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Faith and Piety in Erasmus's Thought

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Erasmus's understanding of faith and piety corresponds to his use of the allegorical and tropological method. Just as the Christological and the ethical interpretation perform metaphorical functions between letter and spirit by showing the proper and the broader meaning of the text, so faith expresses one's specific relation to God in Christ, whereas piety includes the general scope of moral behavior. Faith reveals the absolute priority of grace over nature, but piety relates the natural virtues to the way of salvation. Erasmus insisted on the exclusiveness of grace and faith while reserving a preparatory, ancillary, and concomitant function to natural morality and Christian charity.

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM, the sixteenth-century biblical humanist, was anxious to steer a middle course between extremes on both sides of the Reformation. Yet his attempt at mediating between contrary opinions proved historically abortive. Small wonder, then, that subsequent interpreters could not arrive at a consensus either. For centuries scholars failed to concur in what he was really all about.[1] One reason for the diversity of interpretations is that his thought indeed appears ambiguous and his attitude ambivalent. But the lack of agreement is also attributable to the different presuppositions informing his interpreters and thus coloring the various portraits of this apparently enigmatic figure.

Of course, Erasmus sided with neither party. He charged the Catholic authorities with enforcing the status quo of a tradition which, while good in its beginning and early development, had deteriorated over time through abuse of power. And yet he shunned both the Reformation movements and their leftwing offspring for upsetting the established order. Even so, he did espouse a reform program of comprehensive scope, the *restitutio christianismi* on the basis of the *philosophia Christi,* though he was far from presuming

[1] Information about the history of Erasmus interpretation (with further bibliographical references) can be found in: G. Ritter, *Die geschichtliche Bedeutung des deutschen Humanismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963); A. Flitner, *Erasmus im Urteil seiner Nachwelt* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1952); W. Kaegi, "Erasmus im achtzehnten Jahrhundert," *Historische Meditationen* (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1942), 185 ff.; B.E. Mansfield, "Erasmus in the Nineteenth Century, the Liberal Tradition," *Studies in the Renaissance* 15 (1968): 139 ff.; L.W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 234; M. Hoffmann, *Erkenntnis und Verwirklichung der wahren Theologie nach Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972), 10 ff.; B.E. Mansfield, *Phoenix of His Age: Interpretations of Erasmus c. 1550-1750* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); C. Reedijk, *Tandem bona causa triumphat. Zur Geschichte des Gesamtwerkes des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Basel-Stuttgart: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1980).

that it should take on its own form apart from the institutional church.[2] While being quite outspoken with his ideas through voluminous, widely distributed publications, he stayed on the sideline of history in the making and tried to remain moderate. He preferred dialogue and accommodation, convinced as he was that the truth would assert itself once one prudently compared both sides of an issue with an eye to underlying common denominators and with a feel for the "grammar of consent."[3]

Many modern interpreters, depending on various perspectives, have depicted him as a skeptic, rationalist, and moralist as well as the proponent of an undogmatic, spiritual religion which foreshadowed their own liberal frame of mind.[4] Especially his attitude toward the Christian faith was supposed to have made him the forerunner of Enlightenment thought. He was said to have proposed something like an informal, general religion which ultimately holds the truth in suspension and therefore tolerates whatever personal convictions individuals may choose for themselves within the broadest possible range of options.

However, more recent Erasmus research has begun to expose these clichés by focusing on his theological work which for the most part has escaped translation into modern languages.[5] What is beginning to emerge here is the profile of a humanist who in fact taught a distinct theology that

[2] See my article: "Erasmus on Church and Ministry," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 7 (1987): 1-30.

[3] See J.K. McConica, "Erasmus and the Grammar of Consent," in J. Coppens, ed., *Scrinium Erasmianum 2* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969): 77 ff.; M. O'Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus' Civil Dispute with Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[4] This line of interpretation has been advanced first of all by W. Dilthey, *Auffassung und Analyse des Menschen im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert, Gesammelte Schriften 2* (5th ed., Berlin: Teubner, 1957); *Pädagogik. Geschichte und Grundlinien des Systems, Gesammelte Schriften 8,* 2d ed. (Berlin: Teubner, 1960), by E. Troeltsch, "Protestantisches Christentum und die Kirche in der Neuzeit," *Die Kultur der Gegenwart,* (Berlin: Teubner, 1909) vol. 1, 4:1, 431 ff.; "Wesen der Religion und Religionswissenschaft," ibid., 4:2, 1 ff.); and by P. Wernle, *Die Renaissance des Christentums im 16. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1904). It was generally continued, though in modified versions, by J. Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (New York: Scribners, 1923), P. Smith, *Erasmus: A Study of His Life, Ideals and Place in History* (New York-London: Harper, 1923), and A. Renaudet, *Etudes Erasmiennes* (Paris: Droz, 1939). A contemporary representative of this view is J. Chomarat, *Grammaire et Rhétorique chez Erasme* (Paris: Société d'Edition "Les Belles Lettres," 1981).

[5] A. Auer, *Die vollkommene Frömmigkeit des Christen nach dem Enchiridion militis Christiani des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1954); L. Bouyer, *Autour d'Erasme* (Paris: Cerf, 1955); R. Padberg, *Erasmus als Katechet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956); C. Augustijn, *Erasmus en de Reformatie* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1962); L.W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists*; R. Padber, *Personaler Humanismus* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1964); E.-W. Kohls, *Die Theologie des Erasmus* (Basel: Reinhardt, 1966); J.B. Payne, *Erasmus: His Theology of the Sacraments* (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1970); G. Chantraine, *'Mystère' et 'Philosophie du Christ' selon Erasme* (Namur-Gembloux: DuCulot, 1971); M. Hoffmann, *Erkenntnis und Verwirklichung*; A. Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1972); G. Winkler, *Erasmus von Rotterdam und die Einleitungsschriften zum Neuen Testament* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1974); M. O'Rourke Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); F. Krüger, *Humanistische Evangelienauslegung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986).

constituted the bedrock of his thought as a whole. Moreover, his theological insights were not simply bunched in haphazard juxtapostions with disparate parts pieced together for ad hoc arguments. Rather, his theological thought constituted a system of coordinates, a matrix of comprehensive understanding informing his entire work.[6] Certainly, this hermeneutical blueprint of the biblical humanist represents a system quite unlike that of a medieval *summa* since it replaces the rigid structure of cogently argued syllogistic conclusions with a looser framework of thought. But this framework is cohesive, nonetheless, for it outlines coordinates intersecting in a *scopus,* identifies *topoi* in their proper places of convenience, and draws connections in a generally coherent way.

To be sure, one is unable to grasp this system on the surfce of his writings. According to the exegetical principles governing his interpretation of literature, especially Scripture, it must emerge from language itself, from the text, its context, and texture.[7] Just as the word in *sacrae literae,* and even in *bonae literae,* will reveal its spirit if the reader is both adept in the use of rhetorical skills and amenable to moral instruction, so Erasmus leads us to expect that his own writings become so transparent as to draw us into their meaning–provided that we approach them with the proper method and appropriate disposition.

Once this meaning enters into the mind, a universal *ordo* encompassing nature, humanity, the world, and God gradually opens up, and this makes for knowledge and piety in all dimensions of life. Like his beloved fathers of the third and fourth centuries (above all Jerome, Origen, and Augustine) Erasmus had no qualms to exploit the *spolia Aegytiorum* in order to provide a philosophical substructure for his theology. And yet these borrowings from pagan philosophers, just as the use of rhetorical principles for understanding language and literature, were to serve only as handmaids of the queen of sciences, theology. They functioned as *progymnasmata,* as a training ground preliminary to the real pursuit of knowledge.[8] Their relation to theology was

[6] See my book *Erkenntnis und Verwirklichung,* 59 ff.; F. Krüger, *Humanistische Evangelienauslegung,* 29 ff.

[7] On Erasmus's hermeneutic see J.B. Payne, "Toward the Hermeneutic of Erasmus," in *Scrinium Erasmianum* 2: 13 ff.; A. Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament,* 99 ff.; G. Chantraine, *Erasme et Luther* (Paris: Lethielleux; Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 1981) 275 ff.; J. Chomarat, *Grammaire et Rhétorique chez Erasme,* 509 ff.; B. Hall, "Erasmus, Biblical Scholar and Reformer," in: T.A. Dorey, ed., *Erasmus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) 81 ff.; C.A.L. Jarrott, "Erasmus's Biblical Humanism," *Studies in the Renaissance* 17 (1970): 119 ff.; J.B. Payne, "Erasmus, Interpreter of Romans," *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* 2 (1971): 1 ff.; C. Augustijn, "Hyperaspistes I. La doctrine d'Erasme et de Luther sur la 'Claritas Scripturae'," *Colloquia Erasmiana Turonensia* 2 (1972): 737 ff.; M. Hoffmann, "Erasmus im Streit mit Luther," *Humanismus und Reformation, Martin Luther und Erasmus von Rotterdam in den Konflikten ihrer Zeit* (München-Zürich: Schnell & Steiner, 1985) 93 ff.; F. Krüger, *Humanistische Evangelienauslegung,* 80 ff.

[8] *Enchiridion* (Holborn) 32, 7 ff.; *Ep.* 182, 132 ff. (Allen, I, 410); *LB* IX, 104D; *Ratio* (Holborn) 181, 15 ff.; *LB* I, 1026A f.

to be like that of the letter to the spirit. Thus Erasmus combined a largely Neo-Platonic ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and a largely Stoic ethic with fundamentals of rhetoric drawn primarily from Cicero, Quintilian, and Valla. However, these pagan aids were to be subservient to the real task of theology, i.e., the interpretation of the Bible, the only source of genuine knowledge.

The natural order of things served as a backdrop for that true theology which springs from God's revelation in Scripture. Erasmus arranged the biblical subject matter around certain *loci* to outline a system centering in the unique *scopus,* Christ, with various levels of approximation surrounding it and with the dynamic of increasing knowledge and ethical improvement energizing it. Philological criticism (*ad fontes*) was to restore Scripture to its original purity. Nature was to be brought back to its primordial goodness (*instauratio naturae bene conditae*). The *restitutio Christianismi* was intended to call a perturbed church back from superstitious beliefs, external practices, and abuse in office to the simplicity of Christ's teaching and example. Civil authority was enjoined to restore the pristine tranquillity of a society in turmoil. History was to go forward by returning to the golden age from whence it came. Above all, splintering Christendom would regain its unity only by recovering its one source, Christ. On the whole, then, this Erasmian vision was informed by the integrity and coherence of a theological system which was fundamentally orthodox in terms of the classical Christian tradition.

Lack of space prevents us from sketching this *ordo* of theological comprehension. By concentrating on Erasmus's notion of faith and piety we must be content with seeing it disclose itself within a limited framework. Moreover, it would unnecessarily extend the scope of our inquiry, if we were to consult all available primary sources. It must suffice to find a block of material that is broad enough to reveal his fundamental understanding of humanity's relation to God, chronologically extensive enough to encompass a significant span of his life, and yet manageable enough to serve as a text-base.

Fortunately, there is such a sequence of writings meeting these specifications, his *Commentaries on the Psalms.*[9] We have chosen his ten expositions of selected Psalms between 1515 and 1536 (variously entitled *enarratio, commentarius, paraphrasis,* and *concio*) rather than his *Paraphrases on the New Testament* because the Old Testament texts require allegorical interpretation and therefore allow him to apply his hermeneutic more fully and to display his theology more distinctly than his New Testament exegesis where his chosen literary genre, the *paraphrasis,* makes him stick closer to the text by "saying the same in different words," though also here his choice

[9] *ASD* V-2; V-3: *LB* V, 171 ff.

of language and his inclination to commentary more often than not betray his theological predisposition.[10]

As regards his exegetical procedure, Erasmus generally adopted the medieval fourfold sense of the Bible (*littera, allegoria, tropologia, anagogia*).[11] But he modified this traditional method according to his humanist principles of grammar and rhetoric and thus freed the text from the constraints of scholastic dogmatism. The text must not be violated by imposing on it any heterogeneous canon of interpretation. For the word cannot release its true meaning unless it speaks for itself and, in turn, unless one lets oneself be drawn into it. This liberation of the word from dogmatic constriction implied that he approached the sacred text in the same way as a profane text, even though the content of God's word, especially in the New Testament, possessed for him the higher authority of God's epilogue, God's final word in Christ as it is most clearly revealed by the radiance of the gospel light.[12]

But even in Scripture itself there is a qualitative distinction between the letter and the spirit, the kernel and the husk. Like Origen, Erasmus followed the exegetical rule: *Littera occidens, spiritus vivificans.*[13] The fundamental question is, then, how to find the spirit in the letter. Before we move on to Erasmus's answer, however, it must be remembered that he refused to abandon the literal, historical meaning of the word, for that would have been against his humanist grain. The letter constitutes the irremovable fundament and substratum of its hidden meaning. Nevertheless, there is more to the word than its surface, namely, its recondite content, to be uncovered by the allegorical and tropological method. Still, although allegory and tropology lie concealed in *historia,* their interpretation yet builds on the historical sense rather than removing it. When disclosing the truth, they liberate the confined word into its own broader and deeper meaning.[14]

Following the *rule of Tychonius,* Erasmus takes the allegorical meaning to point not only to Christ, but also to the church, the body of Christ, and to the Christians, the members of this body.[15] Allegory performs an essentially Christological and ecclesiological function. The tropological meaning, on the other hand, uncovers the moral instruction of the word aiming at ethical utility for individuals and society.[16] The final, anagogical sense, however,

[10] *Ep.* 710, 30 f. (Allen III, 138); cf. J. Chomarat, *Grammaire et Rhétorique,* 587 ff.; F. Krüger, *Humanistische Evangelienauslegung,* 23 ff.

[11] See for instance *LB* V, 1034C ff.

[12] See for instance *LB* IV, 696E; V, 1092A, D; 1093B; *ASD* V-2, 118, 679; 140, 363; et al.

[13] *Enchiridion* (Holborn) 34, 35 f.; 72, 17 f.; *ASD* V-2, 346, 561; 221, 919; *ASD* V-3, 101, 240; et al.

[14] *LB* V, 1036E; 1043B, D.

[15] *LB* V, 1036F; 1058F ff.; *ASD* V-2, 194, 51; 224, 994.

[16] *LB* V, 1036E.

adumbrates the last things of God's mysteryy.[17] Since anagogy touches on an eschatological, transcendent, and trinitarian reality which lies beyond human comprehension, makes us speechless, and therefore must be worshipped in silence, it remains for the most part beyond the exegetical reach.

Both allegory (the specifically Christological, ecclesiological, and Christian understanding) and tropology (the general moral instruction in terms of ethical utility, civility, and humanity) unfold from the immediate literal sense of the text. While continuing to adhere to history as their *declaratio,* they nevertheless open new perspectives by casting light on the letter, at once rendering it a shadow and revealing its true meaning. Thus it would be erroneous, even blasphemous, to reject the obvious literal sense. Just the same, should a literal interpretation lead to nonsense, run counter to Christ's teachings, or undermine morality, then an allegorical and tropological interpretation must prevail, then the spirit must do without the letter. It is true, not all scriptural passages, especially certain Old Testament ones, are conducive to Christian allegory. Some are so frigid and jejune that they cannot kindle the fire of Christ's love. But to draw a moral lesson from any good source, foremost from biblical history, is always possible (*tropologice nusquam non est locus.*)[18]

For Erasmus the allegorical, Christological interpretation grasps the proper meaning of the word, whereas the tropological, moral interpretation comprehends its broader import. No doubt, the historical sense establishes the only basis from which the exegete moves to a higher meaning. But it is allegory and tropology that perform this metaphorical function. The Christological interpretation, properly speaking, and the moral interpretation, broadly speaking, carry the meaning of the text over from the confinement of the letter to the freedom of the spirit, and from here onward to the final mystery, the anagogical sense. History denotes the beginning of the text; mystery bespeaks its consummation. Yet Erasmus, the humanist, concentrates on the exegetical middle region, the transition between beginning and end, the progress from origin to fulfillment.[19]

Just as language itself functions in the world order as the medium for knowing and doing between beginning and end, so the christological-ethical exposition of the text marks the transitional area between the outer appearance of the word and its internal essence. Allegory and tropology

[17] *LB* V, 1035A; 1037B.

[18] *ASD* V-2, 102, 190; *LB* V, 1050A; see my review article of J. Chomarat's book in: *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 5 (1985): 78.

[19] Just as Erasmus arranges subjects around *loci* which are oriented toward the unique *scopus* Christ in a system that is predicated on the Platonic priniciple *similia similibus,* so the dramatic development *initium-progressus-perfectio* provides the dynamic within this system. Cf. for instance *LB* V, 914F, 926B, 933E, 941B f., 953B, 1032F, 1077A, 1138C, 1140C, 1150B; *LB* X, 1410C; see E.-W. Kohls, *Die Theologie des Erasmus,* 222 f.; R. Padberg, *Erasmus als Katechet,* 73; and M. Hoffmann, *Erkenntnis und Verwirklichung,* 29, 42.

represent a metaphorical coincidence of history and mysteryy, a mediating *transitus* between the visible and the invisible, between the outside and the inside of reality. This concentration on the middle process between source and goal, namely, the christological-ethical transition between two mutually exclusive realities, constitutes one of the essential principles of Erasmus's hermeneutic.

The same concentration on the middle is, after all, also the salient point in Erasmus's anthropology and theology. Christ, the word, stands as the incarnate mediator between God and humanity. Human response to Christ is the means by which human beings, placed as they are in the middle between God and animals, can move upward toward divinity, provided that they yield to the drawing power of divine love (*eros*). Conversely, their failure to respond makes them fall for the gravitational pull of brutish passions. Like the soul, psychologically speaking, between spirit and body, and the *affectus,* ethically, between virtue and vice, human beings themselves are placed in a position where by word and deed they can either strive heavenward or go down, become increasingly spiritual or mundane. And their movement, whether toward improvement or degeneration, affects others, uplifting them or degrading, enhancing or diminishing, enlivening or destroying.[20]

These general reflections on Erasmus's hermeneutic indicate that faith must have something to do with the allegorical-christological meaning of the text *proprie dictu,* and piety with the tropological-moral import of the text *late dictu.* Going through Erasmus's exegesis of the Psalms, we analyze first what he has to say about faith. Then we take a look at his references to piety. It is safe to assume from the outset that piety encompasses a wider range of ethical signification, while faith concentrates on the specific point of the Christian's relation to God through Christ. In a word, faith is to allegory what piety is to tropology.

A composite picture of Erasmus's statements on faith indeed bears out that his allegorical interpretation coordinates faith with Christ and the church. Bearing the sins of the world and fulfilling God's law, Christ invites all people through evangelical faith and grace to share in the dignity of God's children.[21] By faith and baptism[22] human beings are born into Christ's body, the church. Baptismal regeneration unites the neophytes with Christ, who is God's son by nature, and incorporates them as equal members into his body.[23] This rebirth can be variously described as an admirable *metamorphosis,* a transformation and transmutation,[24] a restitution to original innocence, a

[20] *ASD* V-3, 147, 14 ff.

[21] *ASD* V-2, 106, 300.

[22] *ASD* V-2, 174, 323; 198, 142; 247, 740; 260, 180; 300, 451; V-3, 101, 231; 288, 38; 351, 577.

[23] *ASD* V-3, 125, 162.

[24] *ASD* V-2, 254, 979, 985; *ASD* V-3, 217, 733; 234, 389.

conversion from darkness to light, from perversion to the true order, from death to newness of life and to the primordial purity before the fall.[25] The child of wrath, of the world, and of the devil, had become a child of God by adoption. In Christ, human beings are returned to their original image of God because they are restored to a sound mind capable again truly to recognize and acknowledge God.[26] But happier is the restitution by grace than the creation by nature (*felix culpa*).[27]

Although this total change is brought about by God's love and grace alone, it nevertheless involves human action.[28] To be sure, it is nothing but grace that operates *prima causa.* Yet grace also invites and enables human cooperation as a secondary cause effected by the first cause. So it is first of all the laver of regeneration that gratuitously washes away all sins. Even so, by repentance[29] the sinner assists in destroying the old Adam. Doing penance by mortifying the flesh, the penitent amputates all carnal desires rather than injuring the body, for the body is God's temple to be honored, sanctified, and adorned with good works.[30] The new human being is delivered from the bondage of sin precisely in order to lead a godly life through the inspiration of the divine spirit. And even though baptism as such is to no avail except for God's gift of grace and faith, it does completely alter the human constitution and disposition so that persons can bear fruit, if only they respond to and cooperate with this divine gift.[31]

Faith is a living, invincible, adamant, even importunate thing.[32] To describe this faith, Erasmus uses chiefly the metaphor "light."[33] The divine light so illuminates the human mind that it sees with the eyes of faith and thus can both believe what is not seen and hope for what is not apparent.[34] Moreover, faith is not only freely given in baptismal regeneration. It is also generated, enlivened, and corroborated by God's word, Christ.[35] Erasmus sees no contradiction in connecting faith with the sacrament of baptism while attaching it also to the gospel light. Faith in the evangelical truth enlightens and stabilizes the mind.[36] Indeed, whoever believes the gospel possesses what

[25] *ASD* V-2, 174, 327; 198, 155; 260, 160; 349, 665, 666; *ASD* V-3, 384, 500.

[26] *ASD* V-2, 150, 680; 209, 514; 212, 615; *ASD* V-3, 146, 974.

[27] *ASD* V-2, 349, 667.

[28] *ASD* V-2, 212, 636; 349, 670; 350, 714; *ASD* V-3, 101, 230; 127, 222; 160, 498; 212, 540; 288, 39; 384, 500.

[29] *ASD* V-2, 344, 495; V-3, 160; 504.

[30] *ASD* V-2, 209, 514.

[31] *ASD* V-2, 237, 426; 238, 470; V-3, 146, 974; 213, 595; 288, 38; 384, 528.

[32] *ASD* V-2, 298, 400; 340, 356, 369; V-3, 269, 379; 288, 47, 68.

[33] *ASD* V-2, 212, 622; 217, 782; V-3, 130, 335.

[34] *ASD* V-2, 112, 501; 212, 254; 214, 677; 344, 510; V-3, 181, 390; 222, 938; 296, 346.

[35] *ASD* V-2, 150, 680; 209, 528; 214, 695; 247, 276; V-3, 136, 557; 141, 790.

[36] *ASD* V-2, 212, 634; 247, 750.

it promises, that is, the believers are already sanctified, even if they are not yet altogether free from sin.[37] Nonetheless, faith constitutes not only an objective assurance derived from the word itself. It connotes also the believer's commitment, both intellectual and moral, to the truth and its consequences. Therefore, to draw faith from the gospel means both to believe that one has been returned to innocence by Christ's death and to intend to lead a new life according to Christ's law.[38]

Thus Erasmus can stress the Protestant principle *sola Scriptura,* according to which salvation is revealed by Scripture alone. But a true understanding of Scripture hinges, as we have seen, on the allegorical interpretation, otherwise the word would yield at most a broader tropological sense like the *bonae littera,* or nothing at all. And to expound the word allegorically, one needs the eye of faith. For Scripture has been generated by Christ's spirit. Consequently, no one can grasp its essential truth except those who by evangelical faith partake in his spirit.[39] *Similia similibus,* one of the key principles of Erasmus's theology,[40] obtains here as much as elsewhere: one cannot enter the sacred text unless one shares the same spirit. Therefore, without Christ and faith the fountain of canonical Scripture cannot flow. Not until one receives this spiritual key does the word unlock what is shut on its outside (*Sileni Alcibiadis*).[41] Conversely, only Christ and faith close what seems to be apparent on the surface. Christ and faith, then, are as it were the low gateway to the word of life. And in the faithful who enters in humility and walks in the spirit of Christ, God's word will bring to fruition what it promises, it will do what it says. The text will transform persons by drawing them into itself.[42]

Believers trust that God's word will grow in them to bring forth spiritual fruit. Erasmus's concept of confidence (*fiducia*), though linked with faith (*fides*) as its intensified mode (*con-fidere*), is closer akin to hope (*spes*).[43] Hence it includes a wider meaning that orients faith toward future fulfillment.[44] Trust arises from the recognition of God's loving kindness. It renders the conscience good by virtue of a sound mind having come to its spiritual senses (*resipiscentia*) and hence to an understanding of true reality, whereas the bad conscience of a perverted and corrupt mind wallows in the foolish nonsense

[37] *ASD* V-2, 198, 142; 254, 976; 367, 276; V-3, 141, 790.

[38] *ASD* V-2, 261, 214; 344, 496.

[39] *ASD* V-2, 154, 842; 345, 551; 346, 587.

[40] Cf. M. Hoffmann, *Erkenntnis und Verwirklichung, s.v.,* 225.

[41] *ASD* II-5, 159 ff.

[42] *ASD* V-2, 52, 581; 209, 528; 211, 596; 221, 922; 261, 202; 375, 579; V-3, 98, 122; 136, 558; 141, 790; 172, 48, 288, 38; 378, 348.

[43] *ASD* V-2, 158, 936; 174, 321; 210, 540; 211, 596; 288, 63; 340, 357; 344, 511; V-3, 136, 582; 358, 760; 378, 355.

[44] *ASD* V-2, 155, 864.

of its dream world.[45] Needless to say, faithful trust is far from being anything like self-confidence because it would be inane to trust in one's own merits rather than anchoring one's hope to the immense mercy of God.[46] When faith turns away from the multiplicity of earthly cares, it becomes simple as it gathers trust in God, the author and perfecter of salvation.[47] Trust means therefore to despair in one's own strength, works, and righteousness and to pin one's hope on God who will bring the good beginning to a happy conclusion.[48] Faith collects its trust in the divine promises which hold out the eventual victory over the world.[49]

Erasmus sees no real problem in relating the objective gift of grace, faith, and word to the subjective response by human beings. Certainly, God's action always comes first, thus has priority over the human reaction, both in a temporal and qualitative sense. But unlike Luther, Erasmus carefully avoids absolutizing the divine operation by totally eliminating human cooperation. Therefore, while grace, faith, and Christ are exclusively given by God, there is still the possibility, indeed the need for human beings to appropriate these gifts in an *a posteriori* response to the *a priori* divine initiative. Consequently, Erasmus does emphasize the Reformation principles *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura, solus Christus* in terms of the exclusiveness of the first cause. Yet he coordinates human efforts, and even achievements, with the first cause in such a way that they are effected by it and therefore qualify as secondary causes.[50]

Accordingly, the biblical humanist stresses the principle *sola fide* without denying the need for good works. Salvation and faith are indeed freely given by grace apart from works. All the same, faith involves human efforts as it answers to the divine operation.[51] So faith symbolizes not only the spring from which all blessings flow but also the root from which all good deeds grow. It is true, the repentant believer abandons the old life by suffering punishment and abstaining from sin. But leaving the old way is possible only by virtue of preventing grace (*gratia dedutrix*). And walking in the way of new life is impossible without the aid of concomitant grace (*gratia comites*).[52] The ability to relinquish the old and to advance in the new is first of all due

[45] *ASD* V-2, 155, 860; 157, 922; 198, 140.

[46] *ASD* V-2, 156, 871; 252, 930; V-3, 212, 541; 300, 493; 349, 521.

[47] *ASD* V-2, 210, 546; V-3, 128, 276.

[48] *ASD* V-2, 210, 540; 273, 605.

[49] *ASD* V-2, 174, 338; 226, 84.

[50] See R. Padberg, "Glaubenstheologie und Glaubensverkündigung bei Erasmus von Rotterdam," in: Th. Filthaut u. J.-A. Jungmann, eds., *Verkündigung und Glaube, Festschrift F.X. Arnold* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958), 58-75; M. Hoffmann, "Erasmus im Streit mit Luther," in: *Humanismus und Reformation,* 107 ff.

[51] *ASD* V-2, 204, 350, 355; 212, 623; 225, 54; 260, 180; 261, 205, 215; 293, 217; 302, 486; 352, 788; V-3, 148, 44; 275, 606; 276, 616; 282, 859; 304, 635; 384, 528.

[52] *ASD* V-3, 385, 530.

to the effecting cause, the drawing power of divine grace. Still, it is in effect also the result of human endeavor.[53]

This dialectic of God's primary work and the human secondary effort surfaces again when we focus on Erasmus's understanding of the relation between faith and righteousness. No doubt, righteousness by faith alone is an exclusive gift of God through Christ's sacrifice on the cross.[54] No one can be just before God except when justified by faith, because nothing is ours unless given by God. This is so because God alone is the author of justice; only the one who is just and sees the inner recesses of the human heart is able to judge justly.[55] But this judge is the physician, too, providing the remedy for our sickness unto death. So, always justice and mercy go together, right and equity, judgment and clemency.[56] Human righteousness before God therefore means not only to acknowledge one's sin but also to recognize God's goodness, to know that one is so totally sinful as to deserve nothing but condemnation, and to believe so sincerely in God's mercy as to trust God's promises. God's righteousness, on the other hand, signifies that God fulfills God's promises. Thus the faithful believes that God is faithful in the first place, that God is true to God's self by keeping God's word.[57]

However, the faithful themselves are also called upon to pursue righteousness by producing fruit worthy of repentance before justification and works of righteousness in their new life. Accordingly, the first part of righteousness consists in recognizing one's guilt, making amends, and believing that one has been restored to innocence by Christ's death. But it is not enough to have been made sinless unless faith begins to come alive through love so as to bring forth the fruits of good works.[58] Even so, righteousness by faith excludes pride in one's own achievements. We must not arrogate to ourselves our own righteousness. Consequently, merits are ours only insofar as we attribute them to God's grace rather than claiming them for ouselves.[59] In other words, God's gift engenders a new understanding of spiritual possession: as soon as we concede that property is not ours, it is ours by right; as soon as we claim our right to the possession

[53] *ASD* V-2, 352, 802; V-3, 369, 88. The question of how Erasmus deals with the medieval doctrine of *merita de condigno* and *merita de congruo* cannot be answered from his commentaries on the Psalms because of lack of references. One must turn to his *De libero arbitrio* and his *Hyperaspistes* I and II to clarify this problem; see C. Trinkaus, "Erasmus, Augustine, and the Nominalists," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 67 (1976): 5-32; and J.D. Tracy, "Two Erasmuses, Two Luthers: Erasmus's Strategy in Defense of *De Libero Arbitrio*," ibid. 78 (1987): 37-60.

[54] *ASD* V-2, 212, 614; 376, 592; V-3, 157, 410.

[55] *ASD* V-2, 231f.

[56] *ASD* V-2, 172, 247; V-3, 232, 334; 240, 634; 368, 950.

[57] *ASD* V-2, 230, 202, 210; 350, 721; V-3, 232, 320.

[58] *ASD* V-2, 260, 166; 261, 215; 302, 491; 349, 677; 350, 728; 352, 788, 801.

[59] *ASD* V-2, 260, 160; 262, 226, 253; 309, 756; 353, 823; 376, 616; V-3, 304, 627; 340, 258; 350, 569; 351, 578.

of righteousness, we lose it. Certainly, no possession is more assuredly ours than what God freely gives us. But it is ours only in such a way that it is not ours (*iustitia aliena*).[60]

We have seen that Erasmus understood faith as a gift of God in Christ which engenders personal trust and commitment (*fides qua creditur*). But our findings already implied that faith is also a matter of intellectual knowledge and affirmation (*fides quae creditur*). Faith is therefore not only a disposition of the heart but also a constitution of the mind, and a motivation of the will, for that matter. Both the noetic and the volitional elements of faith are much in evidence.

God's gift so restores the human mind to soundness that conversion can be described as *resipiscentia* (coming to one's senses).[61] With the mind illuminated by the light of faith, then, the believer turns into an anointed prophet who sees the Messiah, Christ, as the son of God.[62] Thus faith leads to an understanding which cares nothing for human reasons. In fact, all human rationality is shaken to its foundation by the strength of faith.[63] It is true, the creator endowed all human beings with the mental powers of the light of nature to perceive God's authority, might, excellence, wisdom, goodness, and eternal divinity. Moreover, the human creature is innately capable of comprehending the law of nature, to understand that one must flee from vices and strive after virtue.[64] Accordingly, the first step of wisdom is both to know God and to benefit from God (*frui*), or, in other words, to fear and love God.[65] Yet this natural disposition has been obscured by human disobedience. Therefore, however wonderfully the fabric of creation everywhere reflects the nature of the creator, however clearly the malice of vice and the benefits of virtue can be known, all human beings are born children of wrath; no one is not infected by natural concupiscence. For, although God created the universe by God's word, the first parents, and in them all progeny, turned against the creator and worshipped the creature as God (original sin).[66]

Therefore, God in God's infinite mercy created human beings again, this time restoring them to their original image and, beyond that, making them a new creation through the regeneration of the word of life, Christ.[67] Though under the law of nature not few served God, many under the law of Moses, and most under the evangelical law of love, observation of the law itself is

[60] *ASD* V-3, 342, 310 ff.; 344, 354, 360; 346, 433; 348, 479; 352, 618.

[61] *ASD* V-2, 150, 680; 198, 141; 209, 515; see my *Erkenntnis und Verwirklichung,* 214 f.

[62] *ASD* V-2, 112, 501.

[63] *ASD* V-2, 211, 595.

[64] *ASD* V-2, 40, 221; 214, 679; 286, 44; V-3, 345, 407; 377, 313 ff.

[65] *ASD* V-3, 136, 573, 595; 142, 828; 145, 934; 280, 786; 388, 611, 628.

[66] *ASD* V-2, 47, 422; 291, 145; 298, 360; V-3, 214, 636; 342, 301; 379, 365.

[67] *ASD* V-2, 349, 666; V-3, 234, 397; 262, 128; 376, 290; 382, 448.

of no avail to salvation but for faith in God's mercy as revealed in Christ. Again, God spoke in creation, through law and the prophets, through sacred books and miracles, through apostles and martyrs, even as God speaks these days through the gift of faith and the inspiration of the spirit.[68] But without acknowledging our foolishness and accepting God's wisdom, without recognizing our misery and receiving Christ's blessedness, there is no salvation, properly speaking. Of course, since God is the creator of natural gifts they must not be disdained. But they must be dedicated to the lord. Natural virtues must be enhanced by Christian virtues. Natural intelligence must be qualified by faith, natural love by charity, and natural expectation by hope.[69]

On the whole, then, the eyes of faith perceive God's grand design for the world and humanity, namely, the order of salvation history with its beginning in creation, its middle region in restoration, and its end in the final consummation. And since the middle shares in the beginning and the end, the gospel of Christ and the church of the just existed from the beginning of the world, even though through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection the revelation has become most evident.[70]

These noetic and ethical connotations of faith already have lead us into the overlapping province of piety. According to the threefold division of salvation history (creation, restoration, consummation) there are three corresponding notions of piety: natural piety, Christian or true piety, and perfect piety. While faith concerns specifically the area of restoration in Christ (and therefore implicitly also the area of creation and, as confidence and hope, the area of consummation), piety covers more broadly all three regions of the divine order. The quantitative preponderance of references to piety, however, do not impair Erasmus's insistence on the qualitative preeminence of faith for salvation. Only through grace, word, and faith can natural piety become true piety and therefore eventually arrive at its consummation in perfect piety. Not until natural love has been transformed by Christian charity is it able to reach its absolute height. And that means in general, without Christian restoration there is no true recovery of creation and hence no real hope for an ultimate fulfillment.

Christian piety, the middle region between creation and perfection where both the transition from nature to spirit and the progress in the spirit takes place, combines faith with charity. Charity arises above all from the freedom of God's children in contrast to the constricting obedience of servants. The gift of the spirit, Christian love, so liberates the believers' minds and hearts from the contractions of anxiety and fear that they delight in willing and

[68] *ASD* V-2, 214, 683; 288, 45; V-3, 100, 180.

[69] *ASD* V-2, 60, 802; 293, 217; 374, 539; V-3, 181, 401; 345, 407.

[70] *ASD* V-2, 288, 48; V-3, 262, 125; 378, 322; 382, 448.

doing what is of benefit for others.[71] Consequently, Erasmus's statements about faith and works of righteousness appertain to the rubric of Christian piety as well. To be sure, the believer is justified by faith alone. But faith as piety is a living thing, not an idle thing.[72] This is so because the spirit allots to each the ability to perform good works according to the given measure of faith.[73] Thus faith operates through charity, which for Erasmus is synonymous with *dilectio,* the prudent choice of options to be beneficial to others.[74] So charity is always concerned with blessing others, i.e., speaking well of (*bene-dicere*) other people and serving them well (*bene mereri*) rather than hurting them. Should faith fail to work through *dilectio,* it is dead and not worthy its title.[75]

Christ's law of love always shines before the believer who advances in the narrow path of piety, with grace incessantly being present to assist in making progress toward perfection.[76] Indeed, future happiness already informs the Christians' life, but in such a way that they are blessed by hope rather than by possession. Cooperating with the divine grace, then, human beings bring forth good works which are so evident to others that they glorify on earth God who is in heaven. For it is through the way the Christian walks that God is disgraced or glorified.[77] So, salvation must be pursued by works of love which spring from the root of faith. Of course, most of the credit is due to grace, says Erasmus with an eye on Luther, but the Scripture also commends in so many places the performance of good works.[78]

This progress on the way of salvation is a matter of Christian piety, properly speaking.[79] Yet Erasmus does not give up the connection of Christian knowledge and life with natural cognition and virtue, broadly speaking. However tentative the relation, he never surrendered the analogy between nature and grace, culture and religion, antiquity and Christianity, classical

[71] *ASD* V-2, 48, 430; 197, 123; 237, 420; 238, 448, 453; 240, 512, 546; 241, 551; 268, 425; 372, 455; V-3, 135, 529; 160, 497.

[72] *ASD* V-2, 62, 856; 261, 204.

[73] *ASD* V-2, 260, 181.

[74] *ASD* V-2, 261, 205; V-3, 386, 536.

[75] *ASD* V-2, 214, 548; 313, 898; 372, 455; V-3, 148, 40, 49; 386, 536.

[76] *ASD* V-2, 50, 521; 52, 544; 240, 519; 349, 681; 350, 689; V-3, 289, 92; 389, 650.

[77] *ASD* V-2, 62, 882; V-3, 386, 548; 422, 489.

[78] *ASD* V-2, 302, 491; V-3, 304, 630 f.

[79] In addition to its connection with faith and works, true piety is for Erasmus also equivalent with spirituality. His understanding of Christian spirituality derives primarily from his *Devotio Moderna* heritage (see R.L. DeMolen, *The Spirituality of Erasmus of Rotterdam* [Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1987]). Although we wish in no way to underrate the spiritual element of his theology, we concentrate on the noetic and ethical meaning of piety since an exclusive focus on spiritual piety tends to overlook its relation to both natural piety and faith as piety. The focus on piety as spirituality also emphasizes the mystical element which has more to do with the goal of Christian perfection than with the noetic-ethical progress in the middle between beginning and end.

and Christian virtues, the common good and salvation, the body of Christ and the body politic. This is why piety can appear also in its natural context. Natural piety signifies "all affection, worship, and dutiful action which we owe to those from whom we have received life."[80]

More specifically, natural piety is the innate disposition of reverence toward the life-givers, first of all God. It is an attitude toward authority, namely, toward those authors by whose power we have received what we are unable to engender ourselves, life, and to whom therefore honor and respect is due. Piety is owing foremost to God, and then to country and civil authority, to parents, to teachers in school and church, and to those by whose service we are restored to life, either from sickness or from impiety, i.e., physicians who heal and clergy who convert people to Christian piety. When Erasmus deals with the source of natural piety, the natural affections, he includes, besides the love of God, the care for self-preservation (a kind of positive self-love), marital love, love toward parents and children, and love toward neighbors and friends.[81] These affections are located in the soul, in the middle between body and spirit (and in the soul they originally occupy the neutral middle part, from where they can either be drawn upward to the higher part of the soul and thus toward the spirit, or they can fall downward to the lower part of the soul and hence toward the body). So they are neutral and potentially positive in themselves provided they do not fall for the flesh. When preserved in their natural state, then, they can be perfected by grace and faith as they are raised to the spirit and consummated in the love of Christ.[82] In all, natural piety and its affections are pre-Christian rather than sub-Christian.

Particularly with respect to piety toward God, Erasmus holds on to the classical notion of *eusebeia,* the duty of reverent human conduct before the divinity, both in terms of pious devotion and religious worship. Indeed, he so agrees with the concept of a natural veneration of God that he teaches that the *cura religionis* is the foremost obligation of the state. What is more, he subscribes, albeit reluctantly, to the ancient, and still existing heresy laws according to which the malicious denial of God and the obstinate refusal to worship God (*asebeia*[83]), including blasphemy, sacrilege, and idolatry, must be punished, even up to the death penalty in extreme cases of evil. This most severe application of the state's care of religion, namely, the elimination of atheism, is mandatory because the political and cultural unity of the republic rests on the foundation of religion. Impiety unhampered leads at the worst

[80] *LB* V, 1080F.

[81] *ASD* V-2, 48, 458; 66, 13; 214, 679; 364, 166; 374, 537.

[82] *ASD* V-3, 181, 398; 285, 963; *LB* V, 1080F ff.; 1085F f.; X, 1488E.

[83] See J. Keil, "Asebieprozesse," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann), I, 735 ff.; D. Kaufmann-Bühler, "Eusebeia," ibid. 6: 985 ff.; H. Merkel, "Gotteslästerung," ibid. 11: 1185 ff.

to both lèse-majesté and to devil worship, to political upheaval and the perversion of the divine order. For "only piety . . . joins us together with God . . . so that we are made one with him. In opposition, impiety segregates evil persons such that they are alienated from the highest good and added to the members of the devil's flock." In short, piety unites, impiety divides.[84]

In spite of all his concern for mediation, there is at the bottom of Erasmus's thought a fundamental dualism, a dichotomy between God and the devil, true and false, good and evil, unity and division. In what comes closest to a systematic outline of his theology, the *Elenchus* and *Sylva* of his fourth book of *Ecclesiastes,* the whole order of the world is displayed in terms of two contrary realities: God and the devil; God's hierarchies and the kingdom of the devil; the law of God and the law of Satan; virtues and vices in general and in particular; the end of virtue and vice; the death of the evil person and of the Christian. Two diametrically opposed domains with different origins, associations, laws, modes of behavior, and ends, are ranked in the order of *initium, progressus, consummatio.* Evidently, piety, whether at first broadly as natural piety or then strictly as Christian piety, and impiety, whether as atheism in general or as heresy specifically, function in the middle between origin and goal, either coming from God and leading to blessedness, or coming from evil and leading to condemnation. Piety or impiety define human beings as belonging to either one or the other side of the line of demarcation.[85]

Nevertheless, dualism does not have the last word. The optimism of Erasmus's confidence in the divine order prevails–an order that encompasses the broader area of God's general omnipotence and governance as well as the proper area of God's special revelation in Christ for the salvation of humankind. If persons yield to their natural inclination toward piety and lead a moral life informed by the philosophical virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) Erasmus finds it inhuman, if not un-Christian, to exclude them from the company of the blessed, especially when he compares them to those members of the church who are Christians in name only because they lack the godliness of Christian piety. Though he is very careful, almost hedging, with the problem that has plagued the church for centuries, namely, the "salvation of the unregenerated heathen," in one of his more unguarded moments he can be carried away to say: "Perhaps the spirit of Christ is poured out more widely than we understand. And there are many in the partnership of the saints who are not listed in our catalogue . . .. Indeed, we have to admire the mind of those who did not know Christ and

[84] *ASD* V-2, 38, 156; 40, 221; V-3, 123, 58; 144, 892 ff.; 145, 934; 422, 510; *LB* V, 803E, 931A, 1024C ff., 1187A ff.; see my article "Erasmus and Religious Toleration," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 2 (1982): 80 ff.

[85] *LB* V, 1083E ff.

the holy Scriptures. Therefore, when I read about such persons, I can scarcely refrain from saying: Saint Socrates, pray for us."[86]

Interestingly, it is the concept of predestination, the divine foreknowledge within the inner recesses of God's secret council, that allows Erasmus to extend the limits of the communion of saints to include saintly persons among the pagans precisely for their life of natural piety and philosophical virtue, such as Socrates and Plutarch, while nonetheless holding on to the principle of exclusiveness of the church, Christ, Scripture, grace, and faith. After all, the classical virtues, just like nature, natural cognition of God, and the natural volition to serve God, are not entirely eliminated but rather perfected by the Christian revelation, knowledge, virtues, and worship. In fact, Erasmus can coordinate the philosophical and Christian virtues. Their relation is that of *genera* to *species*: prudence corresponds to faith, justice to love, and fortitude to hope, with temperance being a sub-species of justice.[87]

To sum up, Erasmus appears to have been a humanist theologian who tried to preserve the connection between Christian piety and natural piety, yet without surrendering the uniqueness and finality of the Christian faith and life. He attempted to relate Christianity to antiquity in such a way that the exclusive Christian claim could still give a preliminary place to the best of ancient moral philosophy. Thus he remained within the orthodox parameters of the classical Christian tradition.

The soleisms of Luther's Reformation, however, divorced grace from nature also with respect to faith and piety.[88] Consequently, piety came to mean exclusively the Christian's progress in the way of salvation. Moreover, piety became increasingly a measure of the Christian's spirituality in terms of experience and feeling, as for instance in Pietism. The noetic and ethical element of natural piety were given short shrift as its spiritual and emotional side was emphasized. On the other hand, the Enlightenment movement developed an understanding of morality on the basis of natural religion alone and hence ignored the essence of the specifically Christian piety based on faith, grace, justification, and sanctification.[89] So, it would appear that the tradition following the Reformation had severed the relation between Christianity and antiquity. The new illumination of human reason, however,

[86] *ASD* I-3, 251, 619; 254, 700.

[87] *LB* V, 1080D f. Concerning the whole problem see *ASD* I-3, 371 f.; *Inquisitio de fide, A Colloquy by Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus 1524,* ed. C.R. Thompson, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), n. 13, 101 ff.; and H. Baron, "Erasmus-Probleme im Spiegel des Colloquium 'Inquisitio de fide'," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 43 (1952): 254 ff.

[88] "Fromme leut machen gehört dem Evangelio nicht zu, sondern es macht nur Chrysten. Es ist vil mer ein Christ sein denn fromm sein, Es kan einer wohl fromm sein, aber nicht ein Christ." (*WA* 10/1/2, 430, 30 ff.)

[89] See H.-J. Greschat, M. Seitz, F. Wintzer, "Frömmigkeit," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter) 11: 671 ff.

found itself commensurable with the morality of natural religion, but jettisoned much of the specifically Christian heritage. Both developments had far-reaching implications with disturbing effects, the repercussions of which are still felt.