the Carmelite and the Dominican.... There is no remedy but that love of conflict and self-love, noxious above all things, be torn up by the roots from our inmost vitals: as indeed they are torn up by the doctrine of Scripture. Above all, these two points are to be kept in mind, namely, that the glory of the Lord remain undiminished, as if under a sound roof, and that in the face of his judgment our consciences maintain a restful calm and a serene tranquility....in a nutshell, no man may without sacrilege claim any particle of justice for his own, for in so doing he takes away and belittles just as much from the justice and glory of God...

And...

Erasmus "The Praise of Folly" (1509, additional excerpts):

The merchants are the biggest fool of all. They carry on the most sordid business and by the most corrupt methods. Whenever it is necessary, they will lie, perjure themselves, steal, cheat, and mislead the public. Nevertheless, they are highly respected because of their money. There is no lack of flattering friars to kowtow to them, and call them Right Honorable in public. The motive of the friars is clear: they are after some of the loot....

After the lawyers come the philosophers, who are revered for their beards and the fur on their gowns. They announce that they alone are wise and that the rest of men are only passing shadows.... The fact that they can never explain why they constantly disagree with each other is sufficient proof that they do not know the truth about anything. They know nothing at all, yet profess to know everything. They are ignorant even of themselves, and are often too absentminded or near-sighted to see the ditch or stone in front of them....

Perhaps it would be wise to pass over the theologians in silence. That short-tempered and supercilious crew is unpleasant to deal with.... They will proclaim me a heretic. With this thunderbolt they terrify the people they don't like. Their opinion of themselves is so great that they behave as if they were already in heaven; they look down pityingly on other men as so many worms. A wall of imposing definitions, conclusions, corollaries, and explicit and implicit propositions protects them. They are full of big words and newly-invented terms.... Next to the theologians in happiness are those who commonly call themselves the religious and monks. Both are complete misnomers, since most of them stay as far away from religion as possible, and no people are seen more often in public. They are so detested that it is considered bad luck if one crosses your path, and yet they are highly pleased with themselves. They cannot read, and so they consider it the height of piety to have no contact with literature.... Most of them capitalize on their dirt and poverty by whining for food from door to door.... These smooth fellows simply explain that by their very filth, ignorance, boorishness, and insolence they enact the lives of the apostles for us. It is amusing to see how they do everything by rule, almost mathematically. Any slip is sacrilege, each shoe string must have so many knots and must be of a certain color.... They even condemn each other, these professors of apostolic charity, making an extraordinary stir if a habit is belied incorrectly or if its color is a shade too dark.... The monks of certain orders recoil in horror from money, as if it were poison, but not from wine or women. They take extreme pains, not in order to be like Christ, but to be unlike each other. Most of them consider one heaven an inadequate reward for their devotion to ceremony and traditional details. They forget that Christ will condemn all of this and will call for a reckoning of that which He has prescribed, namely, charity.

[Source: The History Guide: Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History, "Desiderius Erasmus, 1466-1536," Retrieved December 8th, 2011, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/erasmus.html>]