ERASMUS ON THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

By Fritz Caspari

Erasmus was a Christian humanist, a liberal rationalist, an individualistic cosmopolitan. As the outstanding critic of his age he often held up the mirror to his contemporaries. He is still remembered as the wise and humane scholar who tries to teach the world how it can live in peace, but who ultimately sees all his admonitions disregarded, his hopes dashed, his ideas shattered by greedy, rapacious, and stupid men.

When we think thus of him we imply that the world would have been better off had it followed his guidance. The question, however, is whether and to what extent he supplied such guidance. He meant to lead humanity toward a goal which in general terms might be described as a peaceful and harmonious order of the world based on Christ's principle of brotherly love. What made it difficult to follow him was a lack of clarity and consistency in practical matters and a certain vagueness with regard to actual aims which are apparent in his work.

In various places and at different times he advanced many opinions on such matters as the ideal Christian world, the perfect state, the kind of men that is to embody that perfection and to make it a living reality, the education necessary to create this ideal type. These elements of Erasmus' thought have been the subject of much discussion, but the basic unity of purpose in his thought has not, I feel, been sufficiently demonstrated.[1] His humanism is

[1] Valuable material and critical evaluation is to be found in a number of recent studies, of which I shall here mention a few that are particularly useful: Rudolf Pfeiffer, *Humanitas Erasmiana* (Leipzig, 1931); and "Die Einheit im geistigen Werk des Erasmus," in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte,* XV (1937), 473–87. Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus* (New York, 1924); and "Erasmus über Vaterland und Nationen," in: *Gedenkschrift zum 400. Todestage des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Basel, 1936). This *Gedenkschrift* contains a number of good articles, of which I also wish to mention Rudolf Liechtenhan, "Die politische Hoffnung des Erasmus und ihr Zusammenbruch." L. K. Born, in the introduction to his English translation of Erasmus' *Education of a Christian Prince* (New York, 1936), and A. Renaudet, in the chapter "La Critique du Gouvernement et de la Société" of his *Études Érasmiennes (1521–1529)* (Paris, 1939), examine Erasmus' political theories, as does F. Geldner, *Staatsauffassung und Fürstenlehre*

not limited in its functions to the field of education but tries to encompass the whole organism of human society, which it seeks to mould into a better and more harmonious shape.[2] Whatever shortcomings his conception may have should be seen in their proper perspective, as blemishes and imperfections of the larger picture Erasmus had conceived in his mind. While Erasmus was not a systematic philosopher and created no system comparable in completeness to Plato's *Republic,* he must himself have felt his ideas to be interdependent and complementary—to form a whole. The functions he assigns to a militant humanism in education, in national government and international relations are conceived as similar means in different fields leading to the same end.

Certain basic contradictions between the Christian and the pagan worlds are glossed over rather than resolved in both his aim and his methods. This burdens his argument. A further difficulty is his lack of concern with the forms of actual social and political organization, and a simultaneous overestimation of the value of education. These factors explain the practical limitations of his influence, but they do not detract from the greatness of his vision. In our own day, liberal humanism is still burdened by the unresolved antagonism of its constituent Christian and pagan elements, and it is still puzzled by the practical problems which Erasmus failed to solve. Erasmus' difficulties, then, are still with us, and therefore relevant for us.

Erasmus hoped that the education of all individuals, especially of princes and nobles, in the spirit and disciplines of an-

des Erasmus von Rotterdam (Berlin, 1930). A. Hyma, in *The Youth of Erasmus* (Ann Arbor, 1930); in "Erasmus and the Oxford Reformers (1493–1503)," *Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkgeschiednis,* n.s., 25 (1932), 69–92, 97–136, and in "Continental Origins of English Humanism," *Huntington Library Quarterly,* IV (1940–1941), 1–25, throws much light on Erasmus' attitude toward Christianity. Cf. now also R. P. Adams, "Designs by More and Erasmus for a new social order," *Studies in Philology,* XLIV (1945), 131–45.

[2] The term "humanism" as used in this essay denotes the historical movement which from the late Middle Ages on, in contrast with the uncritical acceptance of current traditions, advocated and practiced a rational and secular education, mainly by the study of the classics. From this rational education of the individual the humanists expected great benefits to man and society. In particular, the term is here used with reference to Erasmus' expression of that intellectual tradition. His thought, of course, was influenced by and representative of the traditions of humanism which for two centuries had grown up in Southern, Central, and Western Europe, and many of his problems were as old as the humanistic movement itself.

tiquity and Christianity would bring the rational element in them to full fruition. *Ratio,* reason, was in his mind almost synonymous with "goodness" and "kindness." The rule of reason, achieved through education, would therefore result in men's living together in universal peace and harmony in accord with the lessons of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. This briefly was what Erasmus envisaged.

Spirit, inward virtue, reason were important to him, more important than outward forms. The latter, he was confident, would evolve logically from the former. It was perhaps due to this attitude that Erasmus was frequently vague and sometimes contradictory when he came to positive suggestions about the organization of society and the state. It shows the distance at which he lived from the practical conditions of human life. Such abstraction is often necessary for the philosopher, but its continued practice is dangerous for the social reformer. It meant, in the case of Erasmus, that his plan for a general improvement of mankind was too vague to be put into practice. In this respect our own humanism, i.e., that humanism which is still based on the "*Litterae humaniores,*" too often bears an uncomfortable resemblance to that of Erasmus, its direct ancestor: the ultimate ideals of "liberal education" and the means through which they are to be realized unfortunately are still far from a satisfactory definition.

The core of Erasmus' interest was the individual, and his image of man as expressed in his ideas on education must therefore be our first concern. Society and state, their national and international organization, are secondary to this central theme. Erasmus seems to test these institutions of communal life by asking whether they enable man to grow and exist in accordance with his humanistic ideal. Organized forms of human life such as states are not seen as ends in themselves, but are always subordinated to the needs of the individual as postulated by the humanist.

Like most humanists, Erasmus was a great optimist concerning the educability of man. He goes so far as to say that "homines non nascuntur, sed finguntur,"[3] that men are shaped by education rather than by birth. Like many of his *dicta,* this phrase should not be taken too literally; it is, however, indicative of his general emphasis. He obviously does not attach much importance to

[3] Quoted from W. H. Woodward, *Studies in Education During the Age of the Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1906), 116.

hereditary or other natural differences between men. Such differences can presumably be overcome by education, which in his opinion is so potent a force as to "overcome everything"[4] and to form the individual completely.[5] The power of education is based on the highly formative effect which Erasmus attributes to *ratio* in man. It is possible for every man to follow reason, after the right kind of education has enabled him to recognize it. Once he sees its light, man will make it his guiding principle and become good by following it.

Since all men are endowed with complete liberty of will by their creator,[6] according to the stand taken by Erasmus and defended in his famous controversy with Luther, there can be no natural badness that will not yield to the force of reason. It must therefore be the aim of a Christian society to educate its members in accordance with reason and through this process of education to achieve universal goodness. This in itself would solve all the problems of the social and political organization of mankind, which to him were "merely a matter of personal morality and intellectual enlightenment."[7] A recent critic remarks that with his "enunciation of the creed of education and perfectibility, of warm social feeling and of faith in human nature, of peaceful kindliness and toleration," Erasmus was a precursor of the eighteenth century.[8]

[4] *Loc. cit.; ib.* also: "Nature is powerful, but more potent education conquers it." (My translations. Unless otherwise indicated—see particularly footnote 6, below—English translations from Erasmus' Latin passages in the following text and footnotes are mine.)

[5] He does not always hold this opinion, however, and even takes the opposite point of view. Cf. *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia emendatiora et auctiora . . . studio et opera Joannis Clerici,* 10 vols. (Lugduni Batavorum, 1703–1706; hereafter briefly referred to as *LB,* with Arabic numerals indicating columns, not pages), I, 508: "If then you ask: 'What is to be done to boys who respond to no other spur [than flogging]?' My answer is: 'What would you do if an ox or an ass strayed into your schoolroom?' Turn him out to the plough or the pack-saddle, no doubt. Well, so there are boys good only for the farm and manual toil: send your dunces there for their own good." (Here quoted from W. H. Woodward's rather free translation in: *Desiderius Erasmus Concerning the Aim and Method of Education* [Cambridge, 1904], 209.)

[6] *LB* IV, 578: "God gave the angels and men free will so that He would not be ruling over bondsmen and so that He might glorify and add further grandeur to His kingdom." (In this, as in all subsequent passages from the *Institutio Principis Christiani—LB* IV, 562–612—I quote L. K. Born's English version cited above.

[7] Huizinga, *Erasmus,* 193.

[8] Huizinga, *Erasmus,* 244. Cf. also Hyma, "Continental Origins of English

He probably would have been happier in the enlightened and tolerant atmosphere of that period than he was in his age of narrow and violent religious fanaticism. It is interesting to note that the most complete edition of his works which remains the standard one to this day was printed in the eighteenth century.

The predominance which Erasmus usually assigns to reason over nature—in our instance, to the influence of rational education over characteristics inherited at birth—and the emphasis he places on the power of the spirit to form men, are obviously exaggerated and frequently betray a typical neglect of natural factors. Human nature in its perplexing and often crude variety seems to have appalled him so much that he often refused even to consider it. He preferred to take refuge in his vision of a purely rational and, therefore, good man. He substituted it for and opposed it to the unpleasant reality. On this abstract vision he based much of his thought.

The central position reason assumed in the work of Erasmus reflects the preponderant *rôle* it played in his own life and thought. His scholarly, detached, and noncommittal attitude restricted his practical effectiveness: it is not an unfair criticism to say that his conceptions of man, society, and the state, admirable as they are in their burning idealism, often seem lifeless because, while they have much *esprit,* they lack body. Or, to put it differently, his good wine spills because he provides no receptacle for it.

It is, of course, a moot question whether he should have been more "realistic," or whether instead of accusing him we would not be more justified in blaming mankind for being selfish, crude, vulgar, violent, and therefore unable to live up to his ideas. This question is already raised in Plato's problem of how to make reluctant philosophers consent to be kings. Erasmus, in his own practice, decided that philosophers should be philosophers rather than spoil their ideas and soil their hands by being kings or their helpers. While thus keeping himself pure, he advised rulers to turn to philosophy.

The *Praise of Folly,* for instance, and many of his letters show that despite his abstract tendencies Erasmus can be very

Humanism," 17, where Erasmus' rationalism is compared to that of Voltaire. Pfeiffer, in *Die Einheit, etc.,* strongly attacks these attempts to class Erasmus with the eighteenth-century rationalists, and argues for his Christianity instead. His argument seems to me to go too far. Cf. note 26, below.

lively and practical. Nevertheless, the general impression of idealistic detachment prevails. His humanistic friends and followers, pursuing more limited aims, evolved correspondingly more practical systems of education and society; but they depended for their conceptions on Erasmus' superior vision. They adapted his ideas to their own specific purposes. Erasmus also furnished them with an enormous collection of practical tools for acquiring and transmitting classical erudition. He was a teacher of teachers rather than a teacher himself.

The humanism of Erasmus was diametrically opposed to the doctrine enunciated by his contemporary, Machiavelli, in *The Prince.* That doctrine of realistic and ruthless power politics, which made Machiavelli famous, undoubtedly shows only an isolated aspect of his thought.[9] But it was his fate that his name should become practically synonymous with the practices he advocated in *The Prince,* with the attitude of cynical realism which permeates that particular work. It is unlikely that Erasmus could have known *The Prince* when he published the *Institutio Principis Christiani. The Prince* had then just been written but was not available in printed form.[10] Yet some of Erasmus' remarks sound as if they had been written in flat contradiction of certain tenets of the Florentine.

The explanation is very simple. Machiavelli in *The Prince* described objectively and reduced to a rational system the political practices of the *condottieri* and princes of his day, whereas Erasmus attacked these very practices from an ethical point of view. It is not surprising then that the two works, the *Institutio* and *The Prince,* should seem like two opposite poles. *The Prince,* when

[9] Opinion on Machiavelli's political thought as a whole remains much divided. I cannot here enter into the discussion of what motives Machiavelli had in writing *The Prince,* or try to demonstrate the relationship of the ideas expressed in that work to those found in his other writings. Suffice it to say that I consider *The Prince* the antithesis to Erasmus' teaching in the political field, notwithstanding the fact that Machiavelli on the whole seems to hold ideas different from the doctrine he advocates in that work.

[10] L. K. Born, "Erasmus on Political Ethics: The Institutio Principis Christiani," in *Political Science Quarterly,* XLIII (1928), 539, note 5: "There is no evidence that Erasmus knew of Machiavelli's *Il Principe,* but his own treatise forms a perfect antithesis to it." L. Gautier Vignal, *Érasme* (Paris, 1936), 172, says that both books were presented to their respective recipients in the same year. Cf. also L. Enthoven, "Über die Institutio . . .," in *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum,* XXIV (1909), 312–29.

taken by itself as it usually was, and not in conjunction with Machiavelli's other works, reveals a basic ethical antagonism between Machiavelli and Erasmus. The author of *The Prince* appears as a sceptic whose premise is the badness of man. Erasmus, despite sceptical moments and utterances, generally holds to the premise that man is or can be made good. The *raison d'état* of Machiavelli's disciples and the moral humanism of Erasmus and his followers derive logically from these opposite convictions.

The key to Erasmus' position is his ideal of humanity. As Pfeiffer has shown, it is based on the classical Roman conception of *humanitas.*[11] In this *humanitas,* Greek ideas had been harmoniously blended with the traditions of conduct observed by the Roman aristocracy. Romans of the classical period held to the conviction that education based on the *Litterae* leads to *virtus,* to *morum integritas.* This pagan ideal, however, could not be entirely acceptable and complete for the Christian Erasmus. Yet it was indispensable as the only comprehensive system of human erudition which he was ready to recognize as such. He did not consider scholasticism to have provided such a system; nor did he believe that Christian education necessarily had to follow scholastic lines. He was convinced, on the other hand, that Roman humanism contained nothing alien or opposed to Christianity, but that the two elements formed an organic unity—both as regards their historical growth and the way in which they complement each other systematically. Only by the aid of classical *humanitas* could Christianity originally be spread, for according to Erasmus it was the synthesis of ancient wisdom with the new creed into the *Philosophia Christi* as achieved by Fathers of the Church like St. Jerome and Origen which won the battle for Christianity.

Erasmus clearly saw the crisis through which Christianity was going in his own time. He insisted that only the aid of *humanitas* could save Christian civilization. Thus Erasmus conceived it as his lifelong task to reconcile and tie together the *sacrae* and the *humanae litterae.* It was his conviction that humanistic studies must of necessity lead to Christian *pietas,* just as ancient philosophy led to the Christian religion and was crowned by the gospel. In Erasmus' reasoning, *paideia* would revive *pistis;* the combined

[11] Cf. R. Pfeiffer, *Humanitas Erasmiana* (Leipzig, 1931), and A. Gwynn, *Roman Education . . .* (Oxford, 1926), 57 f.

study of both would result in *pietas litterata,* the Christian and therefore highest form of *humanitas.* To achieve such perfection lies within the free will of man, and is his task in this world. The purpose of human society must be to assimilate the world to the Divine as closely as it may be given to man's mortal powers to do so. In this manner Erasmus Christianized classical erudition and at the same time humanized Christian education. He transformed Christian *humilitas* into Christian *humanitas.*[12]

In arriving at this conception of Christian *humanitas* Erasmus assumed that the pagan writers of antiquity had contributed to its growth, and that there was nothing unalterably opposed to Christianity in their writings. It was the task of the Christian humanist, as he conceived it, to find the philologically exact meaning of their writings and of the Bible, to interpret them accurately, and to derive from them the true philosophy of Christ by entirely rational means. This method had two consequences: 1) his "Christian philosophy" contained many truly pagan elements and was not much concerned with questions of Christian doctrine, such as the problems of the Trinity and of Transubstantiation; 2) philological discrimination and rational understanding became more important than repentance and prayer. The learned man would appear to take a higher place in Erasmus' hierarchy, and to approach God more closely, than the humble man, the poor in spirit. In his philosophy, the degree of knowledge determines man's position: he who knows most approximates the divine most closely.

This Erasmian stand was powerfully challenged by Luther, its most violent opponent. Luther refused to recognize the power of man to achieve anything of his own will.[13] Not only are man's deeds and their consequences beyond his control, they are also likely to be sinful. For Luther, the only way to God is through devotion and prayer, through the invocation of His grace. Trust in mere human knowledge, unaided by grace, can but lead to sinful pride, to eternal perdition. Only through God's grace can man find salvation, and that salvation can probably be attained by the poor in spirit more easily than by learned and conceited philologians. *Humanitas,* the perfection of human nature as such which Erasmus advocates, has no place in Luther's theology. It must appear to him like wicked temerity, like sheer *superbia.*

[12] Cf. Otto Schottenloher, *Erasmus im Ringen um die humanistische Bildungsform* (Münster, 1933).

[13] Cf. Pfeiffer, *op. cit.,* 19.

This is not to say that Luther despised scholarship. On the contrary, he fully knew its importance and, being a scholar himself, was entirely aware of the value of Erasmus' services in its cause. To purify and clarify the real text of the Bible, for instance, one had to use all the philological tools, such as grammar and textual criticism, which Luther agreed Erasmus was wielding in a masterly and erudite fashion. But anything that mere human reason could thus achieve was necessarily insufficient and faulty. To arrive at the true meaning of the word of God, to achieve anything even in a purely scholarly way, one had to be aided by divine grace, and Erasmus seemed to Luther to rely too much on human judgment, too little on grace. When their debate grew angry, Luther in consequence held Erasmus ignorant of the fundamental truths of the Bible, whereas Erasmus considered Luther an enemy of good letters. While these mutual accusations were clearly exaggerated, it is obvious that despite their agreement on basic philological methods Luther and Erasmus were in opposite camps.[14]

Luther, believing in inspiration and guidance, detested Erasmus' cold rationalism. Where Luther was convinced of the utter helplessness of the human creature, Erasmus believed in the perfectibility of man by his own effort. Where Luther preached that every man could understand the simple Christian truths of the Bible and should follow its dictates of humility, Erasmus came very close to paganism when he exclaimed that in our efforts to reach the limits of humanity and approximate God we should imitate Prometheus[15]—the greatest symbol of man's rebellious ambition and pride!

Such pagan statements are not the rule with Erasmus, even if on another occasion he does invoke "Saint Socrates" to pray for us.[16] He usually reiterates the more conservative opinion that Christ is the chief example of humanity, and that He alone is to be imitated in every respect.[17] He is the absolute example of all virtue and wisdom, the ultimate goal of all education.[18]

[14] For a comparison of their methods, see R. McKeon, "Renaissance and Method in Philosophy," in *Studies in the History of Ideas,* III (New York, 1935), 44, 46, 72–73, 88–105.

[15] *LB* X, 1742. [16] *LB* I, 683.

[17] *LB* IV, 578; *ib.*: ". . . in Him is the perfect example of all virtue and wisdom." Other biblical figures may sometimes be imitated, but in many instances that

In a very real and personal sense, Christ as a human figure embodies Erasmus' ideals. The study of the gospels is to lead to the imitation of His life, to the practice of His teachings. He is seen not through the haze of scholastic doctrine but in an unbroken light as the eternal living example of goodness, kindness, and charity. The early Christians and St. Francis beheld a similar image.

In order to show his fellow-men how they are to educate themselves and their children and students so as to be able to lead their lives according to this prototype, Erasmus wrote such works as the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* and the *Institutio Principis Christiani.* The law for the education and behavior of Christian princes and noblemen as well as the moral principles which they are to follow are laid down in these works. Above all, they are to imitate Christ. Whoever is of noble stock will increase his honor if his manners are worthy of Christ, if he reads and follows the gospel.[19] Yet while Christ is to be the main example, in his practical educational advice Erasmus emphasizes the study of classical authors more than that of the Bible or of theological works. Education is to produce an aristocracy[20] which is good in the humanistic sense, and not only equal to that of the states of pagan antiquity but even superior to it on account of its Christian faith.

Among the writings which form the basis of his educational scheme, Erasmus includes some Biblical and patristic texts, but he places his main emphasis on the classics. Plutarch, Aristotle's *Politics,* Cicero's *De Officiis* should be studied; "sed sanctius his de rebus locutus est Plato."[21] Plato is his favorite philosopher, and Plato's influence on Erasmus' work is evident everywhere. He and after him the other classical authors were the "*fontes*" of

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would be decidedly wrong. A case in point is those princes who try to excuse their promiscuous lives by pointing to the example of Solomon and his concubines (*LB* V, 49). Christ is the only reliable guide.

[18] Cf. H. Ener, *Der Einfluss des Erasmus auf die englische Bildungsidee* (Berlin, 1939), 79.

[19] *LB* V, 47.

[20] *LB* IV, 598.

[21] *LB* IV, 588. The Academic and Stoic schools exerted the principal influence on his views. In the *Institutio,* Erasmus, according to an analysis of his borrowings from other writers, "was indebted most of all to Plato, . . . in close position for second place [are] Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch." (Born, introduction to his translation, 98. *Ib.,* 97, he notes that more than 70 passages drawn from Plato are in the *Institutio.*)

knowledge for Erasmus.[22] They are not to be read by the young merely as intellectual and philological exercises: it is their ethical content to which Erasmus attaches the greatest importance. This is to inspire and transform the student so that he may become capable and worthy of his function as a *miles Christianus*. It is his task to fill a high position in the state and there to employ to the common benefit rather than to keep to himself what he has learned.[23] Erasmus thus hoped to fashion the humanistic Christian nobleman who in every respect distinguishes himself honorably from those below him in the social scale, and who gives an example of Christian life to those in his charge.[24] The existing nobility must be reformed in order to be justified in occupying its elevated social position. It is the view of Erasmus that the transformation of this greedy, rapacious, and violent group should be brought about by Christian humanism.[25]

Erasmus fails, however, to solve one important problem inherent in his conception of *humanitas Christiana*. Since Christ above all others is to be the ruler's prototype, the question arises to what extent His life can be the guiding example for a man who has to exercise worldly power. Christ, unlike the worldly ruler, did not have to command and punish and use force. Erasmus is not specific on this point. His general injunctions that the Christian knight should follow the example of Christ *and* the precepts contained in the literature and lives of Greece and Rome do not really solve but rather accentuate the dilemma. There are too

[22] *LB* I, 523: "But at the outset let us hasten to the sources themselves, i.e., the Greeks and ancients. Plato will teach philosophy best, and Aristotle. . . ." How typically humanistic!

[23] *LB* V, 45.

[24] *LB* V, 39: ". . . the mind of him who strives after Christ should differ from the crowd . . . as much as possible, and he should seek the pattern of piety nowhere but in Christ alone. . . ." *Ib.*, 40: "Our example is Christ . . . he may be imitated in every respect." *Ib.*, 41: "He is truly noble who despises empty titles; true nobility consists in the service of Christ."

[25] *LB* V, 47. Cf. also a letter in which Erasmus feels it necessary to defend his dedication of a Biblical text to a prince against more popular competition (*Opus Epistolarum . . . Erasmi . . . .*, ed. P. S. and H. M. Allen [Oxford, 1906–1941]—hereafter referred to as *Op. Ep.*—vol. V, ep. 1333): "It seems that only those writers bring appropriate gifts to princes who present them with pamphlets on hunting, feeding dogs, keeping horses, on implements of war or perhaps on playing dice. . . ."—Apparently he does not find the nobility as readily disposed to read his pious injuctions as it is to amuse itself with these sporting books!

many contradictions between the worlds of classical antiquity and Christianity that Erasmus chooses to gloss over rather than reconcile.[26]

In this, he reveals the dualism that runs through the history of Western civilization since the end of antiquity, a dualism that neither he nor any of the other "Christian humanists" ever completely overcame. They imparted it to their scheme of education and civilization which has survived until the present day. We see this inherent paradox when, on the one hand, Erasmus calls Socrates a "Saint," states that "with slight qualifications the whole of attainable knowledge lies enclosed within the literary monuments of ancient Greece,"[27] affirms that a man becomes educated by reading these and certain Roman authors, and yet on the other hand declares that Christ alone should be man's guide and example!

The two attitudes were superficially reconciled in the scholastic tradition, which adopted an inexact and Christianized version of

[26] Huizinga, *Erasmus,* 130, claims that "the warp of his mind is Christian; his classicism only serves him as a form, and from Antiquity he only chooses those elements which in ethical tendency are in conformity with his Christian ideal." I do not think that this is quite accurate, or that it is possible to stretch the term "conformity" to such a degree. Hyma, on the other hand, argues that Erasmus was a great admirer of Valla, and that Valla cannot be termed a "Christian" humanist, since he was indifferent to the teachings of Jesus and refused to follow them. (See his "Continental Origins. . . .") Erasmus himself, according to Hyma, "was not moved by feelings of profound guilt and remorse for his misdemeanors," and is thus on the side of pagan rationalists like Valla and Voltaire rather than on that of the Christians. I believe that the feelings of sin, guilt, and remorse gained in importance as the attributes of a Christian through the efforts of the Reformers. If Erasmus did not particularly evince them, that lack would seem to be characteristic of many pre-Reformation Christians who are not *ipso facto* pagans. Erasmus was somewhere in between the pagan and the Christian positions, vacillating from one to the other without ever resolving the inherent conflict by anything but a perpetual compromise. While he was not very interested in sin, he did advocate the practice of brotherly love, and devoted a great deal of his time and energy to the writing of theological works.—See also the discussion of Erasmus' *philosophia Christi* in McKeon, "Renaissance and Method," 72 ff.; and Gautier Vignal, *op. cit.,* 203. Pfeiffer, *Humanitas Erasmiana,* 24, indicates the problem as follows: ". . . inwiefern einer eindringenden systematischen Betrachtung diese Verbindung von pietas und humanitas, von pistis und paideia standhält, inwiefern es eben ein System eines solchen christlichen Humanismus überhaupt geben kann, das bleibe hier ungefragt."

[27] Quoted from Woodward's translation of *De Ratione Studii* (*Erasmus concerning . . . Education*), 164.

antiquity. As a humanist, Erasmus saw classical life and thought more accurately than his scholastic predecessors had perceived it.[28] He had better and fuller texts of Greek and Roman works and of the Bible at his disposal. This made a superficial solution of differences and contradictions more difficult, especially for one who was a devoted follower of Lorenzo Valla. While not neglecting Aristotle, Erasmus like other humanists shifted his emphasis to Plato. The combination of classical and Christian elements thus had to be effected on a new plane in line with the efforts of the Neoplatonists. The form in which it was achieved by Erasmus was not a complete fusion of the two elements; as I have mentioned above, many unresolved divergences and contradictions reveal that his *humanitas Christiana* does not present a complete synthesis of the two systems.[29]

Sometimes, as in the *Praise of Folly,* one has the feeling that he saw the thinly veiled dichotomy that runs through his humanism and is apparent in his injunctions. But on the whole, like many Christians and humanists from his day to ours, he avoided the unpleasant problem, perhaps by persuading himself either that it did not exist or else that he had resolved it.

Even if we take into consideration the various tutoring jobs of Erasmus' earlier days and his university lectures, the actual education of men according to his ideal played only a subordinate part in his life. He was much more interested in the theoretical exposition of the methods of pedagogy than in actual teaching.[30]

[28] It would go beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a detailed discussion of the question, recently asked by Douglas Bush (*The Renaissance and English Humanism* [Toronto, 1939]), and others, whether humanism was in any essential respect different from scholasticism, whether there was such a chasm between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as Jakob Burckhardt (*Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* [Basel, 1860]), originally claimed. The present writer, as will be apparent from this essay, is of the opinion that the Renaissance and humanism distinctly represent a new scheme of life and thought. Erasmus certainly felt very dissatisfied with scholasticism, broke with it, and tried, in his humanism, to forge a new unity of classicism and Christianity on a plane different from scholasticism.

[29] Pfeiffer, in *Die Einheit im geistigen Werk des Erasmus* (1937), argued that such unity had been achieved by Erasmus on a predominantly Christian basis, but I cannot agree with his conclusion. Cf. note 26, *supra.*

[30] Notwithstanding the fact that he had various positions as tutor of young men, that he advised Colet in the foundation of St. Paul's School, and that he lectured in various universities, such as Cambridge and Louvain. Cf. Gautier Vignal, *op. cit.,* 133: "L'enseignement parlé ne l'a jamais intéressé. . . ."

His works were read and used for a long time and formed part of the great scheme of humanistic education. He lays down practical and detailed rules for the training of children in the classical languages and literatures in *De Ratione Studii,* and therein establishes a concrete curriculum of humanistic studies for the young.[31] In his later treatise, *De pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis,* he advocates a very liberal, humane, almost "progressive" method of instruction. He provides young pupils with a book of exercises, *De copia verborum,* and directs them to other treatises on pure Latin such as Valla's *Elegantiae.*[32] He teaches everybody how to write letters by innumerable epistles that were immediately reproduced by the printing press, and in his work, *De conscribendis epistolis.* How to make polite conversation one learns from the *Colloquia.* In the *Adagia,* the *Parabolae,* and the *Apophthegmata* he provides the world with what Huizinga describes as a retail shop of classical knowledge.

These works were very effective and successful in spreading humanistic refinement throughout Europe; and yet, when reading much of Erasmus, one comes to wonder toward exactly what goal his efforts were directed, on what image of man, society, and the state his eyes were ultimately focused. There seem to be different pictures, changing with circumstance. They have strong colors but not very clear lines. When he rises above the text-book and grammar level and considers ethics, when he discusses the ultimate objectives of his educational suggestions in terms of an ideal society toward which they are to lead, he becomes rather vague. One is forced to the conclusion that Erasmus did not consistently have before his eye a clearly defined ideal of man or the state.

When he discusses the education, character, and duties of those who will be the decisive elements in society, of princes and noblemen, he makes few definite recommendations, but is apt to indulge in general, high-sounding moral injunctions. In their moral loftiness and practical vagueness these statements are similar to those on the state, society, and politics, which we shall discuss later. Neither in the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* nor in the *Institutio Principis Christiani* can Erasmus be said to elaborate in detail how

[31] Cf. J. F. Larkin, *Erasmus' De Ratione Studii. . . .* (Abstract of Thesis, University of Illinois, 1942. Larkin's translation of that work is unfortunately not available in print.)

[32] *LB* I, 522.

his knights and princes are to be educated, or how they are to discharge their functions. While few definite recommendations are offered, the one point is made abundantly clear that these men are to be paragons of all the virtues. This is somehow not quite satisfactory. Erasmus often seems to assume that the spirit which animates him and to which he gives expression in what he considers to be perfect style will create, by its own impetus, the institutions it needs to propagate itself. His rational idealism, his frail constitution, his great intellectual ability and capacity for work led him to an overestimation of the power of pure intellect in man. For better or for worse, *ratio* is not, as he wishfully thinks, the sole determining factor and guiding principle in individuals, in human affairs and societies. As an educational optimist, he fails to see that there are very definite limitations to the effectiveness of education; that it is, after all, unlikely that by it all men can be made good and filled with love for each other as they would have to be in his ideal state.

Nonetheless, Erasmus made a great impact on the humanistic scheme of education. For centuries his pedagogical works were used both as guides to the authors and teachers of classical Latinity and as examples of it. As such they were quoted and imitated. They were written in Latin, were completely cosmopolitan in outlook, and directed to no one particular country or religion. Thus Erasmus was the teacher not of one country, like Melanchthon, who is still remembered as the *Praeceptor Germaniae,* but of all Christendom, whether Catholic or Protestant.[33] He held this position despite the fact that neither faction was very fond of him, and that some of his works were until recently on the Index. His contemporaries and successors among the humanists used his precepts, thus giving them even wider currency. But while using them they were apt to neglect Erasmus' ultimate cosmopolitan and Christian aims. They limited their appeals to their own nations and religions and created the different national and religious forms of humanistic education the vestiges of which exist to this day.[34]

[33] Huizinga, *Erasmus,* 243, says: "He was the only one of the Humanists who really wrote for all the world, that is to say, for all educated people."

[34] Thus, Budé may have borrowed very extensively from Erasmus' *Institutio* when composing his *De l'Institution du Prince.* Cf. Born, *Education,* 28. I shall try to show in another place how, in England, Erasmus' aims were thus "narrowed down" by men like Sir Thomas More and Sir Thomas Elyot. The same process could, I think, be demonstrated for Germany (Hutten, Wimpheling) and for France.

These less universalistic humanists, then, were narrower in outlook but more realistic than Erasmus. While Erasmus, even if vaguely, had an ideal Christian order among men and nations before his eye, and wrote with this end in mind, they paid attention more to the immediate needs that had been created in their particular surroundings by the dissolution or alteration of the medieval system of education and the medieval structure of society. They founded schools and taught in them as schoolmasters or professors; they became officials, princes' councillors and ministers; or they held important positions in their respective churches. They became practical pedagogues, specialized scholars, apologists for their faiths, or patriots appealing to the nationalism of their countries. In short, they lost the breadth of Erasmus' vision and used the tools he gave them for their limited aims and special interests. Erasmus, it is true, was nominally an imperial councillor; he lectured in several universities, gave advice on the founding of schools, and belonged to the Catholic clergy. But he kept as far aloof as possible from all activity connected with these functions, from any kind of permanent association with institutions of learning or education or religion.

This aloofness, which distinguishes him from most other humanists, kept him socially, politically, and ideologically independent. It corresponded to and was the essential basis for the characteristic liberty with which he acted in contemporary issues of all kinds. He was "essentially a critic and an intellectual,"[35] and his real effectiveness came out in oral disputations and controversies of the pen, in his penetrating, sharp, often constructive criticism. His own words can be contradictory, which is not surprising, considering the size of his literary output; they shimmer in so many colors that one has to observe the whole picture of his intellectual structure from some distance in order to appreciate its outlines.

As in educational practice, Erasmus took little part in actual politics, although he was in frequent contact with rulers and statesmen. He served the pure idea, and as a philosopher did not want to contaminate or falsify it by becoming absorbed in political action. The idea which he consistently propagated as the goal of politics was a moral humanity, combining the best of antiquity and of Christianity. Whereas Machiavelli assumed the a-moral

[35] Born, *op. cit.*, 20.

political practices prevailing at the time to be natural and inevitable and rationalized them into an eminently practical and realistic political system, Erasmus opposed these same practices by his humanistic idealism, and attacked them both in general and on particular points. Machiavelli's sceptical mind in *The Prince* divorces the realm of power from that of ethics. In this realm, he perceives as real only what is conducive or harmful to the acquisition and maintenance of power. His most striking conviction, as we have indicated, is that in dealing with men the principal factor to be taken into account is their inherent badness. From that badness, which he assumes to be inevitable and unalterable, he deduces his *raison d'état.* Erasmus never tired of attacking the practical application of this principle, and never ceased to demonstrate its disastrous consequences for Europe. There are few treatises or letters in which he does not, in one way or another, complain or despair of its effects, and confront it with his moral ideal of humanity. This view is basic to his educational idea, and is most clearly expressed in the *Principe's* contemporary, the *Institutio Principis Christiani,* in the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani,* and in many of his letters.

According to Erasmus' teaching, if all those who call themselves Christians follow Christ there will be no need for the use of force among them;[36] by right education, they can all be induced to lead such truly Christian lives that force will be replaced by reason and brotherly love. Mutual friendship will then animate the life of society and nations[37] and make the state superfluous in all but its purely administrative functions. Force will become meaningless, since it will be used neither in internal nor in external affairs. The whole Christian world will be one peaceful Christian universe, without disturbing political divisions. Roman *philanthropia* and Christian *agape* will rule men and states in their mutual relations and be the basis of Christian life in the occident.

At times his theory of a truly Christian community causes Erasmus to suspect any form of secular hierarchy among Christians. The ultimate logical consequence of his reasoning would be a state without domination of men by men—a condition in which

[36] Cf. *LB* V, 49: "A Christian does not employ force against his people, but charity, and he who is chief of all should consider himself their servant, not their master."

[37] *LB* II, 957: ". . . what else is peace but the mutual friendship of many?"

there is no longer any need for government. If the pagan Stoics held all men capable of being good, free, and equal, certainly Christians should be capable of living in freedom. When Erasmus thinks along these lines, all authority, any sovereign power seems bad to him.[38] If the state is a necessary evil, the form in which it is least bad is a republic. Did not the greatest philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, live in republican communities? If there has to be a monarchy, it should not be absolute; at least the people should be able to express their opinion and consent in a constitutional form,[39] and certainly grave matters such as war should not be undertaken without such consent.[40] Although Erasmus did not directly advocate government without royalty, he often showed strong democratic tendencies[41] and defended the freedom and self-government of the people against princely encroachments.[42]

Erasmus did not concern himself with the way in which opinion and consent are to be expressed and transformed into political action. Since the "practical details" of institutions did not interest but rather annoyed him, he made hardly any serious suggestions with regard to constitutions, laws, and political bodies. His argument is concerned with ethics rather than with the incorporation of such ethics into the actual organization of society. His difficulty, however, often seems to be that he is under the delusion that his admonitions are not only consistent but also in themselves sufficient to provide for a peaceful and harmonious solution of the play of forces between men and between states. This satisfaction with merely theoretical advice is caused by his unlimited faith in

[38] *LB* IV, 577: "Never forget that 'dominion,' 'imperial authority,' 'kingdom,' 'majesty,' 'power' are all pagan terms, not Christian. The ruling power of a Christian state consists only of administration, kindness, and protection."

[39] Cf. *LB* II, 1202, Adage *Civitas non civitas:* "A body politic does not exist where all is done and carried out by the arbitrary judgment of one man. . . . A real king rules over free men, and does not attempt to do anything without the consent of the citizens."

[40] Cf. *LB* V, 354 (*De bello Turcis inferendo*).

[41] Cf. Geldner's observation (*op. cit.*, 88) that in his theory Erasmus was a democrat; Born, *op. cit.*, 23, note 104; and Renaudet, *Études* . . . , 79.

[42] Note Erasmus' interesting complaint in his treatise on the Turkish War, *LB* V, 365: ". . . it is incredible to relate how largely popular liberties, the freedom of cities, the authority of councils, the respect for the clergy have disappeared and how, on the other hand, the princes' powers . . . have grown" so that their will is law. In the *Adagia, LB* II, 634, he emphasizes the need for freedom of speech.

the power of reason. His ideas about a good administration are, as Huizinga says, extremely primitive but basically revolutionary.[43]

Only occasionally, however, does he seem to favor a popular democracy. On the whole, he tends to have a low opinion of the rule of the people, and even to blast against it. Because it lacks true education, the crowd is unreasonable and inclined to badness; like the men in Plato's cave, it mistakes the shadows for the real things.[44] It easily acclaims the worst and follows it.[45] So it is not surprising to see him disregard his demand for government with the consent of the people in some of his works, notably in the *Institutio Principis Christiani.* In this work, dedicated to the future Emperor Charles V, he bases his argument on the assumption that the Emperor can do anything he chooses to do, without any apparent limitation to his powers. This most obviously shows a wrong estimate of the structure and strength of the Empire. He justifies this imagined imperial absolutism with the theory that the Emperor is to be the absolute embodiment of all that is good.

It might be objected that this is nothing but flattery on the part of Erasmus, and that, while praising individual princes, he still condemns them in general.[46] There certainly is no lack of flattery when he addresses princes and other men of influence whom he wants to lead in his direction, or to use for his purposes.[47] But his theory of "good absolutism" is at times put forth quite enthusiastically and recurs too frequently to be brushed aside entirely. Thus, in one of his Adages, there is the most exuberant exaltation of the good prince whose function is compared with those of the eye, the sun, the soul, even of God.[48] These comparisons are taken

[43] *Op. cit.,* 194.

[44] *LB* V, 40: "Such are of the crowd who, fettered in Plato's cave by their affections, admiringly mistake the hollow images of things for the real things." He expresses the same judgment in *LB* IV, 565.

[45] *LB* V, 40. Cf. also *LB* V, 13, where Erasmus—flatly contradicting his adage in note 39, above—says that revolt may break out "unless one man has all the power of government." The ruler should distrust the wishes of the people and, presumably, act contrary to them (*LB* V, 40): "You must suspect that which the majority likes."

[46] Cf. Huizinga, *op. cit.,* 195.

[47] Born, *op. cit.,* 6, quotes Erasmus as actually saying that flattery is the best way of influencing princes.

[48] In the Adage *Aut Regem . . . , LB* II, 109; similar *LB* V, 366.

from classical and medieval sources; they most clearly show his esteem for an absolute monarchy with an absolutely good prince.[49]

The apparent contradictions between his statements here in favor of monarchy and those for republican liberties are explained by the fact that in Erasmus' scale of values the ethical good takes the first place. Since this good cannot be definitely connected with any particular form of government, good and bad forms of monarchy, of aristocracy, or of democracy appear to Erasmus to be equally possible. He always subordinates the form of government as such to the degree in which it makes realization of the ethical good possible.

In the light of Christianity, Erasmus qualifies the requirements for a good absolute monarch. He attacks the prototypes of secular monarchs, such as Alexander and Caesar, and Christian princes who try to emulate these pagan heroes rather than Christ. As the greatest and best of all kings, Christ, and Christ only, is to be imitated by Christian princes.[50] Erasmus here thinks that this injunction by itself should suffice to make a good ruler. He neglects to elaborate his postulate in detail, and fails to think about the mechanism of a truly Christian empire. This omission is caused in part by Erasmus' disregard of institutions. Moreover, it reveals a fundamental difficulty: did not Christ say that his Kingdom was not of this world?[51] That being the case, how is he to be the example for the worldly ruler? There was no king to whom Christ could give his laws, and to whom he could prescribe a Christian order of the state, and he did, in fact, say very little on the subject. Christ asked for brotherly love, and Erasmus wished to use this love, the "concordia" of all men, as the basis of his ideal society. He was not blind, however, and had only to look around in the world in which he lived to become imbued with the gravest doubts as to whether this code would ever be sufficient to replace power as the basis of social order.

He turns to the essentially medieval notion of a "natural law,"

[49] Cf. Renaudet, *op. cit.*, 106. Born, *op. cit.*, 33, thinks that Erasmus either wants this absolutism, or else that he is in favor of a monarchy limited by aristocracy and democracy if the prince does not rise above the average.

[50] *LB* V, 48–49.

[51] Erasmus mentions this in *LB* V, 49, but does not solve the problem: Christ "denied that his kingdom was of this world, since he was the Lord of heaven and earth."

thought to represent the will of God. For Erasmus, as for many before him, this is the rather vague and mystical principle which is to guide the state and its ruler.[52] The good prince obeys and embodies it to such a degree that he is nothing but a living law.[53] This in turn is the Platonic idea of the philosopher-king, who by contemplation of the eternal finds the right order of things, incorporates it in his person, and imposes it on the world. Erasmus specifically refers to and agrees with this Platonic conception,[54] and actually declares that the king, in order to be able to rule, must be a philosopher.[55] If he does act according to reason, the most divine part of his soul, he is God's image on earth, comparable to the sun in the skies.[56] Monarchy, which imitates the divine order, is the best form of the state, if the prince excels all in wisdom and goodness, only strives to be of advantage to the state, and is entirely unselfish.[57]

It is interesting to note that Erasmus cannot consistently advocate a purely Christian order of the state in the sense described above, but again and again follows the classical authorities, especially Plato, who demand a hierarchical order rather than the egalitarian order of brotherly love. Christ does not give instructions to rulers how to manage worldly affairs, whereas the Greek and Roman authors recommended and quoted by Erasmus do. But even if Erasmus chooses to overlook the fact, their teachings are by no means always consonant with the Sermon on the Mount.

For Erasmus as for Plato the well-being of the state depends entirely on the human quality of the ruler, which in turn is largely the result of education. The education of the Christian prince,

[52] Cf. *LB* V, 13: ". . . the king himself obeys no one but the law; the law corresponds to the idea of honesty." This *"honestatis idea"* would seem to be rather vague as the basis for a legal system! Similarly vague, *ib.*, 48: "Do not consider whatever you wish to be the law, but desire only what is lawful."

[53] *LB* IV, 595.

[54] Thus *LB* IV, 566: "Do not think that Plato rashly advanced the idea, which was praised by the most highly esteemed men, that the blessed state will be that in which the princes are philosophers, or in which the philosophers seize the principate."

[55] *LB* IV, 583: ". . . you cannot be a king unless reason completely controls you."

[56] *LB* IV, 570. Also *LB* II, 109: "The prince is for the nation what the sun is in heaven. The sun is the eye of the world, the prince the eye of the people."

[57] *LB* IV, 576. Also *ib.*, 584: "He who looks to the good of his people is a king, he who is concerned for himself is a tyrant."

therefore, is of the utmost importance, because it determines whether he will rule as a good monarch or as a tyrant. The young prince is to be shown the way to goodness, virtue, wisdom, unselfishness, and justice.[58] There is a direct connection between his education and the quality and welfare of the people over whom he rules: if a bad teacher corrupts him, he will corrupt the entire nation.[59] If he is stupid he is most apt to do harm to the whole world, just as if he is wise his knowledge may be to everybody's advantage.[60] The worst thing that can happen is the perversion of knowledge by the ruler who abuses his intelligence to further his own ends by clever falsehood and injustice. He is a tyrant and nothing less than a public pestilence.[61]

This emphasis on the paramount importance of education, the belief in its almost miraculous power to do infinite good or infinite bad, is in the best humanistic tradition. It is to man and his perfection that the humanists devote their attention and efforts; and since government to them is largely a process of education as well as its result, the virtues or vices of the princely pedagogue necessarily have the most far-reaching effect.

Unfortunately, if one draws the balance of Erasmus' eulogies and condemnations of princes, if one weighs his flatteries and bitter blasts, one cannot help feeling that the vices were more frequently to be found in reality than the ideal virtues. His praises of monarchy are counterbalanced by tirades against tyranny, his defense of popular freedom by attacks on the stupidity and incompetence of the crowd.

[58] One of the most typical passages of this kind is in *LB* II, 108–9: "First of all, the prince's soul must be freed from all errors, so that he can recognize true honor, glory, and greatness. Then he should be inspired with a hatred of baseness, and a love of virtue, so that he may perceive what is becoming to a prince, and that he may desire nothing except what is worthy of a good and beneficent prince. He should see where virtue is, should judge everything by this one standard, and should never deviate from this aim. . . . And the prince should excel all other men [in wisdom] to the same degree in which he surpasses them in dignity, wealth, apparel, and power."

[59] *LB* II, 941: ". . . a bad master corrupts his pupil; a wicked king likewise corrupts the nation."

[60] *LB* II, 107.

[61] *LB* II, 109: The tyrant "either is ignorant or . . . uses his knowledge for the ruin of the community. What power he has, he abuses to infect the state with pestilence. . . . No wild beast is more harmful than the tyrant."

One comes to the conclusion that a patriarchal government, animated by the spirit of Christian love, and therefore able to dispense with force in both internal and external affairs, comes closest to his ideal. The ruler of his state is always "under the law"; he may be a good *paterfamilias,* like his Roman prototype endowed with absolute authority; or he may be a monarch limited in his powers by nobility, magistrates, and the necessity of obtaining the consent of the people. Some of his views are derived from medieval images:[62] when he compares the state to a large monastery,[63] he is thinking of the prince in terms of a good shepherd, of a paternally benign abbot. On another occasion, the prince is likened to the father who rules his family with the spirit of Christian love.[64] Platonic and Aristotelian ideas are blended with medieval ones into his conception of an organic society when he describes the state as an enormous human body:[65] the head of the state, which is farthest removed from the passions and partakes most of wisdom, should govern the limbs and the body in the same manner as the upper part of the soul governs its lower spheres, and the soul in turn rules the body. Between the "head" and the "body" of the state are the magistrates, who correspond to the middle part of the soul, and thus both obey and command.[66]

[62] After a comparison of the classical and medieval sources of the *Institutio,* Born (*op. cit.,* 128) comes to the conclusion that Erasmus, while not borrowing directly from medieval mirrors of princes, did follow the medieval pattern (*ib.,* 126). He mentions such points as Erasmus' emphasis on the prince's moral and personal qualities, and his use of the organic analogy of the state. As to direct sources, Born concludes that on the whole Erasmus followed classical rather than medieval writers (*ib.,* 95).—It seems to me that Erasmus was probably familiar with medieval thought on the subject, but that he greatly preferred classical sources. When he did incorporate medieval notions into his own work, he chose those which were closest to Greek and Roman ideas, both in origin and content. In his own use and interpretation of such ideas, he emphasized their classical rather than their medieval context.

[63] *Op. Ep.* III, ep. 858.

[64] *LB* IV, 574: "What is the king if not the father of a great multitude?"

[65] In *LB* IV, 577, he refers to the pagan philosophers who said that "the rule of a prince over his people is not different from that of the mind over the body"; *ib.,* 579, "the state is a sort of body, composed of various members. . . ."

[66] *LB* IV, 602: "The parts of the mind are not all equal in importance: some control, others obey. The body only obeys. As the prince is the most important part of the state, he ought to know most and be farthest divorced from all gross passions. Closest to him will be the magistrates, who obey in part and rule in part, for they obey the prince and rule over the common people." Similar tenets in *LB* IV, 577; *LB* V, 14; etc.

The magistrates and nobility, then, are next to the prince the most important members of this organism. They fulfill a function similar to that of the Platonic guardians.[67] In the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* Erasmus follows the Platonic doctrine very closely when he makes the degree of knowledge the criterion of man's position in society.[68] He combines this with a conservative esteem for high birth, but condemns the choice of magistrates according to their monetary power.[69] He demands that the best citizens and nobles be heard in councils, at least in an advisory capacity.[70]

The outline Erasmus gives of the Christian prince and the Christian noblemen lacks the clarity of feature that distinguishes Plato's philosopher-king and guardian; or, to draw on a contemporary for comparison, Erasmus gives us not nearly as succinct a picture as Castiglione does of his exemplary courtier in the *Cortegiano*. Yet he establishes an educational ideal of man, and this ideal occupies a central position in his philosophy.

Erasmus devoted much of his educational and literary work to the attempt to inject his humanistic idealism into the manifold social and political organization of Europe. The ideas concerning the political structure of society that can be derived from Erasmus' writings are, on the whole, the least precise among his propositions. He is not certain whether and how humanity should be ordered politically. Even if on the whole he concludes that such an organization is necessary, he does not arrive at a definite and final conception of its machinery. On the one hand, he desires to replace

[67] I cannot agree with Born, who thinks that Erasmus "ardently supported Plato's doctrine of the philosopher-king, yet he could not adopt his scheme for the rule of an aristocracy" (*op. cit.*, 98). Erasmus indeed did not adopt, but he tried to adapt, the scheme to his Christian humanism and to contemporary conditions, as he adapted the philosopher-king; furthermore, he was strongly in favor of a nobility and a civic patriarchate.

[68] *LB* V, 13: "Therefore he who is wiser should have greater power; he who is less wise should obey."

[69] Thus *LB* II, 108: ". . . the greatest misfortune to the state is caused by the fact that not those are appointed to public office who could be of the greatest advantage to the community on account of their wisdom, experience, and the integrity of their lives, but those who bid the largest amount of money." Cf. also *LB* V, 48.

[70] *LB* V, 13: "The opinion of the best citizens, or those of high birth, should be heard in council, but in such a manner that the power of making laws remains in the hands of the monarch. He may now and then be strongly urged, but should not be forced or overruled."

all sovereignty by Christian love; on the other, he wants to resuscitate the medieval empire under a Christian monarch; again, he contemplates constitutional monarchies. Geldner concludes that "Erasmus ist in der Theorie Demokrat, Aristokrat aus Neigung, und der Wirklichkeit gegenüber Monarchist."[71] This sound statement needs some modification and amplification: It is Erasmus' idea of the fundamental goodness of man which is essentially democratic. His emphasis on intellectual and ethical excellence is aristocratic in the sense of quality rather than of privilege. Finally, Geldner's statement indicates that Erasmus was aware of monarchy as the form of government coming to prevail in his age, and that he held the modern prince perfectly capable of becoming his ideal Christian statesman. As we have noted earlier, Erasmus' efforts to achieve a society based on ethics is put into the proper perspective when we realize that in his scale of values the particular forms of government are subordinated to the ethical wisdom and conduct of their representatives. Any form of society seems acceptable to him if it brings mankind closer to the realization of his educational ideal.

In consequence, it is in Erasmus' philosophy of education that we find his hope greatest, and his ideas most constant. An aristocracy educated according to these ideas, and therefore good by his standards, may one day be the ruling element in Christendom. Knight and scholar shall be welded into a new type of man, the Christian knight, and to that end Erasmus gave fruitful advice.

In their uncompromising humanism, his basic aspirations go beyond those of most of his humanistic brethren anywhere. His belief in the value of man as such causes him to regard national and religious barriers between men as artificial. From this truly humanistic conception he derives his international cosmopolitanism. The independent energy of his mind leads him to an ultimate political conclusion: the postulate of a universal, peaceful, Christian order of men. The education of the individual will engender that of society and will finally bring about the general acceptance of Christian standards of behavior throughout Christendom.

Again, he sees in education the cure for all evils, particularly for the principal vice in which rulers and nations of his time indulged, their nationalism. The continual wars which this produced prevented the achievement of lasting international peace

[71] F. Geldner, *op. cit.*, 88.

and, most irksome to Erasmus, severely impeded the progress of humane learning. Only education could cure this vice. It was thus a beautiful and highly symbolic gesture when he dedicated his paraphrases of the four gospels to the mighty princes of Europe—one each to Charles V, Ferdinand I, Henry VIII, and Francis I. He was not afraid to intersperse the necessary and conventional humanistic flatteries of his dedicatory epistles with some rather potent admonitions.[72] His authority was great enough to permit him considerable liberty in speaking even to princes. The essence of these dedications was his hope that, just as the names of the princes were already joined together by his dedications of the four gospels, so the spirit of the gospels might soon unite them forever in brotherly love.[73] He hoped that symbolic gestures like this joint dedication would promote the desired result of peace among Christians; he used satire, as in the *Praise of Folly,* with the same end in mind. He may have believed that injunctions like these would suffice to lead to a truly Christian, peaceful order of the occident.

But obviously Erasmus lamentably overestimated the power of reason. Despite his aloofness, he was passionately interested in politics, particularly in "international relations." Like a true idealist, he thought he was offering the world the solution of all its troubles if only the world would take his recipe.[74] In this formative period of the modern state, however, the princes of Europe were bent on an undisguised power policy. Even if Erasmus recognized the futility of his efforts, he never gave up. Using all the modulations he had in his rich register, from flattery and persuasion to sarcasm and threats, he continued courageously to preach his gospel of peace and brotherly love.

He condemned the ceaseless wars of these princes who claimed to be Christians: if the pagan Plato called the struggles of the Greeks among themselves "seditions" rather than wars, how then should we term the wars in which Christians, pledged to be loving brethren, continually engage?[75] Again the contrast between the

[72] Cf. Liechtenhan in *Gedenkschrift,* 148; and *Op. Ep.* V, ep. 1255, 1333, 1381, 1403.

[73] *Op. Ep.* V, ep. 1403 (to Francis I).

[74] Cf. Liechtenhan, in *op. cit.,* 150 f.

[75] *LB* IV, 608. Cf. also *ib.,* 609: ". . . the good Christian prince should hold under suspicion every war, no matter how just." And *ib.,* 607, he doubts "if there really is any war which can be called just."

idealist Erasmus and the sceptical realist Machiavelli emerges most clearly: while the latter takes the political structure of history for granted and establishes his system accordingly, political history appears to the former at times like a long series of criminal follies. The princes, whose depravity is encouraged by Machiavelli's analysis, seem to Erasmus like fools and knaves. *Virtù* leads to war, *virtus* to peace.

Despite his scornful complaints, Erasmus was not a complete pacifist. He conceded that states sometimes had the right to make war,[76] but in the same breath he pointed out that most wars are caused by greed and desire for power.[77] Occasionally he betrays the shrewdest scepticism as to the difference between the actual and the professed motives of rulers for waging wars: he plainly accuses them of having a secret understanding while fighting each other, the point of this understanding being that they will continue to fight until their own peoples are so exhausted that they are in a position to impose tyrannies on them.[78] He does not hesitate to suggest—although careful to disassociate himself from such a "detestable" imputation—that the princes of Europe when planning to make war on the Turks are in a similar collusion, have exactly this end in mind, and aim at nothing less than the establishment in their own states of a tyrannical and corrupt oligarchy indistinguishable from that of the Turks.[79]

[76] In *LB* V, 354, Erasmus argues that "we have to concede the right of waging war to princes" if we concede the right of the authorities to punish evildoers. Yet, however grave and just their motives may be, war should be waged only after *all* other means are exhausted.

[77] *Loc. cit.*: ". . . If lust for power, ambition, personal resentment, or desire for revenge has been the incentive for war, it is definitely highway-robbery, not war."

[78] Adage *Principes inter se noti, LB* II, 933: They are in collusion while fighting each other: they wage war only "so that each may exhaust his own nation and, after the structure of the commonwealth has been subverted, may establish his own tyrannical rule over it." The same motives are suggested in *Op. Ep.* V, ep. 1333: God is pleased if a prince "takes care that the storm of war does not arise, that the liberty of the people is not outraged, that the poor are not reduced to famine, that no corrupt officials are appointed. . . . " The simultaneous appearance of war, violation of civil liberties, and corrupt government would suggest a strong association of these ideas in Erasmus' mind.

[79] *LB* V, 366: "There are some who suspect that the Princes use the Turkish war as a crooked pretext to rob the cities, the farmers, and the people in general; to override the laws, extinguish freedom in their states, abolish the rights of councils, destroy the respect for ecclesiastical authority, so that the state is governed by

Treatises such as the *Querela Pacis,* the *Dulce bellum inexpertis,* and innumerable remarks interspersed through his works and letters plead for peace, arbitration of international disputes, and Christian relations among princes.[80] In an age when the rising monarchies were evolving the methods of modern power politics, Erasmus, the wandering scholar, the *Weltbürger,* continually protested against such methods. The only remedy he could see was the humanistic education of princes. Thus he was, or claimed to be, in high hopes that the young prince Charles, to whom he dedicated the *Institutio,* would realize his dream of a peaceful Occident, and full of hope he sent his work also to Henry VIII of England and to Ferdinand of Spain.[81] Needless to say he was disappointed. His dream of reason and moderation was not fulfilled either by a revived universal Empire or by a federation of Christian princes. He was swimming against the tide which was carrying the followers of Machiavelli.

The real instrument of Erasmus' activity was the written word; more specifically, the printed word.[82] For considerable periods he actually did his work in the printing establishments of Aldus and Froben. He was a great *homme de lettres* and publicist. Within the framework of his age, he assumed something like the function of a "columnist" in the modern American sense of the word. His tool was the pen, the products of which were immediately multiplied by printing and widely circulated. His social function restricts the man of letters to giving advice. Erasmus had all the characteristics of this position and spread his advice among all and sundry, but he shrank from taking personal responsibilities. Hating to "commit himself," he very astutely managed to attain personal independence and individual liberty. He succeeded in maintaining it throughout the wars, the religious struggles, and the factionalism which filled his lifetime. He kept aloof especially from po-

the greed of a few, and everything is determined by force of arms rather than by reasonable deliberation, just as it is among the Turks." He goes on to compare this effort with the suppression of Roman liberties by the triumvirate, and then, in a rather transparent manner, disclaims that he, Erasmus, ever thought the princes entertained such notions.

[80] Cf. Born, *op. cit.,* 19, where an actual plan of arbitration is mentioned; also *LB* V, 367: ". . . most secure are moderate monarchies joined together by Christian treaties."

[81] Born, *op. cit.,* 4.

[82] Huizinga, *op. cit.,* 83.

litical responsibility,[83] but also from permanent associations with institutions of learning, and from the responsibilities that such associations would entail. He never really settled down anywhere, and even if he stayed in a place for a considerable period, as in Basel during his later years, he never gave the impression of planning to live there always—as indeed he did not. Of no one particular society did he feel himself to be a part:[84] his society was every individual, it was mankind.

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[83] Cf. Liechtenhan, in *op. cit.,* 150: "Er scheute sich, Verantwortlichkeiten konkreten politischen Handelns zu übernehmen, die über die grundsätzlichen Ermahnungen seiner christlich-humanistischen Pädagogik hinausgingen."

[84] On this point, cf. L. Enthoven, "Erasmus Weltbürger oder Patriot?" in: *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum,* XXIX (1912), 205–15, and Huizinga's article in *Gedenkschrift,* 34–49.