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The *Philosophia Christi* of Erasmus

submitted by
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Trinity College

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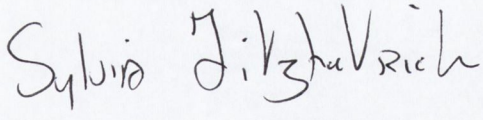
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Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted previously as an exercise for a degree at this, or any other, university. It is entirely my own work. I agree that the library may lend or copy this thesis on request.



Sylvia Fitzpatrick.

Summary

The object of this thesis is to demonstrate that underlying all of Erasmus' diverse writing was his own distinctive, consistent and coherent concept of Christianity. He called this the *philosophia Christi*. The two main pillars of his thought are his concept of Christ and his concept of man. The thesis begins with an analysis of these two seminal concepts. It describes how they are both intricately bound up with his view of the human perfection process and that this is what all of his works aim to explore and explain.

Erasmus believed that Christ was both human and divine and that as man and as *logos*, he functioned as both an exemplar, and as the means, of perfection. It was essential for him that Christ was truly and abjectly human otherwise he could not serve as a model to fellow-humans. This did not in any way take from the importance he placed on the other element of his concept of Christ which was the eternal spirit of the *logos*. He saw this as the instrument by means of which God becomes manifest to man. This was the mediating function of Christ. He also thought that the *logos* functioned as the instrument of creation itself and that it continues through all time to be the guiding and perfecting principle of creation.

The second pilar of his view of the process of perfection, his concept of man, is then examined. Man's nature is both the basic raw material for, and the starting point of, the perfection process described in the *philosophia Christi*. The method of perfection entailed the attainment of consciousness of the self and the world which would *necessarily* result in a rejection of the material world and all of its values and honours because dawning consciousness would show these to be unreal ephemera. The evolving Christian would then edge closer to union with the divine spirit of God. Erasmus' notion that perfection lay in consciousness of the tension or dialogue that existed between the disparate elements in the human being is mirrored in his concept of *logos* as a creative dialogue. When man enters into this conscious struggle he embodies the *logos* of Christ or the divine dialogue which is the one true law of creation operating

in the whole universe eternally. Erasmus believed that in this way, man could actually partake of divinity. This emphasis of man's divinity together with his particular version of Christ's humanity meant that in the Erasmian view the historical Jesus and the perfected man were very similar entities.

Having examined and defined the fundamental concepts of Christ and man and how they contribute to Erasmus' concept of perfection the next chapter shows how he infused some of his writings with hidden meaning in order to reveal certain less orthodox, but nevertheless, essential elements of this concept. In his dialogue called the *Ciceronianus* he used allegory to impart his view of how man should incorporate the spirit of Christ. Under the guise of describing how the true follower of Cicero should act he was also explaining how the aspiring Christian should emulate Christ. The true method of imitation, for Erasmus, was that each individual should use his or her own special gifts and attributes to achieve the perfection of their own individual nature. Consequently the true Christian would, of necessity, be the least like Christ superficially because in emulating the essence of Christ's life, he or she would become truly themselves as he had rather than slavishly copying the externals of the Saviour's life.

The next chapter demonstrates that Erasmus revealed another important element of his thought in his colloquy called *The Godly Feast*. Here, again under the protection of allegory, Erasmus described how man can discover the truth of Christ by observing the manifestations of the *logos* in the divine creation. As a consequence of the exploration and exposition of this concept of Christ as the eternal and omnipresent *logos* the characters in the colloquy declare that some pre-Christian writers of high moral standing have attained sainthood. This argument was clearly heretical and Erasmus would never, therefore, have risked stating it overtly. *The Godly Feast,* as the name indicates, is also an allegorical description of Erasmus' view of the true meaning of the Eucharist. For him the Eucharist was the incorporation of Christ which was achieved by dying to the world, in other words it was the process of perfection. Erasmus believed that this Christianizing process would result in our becoming more fully human.

The following chapter shows how Erasmus found his concept of the perfection process in Scripture, with particular reference to his *Paraphrase on Mark* and his *Paraphrase on Romans*. In these works he employed an allegorical interpretation of Christ's actions and teaching to demonstrate the method of perfection to his readers. He saw Sacred Scripture as an instrument of salvation because it was the primary means of discerning the method of perfection. He believed that Christ not only taught the way to perfection by means of verbal instruction but that he had also consciously constructed his life as a paradigm of the process of perfection.

The final chapter is an examination of his richly allegorical personal device: the god Terminus with the motto *concedo nulli*. It demonstrates that it was a symbol for the union of opposites which is the object of the struggle for perfection. The whole dynamic of the *philosophia Christi* can be seen as a union of opposites. The opposites are the human and the divine. His Christ is more human than orthodoxy and his man is more divine and so in Erasmus there is an harmonious symmetry of these opposites. The entire key to his thought system lies in this union of the human and divine in his concepts of Christ and man.

Introduction

This thesis attempts to demonstrate that a very unique and totally consistent view of the nature of the Christian message lay at the heart of Erasmus' immense corpus of writings. The uniqueness of his view accounts for the fact that, in his own day, Erasmus was something of an enigma and has remained so to the present day. Men on both sides of the great confessional divide found Erasmus infuriating. On the Catholic side he was twice offered a cardinal's hat but was nevertheless also castigated by the Inquisition and most of his works were placed on the Index after his death. On the side of the reformers many of his humanist friends became Protestants but he was also severely criticized, most notably by Luther himself, for his apparent cowardice in not joining their ranks. While his religious beliefs are clearly Christian, the precise nature of those beliefs has been the source of much historical speculation. In simple terms this is due to the fact that, on the one hand, he never ceased to criticize institutionalised religion, while on the other hand, he remained within the established Church, despite the obvious option of joining the reformers with whom he shared some crucial beliefs. In the earlier part of this century the Protestant view of Erasmus as a man who was too cowardly to side with the reformers despite his clear antipathy to the Roman Church was championed by Johan Huizinga.[1] In the 1960s the more liberal-minded RH Bainton argued that his reasons for staying within the Roman Church were more complex.[2] He suggested that they were a combination of the fact that Erasmus had strong personal attachments to the Church on account of the 'multitude of personal friends' it enveloped within its ranks together with the influence of two philosophical notions: the Neoplatonic doctrine that progress must be in the direction of oneness and the Stoic idea of cosmic harmony. The underlying assumption in Bainton's thesis is that in terms of religious thought Erasmus should certainly have joined the reformers. In the centuries following the condemnation of his works at the Council of Trent Erasmus was not included

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1 Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus*, (Haarlam,1924) *trans.*, F Hopkin.

2 RH Bainon, *Erasmus of Christendom*, (New York, 1969).

among the ranks of eminent Catholics.[3] In the ecumenical climate of the second half of the twentieth century, however, the tide has turned and he has been hailed by some as the forerunner of a more modern Catholicism. Louis Bouyer, for example, has called him 'the chief embodiment of humanist Catholicism'.[4] The dominant trend in more recent works on Erasmus is to view him primarily as an educator and corrector of texts; a biblical humanist whose main aim was a return to a pure form of Christianity by means of a truer theology based on a humanistic revision of the text of Scripture. This lead him to believe in an internal religion which depended more on inner transformation than on prescribed dogma or external ceremonies. He is not perceived as having been either an innovative theologian or a practical reformer.[5] Erasmus studies have settled into this consensus and new research tends to concentrate on more specialized accounts of his philological and hermeneutical practices particularly in relation to his New Testament writings.[6] This view of Erasmus emanates from two disparate sources. First, it is a result of the current consensus on the nature of Renaissance humanism itself which is now perceived as a movement concerned, primarily, with a new mode of education based on classical mores and texts rather than the embodiment of a commonly-held philosophy.[7] In this thesis I will argue that in the case of Erasmus, at least, humanism cannot be defined in such narrow terms. Secondly, the current view of Erasmus is based

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3 This view is shared by historians in the present century also, see Albert Hyma, *The Life of Desiderius Erasmus,* (Assen, 1972), and Eugene Rice, 'Erasmus and the Religious Tradition' in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11 (1950) 387-411.

4 Louis Bouyer, *Erasmus and the Humanist Experiment,* (London, 1959).

5 The latest biographies of Erasmus all present this view of him. See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto,1996) reprint; L-E Halkin, *Erasmus,* (Oxford,1994) reprint; RJ Schoeck, *Erasmus Grandescens: The Growth of a Humanist's Mind and Spirituality,* (Nieuwkoop, 1988); JK McConica, *Erasmus,* (Oxford, 1991).

6 See Erika Rummel, *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian,* (Toronto,1986); Albert Rabil jr, *Erasmus and the New Testament: The Mind of a Christian Humanist,* (San Antonio,1972) and also his article 'Erasmus' Paraphrases of the New Testament' in *Essays on the Works of Erasmus,* ed., Richard DeMolen, (London,1978) 145-61; JB Payne, 'Towards the Hermeneutics of Erasmus' in *Scrinium Erasmianum* 11, 13-49 and Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus,* Erasmus Studies 12 (Toronto,1994).

7 This argument was championed by PO Kristeller and has become the new orthodoxy. See PO Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought,* 2 vols (New York, 1961-5).

on his own protestations of orthodoxy in the face of the severe criticism levelled at him by a number of his contemporaries. Despite these protestations and his appeals to the authority of Scripture, however, close reading of his writings always leaves one with the whiff of the unorthodox and the heretical.[8] In this thesis I will argue that Erasmus had a unique, coherent and consistent, view of what the Christian message was and he named this the *philosophia Christi* .

Erasmus does not fit neatly into any religious or philosophical category. The accolade 'a man for all seasons' which he conferred on his friend Thomas More was much more appropriate for himself. While he was not, in any way, an intellectual gadfly there are several difficulties in assessing his work as a totality. The first of these lies in the fact that he chose numerous very different modes in which to express his ideas. He used biblical philology, exegesis of classical adages, satire, comedy and classical translations, together with spiritual and educational writings, to put forward his world-view. He, himself, did not see these writings as separate, rather, each glossed the other. He said that his satirical *Moria* carried exactly the same message as his religious handbook: the *Enchiridion.*[9] His writings encompass the modern disciplines of theology, classical studies, philosophy and literary studies as well as intellectual history. Since each of these fields requires a level of expertise it is naturally difficult for one person to produce an integrated assessment of them as a whole.[10] The second difficulty in ascertaining Erasmus' body of thought is that as a totality it defies categorization. He claimed that he was not a theologian, although he

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8 The difficulties in assessing the true intent of Erasmus' writings were expressed by one of his early biographers when he said: 'at every stage of the study of Erasmus one has to ask first what he believed himself to be doing, then what he wished others to believe he was doing, then what others did think he was doing, and finally what the man actually was doing. And all this has to be learned chiefly from his own words and from his reports of the words of others.' Ephraim Emerton, *Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam,* (London,1899) iv.

9 Erasmus said this in his letter to Martin Dorp which is quoted in Betty Radice, trans,*The Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 215.

10 AHT Levi in his introduction to the *Praise of Folly* said that 'Totally to understand the contours of his thought in so many different fields demands a rare and complex competence unlikely to be found in any individual modern scholar'. Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London, 1986) 10.

wrote widely on theological matters.[11] Nor was he an original, or trained philosopher although he expressed opinions on many matters, such as the nature of man, that lay within the expertise of the philosopher. Erasmus was a man of the Renaissance who must be assessed within his own terms rather than by means of any imposed classification. Assessment of his thought has also suffered from the fact that he lived at the time of the Reformation. The reformers are viewed as a dynamic force in opposition to the static nature of the Catholic Church. Erasmus, who did not overtly initiate any practical reform movement and who stayed within the old Church has been mistakenly identified as belonging to its stasis.[12] His most important religious views were fully formed before the Reformation and consequently it cannot be seen as a conditioning factor of his thought. Lewis Spitz has pointed out that in the case of Erasmus, 'more than in that of most intellectuals, the end was present in the beginning so that his development was marked by gradualism and a high degree of consistency'.[13] He belongs to the age of the Renaissance and to humanism rather than the Reformation. The historiographical emphasis on the question of the position he took between the two great confessions can, therefore, be misleading. He conceived of Christianity above all as a unity and thus his main view of the split was that it should be healed as soon as possible. This is what conditioned all of his utterances on the subject. His own religion was undogmatic, open-ended and tolerant of everything except division. In his own day he was described by the author of the *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum* as a man entirely on his own; this is precisely what he was.

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11 The *Apologia ad Fabrum* is in Jean Leclerc, ed., *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, IX, 66B and translated in *CWE*, 83, *Controversies*. For a discussion of Erasmus' theological studies at Paris see JK Farge, 'Erasmus, the University of Paris, and the Profession of Theology' in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Yearbook* 19 (1999) 18-46. Farge has argued first, that Erasmus' time 'in Paris was clearly too short to earn any degree at all in theology and, second that during the time he did reside there Erasmus paid scant attention to the formal study of theology. Finally, Erasmus was in fact ineligible for a Paris degree. Every theology candidate was required to swear two solemn oaths attesting to his legitimate birth'. *ibid.*, 25. On the veracity of his doctorate of Theology see PF Grendler, 'How to Get a Degree in Fifteen Days: Erasmus' Doctorate of Theology from the University of Turin' in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Yearbook* 18 (1998) 40-69.

12 See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus*, 6, who states that Erasmus was 'unfortunate in having constantly been judged by the measure of Luther'.

13 Lewis Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists*, (Cambridge Mass., 1963) 199.

I propose to demonstrate in this thesis that a strong concern with the inner transformation of the individual soul underlay all of Erasmus' work. The *philosophia Christi* was in essence a description of the method of human perfection. His life's work consisted in expounding this method to as many people as possible. All of his writings contribute to this goal by elaborating some element of the method. The basic components of his system were Christianity and humanism. The fundamental elements of these two systems are the concept of Christ and the concept of man. His views on these two major concepts led to accusations of Arianism and Pelagianism being levelled at him by his own contemporaries. A close examination of his interpretation of the rich concepts of Christ and man reveals that he had a subtly unique, and partly unorthodox, view of their meaning which was fundamental to his system of thought. This system, despite defying classification, was a consistent totality. The thesis therefore begins with a detailed analysis of these two concepts as they appear throughout his writings.

Erasmus' Concept of Christ

The exact nature of Erasmus' Christology, although it is central to his thought-system, has rarely been addressed in detail by historians. The approach taken by RH Bainton is typical. He did not tackle the question at all and instead he simply assumed Erasmus' orthodoxy on the matter. For him Erasmus' religious beliefs were part of, and epitomized, an early evangelical reform movement whose aim was 'a return to the...religion of the New Testament'.[1] He did not, however, strictly define what the Christology of this religion entailed. CR Thompson, the translator of the colloquies, believed that Erasmus was a loyal Catholic who wanted to purify religion through philology from within the church.[2] Neither of these viewpoints give serious credence to Erasmus' Platonic and syncretic leanings. AHT Levi, who wrote the excellent introduction to the Radice edition of the *Praise of Folly,* emphasized in it that Erasmus' essentially humanistic belief in the perfectibility of man was of paramount importance to his thought. He nevertheless left the whole question of the implications of this for Erasmus' view of the role played by Christ in man's salvation tantalizingly untouched. He acknowledged that the implications of Erasmus' beliefs on free-will 'would certainly have been dangerous for him had they been spelled out in a formal theological account of how grace acts in the will'.[3] He believed that Erasmus held the same view of this as Pico Della Mirandola but that because of Pico's fate Erasmus decided to be more circumspect in his methods of attacking the status quo.[4] Margaret Mann Phillips, whose work centred on Erasmus' humanistic classical scholarship, nevertheless concluded that his concept of Christ was strictly orthodox. She said 'Erasmus' philosophy looked beyond the spirit of man for its guide and master, and accepted the doctrine of the redemption of the world'.[5] In a more recent study MA Screech came to a similar

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1 RH Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom, (London, 1970) 17.

2 See CR Thompson, ed, *The Colloquies of Erasmus,* (Chicago, 1965) introduction.

3 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 31.

4 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 31.

5 MM Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance,* (Suffolk, 1981) 120.

conclusion.[6] His excellent study explored the classical sources of Erasmus' world-view and correctly identified Platonism as the major source. Screech acknowledged Erasmus' syncretism but he did not see this as necessitating an unorthodox view of Christ because Platonic-Christian syncretism was Patristic in origin.[7] He argued that 'for Erasmus..the centuries-old syncretism was something to treasure. Indeed, for him this was Christianity, provided that the guiding light, first and last, was not Plato, nor even Socrates, but God made man in Christ'.[8] Continuing this theme, he wrote that the famous passage in the *Paraclesis*, in which Erasmus said that many elements of the *philosophia Christi* are found in the writings of pre-Christian philosophers, cannot be interpreted as meaning that Erasmus limited 'the role of Christ in the redemption of mankind to his expounding of an admittedly higher version of Greek philosophy'.[9] Another female historian, Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle also worked on Erasmus' relationship with the classics. More precisely, she dealt specifically with his syncretism. She highlighted the fact that Erasmus made it his business to christen pagan mysteries.[10] Unlike Screech she did not see this as a continuation of the Patristic tradition because although the Fathers had believed that an assimilation of classical pagan literature with truths borrowed from Hebrew Scripture was beneficial to Christians, Erasmus went much further and asserted that the pagans had found the truth through Christ who ordained it thus.[11] Nevertheless she did not draw any theological or doctrinal conclusions from this. Rather, she believed that

> these views about the classics are not the persuasions of a secular or sceptical mind, as has too often been charged. All of the wisdom of antiquity, and all of the mysteries which transcend it,

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6 MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980).

7 MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 77.

8 MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 77.

9 MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 79. The passage from the *Paraclesis* can be found in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 100-2.

10 Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries,* (Toronto, 1981) 10.

11 Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries,* (Toronto, 1981) 11.

devolve for Erasmus in Christ, who recapitulates them in himself.[12]

Above all, she always emphasized the Christocentric nature of Erasmus' evangelical humanism.[13] This trend of seeing Erasmus as the author of a fairly orthodox Christology has become the norm and as such it is reflected in the works of his most recent biographers. Cornelis Augustijn commenting on the Christological controversy between Erasmus and the Spanish Inquisition concluded: 'we may...observe that Erasmus' protestations of orthodoxy - reiterated to the point of becoming wearisome - sound honestly meant: a deliberate departure from the doctrine of the church was in fact beyond Erasmus' scope'.[14] Léon Halkin essentially agreed with this and summed up Erasmus' beliefs thus: 'he believed what the church believed. He admitted the weakness of fallen man and the necessity of grace and penitence, but he insisted on Redemption and the restoration of human nature.'[15] This consensus is based to a large extent on Erasmus' own protestations of orthodoxy. He took great care to protect his position and he believed that his concept of Christ was truly to be found in Scripture. A close examination of this concept, however, reveals that it resulted from a rather unique reading of patristic and scriptural sources.

For Erasmus, the term 'Christ' had two distinct meanings. First, in common with most other Christians, he used the term to denote the historical Jesus. He had his own particular view, however, of the exact composition of this being who lived on earth in a fragment of time. The second way in which he conceived of Christ was as a multi-dimensional force existing both outside of, and within, time and space. His concept of the historical Jesus was of a being who had 'two very different qualities: divine majesty, than which nothing can be more sublime; and human weakness, than which nothing can be more abject.'[16]s It was crucial to Erasmus' version of the *philosophia Christi* that

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12 Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries,* (Toronto, 1981) 19.

13 Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries,* (Toronto, 1981) 10.

14 Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto,1996) 158.

15 Leon-E Halkin, *Erasmus,* (Oxford,1994) 285.

16*Collected Works of Erasmus,* Toronto, 1974- hereafter *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 162.

Christ was both human and divine. He wrote:

> Christ is a man in such a way that at the same time he is also God, not the God peculiar to this or that nation, but the God of the whole world, and a God who is one with the Father. He is in command of all, and all these things are carried out by his inscrutable wisdom.[17]

The precise elements of the nature of Jesus Christ, whether human or divine, have been the subject of heated debate among Christians from the earliest times.[18] Erasmus was aware of this and was not inclined to enter the debate. While this was primarily because he hated dissension above all, it was also certainly because his terms of reference, if too clearly defined, would have been seen to lie outside the then current, or indeed any, orthodoxy.

The human aspect of Christ was vital for Erasmus because he believed that unless people knew that Christ, in his own nature, shared in their humanity they would not be attracted to his message. His view of the function of the human nature of Christ was that it 'first makes a contribution towards arousing men's love towards him (for we are more ready to love things which we know)'.[19] Then, if men could love Christ as something familiar, this in turn would provide a 'keener incentive to imitate him. For who would try to emulate what had been done by an angel in appearance only and not also in truth?'[20] Christ had to be a real man and not a disguised angel or other divine creature if he was to be useful to humankind in the process of salvation. If he was not truly a man, then men

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17 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 53.

18 Christological heresies abounded throughout church history but particularly in the early church. The main groups who diminished or denied the humanity of Christ were the Marcionites, the Valentinians and the followers of Appolinarius; those who diminished or denied his divinity included the Ebionites, the Theodotians, the Sabellians and, of course, the Arians. There was also a third category of heresy which differed from orthodoxy in its assessment of the precise way in which two nature of Christ co-existed. These included the Nestorians, the Monophysites and the Monothelites. Church othodoxy was defined by the councils of Nicea, Constantinople and Ephesus. Finally in the year 451 the council of Chalcedon came up with a definition of the composite nature of Christ which despite continuing heresies was universally accepted.

19 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 242, also *CWE,* 31, *Adages,* 165-70. See especially no. lii, 167.

20 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 242.

would clearly despair of imitating him. Erasmus was arguing in effect that it was not realistic to expect humankind to take a leap of faith and to accept something beyond the realm of their experience.

On the other hand, however, Erasmus also believed in an element of the true nature of Christ which was intimately connected to higher universal mysteries. He thought that the best exposition of this was to be found in the Gospel of John. In the preface to the introduction of his paraphrase of this Gospel, Erasmus said that its main theme was the mysteries of the Divine nature and 'its marvellous association with our own'. [21] He then gave a brief summary of these mysteries while at the same time expressing his belief that they were somewhat beyond our powers of comprehension. He asked:

> what human intellect can even begin to encompass how God the Father without beginning and without end eternally begets the Son? - into whom in the act of generation he pours the whole of himself, and yet loses nothing; and the Son is born from him, yet never leaves the Father who brings him into life? Or again, how the Holy Spirit proceeds from them both in such a way that there is a perfect community of the same nature between them all, with no confusion between the individuality of the three persons?[22]

While this was a consciously orthodox statement about the nature of the Trinity, Erasmus then asked 'who can embrace in his understanding the bond by which that supreme and ineffable nature bound man unto himself, so that the same person who had eternally been very God of very God was born very man of very man?'[23] As a description of the nature of Christ intended for public consumption, this passage had a sense of the unorthodox about it.[24] It did not refer to God sending his only begotten Son to redeem humankind; instead Erasmus depicted a mystical union in which the divine nature bound man unto

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21 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 232-1.

22 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 232.

23 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 232.

24 Erasmus expressed the wish in his *Paraclesis* that all Christians however lowly should read the Scriptures and indeed his *Paraphrases* were later placed in every church in England by royal decree

itself so that it was born 'very man of very man'. There was no specific mention of Christ, just the bonding of 'that supreme and ineffable nature' with man. This produces a different picture in the human mind than would reference to the man Jesus. It removes us from the human to the cosmic and eternal sphere in which Christ is not simply the historic man, Jesus, but a complex concept of the bonding of the divine and human principles. Erasmus was completely aware of this effect in John's Gospel itself and he was emulating the evangelist. He wrote that the language John put into the mouth of Jesus was 'highly figurative and obscure' and that 'the way in which our Lord says many things shows that he knew they could not be understood and did not wish them to be understood, until the course of events should make his meaning plain'.[25] Erasmus believed that the Gospel of John was written to supplement the others and that its main purpose was 'to assert the divinity of Christ against the heresies which were already...sprouting up'.[26] He argued that the author of the fourth Gospel believed it to be 'of the first importance that the world should know and believe that Christ was at once true God and true man'.[27] It is evident from the fact that Erasmus valued the fourth Gospel so highly that he concurred with this sentiment. He believed, incorrectly, that its author, John, was the 'beloved' disciple of Christ. Thus he argued:

> seeing that he who is the fountain of all wisdom loved John above the rest, we may well believe that he inspired his favourite, if I may use the term, with a fuller knowledge of certain mysteries. Let us all therefore drink deep of this man whom Christ loved that we in our turn may deserve to become lovers of Christ.[28]

In order to love the totality of Christ it was necessary to know precisely who, or

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25 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 233.

26 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 242. This is a very different approach to exegesis than that of the reformers who believed that Scripture was above all the word of God. Erasmus thought that the author of the Word, John, was the one who made the decision as to how he would present his gospel. The reformer's emphasis was always on the fact that Scripture was divinely inspired. For a synopsis of Luther's view of the Word see Martin Brecht, JL Schaaf, trans., *Martin Luther, The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546,* (Minneapolis, 1993) 111-3.

27 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 242.

28 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 243.

what, Christ was. Erasmus believed that the only way to achieve this was to start with a study of the human element of Christ and then, by stages, progress to an understanding of his divine nature.

This ultimate understanding of the divine nature of Christ could only be achieved by those who had progressed on the path of Christianity itself. Erasmus wrote that the earlier evangelists had

> scarcely touched on the divinity of the Lord Jesus. For this I take to be the wisdom of which Paul used to speak 'among them that are perfect', while professing in front of everyone else 'not to know anything save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.[29]

He went on to argue that: 'perhaps the time was not yet ripe for such an ineffable mystery to be made public in written form, for fear the godless might laugh to scorn what they could neither believe nor understand'.[30] In Erasmus' writings this correlation between belief and understanding is very common but he always argued that the process of understanding was a gradual one which progressed by stages and that on account of this it was sometimes necessary to be parsimonious in the dissemination of the truth. In another letter Erasmus pointed out that Christ himself was often deliberately obscure. He wrote that Christ 'sometimes spoke as though at the time he wished not to be understood' and that 'Jesus so mixes and adapts what he had to say that he seems to me to have wished to remain obscure not only to the apostles but to us'.[31] In his opinion it was the rise of heresy that made John and the Fathers after him write more openly than they would have liked about the divine nature.[32] Thus Erasmus suggested that certain elements of Christianity were mysteries that should not be communicated openly. These mysteries, of their very nature, could only be comprehended by someone who had taken on and progressed along the path of Christian perfection. Moreover, it is clear that he thought that

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29 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1333: 243, see also same volume 1255: 9.

30 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1333: 243.

31 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1255: 9.

32 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1333: 243.

both the apostles and his own contemporaries were equally expected to find these things obscure until they had advanced in Christ.

There is an element of the unorthodox in this notion that Jesus did not distinguish between pre-Redemption and post-Redemption Christians and that he set out deliberately to obscure the truth of certain mysteries from all but an inner circle. Indeed, Erasmus was castigated by Béda, the Paris theologian, for saying this.[33] He had written earlier in 1521 to Justas Jonas on the method employed by Jesus.[34] He said that he attuned himself to the feelings of the Jews and that 'he says one thing to the multitudes, who are somewhat thick-witted, and another to his disciples; and even so he has to bear with them for a long time while he gradually brings them to understand the celestial philosophy'.[35] This kind of statement could be interpreted as elitism on the part of Erasmus. It was not. He believed the path of Christianity was open to all men and women but it was so difficult that very few succeeded, despite the fact that all were capable of success. Thus in the *Paraclesis* he asserted that 'only a very few can be learned, but all can be Christian'.[36]

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33 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1333: 233. Noël Béda was the syndic of the faculty of theology at Paris from 1520 until 1535. He spent those years pursuing and prosecuting both humanists and reformers. Erasmus was high on his list of heterodox writers. Béda wrote several works condemning aspects of Erasmus' writings and in 1527, despite Erasmus' efforts to defend himself, the faculty at Paris condemned the Colloquies, Parphrases and several other works at the instigation of Béda. For an account of the Beda controversy see Erika Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics,* vol 2, (Nieuwkoop, 1989) 29 ff.

34 Justus Jonas studied law at the university of Wittenburg. In 1518 he received a canonry in Erfurt and became a professor in the faculty of arts there. Erfurt had a burgeoning humanist circle and in 1519, while he was rector of the university the philosophy faculty was reformed to encompass a new emphasis on humanistic and language studies. Jonas first met Erasmus in Louvain in 1519 and as a result of this meeting Erasmus advised him to study theology. His friendship with Erasmus and his humanist leanings led him to view the beginning of the Lutheran reform from a humanist point of view. Later, however, in 1521, he became professor of law at Wittenburg and cannon of the chapter. From then on he supported the Lutheran cause, while at the same time he urged Luther to be more moderate in his view of Erasmus.In 1527 he appears to have conceded that there was no hope of reconciliation between the reformers and Erasmus. He was not a leading theologian but his translations of Luther's most important writings were an important contribution to the new theology.

35 *CWE,* 8, *Letters,* 1202: 203.

36 JC Olin ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976)100.

As early as 1499 Erasmus' Christological views were firmly established. In that year he had a dispute with John Colet which illustrates the exact way in which he thought the human and divine parts of Christ interacted. It also demonstrates his emphasis on the pedagogical efficacy of Christ's human dimension.[37] The dispute centred on the account of the agony of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. Put simply, Erasmus argued that Christ, because of his human nature, had felt real aversion to the prospect of dying. Colet, however, on account of his own view of Christ's nature, would not allow of this possibility. Erasmus argued that when 'Christ, speaking after the fashion of men,' said: 'Father, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt', what he meant was,

> My Father, I am conscious within Myself of the nature I have taken upon me, a nature that violently dreads a cup so bitter; but let Thy will, not Mine, be done, since whatever is Thy will is Mine also. I am in no way moved by this anguish of spirit to be unwilling to drink the cup. Rather, I Thirst deeply for it; for, exceedingly bitter as it must be for Me, it is to bring salvation to those whom I love, and it cannot do so unless it be bitter for Me. Therefore I wish to drink it, but the will whereby I wish this is Thine, not Mine, for My steadfast desire to do so comes not from Myself but from Thee, by whose gift I am what I am.[38]

Erasmus asserted that Christ felt genuine anguish but he did not let that anguish influence or determine his actions. He achieved this by being completely conscious of his the disparate elements within himself. Erasmus believed that it was by means of this act of conscious introspection that Christ had subjected his human will to the divine will.

The purpose of Erasmus' elaboration on the nature of Jesus' condition in the garden was to demonstrate the complexities of true consciousness. Having first argued vehemently that Christ dreaded the prospect of death because of his lower nature he then argued that

> among the whole army of martyrs there never was such holy joy as Christ had in that hour when he sweated drops of blood. At that very moment he rejoiced with inexpressible gladness

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37 *CWE,* 1, *Letters,* see introduction to 108: 202, and 109-11:208 *ff.*

38 *CWE,* 1, *Letters,* 109: 208.

that the time, ordained by his Father before time was, had now come to pass, when he should reconcile fallen mankind to his Father by his death. Never was there any man whose longing for life made him wish as ardently to live as he wished to die. Never did anyone seek the kingdom of Heaven as passionately as he thirsted for death.[39]

While a belief in the human weakness of Christ is quite orthodox Erasmus stretched it to edge of, and even beyond orthodoxy. He was, nevertheless, aware of this pitfall and was careful to avoid it. This was not difficult for him because he also believed that Christ contained a divine element. Throughout his writings the two natures always co-exist in a creative tension. Nor did he see any inherent contradiction in these conflicting emotions. He explained that:

there is no reason why one soul should not experience different sense-impressions by way of different organs, above all in Christ, and.....the senses never obstruct the operation of other senses, nor the feelings other feelings. To this extent, Our Lord's soul, where it approached most closely to his bodily feelings, was sensitive to the agonies that torture the body, while on the other side, where it lay nearest to the Godhead, it exulted with ineffable joy. Yet that feeling of grief did not impede his joy, nor did that joy diminish or alleviate the experience of terror.[40]

The great joy that Christ felt was a result of the fact that he knew he was going to reconcile fallen mankind to his Father by his death on the cross. This understanding was reached by means of an interior process in which Christ, died to his lower human part and reconciled his total being to God by conforming to the dictates of his higher nature. Nevertheless Christ, even at the end of his time on earth, had not managed to eliminate the weakness of the flesh. He felt real terror. He had to do battle with his own human weakness until the very end.[41] The method he employed to overcome weakness was not to suppress his terror or try to stamp it out but, rather, to allow it expression, while at the same time being conscious of his higher aim. Erasmus was quite explicit in his belief that the two emotions could be experienced simultaneously

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39 *CWE,* 1, *Letters,* 109: 208.

40 *CWE,* 1, *Letters,* 109: 209.

41 This is echoed in the belief expressed throughout Erasmus' writings that man also has to struggle within himself until death. See especially *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49.

and that a process of conscious introspection was necessary in order to chose the right course of action. Moreover, it is clear that he believed right action would *necessarily* follow from proper understanding.[42] In the case of Christ, he believed that his soul was in a state of earthly perfection which meant that despite a very real struggle he was always going to chose the good. This was not the ultimate state of perfection which was only achievable in Heaven. The importance of the agony in the garden, for Erasmus, lay in the fact that it functioned as a very important a lesson for man. The process of reconciling the two natures in Christ was precisely the same process that each individual had to engage in if he was to achieve perfection.[43] What he described was the psychological condition of the true Christian who has united within himself the two warring natures described throughout the *Enchiridion*, in such a way that the spiritual nature triumphs over the earthly one to produce a state of joyous harmony.[44]

Erasmus' particular emphasis of the human aspect of Christ's nature did not mean that he dismissed the divine nature. He clearly believed in the divine nature of Christ and its importance in the salvation of mankind, but, he thought that it was only possible for the aspiring Christian to achieve a full understanding of it when he had progressed to the point where he could distinguish the warring factions in his own nature. Erasmus noted that Scripture portrayed the patience, gentleness and long-suffering nature of Christ rather than the joy he was capable of experiencing in the face of death. He argued that Christ did not exhibit the joy he felt in Gethsemane because 'that joy was not likely to be of great service to us, but his sorrow brought us gain; it was essential that he who paid the penalty of death for our sakes, might be held to be

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42 The seventh rule in the Enchiridion is that contemplation of the higher spiritual realm will necessarily bring with it a repugnance for material transitory things, *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 104. This is a Platonic notion which has been rejected by modern philosophers but was still unchallenged in Erasmus' day. It was adopted by the scholastics, probably because Aristotle had agree with it, and was not seriously challenged until Hume in the *Treatise of Human Nature,* III,1,i, where he highlighted the impossibility of deriving 'ought' propositions from 'is' propositions.

43 See below Chapter 2: Erasmus' Concept of Man.

44 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51 ff. For a full discussion of this process see chapters 2 and 5 below.

very man'.[45] Men who had not yet progressed far on the path to Christianity had to be able to relate to the nature they shared with Christ in order to believe they could imitate him. Moreover Erasmus believed that Christ had truly felt this very human sense of fear and despair. He said: 'there is none to doubt that he who stood in dread of death was very man'.[46] He added that

> he did not exhibit, in himself, that joy amidst great agonies which, since it is opposed to nature, he does not expect of us, but he sets us an example of the patience and gentleness which he bade us learn from him, and did so by the tokens that are most familiar to men's senses.[47]

In sum, Erasmus emphasised the human element in Christ's nature because he believed that without this men would have no point of reference with him. Ordinary men had to see in Christ a nature like their own in order that they could conceive of imitating him. In his *Paraphrase on Mark* Erasmus elaborated on the value of the agony of Jesus at Gethsemane. He said that Christ experienced and made manifest his human weakness because he wished the apostles 'to witness his extreme abjectness and humility to teach them in his own person what must be imitated and what hoped for.'[48] They saw

> a man destitute of all help, he began to be shaken by fear and robbed of his senses by anguish. Indeed he was truly man and significantly expressed in himself what happens to men who are nothing but men when such a storm is threatening.[49]

Erasmus continued his description, using very colourful language to drive home his point. He depicted the state of utter despair in which Jesus could not even find consolation in God his Father.[50] He said that Jesus

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45 *CWE*, 1, *Letters*, 109: 209.

46 *CWE*, 1, *Letters*, 109: 210.

47 *CWE*, 1, *Letters*, 109: 210.

48 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 162.

49 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 162.

50 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 162.

sought refuge in his Father's help, finding no immediate relief from his misfortune even in him. Thus, he fell down on the ground, lowered his face to the earth, and begged his Father to let the time of trial pass if it was somehow possible. His physical nature recoiled from suffering and imminent death.[51]

The intensity of the language used by Erasmus in this depiction of Gethsemane demonstrates his belief in the true humanity of Christ. Jesus was utterly weak and lost and destitute of all hope. He was true man at his most abject. Throughout his paraphrases of the gospels Erasmus depicted the human weakness of Christ in this way. In his work on the gospel of John he said that Christ

did not put on an imaginary body; who would love an empty ghost or a deceiving illusion? But he truly put on a human body; that is, he put on the whole nature of a man, not even disdaining the part by which we are in bondage to death and differ least of all from the race of dumb animals. and he did not put it on for a time, soon to lay aside what he had put on. But in order to confirm faith in his human nature, not put on in pretence, he dwelt on earth for a long while; He thirsted, he hungered, he was afflicted, he died; eyes saw him, ears heard him, hands touched him.[52]

Despite this insistence that Christ was truly human and full of human frailty Erasmus never portrayed him as being permanently defeated by the weakness of the flesh. The whole point of the exercise was that Christ overcame the flesh and thereby gave us the perfect example of how to engage in the struggle for perfection. Having described Jesus' human frailty in the Gethsemane episode, Erasmus then portrayed the disciples saying that despite this Christ was also divine.

He was not without his divine majesty during the time when he went on earth in his mortal body. For we who lived as friends with him are witnesses of both natures. We saw him hungry, thirsty, sleeping, weeping, afflicted, dying. We heard him speaking in a human voice, we touched him with our hands, and by every piece of evidence we found him truly a man. But

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51 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 162.

52 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 23.

we also saw his divine glory, clearly befitting the only-begotten Son of God, such as was never shown to any of the angels, or to any of the prophets or to the patriarchs, but by it God the Father chose to honour his only Son.[53]

Erasmus believed that Christ's composite nature was akin to the true nature of man. Man too was made of human and divine elements. It was, therefore, vital that Christ showed both of these natures in his life.

Although while he dwelt on earth carrying out the task of our salvation he preferred to show us a model of self-restraint and gentle obedience rather than display his greatness, nonetheless everything he said, all his deeds, even his bearing and expression made clear that he was full of every divine endowment, full of eternal and inviolable truth.[54]

In describing the joy mixed with agony, the emotions under the sway of reason, the human and divine dynamic of Christ at Gethsemane, Erasmus was speaking in terms that could also be understood by those who were further along the path of Christianity. His intention of disseminating these views to a wide audience is evident from the fact that while this debate was initially conducted by means of correspondence with Colet, the argument was also amplified and published in the *Lucubratiunculae* of 1503.[55]

The most notable element of this dispute was the emphasis Erasmus placed on the salvific importance of Christ's role as an exemplar for man. While he never denied the orthodox view that Christ effected redemption by becoming truly human and being crucified, he nevertheless did not emphasize the mysterious element of this doctrine.[56] In that doctrine there are many mysteries including the exact mechanism of redemption. Erasmus was not interested in mysteries. In

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53 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 23.

54 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 23-4.

55 *CWE,* 1, *Letters,* 109:208.

56 Eugene Rice has argued that Erasmus' emphasis of the primary importance of the didactic element in Christ's mission in his *De casa natalitia Jesu* meant that he left out the central mystery of the Incarnation. See EF Rice, 'Erasmus and the Religious Tradition', in *Journal of the History of Ideas,* 11 (1950) 393.

the *Adagia* he quoted a saying of Socrates: 'the things that are above us are nothing to us'.[57] He interpreted this as meaning that Socrates 'discourages us from restless enquiry into heavenly things and the secrets of nature'.[58] Significantly, he advised the reader that the saying could be 'diverted also for use against those who talk loosely about...the mysteries of theology'.[59] He believed that we should start our search for knowledge and perfection with the things that are accessible to our intelligence and experience and that it is only when we have mastered these that we can move to the next stage. He always argues for the necessity of understanding as a crucial aid to belief. For Erasmus the life of Christ was an infinitely complex and consciously constructed exemplar which could be interpreted and used by all true Christians no matter what stage they had reached on the path of Christianity.[60]

Despite his clear belief in the divinity of Christ Erasmus did emphasize his human nature to a point which stretched orthodoxy. In his preface to the works of St Hilary he obliquely implied that he had some small sympathy for the views of Arius.[61] In the context of arguing in favour of tolerance for theologians who may make an error of judgement he said that Hilary was wrong to rail against the Arians because 'it is probable that there were men in the Arian faction who were convinced that their preaching about Christ was true and devout'. He also said that their doctrine rested on many authorities and that some of Holy Scripture gave the impression of supporting it.[62] He was attacked by various

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57 *CWE,* 32, *Adages*, 48.

58 *CWE,* 32, *Adages*, 48.

59 *CWE,* 32, *Adages*, 48.

60 For a treatment of Erasmus' belief in the importance of Christ's salvific pedagogy see JM Weiss, 'Ecclesiastes and Erasmus: the Mirror and the Image' in *Archive for Reformation History* (65) 86.

61 JD Tracy has argued that the position adopted by Erasmus on this issue was semi-Arian. See JD Tracy in *Catholic Historical Review* lxvii (1981) 1-10.

62 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1334: 261. AB Hall, has pointed out that Erasmus, in several places, corrected the Vulgate in such a way as to undermine the value of the verses in question against Arianism. (Romans 5:12; Romans 9:5; Philippians 2:6 and Colossians 11: 9.) See 'Erasmus: Biblical Scholar and Reformer' in TA Dorey, ed, *Erasmus,* (London, 1970) 81-114.

theologians and even fellow-humanists for what they believed to be his over-emphasis of this human element. In general they criticised parts of the *Praise of Folly* and the *Enchiridion* but the attacks reached a fever pitch when he published his annotations on the New Testament in 1516.[63] The attack of the French humanist, and former ally of Erasmus, Lefèvre d'Étaples, is a prime example of this kind of criticism.[64] In a letter to Thomas More about the origin of this dispute Erasmus wrote: 'I touched him on the raw by saying "he is a man"'.[65] He was referring to his note on Hebrews 2:7 in which he interpreted the passage as meaning that Christ had been made 'a little lower than the angels'.[66] Lefèvre disputed this and preferred that it should read, 'a little lower than God', like the psalm to which it referred.[67] In insisting on the interpretation that Christ was a little lower than the angels, Erasmus appeared to

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63 For an excellent account of the barrage of criticism which Erasmus' New Testament scholarship provoked see Erika Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics*, 2 vols, (Nieuwkoop, 1989).

64 Lefèvre d'Étaples was educated in Paris and studied Greek there. He was greatly influenced by his three trips to Italy where he met Pico, Ficino and Ermolao Barbaro. The latter was the inspiration for Lefèvre's humanist translations of, and commentaries on, the entire Aristotelian corpus. While he rejected Plato he nevertheless became intensely interested in the Pseudo-Dionysian writings and the Hermetic corpus. Under the influence of Erasmus and Valla he turned to Scriptural studies. The first fruits of this decision were a critical study of the *Quincuplex Psalterium* in 1509 followed three years later by commentaries on the Pauline Epistles. In 1521 he was called on to assist in the reform of the diocese of Meaux. Over the next few years he gradually adopted reformist views on such matters as the priesthood, the efficacy of the sacraments, the real presence, the intercession of saints and many other disputed religious topics. Growing radicalism in Meaux prompted him to flee to Strasbourg in 1525. In early 1526, however, he was recalled by Francis I and appointed as tutor to the royal children. One of his crowning achievements was the translation of the bible into French, which task he completed in 1530. His rejection of Plato and his interest in Aristotle were at variance with the views of Erasmus and it may well have been his Aristotelianism which lay at the heart of their Christological dispute. Lefèvre's Christ was far more distant from man than Erasmus' Christ; Just as the Aristotelian creator is removed from his creation.

65 Volume 83 of the *CWE* contains a comprehensive account of the dispute. Later Erasmus was also accused of diminishing the divinity of Christ by the Spanish monks, to which accusation of heresy he replied with the *Apologia adversus monachos quosdam hispanos adversos*, Leclerc ix: 1015-94. For an account of the accusation of Edward Lee in the same vein see Robert Coogan, *Erasmus, Lee and the Correction of the Vulgate: The Shaking of the Foundations*, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, 261 (Geneva, 1992).

66 *CWE*, 5, *Letters*, 778: 310.

67 *CWE*, 5, *Letters*, 778: 310.

diminish his divinity. While he could claim to be on safe ground here, insofar as Jerome had favoured this interpretation, his vehement defence in the form of an *Apologia* against a fellow-humanist illustrates both the validity of the attack and the importance of the point to his concept of Christ.[68] His own inclination was always to avoid controversy wherever possible so he only risked dissention on matters that were vital to his view of Christianity.[69]

On 6th December 1517 he wrote three letters defending his interpretation of Christ in the *Apologia* . In these letters he tried to hold on to his own view while remaining within the orthodox tradition. The first of these was to Ludwig Baer in which he wrote:

> that Christ was not a composite being of two natures is a fact I learnt some thirty years ago...all through my argument I maintain the singleness of his substance, nor do I say anywhere that Christ is to be taken as having one rather than both, as Lefevre says; by which I mean the divine nature, but a divine which has united the human to Itself.[70]

The same argument was put forward in the remaining two letters which he addressed respectively to Faber Capito and to Beatus Rhenanus.[71] It is clear

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68 *CWE,* 83, *Controversies.*

69 See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto,1996) 114.

70 *CWE,* 5, *Letters,* 730: 225. Ludwig Baer was a theologian and native of Basel, who, despite his connections with the faculty of theology at Paris and his own predilection for the scholastic method in theology, was nevertheless valued as a friend and colleague by Erasmus. The latter often sought Baer's expert opinion on theological matters.

71 *CWE,* 5, *Letters,* 731 and 732: 227-30.
Wolfgang Faber Capito was a theologian and humanist who lived in the Upper Rhine region. From 1515 he was appointed preacher at Basel cathedral and at the same time he was appointed professor of theology at Basel. During this time Erasmus and he developed a relationship based on mutual respect for each other's scholarship. Ultimately he joined the reformers and with Martin Bucer he directed the reform at Strasbourg. This led to a break with Erasmus which was never healed.

Beatus Rhenanus was also a humanist who lived in the Upper
Rhine region. He spent from 1507 to 1527 in Basel where he met and was befriended by Erasmus. The two worked closely together and from 1515 Erasmus appointed Beatus to take charge of his editorial and personal affairs whenever he left Basel. After 1525 Beatus' own burgeoning career as a classical scholar and historian left less time for collaboration with Erasmus but the two were friends to the end. He became the most outstanding German

from the fact that Erasmus felt the need to write to Capito again three days later that the above explanation was not sufficient to quell the latter's suspicion about his orthodoxy. In this letter Erasmus elaborated on the theme. Using more technical language he stated: 'Christ is not composite as a thing is composed of matter and form or a house out of framing and infilling; but in some way or other he is composite. Things which are put together and joined together are in Latin called "composite"'.[72] He said his view of Christ's two natures was that 'both are signified while one is connoted'.[73] He went on: 'to connote something is no more than to mean it in a different or, as your friends would say, secondary sense'.[74] In short, Erasmus stuck fast to his interpretation of the nature of Christ even in the face of specific criticism. While he was willing to change the language he used to please his critics he would not change his particular emphasis of the human element in Christ. The strength of his conviction is also clear from his remarks in a letter to the French humanist Budé.[75] He said that it had been necessary to refute Lefèvre 'unless I had preferred to imperil, or rather to betray, the citadel of my beliefs' for 'to admit a charge of irreligion is forbidden in the first place by religion itself'.[76] He also said:' I am unfortunate, I admit, compelled as I have been to plunge into this contest which I have always abhorred, and into which nothing but this one weapon could have dragged me'.[77] While it was indeed true that Erasmus could not afford to leave a charge of irreligion unrefuted he nevertheless would not back down in any way because to do so would have caused him to betray the

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historian of his age and he wrote a biography of Erasmus which is useful but rather cursory.

72 *CWE,* 5, *Letters*, 734: 232.

73 *CWE,* 5, *Letters*, 734: 233.

74 *CWE,* 5, *Letters*, 734: 233.

75 Guillaume Budé was a new type of man of letters: a humanist and lay, married man. He became the foremost french scholar and had much influence at the court of Francis I. His friendship with Erasmus was based entirely on correspondence: the two never met. It began in 1517 and despite early promise and their common interests it gradually disintegrated into peevish quarrelling, possibly because Erasmus would not accept an invitation from Francis I to become a courtier.

76 *CWE,* 5, *Letters*, 778: 307.

77 *CWE,* 5, *Letters*, 778: 308.

citadel of his beliefs. His Christology was absolutely central to his belief-system.

Erasmus was also criticised by Hieronymus Dungersheim for this emphasis on the humanity of Christ.[78] The latter challenged his annotation on the phrase about the nature of Christ in the second chapter of Philippians in his New Testament which read: 'who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself no reputation'. Dungersheim complained about the fact that Erasmus suggested in his notes that the clause 'thought it not robbery to be equal with God' should be understood of Christ inasmuch as he is man. He argued that the Patristic view of this phrase was that in it Paul had been speaking of the divinity of Christ and also that it was important because the Fathers had used it against the Arians.[79] There is no record of a reply from Erasmus to this letter but its significance lies in the fact that, again, it was his particular emphasis on the human element of Christ that gave offence. Moreover, if it was allowed that Christ, because of his humanity, was equal to God then the corollary of this would be that man also could be equal to God. Since this was clearly blasphemous, Erasmus' unwillingness to defend himself suggests that he could not do so without prejudicing a dearly-held belief.

Prior to the publication of the *Annotations*, Erasmus had portrayed the humanity of Christ in the *Praise of Folly*, in which work he went as far as attributing human folly itself to Christ and the apostles.[80] In his famous letter to Martin Dorp which was often published with this work, he defended this portrayal against the attacks of the Louvain theologians. He argued that Christ and the apostles were all credited in the Gospels with 'some kind of foolishness'.[81] His point was that because Folly rules supreme in all human affairs, if Christ was truly human, he would, of necessity, have had to embrace

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78 Dungersheim was a professor of theology at Leipzig. He was a staunch defender of the Catholic faith throughout his life.

79 *CWE*, 4, *Letters*, 554: 286.

80 Betty Radice, trans., *The Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 233.

81 *CWE*, 3, *Letters*, 337: 126.

Folly in order to overcome it for our sakes.[82] He held, however, that Christ and the apostles were not foolish in an ordinary sense but that, nevertheless,

> in them too there was an element of weakness, something attributable to our natural affections, which when compared with that pure and eternal wisdom might seem less than wise. But this same folly of theirs overcame all the wisdom of the world.[83]

The fact that Erasmus spoke of Christ and the apostles as if they all shared the same nature is consistent with the emphasis he placed on Christ's humanity. Erasmus argued that

> Christ too, was made something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind, when he assumed the nature of man and was seen in man's form; just as he was made sin so that he could redeem sinners. Nor did he wish them to be redeemed in any other way save by the folly of the cross and through his simple, ignorant apostles, to whom he unfailingly preached folly.[84]

It is somewhat unorthodox to suggest that Christ sinned, although Erasmus made it clear that he was following St Paul who also said that Christ was 'made sin'.[85] He interpreted this as being even stronger than saying that Christ was a *sinner* but he argued that the way St Paul meant it was in fact a pious tribute.[86]

The orthodox view is that Jesus took upon himself the responsibility for the sins of the world, but Erasmus suggested that, just as he was made man, he was also made sin. What he meant by this was that Jesus, being fully human, took on the effects of sin like all men. Erasmus was aware that the Greek word

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82 *CWE,* 3, *Letters,* 337: 126.

83 *CWE,* 3, *Letters,* 337: 126.

84 Betty Radice, trans.,*The Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 198-9. MA Screech has demonstrated that Erasmus pushed this idea far beyond its basic scriptural meaning and with evidence from Erasmus' manuscript he has convincingly concluded that Erasmus was so anxious to portray Christ as a fool that he consciously misinterpreted the text, see his *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 149-50.

85 2 Cor. 5:21.

86 *CWE,* 3, *Letters,* 337: 127.

for the verb to sin is *amartano* which also means to miss the mark or target. Since, for him, the spirit of Christ was the target or goal of man, sinning would have been missing this target.[87] Thus sinning, rather than being a positive evil act was instead a negative inclination away from the process which leads to Christ or perfection. More significantly, it was also the state of nature into which every man is born insofar as Erasmus believed that the attainment of Christ was achieved by means of an internal struggle between the two elements of man. In order to teach us the way of salvation, Christ had to be made man, and this entailed being subject to the condition of 'missing the mark' or sin, so that he could demonstrate the way to overcome this condition.[88] In the *Enchiridion* he asserted that the path to perfection is a narrow one along which few men have walked.[89] It is not, however, beyond our capacities. He argued that 'all those who were pleasing to God from the beginning of the world have trodden it'.[90] Most importantly, he maintained that Christ himself had walked this path.[91] Thus in some sense the incarnate Christ in the man Jesus had had to strive to achieve the pure concept or spirit of Christ and merit the name because if he had been perfect and purely divine he could not have taught us by example.

What saved Erasmus from sustainable charges of Arianism on this point was the fact that he also always balanced the human element in Christ with a divine element. Moreover, in relation to the human element of Christ he believed that Jesus was always successful in his battle with the human condition. In 1518 he wrote to Maarten Lips defending himself against an attack by the Englishman, Edward Lee, who had argued that it was wrong to attribute foolishness to Christ.[92] Erasmus stood steadfastly by his opinion and defended himself in a

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87 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 118.

88 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 30.

89 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 57.

90 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 57.

91 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 57.

92 Martin Lips was a priest at the priory of St Maartensdal at Louvain. He used its well-stocked library to further the cause of good-letters. He met Erasmus about 1516 and thereafter was of enormous help to the humanist in producing his edition of St Augustine: both in

typically humanist fashion by saying that he attributed folly to God and Christ because Paul and Augustine had done this.[93] Moreover, he asserted that

> In order to show how Christ had brought himself down to the level of our weakness, I had said that there was in Christ something infirm, something subject to our affections; and the blockhead imagines that I attribute faulty passions to the mind of Christ.[94]

The distinction between 'something infirm' and 'faulty passions' is, perhaps, most clearly illustrated in Erasmus' exposition of the process that Christ engaged in at Gethsemane. The 'something infirm' was the weakness of human nature which Christ had to struggle with right up to his death. This did not result in his giving in to 'faulty passions' however, because he overcame weakness through consciousness and subjected his lower human will to the will of God, or the divine will. This view is also expressed in the *Enchiridion* when he wrote of an incident in which the apostles asked Jesus 'where shall we go? You have the words of life'.[95] Erasmus said that the explanation for the phrase 'words of life' was that they flowed from the soul of Christ 'from which

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searching out manuscripts and preparing work for the press. He also helped in the production of Erasmus' Ambrose, Hilary, and Chromatius as well as these he performed other tasks such as making indices for the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In about 1525 he was moved by his order to the remote village of Lens-St-Remy. This was probably on account of the growing hostility to Erasmus at Louvain. Despite this deprivation, however, he remained a loyal helper of Erasmus until the latter's death.

Edward Lee was an Englishman who became a serious opponent of Erasmus. In 1516 he went to Louvain to learn Greek and it was there he encountered Erasmus. Their relationship was cordial at first but when Erasmus rejected some notes he had submitted to him on his New Testament Lee took offense and a protracted dispute ensued. Lee, being younger and far less experienced was never a match for Erasmus and historians have been at pains to discover why Erasmus paid so much attention to these easily-refuted attacks. With hindsight it is possible to see that Lee was ambitious and well-connected and Erasmus may well have known this and was therefore protecting his reputation in England by taking Lee seriously and refuting each point. At the time of the dispute Erasmus may still have harboured hopes of living in England in the future. For a discussion of the other possible reasons Erasmus may have had for this dispute see the article on Lee by Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle in PG Bietenholz, *Contemporaries of Erasmus,* vol 2 (Toronto, 1986) 311-4.

93 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 843: 24.

94 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 843: 24.

95 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 29

divinity never departed even for an instant'[96] Thus although Christ had to struggle continually, he nevertheless always triumphed over his lower passions. Christ had conquered sin for us. He 'was the first and only one, himself free of sin, to suppress the tyranny of sin'.[97] For Erasmus this immunity was not a result of detached omnipotence it was achieved by means of a struggle which had resulted in victory over sin. He clarified this in his *Paraphrase on Romans* where he wrote of Christ that

> to such an extent did he adopt the mask of sin, so to speak, that through the form of sin he first conquered sin, then destroyed it, made a victim for our sins. And since he died in this way in accordance with the flesh which he had put on, he subdued death, which used to be our master through the passions of the flesh and the carnal law; and he brought it about that for the future the flesh of the law would be abolished and that the better part of the law, which we have called spiritual, would take its place.[98]

Christ overcame sin by becoming subject to sin and thereby putting himself in a position to demonstrate to us the method of conquering our faults. In this process Erasmus discerned the concept that strength is made perfect in weakness. He expressed this view in 1512 in a letter to his close friend Ammonio when he wrote that Christ tests 'most severely in misfortune's storms those whose discipleship he most desires to reveal'.[99] Erasmus believed that Christ lowered himself to our state and by so doing gave us the possibility of becoming more than we are born. In his *Paraphrase on John* he wrote:

> for the Son of God and God himself sent himself down to our lowliness just to raise us by faith to his own loftiness. He took upon himself the shame of our mortality just to make us sharers in his divine glory. He chose to be born bodily flesh of flesh just so that we might be

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96 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 29.

97 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 30.

98 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 45.

99 *CWE,* 2, *Letters,* 262: 230. Andrea Ammonio was one of Erasmus' closest friends in England. He was secretary to Lord Mountjoy and in 1511 he became Latin secretary to Henry viii. He held several ecclesiastical posts and finally he was appointed subcollector of papal taxes in England. He was instrumental in securing the parish of Aldington in Kent for Erasmus which provided the latter with much-needed financial security.

reborn spiritually of God. He came down to earth just to carry us up into heaven.[100]

In tandem with his view of the nature of the incarnate Christ, Erasmus also attributed a second meaning to the term 'Christ'. This was a concept which had many dimensions; It was a universal and eternal principal. He thought of Christ as both the ultimate goal of man and as the ordering principle of man's life in the struggle for this goal of perfection. He wrote that St Paul was anxious over the Galatians 'until Christ be formed in them'.[101] Clearly this 'Christ' was not the historical figure of Jesus, it was the spirit of Christ. In his *Paraphrase on John* he said

even more stupid is the mistake of those who think that the Son and word of God came into existence only at the time when he was physically born of the Virgin Mary. Every created thing has a beginning in time, but the Son of God was born twice, once from his Father before all time, or rather without time, true God from true God, and again in time marked off from eternity, of the virgin Mary, true human from a human.[102]

The Greek word *christos* used in Scripture was a translation of the Jewish word *messiah* and meant the anointed one, that is, the enlightened, or chosen, one. Christ, for Erasmus, was enlightened consciousness. He wrote that Christ was Wisdom and the true Light who alone shattered the 'night of worldly stupidity'.[103] More specifically, he thought that the term 'Christ' meant a deep and profound knowledge of the truth. He said: 'Do not think of 'Christ' as an empty word, but that it stands for charity, simplicity, patience, purity, in brief, all that he has taught'.[104] Christ was the light of the world; the source of

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100 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 22.

101 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 121.

102 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on John,* 17.

103 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 38.

104 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 61.

wisdom which dispelled the darkness of ignorance. Erasmus believed that Christ was 'the source of light, inasmuch as the Father through his eternal begetting pours into him the fullness of nature, so that he alone restores life even to the dead, and with his light scatters the darkness of souls no matter how thick it may be'.[105] This function of the enlightenment of mankind was the essential purpose of the spirit of Christ or the *logos*.

The word of God..was the true light, forever pouring forth from God the Father, the source of all light, from whom everything that shines in heaven and earth borrows its brightness. Any spark of intelligence, any knowledge of truth, any light of faith, whether among mankind or the angels, comes from this source. Just as without the sun this world is blind, so without this light all things are in darkness.[106]

Christ, as illuminator, is the means by which man can come to know the nature of existence. The goal of this illumination is the perfection of man. There is no salvation without true consciousness and that is impossible without the light of Christ. Erasmus explained that

this light goes on shining by its own natural power even in the thickest darkness of the world, offering itself to all so that they may live again and see the path of eternal salvation, which is open to everyone through the gospel faith.[107]

There is a great need for the light of Christ in the world because of the innate darkness or ignorance of the material realm. Material reality is an illusion which Erasmus equates with darkness. Nevertheless this darkness is not inert. It has a grip on the soul of man and is very powerful.

The darkness of this world fights constantly against the light, which the world hates as the revealer of its works, and it quenches or dims the rays of many, but against this living and eternal light it has not prevailed. Tumults have been raised by Jews, by philosophers and men of power, by those who have completely surrendered themselves to transitory things, but this

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105 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 18.

106 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 20.

107 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 18.

light wins out; it still shines in the midst of the world's darkness, and it will always shine, sharing itself with anyone who only shows himself capable of enlightenment.[108]

The truth is available to all but in order to achieve perfection man has to struggle with the mundane forces of darkness. As a result of the difficulty of the struggle Erasmus asserted that many people never achieved victory over darkness. They did not recognize the light or true reality. 'Accustomed to darkness, they shunned the light, and blinded by sins, they embraced death instead of life.'[109] Indeed, even when Jesus 'showed himself to the world in more familiar guise, dwelling in a human body and living among mankind, he was not recognized by those who had dedicated themselves entirely to this world'.[110] Thus, although Erasmus believed that it was not possible for the light of truth itself to be extinguished by worldly darkness, nevertheless, many individuals were lost forever in the ignorance of the world.

In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus first made this distinction between the historical Jesus and the concept of Christ clear. In writing about the episode after the resurrection when Jesus was about to leave the apostles and he reproved them for their unbelief, Erasmus asked 'as long as the apostles enjoyed the physical company of Christ, do you not read how weak they were and how crass was their understanding?' He said that their weakness was because the 'flesh of Christ stood in the way'.[111] He went on to explain that Christ told them 'if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come. It is expedient for you that I go'.[112] Erasmus then asked the reader how he could put his trust in corporal things if 'the physical presence of Christ is of no profit for salvation?'[113] While it was

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108 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 18.

109 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 20-1.

110 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 20-1.

111 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 73.

112 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 73.

113 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 73.

acceptable to point out that material and physical things were of no use in the process of salvation, this denigration of the physical presence of Christ himself would have had very serious implications for the role of the sacrament of the Eucharist in this process, if it were carried to its logical conclusion. If the physical presence of the living, breathing Christ was an impediment to perfection then it could be argued that the physical element or *real presence* in the Eucharist was not effective in the process of sanctification. Erasmus went on in this passage to endorse his argument by pointing out that St Paul said he had advanced in the spirit beyond the mere physical knowledge of Christ. Thus he implied that St Paul also differentiated between the historical Jesus and the spirit of Christ. Paul achieved this understanding because 'he had advanced to a higher state of grace'.[114]

While Erasmus never openly denied the doctrine of the real presence he nevertheless always emphasised the spiritual meaning of the Eucharist, often to the very point of heresy. Indeed Melanchthon stated that Erasmus' views 'with respect to the sacrament of the altar would have given rise to much graver tumults had not Luther arisen to channel the zeal of men in another direction'.[115] Erasmus believed that the Eucharist had a secret meaning which had been revealed to very few men.[116] He expressed this most succinctly in the *Praise of Folly* when he said 'it represents the death of Christ, which men must express through the mastery and extinction of their bodily passions, laying them in the tomb, wherein they can be united with him and with each other'.[117] In short, he believed that the Eucharist represented the process of perfection which united men to Christ and to each other. This was expressed by the eating of the body of Christ in the form of bread and wine. For Erasmus, the eating of the 'body of Christ' symbolised the fact that the participants were infused with the spirit of Christ, the *logos*. He then became their centre, their aim and target. If they were infused with Christ, they were also one in the Body of Christ in the

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114 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 73.

115 See RH Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, (London, 1969) 204.

116 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 70.

117 Betty Radice, trans., *The Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 205.

wider sense of all those who embody Christ. The spirit of Christ was something that all men could achieve by dying to, or overcoming, bodily passions. This spirit had been embodied in a most perfect way in the historical Jesus who was *Christos*.

This concept of the Eucharist and his emphasis on the pedagogic importance of Christ's human dimension, meant that the death and resurrection of Christ took on a different perspective in the redemptive process for Erasmus. The redemptive function of Christ's life lay in the fact that it symbolised the method by which man progresses from the imperfect state in which he is born to the state of perfection in which, ultimately, he can become one with Christ. Man must die to his bodily passions as Christ died to the world. Then having experienced this death to the world, he will rise again in a renewed state just as Christ himself rose again. Christ, the most perfect teacher, was, in his life and in himself, the most perfect expression of the potential of a true man. By his words, and especially, by his very life and death, he taught us all we would ever need to know in order to achieve perfection. Erasmus referred to this dual method of teaching in the *Adagia* when he wrote that 'just as the whole of Christ's teaching spelt tolerance and love, so his entire life was a lesson in compassion'.[118]

In conformity with this belief Erasmus spent the whole of his own life in imitation of the pedagogical role of Christ. Every line of his immense corpus was dedicated to this end. He wanted above all to help his readers to understand the only truth: the *philosophia Christi*. He wrote 'I wish to be of use to all men, in such a way that if possible I hurt no one'.[119] Erasmus' diminution of the mysterious element of Christ's redemptive powers and his emphasis instead on the power of his teaching as the embodiment of truth placed a tremendous onus on man to absorb this teaching and put it into practice. Man's role in his own Redemption was enhanced and the sacramental role of the church was

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118 MM Phillips, ed., *The Adages of Erasmus*, (Cambridge, 1964) 328.

119 *CWE*, 8, *Letters*, 1202: 209. This has clear echoes of Erasmus' paraphrase of Romans 13: 8-10, 'Love is, as far as possible, helpful to all, even to evil men, and it harms no one.' *CWE*, 42, *Romans*, 76.

diminished. Man had to participate more fully in the process himself.[120] This goes some way towards explaining his belief that Plato, Socrates, Cicero and many others participated in the divine truth. If man's Redemption depended on the historical death of Jesus then these men who lived before this event were doomed. If, however, the life and death of Jesus Christ were not *the* effective, essential factor in salvation, then men could have achieved perfection prior to the time of the Incarnation of Christ in Jesus of Nazareth, by means of the eternal spirit of Christ.[121]Recent Erasmian scholarship assumes that while he was anxious to combine classical mores and literature with Christian theology, he, nevertheless, had a completely orthodox view of the Redemption and Incarnation.[122] Erasmus nowhere overtly condemned the orthodox doctrine of the Redemption. It was possible for him to speak of the redemptive role of Christ in a seemingly orthodox way, however, because he believed that the attainment of the spirit of Christ, or perfection, involved a kind of spiritual death and resurrection for anyone who attained it. Moreover, he did believe that Christ as embodied in Jesus of Nazareth had indeed saved mankind by his life and death because these events had been consciously constructed by him in line with the divine plan to represent the perfection process and consequently his life was thus the most perfect expression of the truth available to mankind.

It is clear, however, that Erasmus also believed that the redemptive power of Christ as the spirit of truth, or *logos*, had always existed. This concept of Christ

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120 RD Sider has analyzed Erasmus' use of the terms just and holy in his scriptural writings and concluded that Erasmus' interpretation was very Catholic in that he believed that while Christ's death restored man to friendship with God it would nevertheless only be maintained by a life of virtue. In other words man had to participate in his own perfection. RD Sider, 'The Just and the Holy in Erasmus' New Testament Scholarship' in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Yearbook*, 11 (1991) 1-26.

121 The virtue of pagans debate raged throughout the Renaissance. Other Christian humanists also came very close to explicitly expressing this view: See Guillaume Budé, *Opera*, 1557, 243, 14. Another French humanist Lefèvre d'Étaples in his commentary on the Pauline epistles said that those who in ignorance of the Gospel kept the divine and natural laws would be saved. See Betty Radice, trans., *The Praise of Folly*, 24-8.

122 See Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries*, (Toronto, 1981); L-E Halkin, *Erasmus*, (Oxford,1994) 185-6; MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*, (London,1980) 41-2. A rather novel approach to this problem is taken by EF Rice who argues that although there are many examples of the heretical in Erasmus' writings, his secularism was, nevertheless, unconscious. See 'Erasmus and the Religious Tradition' in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol ix, (1950) 387-411.

clearly led him to the conclusion that men before the time of Jesus could embody Christ. He made his character Eusebius, the host in *The Godly Feast,* say that

> perhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar. Speaking frankly among friends, I can't read Cicero's *De senectute, De amicitia, De officiis, De Tusculanis quaestionibus* without sometimes kissing the book and blessing that pure heart, divinely inspired as it was'.[123]

Here through the medium of a fictitious character Erasmus asserted his belief in the widespread nature of the spirit of Christ.[124] He believed that spirit was one which a truly conscious man embodied, that is to say, it was the spirit that informed a perfected human psyche. In his biblical writings Erasmus often expressed the view that the spirit of Christ was evident, prior to the advent of Jesus, in Old Testament times. In his *Paraphrase on John* he portrayed John the Baptist as saying: 'he is the well-spring of all truth and grace.'[125] 'Whatever power there was in the patriarchs, in the prophets, in Moses came from his well-spring.'[126] In his paraphrase of St Paul's letter to the Romans he was even more explicit. He said that 'Abraham was righteous because he believed in Christ'. [127] St Paul did not actually say this. He wrote of Abraham's faith, but Erasmus specified that it was faith in Christ. St Paul's reference was to Genesis 15:6 which states that God told Abraham his descendants would be numerous as the stars. Abraham's faith, therefore, would have been in God's promise to him but Erasmus chose to interpret it as faith in Christ because he believed that salvation came specifically through faith in the knowable Christ rather than the unknowable God. Erasmus believed that all righteous men were justified by their faith in Christ whether they lived before the specific Incarnation of the *logos* in Jesus of Nazareth or after him. He returned to this theme in *Romans*

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123 CR Thompson, ed., *The Colloquies of Erasmus,* (Chicago, 1965) 65.

124 For a full discussion of this theme see below Chapter 3.

125 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 25.

126 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 25.

127 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 28-9.

when he said that Abraham's sons were all sons of God and that Isaac, in particular, was a type of Christ and 'the one and only son of faith whom God had especially chosen by his will'.[128] The function of the historical Incarnation of Christ was not the replacement of the law, but the perfection of it. He wrote: 'our lord Jesus did not want to abolish the authority of the law; he wanted to interpret what had not been understood. He perfected rather than destroyed it'.[129] Christ, for him, was 'the central point of the whole law'.[130] Nor was this revelation confined to the chosen people. Erasmus said that God will regard the heathen as circumcised if 'he achieves what is the essence and goal of the law, namely, a sound and pure life; and if he trusts and obeys Christ who is the fulfilment of all laws'.[131] Erasmus believed that man, as God's creature, had access since the beginning of time to the truth of Christ. He argued that

> the word of God has always been in the world - not that he who is immeasurable can be contained by any boundary of space, but he was in the world as the intelligence of the craftsman is in his handicraft, as the pilot is in that which he steers. The light was even then shining in the world, somehow making plain through what had been marvellously created the divine might, wisdom, and goodness, and in this way even then he was speaking in some fashion to the human race.[132]

This eternal spirit of Christ was the *logos*. It had two functions according to Erasmus. The first of these was that it was the instrument by means of which God becomes manifest to man. In his *Paraphrase on John* he said that

> the term "Word" is used because through him God, who in his own nature cannot be understood by any reasoning, chose to become known to us; and he chose to become known for no other reason than that from knowledge of him

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128 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 54.

129 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 22 see also *ibid.*, 36.

130 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 22.

131 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 22

132 *CWE*, 46, *Paraphrase on John*, 20.

we might attain eternal bliss.[133]

The second function of the *logos* was that it was the instrument of creation itself and it continues to be the guiding principle of creation. He outlined this function thus:

through this word of his, coeternal with himself, the Father created all things that were created, visible and invisible; through it he governs all things, through it he has renewed all things, not as using a tool or a servant, but as a son of the same nature and the same power, so that everything that exists comes from the Father as the ultimate source but through the Son, whom he had eternally begotten equal to himself in all things and whom he begets without end.[134]

Christ, then is the life-force in the sense of that vivifying force which allows all living things to reach their allotted end: the force of creation and perfection.

And not only was there in this word of God the power of creating at his nod the entirety of things visible and invisible, but the life and vigour of all created things was also in him, so that through him every single thing would live by its own innate vigour and would protect itself, once the force of life was implanted, by continual procreation.[135]

Erasmus believed that man without the spirit of Christ could not come to know God. Christ was the means of our knowing God. 'No one knows the Father as he really is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son has chosen to reveal him.'[136] The world and mankind itself was created through the mediating power of the Son for the express purpose of making God manifest. He asserted that God

created all of this machinery of the world, and in it the minds of angels, and the human race, midway, as it were, between the angels and the beasts, so that from the wonders of creation

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133 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 16.

134 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 17.

135 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 17.

136 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 13.

and even from itself it might deduce the power, the holiness, and the goodness of its maker.[137]

The aim of our knowing God was that we would then love him and in that power of attraction lay our perfection.

So the Father, truly almighty, created all things by means of his Son and word, And for this reason chiefly he first delivered his word, so that through it he might become known to us in speaking. as it were, and so that through it, having become known by means of our wonder at the beauty of the workings of the universe, he might wind his way into our affections.[138]

In his New Testament, Erasmus changed the preferred reading of Acts 17:25 from, 'he gives to all life and breath *and* all things', to 'he gives to all life and breath *through* all things'.[139] While this was based on a reading of the Greek original, it nevertheless accorded with his own dearly-held belief about the manifestation of the Creator in the creation.

Erasmus' concept of the *logos*, or Christ, provoked much criticism.[140] In the second edition of his New Testament version of the Gospel of John he used the word *sermo* rather than the Vulgate *verbum* to translate the Greek *logos*. Despite the outcry this caused he stuck to his choice of term.[141] In an effort to calm his critics, however, he wrote a defence of his position: the *Apologia De in Principio Erat Sermo* .[142] In this he argued that *sermo* and *verbum* were used interchangeably by the Fathers, as well as in the Vulgate, to designate the Son

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137 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 16. This theme is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

138 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 16.

139 *CWE,* 50, *Paraphrase on the Acts*, 109, footnote 37.

140 For example: the Christological and Trinitarian criticisms levelled at Erasmus by Edward Lee. For an account of these disputes see Robert Coogan, *Erasmus, Lee and the Correction of the Vulgate: The Shaking of the Foundation,* Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, (Geneva: Librairie de Droz, 1992) 261.

141 For an analysis of this controversy see CAL Jarrott 'Erasmus' *In Principio Erat Sermo:* A Controversial Translation' in *Studies in Philology* 61 (1964) 35-40, and Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology,* (Toronto, 1977) 3-31.

142 Jean Leclerc, ed., *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia,* IX, (Leiden,1706) col.112d-113b.

of God.[143] It is clear, however, that his own reason for using the term was not strictly philological.[144] He thought that *sermo* was a better description of the concept of *logos*, or Christ, as the creative force in the world. This is not Christ as manifested in the historical Jesus. He said that

> the emanation of the divine word corresponds to our thinking. But when it is the eternal thought of the Father, it follows that the divine word is born in another manner, and in another manner produced than by assuming human nature. For what is born in a certain way, is brought forth in that way...By this third way God generated his Word, when he spoke by thinking within himself.[145]

Erasmus then added that 'he who thinks is in a certain manner talking to himself.'[146] Thus *sermo* which means a dialogue is more appropriate than *verbum* which simply means a word. This element of Christ was the instrument of divine creation. The process of divine creation was one in which the Divinity engaged with itself in a dynamic way to produce the creation. Erasmus used many authorities to support his thesis but as Jarrott has pointed out the most

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143 Origen used *verbum* and *sermo* interchangeably in his commentary on the *Song of Songs which is Solomon's* 2:9. Thomas More also defended Erasmus on this point by referring to Gregory of Nazianzus, see Mc Conica, *Erasmus,* (Oxford, 1991) 65.

144 Mc Conica has claimed, on the contrary, that Erasmus did make the decision on the basis of philology and was unaware of the outcry he would provoke, see JK Mc Conica, *Erasmus,* (Oxford, 1991) 64-5. This does not explain, however, why Erasmus insisted on defending himself so vehemently in the *Apologia* and why he did not change *sermo* back to *verbum* in subsequent editions. Many historians believe that Erasmus made philological decisions rather than theological ones in his biblical writings. HJ De Jonge has also argued that Erasmus made changes to the Vulgate, not for the purpose of better exegesis, but, for reasons of elegance and accuracy, see 'The Character of Erasmus' Translation of the New Testament, as reflected in his Translation of Hebrews 9' in *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies,* 14 (1984) 81-7. RD Sider, reached a similar conclusion in 'The Just and the Holy In Erasmus' New Testament Scholarship' in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook,* 11(1991) 4. An analysis of Erasmus' writings as a totality, however, shows that Erasmus, in fact, used philology to enhance his theology and not the other way around.

145 Jean Leclerc, ed., *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia,* IX, (Leiden,1706) coll 119-120.

146 Jean Leclerc, ed., *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia,* IX, (Leiden,1706) coll 119-120.

apposite of these was Hilary.[147] He believed that Hilary in his *Libro de Trinitate* was referring to Christ as the '*sermonem aeternum*' sent forth from the eternal mind of God without end.[148]

The two principal elements of Erasmus' concept of Christ come together in the function of imparting knowledge of the truth to man. The specific Incarnation of the *logos* in Jesus of Nazareth had the same purpose as that of the eternal *logos*. The *logos* worked in, and through, Jesus to teach us the way of perfection. Understanding was vital for faith and faith was essential for perfection. Christ, in Erasmus' paraphrase of Mark says 'he who does not believe does not understand'.[149] For Erasmus Jesus' teaching was conducted verbally through the medium of the parable but he also believed the teaching was communicated through the medium of his life itself. He thought that Jesus' choice of the parable as the mode for his verbal instruction was most efficacious. 'Christ taught in parables that is in similes,...for this is the simplest and most suitable way of teaching uneducated men.'[150]

> The philosophers with their convoluted syllogisms enveloped their listeners in a cloud of darkness, The orators with their marvellous abundance of words twisted the minds of men. The Pharisees heaped up abstruse doctrines far removed from the people's grasp. But Jesus chose for himself that simplest kind of teaching which is a stranger to theatrical display.[151]

The value of the parable as a method of teaching was that it could be understood at whatever level of development the listener had achieved. Erasmus was always at pains to explain that Christ's teaching could only be understood gradually in stages and that it was detrimental to hurl it all headlong at someone who was not

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147 CAL Jarrott, 'Erasmus' *In Principio Erat Sermo* : a controversial translation' in *Studies in Philology* (61) 38.

148 It is, of course, no mere coincidence that Erasmus composed his *Hilary* and the *Paraphrase on John* at almost the same time.

149 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 57.

150 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 56.

151 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*,. 56.

capable of understanding it.[152] Thus the parable was an excellent vehicle for dissemination of the truth because it could be understood on several levels depending on the state of the hearer.

In common with other Christians Erasmus believed that the events of Christ's life provided an example for imitation but he also thought that the events of Christ's life were an allegory for the method of perfection.[153] The most potent form of parable therefore, for Erasmus, was Christ's life itself. He believed that everything Christ did was consciously constructed to instruct us as to the method of perfection. When the apostles could not understand the parable of the sower Erasmus described Jesus chiding them thus: 'how then, will you understand all the other parables when nothing of what I say *or do* is without a deeper meaning?'[154] Thus not just his words but also his actions were deeply allegorical. In Mark, when Jesus decided to warn the apostles about his forthcoming death and passion lest they would be overcome with grief, Erasmus described him saying 'you must know and remember this...lest you think this is carried out by chance or without my knowledge and against my will, whereas everything is carried out according to God's plan'.[155] Erasmus then addressed himself to the reader and advised that he should take note

> not only of Jesus' words, but also how he conducted himself throughout his life. None of this was done by chance but rather by a divine plan and for the instruction of mankind, For there is nothing that does not have an exemplary character displaying godliness for us, nothing that does not reflect ancient prophecy or express a figure by which, in a dark manner, the law had designated Christ or a meaning forecasting future events.[156]

Throughout this paraphrase, in particular, Erasmus constantly read Jesus'

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152 See his letter to Paul Volz in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 120. This view is also expressed in the *Paraclesis, ibid.*, 96.

153 The *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas a Kempis was an influential expression of this concept.

154 My italics, *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 57.

155 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 129.

156 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 135.

actions allegorically.[157]

Erasmus believed that in order to know something properly it was necessary to grasp it with two senses.[158] His view of Christ as the perfect pedagogue is conditioned by this belief. When he wrote of the efficacy and appropriateness of parables he said that Jesus wanted his audience to both hear and see his words. They heard the parables and other sermons but they were also watching his actions. Erasmus believed that Jesus, the greatest teacher who ever lived, communicated to two senses of his listeners and that we, too, can learn from both his words and his actions. When he described Jesus talking to the apostles about the their level of understanding he described him as saying that the apostles were allowed to know everything but that for those 'excluded from the inner circle, all is conducted in parables, whether I speak or act before them. For they do not have suitable ears or suitable eyes'.[159] Erasmus believed that 'just as Jesus words often take the form of a parable, so his actions, too, are frequently parables'.[160] It was necessary for the efficacy of the salvific pedagogy of Christ that his message be communicated in his very life as well as his words. The mystery of the cross had to be acted out by Christ in clear and simple events because it would not have been sufficient for the salvation of man if he had simply preached the truth in words.

Erasmus' objective was a very subtle and difficult one. He wanted to impart what he believed to be the true meaning of Christianity to all men. The contemporary church taught that men were saved by Jesus' death on the cross. Erasmus believed that the true meaning of the cross was that man had to save himself by dying to the world and his worldly body. For him Christ, in one sense, was consciousness of the truth of human existence. It was like an inner voice that knew the way of salvation. Men could only be perfected by acknowledging, and then following, this inner voice. In the colloquy, *The*

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157 This is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 below. See also JD Tracy, *Erasmus: The Growth of a Mind*, (Geneva, 1972) 217.

158 See below, Chapter 5.

159 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 57.

160 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 96.

Godly Feast, Erasmus has the character Timothy refer to this voice as 'the Master'.[161] The perfected man would be led in all things by this 'Master'. As with his view of the redemptive process, the sacramental function of the church was severely limited in this system of belief. He did not see salvation in any particular type of church or sacramental system; he believed that the method of salvation was available to man in the scriptural accounts of Christ's life and death and teaching and by means of the operation of the *logos* in creation. This is why he spent so many hours labouring to purify the Gospel text.

The Christian church for Erasmus was not necessarily the Church of Rome or Wittenberg or, indeed, anywhere else. His view of the true church of Christ is, perhaps, best elaborated in his letter to Paul Volz which was written as the preface to the 1518 edition of the *Enchiridion.*[162] This depiction of a true church or *ecclesia* shows how Erasmus' concept of the *logos* or spirit of Christ worked in practice. In this letter he envisioned a Christian society as one which had Christ at its centre with three concentric circles running around it. The first circle was the domain of 'those who are nearest to Christ, priests, bishops, cardinals, popes, and all whose duty it is to follow the Lamb wheresoever he shall go'[163] The second circle contained 'secular princes whose arms and whose laws serve Christ in their own fashion'.[164] In the third circle are 'the common people, as the grossest part of this world, but gross as it is still belonging to the body of

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161 CR Thompson, ed., *The Colloquies of Erasmus,* (Chicago, 1965) 58-9.

162 Paul Volz was abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Hugshofen, near Schlettstadt. He was associated with the humanist literary circle of Schlettstadt which included notable humanists such as Beatus Rhenanus and Jacob Wimpfeling. He was an ardent admirer of Erasmus and the two remained on cordial terms to the end despite the fact that Volz joined the reformers in 1526. Volz was appointed preacher and chaplain to the nuns of St Nicolaus in Strasbourg but he was strongly influenced by the spiritualism of Kaspar Schwenckfeld and refused to sign the Wittenberg Concord. On account of this he was removed from his pulpit. He recanted later, however, under the guidance of Jean Calvin and was reinstated and even allowed to preach at the cathedral. Erasmus, for his part, believed that Volz exemplified the Christian traits he had outlined in his *Enchiridion* and in 1536 he sent him a gold cup and bequeathed one hundred pieces of gold to him in his will as a token of his esteem.

163 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 118.

164 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 118.

Christ'.[165] While the ideal state described here by Erasmus was a closed one, it was not, however, static. There was an organic progression taking place in it. At its centre Christ was like an everlasting fire who 'draws next to him the order of priests and makes them fiery and purifies them from all earthly stain'.[166] These in turn draw the next circle of princes to themselves.[167] The princes and rulers have a duty to those in the third circle to provide justice and peace.[168] He wrote that 'the image, or rather the shadow, of divine justice gleams in them'.[169] It ought to 'shine forth with far greater sharpness, clarity, and purity in the morals and laws of priests. An image is reflected in one way in iron, in another way in a mirror of glass'.[170] In the third circle were the common people 'the grossest part of this world'.[171] They, nevertheless, belonged to the body of Christ. The notion of a progressive dynamic was again evident when Erasmus described how in this body he who was at one time the foot could become the eye.[172] He argued that the members of the system would strive towards Christ each according to his own strength. He then drew an analogy between this system and the four elements. He likened the members of each circle to the different elements. Of these he said that Fire occupied the highest place and that, little by little, it 'draws all the others to it and, as far as it can, transforms them into its own nature. It turns clear water into air, the thin air it transforms into itself.'[173] Thus in the Erasmian Christian system each of the elements of society would play its part in the continual progression of all towards the central target which was Christ. The spirit of Christ itself, like fire, had the power to

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165 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 120.

166 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 118.

167 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 118.

168 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 118-9.

169 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 120.

170 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 120.

171 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 120.

172 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 120.

173 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 121.

transform all other entities into itself. This emphasis on a process of transformation in order to achieve Christ is central to Erasmus' concept of Christianity.[174] In 1515 he wrote to Beatus Rhenanus that his name in Greek, *Makares*, or the blessed ones, was a title the ancient Greeks had ascribed to the Gods; 'Not of course that the honour of such a distinguished name belongs to any mortal, unless he is so engrafted in Christ that he is already as it were transfigured and made one with him, and so deserves to be given a share in his immortality and in that splendid name'.[175] Erasmus believed that it was possible for men to achieve Christ. This is much stronger than to say that they can become Christians. They can actually become Christ: the embodiment of the divine traits of truth and wisdom.

The difficulties posed for orthodoxy by Erasmus' particular emphasis of the human incorporation of Christ did not go unnoticed. Edward Lee questioned a remark in the *Moria* about Plato's notion of holy madness where Erasmus had written that it was an experience, a foretaste, of future blessedness 'by which we shall be absorbed into God and shall live in future more in him than in ourselves'.[176] Erasmus defended this and asserted that he had said that

> the soul was absorbed by God because it is wholly rapt into him by love, and the soul exists more truly where it loves than where it gives life. For it is rapt in such a way that it does not disappear but is made perfect'.[177]

It was not surprising that Edward Lee took exception to this because it implied that man, in the process of perfecting his soul, became part of God. At very least this was an extremely radical interpretation of the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ but taken at face value it would have been outright heresy to

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174 See the *Paraclesis* in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York, 1976) 100.

175 *CWE*, 3, *Letters*, 327: 78.

176 *CWE*, 4, *Letters*, 843: 24-5.

177 *CWE*, 4, *Letters*, 843: 25.

imply that ordinary man could become God.[178] Moreover, this was no mere slip of the pen. It was a vital part of his *philosophia Christi*. Erasmus also espoused this idea in his annotation on the second chapter of Philippians in which he claimed that Christ as man, rather than as God, could be equal to God.[179]

For Erasmus, Christ was the way, the truth and the life. This rich concept was the spirit of God through which all truth and wisdom were made manifest to man. He believed that the truth of human existence was that although man was born into a condition of 'sin' he could nevertheless struggle to achieve a higher state. Christ by his teaching and through the symbolic example of his life was the most perfect teacher of the way of perfection. The eternal *logos* and the specific manifestation of Christ in Jesus both ultimately functioned to enlighten man. He believed that if a man achieved perfection he would then share in the nature and name of Christ. Thus Christ, for Erasmus, was in fact the essence of the spirit of perfection.

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178 For a slightly different view of this see MA Screech who argues that in this instance Erasmus was being accused primarily of the kind of heretical mysticism found in Meister Eckhart and Tauler. Screech concludes that Erasmus was not guilty of this kind of mystical excess. MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*, (London,1980) 163-9.

179 See Chapter 2 below for a full discussion of this theme.

Erasmus' Concept of Man

Erasmus' concept of man is the second pilar of his theory of the process of perfection and, as such, an awareness of its exact nature is essential for any understanding of the *philosophia Christi.* Man's nature is both the basic raw material, and the starting point, of the perfection process described in this philosophy. The *Enchiridion* is the richest source for Erasmus' views on man and, although it was one of his earliest works, his view of the components and function of human nature outlined in it remained consistent throughout his life. His concept of man was one in which Pauline and Platonic concepts were fused. In the *Enchiridion* he proposed a dual, and then a more elaborate triple, division of man's nature.[1] Like Christ, man was also a composite being. The dual model was one in which Erasmus envisaged human nature as being composed of two basic elements: matter and spirit, or, body and soul.[2] He believed that these two elements were locked in mortal combat, but that, ultimately, this dissension concealed an underlying unity. He said 'such is their confused turmoil and strife that they seem to be distinct from one another, although they are one'.[3] The turmoil resulted from the two elements being pulled in opposite directions. In typically Platonic terms he explained that:

> since the body is itself visible, it takes pleasure in things visible. Since it is mortal, it pursues temporal things; since it is heavy, it sinks downward. The soul, on the other hand, remembering its heavenly origin, strives upwards with all its might and struggles against its earthly burden. It despises those things that are seen, for it knows that they are transitory; it seeks those that are true and eternal. Being immortal, it loves things immortal; being heavenly, it loves that which is heavenly.[4]

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1 The dual division is elaborated in *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41ff, the triple division follows at *ibid.,* 51ff. For a discussion of Erasmus' anthropology see JK McConica, *Erasmus,* (Oxford, 1991) 55.

2 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41.

3 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41. The unity of the three apparently disparate parts of man is a Platonic notion, see Plato, *Republic,* 443 d-e.

4 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41.

This polarization was not by any means the natural condition of the elements. Erasmus believed that the discord had been produced by sin.[5] He said that

> it was not the fabled Prometheus who implanted this discord by mixing a particle from every living thing in our minds, nor was it instilled into us by our primitive nature, but sin corrupted that which had been well put together, sowing the poison of dissension between two harmonious entities.[6]

This is reminiscent of Plato's description of the disharmony which resulted from a state of injustice in which the elements of the psyche were dissenting among themselves.[7] Erasmus, like Plato, thought it was possible to overcome the state in which the elements of the human psyche were at war. This would result in the creation of a true, perfected human being in whom the disparate elements had been merged into an harmonious unity because sin had been overcome.[8] In short, when man is one he has hit the mark or achieved his true aim. Erasmus believed that this unity had existed at some previous time. He harked back either to a golden age or, arguably, a prior state, in which 'previously the mind commanded the body without any trouble, and the body obeyed the mind freely and willingly'.[9] Again there is a Platonic echo here of the theory that we come from the realm of the divine and can dimly remember it.[10] Erasmus was aware that this idea was potentially heretical when applied to the Christian soul but he nevertheless appears to have had an affection for it.[11] He specifically referred to it when he was at his most didactic in his work on letter-writing. There he recommended that in order to support the concept of a

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5 *CWE,* 66,*Enchiridion,* 41.

6 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41-2.

7 Plato, *Republic,* 444 b.

8 See Plato, *Republic,* 441 d-e.

9 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 42.

10 Plato, *Phaedrus,* 248c.

11 See MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London, 1980) 169-73, for a discussion of this concept and its heretical implications in the *Moria.*

divine element in the mind of man the reader should quote Plato's 'conception of souls descending to earth whose knowledge here is nothing but a dreamlike memory of what they once saw free from their bodies in the presence of God'.[12]

It is clear, particularly from the *Enchiridion*, that Erasmus believed the true, ideal order of spirit and flesh to be usually reversed on earth. He argued that in the earthly realm 'the passions of the body strive to have dominion over reason, and reason is forced to accede to the wishes of the body'.[13] Then using an overtly Platonic example to explain this dissension he wrote:

> that is why the heart of man is not inaptly compared to a turbulent republic, which, since it is made up of different kinds of men, is subject to frequent upheavals and conflicts because of discordant interests, unless supreme power is vested in one man, who will ordain nothing that is not for the best welfare of the state.[14]

This is clearly an allusion to Plato's *Republic* .[15] Erasmus went on to utilize this Platonic comparison of man as microcosm to the state as macrocosm in order to expand on his view of the true nature of the distinct elements of man. He explained that the ruler or king in man is reason and that the 'king himself should obey none but the law, and the law corresponds to the idea of the good'.[16] Next to the king come 'certain physical but not brutish emotions, like filial respect for one's parents, love for one's brothers and sisters, kindness towards friends, compassion for the afflicted, fear of disgrace, desire for a good reputation, and similar qualities'.[17] Then come

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12 *CWE,* 25, *De conscribendis Epistolis,* 32.

13 *CWE,* 66,*Enchiridion,* 42.

14 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 42.

15 Plato, *Republic,* 440 b.

16 *CWE,* 66,*Enchiridion,* 42.

17 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 42.

those passions of the soul that are further removed from the dictates of reason and are debased to the lowliness of beasts, consider these to be like the lowest dregs of the masses. Of this kind are lust, debauchery, envy, and similar disorders of the mind.[18]

This description of the psyche of man has obvious echoes of the perfect society informed by Christ outlined by Erasmus in his letter to Volz, which served as the introduction to the 1518 edition of the *Enchiridion.*[19] In the perfected man all the elements are subject ultimately to the idea of the Good. In the perfect Christian society all elements are subject to Christ. The one reflects and corresponds to the other. The rule of Christ and the rule of the idea of the Good are the same rule. On the next level the king, or reason, is the manifestation and dispenser of the Good in the individual human system and as such this can be equated with the role of ideal priests in the Erasmian Christian society. The third element in the human system is that of the more noble passions. These in turn can be equated to the role of noblemen or princes in the Christian society. Finally, in both systems, come the 'dregs of the masses' which nevertheless belong to, and have a part to play in, these systems.[20] Each delineates the dynamic of a properly functioning human system: one at the level of the individual and the other at the wider level of society. In one image the terms are Christian while in the other they are Platonic. Clearly, Erasmus saw a correlation between the philosophy of Plato and the *philosophia Christi.*[21]

While Erasmus accepted that the dual division of man was the basic structure of the psyche he ultimately thought that the true nature of man was, in fact, threefold. He expanded his dualistic description of man in the *Enchiridion* and postulated a slightly more complex triple division of spirit, soul and flesh.[22] The tripartite division of man had been condemned by the ninth-century council

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18 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 42.

19 JC Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 107.

20 JC Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 120.

21 See MA Screech, *The Praise of Folly,* (London, 1980) 136. Screech correctly points out that for Erasmus Plato had replaced Aristotle as *the* Philosopher.

22 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51.

of Constantinople and by most of the church Fathers. Moreover, the Fourth Latern Council had also upheld the dual division of man.[23] Thus, Erasmus clearly believed this was an important point because he was willing to risk censure by proposing it. The heretical tripartite division was a Platonic concept that had also been propounded by Origen. Erasmus was careful to argue that he was not only following the partly heterodox Origen but also the completely orthodox St Paul.[24] Moreover, he also protected himself by arguing that Plato's anthropology was the same as St Paul's although they had used different words to describe the elements of the psyche.[25] He asserted, rather unconvincingly, that although the previous description of the dual nature of man may have been 'more than sufficient', he would nevertheless elaborate on it in order that the reader would 'be even more enlightened and self-aware'.[26] He declared that he agreed with Origen's view that the body or the flesh is the 'lowest part of us, in which, through the fault of our first parents, the cunning serpent has inscribed the law of sin, and by which we are incited to base actions and once vanquished, joined to the devil.'[27] The spirit was that part

by which we reproduce a likeness of the divine nature, in which the supreme maker has

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23 Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma,* (Dublin, 1966) 96-7.

24 MA Screech has also noted that after the *Moria* Erasmus frequently omitted any reference to Origen when expounding his tripartite concept of man preferring instead to attribute it to St Paul. He believed, however, that these later omissions arose 'out of a tardy realization that Origen had pushed his interpretation of St Paul beyond the frontier of orthodoxy'. For a detailed discussion of this theme see MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 96-110.

25 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 47. It is notable that Erasmus placed Plato's division of man in his section on the dual division of man. His reference is to the *Timaeus,* 69c ff in which Plato described two souls and a body in man. Plato's anthropology here and elsewhere in his writings is triple in nature.(See Plato, *Republic,* 435cff, Phaedrus 246a.) Earlier in the *Timaeus,* Plato wrote that two created things 'cannot be rightly put together without a third; there must be some kind of union between them. And the fairest bond is that which makes the most complete fusion of itself and the things which it combines.' (*Timaeus,* 31c.) Erasmus appears to have been anxious to distance himself from the triple Platonic division of man, which could be seen as heretical. Instead he insisted that he was following St Paul in his anthropology although the Platonic influence is clearly visible.

26 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51.

27 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51.

engraved with his finger, that is, his Spirit, the eternal law of goodness, drawn from the archetype of his own mind, by which we are glued to God and are made one with him.[28]

Then he proposed the third part which he called the soul. He believed that the soul was that part which lay in the middle between the other two and was 'capable of sensations and natural movements'.[29] The soul was of vital importance to the process of salvation. It was there that the struggle for perfection took place. He described this struggle thus:

as in a republic rent by factions, the soul cannot but attach itself to one of the two sides; solicited on this side and on that, it is free to incline to whichever direction it wishes. If it renounces the flesh and goes over to the side of the spirit, it will itself become spiritual, but if it abandons itself to the cupidities of the flesh, it will degenerate into the body.[30]

Erasmus saw the inner workings of the human psyche as a duality of spirit and flesh which, in truly Platonic terms, were fused together in the soul. It was a dynamic involving three forces which were positive, negative and neutral: the spirit being positive, the body was negative and the soul was perceived as the area of neutrality. He wrote:

the spirit makes us gods, the flesh makes us brute animals, the soul constitutes us as human beings. The spirit makes us religious, the flesh irreligious, the soul neither the one nor the other. The spirit seeks heavenly things, the flesh seeks pleasure, the soul what is necessary. The spirit elevates us to heaven, the flesh drags us down to hell, the soul has no charge imputed to it. Whatever is carnal is base, whatever is spiritual is perfect, whatever belongs to the soul as life-giving element is in between and indifferent.[31]

Given the arguable heterodoxy of this tripartite division of man and its dynamic, Erasmus' insistence on elaborating it demonstrates that he believed that it, rather than the dual division, was the true reality of man's psyche. The dual division

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28 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51.

29 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51.

30 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51.

31 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 52.

was easier for men to understand and was adequate at a certain level of development but more profound self-knowledge required consciousness of a triple inner division. There is an obvious parallel between this concept and the doctrine of the Trinity. Just as there were three divine persons in one God, so also, there were three distinct elements in each man. Man, the microcosm, reflected the macrocosmic Divinity. As a consequence of this man can come to know God. In his *Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles,* Erasmus referred to the idea that man could increase his knowledge of God by looking within himself in order to discern the divine traces there. He wrote: 'it is not necessary to seek God in external things, since we may find him in ourselves, if only each person observes himself and sees within himself the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of the creator.'[32] He went on to say that 'though God has disclosed certain traces of his divinity in the heavenly orbs, on the earth, in the sea, and in all living things, yet in none is his divinity more wonderful than in man himself'.[33] The fundamental law of human nature for Erasmus was this continuum of positive, negative and neutral forces. This was not a fixed system, it was dynamic. The body and the spirit were fixed elements but they exercised a pull in opposite directions. The soul was the neutral area where free-choice operated. It had the potential for transformation and could unite with the flesh or with the spirit and so be changed into whichever it chose. It could not, however, remain neutral. There was some kind of necessity for it to transform upwards or downwards. Crucially, the soul was also the area where consciousness resided. Erasmus suggested that the other two parts could only be expressed through the soul. They were given individual human expression and brought into consciousness when the soul adhered to them. The brute was made manifest, or the divine was made manifest in the area of the soul. Erasmus thought that it was unlikely that anyone could reach a state of perfect equilibrium, in which the higher part permanently ruled the brutish part, while still living on earth. He wrote: 'we are not so perfect as never to admit any sin (I cannot say whether or not this is granted to any mortal in his lifetime)'.[34] Even Christ, according to Erasmus' interpretation of the agony in Gethsemane, had to

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32 *CWE,* 50, *Paraphraseon Acts,* 109.

33 *CWE,* 50, *Paraphrase on Acts,* 110.

34 *CWE,* 66, *De Contemptu Mundi,* 158. See also *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49.

struggle with the effects of human weakness right up to the time of his death.[35]

Erasmus believed this struggle for perfection was a truly onerous one which only someone who was willing to take on relentless and almost crippling toil could achieve. In typically syncretic mode he several times interpreted the myth of the labours of Hercules as being an allegory for this process. When writing in the *Enchiridion* about the struggles of St Paul he compared them to those of Hercules and said that

> when all other vices have been subdued, the sole vice of vainglory is still lurking even in the midst of virtue, like the hydra that attacked Hercules, an indestructible monster that reproduces itself from its own wounds, which at the very end, after enduring every toil, we can barely defeat.[36]

In a spirit of hope, however, he then quoted the maxim: "relentless labour masters all".[37] He also wrote quite a lengthy exposition of this myth in his *Adages* where he argued that the Herculean labours were of two kinds.[38] First, there were those required by a great task and, secondly, those which were 'of a kind to bring the greatest advantage to others, and little profit to the doer, except a little fame, and a lot of envy'.[39] Erasmus was here explicitly identifying his own work of compiling adages as belonging to the second category. In this work as in all of his other literary output his purpose was the same: he wanted to contribute to the knowledge necessary for the perfection of mankind. His description of the kind of sacrifices this work demanded invokes the question of what possessed him to take on this task.[40] He acknowledged that anyone who

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35 See above in Chapter 1.

36 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49.

37 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49. See also MM Phillips, ***Erasmus on His Times,*** (Cambridge, 1980) 18, where the same sentiment is quoted by Erasmus from Horace, *Epistles,* II. i, 10-11, with the exception that there it is envy which is last to be conquered.

38 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 18-31.

39 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 18.

40 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 20-21.

was not a 'real Hercules in mind, able to do and suffer anything for the sake of serving others' would not be wiling to undertake it. Moreover, he clearly saw this work as being part of the process of his own perfection. He said that it was proof of a 'lofty and undaunted mind' if, despite the onerousness of the task and the envy of others, a person strove nonetheless for immortal fame 'to pursue the advantage of others at the greatest expense to oneself, and bring forth the finest fruits of virtue by being of the greatest service to the greatest number, and thus to imitate the immortal power as far as mortal may'.[41] He believed that this kind of gruelling toil was a necessary part of the struggle. Quoting Cicero he said that 'our ancestors gave the sad title of toil, *(aerumna)*, to those labours which could not be avoided, even in the case of a god'.[42] It is clear that, like Cicero, Erasmus believed that even a god could not avoid these labours. He asserted in the *Enchiridion* that the path to salvation, which entailed these labours, was a narrow one over which few men walked but that Christ himself had walked it. For him the labours of Hercules were, in fact, analogous to the suffering and crucifixion of Christ. In his work on writing letters Erasmus demonstrated that he saw the same struggle depicted allegorically in both the Iliad and the Odyssey. He said that the difficulties encountered by Ulysses in the Odyssey and the Iliad were Homer's way of allegorizing the struggle for perfection.[43] He argued that in these works Homer's purpose was to show us that 'the path to virtue is difficult and lies through the hardest toil'.[44] He then linked this back to Hercules and went on to say that the stories about Hercules had the same purpose. 'Hercules, after enduring so many labours, suffered his body to be consumed by fire and was carried off into the company of the gods.'[45] This meant that 'immortality was only the lot of those who had spent their whole life in honourable labours and unquenchable ardour for virtue, and

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41 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 20.

42 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 18. Cicero, *De Finibus,* II.i, 118. See also Erasmus' colloquy on the *Art of Learning,* in which he made his character argue that all learning, but especially sacred knowledge, was only achievable by dint of extreme toil. CR Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus,* (Chicago, 1965) 460

43 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 87.

44 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 87.

45 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 87

had waged war tirelessly upon the monstrous apparitions of all vices'.[46] Man, in imitation of Christ, had to strive to the limit of his powers and beyond, in order to overcome temptation and achieve virtue by means of an internal personal struggle. Then, having achieved an initial level of knowledge, there was an onus on him to participate in the divine work of helping fellow-men. There is a suggestion here that the work of being of service to others is the milieu in which man is tested and forged anew.

In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus described the struggle against temptation in some detail. He compared this process, in which the soul was torn apart by passions, to Virgil's description of Proteus who 'in wondrous transformation ...becomes Fire and hideous beast and flowing stream until he returns to his original form'.[47] Throughout this blind and all-encompassing struggle man must hold fast to the soul even if he cannot control it. Indeed, Erasmus suggested that to hold on is all man is capable of at this point. He quoted Virgil again 'the more new forms and shapes you see him take, the more draw tight the tautened bonds'.[48] He then reinforced his point by an allegorical interpretation of the story of Jacob from the Old Testament. He urged the reader to be like Jacob and 'press on steadfastly in this nocturnal struggle until the dawn of divine help will shine upon you, and say "I shall not let you go until you give me your blessing"'.[49] If man struggled relentlessly in the dark he would, of necessity, be rewarded with an immediate angelic blessing. He argued that 'after conquering temptation man is always given a surplus of divine grace so that he will be much more fortified for the next attack of the enemy'.[50] He illustrated this by explaining that having struggled, Jacob was struck in the thigh-bone and began to limp on one leg which meant that the passion of the flesh had so died

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46 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 88; See also *ibid.,* 95.

4747 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49-50.

48 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 50.

49 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 50; Erasmus is quoting from Genesis 32:36.

50 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 50.

out in him that he was now supported by the right leg, or the spirit.[51] Moreover, he was then re-named Israel which Erasmus, after the fashion of Jerome, said meant 'taste and see how sweet is the Lord'.[52]

For Erasmus, overcoming a temptation was achieved by means of understanding and experiencing the truth or reality of ones own nature. A man who had done this was one who had managed to hold on while his soul changed tumultuously into phantasms until the peace and calm of the only truth, that is the spiritual truth, dawned on him. What the man in question held onto was consciousness of his true self despite the ravages of passion. As a practical exercise in this method of achieving the truth Erasmus advised his reader that in order to be able to overcome the passion of anger he should 'make it a point, when you are mentally sound yourself, to look at the face of a man in a fit of anger, or when you are the victim of anger, look at yourself in the mirror'.[53] He concluded that the image such a person would see would hardly be human at all.[54] What he was advocating was that when man was in a state of reason he should observe in another person what it was like to be in a state where base passions were in control. In doing this the observer would realize that at that time the impassioned man was hardly human because he had given himself over to his brutish side alone. Erasmus also thought that by watching oneself it was possible to separate consciousness from unconscious reaction and observe through the eyes of reason the brutishness of one's own anger. For him the true human being was one who had made a conscious decision in his soul to subjugate the flesh to the spirit. Erasmus believed that one could overcome base instincts, not simply by trying to keep control of one's passions, but, by endeavouring to observe oneself and others who were out of the control of

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51 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 50.

52 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 50. In the third rule of the *Enchiridion* Erasmus outlined his belief that despite the arduousness of the struggle for perfection, it was, nevertheless, the only way to happiness. See *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 58 ff.

53 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 126. See also *CWE,* 29, *Oration on the Pursuit of Virtue,* 3-4, in which Erasmus, in the dedicatory letter, told Adolph of Vere, that his intention in the piece was 'simply to show you to yourself as though in a mirror, so that you can know yourself'. He then went on to speak of 'Socrates mirror'.

54 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 126.

reason. He believed that an attempt at self-control without self-consciousness would not work. He was careful to emphasize that man must hold on in the dark and in the most violent circumstances to the idea of truth, or reality, or the spirit and that in this way the storm would necessarily be weathered and the victim would be strengthened on account of it. This was the function of faith for Erasmus. If a man was not shaken by the phantasms of the passions then, when they had receded, he could see them for what they were and this consciousness would render them less powerful in the future. This was how grace worked in practice. Thus, rather than assuming that man could control his passions by some immediate exercising of will, Erasmus observed and understood that this was not always possible. This did not in any way negate his belief in the freedom of the will. The choosing of the good was a necessary pre-requisite for its achievement. He argued that a man who was seized by the madness of anger, who could not repress it but who nevertheless admitted that he was not sane at that moment, was well on the way to sanity.[55] If a man took the first step he, like Jacob, would be given angelic help which would remind him to walk on the right path in the future. In this way sin itself became an occasion of perfection.

Consequently, Erasmus believed that ignorance of the truth of existence was the first and principle obstacle to human perfection. In the *Enchiridion* where he outlined some general rules of true Christianity, the first of these was against the 'evil of ignorance'.[56] He thought that the majority of men lived in a state in which 'a cloud of ignorance ... obscures the judgement of reason'.[57] He argued that there were several reasons for this:

> First, the pure light of the divine countenance, which the creator had instilled in us, was partially obscured by the sin of our first parents. Then faulty upbringing, evil companionship, perverse desires, the darkness of vice, and the habit of sin have so covered it over with mildew that only the barest traces of the law divinely engraved in us are visible.[58]

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55 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 125.

56 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 55.

57 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 54.

58 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 54.

Attempting to overcome this human blindness was the first stage in perfection.[59] The second stage in the process was overcoming the dictates of the flesh because he said they 'influenced the passions in such a way that even if we recognize what is best, we love the very opposite'.[60] The third stage was defeating weakness which he believed 'causes us to give in to weariness or temptation and thus abandon virtue once we have acquired it'.[61] Clearly, these three stages relate to the different parts of man. The first, blindness, relates to the spiritual part which knows the law of goodness. The second is related to the flesh which obscures our view of reality. The third relates to the soul in which will resides. Thus, in order to attain perfection each part of man had to be free to operate properly within its own sphere and not interfere with the working of the other parts because each human elements had its own role in perfection. The perfected human psyche would, therefore, be one in which all of the elements operated in a kind of equilibrium. In a later section of the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus, while elaborating on St Paul's description of the mystical body of Christ, described this harmonious condition thus:

> God has so harmonized the parts of the body that he gave greater dignity to that which was inferior so that there would not be discord in the body but that the members would have equal care for one another...You are the body of Christ and members each in a different fashion.[62]

When this is applied to the individual human being it explains the apparently stronger pull exerted by the fleshly element. Erasmus believed that because this element was inferior to the others God had consciously created it stronger in order that equilibrium would be possible.[63] Again this shows his emphasis of the dynamic of struggle or conflict in the perfection process because if the

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59 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 54-5.

60 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 54.

61 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 54.

62 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 96. See also *ibid.*, 15.

63 The notion that the flesh is the largest and strongest part of man is also to be found in Plato, *Republic*, 442 a-b.

superior spiritual element were also stronger in the psyche then it would easily overcome the flesh without the necessity for struggle.

Erasmus' emphasis of consciousness of the self as an aid to perfection rested on two unstated premises: first, that man had an innate knowledge of the idea of the Good, or Christ, and secondly, that the inherent tension between the positive negative and neutral elements of the human psyche was the true dynamic of the perfection process. He believed that man was actually designed for perfection. The element of free-will, of course, meant that perfection was not necessarily assured. Man had to choose the Good and struggle always to keep it because without struggle the psyche would incline towards the fleshly element which like gravity would pull the soul downwards. Man's reason, which allowed him access to the innate idea of the Good was the countervailing force to this degeneration. Erasmus, therefore, firmly believed that self-knowledge was necessary for the attainment of wisdom and this in turn would lead to perfection. He wrote: 'the beginning of wisdom is to know oneself'.[64] Wisdom, for Erasmus, was also interchangeable with the concept of Christ because he believed that Christ was not only the author of wisdom but that he actually was 'wisdom itself'.[65] Thus, in order to achieve Christ, man must first come to know himself. In the *Adagia* Erasmus showed his respect for this maxim by devoting a section to it.[66] He introduced this section by asserting that the exhortation to 'know thyself' was 'the most famous of all utterances of wise men'.[67] He related this saying to the adage '*In Se Decendere* ': 'To Venture Down into Oneself'. He explained that 'to venture down into oneself is for a man to contemplate his own faults'. This was a reference 'to those cavernous recesses of the human heart, which Momus thought should have been supplied with windows'[68] The onerous nature of this task meant that men were very reluctant to participate in it. He found evidence for this in the saying of Persius

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64 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 38.

65 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 38.

66 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 56-63.

67 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 62.

68 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 57.

that 'none, none dare venture down into themselves. They watch the wallet hanging on the back of him that walks before.'[69] Erasmus however believed that man had to overcome this reticence because the process of self-knowledge ultimately contained the remedy for 'the source of all life's troubles'.[70] It was in an effort to enable man to achieve this self-knowledge that Erasmus wrote the *Enchiridion* which was his best-selling work.[71] In its opening pages he addressed the reader thus:

> since you have entered into war with yourself, and since your greatest hope of victory lies in knowing yourself as fully as possible, I shall set before you a kind of likeness of yourself, as in a painting, so that you may have a clear knowledge of what you are skin-deep.[72]

He believed this was necessary because the attainment of self-knowledge was difficult. He said:

> let no one rashly lay claim to possessing such wisdom that he is sufficiently known to himself. I doubt whether anyone has an accurate knowledge of his own body, and are we to think that anyone at all will be conscious of his own state of mind?[73]

In the *Adagia,* Erasmus highlighted the fact that when Laertius was asked what was the most difficult thing for a person to do, he replied that it was to know oneself.[74] Plato, too, acknowledged the importance of this maxim and Erasmus recounted how he had said it was inscribed on the front doors of the famous

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69 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 57.

70 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 57.

71 The *Enchiridion* was written in 1501 and published in 1503 but was not an immediate success. It became a best-seller only after its author had become famous. In 1518, Froben produced what Erasmus himself described as an elegant edition. From this time onwards it was a best-seller with forty editions appearing in the next ten years. See *CWE,* 66, 1-7 for further details of its history.

72 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41.

73 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 40.

74 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 47.

temple at Delphi.[75] However, his emphasis here too was on the difficulty of the task. He quoted the *Phaedrus* in which Plato himself said: 'I cannot yet achieve the self-knowledge of the Delphian inscription'.[76] Nonetheless, Erasmus believed that 'the only road to happiness is first to know yourself and then not to act in anything according to the passions but in all things according to the judgement of reason'.[77]

Blindness and ignorance were not just an individual problem for Erasmus; he believed that they also existed on a grand-scale. The central message of his satirical masterpiece, the *Praise of Folly,* is that the entire world is blind to the truth and that consequently true Christianity, which of necessity embodies the truth, is therefore in opposition to the world. Thus, what is perceived as folly by the world is, in fact, the highest reality and, conversely, worldly wisdom is in fact folly. Erasmus showed how in worldly terms Christ saved mankind by an act of supreme folly. One of his main sources for this notion was, of course, St Paul.[78] In the *Enchiridion,* he paraphrased Paul and said 'there is no greater stupidity than earthly wisdom, which one must unlearn if he truly wishes to be wise'.[79] He found precisely the same notion in the writings of the ancients particularly in Plato's myth of the cave.[80] He interpreted this myth, in which the imprisoned and deluded cave-dwellers believed that the shadows cast on their wall of events happening in the world outside the cave were the only reality, as meaning that the world was blind to the truth.[81] In juxtaposition to worldly wisdom, the true philosopher, for Erasmus, was one who loved the things at

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75 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 62.

76 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 63.

77 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 46.

78 See 1 Cor. 3:19.

79 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 39.

80 Plato, *Repbulic,* book 7, 514 ff. See also Plato, *Phaedrus,* 249 c-d.

81 Betty Radice, *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 202-3 and *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 86.

which the common herd goggled.[82] His role was to wake people from their state of ignorance and denial in order that they could then begin to seek the Good. Erasmus approved of the saying of Socrates that 'virtue is simply the knowledge of what is to be sought after and what avoided'.[83] He said that this is not to say that Socrates 'did not see the distinction between the knowledge and the love of good'.[84] There is, however, a strong suggestion that the former would lead to the latter. Erasmus explained that in his discussion with Protagoras, Socrates 'proves that knowledge has so great an importance in all virtue that sins arise solely from false opinions'.[85] Later in his *Paraphrase on Mark* he highlighted the importance of understanding for faith. He argued that 'he who does not believe does not understand', and went on to explain that 'sins are not forgiven except in the case of those who believe that through the gospel sins are freely forgiven.'[86] Faith in the future promise of God which is essential for salvation is not blind but based on what we can understand. Consequently proper understanding which starts with self-knowledge was crucial. Erasmus argued:

> it should be the chief care of Christians that from the cradle onwards, amidst the blandishments of nurses and the kisses of parents, under the tutelage of their teachers children should imbibe convictions worthy of Christ, because nothing sinks more deeply into the mind or adheres to it more tenaciously than that which is instilled in it in early years.[87]

Additionally he said:

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82 *CWE,* 31, *Adages,* 230.

83 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 85.

84 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 85.

85 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 85.

86 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 57.

87 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 85.

there is no time of life when this rule should not be put into practice so that all vulgar errors may be pulled out of the mind by the roots and salutary opinions be put in their place and so reinforced that nothing will be able to dislodge them.[88]

Thus, just as he believed that wisdom and Christ were interchangeable, so too he thought that wisdom and virtue were synonymous. He wrote: 'the purest virtue, perfect in every respect, is called wisdom' by both Stoics and Christians.[89]

Knowledge of the self had another, related, function for Erasmus. In the *Enchiridion* he argued that his description of man's nature should be used as a guide to understanding the invisible ineffable mysteries and even the celestial realm. He wrote: 'perfect piety is the attempt to progress always from visible things, which are usually imperfect or indifferent, to invisible, *according to the division of man discussed earlier*" .[90] In short, man can understand his higher spiritual nature by observing his material nature and through observation of his total being he can understand higher mysteries which are reflected in it. Erasmus, in true Renaissance fashion, placed great emphasis on this idea that man the microcosm reflected the macrocosm. He believed that ignorance of the pre-eminence of the invisible eternal reality was a serious evil. He wrote: 'this precept is most pertinent to our discussion since it is through neglect or ignorance of it that most Christians are superstitious rather than pious, and except for the name of Christ differ hardly at all from superstitious pagans'.[91] Erasmus followed this statement with a passage that set out the precise nature of his concept that visible reality was merely a reflection of a higher metaphysical and true reality. He then moved from his concept of man, as a reflection of both the visible and the invisible worlds, to its corollary, in which all of the visible world was a diagram of the psyche of man and thus an aid to the knowledge necessary for perfection. He described it thus:

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88 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 85.

89 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 38.

90 My italics, *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 65; Erasmus' reference is to 45-54.

91 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 65.

let us imagine, therefore, two worlds, the one merely intelligible, the other visible. The intelligible, which may also be called the angelic, is the one in which God dwells with the blessed spirits, while the visible world comprises the celestial spheres and all that is contained therein. Then there is man, who constitutes, as it were, a third world, participating in the other two, in the visible world through the body, and in the invisible through the soul.[92]

This corresponds to the Erasmian tri-partite division of man.[93] The body corresponds to the visible world, the spirit to the angelic or divine, and the soul, which Erasmus believed to be that element which makes us human, lying between the two corresponds to mankind in the macrocosmic image. The significance of this version of reality, for Erasmus, was that it afforded man the opportunity to understand the higher truth of his existence and purpose. He recommended that man should not identify with the physical world but should 'relate by a fitting comparison everything that occurs to the senses either to the angelic world or, in more practical terms, to morals and to that part of man that corresponds to the angelic'.[94] He gave some examples of this and explained that

what the visible sun is here in the visible world the divine mind is in the intelligible world and in that part of you related to it, namely, the spirit. What the moon is here is in that world the assembly of angels and blessed spirits, which they call the church triumphant, and in you it is the spirit. Whatever influence the upper world has over the earth, which lies beneath it, God exercises this same influence over your soul.[95]

Erasmus argued that by using the visible world and the visible part of man to learn about the invisible realm 'whatever offers itself to the senses will become

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92 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 65. This has clear echoes of Pico's, *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* see Ernst Cassirer, PO Kristeller & JH Randall, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man,* (Chicago,1948) 225.

93 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 51-4.

94 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 65.

95 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 65. Significantly, here we can see that Erasmus, unlike many of his Renaissance contemporaries, did not hold the usual astrological views. While he did believe the celestial bodies had an influence on the earth itself, he thought that it was God who exercised this power in man's heart.

for you an occasion for the practice of piety'.[96] Again, he was clearly alluding to the Platonic cave myth when he said 'be so convinced of the existence of invisible things that those things that are seen become but mere shadows, which present to the eye only a faint image of invisible realities.'[97] This was the method by which man could follow the sage and attain true knowledge of himself. Erasmus said 'whatever we perceive in the body must be understood to exist also in the soul'.[98] Clearly, he believed that perception began in the physical realm and only then moved on to the more real spiritual world. There is a great emphasis on personal verification of truth in this method. He put it thus:

> the road to the spiritual and perfect life consists in gradually accustoming ourselves to be weaned from those things that do not really exist but appear partly to be what they are not, such as base pleasure or worldly honour, and are partly in a state of flux, hastening to return to nothing, and let ourselves be carried away to things that are real, eternal, unchangeable, and authentic.[99]

This has distinct echoes of his definition of true philosophy in which he agreed with Plato that 'philosophy is nothing but a meditation on death' and that it 'withdraws the mind from the physical and coarse things to those that are eternal and intelligible'.[100] The best example of true philosophy for him, was, of course, the *philosophia Christi* . The method of perfection entailed a broadening consciousness of the self and the world which would necessarily result in a rejection of the physical world and all of its values and honours because dawning consciousness would show these to be unreal ephemera. The perfected individual would then edge closer and closer to union with the divine spirit of God. Erasmus was not prescribing a set of beliefs which the reader was obliged to accept but rather a method by which the reader could come to understand

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96 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 66.

97 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 66.

98 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 66.

99 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 66.

100 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 32. The same idea is expressed in Betty Radicce, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 202. Erasmus is quoting Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo,* 67 d-68 b.

himself and existence, Underlying all of this is the Platonic notion that true knowledge would then *necessarily* produce a virtuous life.[101] The highest point The highest point of knowledge was to know the Good. While this notion has been rejected by modern philosophers it was still unchallenged in Erasmus' day and is absolutely essential for an understanding of the *philosophia Christi* .[102]

There was a strong correlation for Erasmus between this state of wisdom or religious perfection and that of true humanity. He believed that man was not born into a state of true or perfect humanity. It, like religious perfection, was something he had to struggle to achieve. In the introduction to *De Pueris Instituendis* he expressed this thus: 'man certainly is not born, but made man. Primitive man, living a lawless, unschooled, promiscuous life in the woods, was not human, but rather a wild animal. It is reason which defines our humanity.'[103] To drive home his point he then quoted Diogenes who, while walking through a crowded place one day, said; "I am looking for a man". Erasmus explained that Diogenes was 'aware, of course, of the crowd around him, but to him it was nothing more than a herd of animals, not a gathering of human beings'.[104] He went on to say:

> it is beyond argument that a man who has never been instructed in philosophy or in any branch of learning is a creature quite inferior to the brute animals. Animals only follow their natural instincts; but man, unless he has experienced the influence of learning and philosophy, is at the mercy of impulses that are worse than those of a wild beast.[105]

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101 See RM Hare's general introduction to the Jowett translation of *The Dialogues of Plato,* vol. 3, 23-30. It appears explicitly in the *Gorgias* and is an absolutely essential underlying theme in the *Republic.*

102 This concept was adopted by the scholastics probably because Aristotle agreed with it and was not seriously challenged until Hume in the *Treatise of Human Nature,* III, 1, i where he highlighted the impossibility of deriving 'ought' propositions from 'is' propositions.

103 *CWE,* 26, *De Pueris Instituendis,* 304.

104 *CWE,* 26, *De Pueris Instituendis*, 304.

105 *CWE,* 26, *De Pueris Instituendis*, 304-5.

Elsewhere he said that 'birth does not create a man, but only something capable of having man's nature. What is born is the raw material, so to speak, education gives it shape.'[106] The notable element of his views on the best possible educational program is that he advocated not only 'learning' but also 'philosophy'. Erasmus, as a committed Christian, believed that the purpose of man's life was to struggle for perfection in the religious sense, he also believed, as a humanist, that man has to struggle to reach a state of full humanity. The discipline of philosophy was essential to both ends. There is no element of purely secular aspiration in his humanism however, because he did not, in fact, distinguish between the state of religious perfection and the condition of full humanity: they are one and the same. He believed that the *philosophia Christi,* was the best expression of true philosophy and that it had a special affinity with human nature. In the *Paraclesis* where he first explicitly employed this term, he said: 'this philosophy easily penetrates into the minds of all, an action in especial accord with human nature'.[107] He went on to specifically equate the process of Christian perfection with the perfection of human nature when he asked 'what else is the philosophy of Christ, which he himself calls a rebirth, than the restoration of human nature originally well formed?'[108] In short, for Erasmus, Christian perfection was also a state of true humanity. This was the kernel of his humanism.[109] Human nature itself was the raw material of Christian perfection. Man, therefore, is elevated to the central position in the all-important process of perfection. This has many implications for Erasmus' thought and is particularly important to understanding the value he placed on classical literature. His contemporaries understood this vital component of his

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106 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 33.

107 JC Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 100. For a recent discussion of the term *Philosophia Christi* see Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto,1996) 75ff. He points out that Louis Bouyer correctly identified the term as being patristic in origin and that it was probably first mooted as a concept (although not explicitly) by Erasmus in the adage, *Sileni Alcibiades.*

108 JC Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 100.

109 See also AHT Levi's note 61 in his introduction to the Radice translation of the *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 113, where he makes the point that this concept is perhaps at the centre of *all* evangelical humanism.

thought. In 1522 Urbanus Rhegius wrote to him :

> it is a wonderful sight to see humane and sacred studies so interconnected that they can be pursued together without conflict, though previously the machinations of the ignorant made them worse than enemies. All this we owe to your efforts.[110]

Erasmus's contribution to the humanist tradition was precisely this syncretic fusion of the more secular aspirations with purely Christian ones.[111] His writings are infused with the spirit of the earlier Italian humanists but his brand of humanism had at its heart a concept of *humanitas* that was similar to, while at the same time essentially different from, the standard concept of *humanitas*. This term originated in classical times and has been described very succinctly by Trinkaus.[112] He argued that for the Greeks and Romans *humanitas*

> meant what we to-day would regard as the "culture" acquired by a particular society. However, they thought of these terms as referring to a generic human culture rather than their own peculiar one and the education which instilled *paideia* or *humanitas* was, again *the* education and not simply their own.[113]

He explained, however, that despite this they 'denied that what Asians and

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110 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1253: 4. Urbanus Rhegius began his career by teaching at the University of Ingolstadt where he lectured on the works of Jerome and Lefèvre d'Étaples. In 1519 he was ordained and the following year he succeeded Oecolampadius as cathedral preacher in Augsburg. In 1521, however, he displayed his reforming tendencies when he preached a sermon against indulgences. As a result of this he had to leave Augsburg but in 1524 the council brought him back as preacher at the Franciscan church. He became a leader of the reform party and in 1525 sealed his commitment by marrying and celebrating communion in both kinds. From 1530 he was a loyal supporter of Luther and he introduced the reformation into both his native Luneburg and Hanover. His relations with Erasmus declined after 1525 when the latter published *De Libero Arbitrio* but he remained a moderate to the end.

111 For a discussion of this theme see Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries,* (Toronto, 1981).

112 Charles Trinkaus, 'Themes for a Renaissance Anthropology' in Andre Chastel et al., *The Renaissance : Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1979) 83.

113 Charles Trinkaus, 'Themes for a Renaissance Anthropology' in Andre Chastel et al., *The Renaissance : Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1979) 83-4.

barbarians acquired through their own mores was culture'.[114] For them the only true manifestation of generic human culture was to be found in classical Greece and Rome. Thus they believed that by taking over Greek or Roman ways, any people could acquire universal *paideia* or *humanitas*.[115] The humanists of Erasmus' day concurred with this notion and Erasmus accepted the generalities of this scheme but not the specifics. He agreed with the humanists that man without the right kind of education would degenerate into a state of barbarism.[116] He also valued Roman and, more especially, Greek mores. He did not, however, espouse the view that Roman and Greek mores were necessarily the only basis for an educational system which would enable man to develop his full potential. He endorsed humanist methods of education based on these classical cultures but he believed that it was the *philosophia Christi* which was the instrument of human perfection. His concept of *humanitas* was not simply related to the cultural perfection of man but to the true perfection of man in the widest possible spiritual sense. The central concepts of *humanitas* and the *philosophia Christi* had a lot in common: they both espoused the goal of man loving his neighbour for instance. Erasmus recognised this and said 'I believe that the word "humane" is generally applied to anything to do with mutual good-will'.[117] In his famous work, *The Praise of Folly,* he lauded the apparent folly of the *philosophia Christi* as expressed in the life and, particularly, in the death of Christ. He argued that this folly was, in fact, the highest Wisdom. He would have been aware of the connection between the Greek word for *humanitas* which was *paideia* and his concept of Folly. The Folly, or *Moria,* was a pun on Thomas More's name but there may be a further pun. The Greek root of *paideia* is *pais* or child which was also used to depict foolishness in general. Thus when Erasmus was praising Folly he may have also have expected his reader to see that he was praising true *humanitas* : the open, childlike, innocent and, to worldly eyes, foolish condition which was necessary for the reception

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114 Charles Trinkaus, 'Themes for a Renaissance Anthropology' in Andre Chastel et al., *The Renaissance : Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1979) 84.

115 Charles Trinkaus, 'Themes for a Renaissance Anthropology' in Andre Chastel et al., *The Renaissance : Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1979) 84.

116 *CWE,* 26, *De Pueris Instituendis,* 305.

117 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 295.

and practice of true wisdom.

He believed that all men were designed in such a fashion that they would be driven into the struggle for perfection unless thwarted by the distractions of the world or the flesh. His basis for this was essentially Epicurean. He thought that the things which engendered happiness were also those which led to perfection and man was driven to want happiness.[118] He presented the reasoning for this in the *Enchiridion* where he argued that if man were to ignore the illusions of the flesh it would be clear that 'the way of Christ is not only the only one that leads to happiness, but even without considering the reward it is the most advantageous one to follow'.[119] He believed that 'the life of mortals is itself exposed to a thousand woes common to just and unjust alike'.[120] Thus we should not be put off by struggle itself because no matter which path we choose we cannot avoid struggle. He argued, moreover, that we are so designed that there is no real happiness or peace outside of the struggle for perfection: 'no pleasure is lacking when there is a tranquil conscience. But no misery is absent when an unhappy conscience torments us. These must be regarded as matters of absolute certitude.'[121] In short, he believed that the intrinsic design of the human psyche tends towards the struggle for perfection. This, together with his understanding of the nature of the *logos*, led him to the belief that men who lived prior to Christ had also struggled for, and indeed achieved, a measure of perfection.[122]

He saw a correlation between the ancients, notably the Platonists, who in their notions of the idea of the Good and the struggle for virtue were very close to the

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118 See *CWE,* 31, *Adages,* 80, where Erasmus said that everyone is searching for happiness. See also *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 58-61: the third rule of the *Enchiridion* which is a discussion of how the Christian way is the surest road to happiness. The underlying implication being that all men seek happiness. This partially Epicurean theme is also discussed earlier in *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 46-7.

119 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion*, 58.

120 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion*, 58.

121 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion*, 58.

122 See above Chapter 1 on Christ as *logos* and below Chapter 4 on *The Godly Feast.*

philosophia Christi. He argued that

> although they did not have certain knowledge of God and were not inspired by the hope of attaining the kingdom of heaven or moved by God's spirit, nonetheless, they thought intently about the nature of virtue with whatever strength their mortal minds possessed, and delved deeply and subtly into so many things, and showed forth in their deeds many examples of virtuous accomplishments, (or, if you prefer, the appearance of virtuous accomplishments).[123]

The complexity of this statement is testimony to the fact that Erasmus had to take great care when he expressed his view that some of the ancients had achieved a state of virtue.[124] Nevertheless he clearly believed that this was the case. He thought that Socrates had achieved such a state and that as a proof of this he exhibited virtue in his way of life. He said that Socrates was 'not only the wisest of philosophers but also the most incorruptible man of all time'.[125] He valued Socrates because he had 'brought down philosophy from the contemplation of natural phenomena into the midst of human life' and diverted all study 'to the consideration of morals'.[126] Erasmus was never very interested in the study of natural phenomena. His chosen study was man and how Christ could be incorporated and operate through man. His most famous syncretic statement appeared in his colloquy *The Godly Feast* in which Socrates is canonized.[127] Cicero, too, is singled out for the highest praise in the same work. He wrote to Jacob de Voecht that he found himself thinking as he read Cicero,

> what justice, what purity, what sincerity, what truth in his rules for living! All is in harmony with nature'...'How many lessons he teaches, and how like a saint - almost a deity! - on how we should do good to all men even without reward, on the maintenance of friendship, on the

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123 *CWE*, 66, *De Vidua Christiana*, 91.

124 See introduction by AHT Levi to Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 25-6.

125 See the dedicatory letter to Adolph of Veere which accompanied Erasmus' *Oration on the Pursuit of Virtue*, *CWE*, 29, *De Virtute*, 5.

126 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1334: 251.

127 This colloquy and Erasmus' syncretism are discussed in detail in Chapter 4 below.

immortality of the soul.[128]

The question of the salvation of pagans was a thorny one for the Renaissance scholar. Erasmus' view of human nature and the process of perfection led him to hold views which would not have had the approval of the Church. This was not because his views were in any way secular but rather that he minimized the role of the Church in salvation. He believed that human perfection was achieved by incorporating Christ but his view of the exact nature of Christ meant, as we have seen, that this concept had been accessible to all men from the beginning of time. In his *Paraphrase on Romans* Erasmus argued that God approved the meritorious actions of non-Christians, even those who had never heard of the Law of Moses:

> for when the races foreign to the law of Moses do of their own accord under the guidance of nature the things which are ordered by the law even though they are instructed by no prescription of the Mosaic law, they themselves are a law unto themselves because they express the substance of the law, engraved not on tablets but on their own minds. Whatever among them is usually done before a tribunal of justice is done in their hearts; your conscience gives testimony for or against you, and your thoughts contending with one another, alternately accuse and defend you.[129]

In his treatise on the education of children he said that three things were needed for the perfection of human happiness: these were 'nature, method, and practice'.[130] He defined nature as 'man's innate capacity and inclination for the good'.[131] The method was to engage in a process of education. By practice, he meant 'the exercise of a disposition which has been implanted by nature and

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128 *CWE*, 7, *Letters*, 1013: 72. Jacob de Voecht was a cannon lawyer from Antwerp who studied at Louvain and Orléans. He then returned to Antwerp in 1506 and remained there until his death in 1536. During that time he appears to have been engaged in several diplomatic missions including one to London in 1509 where he met Thomas More. He was also a friend of the close associate of Erasmus, and town clerk of Antwerp, Pieter Gillis. Erasmus met him in 1500 when he lodged with him at Orléans. They remained in contact thereafter and Erasmus, in this letter, dedicated his edition of Cicero's *De officiis* to him in 1519.

129 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 20-1.

130 *CWE*, 26, *De Pueris Instituendis*, 311.

131 *CWE*, 26, *De Pueris Instituendis*, 311.

moulded by method'.[132] In sum, he said that 'nature is realized only through method, and practice, unless it is guided by the principles of method, is open to numerous errors and pitfalls'.[133] Since, for Erasmus, the perfection of human nature was also Christian perfection this description can seem rather secular. It was not, however, because at all stages in the process Christ is essential. The innate inclination to the good is the human perception of the *logos*. The learning he referred to was, of course, the truth of Christ and the practice was living a virtuous life according to the principles of Christ. For Erasmus, the best exposition of this knowledge was in Scripture, particularly the New Testament. Its effectiveness was absolutely dependent on the effort an individual made to understand its precepts and, more importantly, practice them. He called his 1516 version of the Gospels the *Novum Instrumentum*. Like his *Enchiridion* he saw it as an instrument or tool rather than simply a record of religious significance.[134] His emphasis was always on the transformation of man, rather than intellectual comprehension which was simply a means to this end.[135]

The basic impulse of the Erasmian perfection process appears wholly Platonic at first glance, yet there was a crucial difference. While, like the Platonists and Neoplatinists, he certainly believed that the flesh should be subjected to the higher power of a reason informed by spirit, unlike them he thought the flesh was nevertheless crucial in the process of perfection. This was also quite

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132 *CWE,* 26, *De Pueris Instituendis,* 311.

133 *CWE,* 26, *De Pueris Instituendis,* 311.

134 Augustijn has argued that the term *Instrumentum* implied a written document. While this is true, the primary sense of the term is a tool or implement and Erasmus was always concerned with the usefulness of Scripture as an instrument of salvation. See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto, 1996) 90.

135 Erasmus also expressed the importance of utility In his colloquy *The Art of Learning,* where his character Desiderius told his friend Erasmus that he must discipline himself in order to win self-control and 'find delight in things productive of utility rather than pleasure'. See CR Thompson,*The Colloquies of Erasmus,* (Toronto, 1965) 460.

contrary to the beliefs of most of his Christian contemporaries.[136] The clearest exposition of this view is again to be found in the *Enchiridion* where it is interwoven seamlessly with a more orthodox Christian Platonism. In this work he quoted the arguments of the Stoics and Peripatetics to highlight two 'slightly different views' on the function of the flesh in perfection.[137] Having described 'the diversity of the passions' which, for him, were expressions of the flesh he said:

> the Stoics believe that when you have used as guides those passions that are awakened most directly by the senses and have arrived at the point of being able to judge and discriminate what is to be sought after and what avoided, then they should be abandoned altogether. From then on not only are they useless for the attaining of wisdom, but even detrimental. For this reason they wish that the perfect wise man should be free of such promptings as if they were diseases of the mind.[138]

On the other hand, he explained that

> the Peripatetics teach that the passions are not to be eradicated, but subdued. They consider them to be of some use, imparted to us by nature as incentives and inducements to virtue, such as anger as an incentive to courage, or envy to industry and so with the rest.[139]

In sum, both schools agreed that, ultimately, man should live according to the dictates of reason and not be led by the passions. They also agreed that the passions played a vital role in the struggle for perfection. They differed, however, on the precise nature of the role played by the passions once a state of consciousness of the true nature of good and evil had been achieved. In this

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136 Catholic theology disagreed with the excessive spiritualism of Platonic and Origenistic thought. Nevertheless its insistence on the essential unity of body and soul did not imply that the flesh was vital in the perfection process, on the contrary it was seen as a hindrance to the spirit. See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic dogma,* (Dublin, 1966) 96-7. Protestant theology under the influence of Luther's *Two kingdoms* doctrine made an even greater distinction between the superior spirit and the inferior flesh.

137 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 44.

138 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion*, 44. The same idea is expressed in the *Moria*, see Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 106.

139 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 44.

work Erasmus was addressing the person who had not yet achieved such a state and thus there was no real need for him to resolve the problem of which belief was correct. As we have seen, however, he was not convinced that man could actually achieve a state of ultimate perfection on earth. He also touched on this point again a few pages on in the *Enchiridion*. Having interpreted the biblical account of Abraham and Sara allegorically as meaning that Abraham had reached a state of equilibrium with his flesh as represented by Sara he exclaimed: 'O blessed old age of those in whom the earthly man is already so dead that it presents no trouble to the spirit'.[140] He went on to qualify this, nevertheless, and wrote: 'I for my part should not venture to assert that such perfect concord in all matters can be granted to a man in this life. Perhaps it would not even be advantageous'.[141] Thus he inclined towards the belief that a permanent state of equilibrium was not attainable on earth and that the flesh played an important part in the human psyche until death. He also questioned the validity of the Stoic desire for the eradication of all passions, in the *Moria*, when he made Folly say that 'these emotions not only act as guides to those hastening towards the haven of wisdom, but also wherever virtue is put into practice they are always present to act like spurs and goads as incentives to good deeds'.[142] Moreover he argued that the 'double-dyed' Stoic, Seneca, strips the wise man of every emotion and 'leaves nothing at all of the man, and has to "fabricate" in his place a new sort of god who never was and never will be in existence anywhere'.[143] Erasmus did, however, believe that it was possible to achieve a state of earthly perfection although this was not a state that coincided with the Stoic state of wisdom.[144] In man, and in Christ himself, this state was one in which the flesh had been subdued but not annihilated. The tension between flesh and spirit continued until death but in the perfect state the higher principle always ruled behaviour. Ultimate perfection, in which the flesh was

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140 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 49.

141 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 49; See also *ibid.*, 107-8 and Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 106.

142 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 106.

143 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 106.

144 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 97 and 126.

permanently subdued, was only possible after death when man was face to face with the Deity.

In defense of his emphasis on the importance of the flesh Erasmus went as far as to take issue with the words of Christ himself, as reported in the Gospel of John. According to this account Christ had said: 'the flesh is of no profit, it is the spirit that gives life'.[145] Erasmus questioned this and argued: 'I would have had scruples to say: "It is of no profit", it would have been sufficient to say: "it is of some profit, but the spirit is much more profitable". But Truth itself said: "It is of no profit".'[146] Clearly, Erasmus had qualms about the pronouncement of 'Truth', or Christ, here. He had a very important reason for taking issue with the words of Christ himself. He went on to argue: 'In another respect the flesh is useful in this sense, that it leads our weakness to the spirit by degrees'.[147] Although this was undoubtedly a central tenet of his perfection process he then elaborated in great detail the Pauline emphasis on the spirit and the rejection of the flesh.[148] The subtlety of his belief in the usefulness of the flesh was obscured by his eloquent arguments in favour of the orthodox position of the spirit as the goal of perfection. In fact, none of these arguments were incompatible with his own emphasis on the flesh and the attentive reader could still gain a real understanding of his position while he managed to preserve the appearance of orthodoxy. There can be no doubt that he held a very sincere belief in the absolute superiority of the spirit as the goal of man and so he could agree with most of what St Paul had to say on the matter. In the case of Plato, Erasmus was on surer ground in expressing his disapproval of the philosopher's disregard for the body. The Platonic belief that the body was the tomb of the soul and only a kind of shadow was unorthodox.[149] In his work on letter-writing, Erasmus expressed his disagreement with Plato, the

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145 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 69. The reference is to John. 6:63.

146 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 69.

147 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 69-70.

148 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 70-84. For a full treatment of the theme of flesh being made perfect in weakness see below Chapter 5.

149 Plato, *Gorgias*, 493 a.

philosopher whom he held to be first in virtue and wisdom among non-Christians, on the usefulness of the flesh. He complained that Plato refused to accept that 'the body forms part of man's nature, that it is the instrument, habitation, or vehicle of the soul, and that the soul is the whole of what we call man'.[150] While this was an orthodox statement it also coincided with Erasmus' own particular view of the role of the flesh. In *The Godly Feast* he expressed the view that to pre-conscious man the passions were invaluable tools in the struggle for perfection. In that colloquy he has Eusebius say that our bodies are 'our partners'.[151] Then casting a clear barb at the Platonic and Pauline notions, he said he preferred 'partners' to instruments or dwellings or tombs.[152] This issue was of such importance for Erasmus that he was willing to disagree with both Christ and Plato about it. While he could not, and would not, question the authority of Christ overtly, he manifestly did not understand the dictum. Perhaps this was because his own experience contradicted it.[153]

The reliance on individual experience as an instrument of judgement was an important feature of Renaissance humanism. Erasmus' view on this subject was rarely expressed overtly but was nevertheless often apparent.[154] It was outlined, if somewhat obliquely, in his exposition of the phrase ,'double diapason', in the *Adagia* .[155] This was the name given to the harmony produced by striking the first and last notes of two consecutive octaves. He argued that the double diapason was the limit of harmony despite the fact that contemporary

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150 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 32.

151 CR Thompson, *Ten Colloquies,* (New York, 1986) 150.

152 CR Thompson, *Ten Colloquies,* (New York, 1986) 150.

153 AHT Levi has pointed out that 'Erasmus always defended the view that human perfection, even religious perfection, was achieved in accordance with natural needs and moral aspirations, while the scholastics of the early sixteenth century thought of religious perfection in practice as something extrinsic to human needs and not empirically verifiable in human experience'. See Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 113.

154 See AHT Levi, introduction to Betty Radice, trans., *The Praise of Folly,* (London, 1986) 27, where he argued that 'the source of Erasmus's attitudes in all domains lies in his own discernment of what does and what does not conduce to moral enrichment.'

155 *CWE,* 31, *Adages,* 203-6.

musicians 'do not hesitate to extend the limits of harmony to the twentieth note of the gamut'.[156] He quoted Ambrogio Leone of Nola as an authority for his argument. Leone had asserted that nature fixed the limit at the double diapason 'by arranging it that the human voice should not reach beyond the fifteenth interval'.[157] Erasmus continued by arguing that as far as reason is concerned there could be a 'thousandth diapason' but that this was not acceptable because

> the physical senses have their own limits prescribed for them by nature, and if they transgress these, they gradually become misty and wandering, and can no longer judge with certainty as they used to do, but through a cloud, as they say, or in a dream.[158]

He concluded, therefore, that 'it was not fitting that principles of art should be drawn from an uncertainty of judgement'.[159] Thus Erasmus believed that, in art, reason could not be relied on if its conclusions could not be verified by means of the senses. As with art, so also in the process of human perfection, he believed personal verification using the senses was the only real way of knowing something. This was a second function of the body in the process of perfection. What he hated most about the scholastic theologians of his day was their endless abstract reasoning which, if it was not rooted in some kind of reality or experience, was, at times, nothing more than a dangerous kind of imagination.[160] In the *Moria* he described them as having been engaged in 'quibbles..about concepts, formalities, quiddities, ecceities, which no one could possibly perceive unless like Lynceus he could see through blackest darkness things which don't exist'.[161] He contrasted this with the simple message preached by the Apostles who had personal experience of Christ and had been moved by his spirit.

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156 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 204.

157 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 204.

158 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 206.

159 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 206.

160 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 152-163.

161 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly*, (London,1986) 155.

In conformity with this principle Erasmus was against endless speculation into unknowable things. He subscribed to the dictum which he ascribed to Socrates: 'the things that are above us are nothing to us'.[162] He said this was 'a remark of Socrates which discourages us from restless enquiry into heavenly things and the secrets of nature.'[163] In the *Moria* , Folly laments the passing of the Golden Age of innocence when it was thought to be 'sacrilege for mortal man to attempt to acquire knowledge outside his allotted portion'.[164] This concept is also apparent in his exposition of the adage 'you move what should not be moved'.[165] He wrote, of this, that Plato recorded it in the *Laws* 'where he brings forward a law which he calls the statute of Jove, god of boundaries, about not altering bounds or frontiers'.[166] He added to this the epigram 'not Death himself grasps what may not be moved'.[167] On the other hand, of course, Erasmus believed fervently in the power of reason and the importance for man of attaining true knowledge and wisdom. He believed that man should try with all of his strength and talent to understand the things which are accessible to human experience and the powers of reasoning. This, for Erasmus, was the tension man was required to live within. He had to strive constantly for knowledge while not going past the bounds of his capabilities where reasoning would become misty and useless. This is one possible interpretation of Erasmus' complex and richly allegorical personal device which was an image of the upper torso of a youth with flying hair embedded in a block of stone with the motto *cedo nulli* which later became *concedo nulli*. The motto and the block represent the god Terminus, god of boundaries, while the torso may have been Iuventas or Youth. It is a perfect depiction of the unity of opposites within which man is compelled to live on earth. The optimism, energy

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162 *CWE*, 32, *Adages*, 48.

163 *CWE*, 32, *Adages*, 48.

164 Betty Radice trans., *Praise of Folly*, (London, 1986) 113.

165 *CWE*, 32, *Adages*, 44.

166 *CWE*, 32, *Adages*, 44.

167 *CWE*, 32, *Adages*, 44.

and innocence of youth embedded in the dead, limited, reality of stone is a perfect depiction of the Erasmian notion that man must ever strive to reach the limits of his capabilities while at the same time always living within those limits.[168]

The importance which Erasmus placed on the role of the body in human perfection was an important distinguishing factor of his thought. He insisted on this despite the fact that the leaders, in his estimation, of the two highest branches of philosophy had denied it. Christ, for Erasmus, was indeed the author and chief exponent of a philosophy. He said:

> Christ, the sure author of all truth, explained to us concisely the celestial philosophy in such a way that no age, no sex, no temperament would be unsuited to his teaching as long as it presented a mind that was malleable, tractable, and ripe for learning.[169]

Erasmus believed that the soul was housed by the body, was expressed through the body and was served by the body. He was not, in fact, in serious disagreement with Christ or Plato. He believed, in conformity with Christian and Platonic principles, that the true, or perfected, or ideal man would recognize that the body was indeed a tomb and the spirit was all-important.[170] Where he differed was in describing the means to achieve the common goal. He, unlike Christ or Plato, did not consider himself to be the author of a philosophy. His concern was the practical interpretation of the innate and revealed *philosophia Christi* in order to help those who were toiling on the road to perfection to reach their goal. All of his writings are concerned either directly or indirectly with the method of perfection contained in this philosophy. People already knew that they should abhor the flesh and cling to the spirit but they did not know how to achieve this. His overriding aim was always to describe a *method* of perfection rather than the goal or state of perfection itself. This led him to emphasize the

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168 For a full exposition of the meaning of this device see below Chapter 6.

169 *CWE,* 66, *De Vidua Christiana,* 91.

170 See *CWE,* 25,*De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 32, where Erasmus highlights the similarity between the Greek words *soma* and *sema* i.e. body and tomb. This is a reference to the Platonic notion that the soul is entombed in the body, see Plato, *Cratylus* 400 c and *Gorgias* 493 a.

role of the flesh in perfection. He believed that in order to achieve the rejection of matter and the love of spirit which was central to the *philosophia Christi* it was necessary for man to observe and learn from sense experience.

The most important function of the flesh for Erasmus was its power of temptation. He believed that man was so designed that he actually needed to be tempted in the flesh in order to perfect the spirit. He wrote that the three evils of human nature: blindness, the flesh and weakness, acted in man as a 'safeguard of humility and as raw material and a fertile terrain for virtue'.[171] The flesh acted both as a spur to virtue and also as a safeguard against the very dangerous sin of pride by reminding us of our weakness. Moreover, even the perfect needed the weakness of the flesh in order to remain in a state of earthly perfection: 'at times temptations are not only not dangerous for those who are perfect but are even necessary for the preservation of virtue'.[172] He acknowledged that it was a 'strange kind of remedy' but it was nonetheless true that 'strength is made perfect in weakness'.[173] He said that even St Paul was tempted by pride lest he should become proud and that 'in order that he be unwavering in Christ, he is forced to be weak in himself'.[174] Erasmus interpreted the Pauline concept of strength through weakness as meaning that without the weakness of the flesh we would have no means of achieving perfection.[175] Every time a man fell to the pull of the flesh and managed to look at himself on the ground with the eyes of reason he learned a vital lesson about

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171 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 54.

172 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49.

173 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49.

174 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49.

175 Ficino in his work, *Five Questions Concerning the Mind,* argued something similar to this. He claimed that 'the greater the difficulty with which all the descendants of the first parent receive blessedness when placed outside the order of nature, the greater the ease with which they would receive it if restored to that very order'. See Ernst Cassirer, PO Kristeller & JH Randall, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man,* (Chicago,1948) 209. He also argued that 'the more laborious it is for the celestial and immortal soul continually to follow its happiness, while fallen into an intemperate earthly destructible body, the more easily it obtains it when it is either free from the body or in a temperate immortal celestial body'. *Ibid.,* 211.

his true state. This lesson served to weaken the hold of the flesh over him. Only ignorance or denial of the power of the flesh were really dangerous and not the actual fall itself. He advised the reader of the *Enchiridion* that

> if the storms of temptation descend upon you more frequently and more violently, do not immediately begin to be dissatisfied with yourself as if you were not dear to your God or pleasing in his sight, or as if you were lacking in piety or any less perfect. On the contrary give thanks that he is training you as a future heir, chastising you as a dear son, putting you to the test as a friend. It is the greatest proof that a man has been rejected by divine mercy when he is assailed by no temptations.[176]

Erasmus described how St Paul had 'carried the treasures of heavenly revelation in a vessel of clay to show that such transcendent power came from God and not from himself'.[177] This is also the lot of all men according to Erasmus. Even the perfect man is tied to his body and as long as he lives he will carry the treasures of heaven in a vessel of clay. Erasmus elaborated on this when he described the pre-perfect and perfect states of man in allegorical form. He said that in the Bible woman or 'Eve' represented the carnal passions 'whose glance the clever serpent attracts daily. When she has been corrupted, she proceeds to tempt her spouse to participate with her in evil.'[178] This is the state of ordinary man before he has reached perfection. Then he described the perfect state. He wrote:

> but what do you read about the new woman, the one who is obedient to her husband? "I shall create enmity between you" (obviously the serpent) "and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. She will crush your head, and you will strike insidiously at her heel."[179]

Then Erasmus united this Old Testament account with the New Testament, thereby showing the timelessness of the message, He said:

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176 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 106.

177 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 49.

178 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 48.

179 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 48. The quote is from Genesis 3:15.

the serpent has been thrown down on its belly; the death of Christ has broken the force of his attack. All he can do is lie in wait to strike blows at her heel from ambush. But by the power of faith the woman has been turned into a female warrior and with great heroism crushes his poisonous head. Grace has been increased; the tyranny of the flesh has been diminished.'[180]

Erasmus attributed the demise of the serpent to Christ. For him, the spirit of Christ is timeless as are the myths of the Old and New Testaments. He believed that the Old Testament in particular should be interpreted allegorically.[181] In this allegory Eve, or the carnal part of man becomes the warrior and hero participating in the death of Christ by dying to the world. Perfection is achieved by means of the heroic deeds of the body.[182] The spirit is already perfect but the body must be transformed by means of the soul adhering to the spirit. It then plays its part heroically in the struggle for personal salvation and, ultimately, for the salvation of others. In writing to Guillaume de Croy in 1519, Erasmus said that the 'blessings of the mind... are mostly to be obtained by our own industry and forethought, so that we owe the chief part of our happiness to no one after God except ourselves, insofar as we can be said to owe ourselves anything.'[183]

Erasmus believed that on account of the soul, that is the area in which conscious choice occurs, man could even reach a higher state than the angelic one. He said: 'with regard to the soul we have such a capacity for divinity that we can soar past the minds of the angels and become one with God'.[184] Man,

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180 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 48.

181 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 68-9.

182 See the adage *The Labours of Hercules* in MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times*, (Cambridge, 1980) 18-31; also *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 68 where Erasmus said that the myth of Hercules reminds us that heaven is won by noble exploits and untiring effort.

183 *CWE*, 6, *Letters*, 957: 336. Guillaume De Croy was the nephew and ward of the lord of Chievres. The latter used his influence with Charles V to gain ecclesiastical preferments for Guillaume. In 1517 he was made a cardinal and in the same year he became Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain. He was an enthusiastic supporter of both the new learning and Erasmus and may have proved useful to the humanist cause if it were not for his early death which resulted from a hunting accident in 1521.

184 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 41. This notion is discernable in Pico della Mirandola's, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, see Ernst Cassirer, PO Kristeller, & JH Randall, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, (Chicago, 1948) 225. Another possible source of this notion

on account of his soul, could achieve a state in which his spiritual and fleshly elements were fused into an harmonious unity. He said that when man incorporates Christ then 'there is neither male nor female but a wholly new creature'.[185] This state would be achieved by choosing to elevate the spirit over the flesh. Erasmus suggested that because angels are born spirit and do not have to struggle they are a slightly lower form of entity than man who has had to struggle with the flesh in order to overcome it and achieve a spiritual transformation. God and man have souls but angels are pure spirits. Pure spirit was somehow less than the perfected union of spirit and matter. Although Erasmus did not address this explicitly the superiority cannot have resided in the material element of man itself since matter was inferior to spirit. The superiority must therefore have resided in the area of conscious choice which the existence of the two opposites in man created. The freedom to choose between spirit and matter, God and the world, good and evil, was a necessary part of the human struggle. Angels being pure spirit could not engage in the struggle between spirit and matter.[186] The dialectic of the struggle produced a higher form of entity than an angel. It is as if the resulting transformation was a creative act and therefore divine. Man had the capability, through struggle, to transform himself into a new man.[187] This is why the notion of free-will was crucial for Erasmus. Without it his entire system would have collapsed.

Erasmus had a further distinctive view on the nature of matter; he believed that spirit and matter, despite their apparent disparity, were in fact one.[188] This,

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for Erasmus was Lorenzo Valla's, *Sermo Laurentiae Vallae de Mysterio Eucharistiae,* printed in *Lactantii Opera,* Venice, 1521, 159.

185 *CWE,* 66, *De Vidua Christiana,* 224.

186 While it is true that angels could degenerate, as in the myth of the Fall, there is no notion of angels transforming into a higher entity.

187 This concept of self-creation and the concept that man can achieve a state higher than the angelic one are both to be found in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* see Ernst Cassirer, PO Kristeller & JH Randall, (eds.) *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man,* (Chicago,1948) 225.

188 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41, speaking of body and soul Erasmus said: 'such is their confused turmoil and strife that they seem to be distinct from one another, although they are one'.

perhaps, stemmed from his belief that God was, in essence, spiritual.[189] Since he was the creator and architect of the natural world, matter actually came from him. So matter was in some way formed from spirit. Thus, if man succeeded in unifying spirit and matter in himself, he would then share in God's nature, become one with him and rise above the angels who had not had to take part in this struggle. The struggle itself was therefore of great value and the flesh, or matter, being vital in this process was also invaluable. In the *Moria* he described the ultimate state of perfection which man could only achieve in heaven. He wrote: 'the spirit will be the stronger, and will conquer and absorb the body, and this it will do the more easily for having previously in life purged and weakened the body in preparation for this transformation'.[190] He went on to say 'this perfect happiness can only be experienced when the soul has recovered its former body and been granted immortality'.[191] Thus even in heaven the body would have a role in the life of perfected man. While this is consistent with the orthodox doctrine of the resurrection of the body, it is nevertheless different in that the heavenly absorbtion of the body by the spirit in Erasmus' thought is a natural consequence of his belief in the effectiveness of the conflict between these two entities. The conflict produced the means of perfection by facilitating consciousness of the true nature of man. In this struggle to overcome the impulses of the flesh, the soul was purified. This purification or perfection came about by the uniting of the two disparate parts into an harmonious whole. Erasmus, under the obvious influence of Neoplatonism, ultimately believed that the perfected soul was then absorbed into the Supreme mind. He said that having absorbed the body ' the spirit will itself be absorbed by the supreme Mind, which is more powerful than its infinite parts'.[192]

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189 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 81.

190 See Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 207.

191 See Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 207. See also Ficino, *Five Questions Concerning the Mind,* where he said 'The condition of the everlasting soul which seems to be in the highest degree natural is that it should continue to live in its own body made everlasting. Therefore, it is concluded by necessary reasoning that the immortality and brightness of the soul can and must at some time shine forth into its own body and that, in this condition alone, the highest blessedness of man is indeed perfected'. Ernst Cassirer, PO Kristeller & JH Randall, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man,* (Chicago,1948) 211-2,

192 See Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 207.

Despite the fact that Erasmus was seen during the eighteenth-century and later as having aspired to the spirit of Rationalism, his system was nevertheless one which contained mysteries that were difficult to grasp. He himself was very much aware of this problem of communicating the full truth. He believed that perfection was a state achieved in stages and that the mystery would unfold by degrees. He said: 'piety also has its infancy, its adolescence, its time of full vigourous strength'.[193] He thought that if man directed his mind toward the spiritual then

> the Lord will draw nigh in his turn to the one who draws nigh to him, and if you will attempt to the limit of your powers to rise out of your moral darkness and the tumult of the senses, he will obligingly come forth to meet you from his inaccessible light and that unimagined silence, in which not only all the tumult of the senses, but also the forms of all intelligible things fall silent.[194]

Man could only do a certain amount to achieve his own perfection but, if he did, then God would do the rest. Man had to work in the dark seeing only shadowy reflections of the light of truth. As man strove towards the spiritual, he would become more spiritual and, by virtue of this, he would then attract the spiritual to himself and even in turn become more attracted to it himself. This attracting principle of transformation is the same one as Erasmus outlined in his description of the Christocentric society where he said that Christ, the centre, would draw all things to himself so that they would be transfigured in him.[195] Like fire he converts all things to himself.[196] Erasmus conceived of love in the Platonic sense as being the same energetic attractive force which facilitates transformation. He said:

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193 Letter to Paul Volz, in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 120.

194 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 84.

195 Letter to Paul Volz, in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 118.

196 Letter to Paul Volz, in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 118 and 121.

my brother, do not progress slowly by dint of reluctant effort, but by moderate exercise arrive at quick and vigorous adulthood in Christ. Embrace zealously this rule, not to be willing to crawl along the ground with unclean animals, but supported on those wings whose growth Plato thinks are induced in our minds by the heat of love and shoot out anew, raise yourself as on the steps of Jacob's ladder from the body to the spirit, from the visible to the invisible, from the letter to the mystery, from sensible things to the intelligible things, from composite things to simple things.[197]

The importance of the flesh in the Erasmian process of perfection did not necessitate a corresponding neglect of the spiritual element in man. Erasmus believed that man contained a divine element which, at times, could be the dominant factor in his actions. His belief in the divine element of the human psyche was, in many ways, quite orthodox, in that, he believed man contained a soul which was godlike and eternal.[198] In the treatise, *De Contemptu Mundi*, he argued that on account of our souls we 'approach to some extent that divine and eternal nature'.[199] For him, the soul was 'heavenly, light, divine, immortal, lasting, lucid and noble'.[200] His views on the divine element in man were, however, both more complex and less orthodox than this. Moreover, this rather metaphysical and mysterious notion was one of verifiable certainty for Erasmus and not simply a tenet of faith. He believed man's divinity was observable because it produced visible effects. It was made manifest in acts of generosity towards one's fellow man. He outlined this belief in his exposition of the adage, 'Man Is a God to Man', in which he argued that the ancients thought anyone, or even anything, that was of value to mortal man was a god.[201] His favourite Roman writer, Cicero, had expressed the same notion when he said that misfortune was derived from mankind and good from God and thus whoever did good was in God's place.[202] He also found this concept in the culture of the

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197 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 84. The references are to Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251 a ff and Gen 28:12, by using them both together Erasmus demonstrated his belief in the unity of truth regardless of its source.

198 Here Erasmus is using the dual division of man.

199 *CWE*, 66, *De Contemptu Mundi*, 166.

200 *CWE*, 66, *De Contemptu Mundi*, 166.

201 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 112.

202 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 113.

Egyptians who, he explained, believed that God was both immortal and mortal and consequently they revered any man who resembled the divinity and they 'gave almost divine honours to those who conferred benefits upon them'.[203] For Erasmus, the only true benefits were those which contributed to salvation, all others were illusory, and he believed that man could actually share in the divine function of aiding his fellow men in the quest for perfection. To emphasize this he quoted Ovid, 'Tis a fitting pleasure for man to save man; There is no better way of seeking favour'.[204] In another adage, he said that Nature had implanted in man

> a spark of the mind of God, so that without having any reward in view, he might take a disinterested delight in being of service to all. For that is the property and nature of God, to shower his benefits for the good of the whole world. Otherwise, what is that rare pleasure which we feel in our souls when we know that we have been the means of someone's salvation?[205]

In short, he believed that when man partook of the divine function of aiding his fellow men, particularly in a way which led to salvation, he thereby shared, in a very real way, in the divine name and nature. This, however, was dangerously close to blasphemy. So having expounded on the saying, 'Man Is a God to Man', in great detail he then contradicted the previous arguments and said:

> among Christians the name of God ought not to be given to any mortal man even in jest, and such extraordinary and disgusting flattery must be altogether unacceptable to our moral code; yet it can happen that this adage finds a use, and not an immoral nor unfitting one.[206]

He proceeded to give no less than five examples of its proper use. While they were relatively conventional ones, the sense of disingenuousness was not avoided. If, as he claimed, he believed that to call man a god was 'disgusting flattery', he could have omitted the adage altogether, or, at least he could have refuted the claims of the pagan and Christian writers he had used to illustrate it.

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203 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 113.

204 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 114.

205 MM Phillips, *The Adages of Erasmus*, (Cambridge, 1964) 312.

206 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 115.

Instead he chose to highlight the divine element in man beyond accepted orthodoxy. In tempering what he had written Erasmus was not simply trying to avoid the potentially life-threatening charge of blasphemy; he was also trying to ensure that his readers would avoid the sin of pride which he believed to be most pernicious. What he was doing, in using the adage, was endeavouring to redress the balance of the Augustinian view of the sinfulness of man. His true view of man was one in which the human and the divine co-existed in tension and he believed that to emphasize one element at the expense of the other was erroneous and therefore dangerous. Moreover, he believed that very few humans ever reached the state in which they could consciously save a fellow being. In the vast majority of people the divine element was completely overshadowed by the flesh. Thus he was careful to ensure that those people did not take false, and potentially damaging, comfort from his arguments. He also outlined this element of the divine in man in a letter to Guillaume de Croy. He explained that if a man existed who was the possessor of

> all the gifts of all the gods, as once Pandora was, and not unworthy of this galaxy of all good things; such an one seems to me to have a colour of deity about him, for he is sent by the powers above on purpose that he may diffuse his munificence over all men far and wide.[207]

He went on to say, as in the *Adagia,* that 'the Ancients rightly held it to be, above all, the peculiar function of deity to aid mortal man'.[208]

As has been demonstrated, Erasmus believed that the process of human perfection towards the goal of Christ involved first perfecting the self and only then helping others to achieve this goal. He held that a person who had achieved this state merited the title 'Son of God', and that it was 'the highest nobility to be both a son and heir of God, a brother and co-heir of Christ'.[209] In short man could reach a state of perfection in which he shared in the divinity of Christ as a true son of God. Erasmus referred to this state throughout his scriptural writings. In his *Paraphrase on Romans* he said: 'all those who are impelled by

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207 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 957: 338.

208 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 957: 338.

209 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 88.

the spirit of God are sons of God'.[210] This happened when a man incorporated Christ. 'When we are one with Christ we are no longer servants but sons and call him Father'.[211] This process of becoming *Chriostos* began with the true baptism: 'we are grafted to the body of Christ through baptism and in a way are transformed into him'.[212] This was the beginning of man's proper inheritance. These transformed beings would then be

> heirs indeed of God, from whom as the source all things flow; and as co-heirs with Christ, incorporated into his body, we have begun to have the same Father as Christ, through whom we have attained the right of a common inheritance.[213]

In order to attain the fullness of this inheritance it was necessary to engage in the struggle for perfection. Erasmus said that the aspiring Christian had to travel towards this goal

> on the same road by which Christ himself reached it....Christ attained possession of the good by bearing evil, he came to power through obedience, he came to glory through dishonour, he attained immortality by death. We must therefore suffer with him so that we may enjoy these gifts with him, we must obey so that we may reign with him, we must bear the insults of the world so that we may be fortified with him we must die with him for a time so that we may live with him forever. This is the law by which one gains this inheritance.[214]

It was God's law and his plan for us that through one son he 'would produce many sons for himself, among whom Jesus Christ would be the head and leader and, as it were, the first born, sharing his own rights also with others'.[215] In his *Paraphrase on John* Erasmus elaborated on this further when he declared that

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210 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 47.

211 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 47.

212 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 37.

213 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 47.

214 *CWE*, 42 *Paraphrase on Romans*, 48.

215 *CWE*, 42 *Paraphrase on Romans*, 50.

whatever persons, of whatever nation and whatever rank, accepted this word, to them in return he brought such honour that, once implanted in Christ by faith and baptism, and once having proclaimed his name, they themselves also became children of God, so that what Christ wasby nature, they became through adoption', they became 'children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ, and heirs with him of the heavenly kingdom.[216]

In Erasmus' dual version of the anatomy of the total human being it was the mind or soul that contained the divine element. As always, he was concerned with producing some kind of proof of this. In his work on letter-writing he gave a list of useful examples, from both philosophy and mythology, of things which 'proclaim a degree of divine nature in the mind'.[217] These included Prometheus putting 'heavenly fire' into a clay statue; God animating clay with his breath; and, the particle of divinity which, according to the Stoics, was added to human bodies.[218] He argued that 'these and many other things proclaim a degree of divine nature in the mind'.[219] He then went on to describe his own version of the predilections of the mind thus:

the mind of man, which has a heavenly origin, should not degenerate from its kind. And as it is natural for fire to make its way upwards, drawn to its origin by an inborn force, so the inborn nature of man, though immersed in these corporeal vapours, still cannot forget its beginnings.[220]

Once again Erasmus used the image of fire attracting and transforming as the mechanism of perfection. He believed that a vestige of the divine law remained in the mind of man on account of its divine origin and that it was because of this

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216 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 22.

217 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 32.

218 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 32.

219 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 32.

220 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 33.

that man was attracted to God. In the *Antibarbari,* Erasmus commented on the appropriateness of the verb *traho* which Christ used when he said he would draw all creation to himself.[221] This is akin to Plato's concept that the philosopher attains 'knowledge of the true nature of every essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul, and by that power drawing near and mingling and becoming incorporate with very being'.[222] Like Plato Erasmus believed that love was the attracting force which was necessary for the perfection of being and that we are only attracted to things which we can recognize by means of an inherent sympathy with them. He said that God fashioned Adam out of clay but 'breathed into this mud image a tiny bit of celestial breath through which we might resemble more closely our parent God himself and because of the similarity in nature might recognize him more easily'.[223] The divine spark in man also helped to dispel the darkness of the world. In the *Enchiridion* he said; 'as a consequence of the divine law that is engraved in him, our king (reason) can be overthrown, but he cannot be corrupted without protesting and seeking redress'.[224] Thus while the world contrived to obscure the divine law inscribed on the mind of man, he, nevertheless, had the means at his disposal to overcome this blindness and achieve consciousness of himself and his position in the universe because of the strength of his reason. Man's reason was the tool he had been given in order that he might overcome the corruption of the world. It was not itself the divine law but it was the instrument which allowed man to recognize the divine law. This law was the guiding principle of all creation and could be equated with the *logos* and, of course, with Christ in the universal sense of the term. The Erasmian notion that the means of perfection lay in being conscious of the tension or dialogue between the disparate elements in the human being is mirrored in his concept of the *logos* as a creative dialogue. When man entered

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221 *CWE,* 23, *Antibarbari,* 59. The biblical verse is John 12:32.

222 Plato, *Republic,* 490 a-b. In Plato, this concept includes the idea of the pre-existence of the soul which is not Christian. MA Screech has argued that although Erasmus may not always have been as clear as he should have been on this matter, he was, nevertheless, orthodox in his view, see *Ecstacy and the Praise of Folly,* (London, 1988) 155-173.

223 *CWE,* 50, *Paraphrase on Acts,* 110.

224 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 44.

into this conscious struggle he embodied the *logos* of Christ, or the divine dialogue, and the one true law of creation which operated eternally throughout the universe.[225]

In addition to this rationally accessible, innate, divine law, Erasmus also believed that man shared in divinity by another means. This was on account of his spiritual nature itself. By means of his individual spirit man participated in the universal nature of the Holy Spirit. In the *Querela Pacis*, he depicted the Holy Spirit as the force which he believed bound all men. He called it a 'fiery spirit' and asked: 'what else can it be but love? Nothing is so beneficial to all as fire, and fire is kindled from fire without diminishment'.[226] Man could have access to this force if he chose to cling to the spirit within him. Thus Erasmus envisaged the divine spirit in man as being akin to fire which, in turn, he thought represented love or that force which bound men to each other in mutual harmony. This harmony or peace was, for him, 'the source of all human happiness'.[227] Christ was the embodiment of this force. When, in turn, an individual man embodied Christ he could also dispense the force for the good of all men. In this sense Erasmian Christianity is expressed in terms of mutual love. Love of neighbour was the expression of divinity in man. This was not, of course, that emotion which humankind usually called love. Erasmus was contemptuous of that and said it was usually so flawed that it was, in fact, a form of hatred.[228] The love he spoke of was that which sublimated the good of the self to the good of the rest of mankind. This was not a recipe for some kind of self-annihilation. The divine quality could not be expressed until a man had first conquered himself, but this was a process of integration rather then annihilation. He declared: 'man is a battlefield within himself: reason is at war with the passions and these are in conflict with each other'.[229] This state of war

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225 See above Chapter 1 Christ as *logos*.

226 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 303.

227 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 293.

228 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 90.

229 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 298-9.

was overcome by adhering to the spirit of Christ. He argued that 'whenever the spirit of Christ is present, there one's own nature gives way to the nature of the creator'.[230] This was the state in which man could truly love. The fundamental law of Christ, for Erasmus, was love. The spirit, which was the divine part of man, was a force of love and the mind of man which contained a vestige of the divine law was an important instrument in achieving this goal of love. Love is a cohesive, harmonious, uniting force and Erasmus believed that the dialectic produced by the union of spirit and flesh was the means of perfection. Thus the *logos* was a dialectic of love or integration and harmony.[231] In the *Enchiridion,* when Erasmus was discussing the two parts of man, he said that the condition of most ordinary men was one in which reason was a slave to the passions and that, in total ignorance of reality, these men called this state one of peace. He wrote of this mistaken appellation:

> this is that hapless peace which Christ, the author of true peace, who made the two one, came to destroy by stirring up salutary warfare between father and son, husband and wife, and between those things which a base accord has badly joined together.[232]

In short, the dialectic of salvation, according to the example of Christ, was struggle between the two factions in man which, if it was pursued in the correct way, would result in a true harmonious unity in which the passions were subjected to an informed reason.[233]

Indeed Erasmus thought that the whole mission of Christ was to bring about such a situation of perfect peace. The attracting force of love produced this

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230 *CWE,* 66, *De Vidua Christiana,* 230.

231 There is an obvious Platonic influence here. See *Enchiridion* where Erasmus said that we progress to heaven on the wings of love as Plato thought, *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 84. Erasmus may also have been influenced by Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium* on this point.

232 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 47.

233 See *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 185-6 where Erasmus has the character Timothy expound on the meaning of the word 'king' in a Scriptural quotation, he said that 'king' could be 'understood as the perfect man who, with his bodily passions under control, is governed solely by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

condition of peace or harmony. He asked 'what induced the Son of God to come to earth if not his wish to reconcile the world with the Father, to bind men together with mutual and indestructible love, and, finally, to make man his own friend?'[234] Clearly he believed that this union was something extraordinary. He said that at the Last Supper Christ asked his disciples to do something for him which was 'no ordinary thing'.[235] He asked them to look after his flock and 'keep them through thy name, that they may be one as we are'.[236] Erasmus argued that Christ was speaking of a special type of unity. This was not simply that they should be of one mind but that they should be 'united in the most perfect and inexpressible way'.[237] What Erasmus understood this to mean was that they would be transformed into Christ and so they would all share in the divine nature. For him, the whole of human nature was designed to move towards this point of union with Christ and thus to union with others who had also achieved this state. Perfection was a process of union and of love. Therefore, while he was one of the most severe and influential critics of what he perceived as the degenerate state of church practices, he was horrified when it became clear that there was going to be a split in the Christian church. Faction and disunity were such fundamental opposites to his belief-system that he could never conceive of good emerging from them. He believed that the central sacrament for Christians which was the Eucharist ratified 'a new kind of concord which should never be broken'.[238] The fundamental law of Christianity which he said was 'love one another' was absolutely central to his esoteric beliefs.[239] Thus the arguments of many of his contemporaries, and many historians since, that Erasmus was a conservative Christian or even a coward, which are primarily based on his actions, fail to take account of the true

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234 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 300.

235 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 301.

236 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 301.

237 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 301.

238 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 302.

239 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 301, and see also *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 79.

basis for these seemingly conservative actions. Actions were never as important to Erasmus as intentions and so he must be judged on his own terms.

The centrality of divine love to the perfection process was not a simple tenet of blind faith for him, but rather faith informed by the rational analysis of observable experience. He believed that this was apparent from the evidence of Nature and could be assessed by the power of reason.[240] His unspoken assumption was that universal laws operate in all of the different spheres of creation. He argued that observation of Nature showed that the celestial bodies and the elements exist in a state of peace and concord.[241] Similarly, he believed that observation of man himself disclosed this law of harmony. He said:

> what can be so dissimilar as body and soul? Yet the closeness of the tie with which Nature has bound them together is indeed revealed when they are torn apart. Just as life is nothing other than the union of the body and soul, so health is the harmony between all the parts of the body.[242]

He observed that Nature had given man an essentially peace-loving disposition;

> which is inclined towards goodwill between him and his fellows, so that he delights in being loved for himself and takes pleasure in being of service to others - so long as he has not been corrupted by base desires, as if by Circe's potions and degenerated from man to beast.[243]

He also argued that it was evident that men needed each other in order to survive and prosper.[244] He said of peace that everything points the way to it; 'first natural instinct and what we might call the human principle itself, then the

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240 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 294-6.

241 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 294.

242 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 294.

243 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 295.

244 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 295.

Prince and author of all human happiness, Christ'.[245]

This principle of unity or love had a further implication in Erasmus' thought. The union of the human and the divine also happened on a cosmic scale in Christ. The important processes of the Incarnation and Redemption were premised on this union. Referring to this Erasmus said that God emptied his son

completely and cast him down so that he might lift us up; he made him to be sin so that we might be freed from sins; he handed him over to death so that we might be restored to life. Consequently, since he gave his Son in whom all things exist, does it not follow that along with the gift of his Son, everything else belonging to the Son was given us as well.[246]

This is at the heart of the Erasmian principle that strength is made perfect in weakness. The universality of the principle meant that God had to participate in human weakness in order to save us.

For the Son of God and God himself sent himself down to our lowliness just to raise us by faith to his own loftiness. He took upon himself the shame of our mortality just to make us sharers in his divine glory. He chose to be born bodily flesh of flesh just so that we might be reborn spiritually of God. He came down to earth just to carry us up into heaven.[247]

The corollary of this, for Erasmus was that if God became man then man could become God. He argued that

it is not surprising if a human being is somehow reshaped to share in the divine nature, when the divine word humbled himself for this reason to put on our flesh, that is, a mortal body, from a virgin, joining in himself two quite dissimilar things, God and human. What is frailer than human flesh, or more despised? What is mightier than God, or more sublime? Do not wonder that these could be joined; it is God who did it. And do not lack faith that humankind can become children of God when he so loved us that for our sake he chose to become a son of

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245 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 321.

246 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 51.

247 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 22.

man.[248]

This is the central mystery of Christianity for Erasmus. He said: 'these are the mysteries of God the Father, these the secret purposes of the divine mind, whereby it seemed good to him to make God into a man, and to make mankind in a fashion into gods'.[249]

In the *Adagia* when he was arguing in favour of a divine element in man Erasmus quoted Gregory of Nazianzus as having said that 'by imitating the mercy of God you will become God to the sufferer, for man has nothing so divine as kindness'.[250] The significance of Gregory of Nazianzus was that he had written against the Christological heresy of Apollinarius who, in his concern to maintain the divinity of Christ, had diminished his humanity. Erasmus' beliefs meant that, on the one hand, he emphasized the humanity of Christ, while on the other hand, he emphasized the divinity of man. In both cases he went further more than was currently accepted and consequently he was accused of both Arianism and Pelagianism. By using Gregory of Nazianzus, who was a defender of the human element in Christ, as a source for the divine element in man there is a sense in which Erasmus is linking these two concepts in a seemingly orthodox way. The extremism of his concepts of Christ and man however, meant that Christ and man were much more similar than orthodoxy allowed. By emphasising man's divinity and Christ's humanity there is a sense in which the historical Jesus and the perfected man are not very different entities. Jesus is the son of God, but so is the perfect man. Jesus is Christ, so also is the perfect man who only reaches the perfect state when he embodies Christ. Erasmus' belief in the complete embodiment of Christ in the perfect man was very close to the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ. Erasmus, nevertheless, throughout his corpus wrote in a perfectly orthodox way about the central tenets of Christianity, such as the Redemption, the Incarnation and the Resurrection. When we analyze everything he said on these subjects, however, it is apparent that there are layers of meaning in these

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248 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 22.

249 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 25.

250 *CWE,* 31, *Adages,* 114-5.

seemingly straightforward statements. Because of his belief that Christianity was a state achieved gradually and by degrees he was always very careful not to tear down a belief which was useful to the salvific process without putting something in its place.[251] He would therefore leave the basic tenet intact while also adding an extra dimension of meaning to it so that the reader could take whichever level he could accept from it. In this way Erasmus was all things to all men. His religion was an esoteric one; it was a condition of the inner man rather than the outer one. The struggle for perfection took place inside each individual, and the world and its institutions simply acted as an occasion of sin or a means of temptation. Outward expressions of religion were therefore of lesser importance to him and thus he condoned whatever ceremonies were deemed necessary for those who needed them. Real truth and knowledge were only accessible to those who engaged in this inner struggle. While he believed it was not possible to communicate the truth directly, his writings are nevertheless always lucid and rational and so the metaphysical side of his thought is often neglected.

The fact that he did not join the reformers, despite his own often severe criticisms of the church is explicable in the light of his belief system. His emphasis on inner transformation and his consequent belief that reform of state, society or church had to start in the individual heart meant that he did not think the reform of institutions was a primary necessity. Institutions could play an important part in aiding or hindering the process of perfection but ultimately they could not achieve it. Man was both responsible for, and instrumental in, his own destiny. The individual was the essential unit of operation. Erasmus' creed was not corporate; for him the function of any institution was always to aid individuals and never the furtherance of its own existence.[252] While he certainly hoped that institutions would facilitate the process of individual transformation, he would not sacrifice the peace or harmony, which was the

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251 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 13; *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 69-70; and Erasmus' letter to Volz in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 120.

252 That is not to say that his view of church was individualistic. Erasmus believed in the unity of Christians and to that end he said he was happy to accept items of doctrine or discipline which had the imprimatur of consensus. See Augustijn on the importance for Erasmus of what he calls the *consensus ecclesiae* or the *magno consensu*. Cornelis, Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto,1996) 151-3.

expression of divine love for him, to the cause of reforming an institution that could only play a peripheral part in the process of perfection.[253] Erasmus expressed the centrality of the notion of peace and love in the community of Christians in the *Adagia* when he wrote:

> what else rings through all Paul's letters, but peace, gentleness, and love? What does John say, over and over again, but "love one another"? And Peter? What else do all true Christian writers say? How comes it that there is such a commotion of wars among the sons of peace? Is it a mere fable, when Christ says"I am the vine, ye are the branches? Who ever saw branch fight with branch? The expression Paul used more than once, is it meaningless - that the church is nothing if not one body with many members, joined to one head, which is Christ? Who ever saw the eye fight with the hand, or the belly with the foot? In this universe, composed of such different elements, there is a harmony. In the body of a living creature, there is peace between one member and another; each part has its own gifts, and uses them not for itself but for all the others. If anything happens to one, the whole body comes to its help. Are we to suppose that the natural bond uniting the parts of a perishable body is more powerful than the bond of the spirit in the mystic and immortal body?[254]

Erasmus believed that this *concordia* was the fundamental distinguishing factor of Christianity and thus faction and disunity among Christians were unthinkable for him.[255] The second reason why he did not join the reformers was that while he did not accept all of the teachings of the old church, particularly its emphasis on externals, he also had very serious problems with the new protestant beliefs. His view of the role of the individual in the transforming process of perfection was absolutely contrary to the concept of *sola fide* . There was nothing arbitrary therefore, about him choosing free-will

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253 For a good description of Erasmus' view of the true church see JD Tracy, *Erasmus: The Growth of a Mind,* (Geneva, 1972) 212-6. Tracy shows how Erasmus differentiated between the internal real church of the true Christians and the external church which was not the true church at all.

254 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 122.

255 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 79; *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 301-3. Tracy has argued that Erasmus 'remained a Catholic only because he believed in public concord and in patience in the face of evil'; See *Erasmus: The Growth of a Mind,* (Geneva, 1972) 215. It was not simply public concord that interested Erasmus, however, but that more profound *concordia* which was an expression of the essence of Christianity.

as the topic of dispute with Luther. This was the true kernel of his divergence from the new creed. He agreed with many of the other proposed reforms, particularly the emphasis on Scripture and the drive towards a purified text, but the stumbling-block of *sola fide* was too great for him. He had one further reason for rejecting the reformers: this was their dogmatic approach to Christian beliefs. Erasmus was not a dogmatist. He never laid down dogmatic beliefs. Both of the main parties in the reformation dispute were dogmatic. His religious philosophy was individualistic and fluid. He believed there should be as few tenets of faith as possible. In the letter which served as the preface to his edition of St Hilary he told Jean de Carondelet that the peace and concord of the church could not be preserved unless 'we define as few matters as possible and leave each individual's judgement free on many questions'.[256] His whole system of religious belief was opposed to the notion that you could impose faith on anyone. He outlined in the same letter how the church had degenerated since patristic times; he said that now

> we force men by intimidation to believe what they do not believe, to love what they do not love, and to understand what they do not understand. Compulsion is incompatible with sincerity, and nothing is pleasing to Christ unless it is voluntary.[257]

While he accepted that faith was a God-given gift he also thought that, in practice, belief originated in experience and therefore it could not be forced on anyone.

Erasmus' concept of man and, in particular, his belief in the innate perfectibility of man led him to take issue with the traditional dogma of original sin on the one hand, and with the reformer's concept of the enslavement of the will, on the other. Both of these doctrines are rooted in Augustine's concept of man. Erasmus appreciated the importance of Augustine's writings for contemporary theology but he, nevertheless, did not give him the foremost

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256 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1334:252. This statement was, of course, censored by the faculty of theology at Paris. Jean de Carondelet was an influential Burgundian statesman and churchman. He was a councillor to both Duke Philip the Handsome of Burgundy and Charles V. Erasmus prized him as a close friend and reliable supporter at the Hapsburg court in the Netherlands.

257 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1334: 257.

position among the Fathers. While he accepted that the Doctor of Grace was 'one of the great doctors' he nevertheless thought that he was not the equal of 'any of the Greeks'.[258] In 1518 he acknowledged, in a letter to Eck, that despite the 'schoolmen's' adulation of Augustine he himself learnt 'more of Christian philosophy from a single page of Origen than from ten of Augustine'.[259] Augustine's anti-Pelagianism, which resulted in an extreme view of man's will, was the basis of Erasmus' rejection of his primacy in theological studies.[260] The inherent predestinarian tendencies of Augustine's writings were incompatible with the crucial Erasmian view of the freedom of man's will.[261]

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258 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 898: 181.

259 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 844: 35. This letter is a very clear statement by Erasmus on his preference for Jerome and Origen over Augustine. He said that Augustine did not know Greek but 'what book was there in the whole library of Greek literature that Jerome had not mastered'. He told Eck that he was aware that Augustine was favoured in 'the schools'; his explanation for this was that 'every class of men has its common throng, and the best has always appealed only to the few'. See also *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 898:181. In the introduction to the *CWE* volume on the *Paraphrases of Romans and Galatians* the editor, RD Sider, states 'the influence of Augustine on Erasmus' interpretation of Romans and Galatians is notable by its absence, especially in the light of the fact that these two letters deal with the contrast between letter and spirit, grace and law, and similar themes which were at the heart of Augustine's theology. Erasmus goes counter to Augustine's exegesis of original sin in Romans 5, his view of law in Romans 7 as applicable not just to pre-Christian man but to Christian man, his understanding of grace and free-will (predestination) in Romans 9; his interpretation of the encounter between Peter and Paul in Galatians 2. *CWE,* 42, *Romans and Galatians,* xviii. See also Jacques Chomrat, *Grammaire et Rhétorique chez Erasme,* 2 vols, (Paris, 1981). For an interpretation of the alternative view that St Augustine had a considerable influence on Erasmus see Charles Béné, *Erasme et Saint Augustin ou L'influence de Saint Augustine sur l'Humanisme d'Erasme,* (Geneva, 1969).
Johann Maier of Eck is best known for his sustained attacks on Luther and was an important champion of the Catholic cause in Germany against the reformers. He was also a serious adversary of Erasmus being notably critical of his New Testament. Erasmus both distrusted and disliked him but nevertheless advised his fellow-humanists not to provoke such a powerful enemy. This in the main was his own reaction to Eck's criticism and thus he managed to avoid serious censure from this element of the Catholic faction in Germany.

260 See *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1334: 260, where Erasmus said that St Augustine in combating Pelagius 'somewhere attributes less to free will than those who now reign in the theological schools think ought to be attributed'.

261 JB Payne in his article 'Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Étaples as interpreters of Paul' in *Archive for Reformation History,* 65 (1974) 54-83, has concluded that 'Erasmus' sentiments, which we might think of as typical of his brand of humanism were, however, not just humanistic but patristic, especially Origenistic - not, however Augustinian. Origen and others of the later Fathers, especially Ambrosiaster and Pelagius, interpreted Paul as denying only the ceremonial

Erasmus directly challenged Augustine's interpretation of the scriptural text used to underpin the concept of original sin. He claimed that he did this on philological grounds and while there was some merit in his argument, it is clear nevertheless that his own views on original sin are epitomized in his interpretation of this verse.[262] In his version of the New Testament he changed the Vulgate reading 'in whom all have sinned', to 'inasmuch as all have sinned'. This had the effect of weakening the doctrine that we inherit original sin as a personal state from Adam. He was severely criticized for this change because of the importance of the verse.[263] While he took great pains to defend his reading of the Greek and pointed out that some of the Fathers had interpreted the passage in a similar way he was, nevertheless, well aware that he was demolishing a pilar of the scriptural basis for the church's version of original sin. Moreover, one of the authorities he cited in his defense was the 'learned man' whom he referred to as ' whoever he was whose scholia on all the Epistles of Paul bear the name of Jerome' [264] This work has now been identified as a commentary by Pelagius with interpolations.[265] There is no evidence that Erasmus was aware of this but it is significant that he was, in fact, using

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law when he talks about its abrogation, as not intending to undermine free-will when he describes original sin and grace'. (81-2) The Augustinian interpretation of Paul was directly opposed to Erasmus' view of the operation of the will.

262 Romans 5:12. Charles Trinkaus has argued that 'Erasmus' own position on free-will is seen by him as in agreement with pre-Augustinian orthodoxy, but not because of the authority of antiquity but rather because he finds a congruity with the position he has independently developed on the basis of his own thinking';*The Scope of Renaissance Humanism,* (Ann Arbor, 1983) 278, see also 274ff. For an alternative view of Erasmus' use of philology in his exegesis see HJ De Jonge, 'The Character of Erasmus' Translation of the New Testament, as reflected in his Translation of Hebrews 9' in *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies,* 14 (1984) 81-7; RD Sider, 'The Just and the Holy In Erasmus' New Testament Scholarship' in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook,* 11(1991) 1-26. Both authors conclude that Erasmus did not use philology to promote a novel theological view but in both studies the subjects of Erasmus' exegesis were not ones on which he held particularly novel stances.

263 By Edward Lee and Frans Titlemans in particular. See *CWE,* 56, *Annotations on Romans,* 151-2 footnote 2.

264 *CWE,* 56, *Annotations on Romans,* 142.

265 *CWE,* 56, *Annotations on Romans,* 155, this is based on Souter see footnote 22.

Pelagius as an authority in his defense against the charge of Pelagianism.[266] While he insisted that he did not deny the existence of original sin, it is clear that his understanding of its exact nature did, in fact, differ from the Augustinian doctrine.[267] His version stressed that man's nature was not inherently sinful as a result of Adam's sin. In 1529 he was forced to defend his position. Throughout his defense he referred to the mechanism of transmission of original sin as that of imitation.[268] Thus while he accepted that the sin of Adam had led to his descendants being weakened by his sin he thought that the way in which this operated, in practice, was that Adam had introduced sin into the human race and then his descendants had imitated his weakness down through the ages.[269] Erasmus admitted that man had a propensity to sin but said 'I think [this propensity] proceeds from example rather than from nature'.[270] He argued that in *Romans* 5:12 St Paul was 'talking about the sins that individuals have committed in imitation of Adam'.[271] When he paraphrased *Romans* he wrote:

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266 Erasmus made a similar error of attribution when he published the *Commentarii in Psalmos* by Arnobius the Younger; He thought this author was the Arnobius who died circa 330 but it was, in fact, another Arnobius who had been a monk in Rome a century later; the real author had attacked Augustine's doctrine of predestination as being heretical. Erasmus found a kindred spirit in this Arnobius and was very generous in his praise of him.He said he wrote 'with so much brilliance, so much learning, such pregnant brevity and (last but not least) such true religious feeling!' See *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1304: 144 ff.

267 See JD Tracy, *Erasmus: The Growth of a Mind,* (Geneva, 1972) 154.

268 The Franciscan, Titlemans, taught at Louvain. In 1529 he published *Collationes quinque super epistolam ad Romanos,* in which he defended the Vulgate against the emendations of Erasmus, Lefevre, and Valla. Erasmus replied in his *Responsio ad Gerontodidascalum,* which elicited an *Epistola apologetica,* from Titlemans in 1530. For an account of this dispute see Erika Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics,* vol 2, (Nieuwkoop, 1989) 14-22.

269 Erasmus believed that all human evils came about gradually by a process of degeneration, see his *Dulce Bellum Inexpertis,* where he said: 'every bad thing either finds its way into human life by imperceptible degrees, or else insinuates itself under the pretext of good', MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 123.

270 *CWE,* 56, *Annotations on Romans,* 140.

271 *CWE,* 56, *Annotations on Romans,* 141. See also his *Paraphrase on James* 1:15, *CWE,* 44, 141, in which he also states that it was an inclination to vice rather than sin itself that was passed on from Adam.

and it was provided by the wonderful and secret plan of God that the way by which our well-being was restored would correspond to the way in which we had suffered ruin. Accordingly, through Adam alone, who first transgressed the law of God, sin crept into the world, and sin dragged along death as its companion inasmuch as sin is the poison of the soul. and so it happened that the evil originated by the first of the race spread through all posterity since no one fails to imitate the example of the first parent.[272]

Again, here, Erasmus interpreted Adam's sin as an evil example that has been imitated ever since. In his treatise on the education of children he affirmed his belief in original sin and then said:

while this is indisputably man's condition, however, we cannot deny that the greater portion of this evil stems from corrupting relationships and a misguided education, especially as they affect our earliest and most impressionable years.[273]

This was the basis for the humanist stance he adopted on the importance of education. He thought that 'birth does not create a man, but only something capable of having man's nature, What is born is the raw material, so to speak; education gives shape'.[274] The significance of his position on original sin was that man was not, as Augustine had argued, inclined to evil and incapable of meriting salvation.[275] His final treatise in the debate with Luther, the

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272 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 34. Noel Béda, the syndic of the faculty of theology at Paris, accused Erasmus of Pelagianism on account of the Paraphrase of this verse.

273 *CWE,* 26, *De Pueris Instituendis,* 321.

274 *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 33.

275 See Augustine, *De Natura et Gratia,* iii, 3-iv, 4. JD Tracy has argued that, on the one hand, 'Erasmus' beliefs about the goodness and moral autonomy of human nature would be perfectly comprehensible to any seventeenth-century Deist, or to one of those eighteenth-century Sorbonne theologians whose optimistic view of nature so closely resembles that of the *philosophes* ', but, on the other hand, he treated the works of St Augustine with 'peculiar respect'; JD Tracy, 'Two Erasmuses, Two Luthers: Erasmus's strategy in Defense of *De Libero Arbitrio* ' in *Archive for Reformation History,* 78 (1987) 57. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that Erasmus acknowledged the debt that theology owed to St Augustine and that although he disagreed with his interpretation of free-will he was also aware that it was a thorny question which had exercised the finest minds throughout the ages and had never been solved definitively. Tracy tries to show that Erasmus, in this debate, was conscious of the ambiguity of his position on free-will.

Hyperaspistes II, is a defense of the goodness of human nature. While Erasmus never denied God his part in man's perfection and always agreed that without divine grace man was powerless, it was, nevertheless, fundamental to his thought that man was capable of effecting his own perfection; the *philosophia Christi* was a description of the method by means of which man could achieve perfection. This, then, was the issue on which he publicly broke with Luther in 1524. As early as December 1522 the pope, Adrian VI, had exhorted Erasmus to take up cudgels against Luther.[276] In his letter the pope left him little choice in the matter even to the point of implying that if Erasmus did not defend the church he would, *ipso facto*, be deemed an enemy of the church. Despite this order from the head of Christendom, Erasmus clearly did not want to take sides in the dispute but when he did finally and reluctantly enter the fray it was Luther's thoroughly Augustinian denial of man's capacity to participate in perfection which he chose to challenge.[277] As early as 1522 the Lutherans had been critical of his paraphrase of *Romans* 9 because they thought he allotted too much to the freedom of the will in it.[278] Erasmus acknowledged that as a result of his stance 'Luther's party in their public utterances tear me to pieces as a Pelagian, because they think I give more weight than they do to free-will'.[279] The truth was that his view of the operation of the human will differed from both the reformers and the traditional church.[280] He defended himself against

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276 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1324: 205-8.

277 This was always the kernel of their disagreement. See E. Kinowaki, 'Erasmus's *Paraphrasis in Epistolam Jacobi* and His Anthropology' in J Chomrat, A Godin and JC Margolin, eds., *Actes du Colloque international Erasme*, (Geneva, 1990) 153-60, the author shows how Erasmus and Luther differed over this letter on the basis of its view of the process of justification; Luther disliked it because it did not contain the concept of justification by faith and Erasmus liked it for the same reason.

278 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1265: 43.

279 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1259: 23. For a discussion of Erasmus' views in this regard see Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, 'Erasmus and the modern question: Was He Semi-Pelagian? in *Archive for Reformation History* 75 (1984) 59-77, her conclusion is that he was not.

280 See Robert Coogan, *Erasmus, Lee and the Correction of the Vulgate: The Shaking of the Foundations*, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, 261 (Geneva,1992), in which Coogan describes how Lee was the first of many on the Catholic side to attack Erasmus as a Pelagian on the basis of his annotations.

both sides in 1523 when he laid out his own views on free-will in a letter. He said that he had tried to steer between

> the peril of Scylla, persuading us to put our trust in good works, which I admit is the greatest threat to religion. On the other side I could see Charybdis, a monster yet more terrible, by whom not a few of them are now held fast, saying, "Let us do as we please; for whether we torment ourselves or please ourselves, what God has decided is sure to happen."[281]

As a consequence of this he said that he thought it best to allot a small amount to free-will. In truth he would certainly have preferred to leave such a thorny question un-defined. In the same year he argued that philosophers had been debating about *fato* long before Christ,

> and from them there have descended to us these insoluble problems about foreknowledge, about predestination by God, about human free-will, about contingency of future events, in which I think it the best course not to spend too much anxious time, since this is an abyss no man can get to the bottom of.[282]

By 1524, however, circumstances had dictated that this doctrine should occupy centre-stage. It was of such great import to him that he could no longer keep a scholarly distance and instead he had to engage in the debate with Luther.[283]

Erasmus' descriptions of the different facets of human nature were always linked to the salvation process. He was not primarily interested in man as a social, economic or political entity. For him, human nature itself was the *prima materia* of salvation or perfection. The actual elements and design of man allowed this process to occur. This was why he insisted on the importance of becoming truly conscious of one's intrinsic human nature and why he also

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281 *CWE*, 9 *Letters*, 1342: 399.

282 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1342: 400.

283 The latest edition of this dispute in english is in *CWE*, 76 and 77, *Controversies*, this has an excellent introduction by Charles Trinkaus; See also EG Rupp, ed., *Luther and Erasmus on Free Will*, Library of Christian Classics, 17 (Philadelphia,1969); RH Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, (London, 1970) 227-36 is still a good readable account of the dispute.

emphasised personal experience as being essential to an understanding of the method of perfection. In this way Erasmus' humanism was absolutely central to his interpretation of the *philosophia Christi*. The historian, Jacob Burckhardt, postulated the theory that one of the most important facets of the Renaissance was the rediscovery of man and his central position in the universe.[284] This, he claimed, resulted in the elevation of the individual and meant that individual experience and judgement became crucially important. Even the most recent eminent opponent of the general Burckhardt thesis, Kristeller, has agreed that in the field of humanist literature 'abstract generalization gave way to personal opinion and individual experience'.[285] The debate about the Renaissance has raged for centuries and need not be rehearsed here in detail but it was crucial for Erasmus' brand of humanism and so it is necessary to examine its essential character in order to fully understand Erasmus' version of Christian humanism.[286]

What was actually new in the Renaissance world of thought was the increased interest, influence and availability of the works of Plato. It has been established that there was a Platonic and Neoplatonic movement of sorts in the middle-ages, based on the translations of several texts of Plato and Proclus, on Boethius and other Latin Platonists, and above all on St Augustine and the extremely widespread texts which circulated under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite. This movement, however, never became a main-stream force; the Aristotelian-

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284 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,* (London, 1990), Penguin edition, 229. This idea was first mooted by Michelet but Burckhardt was the major exponent of it.

285 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel, *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 134.

286 For a discussion of this theme see PO Kristeller, 'Erasmus from an Italian Perspective', in *Renaissance Quarterly,* 23 (1970) 1-14; he has argued that 'Erasmus was to a much greater extent than is usually realized, a student and disciple of the Italian Renaissance, of its humanism as well as of its Platonism'. Kristeller concluded that Erasmus' Platonism was very like that of Ficino. Similarly, see JB Payne, 'Towards the Hermeneutics of Erasmus' in *Scrinium Erasmianum,* (11) 17, and AHT Levi's introduction to Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 21-5. MA Screech, however, has argued, that although Ficino may have had some influence on Erasmus, on the whole he took his Platonism directly from Plato. See MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) xxi and 76 .

based scolasticism ruled supreme.[287] In the Renaissance, Platonism, became a force to be reckoned with in Europe west of Greece for the first time in over a thousand years.[288] It had an influence which was not limited to the field of philosophy in the strict sense of the term. The central concept of humanism and the driving force of the Renaissance stems from the Platonic concept of man and, more particularly, the notion that man contains within himself an image of the Divine or the Good. Man the microcosm reflected the macrocosm of the universe and, perhaps more importantly, he reflected God. Thus he contained within himself the seeds of all knowledge: an ideal against which he could verify truth. Above all Platonic man had the possibility of perfecting himself by means of proper education in philosophy because this would lead to an understanding of the unseen reality. This is expressed very succinctly in Plato's myth of the cave in the *Republic*[289]which was an important recurring theme in Erasmus' work.[290] Burckhardt, who has not been superseded, thought that the central achievement of the Renaissance was 'the discerning and bringing to light' of 'the full, whole nature of man'.[291] In the final sentence of his famous work Burckhardt acknowledged that the blossoming of this concept during the Renaissance is the sole reason why this period must be called 'the leader of modern ages'.[292] Man became the centre of his own universe and the *prima materia* of his own perfection. By definition, this Platonic concept would not produce a single fixed philosophical system since it elevated individual

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287 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel, *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 143.

288 For details of the Greek writings which were published in the West in the 15th and 16th centuries see PO Kristeller, 'Renaissance Humanism and Classical Antiquity', in Rabil, Albert, *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and legacy,* (Pennsylvania, 1988) vol. 1, 5-16.

289 Plato, *Republic,* book 7, 514 a ff.

290 Notably in the *Moria* and the *Enchiridion.* For a short discussion on this see MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 88-90.

291 See Denis Hay, 'Historians and the Renaissance during the last 25 Years' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 7.

292 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,* (London, 1990) 351.

experience. It would, and of course did, produce a flowering of individual creativity in all spheres of artistic and intellectual endeavour. Men who adhered to this concept were freed from the shackles of traditional authority. They could express their own individual genius in the comforting knowledge that it reflected the divine mind. This is precisely consistent with Plato's own desire that his philosophy should not become dogma.[293] The religious expression of this concept was that man could determine his own path of perfection. In the very early days of the church this fusion of Platonism and Christianity had produced the Gnostic tendency among others. The better-established church of the Renaissance would not brook such heresy. Moreover, all of the humanists were Christians and most of them were anxious to show that the two viewpoints were totally compatible.

In the writings of Erasmus we see a high point of the fusion of humanism and Christianity. The philological efforts of the humanists in scriptural matters can be seen as an important expression of the new-found confidence in individual discernment.[294] Prior to this time the Vulgate had acquired an almost sacred authority in itself. Thus changing a Vulgate reading was considered by many as being tantamount to blasphemy and it certainly was a revolutionary act.[295] The humanists, however, were prepared to risk censure in their efforts to achieve a

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293 Eugenio Garin in his work *Italian Humanism,* (Connecticut, 1975) has argued that the humanist's choice of Plato was 'in the very last analysis..a preference for the conception of an open world, discontinuous and full of contradictions, incessantly changing and hostile to any kind of systematization'.(10) A similar view is also expressed about the nature of Plato`s work in the introduction to the Jowett edition of Plato's *Phaedrus:* 'Plato always held all his views open to question, never claimed to achieve absolute truth, and denied that there could exist any complete or dogmatic statement of his views'. Benjamin Jowett, trans., *The Dialogues of Plato,* vol 2, (London, 1970) 242.

294 See Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation,* (Oxford, 1987) 136.

295 It is clear from an early letter of Erasmus to Christopher Fisher that he himself was well aware of the uproar a change to the Vulgate would entail. In the letter he dedicated his edition of Valla's annotations on the New Testament to Fisher and said: 'I have..attempted, in a few words, to dispel the widespread dislike of Valla's name..Being an intelligent man, he did not fail to see that a disease so deeply established could not be cured by anything short of harsh medicines, cautery, and surgery, and that this must inevitably invoke great suffering for many people, He was well aware that even among good men one can hardly find anyone who is willing to listen to the truth.' *CWE,* 2, *Letters,* 182: 90.

true reading of Scripture. They worked outside of the established theological tradition using new methods of textual criticism which in most cases they developed as they worked. In essence, then, they were putting their own individual judgement above that of centuries of church tradition, although, of necessity, they strenuously denied this. The spell of unquestioned authority had been broken. This new view of man and his capacities was applied to many spheres of human endeavour and was the central underlying achievement of the Renaissance. For the humanists, the pronouncements of authority were acceptable and deemed correct only if individual judgement assessed them to be so. The new humanist educational programme, the *studia humanitatis,* in sharp contrast to the medieval liberal arts, was designed to educate men to think for themselves and pass on this new-found intellectual freedom to others. The emphasis on eloquence was inspired by the desire to communicate. In the *Ciceronianus* Erasmus was scathing in his criticism of those humanists who misunderstood this vital point. For him, antiquity was to be valued not for itself but because the ancients had perfected methods of communication and ideals of moral virtue.

If attempts to understand humanism concentrate on the manifestations of the concept without understanding the central idea itself then confusion necessarily results. The problem here is that some renowned humanists did not overtly state their support for this concept but they nevertheless tacitly developed and promoted it in their work. Martin Luther, for instance, was clearly in favour of the humanist approach to the text of Scripture but his concept of justification by faith alone, in which faith is a freely-granted gift from God and not something man can merit himself may appear to be in opposition to the elevation of the individual. Luther, however, reached his theology of salvation by means of a courageous personal soul-searching which was brought on in part by the fact that the message of the medieval church did not satisfy the longings of his own heart. He went on from this to develop his own theology based on a personal reading of Scripture. Thus the method of achieving his theology was imbued with the notion that individual discernment was paramount. He trusted his own judgement above that of the medieval church. In that, he exhibited a thoroughly humanist belief in the importance of individual experience. This also applies to the numerous other protestant reformers such as Melanchthon and Calvin who championed humanist educational, literary, and philological aims but did not

believe in the primacy of the individual's role in the process of perfection. Conversely, Erasmus, whose writings are permeated with the concept that man had a vital role to play in perfection, did not reject the church's authority.

Kristeller, one of the foremost experts on Renaissance ideas, disagreed with this argument about the centrality of the Platonic vision of man in humanist thought. He has claimed that humanism was primarily an educational system which aimed to produce a particular culture and that it must be differentiated from Renaissance Platonism. He said that 'humanist culture as such was neutral with regard to certain theological or even philosophical doctrines, and each humanist was free to formulate his opinions according to his own convictions and inclinations'.[296] He correctly pointed out that 'we find humanist scholars and men of letters, as well as men reared in the humanist culture, among the Catholics, Protestants and heretics of the sixteenth century'.[297] He has also identified humanists who were Aristotelians as well as those who espoused Platonic doctrines. Kristeller's viewpoint is that of a philosopher. As such, he could see clearly that there was no distinct philosophical system that could be called humanism. He therefore concluded that humanism was an educational, cultural phenomenon rather than something that was based on an idea or set of ideas. He noted that 'most of the works of humanists have nothing to do with philosophy'.[298] He argued that the themes of humanist treatises 'are neither profound nor rigorous, if measured according to criteria of ancient, modern or even medieval philosophy'.[299] He then went on to say that 'the conclusions are often ambiguous, and even the various theses of Petrarch, Bruni or Valla do not constitute systematic thought or a collection of doctrines which could generally

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296 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 136.

297 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 136.

298 PO Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought,* (New York, 1961) 99.

299 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 133.

be accepted by the other humanists'.[300] He believed that they shared 'general attitudes characterized by the cultural ideal which was based upon the study of Latin and Greek classics'.[301] For him the defining principle of humanism was its relationship with the educational programme contained in the *studia humanitatis* .[302] He believed that its direct contribution to the history of thought came through the writings on moral philosophy which were part of this programme. The indirect contribution was through scholars whom he considers were not humanists but who had a humanist education and manifested this in their own 'rich and complex thought'.[303] He held that Renaissance Platonism was quite distinct from humanism. He said: 'it is imperative to consider and treat Renaissance Platonism as a movement unto itself, as distinct from Aristotelianism and humanism'.[304] In Kristeller's terms some Platonists had humanist elements in their thought and some did not. Thus he believed that there was no necessary connection between the two. Indeed there were humanists who were Aristotelians such as Pomponazzi. There were even Aristotelians who espoused Platonic doctrines and Platonists who espoused Aristotelian ones.[305] Kristeller's thesis is very difficult to dispute within its own terms. It is cogently argued and based on meticulous scholarship. There is a problem with it however, in that while he acknowledged that humanism was 'the intellectual movement which in many respects is the most characteristic of the

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300 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 133.

301 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 133.

302 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 131-2.

303 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 133.

304 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 143.

305 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 142-3.

Renaissance',[306] his thesis does not then explain how this educational cultural phenomenon could have produced such an enormous effect in all the intellectual and creative fields of the time if its parameters were simply educational and cultural. Moreover, and crucially, the flowering of Renaissance creativity was achieved before the educational system was fully operational or widely accepted.

If we define humanism by its educational, philological and cultural manifestations alone, we do not explain the impulse underlying these manifestations. This impulse was Platonic. Often humanists did not express, or, even know, the Platonic origin of this impulse. Kristeller accepts that the humanists were free to adhere to whichever philosophical or religious impulse they judged to be correct. This freedom to choose whatever is discerned to be best is an essential part of the underlying impulse in the diverse movement that we still correctly see as a unity. Burckhardt's notion is the underlying impulse. Kristeller himself admits that

> every thinker who is called Platonic represents his own synthesis of Platonic, extraneous and original elements, which must all be carefully examined; it is quite possible to find two thinkers who are correctly identified as Platonic or Platonizing, but who share no common doctrine.[307]

Platonism of its essence inspires an individual response. Platonic philosophy is not, or should not be, dogmatic. The great Socrates was only sure of one thing and that was that he knew nothing. Plato, himself, never finally elaborated his famous theory of Forms in any dogmatic sense. The flowering of the individual creative impulse which characterized the Renaissance was a diverse effect which had a single underlying cause. This was the new prominence which was given to the essentially Platonic vision of the nature of man.

Kristeller did not include Pico della Mirandola, whose *Oration on the Dignity*

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306 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 131.

307 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 144.

of Man was the most important exposition of this new vision, in the ranks of the humanists. He also excluded Ficino, Pomponazzi and Patrizi, all of whom are normally seen as exemplary humanists.[308] He did, however, accept that there was an element of humanism in the rich and complex thought of each of these men.[309] The difficulty with a definition of humanism is that there was no such thing as humanism in the Renaissance period. Humanists were teachers of the humanities. There was no concrete movement called humanism with easily identifiable and accepted members who were called humanists. Thus it has been all too easy for historians to define what they believe humanism was and then exclude any figure who does not fit in with their definition. Kristeller's exclusion of Pico, for instance, facilitates the overturn of Burckhardt's notion of the primary importance of the new vision of man. Thus the definition of humanism to some extent will always be arbitrary. It was invented to explain a phenomenon but there is no exact description of the components of this phenomenon. We could agree with Kristeller's minimalist definition of humanism but it is deficient in that it does not explain the idea that underlies the *studia humanitatis*. Something did happen in the Renaissance and it was related to the *studia humanitatis* but it was not a result of this programme. It was a result of the rediscovery of a radical new idea: the idea that man has within himself the means of achieving his own perfection. Man, because he contains a spark of divinity, is a microcosm which reflects the divine macrocosm. He can thus discern the underlying laws which operate in all spheres or dimensions of existence. This idea was to be found in the newly-flourishing Cabbalistic and Hermetic movements of the Renaissance as well and was to be influential in the seventeenth-century rise of science. The new educational program and the occult philosophies had more in common than is immediately apparent. They were all instruments being used by men who wanted to perfect their nature.

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308 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 133. Charles Trinkaus has asserted that 'it is ridiculous to argue as to whether Ficino was the philosophical fulfilment of humanism or not. The point is that contemporary humanists flocked to his ideas and his *academy* with no hesitation and great approval, understanding his philosophy or not'., *In Our Image and Likeness,* (Chicago, 1970) 773.

309 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 133.

Kristeller said that 'the diversity of opinions that have been expressed during the last hundred years or so about the Renaissance and its historical significance is so vast that in facing it we are likely to be overwhelmed by confusion'.[310] He went on to observe that

> the subject envisaged is large indeed, and since a scholar cannot hope to master it all, he will be obliged to generalize from the limited material with which he is acquainted. The best he may claim is that he emphasizes what is most significant or most representative, and in effect, he ends up by stressing what he happens to know best.[311]

In another article he has said that 'the long war' about the Renaissance 'has not been settled by victory; it has merely given way to an armistice imposed by exhaustion and boredom'.[312] We must not be defeated by exhaustion and boredom. These states can be caused by too much attention to detail and not enough analysis of which detail is significant and which is not. The typical Renaissance scholar had wide-ranging interests rather than a narrow specialization. Thus the modern specialist has to overcome the urge to make him conform to modern norms. Erasmus in his underlying Platonism, his insistence on the destructive nature of dogma, his belief in the superiority of classical mores, his cultivation of humanist educational practices and, above all in his exaltation of the dignity of man, embodied the true spirit of humanism. This underlying impulse pervades his writings and conditioned his interpretation of the *philosophia Christi*. He expressed this in the *Enchiridion* when he wrote, in the mode of Pico, of the 'dignity of man'.[313] He said:

> man is a noble animal, for whose sake alone God fashioned this marvellous contrivance of the world; he is the fellow-citizen of the angels, son of God, heir of immortality, member of

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310 PO Kristeller, 'Changing views of the intellectual History of the Renaissance since Jacob Burckhardt' in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters,* 2 (Rome, 1985) 27.

311 PO Kristeller, 'Changing views of the intellectual History of the Renaissance since Jacob Burckhardt' in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters,* 2 (Rome, 1985) 28.

312 PO Kristeller, 'The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought' in Andre Chastel *et al., The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation,* (London, 1982) 127.

313 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 111.

Christ, member of the church; our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; our minds are both the images and shrines of divinity.[314]

It is essential to acknowledge this underlying impulse in the writings of Erasmus and other humanists in order to fully understand their world-view.

314 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 111.

The *Ciceronianus*

Erasmus' views of the nature of Christ and man are the central tenets of his religious system and as such they conditioned all of his writings. The individual capability of perfection and the importance of individual experience in this quest are paramount. In his dialogue called the *Ciceronianus* it is possible, under the layers of polemic, to discern the concepts of Christ and man in action. On the surface the *Ciceronianus* is a work in which Erasmus attacked the mainly Italian writers who, in his estimation, were doing Cicero a disservice by being too narrowly rigid in their imitation of him. Underneath this surface layer of meaning, however, there was a deeper purpose. It is at this level that his views of the natures of Christ and man are discernable.

Erasmus set the parameters of the piece in the dedicatory letter which served as a preface to the work. He first established that, for him, the object of 'good letters' was to 'proclaim the glory of Christ our Lord and God with all the richness, brilliance and magnificence that Cicero displayed in speaking of things pagan'.[1] As we have seen Erasmus used the term *Christ* to denote both the historical Jesus and also the eternal spirit or truth of Christ.[2] Writing, for Erasmus, was essentially a means to an end. Eloquence could never be an end in itself.[3] He expressed this idea very clearly and bluntly when he wrote to his fellow-humanist Guillaume Budé that 'in writing, hitting the target is the thing - not eloquence'.[4] His target was to communicate the *philosophia Christi* to as many people as possible and in as clear and correct a way as possible. In order to achieve this he used many different literary and scholarly styles and genres. The apparent diversity of his many writings including his biblical exegesis, his Christian handbooks, his satire, the sometimes slapstick comedy of the colloquies, his translations of the Fathers, his treatises on various aspects of education and his compilations of ancient adages, belies his absolute unity of

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1 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 337.

2 See Chapter 1.

3 This theme is fully developed in Manfred Hoffman, *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus,* Erasmus Studies 12 (Toronto,1994).

4 *CWE,* 4, *Letters,* 531: 230.

purpose. Everything he wrote, without exception, was designed to this end.[5] He was always aiming to insinuate the Christian philosophy in all its richness and profundity into the hearts and minds of his readers. He believed, therefore, that those modern-day followers of Cicero who prized the virtues of Ciceronian eloquence above the sense and meaning of the writings were missing the point. He obliged the Ciceronians, who in the sixteenth century were all Christians, to justify their method in terms of its effectiveness in communicating the tenets of Christianity. He thereby isolated works which had a religious objective from the many other fields of Ciceronian writings and limited the argument to this sphere.[6] His specific aim was to 'show how we can genuinely represent Cicero, and combine his supreme powers of expression with the faith of Christ'.[7] He did not engage in any discussion of the aesthetic value of the Ciceronian approach because he had little or no interest in aesthetics as a phenomenon in itself. It was utility that mattered most to him in the field of letters.[8] In the preface to his edition of Arnobius' *Commentarii in Psalmos,* for instance, Erasmus said that although Arnobius wrote bad Latin he only wished

> we might be blessed with more people who can write bad Latin about the mysteries of Scripture to the same good purpose as this Arnobius can, with so much brilliance, so much learning, such pregnant brevity and (last but not least) such true religious feeling![9]

Many of the Ciceroninans were not Christian polemicists in any sense of the term and would have considered the aesthetic value of their writings as being of

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5 See Geraldine Thompson, *Under Pretext of Praise,* (Toronto, 1973) 145.

6 In the sixteenth-century context, of course, the influence of Christianity was all-pervasive and no doubt Erasmus did not believe he was limiting the parameters at all. He was simply concentrating on what he perceived to be the most important purpose of communication: the dissemination of the *philosophia Christi.*

7 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 338.

8 There is a rich literature on Erasmus' understanding and use of rhetoric. See M. O'Rourke-Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform. Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology,* (Toronto, 1977) and J. Chomrat, *Grammaire et Rhetorique chez Erasme,* 2vols (Paris, 1981). The latest comprehensive work on this subject is Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus,* Erasmus Studies12, (Toronto, 1994).

9 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1304: 146.

paramount importance.[10] Even they, however, would have had to agree that the primary function of literature, is communication. Whether this might be the communication of an idea, or a feeling, or a state of mind, or any other human experience all authors endeavour to impart to their readers an understanding of what it is they are trying to express.[11] Thus, viewed in this way, aestheticism cannot be an end in itself and can never be valued in isolation from its role in facilitating effective communication. Moreover, Erasmus believed that aesthetic appreciation itself depended on the ability to discern the Christian truth. Later in the piece one of the main protagonists, Bulephorus, maintains that

> when it comes to vocabulary, our pagan way of thinking imposes on us; because our affections are not sufficiently Christian we judge falsely. We find what is essentially beautiful unattractive because we don't love it, Indeed I suspect that we hate it. To the eye of love even what is not beautiful becomes beautiful, as Theocritus said, so it can't find hateful what isn't ugly in the first place.[12]

It could be argued, of course, that while writing which is aesthetic is, in fact, the very form of writing which facilitates clear communication, it is nevertheless true that communication is the ultimate aim and that a particular aesthetic form is simply the means of achieving this aim. Erasmus was, therefore, short-circuiting a major digression into the nature and value of the aesthetics of Ciceronianism by insisting that it be evaluated in relation to the final goal of 'good letters' which he declared to be the proclamation of the glory of Christ.[13]

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10 For a survey of the Ciceronians and non-Ciceronians named by Erasmus see introduction to *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 329-33.

11 For a description of a typical humanist perspective on the powers of rhetoric see Charles Trinkaus, 'A Humanist`s Image of Humanism: the Inaugural Orations of Bartolommeo della Fonte' in *Studies in the Renaissance,* 7 (1960) 96.

12 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus*, 395.

13 Some historians have argued that Erasmus' main aim in the piece was in fact to attack an underlying paganism in the Ciceronian writers. As such this would account for his argument that the communication of the *philosophia Christi* was the only proper goal. See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence* (Toronto,1996) 175; L-E Halkin, *Erasmus,* (Oxford, 1994) 218-9; Marjorie O'Rourke-Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries,* (Toronto, 1981) 139. While it is true that Erasmus attacked the over-emphasis of pagan ideas in the Ciceronian writers it was not his main aim in writing the piece because he valued many pagan writers. It was the inappropriate use of pagan writings which he objected to. See *CWE,*

His limiting of the argument to this sphere was understandable and acceptable in a society which used the Bible as the main source of all knowledge. Equally, since the Ciceronians insisted that all spheres of writing should be subject to their rules, it was perfectly valid that Erasmus should limit his argument to his own field of writing. If he could prove that the Ciceronian approach was not a valid one for the communication of the Christian message then, clearly, their style would not be one which was universally applicable.

The piece is set out as a kind of Socratic dialogue between the two main characters, Nosoponus and Bulephorus; the latter is aided and abetted by a minor character called Hypologus. Nosoponus, is generally thought of as representing the Italian opposition to Erasmus.[14] Bulephorus the 'counsellor' and his supporter the 'responsible' Hypologus are the main exponents of Erasmus' own arguments. Throughout the text Nosoponus defends the extreme Ciceronian cause while Bulephorus attempts to persuade him that he is mistaken in his view of what it means to be a follower of Cicero. The central thesis of Bulephorus lies in his statement that he did not accept that a person was 'speaking in the Ciceronian manner, if, being a Christian, he speaks to Christians on a Christian subject in the way that Cicero, being a pagan, spoke to pagans on non-Christian subjects'.[15] He went on to describe what he believed the true Ciceronian would do. The latter would speak

> as Cicero would be likely to speak if he were living today as a Christian among Christians, endowed with his original native ability and his oratorical experience, possessed of the same understanding of our concerns that he once had of pagan ones, inspired, finally, with love and loyalty for the Christian world as he was once fired with pride, and passion for the city of Rome, and the honour of the Roman name.[16]

28, *Ciceronianus,* 394. His main aim was to describe the correct method of imitation.

14 See *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 327, for instance. The Greek *Nosoponus* is usually translated as Mr. Workmad, it could also be translated as diseased toil and could, therefore, be even more derogatory. Nosoponus, particularly in the early part of the piece, was also meant to be a caricature of Christophe de Longueil, 'who represents for Erasmus a gifted man spoiled by adherence to Ciceronianism'. See *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 324-7.

15 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 392.

16 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 392.

Bulephorus argues throughout the piece for this kind of holistic approach to the imitation of Cicero. He believed that the Ciceronians were missing the point and that they were nit-picking and narrowly literal in their methods.[17] There is a clear parallel here with Erasmus' view of the petty logic of scholasticism as opposed to the more holistic method of humanism. Bulephorus takes great pains to emphasize the primary importance of ascertaining the essence of Cicero's message itself rather than settling for a strict adherence in legalistic fashion to his style and vocabulary. He argues in favour of the spirit rather than the letter of Cicero's writings. His belief is that it is more important to depict things appropriately using whatever language is best fitted to the task rather than to follow Cicero slavishly.[18] In defense of this notion he describes how he once heard a Roman orator speaking about the death of Christ in the Ciceronian manner. He contends that it was tedious and irrelevant and concludes that the Roman 'spoke so Romanly that I heard nothing about the death of Christ'.[19] The orator in question had more than one problem on his hands from the Erasmian perspective. First, because he only used actual words that Cicero had written he had no proper vocabulary to expound on the Christian themes. Secondly, his very adherence to strict Ciceronianism itself meant that he was incapable of understanding the primacy of spirit over law. Erasmus chose to illustrate his point here by using the example of the death of Christ. This was a central tenet of Christianity for him. He believed that it meant that we should die to the world as Christ had. The world included all ephemeral worldly and man-made things such as logic and the law. These are always opposed to the more permanent divine realm of the spirit. Thus the orator, as someone who insisted on the letter of Ciceronianism, would hardly have adhered to the spirit of Christianity. He would, therefore, not only have lacked the proper vocabulary to expound this mystery but he would have had no true understanding of it either. Thus Erasmus was highlighting the ridiculousness of the attempt. He pointed out that Cicero, himself had not stuck rigidly to the letter of classical Latin if it failed him in his attempt to communicate something. For instance,

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17 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 370-1.

18 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 380-1.

19 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 386.

when he was elucidating tenets of Greek philosophy, which had no Latin equivalents at the time, he had invented words or changed the meaning of existing ones.[20] Throughout the piece Bulephorus expands on, and reiterates, these arguments until Nosoponus finally sees the error of his ways and capitulates. In short, although the piece was a treatise against the Ciceronians it was also very much an apology for Cicero. Erasmus argued that Cicero was not simply a superlative literary craftsman but more crucially that he was a superlative human being. He valued Cicero highly and he often praised and quoted him.[21] In the colloquy, *The Godly Feast,* Erasmus depicted the character Eusebius as saying that he often kissed the works of Cicero and 'blessed the pure and divinely inspired heart that wrote them'.[22] Earlier, in a letter to Jacob de Voecht, he said that he found himself thinking as he read Cicero 'what justice, what purity, what sincerity, what truth in his rules for living'.[23] He then sanctified and even deified Tully: 'how many lessons he teaches, and how like a saint - almost a deity! - on how we should do good to all men even without reward, on the maintenance of friendship, on the immortality of souls'.[24] Erasmus was at pains, in the piece, to show that the true Ciceronian was one who appreciated the value of Cicero's knowledge and wisdom and not simply his prose style because Cicero himself had used his personal gifts to further the cause of human knowledge and promote right living. Erasmus' essentially humanist viewpoint was that in emulating Cicero each person should use his or her own gifts in the same way as he had. The result of this could never be a slavish imitation of the literary style of Cicero; Instead it would necessitate the development of new and appropriate styles. Cicero, above all, was truly Cicero. Thus in order to follow him each person would have to endeavour to be truly themselves. This idea was central to Erasmus' brand of humanism.

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20 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 390-1.

21 Cicero is the most quoted author in Erasmus' collections of adages. On Erasmus' respect for Cicero see G Vallese, 'Les Lettres-prefaces au *De Officiis* et aux *Tusculanes*', in *Colloquia Erasmiana Turonensia,* (Paris, 1972) vol 1: 241-6.

22 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 192

23 *CWE,* 7, *Letters,* 1013: 72.

24 *CWE,* 7, *Letters,* 1013: 72.

On this level the piece is clearly a polemical tract in favour of Erasmus' own vision of Cicero and as such it is relatively straightforward. There is, however, a constant echo in it which suggests that Erasmus may have had another purpose for its composition. In the entirely Christian setting of the argument can be discerned an underlying blueprint for Christian life. While overtly describing the best method for the imitation of Cicero, Erasmus was also describing the best method for what actually interested him more, that is, the imitation of Christ. He said, quite clearly, in his introductory letter to Johann Von Vlatten that his aim was 'to show how we can genuinely represent Cicero, and combine his supreme powers of expression with the faith of Christ'.[25] There are, however, more covert instructions to the alert Christian contained in the piece. Near the end Erasmus drew a direct parallel between the correct method of Christianity and the correct Ciceronian method. Bulephorus says:

> the person who studies Christian philosophy with as much application as Cicero did pagan philosophy; who drinks in the psalms and prophets with as much enthusiasm as he did the poets; who works as hard and as long to understand the commands of the apostles, the rites of the church, the origins, progress, and decline of the Christian world as he laboured to grasp the rights and laws governing the provinces, municipalities, and allied states associated with the city of Rome; who, finally, adapts all he has learned by such studies to suit his present situation, He will have some right to claim the title of Ciceronian.[26]

It is quite clear that such a person would also have the right to claim the title of Christian. Erasmus believed that in the sixteenth-century context a true Ciceronian would be a person who was a true Christian. What was implicit in this was that Cicero had used all the writings and accumulated wisdom at his disposal to enlighten his fellow-men and that a true follower of Cicero in the sixteenth-century who had the superior *philosophia Christi* at his disposal would therefore, like Cicero, use all of his talent to communicate it to his fellow-men. In this way, for Erasmus, the Ciceronian writer who was truly emulating Cicero would be one who was a true Christian. Thus the ultimate aims of both true Ciceronianism and true Christianity were one for Erasmus.

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25 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 338.

26 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 400.

If Erasmus had indeed used the discussion of the *imitatio Cicero* as a cover for his views on the correct method of pursuing the *imitatio Christi*, this would raise the question of why he chose to be covert in regard to his aim. There were two reasons why he might have chosen to hide his message. First, he believed that higher truths could only really be communicated in an indirect manner. In the *Moria* he used satire to this end. When he explained his reasons for using the satirical mode in this work, he said `the truth of the gospel slips more pleasantly into the mind and takes firmer grip there if it is attractively clothed than it would if it were presented undisguised`.[27] He believed that the allegorical approach was the one best suited to the communication of the *philosophia Christi* contained in Scripture.[28] In the *Enchiridion* he said that when the reader was deciding which interpreters of Scripture to read he should 'choose those especially who depart as much as possible from the literal sense, such as, after Paul, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine'.[29] Further on in the same work he praised the Fathers for their beautiful prose and constant use of allegory in their commentaries and sermons.[30] The second reason why

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27 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London, 1986) 216.

28 See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto,1996) 98-100. Erasmus defended the allegorical approach to hermeneutics in his *Ratio*, see Hajo Holborn, *Ausgerwahlte Werke* (Munich, 1933) 274:24-284:27. See also *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 68-9. In his *Adagia,* Erasmus also extolled the use of allegorical figures in expounding the 'mysteries of philosophy' and the truth of Scripture. He wrote of the ancient sages: 'those progenitors of wisdom were so far from affecting sophistic loquacity that they closed up those reverend mysteries of their philosophy in certain extremely terse adages, even taking pains to involve them in a certain amount of obscurity through introducing a metaphor or an enigma or some other figure of that sort'. This also applied to Sacred Scripture. He asked: 'haven't you noticed this, at least, that in the mystical books of the Hebrew prophets numerous adages are cited by that very name, and their entire discourse is rife with proverbial figures?....And since adages frequently turn up in the writings of the Apostles and even in the books of the Gospel itself..has it never occurred to you that this style of speaking does not consist merely of slights of hand, but comprises instead a certain divine character well-suited to heavenly subject-matters?', *CWE,* 1, *Letters,* 126: 255.
For a recent comprehensive analysis of the place of allegory in Erasmus' hermeneutics see Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus,* Erasmus Studies 12 (Toronto, 1994) 211. Hoffmann concluded that 'Erasmus interpreted Scripture by means of a rhetorical theology that focused on the metaphorical quality of language. He believed that allegory above all, mediates between similar things, while yet keeping opposite things apart.'

29 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 34.

30 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 69.

Erasmus might have chosen to hide his message was that it contained concepts which were either arguably heretical or else potentially damaging to the reader. As such it was more efficacious to hide these ideas under a layer of allegory so that those who had progressed on the Christian path could discern and use them while at the same time the weaker readers would not be scandalized or damaged by them. One such concept was that of humanistic syncretism and there are references to it throughout the piece. Erasmus' concept of man was such that he believed that man contained the divine imprint and so could discover it within himself. This meant that pre-Christian man had the capacity for perfection. Therefore any truth discovered by man in any age could be related to the truth of Christ. Indeed, for Erasmus it *was* the truth of Christ. This is what allowed him to write in a seemingly orthodox way. The *logos*, or transforming spirit of Christ, was always the instrument of man's perfection. Bulephorus argues that to become a true Ciceronian in the sixteenth-century context it was necessary to become a true Christian. What Cicero had attempted in his work was to reach the essential truth of existence. He had done this with the best material at his disposal. This was what impressed Erasmus most about Cicero: the purity and goodness of his life and the way in which he used his writings to help his fellow-men. Erasmus believed that since the coming of Christianity sixteenth-century Europeans had much better material to hand for the pursuit of truth than Cicero had. Nevertheless, it is clear that Bulephorus believed the achievements of Cicero were in some way comparable to the achievement of true Christianity. He thought that any real search for the truth such as the one Cicero was engaged in would ultimately lead to the truth of Christ. Truth of necessity had to be singular, therefore all truth was the same. This humanistic syncretism is apparent throughout Erasmus' writings but he was always meticulously careful not to let it spill over into the heretical position of simply exalting pagans. It lies at the heart of his respect for pre-Christian philosophers, particularly those of the Platonic tradition. In the *Enchiridion* he asserted that a sensible reading of the pagan poets and philosophers was a good preliminary training for the process of Christianization.[31] The reason he gave pre-eminence to the Platonists was because he believed that 'in much of their thinking as well as in their mode of expression they are the closest to the spirit of the prophets and of the

31 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 33.

gospel'.[32] Like other humanists, he often used the epithet 'divine' when describing Plato.[33] He expressed this concept most clearly in the colloquy, *The Godly Feast*.[34]

In order to fully appreciate the underlying allegory in the *Ciceronianus* it will be necessary to examine the piece in detail. The first clear allegorical theme in the piece is contained in the very manner in which the debate is carried on. Although Bulephorus is scathing in his criticism of what he calls 'Ciceronian apes' he, nevertheless, modifies his tone considerably when dealing with the extreme Ciceronian Nosoponus.[35] In a truly Christian spirit the two main protagonists, Nosoponus and Bulephorus, do not ridicule or perceive each other as illogical fanatics. Although Nosoponus is portrayed as an extreme and even farcical character, both he and Bulephorus are described as having a genuine understanding and acceptance of their respective desires to reproduce the best of Cicero. Nosoponus was a character who employed the accepted rather pedantic Ciceronian method of word-lists and grammatical and rhetorical devices borrowed directly from Cicero. While these traits are inimical to Bulephorus he accepts that Nosoponus' faults are mitigated by his genuine and firm desire to be a true follower of Cicero. They recognize that they have a common aim. Bulephorus speaks of 'our goal'.[36] The debate is never presented as a divisively factional one and here Erasmus was surely pointing the way for the resolution of the divisions which had arisen within contemporary Christianity. There is a parallel to be drawn between these two representatives of different approaches to Ciceronianism and the different Christian factions that had arisen in the late 1520s. Erasmus could see clearly that all of the opposing Christians wanted to represent Christ in his entirety but the different emerging denominations disagreed about the best means of achieving this. He believed that in the current

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32 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 33.

33 See Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism,* (Connecticut, 1975) 11. Garin points out that this epithet was usually used in contrast to the *beast* Aristotle.

34 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 192. For a discussion of this theme see Chapter 4.

35 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 369.

36 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 356.

conflict faction could have been avoided if all the participants had concentrated on the unity of their goal rather than their differences of opinion as to the best method of achieving this end. For Erasmus the essential spirit of Christianity was unity and harmony. Faction was, by definition, un-Christian, therefore anything or anyone who created faction was anathema to him. In the *Querela Pacis* he explained that the Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, meant a 'bringing together' and that the fact that this was the chosen term for the Christian people was significant because it implied a common purpose.[37] As early as 1521 he had severe reservations about the methods which Luther was employing in his reforms because he was afraid that the latter would stir up more hatred and cement faction on account of his immoderate polemic. In a letter to Justus Jonas about the Lutheran controversy he said that

> when in itself an issue is a matter of bitter truth to very many, and when in itself a turbulent issue usually leads, by long experience, to violent upheaval, it were better to mitigate through courteous treatment an issue sharp by its very nature than to add ill will to ill will.[38]

Erasmus was always at pains to emphasize the common humanity of mankind rather than the differences of race or belief or nation. It was part of his Christian humanist manifesto that the process of Christian progress was the same for all men. He wrote:

> The same laws govern birth, the same necessity brings all to old age and death. All share the same founder of the human race, the same author of their faith; all are redeemed by the same blood, all are initiated by the same rites and sustained by the same sacraments. Whatever benefits come from these stem from the same source and are shared equally amongst all. There is the same church and the same reward offered to all.[39]

There are echoes of this in the *Ciceronianus* when Nosoponus points out to Bulephorus that he would conceal nothing from him because the latter was 'an

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37 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 303.

38 Quoted in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 152-3.

39 *CWE*, 27, *Querela Pacis*, 304.

initiate in the same mysteries'.[40] This phrase is, clearly, more apt as a description of a religious tradition rather than a literary fashion. Harmony was the fundamental distinguishing attribute of Christians. Erasmus pointed out that according to Jesus the single aim or goal of mankind is to 'love one another'.[41] He wanted, above all to avoid the faction and enmity which would destroy any chance of achieving this goal. He believed that in order to avoid confusion and disharmony it was necessary to recognize and emphasize the fundamental meaning and purpose of *ecclesia* rather than being too dogmatic about the precise parameters of an ideal church organization.[42] In 1528 when Erasmus wrote the *Ciceronianus* the battle-lines were hardening in the split within Christianity in Europe. His own frame of mind is apparent from a letter he wrote to Hermann von Wied, the archbishop of Cologne, in March 1528 in which he said:

> the violent factiousness of certain people...has virtually ripped apart the fabric of the state with discordant views and contentious dogmas, and has shattered the harmony of the whole church. And, here, indeed, has vanished my fruit and recompense for so many sleepless nights, so much toil, so many years spent![43]

On this level, then, the piece was certainly an Erasmian apology for harmony and reconciliation among the factions. Nosoponus was finally convinced of the superiority of Bulephorus' method because the later, who was in charge of the debate, always kept their unity of purpose in mind.

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40 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 345.

41 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 301. See John 13:35.

42 See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto,1996) 152-3 For an enlightening comparison of Erasmus' view of church with that of the more conventional Alberto Pio see Nelson H Minnich, 'Some Underlying Factors in the Erasmus-Pio Debate', in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook,* 13 (1993) 31 ff.

43 Quoted in RL De Moelen, ed., *Erasmus,* (London, 1973) 161. Hermann von Wied came from an aristocratic family and was Archbishop of Cologne from 1515 until his resignation in 1547. During the 1530s he tried to introduce reforms into his diocese but the failure of the religious colloquies of 1540-1 led him adopt the Protestant reform. As a consequence of this the pope deposed him in 1546. Erasmus' objective in this letter was that von Wied, as an eminent Catholic with a desire for reform, might use his influence to mediate between the factions.

Throughout the dialogue Bulephorus never values the literary method of Cicero in itself. It is precisely the glorification of the method to the detriment of the goal that Bulephorus denounces when he rails against the Ciceronian apes who sacrifice everything for the method. He accuses them of being more concerned with *how* Cicero did things rather than *what* he did. There is an important parallel here with Erasmus' view of Christ's life-work. He believed that it was essential to emulate the essence of Christ's life rather than engage in an outward adherence to Christian rituals and laws. The spirit of Christ was always superior to the letter of the Catholic law. Over and over in his writings Erasmus stated that outward displays of religious fervour were useless unless they were expressions of an inner Christian spirit. This is a central theme in the *Enchiridion* and the *Moria*. It explains the lack of any blueprint for an ideal form of church in his otherwise extensive writings. It also goes a long way towards explaining why although he supported Luther in the early days he nevertheless opposed him later on. He agreed with Luther's early emphasis on the goal of Christianity. The latter, like Erasmus, highlighted the fact that the church had lost sight of this goal and instead had lapsed into emphasizing ritual and dogma. When the Lutheran creed began to be institutionalized as a separate Christian creed, Erasmus could not support it any longer. He did not believe that a division of the Christian church would serve any useful function because the defining principle of Christianity was harmony or peace. Division was by definition un-Christian. He thought that the only true reformation would be one which took place in men's hearts. He spent his life writing in order to re-educate the hearts of his fellow-Christians. The process of institutionalising the Lutheran faith involved standardising and laying down rules and regulations.[44] Erasmus believed that this would be divisive and would not lead to a true reform.[45]

There was a direct parallel between Erasmus' views on the institutionalisation of the Christian message and his views on the Ciceronians. In relation to Cicero

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44 Erika Rummel has concluded that the Reformation 'increased the tendency to dogmatize, and the general trend was to move from discussion to assertion'. See *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation,* (Cambridge, MA., 1995) 61-2.

45 RH Bainton has pointed out that Erasmus was the first to use the distinction between the *fundamenta*, the essential dogmas, and the *adiaphora,* the non-essentials in the defense of religious liberty. See RH Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom,* (London, 1970) 224-5.

he also believed that it was the essence of Cicero's message which was important rather than a rigidly defined grammatical approach to his writings. In the colloquy his mouthpiece, Bulephorus, argues that since Cicero was pagan and did not use Christian terms it would not be possible to represent Christian concepts correctly while adhering rigidly to his vocabulary because the main purpose of communication could not be fulfilled. He gave the description, already mentioned, of a Roman orator he had once heard talking about the death of Christ, as an example of how ridiculous this was. He considered that it was not beneficial for a Ciceronian to follow the example of Cicero in a manner which was rigid and legalistic. He argued that this method had caused many great men to be misinterpreted. He said that Augustine, Benedict and Francis were all defamed by their 'so-called followers'.[46] Then he drew a direct analogy with Christ. He said that Christ had suffered this fate at the hands of 'those who have nothing of him but his name'.[47] Furthermore, he thought that in the past giants of men had been aware of this. The implication was that it took an extraordinary individual to understand the essence of a great truth presented by a great teacher. The lack of such men had resulted in many misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Christ's message. The different levels of human understanding and progress which Erasmus believed were possible meant that it took a person of enormous experience and wisdom to understand the totality of the Christian message. His preferred solution to this problem was that there should be as little dogma as possible and that the exoteric message of Christianity should be kept simple. In May 1521 he wrote to Justus Jonas that St Paul was 'all things to all men' because he understood the need to minister to his flock on the basis of their particular level of understanding.[48] Christ himself had this gift which Erasmus called *prudentia*. He had accommodated himself to the temperaments of the Jews. Erasmus said: 'he speaks one thing to the more uncultivated crowds, another to the disciples, and he gradually leads these very men, bearing with them for a long time, to an understanding of heavenly

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46 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 386.

47 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 387.

48 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 154.

philosophy'.[49] Thus the *philosophia Christi,* in its fullest exposition, was something that was given to a small group of disciples as a result of personal instruction by Christ over a long period of time. This was the highest degree of Christianity and was, of its nature, esoteric. Christ did not dispense this teaching to the masses because they could not yet understand it. He preached the more exoteric elements of his message to the 'uncultivated crowds'.[50] Thus, even people who had been exposed to Jesus himself did not reach the higher echelons of Christian knowledge immediately.

The idea that Christ had a secret teaching which he gave only to his immediate disciples has its origin in Scripture. In the Gospel of Mark after Jesus has been preaching to the crowds it is stated that 'with many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything'.[51] Similarly in the Gospel of John, after the account of the doubting Thomas incident, we read that 'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book'.[52] Erasmus' emphasis of this phenomenon, however, was unusual and has led to some misunderstanding. He has been accused on account of it of being an elitist. He complained of Luther that 'he poured forth headlong, divulging everything and making public even to cobblers what is usually treated among the learned as mysterious and secret'.[53] While this smacks of elitism it must be reconciled with his clear desire that the gospel should be known by all men. In the *Paraclesis* he said that 'Christ wishes his mysteries published as openly as possible'.[54] He went on to say that he wished 'that even the lowliest women' could be enabled to 'read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that

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49 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 153. This is also a major theme is the *Ratio Verae Theologiae*.

50 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 153.

51 Mark 4: 33-4.

52 John 20: 30.

53 Quoted in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 153.

54 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 97.

they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but also by Turks and Saracens.'[55] The two views are not mutually exclusive if his belief in the different levels of Christian perfection is taken into account. He wanted all men to receive the enlightenment of Christianity but he believed that it was only possible to absorb this truth in stages. Consequently he thought that hurling theological discussions of the more difficult elements of it at people did not work and was potentially detrimental to the process of their perfection. This is partly why he favoured the allegorical style in the transmission of truth. It allowed individual readers to take whatever level of teaching they were each capable of grasping. Christ, himself, used this method, employing parables when talking to a large crowd of people but when he was talking in private to his own disciples, whose precise level of understanding was known to him, he was able to speak more directly.[56] In the imitation of Cicero and in the imitation of Christ, Erasmus advocated an individual response. Great men did not follow a list of rules and regulations. Each one of them allowed his own particular genius free reign. They were creative, innovative and individualistic in their respective fields. If their followers were actually to imitate them, they would each have to use the contents of their innermost being to create their own lives.[57] While superficially this could be viewed as a formula for total anarchy, this was the last thing the peace-loving Erasmus wanted in relation to the Christian message. He was well aware of the inherent dangers in such a blueprint and he therefore wanted people to be led gently and carefully to the point where they could be responsible for their own progress. Bulephorus concurred with these reservations in the Ciceronian context when he declared that

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55 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 97.

56 For a discussion of this quality which Erasmus calls *prudentia* and which can be likened to the rhetorical principle of accommodation see Hilmar Pabel, 'Promoting the Buisness of the Gospel: Erasmus' Contribution to Pastoral Ministry', in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 15 (1995) 63ff. See also Manfred Hoffmann, 'Language and Reconciliation: Erasmus' Ecumenical Attitude' in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Yearbook* 15 (1995) 80-1.

57 In his work on preaching, *the Ecclesiastes,* Erasmus expressed the same notion. Having cited patristic writers who should serve as models for the aspiring preacher he said that in imitating these men the orator should adapt their writings to his own capacities and that the ultimate object of imitation was to represent *oneself*. See JM Weiss, 'Ecclesiastes and Erasmus: the Mirror and the Image' in *Archive for Reformation History* (65) 83-108.

aspiring to be like Cicero has its dangers....the giants came to a bad end for aspiring to the throne of Jove, and several persons were destroyed by their desire to see the gods face to face. It is a "task with hazard and danger fraught".[58]

The device of elaborating the imitation of Christ under the guise of the imitation of Cicero allowed Erasmus to say what he wanted to without fear of censure and at the same time it ensured that a reader who was unable to understand the deeper meaning of imitating Christ would not have his faith distorted or damaged by this argument.

The continuing allegory is discernable in Nosoponus' next statement that 'a sacred vocation like this requires a heart not only pure from all sin but free from all care'.[59] For Erasmus there was only one sacred vocation: that of Christianity. He also continually emphasized the need for a pure heart in following its dictates. In the *Paraclesis* he said that the way of Christ was simple and open to anyone but that the main requirements were 'a pious and open mind, possessed above all with a pure and simple faith'.[60] Similarly, in the *Enchiridion,* he said: 'remember that you must approach the sacred Scriptures with washed hands, that is with the greatest purity of mind'.[61] Nosoponus says that because of the need to be free from care he has not married or taken any public or ecclesiastical office.[62] These are exactly the views of Erasmus on his own vocation.[63] They are also the views of St Paul who told the Corinthians:

I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married careth for the things that are of

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58 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 376.

59 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 352.

60 *Paraclesis,* in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 96.

61 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 34.

62 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 352.

63 See L-E Halkin, *Erasmus,* (Oxford,1994) 271. See also *CWE,* 5, *Letters,* 809: 360-7.

the world, how he may please his wife.[64]

Nosoponus also said that 'people who suffer from love, jealousy, ambition, greed for money and other such diseases are wasting their time in aspiring to this honour'.[65] This is, of course, akin to the scriptural concept that one cannot serve God and Mammon.[66] Moreover it is directly related to the Erasmian idea that overcoming the flesh is an essential part of the process of Christianization.[67]

The very stringent preparations that Nosoponus undertakes in order to produce writings of the highest Ciceronian quality are in line with the kind of vigilance that Erasmus recommended for the militant Christian. There are, however, other resonances in the description. Nosoponus tells us that he practices his art of writing in a

shrine of the Muses in the innermost part of the house, with thick walls and double doors and windows, and all the cracks carefully sealed up with plaster and pitch, so that hardly any light or sound can penetrate even by day.[68]

While on the surface this is a device to make Nosoponus look ridiculous, it is also reminiscent of the hermetic seal employed by alchemists. Moreover, this metaphor is expanded when Nosoponus says that in this sanctuary there is a blazing fire which does not smoke. This calls to mind the intense heat used by alchemists to act on the ingredients they put in the hermetically sealed vessel in order to transmute them into gold. The metaphor is then alluded to overtly when Nosoponus mentions alchemy by name in his description of the mental preparations necessary for the task of writing. He argued that 'a sacred vocation

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64 1 Corinthians 7: 32-3.

65 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 351.

66 Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13.

67 This is expressed throughout the Erasmian corpus but it is particularly central to the *Enchiridion.* Cf third rule *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 58 ff.

68 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 351.

like this requires a heart not only pure from all sin but free from all care, just like the esoteric disciplines of magic, astrology, and so-called alchemy'.[69] Since Erasmus was portraying an extreme Ciceronian in the Nosoponus character there is nothing unusual about his allusion to alchemy. What is unusual is that the Bulephorus character, who represents Erasmus' own views, is also clearly familiar with alchemy and he tacitly and explicitly employs some of the same preparations as Nosoponus. Moreover, Erasmus could have used him to teach Nosoponus and the reader a lesson about the dangers of such an art. This lesson, however, is conspicuous by its absence: there is no overt criticism of alchemy in the piece.

Erasmus had no visible interest in the art of alchemy. He was acquainted with two of the most famous alchemists of his day, Henry Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus but his primary point of contact with these men was as fellow humanists.[70] In the piece Erasmus used a qualifying adjective with the word alchemy. This suggests that he thought there was some popular confusion about the discipline: that there was so-called alchemy as opposed to a true form of alchemy. In his colloquy called *Alchemy* , which was published prior to the *Ciceronianus* in 1524, he depicted the alchemist as being a rogue and a swindler. It is not, however, automatically the case that we can conclude that he therefore despised alchemy. The colloquies were aimed at a popular audience and were written in an attempt to clarify and correct every-day misconceptions and abuses. We can suppose that there were many practitioners of the *art* in Erasmus' day who were in fact con-men. Thus he wrote the colloquy in order to warn people against these men. At the end of this piece, however, Erasmus explained that the *alchemist* in question 'understood the *art* about as well as an ass does'.[71] This, again, implies that Erasmus himself had an understanding of the true art of alchemy and that although he despised the popular conception of

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69 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 352.

70 Paracelsus treated Erasmus for a medical ailment but there is no record of any contact on religious or philosophical matters. See Letter from Erasmus in Allen ep 1809, translated in Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of the Reformation*, (New York, 1957) 242-3. Agrippa was an admirer of Erasmus and they did correspond between 1531 and 1533 but Erasmus was very cautious in his dealings with him and never strayed into discussion of alchemy or cabbala.

71 CR Thompson, *Ten Colloquies*, (New York, 1986) 55.

alchemy he was not so scathing about the esoteric discipline itself. Perhaps Erasmus would have liked to call this esoteric discipline something else in order to differentiate it in the popular mind from the kind of trickery he described in the colloquy. He often distinguished between deep hidden truths and the shadowy popular conception of them. Just as Nosoponus referred to 'so-called alchemy' Bulephorus also ridiculed the 'so-called followers of Francis, Benedict, and Augustine'.[72] Bulephorus was clearly in favour of the true teachings of these saints and similarly Nosoponus was in favour of true alchemy.

Alchemy was the process by which base metals were supposedly transmuted into gold. It was also concerned with the transformation of all base substances into higher ones. There was a spiritual side to alchemy in which the practitioner strove to attain personal perfection by a parallel process of transforming the base matter of his own being into more perfect state.[73] As such it was a very useful metaphor for Erasmus who's view of the Christian perfection process similarly involved an internal transformation of man in which the base fleshy elements had to be transformed by a process of incorporating Christ. Thus he may have perceived a parallel between this process of transformation and the alchemical one of transmutation. Erasmus conceived of the Eucharist as an expression of the process of spiritual transformation. He said that its true meaning was something Christ had revealed to very few men. I have already shown that he believed the secret meaning of the Eucharist was that it was a process of the incorporation of Christ into the being of man which then allowed man to participate in a complete way in the Body of Christ.[74] Jesus transformed the basic material elements of bread and wine into the higher essence which was Christ. Erasmus believed that Jesus, the pedagogue, was demonstrating in a spiritual and a practical way that the perfection process was one in which the base instincts of man were transformed into a higher essence of Spirit. Viewed in this way it has very obvious parallels with the more esoteric form of alchemy and Erasmus' more advanced readers would have recognized in Nosoponus'

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72 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 386.

73 George Luck, *Arcana Mundi,* (London,1987) 364-5.

74 See above Chapter 1. This theme is also fully explored in Chapter 4.

apparently ridiculous actions a deeper and more mysterious allegory of the process of Christianization.

In this way the alchemical allusions point to the central theme of the piece: the true method of emulation. This, for Erasmus, involved a transformation which affected the very being. Nosoponus argues that in order to imitate Cicero it was first necessary to absorb him in a holistic way. He says: 'anyone who has absorbed the whole of Cicero cannot express anything but Cicero'.[75] Erasmus' description of how Christians should absorb Christ is very similar. In the *Enchiridion* he wrote:

> if you approach the Scriptures in the correct frame of mind, you will feel that you are inspired, moved, swept away, transfigured in an ineffable manner by the divine power if you approach them with respect, veneration and humility. You will behold the delights of the divine bridegroom; you will behold the opulence of rich King Solomon; you will behold the hidden treasures of eternal wisdom.[76]

Thus, just as the true Ciceronian could reach a state in which he 'cannot express anything but Cicero' by means of reading his works, so also, the true Christian would be transformed by a proper reading of Holy Scripture into a being who exuded the Christian spirit. Erasmus pointed out in the *Paraclesis* that in relation to the philosophy of Christ this process of transformation was far more vital than mere understanding. He wrote that 'transformation is a more important matter than intellectual comprehension'.[77] Thus, in both the Christian process and the Ciceronian one, Erasmus believed that transformation was all important. In the case of the Ciceronian, Erasmus expressed the process of transforming a writer into a true Ciceronian in terms of the alchemical process of transmutation. Since he allegorized the process of Christianization under the guise of the Ciceronian process, he, therefore, also indirectly compared the Christian process to that of alchemy. For Erasmus the alchemical struggle of the disparate elements of man took place in the hermetically-sealed vessel of his being. The

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75 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 369.

76 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 34.

77 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 100.

gold or perfection was achieved by the application of intense heat or fire to this vessel. Erasmus often used the metaphor of fire to express the force of transformation.[78] The most comprehensive statement of this concept was outlined in his famous letter to Paul Volz which was the used as an introduction to the *Moria* . In this letter he outlined his view of the truly Christian society. In it he compared Christ to an eternal fire which drew in and transformed the rest of the society.[79] In this way Christ and the manifestation of Christ contained in his sacred teaching were the forces which effected the process of transformation in man. Erasmus thus understood the true, esoteric, meaning of alchemy. It was a process whereby the psyche of man was transformed under pressure into something superior and not just a means of making ordinary gold. Christianity, for Erasmus, was the process whereby the base metal of mundane unperfected man was transformed into the gold and perfection of Christ.

Erasmus went on in the *Ciceronianus* to describe the correct method of preparing for and carrying out the process of writing in the Ciceronian manner. Again it is possible to discern a deeper meaning under the apparently ridiculous preparations of Nosoponus. What Erasmus was also describing was the proper method for truly Christian writing. Nosoponus described how prior to writing he would fast in order to 'prevent any gross substance from invading the limpid mind, and to make sure no dampness steaming up from the stomach weighs down and nails to the earth the fragment of the divine breath of God'.[80] Given Erasmus' own disposition and his views on asceticism in general he is here ridiculing the Ciceronians in the guise of Nosoponus. At another level, however, the vision of the divine breath of God being weighted down and nailed to the earth is reminiscent of the recurring image represented by his personal device of the youth with flying hair embedded in stone. The image of spirit encased in matter was indicative of the ordinary condition of man for Erasmus.[81] This was the state from which he had to progress in order to attain

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78 See for instance *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 33; *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 120; *CWE,* 25, *De Conscribendis Epistolis,* 33.

79 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 118 and 121.

80 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 352.

81 See Chapter 6.

eternal life. Erasmus was using Nosoponus to describe a method of achieving a higher state by overcoming the impulses of the body in order to liberate the spirit. He was describing the proper preparation for truly Christian writing. The man who was engrossed in the material, fleshy world could never write in the true spirit of Christ. Nosoponus then went on to say that his next preparation consisted in eating 'ten very small raisins, the Corinthian sort. They are not really food or drink, but yet they are in a way.'[82] Given the Corinthian reference Erasmus may have been referring here to the letters of St Paul to the Corinthians. He valued Paul highly as a major exponent of Christianity.[83] Raisins are dried grapes and as such their contents are condensed and intensified like gems. The first ten verses of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reads like a distillation of the *philosophia Christi.* In them the major Erasmian theme of the folly of the cross being, in fact, true wisdom is to be found.[84] It is here too that the notion of a secret teaching is outlined. Paul says that there are gradations of Christianity and that he has become all things to all men in order that each level of listener may understand him.[85] The verses are also infused with the Pauline and Erasmian emphasis of the wisdom of the spirit rather than a worldly wisdom based on glorification of the material world of the flesh.[86] Although there is of course a rejection of worldly wisdom and fleshly appetites, there is in Paul, as in Erasmus, the idea that the body is useful to the Christian process. Paul says in verse six that the 'body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within' and he exhorts his listeners to 'glorify God in your body'.[87] Erasmus, as we have seen, interpreted the Pauline text that strength is made perfect through weakness as meaning that the body and its attendant weaknesses were essential to the

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82 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 353.

83 Erasmus' version of Christianity would have been impossible without St Paul. The *Enchiridion* in particular is suffused with Pauline concepts especially the spirit/flesh dichotomy. See especially *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 72, where Erasmus urges the reader to value St Paul's writings.

84 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

85 1 Corinthians 2:6-7; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

86 1 Corinthians 2:10-13.

87 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

perfection process.[88]

There are two further concepts in the first ten verses of 1 Corinthians which have a particular resonance in the *Ciceronianus*. The first of these is the notion that the spirit of Christ existed in the world before the time of the historical Jesus, and, the second is that dissention is inimical to Christians. The first theme is relevant to the whole question of humanism. The humanists' interest in what were pagan writings was often construed as heterodox. As we have seen Erasmus had no such qualms despite his dearly-held Christian beliefs because of his view that the true spirit of Christ was something that had always existed and that many classical writers exhibited it in their writings. It was this which gave these writers value for Erasmus. The entire overt message of the *Ciceronianus* is directed to this point. For Erasmus, there was nothing to be gained by slavishly imitating good letters in a dead legalistic fashion. It was solely the true spirit of real wisdom in these writers which was worth imitating. Erasmus' overriding desire to promulgate the *philosophia Christi* did not allow him to waste time on pagan writings which did not contribute to this life-task. He loved, and defended Cicero because he believed the breath of God animated his works. Chapter ten of the first letter to the Corinthians begins with St Paul affirming that

> all our fathers..were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.[89]

Since St Paul was here alluding to the Israelites of the Old Testament and speaking to Corinthians who were Gentiles he therefore must have been speaking figuratively when he used the term 'our fathers'. He was referring to the common human ancestry. Yet he declared that they were all baptized and imbued with Christ. It is possible to infer therefore that he was saying that the spirit of Christ existed on earth before the birth of Jesus. Erasmus held this belief to be true although he never attributed it overtly to St Paul. In the colloquy *The Godly Feast* his character Eusebius expressed the same sentiment when he

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88 See above Chapter 2.

89 1 Corinthians 10:1-4.

said that 'the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand, and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar'.[90] Eusebius then went on to name Cicero specifically and to say that he was divinely inspired.[91]Again his character Eusebius said 'I can't read Cicero's *De senectute, De amicitia, De officiis, De Tusculanis quaestionibus* without kissing the book and blessing that pure heart, divinely inspired as it was'.[92] In the same work another character, Chrysoglottus, said that 'most of Tully's books on philosophy seem to breath something of divinity'.[93]

It appears, therefore, that the underlying message that Erasmus wanted to convey was that in order to write a piece in a truly Christian manner it would be beneficial to read and digest St Paul as part of the preparation process. The first ten verses of the first letter to the Corinthians were like raisins in that they contained condensed and intensified tenets of the *philosophia Christi*. While it could be argued that since these preparations were outlined in the work by the extreme Ciceronian, Nosoponus, they might not be considered to be the views of Erasmus himself. Again this is negated by the fact that Erasmus also depicted his own mouthpiece, Bulephorus approving of this practice. Indeed Bulephorus exhibited complete empathy and added that the raisins would 'exude moisture slowly, and stimulate brain and memory'.[94] What was meant by this was that reading St Paul would create a long-lasting and correct mental attitude in which to write. There is also a possible further alchemical allusion here. The alchemists used a small portion of real gold along with the base metal in order to produce a larger quantity of gold. Thus as far as Christian writing was concerned these raisins or gems of Christian philosophy would act in the same way to produce a larger amount of true philosophy. Nosoponus continued his description of preparations for writing by saying that he also ate three sugared

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90 CR Thompson, *Ten Colloquies,* (London, 1986) 155.

91 CR Thompson, *Ten Colloquies,* (London, 1986) 155.

92 CR Thompson, *Ten Colloquies,* (London, 1986) 155.

93 CR Thompson, *Ten Colloquies,* (London, 1986) 155.

94 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 353.

coriander seeds.[95] To which Bulephorus replied 'splendid - that prevents any dampness from the ten raisins flying up to the seat of the mind'.[96] In the Old Testament manna was said to look like coriander seed.[97] Manna was the food sent by God to sustain the Israelites in the wilderness. In relation to the process of writing it could be seen to represent a gift from God or divine inspiration. Instead of ordinary food then Erasmus advised a Christian writer to consume the condensed tenets of Christian philosophy contained in the writings of St Paul. These writings should then be tempered with Divine inspiration in case any of their worldly qualities affected the Christian author. To suggest that the writings of St Paul were contaminated in any way by lesser human concerns would have been blasphemous. Thus Erasmus would have had to use some device such as allegory in order to avoid the charge. He believed that when a Christian wished to write in the spirit of Christ he should not merely imitate Paul or the Gospel authors in a literal and slavish way, but should add his own individual brand of divine inspiration to the concoction. Erasmus believed that these venerable authors had done just this. They did not slavishly imitate a perceived norm. They allowed divine inspiration to guide their writings. Thus to follow them properly one would have to allow inspiration its proper part. In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus outlined his understanding of the deeper meaning and spiritual characteristics of manna. He asked: 'what more apt figure than manna could be devised to express the knowledge of the mysteries of the law?'[98] He then answered his own question thus:

> To begin with, since it did not issue from the earth but rained down from heaven, you can observe the distinction between human and divine learning. All sacred Scripture is divinely inspired and has proceeded from God, its author. That it was in tiny particles signifies the lowliness of speech that conceals immense mysteries in almost crude language; that it was white signifies that there is no human learning that is not defiled by some blackness of error, while only the doctrine of Christ is as white as snow, immaculated, and unadulterated, That it was somewhat rough and granular signifies that the mystery is concealed by the letter. If one

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95 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 353.

96 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 353.

97 Exodus 16:31 and Numbers 11:7.

98 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 32.

touches only the surface or the husk, so to speak, of Scripture, what is harder or more unpleasant to the touch? Was it not merely the hard covering of the manna that they touched who exclaimed: "This saying is harsh, and who can listen to it?" Search out the spiritual meaning, and you will find nothing more sweet or succulent. Finally, "manna" in Hebrew means "What is this?" which fits divine Scripture perfectly, since it contains nothing superfluous, not the smallest point that is not worthy of study and wonder and not worthy of the question "what is this?"[99]

Throughout the *Enchiridion* Erasmus was at great pains to communicate that a literal reading of Scripture was useless because the divine mysteries could only be accessed by penetrating the mystery with the use of the allegorical method.[100] He said: 'you must reject the carnal aspect of the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, and ferret out the spiritual sense. Manna will taste to you like that which you already have on your palate'.[101] Thus the true Ciceronian writer first consumed manna or the spiritual meaning of Scripture before writing and as like attracts like that which was consumed and absorbed would facilitate the creation of truly spiritual and divine writing. Erasmus was aware that this kind of approach to Biblical study was dangerous because it relied on the individual discernment of the interpreter. His solution to this was to prescribe a programme of study before such interpretation could be undertaken.[102] During the reformation upheavals some of the radical spiritualist groups claimed to have been inspired by Erasmus. They found his emphasis on the inner spirit and his belief that the outer form of religious observance was not important very attractive. Their radical and often violent departure from the religious norms of the day was just the kind of excess that Erasmus was at pains

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99 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 32.

100 See especially, *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 68-9.

101 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 68-9.

102 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 69. See also the *Ratio Vera Theologica,* in Hajo and Annemarie, *Ausgerwahlte Werke* (Munich, 1933) 280:30-3, where Erasmus showed that he was aware of the dangers in this method and urged moderation and said that it should not be used to support pronouncements on faith.

to avoid. It was for this very reason that he wrote so obscurely.[103]

Having described the physical preparations which were necessary for the production of Ciceronian writings, Nosoponus then went on to describe his mental preparations. He said that prior to writing he never spoke to anyone in Latin. He explained that 'the riders in a horse-race keep their thoroughbreds from galloping about beforehand so that they come to the serious business vigorous and fresh'.[104] Thus he clearly wanted to keep himself fresh and full of energy for his task. This, however, can also be interpreted in terms of alchemy. It is reminiscent again of the notion of the hermetic seal. Nosoponus used himself as an instrument and kept a lid on his energy in order to refine it and thereby produce the best results. He did not waste the particular kind of energy that went into the speaking of Latin. Instead, he would save it and have it at his command later when he needed it. He achieved this by sealing it off. Erasmus, himself, was notoriously protective of his privacy and liberty. He consciously lived away from courts and even universities so that he could better work undisturbed. Both the physical and mental preparations made by Nosoponus can be interpreted allegorically as belonging to the alchemical tradition. They also show that he had a high degree of insight into the workings of his own psyche. He had clearly observed his psyche as if it operated along strictly mechanical and law-conforming lines. This is precisely the notion of the psyche that Erasmus outlined in the *Enchiridion*. He laid out a clear and complete model of the human being in order to make it easier for the reader to *know himself* objectively.[105].

Nosoponus, having described all of his preparations, then proceeded to indicate the exact method of writing in the Ciceronian manner. He told

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103 For a discussion of Erasmus' influence on the radical reformers see GH Williams, *The Radical Reformation,* (London,1962) 8-11. It was also significant in this regard that the first vernacular translation of the *Enchiridion* was a Czech version produced by the Bohemian Brethren in 1519 who found the *philosophia Christi* very attractive.

104 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 355.

105 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 40. Erasmus devoted a major section near the beginning of the *Enchiridion* to an exposition of the importance of the concept of self-knowledge for the acquisition of wisdom and hence perfection. *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 38ff. This notion is also Platonic see Plato, *Phaedrus,* 230 a.

Bulephorus that it was essential to represent the 'whole of Cicero'. Bulephorus replied by asking him how this can be achieved when 'he didn't reveal himself wholly? And even in the places where he did give us a chance to observe him, he's fragmented and hardly half there'.[106] Again this is like Christ in the gospels. It is clear that we have not got all of his teachings in the Scriptures. In Mark we read that 'with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.'[107] The evangelist does not go on to explain what this private teaching was. In the Ciceronian context Nosoponus' solution to the problem of our lack of the complete works of Cicero was that in attempting to portray the essence of Cicero 'we must do as we are able, when we can't do as we wish'.[108] This was Erasmus' own philosophy in relation to the attempt to be truly Christian. He believed that true Christianity was opposed to the world and that the Christian had to use stealth to get by. He also believed that very few people ever reached the goal of being truly Christian but that this should not prevent us from trying to come as near to the goal as possible. He said that 'to die to sin, to die to carnal desires, to die to the world is an arduous goal, it is a difficult accomplishment' but he then added that even 'if it is not granted to all to arrive at the perfect imitation of the Head, all must nonetheless strive with all their strength to reach it'.[109] Nosoponus' solution to the predicament was that one should attempt to express Cicero in a holistic way. The section that follows is full of this notion that it is more appropriate to have a holistic approach than a nit-picking, logic-chopping, scholastic one. He said that 'anyone who has absorbed the whole of Cicero cannot express anything but Cicero'.[110] This is very like Erasmus' notion in the *Paraclesis* that absorbing the Gospels is the best way to become Christlike. He wrote:

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106 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 363.

107 Mark 4: 33-4.

108 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 363.

109 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 58.

110 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 369.

let us all, therefore, with our whole heart covet this literature, let us embrace it, let us continually occupy ourselves with it, let us fondly kiss it, at length let us die in its embrace, let us be transformed in it, since indeed studies are transmuted into morals.[111]

Clearly Erasmus thought that anyone who had absorbed the whole of Christ would be transformed in such a way that he would reproduce the image of Christ in his speech or writings. Bulephorus went on to castigate the logic-choppers in terms that are similar to those Erasmus used against the scholastics. He argued: 'what a tiny portion of Cicero is offered by those Ciceronian apes who scrape up a few phrases, idioms, figures and rhythmical patterns from here and there and then exhibit just a top surface veneer of Cicero'.[112] In the *Praise of Folly,* in particular, there are clear echoes of this theme being used in the context of scholasticism. Erasmus wrote that the

subtle refinements of subtleties are made still more subtle by all the different lines of scholastic argument, so that you'd extricate yourself faster from a labyrinth than from the tortuous obscurities of Realists, Nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Ochamists and Scotists.[113]

Bulephorus then continued his opposition to the Ciceronian apes and argued that 'there are thousands of things we have to speak about often, that Cicero never even dreamed of. But if he were alive now, he would say the same things as we do'.[114] Erasmus was not in a position to say this directly about Christ because to infer that Christ was unaware of anything would have been blasphemous. Bulephorus said, and Nosoponus agreed, that they were trying 'to ensure that we ignore the irrelevant chatter of the apes and proceed to imitate Cicero as far as we may, in his entirety and with success'.[115] Again the similarity with Erasmus' concept of Christianity is apparent when Bulephorus said that the

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111 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 105.

112 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 369.

113 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 156.

114 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 373.

115 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 376.

imitation of Cicero was a dangerous task.[116] In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus speaking to the reader had said that the way of salvation is a 'narrow path, on which few mortals walk'.[117] Earlier in the handbook he had also cautioned the reader that the entrance to the abode of wisdom was narrow and that he should be careful not to rashly 'break into the secret room. The doorway is low, make sure that you do not strike your head and be thrown backwards and there is danger in not stooping when you enter'.[118]

The central overt argument of the piece then follows: Bulephorus argues that he does not believe

> that a man is speaking in Ciceronian manner, if, being a Christian, he speaks to Christians on a Christian subject in the way that Cicero, being a pagan, once spoke to pagans on non-Christian subjects; but only if he speaks as Cicero would be likely to speak if he were living today as a Christian among Christians, endowed with his original native ability and his oratorical experience, possessed of the same understanding of our concerns that he once had of pagan ones, inspired, finally, with love and loyalty for the Christian world as he was once fired with pride and passion for the city of Rome and the honour of the Roman name.[119]

This was Erasmus' personal solution to the humanist problem of appearing to support pagans. From the time he wrote the *Enchiridion* he was always careful to advise that pagan writers should not be swallowed whole but that a select reading of them could aid the contemporary Christian.[120] In the *Ciceronianus* he went further and provided a more elaborate defense of the humanist emphasis of Greek and Roman classical writing. As we have seen, Erasmus believed that the purpose of writing-style was proper communication and that eloquence in itself was of no consequence.[121] Towards the end of the *Ciceronianus*,

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116 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 376

117 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 57.

118 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 34.

119 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 392.

120 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 33 ff.

121 See *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 405.

Bulephorus said that 'anyone who can be Ciceronian only by being un-Christian is not even Ciceronian'.[122] It was at this point that he added his statement that the purpose of studying eloquence was 'to know Christ, to celebrate the glory of Christ. This is the goal of all learning and all eloquence'.[123] Erasmus here closed the circle of his argument. The goal of the Ciceronians was eloquence and according to Erasmus the goal of eloquence was to know and express Christ; The ultimate goal of the true Ciceronian, therefore, was the Christian goal. The true Ciceronian in the sixteenth-century context was, of necessity, a true Christian. While it is true to say that most, if not all, of the Ciceronians were Christian, Erasmus was here displaying his own bias. He was not interested in literature or any other area of study for its own sake. He was only interested in ultimates; if a discipline did not serve the ultimate goal of human perfection through the spirit of Christ he had no time for it.[124] Yet he had the greatest respect for many pre-Christian writers including Cicero. This apparent contradiction can be explained by his view of human nature. He believed that man was so designed that if he wished to achieve the height of accomplishment in any of the higher pursuits of learning it would involve a quest for the truth. Since finding the truth can only be assured if one acquires objectivity, then the quest would begin with the kind of analysis of the personal psyche described in the *Enchiridion*. It follows, in the Erasmian system, that this would then involve a warfare of the opposites in the psyche. The seeker would find that no objective truth was possible without first conquering the lower instincts. Erasmus believed that no matter how, or in what era, a person tried to find this truth the result would always be the truth of Christ.[125] Thus if a person, such as Cicero, sought true eloquence he could only achieve it by having something of real worth to communicate. In ultimate terms the only thing which possessed

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122 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 447.

123 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 447.

124 Erasmus practiced what he preached. He had started his writing career as a poet but he gave up poetry as a mainstream interest in his youth. See also his famous statement in the letter to Martin Dorp of 1515 in which he said that his aim in the *Moria* was the same as in his other works. 'Only the presentation was different'. See Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 215.

125 See Chapter 4 on *The Godly Feast* for an analysis of the Erasmian concept that all truth is truth of Christ.

this quality was the truth of Christ. It follows that in order to achieve true eloquence it would first be essential to achieve a knowledge of truth. When Bulephorus said that to know Christ and to celebrate the glory of Christ is the goal of all learning and all eloquence, he did not say that it *ought* to be the goal, but that as a matter of fact it *is* thus. He was, moreover, speaking as a true Ciceronian when he said this. The goal of a true Ciceronian was to express Christ.

Nosoponus then asked Bulephorus how this genuine Ciceronianism could be achieved.[126] In responding, Bulephorus first pointed out that human nature is, superficially at least, diverse: not everyone has the natural gifts of a Cicero.[127] He then expressed the view that everyone

> has his own personal inborn characteristics, and these have such force that it is useless for a person fitted by nature for one style of speaking to strive to achieve a different one. As the Greeks say, no one ever succeeded in battling with the gods.[128]

Finally, in an outright attack on the slavish Ciceronians he argued that 'no one should endeavour to copy Cicero if his natural bent is totally different from Cicero's otherwise he will finish up as some kind of monstrosity, having lost his own natural form and not having acquired anyone else's'.[129] This is the essential point and true message of the piece: to copy Cicero in a pedantic superficial way is an aberration. The true Ciceronian would do exactly as Cicero did and use his own personal native talent to achieve eloquence. In the case of Christianity the parallel would be that the true Christian would not slavishly copy Christ but, instead, would use his own individual talents to the full to achieve perfection in the true spirit of Christ. Again, it would have caused great difficulties for Erasmus had he said this directly. Bulephorus elaborated on this important argument by declaring that:

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126 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 396.

127 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 393.

128 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 396-7.

129 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 397.

the natural musician will not be successful as a soldier; the natural soldier will never write satisfactory poetry; the man who is fitted for marriage will never be a good monk; the one who enjoys farming will never get on at court and *vice versa*.[130]

Nosoponus, clearly sensing the severe attack on Ciceronianism that this argument posed interrupted and replied that 'there is no difficulty which cannot be surmounted by unremitting toil'.[131] This was in line with all of the orthodox Christian teachings and in the Ciceronian context it was also a necessary belief. Bulephorus was not impressed however and he said:

the care of man assists nature where it is already going in the right direction, adjusts it when it is slightly astray, corrects it when faulty; but you will meddle in vain, my dear Nosoponus, with a nature which is totally out of harmony and fitted for something quite different. You can teach a horse to go round in circles and step in time. but it's no good taking an ox to the wrestling school, or expecting a dog to pull a plough, or a buffalo to take part in a horse-race.[132]

Thus Erasmus, through his character Bulephorus, was suggesting that a person cannot go entirely against his or her own true nature. In the Christian context the view of human nature was that it was enmeshed in sin and that it was therefore necessary to overcome this baseness in order to achieve salvation. In the *Enchiridion*, however, when Erasmus was exhorting the reader to have a perfect life as his goal, he said 'the human mind has never made vehement demands upon itself that it has not accomplished'.[133] In the same vain he also said: 'no animal is so ferocious that it cannot be tamed by human care'.[134] This appears to contradict Bulephorus' belief that one cannot change one's nature. The two positions are not in fact contradictory however, if their context is taken into

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130 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 397.

131 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 397.

132 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 397.

133 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 46.

134 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 46.

account. In the quotation from the *Enchiridion* Erasmus was alluding to the goal of a truly Christian life which was the incorporation of Christ. He believed that all men were capable of achieving this. He did not, however, think that the way to achieve this goal was by obliterating and distorting one's nature. While it is true that he believed very strongly that man must overcome his base instincts in order to see the beauty of Christ he did not believe that this could be achieved by a distortion of the individual nature. The inner struggle of man was the method of achieving perfection. This perfection was fulfilment of each individual's true nature, and as such it could only be achieved if the individual used all of his or her natural talents in the struggle. Viewed in this way any attempt to strangle or manacle natural gifts or characteristics would be detrimental to salvation: they were an important element of salvation. Erasmus demonstrated this idea in the *Enchiridion* when he explained how there are certain passions that are 'so similar to virtues that there is a risk of being deceived in distinguishing between them'.[135] He argued that the way to correct these was to turn them towards the nearby virtue. As an example of this he said a person

> who is hot-tempered should curb his feelings, and he will become energetic, self-assured, active, free, and open. Another who is a bit niggardly with a little good sense will become frugal; one who is too flattering will become affable and courteous; one who is inflexible, constant; one who is sombre, stern; one who is foolish, obliging; and similarly with other minor defects of character.[136]

In other words rather than crush the instincts of the flesh Erasmus believed that it was necessary instead to try to turn them around and face them in the direction of virtue. This, of course, would entail a different process for each individual depending on the different facets of each character. Bulephorus expressed a similar mechanism in relation to the imitation of Cicero when he said that 'it isn't necessary to aim at being identical if one can manage to be equal, or at any rate not far behind, even if different'.[137] He then elaborated by using gems and

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135 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 45

136 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 45.

137 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 398.

flowers as an example. He explained that in the case of gems and flowers such as rubies and emeralds, and roses and lilies while they are different in outward appearance, they are, nevertheless, equal in beauty and function.[138]

Bulephorus then added another reason for not copying Cicero foolishly when he repeated that we do not have a complete knowledge of Cicero: 'He is hardly half there in fact, whether we think of vocabulary, idiom, rhythms, or corpus of writing'.[139] Again, this could apply equally to Christ. The Gospels give only a second or third-hand sketch of part of his public life together with some of the main tenets of his teachings. He did not leave behind a corpus of writings or any detailed elaboration of his teaching. Bulephorus said that Cicero exists in his entirety only in himself.[140] Thus he told Nosoponus that if he wanted to express the whole of Cicero then he could not express himself and that would be ridiculous. He said:

> it may well be that the most Ciceronian person is the one least like Cicero, the person, that is, who expresses himself in the best and most appropriate way, even though he does so in a manner very different from Cicero's - which would hardly be surprising, considering that everything has been completely altered.[141]

Here we can see the humanist innovative understanding of history in action.[142] Crucially, however, Bulephorus added that we could be like Cicero in one thing; that was that we should 'pursue the "palm of eloquence" along the same paths by which Cicero attained it'.[143] This was the only valid way of imitating Cicero. Imitate the spirit of the man and not the dead letter of his art. To be like

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138 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 398.

139 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 399.

140 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 399.

141 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 399.

142 For a discussion of the humanist innovations in relation to the view of history see especially Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism,* (Connecticut, 1975) 14. Garin argues that 'a well-marked historical consciousness' is the essential distinguishing feature of humanism.

143 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 399.

Cicero it would be necessary to follow exactly the same path as he had taken by allowing one's own individual form of eloquence to develop as he had, rather than copying him slavishly. Thus, while Bulephorus believed that Cicero had achieved the heights of excellence he clearly believed that others could pursue and achieve this goal also. In the Christian context Erasmus believed that Christ taught by example. He perfected his human nature in order to show man how to do this. If, then, we translate Bulephorus' comment about following Cicero into the Christian context it is clear that the true Christian would be one who imitated Christ by engaging in the same struggle that he had. The struggle was an internal, individual one. He said that it was 'not a war between one man and another, but a war with oneself, and the enemy battle line springs forth unbidden from our own entrails'.[144] The basic rules for this method of perfection were universal but in application they would have to be diverse. In the seventeenth rule of the *Enchiridion* when Erasmus was describing the deeper mysteries of the Cross he said that 'in order to meditate on the mystery of the cross with greater profit it will be necessary that everyone prepare a method for himself, a kind of pious art of warfare, and train himself diligently in it, so that, whenever circumstances demand it he will be ready'.[145] Like the true Ciceronian, the true Christian in becoming truly himself would, of necessity, be the least like Christ superficially. Instead he, like Christ, would develop his own gifts and confront his own personal demons and defects and would become a true human being in his own way and in his own right as Christ had. Thus, for instance, the fact that Christ did not marry and lived among tax-collectors and prostitutes would not induce the true Christian to do the same. While most Christians would accept this, Erasmus was pushing the idea further than the norm. To say that the most Ciceronian person was the one *least* like Cicero is a very radical notion when applied to Christianity. Erasmus had no desire whatsoever to create the state of religious anarchy which might ensue if this were to become a central tenet. He was always careful, therefore, to bury it beneath a dense covering of conservative piety. There was no hypocrisy in this because of his belief that people had to be led gently and in stages to the centre of Christianity. Christianity was a method of perfection and not a quick and

144 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 40-1.

145 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 110.

easy panacea for all spiritual ills. He believed that each person was given a unique set of circumstances, gifts and faults by means of which he could perfect his own particular nature. To copy slavishly someone else who had different tools and existed in a different environment and era would, of necessity, result in some kind of abberation rather than a perfected human being. While this concept when applied to the imitation of Cicero was feasible it was not acceptable in this radical form as a concept in relation to the imitation of Christ. The primary reason for this is that Cicero was an ordinary mortal, albeit one who had extraordinary skills, but essentially made up of the usual bits and pieces. Christ, on the other hand, was the son of God. Erasmus certainly believed that Christ was the son of God but he also believed that in coming down to earth he had assumed a real human nature. This meant that he engaged in the struggle for perfection just as all men do.[146] Erasmus wrote that profiting by his example 'we will win through him in the end, if we fight as he fought'.[147] The true Christian must be a man of his times and not a slavish imitator of the first century Jewish Jesus. Erasmus' religion is an internal one. The spirit of Christ is far more important than the letter of the Christian Law. Thus in order to be most like Christ the Christian must follow his own individual bent in the struggle for perfection. The reported teachings of Christ in the Gospels are in the form of parables. These are lessons in the higher truth that lies behind ordinary situations.[148] What Christ was communicating was that we should look for the truth of each situation. The ordinary commerce of life and each individual human nature are the *prima materia* of salvation.

Bulephorus highlighted the fact that Cicero himself did not follow any one writer or philosopher slavishly. Rather, he had read every one of his predecessors.[149] 'He found in every great orator something that lent itself particularly to imitation'.[150] He also 'filled the store-chambers of his mind to

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146 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 57.

147 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 30.

148 This theme is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

149 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 402.

150 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 399.

bursting by studying the authorities on every subject' and 'not only was he an eager dweller in the chambers of the philosophers, but he frequently withdrew to the secret haunts of the Muses'.[151] There is a suggestion in Scripture that Christ also did this. We learn that at twelve years of age he was sitting with the doctors in the Temple learning from them.[152] Jesus frequently referred to the Jewish Scriptures and many of the major events in his life are conscious references to these Scriptures.

Bulephorus in the *Ciceronianus* then explicitly linked the two disciplines and declared that in contemporary terms the true Ciceronian would have to be a true Christian.[153] Cicero had achieved the pinnacle of human possibilities in his time, therefor the sixteenth-century follower of Cicero would have to do the same thing and this would necessitate becoming a true Christian. The end was the same for both but the sixteenth-century European had the advantage of the Gospel. The method was also the same. In this very important theme, Erasmus was trying to negate what he perceived as a dangerous tendency within humanism towards the adoption of pagan ideas. This was reiterated near the end of the piece when Bulephorus pointed out that

> anyone who can be Ciceronian only by being un-Christian is not even Ciceronian. He does not speak in a manner befitting his subject, he has no intimate understanding of what he is talking about, he has no genuine feelings roused by what he is discussing. Finally, he doesn't elaborate and embellish themes provided by the faith he professes, as Cicero embellished topics provided by his own day and age.[154]

In sum, it was not possible, as a Christian, to be genuinely Ciceronian unless the writer used his skills to elaborate Christian themes in a way which ensured that the audience could truly understand them.

Bulephorus then elaborated the method for becoming a Ciceronian. He said

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151 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 400.

152 Luke 2: 41-9.

153 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 400.

154 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 447.

that it was a threefold process which involved practical experience, a real love of the subject and a mental capacity to judge the process. In short, man had to engage his practical experiential, emotional and mental parts in the process. Nosoponus disagreed with this. He believed simple imitation of Cicero's style was enough. He said that people in the sun go brown and those in a perfumery smell nice. Bulephorus dismissed this and replied that these were just surface effects. He said:

> I would prefer to take internally any fine aromatic substances that are going and get them into my system, so that I don't just scatter a whiff of perfume over the people near me, but am myself thoroughly heated and invigorated, and then, whenever the occasion demands, a voice will issue forth which can be recognized as the produce of a sound, well-nourished personality.[155]

As always, Erasmus believed in inner transformation rather than any superficial change. He believed that it was essential to work on the personality and actually effect a change in it rather than pursuing a surface imitation. He described the nature of the transformation thus:

> all that you have devoured in a long course of varied reading must be thoroughly digested and by the action of thought incorporated into your deepest mental processes, not your memory or word-list. Then your mind, fattened on fodder of all kinds will generate out of its own resources not a speech redolent of this or that flower or leaf or herb, but one redolent of your personality, your sensitivities, your feelings, and the reader will hail not snippets abstracted from Cicero, but the manifestations of a mind packed with every kind of knowledge.[156]

Here we see again the kind of alchemical transmutation of the psyche which Erasmus also advocated in relation to Christianity. It is a thoroughly humanistic notion that man's psyche is itself the material which must be used to attain perfection. Man must not simply imitate perfection he must kindle the divine spark within himself and strive to actually be perfect in a most real and intimate way. Erasmus' most famous statement on the importance of transformation in the perfection process is contained in his introduction to the New Testament. He

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155 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 401.

156 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 402.

wrote that the *philosophia Christi* is located 'more truly in the disposition of the mind than in syllogisms' and that because of this in the practice of true Christianity 'life means more than debate, inspiration is preferable to erudition, transformation is a more important matter than intellectual comprehension'.[157] Erasmus continually emphasised transformation rather than imitation in relation to Christianity. He believed in the supreme importance of the saying of Christ that those who believed in him would keep his Word.[158] Clearly those who had not been changed at the centre of their being could not keep the Word of Christ but Christianity, for Erasmus, was something which had to be manifested and not simply given lip-service. In order to demonstrate how complete this transformation must be Bulephorus then likened it to that of bees making honey. He said they collect material for honey from many bushes. They turn this

> into a liquid in their mouths and inner parts and then reproduce it, transmuted in to their own substance; in it one recognizes not the taste or smell of any flower or shrub the bee has sipped, but a creation of the bee itself, compounded from all the contributory elements.[159]

Bulephorus then pushed the point further and claimed that ' no one who does not understand an art can imitate it, and no one can understand it unless he practices it.'[160] Thus even if simple imitation is the goal, understanding is still necessary. He explained that he was not trying to deflect Nosoponus from his desire to emulate Cicero provided this desire is 'kept within bounds, provided you emulate Cicero where he is best, provided you try to be as good as your model rather than indistinguishable from him'.[161] He warned Nosoponus against trying too hard because he claimed that this would be disastrous. His final stipulation was that if Nosoponus failed he must not feel that his life was

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157 *Paraclesis,* in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 100.

158 *Paraclesis,* in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 99.

159 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 402.

160 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 403.

161 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 407. Erasmus also used this idea of emulation rather than imitation in relation to Christ in the *Paraphrase on Mark*. .See *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 130.

ruined.[162] Bulephorus said that he himself had suffered from this disease but that Doctor *Logos* had cured him.[163] The doctor said to him 'you are suffering from a nasty bout of false shame caused by the fact that you can't take the insult you share with thousands of other men'.[164] This was that he did not merit the title Ciceronian. In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus constantly urges the reader not to give up the battle if he falls now and then. He is aware that this is the human predicament. He said: 'weakness causes us to give into weariness or temptation and thus abandon virtue once we have acquired it'.[165] but he then urged: 'you must persevere in good undertakings, and for that reason weakness must be bolstered so that we do not abandon the path of virtue'.[166] He believed that this attitude of determination was absolutely crucial in the process. He said:

> the kingdom of heaven does not fall to the vacillating, but it is glad to suffer violence, and the violent take it by force. While you are hastening to this goal, you must not allow yourself to be detained by the affection of your dear ones or distracted by the enticements of the world or held back by domestic cares, The chain of worldly affairs must be severed if it cannot be untwisted. You must leave Egypt behind in such a way as never to return in mind to its fleshpots, Sodom must be abandoned with all haste once and for all; it is forbidden to look back.[167]

The sense of false shame in failure that Bulephorus had been guilty of was viewed by Erasmus as being very dangerous. He thought it would lead to giving up the fight. It could lead to giving in to a kind of blindness which allowed the person to uphold worldly wisdom rather than true Christian values. In relation to this he said worldly wisdom is

> diabolical, and inimical to God, Its end is perdition because pernicious arrogance always

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162 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 407.

163 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 408.

164 *CWE*, 28, *Ciceronianus*, 408.

165 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 54.

166 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 55.

167 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 56.

follows after it as its attendant; arrogance is then followed by blindness of spirit, blindness by the tyranny of the emotions, and this by a whole harvest of vices and the freedom to commit every manner of sin. This freedom leads to habit, them a fatal dullness of the mind, which produces a complete insensitivity to evil, In this state of torpor the death of the body takes hold of them, followed by the second death.[168]

By this he meant the death of the soul. This greatest of all evils then was a result of a process of degeneration which started with avoidance of the pain of the false shame produced by the failure to recognize one's weaknesses. This resulted in the individual taking the seemingly easier road of self-delusion which leads by stages to perdition and in this choice he is supported by the world at large.

Bulephorus explained that he, like Nosoponus, had adhered to the worldly, literal, imitation of Cicero before he had been cured by Doctor *Logos*. This is similar to Erasmus' views on the interpretation of Scripture. He always argued in favour of an allegorical, rather than a literal reading. In the *Enchiridion* he encouraged the reader to read those commentators 'who depart as much as possible from the literal sense'.[169] He said that too many modern theologians 'are too willing to stick to the letter and give their attention to sophistic subtleties rather than to the elucidation of the mysteries, as if Paul were not right in saying that our law is spiritual'.[170] The spiritual essence of Christ is the *logos* - the generative reason and creative force of the universe. Bulephorus declared that Dr *Logos* cured him of his disease of literalism by means of *logos*. Thus *logos* is opposed to literalism. Erasmus was here implying that a person who was imbued with the spirit of Christ would be cured of the worldly adherence to the letter and would consequently be capable of seeing the true inner meaning in all things. By using the term *logos* Erasmus was alerting the reader to the underlying Christian allegory. Christ is the great healer and the *logos* is Christ.

Bulephorus then turned to a discussion of the true goal of eloquence. He

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168 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 40.

169 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 34.

170 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 34-5.

agreed with Quintilian that this was 'the power to stir the emotions'.[171] He said that different people display 'different attitudes towards the various writers, according to whether the moving spirit proves congenial or antipathetic, attracts or repels'.[172] It is a question of being able to inspire and fire the listener or reader with a love of the topic being communicated. Here, again, is the Erasmian notion that true understanding can only be achieved when the emotions as well as the intellect are engaged. Bulephorus went on to say that in the Christian context 'the mysteries of Christ should be handled not only with learning but with religious feeling. It is not enough to regale the mind of the reader with some trivial, temporary delight; one must arouse emotions worthy of God, and that can only happen if you have an intimate grasp of the subject you are treating. You will set no one on fire if you are cold yourself, nor will you inflame your reader with love of things heavenly if you care for them little or not at all.' Similarly, in the *Paraclesis* Erasmus had expressed the desire for such an eloquence. He cited many examples from mythology such as Mercury, Amphion, Orpheus, the Gaul Ogmius, Marsyas, Socrates and Pericles, all of whom he said had this power to move their listeners. The efficacy of eloquence is all. He wished for 'an eloquence which not only captivates the ear with its fleeting delight but which leaves a lasting string in the minds of its hearers, which grips, which transforms, which sends away a far different listener than it had received'.[173] This was what Bulephorus meant when he said that 'eloquence which does nothing but delight is not eloquence, for eloquence came into existence for quite a different purpose'.[174] The immediate purpose of eloquence was to move the listener but the ultimate goal in all things for Erasmus was Christ. Thus the goal of eloquence to which Erasmus devoted his life was to communicate the spirit of Christ in order to transform his readers.

In summing up Bulephorus said that Cicero was 'the supreme master of the art of speaking and, for a pagan, a good man. If he had studied the philosophy of

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171 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 438.

172 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 443.

173 *Paraclesis,* in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 93.

174 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 405.

Christ, he would, I think have been numbered with those who are now honoured as saints for their blameless and spiritual lives.'[175] Erasmus, himself, went further than this. In the preface to his 1523 edition of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputationes* he said that reading Cicero had had a beneficial ethical effect on him. He added that there was in Cicero 'something divine' and that he was among those who hoped that he 'lives peacefully among the heavenly beings'. He went on to say that in terms of morals many of the Fathers were less blameless than Cicero.[176] Thus behind what Bulephorus said was the notion that to emulate Cicero was to emulate someone who ultimately attained the perfection and eternal bliss in heaven. It follows that his literary output must therefore have reflected the divine understanding he had attained. His writings were valuable then as an expression of the wisdom of a perfected human being. The goal of human perfection, according to Erasmus, was the same as the goal of the *philosophia Christi* . This is the fundamental premise of Erasmus' Christian humanism. Religious perfection as expounded by Christ is one and the same thing as the perfection of human nature itself.[177] This is the concept which allowed Erasmus to exalt pagan writers and believe that they had achieved the realm of divinity after death.[178]

Bulephorus added some final elements to his theory on the imitation of Cicero and said that it was his wish that 'Marcus Tulius should occupy the first and foremost place in the scheme of study, but that there should be others as well'.[179] He went on to say that in his opinion Cicero 'should not be blindly followed, but taken as a pattern and even challenged. Anyone who merely follows treads in someone else's footsteps and obeys rules'.[180] If we continue

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175 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 445.

176 *CWE,* 10, *Letters,* 1390: 98. See also Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 26-7.

177 See *Paraclesis* in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1979) 100.

178 See Chapter 4 on *The Godly Feast.*

179 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 445

180 *CWE,* 28, *Ciceronianus,* 445

the allegorical interpretation of the piece and substitute Christ for Cicero here it means that Erasmus thought that while Christ should occupy the foremost place in our search for perfection we should nevertheless follow others as well and even challenge him if necessary. The first part of this thesis is completely in keeping with Erasmus' philosophy. He believed in the value of non-Christian writers, notably those of the Platonic tradition, in the task of perfection. The second part of this statement is, on the face of it, harder to reconcile with his overt orthodoxy. While it was possible to suggest challenging Cicero the idea of challenging Christ was, at the very least, audacious. Erasmus was however at pains to emphasize the importance of experience in the process of attaining knowledge of the perfection process. He did not believe that any kind of coercion or imposition of faith was possible. In his preface to the edition of Hilary he wrote of the degeneration of the church which had resulted from a proliferation of superficial faith. He argued that any faith which was not based on a solid knowledge of Sacred Scripture was useless.[181] In order to achieve Christ man had to abandon the superficial imitation of Jesus and find his own Christ within because Erasmus believed that the *prima materia* of perfection was human nature itself. In order to tap this resource a man would have to give up the external Christ so that he could achieve the lasting inner transformation. In this way challenging Christ would lead to an inner transformation into Christ. The perfected individual would end up with a solid and personally verified faith rather than one that was defined and forced on him by other men. Clearly, the former faith would be stronger and nearer truth. There would be a true, all-pervasive transformation of the individual rather than an outer adherence to a set of given beliefs and rules. Erasmus could never have suggested in a straightforward way that Christ himself should be challenged. He did suggest, as we have seen, that we can supplement our readings of Scripture with readings of pagan writers, this in itself was dangerous but to challenge Christ himself in any way would have been the highest heresy.[182] The whole thrust of the *Ciceronianus* is that in order to emulate a truly great man one must study him from every perspective and read all others in the field and even challenge

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181 RH Bainon, *Erasmus of Christendom,* (London, 1970) 225

182 In the crucial Erasmian concept of the importance of the body in the process of perfection Erasmus himself almost challenged Christ but he drew back and said that although he disagreed 'Truth itself has spoken'. *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 69.

him. One must then practice the craft of this person oneself and deal with the difficulties inherent in this practice. Then, and only then, can one be transformed in an individual way and become what the great man was. This is the only true method of imitation. Cicero achieved the pinnacle of literary and human perfection by gaining an understanding of the literary and philosophical achievements of his predecessors and by then combining this knowledge with his own native talent to produce a new and unique eloquence. The man Jesus also informed himself of the learning of his predecessors. It is clear that Erasmus believed that Jesus himself actually went through the process of perfection in order to show us how to do it. Man can achieve Christ but not by slavishly imitating the superficial elements of the life of Jesus or his words in Scripture. Like Jesus and Cicero the point is that each man must become fully himself in order to achieve the pinnacle of human perfection. The inner transformation and individual genius which are elaborated here are the trademarks of Erasmus' Christian humanism.

The *Godly Feast*

In the *Ciceronianus* Erasmus displayed his belief in the individual nature of the quest for perfection. This involved a process of inner transformation which was effected by gaining a knowledge of, and then incorporating, the spirit of Christ. In the dialogue entitled *The Godly Feast* he allowed his view of the precise nature of this process of transformation into Christ to become visible. The colloquy has many layers of meaning. On one level it is a description of a dinner party at a country villa which is conducted in a Christian spirit while on another level it is a discourse on the means available to man to discover the eternal nature of the concept of Christ the *logos:* the salvific force in creation.

In the piece Erasmus depicted a group of like-minded friends meeting for a meal. They meet at the country villa of the host, Eusebius. Before and after dining they tour the house and gardens. During the meal itself they discuss some scriptural passages. In accordance with all Erasmian writings the conversation and the whole tone of the piece is Christian. On the surface the work is a description of the ideal way of conducting a truly Christian meal. Eusebius declares that the practice of reading extracts from Scripture at the meal is highly desirable because 'by means of it we avoid foolish yarns and enjoy profitable conversation'.[1] He goes on to say that he disagrees 'emphatically with those who think a dinner party isn't fun unless it overflows with silly, bawdy stories and rings with dirty songs'.[2] The title of the piece, however, evokes a comparison with the Christian Eucharist. Indeed Erasmus made this quite explicit when he had Eusebius declare that for Christians a meal was 'an allegory of that sacred last supper which the Lord Jesus had with his disciples'.[3] This sense of the sacredness of the meal is also evident in the ritual cleansing or purification which the participants engage in before and after eating. Thus the piece can also be interpreted as an allegorical exposition of

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1 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 183.

2 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 183.

3 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 182.

Erasmus' view of the true meaning of the Eucharist.[4] Erasmus always emphasized the sacrament of the Eucharist as being the central aspect of the sacrifice of the mass. Together with Baptism it was very important to his brand of Christianity. He did not, however, believe in the reduction of sacraments as the magisterial reformers did. Their beliefs in this matter were based entirely on the evidence of Scripture which they interpreted to demonstrate that many of the currently accepted sacraments were un-scriptural. While Erasmus undoubtedly had great sympathy with this scriptural viewpoint he was nevertheless not willing to go as far as the reformers. This was not a consequence of cowardice or innate conservatism but rather it was based on his belief that church ceremonies should be left in place for the time being because they were useful and even necessary for those budding Christians who needed such outward displays of spiritual truths. His own view was that the inward spiritual essence of the sacraments was the efficacious element. While he feared that too much emphasis on outward expressions of piety could lead people to value the empty externals of ritual instead of the hidden spiritual truth, he, nevertheless, accepted that this understanding could only be attained gradually. The value of ceremonies was that they symbolized spiritual realities: their outward form had no intrinsic value. In the colloquy Chrysoglottus gives a fairly damming indictment of most sixteenth-century Catholic practice. Erasmus expressed the same view in the adage *Sileni Alcibiades* when he asserted that

> one may find some similarity with the *Sileni* in the sacraments of the church, Let no one be offended by this. You see the water, the salt and the oil, you hear the spoken words, these are like the face of Silenus; you cannot hear or see the power of God, without which all these things would be but mockeries.[5]

Ceremonies, thus, served to teach the participant by means of a physical demonstration and a verbal explanation. Having conceded that there was value in the practice of these rites if they were carried out with Christian conviction he then says:

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4 This view is rejected by Geraldine Thompson who argued that Erasmus preferred symbols to allegory and that *The Godly Feast* was 'not an allegorical or symbolic colloquy; it is a colloquy about eight men who see and explain the emblems and symbols of nature and circumstance'. See *Under Pretext of Praise,* (Toronto, 1973) 33ff.

5 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 82.

the notion that nothing else is needed for Christianity I reject absolutely, since a large part of mankind, while trusting to these things, loses no time in making money by hook or by crook and becoming enslaved to anger, lust, malice and flattery.[6]

He concluded that 'though these ceremonies, especially those sanctioned by ecclesiastical usage, are acceptable, yet there are also other, more interior means of helping us to depart from this life with cheerfulness and Christian trust'.[7] The harnessing and cultivation of the inner spirit were always more important for Erasmus than any strict Catholic observance. His method of scriptural interpretation led him to conclusions which clearly differed from any of the accepted or emerging orthodoxies in relation to the sacraments and the Eucharist. He believed that the Eucharist was central because its secret meaning was related to the true process of Christianization which occurred in the psyche or the soul. He wrote that the sacrifice of the Mass in this spiritual sense really means that we are 'one spirit with the spirit of Christ, one body with the body of Christ, a living member of the church'.[8] Thus the gathering of Christians to celebrate the true Eucharist is an expression of the true *ecclesia* or church. In his *Paraphrase on Mark*, Erasmus also interpreted a banquet as a symbolic representation of a 'type of the church'.[9] The hidden or secret nature of the Eucharist was expressed in the *Enchiridion* when he argued that Christ had revealed the true meaning of the Eucharist to very few men.[10] In the *Moria* he revealed this hidden meaning when he explained that it is a symbol for

the death of Christ, which men must express through the mastery and extinction of their bodily passions, laying them in the tomb, as it were, in order to rise again to a new life

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6 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 196.

7 *CWE*, 31, *Adages*, 196.

8 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 71.

9 This was a banquet given by Matthew for his low-life friends together with Jesus and the disciples. See *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 39

10 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 70.

wherein they can be united with him and with each other.[11]

For Erasmus, then, the consumption of the body and blood of Christ symbolized the state of Christianization which it is possible for a man to achieve by means of the incorporation of Christ into himself and his life by a process of dying to the world. He wrote often of this process to his friends. In 1506 he told Richard Foxe that

Christianity itself is only that true and perfect kind of friendship which consists in dying with Christ, living in Christ, and forming one body and one soul with Christ; it is indeed a communion between men, like the communion of limbs in the body, one with another.[12]

He also addressed the topic in two letters which he wrote in 1515. Here he described the process as one in which the Christian was 'transfigured' and made one with Christ.[13]

This ideal state was one in which the material bodily urges were directed towards the spirit. As we have seen Erasmus did not believe that a state in which the spirit would permanently conquer the flesh was achievable in this life. In his *Paraphrase on Romans* he asserted that

although we have received a pledge of our salvation from Christ, nevertheless he did not grant us full salvation here, but wanted us to wait for it in the age to come, In truth, our perfect salvation is dependent on future events of which we have received a certain hope.[14]

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11 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 205.

12 *CWE,* 2, *Letters,* 187: 103. Richard Foxe born in Grantham, Lincolnshire, was a civil and cannon lawyer who gained ecclesiastical and political preferment in return for his support of Henry VII, most notably, at Bosworth field. He held ecclesiastical offices such as Bishop of Exeter, Bishop of Bath and Wells and Bishop of Winchester. In the political sphere he was Henry VII's councillor, secretary and keeper of the privy seal and he carried out many important diplomatic missions including several to Scotland. In 1516 he proposed that Wolsey replace him as the keeper of the privy seal. He was well-disposed towards Erasmus and according to Thomas More had said that Erasmus' New Testament was worth ten commentaries. This letter is the preface to a version of Lucian's *Toxaris,* which Erasmus had dedicated to Foxe.

13 *CWE,* 3, *Letters,* 327: 78, to Beatus Rhenanus and, *ibid.,* 337: 130, to Dorp.

14 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 49.

The 'certain hope' was made manifest to man through the life of Christ and also by searching the innermost depths of his own heart to find the spirit of Christ. As we have seen, while he thought that the struggle between flesh and spirit went on until death even in the case of Christ himself, he did, nevertheless, believe that it was possible to achieve a level of perfection which resulted in the hegemony of the spirit in this struggle[15]. That is to say that the struggle continued but the spirit was always strong enough to conquer the urges of the flesh. When a man achieved this his eye would be single. He would have enshrined Christ as his goal in all things and at all times. In the *Enchiridion* , in order to depict this state, he quoted the saying 'let your eye be single, and your whole body will be filled with light'.[16] In the famous letter to Paul Volz, when advocating a simplification of the Christian message, Erasmus again used the metaphor of the eye to depict unity and singleness of purpose: he said that to avoid confusion we need the 'simple and clear eye of the Gospel'.[17] His clearest exposition of the symbol of the eye is in the adage 'One ought to be born a king or a fool'.[18] Here he outlined how the Egyptians used an image of a single eye and a sceptre to depict a prince, because the eye represented the highest wisdom. Thus the eye in Christian terms is Christ the *logos*. The spirit by means of which man is given the true sight which allows him to see things as they really are. In the same adage Erasmus defined wisdom as consisting 'not only in the knowledge of truth, but in the love and eager striving for what is good'.[19] Again, here, the ultimate state of wisdom was not simply a static one, but one which involved active participation in the search to achieve goodness. Christianity was not an intellectual exercise, for Erasmus, it was a state which could only be achieved through an active process of incorporating the spirit of Christ into each individual, fleshly body. It involved a rich, diverse and, above

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15 See above Chapter 1.

16 *CWE*, 66. *Enchiridion*, 61.

17 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 117.

18 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times*, (Cambridge, 1980) 35-43.

19 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times*, (Cambridge, 1980) 38.

all, individual process of transformation and was not, therefore, amenable to dogmatic stipulations.

In allegorizing the true meaning of the Christian Eucharist Erasmus approached the 'holy of hollies' of his religious system. The process of incorporating Christ entailed, of necessity, the acquisition of knowledge of the rich concept of Christ. He believed that this Christianizing process would result in our becoming more fully human. As we have seen his concept of Christ included the view that Christ was eternal and omnipresent.[20] In this colloquy the concept is decisively liberated from the narrow confines of dogma. Erasmus, under the protection of allegory, shows us how and where to find the truth of Christ. Throughout his writings he never strayed very far from Plato. In this piece he came very near to deifying the philosopher. The central character Eusebius is imbued with the ultimately Platonic notion that it is Nature who teaches us all that we know particularly about the supreme object of knowledge, which is, God or as Plato would term it 'the Good'.[21] Eusebius declared:

> Nature, in my opinion, is not silent but speaks to us everywhere and teaches the observant man many things if she finds him attentive and receptive. What else does the charming countenance of verdant Nature proclaim than that God the creator's wisdom is equal to his goodness?.[22]

Thus the method of knowing the creator is through his creation. This, of course, included man, the creature God had made to rule over all creation. In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus asserted that the sum of all known wisdom was contained in the concept that man should strive to know himself. The assumption which is common to both ideas is that in the handiwork of God we can find the image of

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20 Above Chapter 1.

21 MA Screech has disputed this idea on the basis that Erasmus never made 'the soul of the pious love God for his beauty, first perceived as mirrored in his creation. For a scholar who knew his business that can only mean a conscious rejection of the idea, which is fundamental to Plato, to neo-Platonists and to Florentine Platonists alike'. See *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London,1980) 141. In Erasmus it is God's goodness which attracts rather than his beauty but the idea of nature being an image of the creator is expressed in *The Godly Feast* although it is not a feature of Screech' s object of study: the *Moria.*

22 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 175; See Plato, *Symposium,* 211 b-c.

his wisdom. This was an idea that was prevalent among the many occult philosophies of Erasmus' time, from Hermeticism to Kabbala. Most of these philosophies were influenced initially by Neoplatonism in either its original, or its Renaissance, incarnation. Erasmus had very little sympathy with the more vulgar expressions of these philosophies preferring as always to drink from the source instead.[23] In *The Godly Feast* Eusebius, is depicted as the creator of a perfect little villa, which he consciously designed as a reflection of the higher creation in order to have an example of the wisdom of God nearby. The guest, Timothy, demonstrated a sympathy with this notion when he entered the villa. He said that he and his companions arrived early 'in order to have time to walk round and see this palace of yours, which we hear is filled with various delights - not a corner that doesn't bear the master's stamp'.[24] The notion that the master's stamp was all-pervading is clearly reminiscent of the divine creation. The view of God's role in his creation which Erasmus described in the *Antibarbari* is exactly that of a thoroughly pervasive presence. He wrote:

> the great and eternal Disposer, who is wisdom itself establishes all things with consummate skill, differentiates them with perfect rightness, so that each balances another in a marvellous way; nor does he allow anything to move at random in all the immense variety of the world.[25]

Thus the Erasmian concept of the universe was one of an ordered entity without randomness or chaos. Underlying all creation was the divine law. The wise man would meditate on creation in order to uncover and know the divine wisdom and truth. Eusebius replied to Timothy that he would 'see a palace worthy of such a king'.[26] In fact Timothy had not mentioned a 'king' but Erasmus frequently used the metaphor of a 'king', as Plato did, to depict a man who's

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23 For instance, MA Screech has pointed out that this was true even in relation to the far more acceptable case of Ficino's Neoplatonism because while Erasmus may well have been influenced by him nevertheless 'on the whole..Erasmus goes back to Plato himself'. *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London, 1980) 76.

24 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 176.

25 *CWE,* 23, *Antibarbari,* 59.

26 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 176.

fleshly impulses and passions were under the control of his reason.[27] In the adage *Sileni Alcibiadis*, for instance, Erasmus employed the term in this way: he said that a king should be as near as possible someone who resembled God. He should excel in wisdom and be far from all low passions. He should 'be to the state what the soul is to the body, what God is to the universe'.[28] Further on in *The Godly Feast* Timothy, himself, similarly interprets the word *king* in a scriptural passage as meaning 'the perfect man, who with his bodily passions under control, is governed solely by the power of the Holy Spirit'.[29] In the colloquy then, Eusebius the host, represents perfected man and as such is a mirror of God himself because such a man shares in the divine nature. Man, the microcosm reflects the divine macrocosm.

The villa is depicted as a kind of *theatrum mundi* from which God can be ascertained. Later in the piece Timothy refers to the idea that the villa was an image of the larger creation when he says 'there is something of the divine about this place, everything shines so'.[30] This is reminiscent of the section of the *Phaedrus* in which Plato described how the soul can recognize images of the higher world in their earthly shadows which are 'seen through a glass dimly'. He then described a 'beatific vision' of beauty '*shining* in company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too *shining* in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense'.[31] Surrounding the garden are galleries with frescoes of plants, trees, birds, quadrupeds, lakes, rivers, seas and fish: in other words an image of the totality of the natural world.[32] This represents a self-contained and integrated system of knowledge. Perfectly designed to

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27 This is a recurring metaphor in the *Enchiridion* see *CWE,* 66, 42-5.

28 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 89. See also *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 42.

29 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 185.

30 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 205.

31 Plato, *Phaedrus,* 250 a-d. Shining is also referred to by Erasmus as an aspect of the process of spiritual illumination. See *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 18.

32 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast*, 178-82. For a discussion of Erasmus' literary purpose in this rich depiction of the frescoes see Terence Cave, '*Enargia:* Erasmus and the Rhetoric of Presence in the Sixteenth Century', in *L'esprit créateur* 16 (1976) 5-19.

instruct those who visit it and to create the right atmosphere for the acquisition of knowledge.[33] Everything serves this purpose: there is no waste and nothing is superfluous. It is a perfectly functioning whole. Its significance is clear from the fact that Erasmus described it in vivid detail. If it were not significant then the detail would have been simply tedious and extreme. It is neither, and the reader is drawn into the cohesiveness of the description. It is a microcosm of the natural world from which the seeker of wisdom can learn the true nature of God. Erasmus expressed this notion in his *Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles* when he wrote that

> God cannot be grasped by human intellect because it is weighted down by the body' but reason can 'infer one thing from another - the invisible from the visible, the universal from the particular, the eternal from the temporal, the things that are grasped only by the intellect from the things perceived by the senses; and he has set human beings in the midst of the theatre of the world so that from the created things which they see with their eyes, touch with their hands, experience through use, they might trace out and search for the creator. Like the blind who discover by feel what they cannot see, so human beings through reflection upon the marvellous creation of the universe might arrive at some knowledge of God, whom truly to know is utmost felicity.[34]

This is why he believed that 'earth, water, air, the very celestial bodies and finally even the angels themselves, were created especially to serve the requirements of men'.[35] In his *Paraphrase on John* he again argued that although the nature of God surpasses human intelligence

> even so traces of divine power, wisdom, and goodness cast a dim glow in the created universe. As a result parallels drawn from the things that we do in some fashion grasp with our senses and intelligence guide us towards a vague and shadowy knowledge of the incomprehensible, so

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33 The idea that man can come to know God through his creation can be found in Roms 1:19-20, as well as in Plato, notably, in *Timaeus,* 28 c-29 d.

34 *CWE,* 50, *Paraphrase on Acts,* 109. This concept is also to be found in Plato, *Phaedrus,* 250 a-d. For the notion that the mind is hampered in its task of understanding by the body see Plato, *Phaedo,* 65 a - 67 c, and 81 c.

35 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 48.

that somehow we gaze on them as through a dream and mist.[36]

Consequently, Erasmus believed that all truth was hidden and had, therefore, to be mined from the depths. Sticking to the dead letter of Scripture was useless and even potentially dangerous; It was always necessary instead to penetrate to its hidden spirit. This was the only method of perceiving the true wisdom of God outlined in it. The factual historical information contained in Scripture particularly the Old Testament was, at best, of limited importance when taken at face value. In a letter to Helias Marcqus in 1518 he argued that the correct title of the book of the Maccabees should be 'on the Sovereign Rule of Reason', and that 'the message of the narrative is that reason can produce any effect in human beings, once it has mastered their desires'.[37] In the *Querela Pacis* he confirmed the psychological allegorical approach to the Old Testament when he argued that the 'bloody slaughters which fill the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures' should be interpreted 'not as the mangling of human bodies but as the tearing of wicked inclinations out of the heart'.[38] From his earliest writings, he championed the cause of spiritual reality over material illusion. This was particularly evident in the *Enchiridion.* where he wrote: 'be so convinced of the existence of invisible things that those things that are seen become but mere shadows, which present to the eye only a faint image of invisible realities'.[39] Truth, for Erasmus, was hidden, eternal and spiritual. Therefore literature could only approach truth allegorically. He addressed the reader of the *Enchiridion* thus:

if you read unallegorically of the infants struggling within the womb, the right of primogeniture sold for a mess of pottage, the fraudulent seizing of a father's blessing ahead of time, David's slaying of Goliath with a sling, and the shaving off of Samson's locks, then it

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36 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 13.

37 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 3. Helias Marcaeus who was born in Metz was rector and confessor of a convent of Benedictine nuns at Cologne which contained relics of the Maccabeans. He spent much time and effort in promoting the cult of the seven Maccabean martyrs and their mother. This letter was one which Marcaeus persuaded Erasmus to write. It served as a preface to a text on the Maccabees attributed to Josephus which Marcaeus published.

38 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 300. See also *CWE,* 27, *Institutio Principis Christiani,* 252, where Erasmus says 'the battles and carnage of the Hebrews and their savage cruelty to their enemies are to be interpreted allegorically; otherwise they make pernicious reading'.

39 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 66.

is of no more importance than if you read the fiction of poets. What difference is there whether you read the Book of Kings or the Book of Judges or Livy's history, if in none of them you perceive the allegory? The latter book contains many things that could amend morals, but in the Bible there are some things that are even absurd at first glance and if understood only superficially can be prejudicial to morals.[40]

Thus when Erasmus himself wanted to impart true knowledge of the Divine he, in imitation of his divine master, often employed indirect methods. In doing this he was emulating Christ because he believed that Christ, not only used allegory when he taught in parables, but also that he used the entirety of his life itself to symbolize essential truths of existence.

In the colloquy the allegory begins when the guests enter the villa by means of a courtyard. This is guarded by an image of St Peter who is depicted as annunciating a prescription for salvation in three different tongues and from three different sources. In Latin he says 'if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments'; in Greek: 'repent ye, therefore, and be converted', and finally in Hebrew: 'the just shall live by his faith'.[41] Here, Erasmus was presenting the idea that the three main traditions from which Christianity draws its precepts have their own unique and different ways of expressing the same important concept of the method of perfection. Thus the visitor to the villa is alerted to the fact that he or she is being invited in to discover the way or method of perfection and, crucially, is also being told that there are various traditions in which this method can be discovered. St Peter, the doorkeeper, as the head of the Church of Christ represents the idea that it is by means of the teaching of the church that men are first called to the process of perfection or sanctification. The next area of the house is a chapel with an image of Christ who is also depicted as speaking three messages. Thus having been awakened to the possibility of salvation by the church, the Christian then progresses to a deeper knowledge of Christ. This is the next step in the way of salvation. In Latin the figure of Christ says 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'; in Greek: 'I am Alpha and Omega', and in Hebrew: 'come , ye children, harken unto me; I will teach you

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40 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 68.

41 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 177.

the fear of the Lord'.[42] In both the case of the Christ image and that of St Peter the Latin quotations are taken from the synoptic gospels; the Greek quotations are respectively taken from the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation. The Hebrew quotes, as one would imagine, are from the Old Testament. They represent the three sources of Christian doctrine: the synoptic gospels, the non-synoptic cannon, and the Old Testament. While it is understandable that St Peter should quote from these three traditions it is less accurate that Christ himself should because the historical Jesus did not span these three traditions. This was therefore an expression of the Erasmian belief that the spirit of Christ is eternal and consequently the message of salvation is the same regardless of which tradition it is transmitted through or indeed whether it is received from the established church or, directly, through the spirit of Christ. His exegesis of the Old Testament in particular also reveals this belief in the eternal nature of the spirit of Christ which he believed clearly existed before the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth. In the colloquy there follows a description of the three upper galleries in the villa. Eusebius described how on the wall of one of these there was a fresco of the 'entire life of Jesus as related by the four Evangelists, up to the sending forth of the Holy Spirit and the first preaching of the Apostles from Acts'.[43] On the opposite wall are 'corresponding figures and prophecies of the Old Testament, particularly from the Prophets and Psalms'.[44] What is significant about this is that Eusebius declares that the latter 'contain nothing other than the life of Christ and the Apostles, told in a different manner'.[45] It was, of course, completely orthodox to believe that the Old Testament prophets foretold the life of Christ but Erasmus was saying something subtly different here. He did not say that the Old Testament was a foreshadowing of the New but that it was exactly the same message told in a different manner.

Erasmus' concept of Christ as a universal and eternal force knowable not only through the Incarnation of Christ in Jesus of Nazareth but also through the

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42 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 177.

43 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 206.

44 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 206.

45 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 206.

application of reason to the creation is the underlying reason for the most striking and unorthodox element of the piece: the very high regard that the participants had for some ancient philosophers and writers. This stretched the bounds of orthodoxy particularly when they wanted to include some of the ancients in the company of saints. Eusebius said that although Sacred Scripture was the basic authority in everything,

> I sometimes run across ancient sayings or pagan writings - even the poets' - so purely and reverently and admirably expressed, that I can't help believing their authors' hearts were moved by some divine power. And perhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand, and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar.[46]

Eusebius' namesake, the church Father from Caesarea, also believed that there were people who were imbued with the spirit of Christ before the time of Jesus. In his *History of the Church* he wrote:

> although we certainly are a youthful people and this undeniably new name of Christians has only lately become known among all nations, nevertheless our life and mode of conduct, together with our religious principles, have not been recently invented by us, but from almost the beginnings of man were built on the natural concepts of those whom God loved in the distant past.[47]

Erasmus may well have been alluding to this when he named the host in this colloquy.[48] For him, the spirit of Christ had always existed. It was incarnated in the historical Jesus in a unique way but it was eternal. In his *Paraphrase on John* he expounded on this in some detail. He considered that 'the mistake of those who think that the Son and word of God came into existence only at the time when he was physically born of the Virgin Mary' was 'stupid'.[49] He

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46 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 192.

47 Eusebius, *The History of the Church,* (Penguin classics, 1988) 46.

48 Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel,* is considered to have been the source for Ficino's syncretism and under his influence the syncretism of later evangelical humanists. See DP Walker, *The Ancient Theology,* (London, 1972) 40.

49 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 17.

declared:

every created thing has a beginning in time, but the Son of God was born twice, once from his Father before all time, or rather without time, true God from true God, and again in time marked off from eternity, of the Virgin Mary, true human from true human.[50]

He then hammered home the point saying 'the Father begot the one Son in two ways; he brought forth the one word in two ways: once in time, but forever outside all time'.[51] This was the basis for Erasmus belief that men before the coming of Jesus Christ were capable of knowing the way of Christian perfection. Unlike some other humanists Erasmus did not speculate in any philosophical or theological way on the salvation of pagans but he did recognize their moral, and human perfection. Since the process of perfecting human nature in the Erasmian sense was nothing less than the *philosophia Christi* itself then his recognition of the human perfection of some ancient men entailed a belief in their sanctity also.[52] The guests at *The Godly Feast* display a sympathy with this notion when they discuss several passages from secular classical writings as well as scriptural passages. This is a demonstration of Erasmus' belief in the usefulness of these ancient writings in the perfection process because they breathed the spirit of Christ. Nephalius and Uranius compared what Socrates said in the *Phaedo* about the body being a garrison with what was to be found in the writings of St Peter and St Paul on the same subject.[53] A discussion then ensued about the proper spirit in which to die and the consensus was that Socrates expressed a far more Christian spirit in this process than most so-called Christians. Chrysoglottus said:

I think I've never read anything in pagan writers more proper to a true Christian than what Socrates spoke to Crito ...before drinking the hemlock: "Whether God will approve of my

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50 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 17.

51 *CWE,* 46, *Paraphrase on John,* 17.

52 This concept of the *instauratio* of human nature is in the *Paraclesis,* Jean Leclerc, ed., *Desiderii Erasmii Opera Omnia,* (Leiden, 1704) 141. For a translation see JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 100.

53 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast*, 194; See Plato, *Phaedo,* 62 b.

works", he said, "I know not; certainly I have tried hard to please him. Yet I have good hope that he will accept my efforts."[54]

Chrysoglottus interpreted this passage as meaning that although Socrates was suitably diffident about his own deeds, 'yet by reason of his earnest desire to obey the divine will, he conceived a strong hope that God in his goodness would accept them, because he had endeavoured to live righteously'.[55] Nephalius then heaped praise on Socrates saying: 'an admirable spirit, surely, in one who had not known Christ and the Sacred Scriptures. And so, when I read such things of such men, I can hardly help exclaiming, "Saint Socrates, pray for us".'[56] Chrysoglottus joined with this sentiment and added: 'as for me, there are many times when I do not hesitate to hope confidently that the souls of Virgil and Horace are sanctified'.[57]

While Erasmus, as always when he was expressing a potentially heterodox view, used slightly ambiguous language here it is nevertheless very clear in the context of the entire piece and his writings in general that he believed the true spirit of Christ was to be found in some of the ancients and their writings.[58] In 1519 Erasmus had written to Jacob de Voecht about reading Cicero. This letter and the later *Ciceronianus* demonstrate his belief in the essentially Christian spirit exhibited in Cicero's writings. He extolled Cicero's virtue and said that what he wrote was worthy of a saint or even a deity.[59]

Erasmus also expressed his views on the spiritual achievements of the ancients

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54 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 194; Plato, *Phaedo*, 69 d.

55 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 194.

56 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 194.

57 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 194.

58 For a useful discussion of this ambiguity see, *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 233-5. The latest consensus among historians is that Erasmus was not sanctifying Socrates here, for a good synopsis of this view see Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence*, (Toronto,1996) 166-8.

59 *CWE*, 7, *Letters*, 1013: 72.

in the *Antibarbari*. This work is a major source for his belief in the value of pagan writing to the perfection process of Christianity. In it he wrote that 'the pagans perfected systems of knowledge according to the divine plan, not for us to scorn them, but for our use'.[60] All the good studies of the pagan world had been 'prepared by Christ for his society', he had supplied the intellect and the zest for inquiry and 'it was through him alone that they found what they sought'.[61] The principal character in the piece, Batt, goes as far as to say that he would, in fact, allow the secular learning of the ancients to be called Christian.[62] He also says: 'if we wished to indulge in guesswork, I could easily prove that the great men among the pagans are saved, or else no one is'.[63] Plutarch, too, belonged to this level of saintly ancient. The year after writing *The Godly Feast* Erasmus wrote to Johann Von Botzheim and told him that he had be translating several works of Plutarch: 'these exercises I enjoyed all the more because they contributed substantially to the building of character no less than to the learning of Greek; for I have read nothing outside Scripture with such a high moral tone'.[64] As was the case with all of his beliefs Erasmus' found his source for this view throughout Scripture but it was in his exposition of St Paul's epistle to the Romans that he found it most clearly expressed. In this work Erasmus paraphrased Paul as saying that many men before Christ had sinned with impunity but that God had now revealed his anger against all of them even those who were exempt from the law of Moses. 'For they have not

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60 *CWE*, 23, *Antibarbari*, 59.

61 *CWE*, 23, *Antibarbari*, 60.

62 *CWE*, 23, *Antibarbari*, 62.

63 *CWE*, 23, *Antibarbari*, 57-8. While it is true that in the *Antibarbari*, Erasmus said that Christ reserved the real highest good, 'the perfect gift' for his own time, this can only really be reconciled with Batt's other statements about the spiritual perfection of pagans by the Erasmian concept of the eternal nature of Christ. Although men since the Incarnation now have the real highest good at their disposal, those men who sought this goal before that time were also perfected by God.

64 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1013: 302-3. Johann von Botzheim was a canon of the cathedral chapter of Constance. He was a firm supporter of the new learning and even showed some sympathy for the reformers. Erasmus valued him as a friend and left him a silver spoon which had an image of Saint Sebastian on it in his will. He also described his house as a 'real home of the Muses' and it bears a strong resemblance to the villa in *the Godly Feast* despite the fact that Erasmus visited it after he had written the colloquy.

applied the truth *however they have come to know it* to pious and holy living'.[65] Again, here he expressed the view that one of the ways of discerning the divine truth was in the creation. He said that besides revealing his truth to man through the prophets and in Scripture God has also 'certainly revealed it in the miracle of this whole structure of the world. For even though God himself is invisible, nevertheless by the intellect he is seen in this world so marvellously created and so wonderfully administered.'[66] He concluded that from the workmanship of the world

> is seen the power of the creator, a power which neither knows any beginning nor will have any end. In fact, the creation demonstrates his very divinity by which he was always in himself complete even before the founding of the world, so that they have no pretext for their own impiety.[67]

Erasmus believed there was yet another means of discerning the truth. This was his view that all men had an innate knowledge of the *philosophia Christi*. He found evidence of this in the same epistle to the Romans. He paraphrased St Paul thus:

> God cherishes and approves meritorious action even if there should be no law, and he turns away from those even more who, although they have the law, do not obey it. There is no one, however, who is entirely without the law. For when the races foreign to the law of Moses do of their own accord under the guidance of nature the things which are ordered by the law even though they are instructed by no prescription of the Mosaic law, they themselves are a law unto themselves, because they express the substance of the law, engraved not on tablets but on their own minds.[68]

This knowledge is what Erasmus later in *The Godly Feast* refers to as the

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65 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 17, my italics.

66 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 17.

67 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 18.

68 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 20.

'Master'.[69] In his *Paraphrase on Romans* he elaborated on the concept and said: 'whatever among them is usually done before a tribunal of justice is done in their hearts; your conscience gives testimony for or against you, and your thoughts contending with one another, alternately accuse and defend you.'[70] Thus he believed in an innate sense of right and wrong in man which could not really be ignored but the more perfect a man became the more fully he recognizes this 'Master'. While this is certainly a description of conscience, it is also far more. It is an innate knowledge of the method of perfection. For Erasmus morality in the usual sense was of no consequence: what was right was whatever aided perfection and what was wrong was whatever hindered it.[71] This interior voice was therefore a guide to the method of perfection.

The principal theological difficulty with the Erasmian version of the existence of the spirit of Christ before the time of Jesus lies in the doctrine of the Redemption. If man could be perfected by his discernment of the truth of Christ before the saviour was born then why would the Incarnation have been necessary? Erasmus never engaged in this kind of theological speculation. He thought that it was quite useless for man to speculate on the higher mysteries and he was perfectly happy to accept church teachings on these matters. He always adhered to the orthodox theology of Redemption. He never denied, and clearly believed, that Jesus redeemed fallen mankind by his passion and death. If, however, his views of the precise nature of this act of Redemption were different from the accepted orthodoxy he never expressed them. This doctrine was so central to the Catholic religion that he would have sacrificed his position of influence and even possibly his life if he had denied it.[72] He saw no value at

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69 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast*, 185. This is reminiscent of Plato, *Republic,* 443 d, when he says 'the just man does not permit the several elements within him to interfere with one another, or any of them to do the work of others, - he sets in order his own inner life, and is his own master and his own law'.

70 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 20-1.

71 Geraldine Thompson has argued that 'morality to Erasmus is more than mere ethics, or even mere reasonableness sometimes: it is a part of man's imaging of God, and of his search for Christian perfection; and so it can hardly be separated from the devout life'. *Under Pretext of Praise,* (Toronto, 1973) XI.

72 See AHT Levi's introduction to Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 27-32.

all in martyrdom. In the *Enchiridion* he urged the reader to conceal his true feelings and instead be 'all things to all men, so that you may win everyone to the side of Christ, as far as it is possible, without giving offence to piety'. He also exhorted the Christian to 'adapt' himself 'to everyone exteriorly, provided that interiorly your resolution remains unshaken'.[73] The enigmatic Erasmus followed his own advice. His humanism led him to a belief in the idea of the innate perfectibility of man.[74] The Erasmian programme of perfection relies on an intimate knowledge of the self.[75] Man must know himself in the deepest possible way before he can ever hope to engage in the war of perfection. Pre-Christian man could engage in this same process and find Christ. This is the beginning of wisdom which we have to mine from Scripture and of which, crucially, the ancients were also aware.[76] He believed that the whole struggle for perfection depended on this self-knowing because the process of perfection contained in the *philosophia Christi* was simply the restoration of imperfect man to a state of true human nature.[77] Thus the Erasmian programme of perfection did not emphasize the concept of grace imparted to fallen man by God on account of the Redemption of Christ. Erasmus was, nevertheless, truly Christian in his philosophy because he believed that the spirit of Christ was the only and proper goal for man. He believed that the heavenly philosophy had never in the past been transmitted to mankind in a more efficacious way than by the historical Jesus but there is an element in his thinking which is purely humanistic. He believed that the human mind contains the divine spark or image of Christ and that if man accesses this by a process of self-knowledge he will then discern the way or method of perfection which is the *philosophia*

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73 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 104. Erasmus also found this concept in Plato and he often mentioned it. See *CWE,* 2, *Letters,* 180: 82; *CWE,* 8, *Letters,* 1195: 173; *CWE,* 8, *Letters,* 1202: 205; *CWE,* 8, *Letters,* 1167: 113.

74 See above in Chapter 2, and also AHT Levi, introduction to Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 23-28.

75 This program is most fully expounded in the *Enchiridion* where Erasmus endeavours to show man to himself.

76 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 40.

77 *Paraclesis,* in, JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 100.

Christi. [78]

The colloquy is an exposition of the Erasmian Eucharist inasmuch as it describes the method of incorporating Christ which is the perfection process. The characters themselves are part of this exposition. They can be interpreted allegorically as representing different aspects of the perfectly functioning Christian psyche. In this way Erasmus was trying to help the reader to a better understanding of the human traits which should be cultivated in order to achieve perfection. The four guests and their shadows, together with Eusebius represent these traits. The lover of God, Theophilus is balanced by his shadow Eulalius who is sweet-spoken or eloquent. He would, therefore, allow Theophilus to express his divine love in an understandable and acceptable form. Conversely the golden-tongued Chrysoglottus has Theodidactus with his teaching skill as his shadow. The latter would provide the former with the requisite knowledge for his sweet speeches. Each of these couples also reflects the other. In each duo the very important attributes of love and knowledge are combined with the necessary skill for their transmission. Indeed, as confirmation of this, Eusebius placed them opposite each other at the table on his right and left side.[79] Erasmus believed that in order to achieve the goal of Christ it was necessary to acquire knowledge of all aspects of this goal and also to love it. Thus the characters contain the elements which were essential for the achievement of perfection. The character Timothy symbolizes the friend of St Paul who helped to set up and administer the early church. He is hailed as the elder of the group and as such he represents the community of the first Pauline Christians. He also alerts the attentive reader to the concept of syncretism contained in the piece. He is a syncretic figure because in his *Paraphrase on Acts* Erasmus pointed out that Timothy was the product of a mixed marriage: his mother was a Jewish convert

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78 *CWE,* 50, *Paraphrase on Acts,* 110, where Erasmus wrote that God fashioned Adam out of clay but 'breathed into this mud image a tiny bit of celestial breath, through which we might resemble more closely our parent God himself and because of the similarity in nature might recognize him more easily'. See also *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 41 where Erasmus said that the soul, on account of its heavenly nature is drawn towards heavenly things because 'like is attracted to like'.

79 CWE, 39, *The Godly Feast,* 183.

to Christianity and his father was a pagan.[80] He has as his shadow the moderate and discreet Sophronius. The reflection of this couple is the duo of the young Hellenist Uranius and his moderate and calm shadow Nephalius. The shadows in both cases are moderating, uniting forces. Their partners represent the sources of Christian wisdom. In the Erasmian system pre-eminence is given to the synoptic writings and the writings of St Paul, of course, but Erasmus was always at pains to point out that a reading of the classics, especially Greek philosophy, was the ideal training for a proper interpretation of the New Testament.[81] Each character had a shadow who was moderate, signifying that the sources of wisdom should be treated with discretion and discernment and never used in a fanatical or immoderate way. For Erasmus the message of Christ as outlined in the New Testament was reflected in much of the classical corpus. This concept is evident in the famous passage in which Eusebius, Chrysoglottus, Theophilus, Uranius and Nephalius all proclaimed the sanctity of ancient classical writers.[82] Three of the four duo's are represented in this passage; Timothy and his shadow are not. This is because they connote the early Pauline church and as such they had no part to play in endorsing the sanctity of pre-Christian pagans. Indeed their historical context necessitated the combatting of Greek pagan religion. Timothy is thought to have been martyred in A.D. 97 because he opposed the festivities of Diana.[83] Perhaps what Erasmus was implying here was that the Christian opposition to Greek pagan ideas came about because of the particular historical context in which Christianity was established rather than any inherent contradictions between its basic tenets and those of the Greeks. The host, Eusebius, represents the Christian duty of service and generosity to mankind. Eusebius provided the venue and the food for everyone. He also directed the more important mental food, or conversation. At the end of the piece he had to rush off on Christian

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80 *CWE,* 50, *Paraphrase on Acts,* 100.

81 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 69.

82 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 192-4.

83 See, *Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church.*

work in the service of others.[84] In the ultimate sense being properly of service to others was work which could only be done by a true perfected human being. His intentions, his objectives, and his understanding would all have to be the correct ones. He would not be led by selfish passion or worldly ambition and he would have acquired true wisdom by dint of Herculean labours himself. Thus he would be capable, through having reached this state of objectivity and true wisdom, of knowing precisely what help another individual needed. He would then have had the resources to provide this. The Greek name Eusebius means godly or pious. Thus the godly man provided a godly feast for his friends.

The fact that each guest has a 'shadow' is consistent with the Erasmian theme of the dichotomy of the spirit and the flesh or the spirit and the law which pervades the entire piece. The notion of shadows is reminiscent of the Platonic cave myth which Erasmus used in the *Moria* to demonstrate this dichotomy. He used it to show that mankind's perception of reality was in fact a miasma.[85] Theophilus says that God rejected the Jews 'not because they observed the rites of the Law but because, foolishly puffed up by keeping them, they would neglect what God especially requires of us. They embraced the shadows and neglected the substance.'[86] Erasmus, like Plato, believed that only the spiritual realm was real and that the material world was but an inferior shadow of this true reality. His version of the Platonic philosophy was Christianized, of course. He believed that God was spiritual in essence and that since we were of God and made in his likeness that our true nature was thus spiritual. The folly of the world was that people did not understand this and thought the only reality was that which was accessible to the material senses.

This was a prime reason for Erasmus' rejection of Aristotle. He believed the latter taught that if a thing cannot be measured and weighed and repeated in experiments then it is not real. It struck Erasmus as ironic, but very human, that

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84 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 206-7.

85 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 202-3. The allusion is to Plato, *Republic,* book 7: 514 a ff.

86 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 188.

a religion which was obviously concerned mainly with the metaphysical realm would take Aristotelian philosophy as its main intellectual bulwark. This was precisely what the medieval scholastics had done. In the 1515 edition of the *Adagia* Erasmus said that the church had reached the point that 'the whole of Aristotle was accepted as an integral part of theology, and accepted in such a way that his authority was almost as sacred as that of Christ'.[87] He went on to complain that

> from him we have learnt that human felicity cannot be complete without worldly goods - physical or financial. From him we have learnt that a state cannot flourish where all things are held in common. We try to combine all his doctrines with the teaching of Christ, which is like mixing water and fire.[88]

Here we have more than the contemporary anti-scholastic humanist rejection of Aristotle as inimical to Plato in philosophical terms. Erasmus viewed Aristotle as a representative of the blindness of the world in his glorification of dialectic whereas he viewed Plato as the champion of the wisdom of the unseen reality.[89] For Erasmus the unseen reality was the realm of the divine in which man by means of his spiritual nature was capable of participating. The blindness of worldly philosophy was naturally dangerous for, and incompatible with, the godly philosophy. To him what the vulgar crowd called reality was, in fact, illusion, and conversely what they thought of as illusion was, in fact, the highest reality.[90] He believed that the human condition was such that man could not easily understand this. For Erasmus the first vestige of original sin caused this blindness which is 'a cloud of ignorance that obscures the judgment of reason'.[91] He went on to say that this blindness 'makes us incapable of

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87 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980)123.

88 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 123-4.

89 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 69. See also *CWE,* 3, *Letters,* 337: 124, where Erasmus asked Maarten Van Dorp ' What can Aristotle have to do with Christ?

90 This is the principle theme of the *Moria.*

91 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 54.

distinguishing in our choice of things, so that we pursue the worst instead of the best, and choose the less profitable over what should be preferred to it'.[92] The only way we could perceive the truth was indirectly by means of metaphor, allegory and image because truth, or true reality was spiritual. Erasmus took this quite literally and not in some mysterious way. He thought that the method of perceiving the truth was necessarily indirect and that the 'divine spirit has its own peculiar language and modes of speech'.[93] He believed that this applied to all literature and he said that in reading Homer or Virgil we must not persist in clinging to the letter, we must look to it's allegorical side.[94]

In *The Godly Feast* Erasmus used the device of the shadow to elaborate this concept. Sophronius, the shadow, interprets a piece of Scripture. Before he does this, however, he expresses reservations about his ability. He says 'If you'll take in good part whatever I say, I'll try my best to tell you how the matter looks to me, How else could a shadow shed light on darkness?'[95] Eusebius replies to this: 'shadows have their own light, one more suitable to our eyes'.[96] In the Platonic cave myth men are bound in chains and prevented from seeing the light of true reality. The images they can see are the only reality to them. They are convinced that the unseen does not exist. In fact, of course, the opposite is the truth. Thus, in a kind of reversal of this idea, Erasmus made the shadows throw light on the darkness of human blindness because what is commonly perceived as shadowy and non-existent is in fact the true reality and who better in that case to interpret the truth than a shadow? In a later part of the dialogue Theophilus employed a similar, if rather unusual, method to solve a problem under discussion. He said: 'my mind is dreaming and is bringing forth something, I know not what. If you order me to, I'll set it before you, whatever

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92 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 54.

93 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 35.

94 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 33.

95 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 186.

96 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 186.

it is, and you'll be the interpreters or midwives'.[97] The problem in question had been expressed in terms of a mathematical equation. On the face of it then, it is all the more strange, that it should have been solved by a method as indirect as dreaming. It is, however, another example of the Erasmian concept of the appropriateness of the indirect approach to the truth of Christ because of its spiritual nature. The enigma that lies at the heart of his corpus was deliberately constructed, but not for spurious reasons. He was aware that wisdom and perfection were achieved through suffering and could not be imparted directly. The Christian had to incorporate the gospel message and live it in order to understand it. Experience, reflection and introspection were essential to its assimilation.

In the Erasmian world-view then, the body is shadow and the spirit is the true reality. As we have seen, however, this did not mean that Erasmus rejected the body altogether.[98] It was by means of the struggle between the body and the spirit that perfection could be achieved. Thus the shadows in this piece perform the very important function of balancing reality. Eusebius declared that our bodies are the 'partners of our minds'. He went on to say that he preferred the word *'partners* to *instruments* or *dwellings* or *tombs'*.[99] This is quite significant because here Erasmus made Eusebius consciously reject St Paul, who, as Uranius told the group a little later, called the body 'a tabernacle', which would be the equivalent of a dwelling.[100] Erasmus, speaking in his own voice, in the *Enchiridion* did the same thing.[101] There he was willing to question the reported words of Christ himself because they did not fit in with his interpretation of the *philosophia Christi* as a whole. He was able to do this because in his humanistic method of exegesis he, like other humanists considered the context of writings and writers in order to achieve a true interpretation of the piece under

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97 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 201.

98 This is central to Erasmus' notion that spiritual strength is achieved by overcoming the weakness of the flesh, see above in Chapter 2.

99 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 189.

100 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 194.

101 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 69-70.

scrutiny. As a result of this method he concluded that the evangelists were men who wanted to communicate to posterity a true and comprehensible portrait of Christ and his message. He thought that in order to achieve this they had presented whatever data suited their individual purposes. He said, of the fourth Gospel, that John had written it to supply certain things the other evangelists had passed over. The chief reason for this according to Erasmus was his 'desire to assert the divinity of Christ against the heresies which were already....sprouting up'.[102]

The theme of exegesis is explored further in *The Godly Feast* when, in conformity with the spirit of a Christian meal, Eusebius suggests that they read and interpret three verses of the book of Proverbs as they eat. This was a text favoured by Erasmus because of its association with Solomon whom he believed was a prefiguration of Christ.[103] Eusebius then prays that Christ should also attend the feast and 'mingle with all our food and drink, so that everything may taste of him, but most of all may he penetrate our hearts!'[104] In order to create the right atmosphere for the reception of Christ into their midst Eusebius then asked his servant to read some scriptural verses which the guests in turn would interpret. Erasmus had perhaps signalled this exercise earlier when, in describing the villa, he depicted various water-features including a stream, ponds, and a fountain. In the *Enchiridion* when he was advocating the allegorical approach to Scripture he said that water was often used as a symbol for 'knowledge of the divine law'.[105] He went on to say that there was frequent mention

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102 *CWE* , 9, *Letters,* 1333: 242.

103 See MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980)121.
In a letter to Justus Jonas, Erasmus reported that Colet would have a boy read 'in a loud voice a chapter from the Pauline Epistles or the Proverbs of Solomon...a passage from which was then discussed.' *CWE* , 8, *Letters,* 1211: 235.

104 *CWE,* 39, *The Godly Feast,* 183. This is also a clear Eucharistic allusion.

105 *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 32.

in the sacred writings of wells, springs and rivers with this meaning, by which we are to understand that the diligent inquiry into the mystical writings is commended to us. What is the meaning of the water hidden in the veins of the earth but that the mystery is veiled by the letter? What is the meaning of water gushing forth in cascades but that the mystery is unveiled and explained? And when this mystery is spread abroad far and wide for the edification of the listener, what is to prevent us from calling it a river?[106]

The verses chosen were as follows:

the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the Lord pondereth the hearts. To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.[107]

Erasmus was well aware that his depiction of laymen interpreting Scripture was potentially controversial. It was a rather audacious act given the context of religious upheaval in 1522. While he certainly did not want to fan the flames of dissent the notion of every man being capable of being a theologian and an interpreter of Scripture is central to his belief system. He explicitly expressed the notion in 1516 in the *Paraclesis* where he said that he disagreed 'very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated into the vulgar tongue, be read by the uneducated, as if Christ taught such intricate doctrines that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians'.[108] He then argued that a true theologian is anyone who

teaches not by skill with intricate syllogisms but by a disposition of the mind, by the very expression and the eyes, by his very life that riches should be disdained, that the Christian should not put his trust in the supports of this world but must rely entirely on heaven, that a wrong should not be avenged, that a good should be wished for those wishing ill, that we should deserve well of those deserving ill. That all good men should be loved and cherished equally as members of the same body, that the evil should be tolerated if they cannot be corrected, that those who are stripped of their goods, those who are turned away from

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106 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 32-3.

107 Proverbs 21:1-3.

108 *Paraclesis*, in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 96-7.

possessions, those who mourn are blessed and should not be deplored and that death should even be desired by the devout, since it is nothing other than a passage to immortality. And if anyone under the inspiration of the spirit of Christ preaches this kind of doctrine, inculcates it, exhorts, incites, and encourages men to it, he indeed is truly a theologian, even if he should be a common labourer or weaver. And if anyone exemplifies this doctrine in his life itself, he is in fact a great doctor.[109]

There were, at the time of composition of this colloquy, groups of laymen with humanist leanings established in many of the imperial cities calling themselves sodalities, who met regularly to discuss Scripture. These groups were soon to be very influential in the reception of the Reformation in their respective cities but at this time Erasmus was still completely in favour of this kind of activity. In the colloquy Eusebius questions whether it is permissible for simple laymen to discuss theological topics but Timothy in true Erasmian fashion answers that 'it would be permissible even for sailors, in my opinion, provided there is no rash attempt at formal definition'.[110] Thus Erasmus was really undermining the fundamental duty of the church to interpret and disseminate Scripture. Moreover in Timothy's next sentence we see Erasmus' idea of *ecclesia* itself. Timothy continued: 'perhaps Christ, who promised to be present wherever two men are gathered together in his name, will help us, since we are so many'.[111] So not only can laymen be doctors and theologians but they can also be the church itself. Erasmus did not believe that the hierarchy of the institutional church were the best exemplars of the Christian spirit. In his *Paraphrase on Mark,* as in many other writings, he is scathing in his denouncement of such men. He took the opportunity while criticizing the Pharisees to condemn their counterparts among his contemporaries. He railed against the bishops of his day and said that most of them would be cast into hell.[112] In a tirade which clearly applied to the sixteenth-century church he said of the Pharisees:

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109 *Paraclesis*, in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 98.

110 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast,* 184.

111 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast,* 184.

112 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 140.

they were holding the citadel of religion, they were continually in the temple, they had the law and the prophets at their fingertips, they were pale with fasting, they uttered long prayers, they gave alms, even their stoles and broad phylacteries had a wonderful aspect of piety.[113]

He then described Jesus' anger at them and the Temple and said that it indicated

that priests, scribes and Pharisees were justly to be removed from their position of religious authority since they had defiled and profaned that old and figurative religion with their avarice, fraudulence, pretence and all kinds of filth. Nowhere do we read of Jesus having ever been aroused in equal measure, nowhere having acted with equal rage.[114]

Indeed Erasmus was so determined to show Jesus' disapproval of the Temple and its priests that he put a command for their destruction into the mouth of Jesus which is not to be found anywhere in the New Testament.[115] This belief did not, however, lead Erasmus to a desire to eradicate the formal role of the church in everyday life. He held steadfastly to the belief that the church was very necessary to those who were infants in Christ and that it continued to be useful even after a certain level of Christianity had been achieved. He was adamant that to disrupt or destroy the unity of the Christian family would be a fatal mistake.

In truly Erasmian spirit Eusebius begins the examination of the first scriptural passage by saying he will lay aside the various conjectures of the traditional commentators and seek the moral sense himself. Essentially, he interprets the passage as meaning that the king's passions are the will, and sometimes the instrument, of God so that there is no point in opposing them. Timothy then searches out the deeper meaning of the verse. His interpretation is consistent with the central point of the piece which is that man achieves perfection by means of a deeper knowledge of himself and of the larger creation. Timothy

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113 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 139.

114 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark* , 139. See also *ibid.*, 137-8.

115 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 137. See also *ibid.*, 210, footnote 16.

interprets the verse as a description of just such a state of perfection. He says '"king" can be understood as the perfect man who, with his bodily passions under control, is governed solely by the power of the Holy Spirit'.[116] He goes on to explain that this man does not need external constraints on his behaviour. He clearly does not need the laws of the church although Timothy does not say this explicitly. What he does say is that

> to compel such a man to conform to human laws is perhaps inappropriate. Instead he should be left to his Master, by whose spirit he is led; he is not to be judged by those circumstances through which the weakness of feeble men is drawn, in one way or another, to true godliness. But if he does anything unrighteously, we ought to say with Paul: "God hath received him; to his own master he standeth or falleth." Likewise: "He that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man." Therefore nobody may prescribe to such men, but the Lord who set the bounds to sea and rivers has the heart of the king in his hand and directs it whithersoever he wills. What need is there to prescribe to him who voluntarily does more than human laws require? Or what foolhardiness would it be to bind by human regulations the man who (as is evident by certain signs) is governed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?[117]

Here we have a very clear exposition of Erasmus' views on the interior and spiritual nature of perfection. It would not be achieved by any amount of outward conformity to the laws of man or the man-made laws of the church. Later in the piece Chrysoglottus comments on the emphasis which the majority of Christians place on outward participation in ceremonies. He says that for most Christians these ceremonies are the 'alpha and omega of life'.[118] He describes how a child is first baptized then

> soon he's anointed again, at length he learns to confess, takes communion, becomes accustomed to resting on holy days, to hearing divine service, to fasting at times, to abstaining from meat, And if he does these things, he's considered a Christian beyond question. He marries - and receives another sacrament. He takes orders - and is once more

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116 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 185. See also *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 42-5

117 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 185-6.

118 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 196.

anointed and consecrated; his clothes are changed, prayers said. All these I approve of, but doing them from custom rather than from conviction I don't approve of. The notion that nothing else is need for Christianity I reject absolutely, since a large part of mankind, while trusting to these things, loses no time in making money by hook or by crook and becoming enslaved to anger, lust, malice, flattery, until at last they come to death's door. Here again ceremonies are ready. Confession is made over and over; extreme unction added; the Eucharist administered; sacred candles, a crucifix, holy water are at hand; indulgences produced; a papal brief displayed or brought on the spot for the dying man; a lavish funeral ordered; once again a solemn contract is made one man shouts in the dying person's ear - sometimes in fact, pesters him to an earlier death if (as frequently happens) he's too loud or well liquored.[119]

Then Chrysoglottus says that although some of these ceremonies which are sanctioned by the church are acceptable, 'there are other, more interior means of helping us to depart from this life with cheerfulness and Christian trust'.[120] This amounts to a fairly damning indictment of most of the common religious practices of his day and yet he holds back and modifies his very extreme condemnation with the last sentence. It was this apparent ambiguity that led most of the reformers to reject Erasmus as a weak and vacillating man.[121] They misunderstood him because his views were too subtle and considered for the revolutionary times he lived in. In many ways, however, his views were even more radical than the reformers. His notion of an interior church and the interior method of perfection went far beyond the views of Luther or Zwingli but his belief that Christianity was only reached by degrees and that therefore those who were in the early stages of the process needed the guidance of the church meant that he was violently opposed to bringing the church into disrepute because it would give scandal to the weak.

In the colloquy this view is expressed by Eulalius who reads a passage from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians: 'All things are lawful unto me, but all things are

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119 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 196.

120 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 196.

121 For a recent discussion of Luther's view of Erasmus see Richard Marius, 'Martin Luther's Erasmus, and How He Got that Way' in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 18 (1998) 70-88.

not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any'.[122] In his examination of this verse Eulalius employs the typically humanist procedure of placing it in its context by looking at the whole letter. He then concludes that despite Jewish food regulations St Paul believed it was 'permissible ... to eat anything one liked, and "unto the pure all things are pure".'[123] Erasmus views on ceremonies were quite clear if definitely unorthodox. In his *Paraphrase on Mark* he brought the scorn of the Paris theologians down upon himself with his interpretation of the incident in which the disciples and Jesus picked corn and to eat on the Sabbath. He paraphrased Jesus thus: 'I do not give them rules of this kind' - eat, abstain, work, dress and such like - 'lest they remain weak forever if they have once learned under my direction to trust corporeal things'.[124] When Jesus was tackled by the Pharisees he replied 'the man who, free from the tumult of evil passions, violates the Sabbath from a desire to help his neighbour violates it in a pious fashion'.[125] He continued, 'those who adhere to the Son of Man, who is master of all law, and teaches us to observe spiritually the regulations which have been prefigured by those carnal laws, are free from such Judaic ceremonies'.[126] The Erasmian view of ceremonies, however, had another vital element in it. In the colloquy he went on to argue that the exercise of freedom by the true Christian from ceremonial law was not necessarily always expedient:

> that all things were permissible was a matter of gospel liberty; but charity everywhere regards what contributes to the salvation of our neighbour and on that account frequently abstains from what is permitted, preferring to yield to the welfare of a neighbour rather than exercise its

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122 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 189. The verse is Corinthians 1: 6.

123 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 190. The theologians at Paris objected to this interpretation on the grounds that it was an attack on the practice of fasting. The gospel verse is Titus 1:15.

124 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 43.

125 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 45.

126 *CWE* , 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 45.

liberty.[127]

Eulalius clarified this further with reference to the views of the church Father, Ambrose. He said that he believed that when St Paul wrote 'I will not be brought under the power of any', he meant:

> though for the sake of my neighbour's salvation and the advancement of the Gospel I abstain sometimes from foods used in sacrifices, or forbidden by the Mosaic law, yet my mind is free, knowing I may eat whatever I please to satisfy my mere bodily needs.[128]

What Erasmus is saying through his character Eulalius is that the observance of traditional ritual is not at all a necessary prerequisite for perfection. Indeed the man who is truly Christian has no need whatsoever of such rites but he has a duty to his weaker fellow men to avoid undermining a rite which could function to increase their purity. While this was always Erasmus' view of the function of church ritual it was particularly important for him to point this out in 1522 when the Reformation was exploding onto the European stage. Erasmus was, of course, walking a tightrope with this view. He was really undermining the church while not wanting to cause it any strife. He dealt with this problem by always paying due deference to church doctrine and rites while criticizing what he perceived to be the wrong interpretation of their function at the same time. He genuinely wanted reformation rather than re-formation and schism.

Having extolled the interior liberty of the true Christian *vis a vis* official religious observance the guests then went on to castigate the lavishness and profligacy of the church. Eusebius led the charge:

> those who build or adorn monasteries or churches at excessive cost, when meanwhile so many of Christ's living temples are in danger of starvation, shiver in their nakedness, and are tormented by want of the necessities of life, seem to me almost guilty of a capital crime.[129]

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127 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 190.

128 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 191.

129 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 198-9.

He then went on to give many specific examples of lavish spending. He said:

when I was in Britain I saw St Thomas' tomb, laden with innumerable precious jewels in addition to other incredible riches. I'd rather have this superfluous wealth spent on the poor than kept for the use of officials who will plunder it all sooner or later.[130]

Moreover he believed that the intentions of the lay benefactors themselves were less than laudable. He thought their benefactions were signs of

a thirst for glory, not charity. Rich men covet a monument for themselves in churches where formerly there was not room for saints. They take care to have their likenesses carved and painted, with their names and an inscription about their gift added.[131]

While these people are silly and of bad intent Eusebius' real scorn is poured upon the priests and bishops who ought to know better. He says:

if I were a priest or a bishop, I would urge upon those thickheaded courtiers or merchants that if they wanted to have their sins forgiven in God's sight, they should spend their money secretly for the support of those who really need it.[132]

Instead of this these clergymen 'consider money wasted that is scattered thus, piecemeal and secretly, to relieve the immediate needs of the poor, since no memorial of it will survive for posterity!.'[133] Thus in the piece all outward expressions of the church are severely criticized and instead we are presented with a group of educated laymen mining the depths of Scripture for themselves. We are also presented with the idea that the spirit of Christ is to be found in all

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130 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 199. Of course this proved to be correct in England when Henry VIII instituted the dissolution of the monasteries.

131 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 199.

132 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 199.

133 *CWE*, 39, *The Godly Feast*, 199.

creation and in the writings of pious ancients. The Erasmian *ecclesia* was a spiritual one in which the person pursuing true Christian progress could participate whether he or she was ordained or not. Christianity was the perfection of human nature itself and so human nature was the raw material for the process. The institutional church was not at all the true church containing as it did many wicked people.[134] While it was necessary for the weak in spirit and those in the early stages of perfection the true and more perfect Christian would participate in the real spiritual *ecclesia* wherever he found it in order to continue on the path of Christ. Erasmus wrote the colloquy in order to elaborate for his more discerning readers, the true spiritual nature of the method of incorporating Christ in all its splendour and diversity. This was the true meaning of the Eucharist for him.

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134 For a discussion of Erasmus' concept of church see JD Tracy, *Erasmus: The Growth of a Mind,* (Geneva, 1972) 212-6. Erasmus also expressed his concept of church in the *Adagia,* see MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 122 and *ibid.*, 86.

The Perfection Process in Scripture

Sacred Scripture was, for Erasmus, the fount of all truth but it was something else too, it was the very instrument of salvation. It functioned for him as the primary means of discerning the method of perfection and as such it had the power to transform man. He believed that Christ not only taught the way to perfection by means of verbal instruction, but that he had also consciously constructed his life as a paradigm of the process of perfection. By interpreting both of these modes of communication in Scripture, Erasmus believed that man could uncover the *philosophia Christi* which contained the wisdom of the way of perfection. When he outlined his views on the *philosophia Christi* in the *Paraclesis* he emphasized, above all, its power of transformation.[1] He then expanded on this and said:

> if anyone should devoutly philosophize, praying more than arguing and seeking to be transformed rather than armed for battle, he would without a doubt find that there is nothing pertaining to the happiness of man and the living of his life which is not taught, examined, and unravelled in these works.[2]

Erasmus' emphasis on developing a new philology and a more precise exegesis were the means of achieving his main goal which was the transformation of men's hearts. He believed that the discipline of theology had degenerated from its earlier golden age and he described this degeneration in a letter to Lorenzo Campeggi which he wrote in 1520. He said that in the earliest times the

> Christian philosophy was a matter of faith, not of disputation; men's simple piety was satisfied with the small oracles of Holy Scripture, and charity, a natural growth, had no need of complicated rules, believing all things and never coming to a stop.[3]

This happy state of affairs did not last however because rhetoric and the philosophers, first Platonic then Aristotelian, were marshalled into the service of

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1 *Paraclesis*, in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 100.

2 *Paraclesis*, in JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, (New York, 1976) 102.

3 JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 100.

Christian philosophy. While this seemed a natural progression in the beginning, it gradually went wrong until 'theology began to be a form of skill, not wisdom; a show-piece, not a means towards true religion...the crystal springs of the old gospel teaching were choked with sawdust by the Philistines'.[4] In a letter to Jean Carondelet which served as the preface to his edition of St Hilary he described the same evils in theology and told Jean that he would

> not be dammed if you do not know whether the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son has a single or a double principle, but you will not escape perdition unless you see to it in the meantime that you have the fruits of the Spirit, which are charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, forbearance, gentleness, faith, moderation, self-control and chastity.[5]

In this letter he also outlined a process of degeneration which was similar to the one he had earlier described and concluded that 'finally faith began to reside in the written word rather than in the soul, and there were almost as many faiths as men..articles increased, but sincerity decreased' and 'the teaching of Christ...began to depend on the support of philosophy'.[6] What Erasmus hated most of all was the scholastic dependence on Aristotle and although the term *philosophia Christi* was patristic in origin Erasmus' adoption of it was his declaration of war on scholastic theology. He believed that sacred letters did not require the assistance of this external and artificially imposed philosophy, rather Scripture had its own inherent philosophy: the *philosophia Christi*.[7] The scholastic use of Aristotelianism as a tool of dialectic was rendered redundant for Erasmus by the transforming power of the *philosophia Christi*.

Thus when Erasmus named his new version of Scripture he called it the *Novum*

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4 *CWE*, 7, *Letters*, 1062: 197. See also *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1334: 257 in which Erasmus outlined the same process of degeneration. He believed that in all human affairs evil entered into the world by degrees and the church and its theology was no different.

5 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1334: 252.

6 *CWE*, 9, *Letters*, 1334: 257.

7 This was one way in which Erasmus translated the humanist rejection of Aristotle into a purely theological mileu.

Instrumentum because he believed it functioned as the tool of our salvation.[8] All of Erasmus' writings are concerned with elaborating one aspect or another of the process of perfection. From the early days of the *Enchiridion*, in which he tried to craft a handbook for the aspiring Christian to aid him in this struggle, to the end of his life, this was his aim. Sacred Scripture was his primary source and he worked incessantly to bring the force of its salvific efficacy to all men. As early in his public career as 1504 he told John Colet that he had spent the last three years learning Greek and reading Origen and that 'hereafter I intend to address myself to the Scriptures and to spend all the rest of my life upon them'.[9] In 1518 his goal was still the same. He wrote to Justus Jonas and told him his only aim in writing was to help his readers to become better human beings.[10] He went on to say, again, that he intended to pursue this goal to the end of his life, and that is precisely what he did.

This goal is apparent across the whole spectrum of his scriptural writings but it is in the *Paraphrases* that his own voice can be most clearly discerned. The theme of the method of perfection is reiterated throughout the *Paraphrases* and thus to avoid extreme repetition I have chosen one synoptic text, *Mark*, as representative of the rest. I have also used Erasmus' *Paraphrase on Romans* to supply some crucial Pauline concepts which he adopted and adapted to his own needs. In the *Paraphrase on Mark* Erasmus made more use of the allegorical method of interpretation than in any of the others.[11] It is, therefore, well suited to the present study because of Erasmus' belief that in order to penetrate to the

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8 Augustijn has argued that the term *Instrumentum* implied a written document. While this is true, the primary sense of the term is a tool or implement and Erasmus was always concerned with the usefulness of Scripture as an instrument of salvation. See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus, His Life, Works, and Influence,* (Toronto, 1996) 90.

9 *CWE,* 2, *Letters,* 181: 86.

10 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 876:145.

11 See JD Tracy *Erasmus: The Growth of a Mind,* (Geneva, 1972) 216-7. Tracy argued that between 1516 and 1523 'the trend of his teaching about Scripture had moved away from allegory', but that in 1523 when he wrote his Mark there was a change which resulted in an 'unusual prominence of allegory'. While this is arguable it is nevertheless the case that Erasmus always recommended the allegorical approach to biblical exegesis as being the one best suited to extracting the truth. See *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 68-9, and especially, the *Ratio Vera Theologica,* in Hajo and Annemarie Holborn, *Ausgerwahlte Werke*, (Munich, 1933) 274: 24 - 284: 27.

deeper truth of Scripture the allegorical method of exegesis was the most effective technique. It is also very useful as an example of the way in which he discerned the fundamental method of perfection in Scripture because it is permeated with descriptions of the various elements and concepts involved in the process. He outlined the initial stages of the process thus:

> the first task is instruction; through instruction the catechumen begins to recognize both his own baseness and God's goodness and is wholly displeased with himself. Then realizing that hope of salvation is obtained from no other source, he takes refuge in the gratuitous kindness of God. To acknowledge one's disease is a large step towards regaining health; to recognize one's benightedness is a large step towards the light.[12]

The way in which he viewed the actions of Jesus as an allegory of the process of perfection is clear from his interpretation of Jesus' baptism as a metaphor for the process. He wrote:

> Consider, Christian soldier, the pattern of your perfection. Instruction in faith induces hatred of one's former life and hope for purification, Guided by these emotions you hurry to the Jordan; there, through faith in Christ, you lose the stains of all your sins. Soon your prayers and those of the church are answered and you are given a new Spirit from heaven. Through him you are received into the number of God's children, indeed, you are grafted onto the body of Jesus Christ, who is head of the church.[13]

Erasmus considered that the most important part of the process was the conscious acknowledgement of one's state of utter imperfection. Without this vital step the process could not even begin. This, he believed, was what the garden of Gethsemane represented. He described it as 'a valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives' and he went on to say that no-one can ascend to the cross of Jesus unless he first descends into this valley, unless he abases himself, renouncing all the resources of human pride'.[14] Christ himself had done this when he trembled with fear and weakness there. It was in order to facilitate this

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12 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 16.

13 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 20.

14 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 162.

process of consciousness that Erasmus had earlier written the *Enchiridion* in which he said he wanted to show man to himself. In the *Paraphrase on Mark* he said that at the outset: 'God, ... requires from us sinners neither burnt offerings nor gifts. Simply acknowledge your disease and have faith in the physician'.[15] Thus having realized the truth of one's existence the second step in the process was to have faith in the healing powers of Christ. Erasmus interpreted Christ's healing of the paralytic man as a metaphor for this part of the method. He believed that the ability to engage in the process of self-examination was God-given because

> when he has decided in his goodness to cure a man's paralytic spirit, he fills him with a wonderful dissatisfaction, such that he hates himself and even tires of his life. He sees in what darkness, in what vice he is entangled; he abhors himself; he would completely despair did not he who sent the vinegar of sorrow add the oil of good hope as well.[16]

Continuing the analogy with disease and healing he then said:

> when the potion administered by a trusted physician violently convulses the whole body, the more violent the convulsion the greater the hope of recovery, especially in a life-threatening illness. In the same manner the closer the repentant sinner is to salvation - Christ being the physician - the deeper his despair.[17]

This is the Erasmian concept taken from St Paul in which strength is made perfect in weakness. The Christian soldier is not left in this impossible state but he is given the grace to conquer his vices and is cured. When the paralytic was cured by Jesus he took his bed on his shoulders and went home. Erasmus interpreted this thus: 'he was now master of his desires whereas before he had been their slave. This is what carrying the cross means; This is what "crucifying the flesh" with its vices and desires means.'[18] Similarly, in his *Paraphrase on Romans* Erasmus pointed out that we must emulate Christ's death and

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15 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 36.

16 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 36.

17 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 36.

18 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 37. The reference is to Galatians 5:24.

resurrection. In imitating his death we must 'lose feeling for all our former desires' and, in fact, we must kill them.[19] We emulate his resurrection by rising to pious deeds when we 'live together with the living Christ' and 'reproduce the image of Christ as far as possible'.[20] Erasmus was very careful to give God due deference in this process. He said that Jesus was happy that the unlearned people who watched this miracle still saw him as a man but they marvelled at the divine power manifested before them:

> Let us be one of the simple crowd, glorifying God, and let us glorify God not only when by his mercy he takes away our spiritual disease, but also when we see others repent of their former vices through the kindness of the same Jesus.[21]

It was in Scripture also that Erasmus found the source for his belief in the crucial concept that the method of perfection was a progressive process in which each step could only be achieved by great effort. This was something he discerned from the example of the apostles. He paraphrased Jesus thus:

> When my disciples have reached that strength of mind in which they are now being trained, love will achieve more with them than the commandments of either the law or John are wrestling from you now. But they have not as yet attained this strength, they are still weak for the presence of this body stands in their way. But there will come a time when the physical presence of the bridegroom will be taken from them. Then they will have acquired more strength having drunk the Spirit from heaven, and they will not only fast and do so of their own accord, but will perform even braver and bolder deeds willingly and joyfully.[22]

The apostles themselves, as ordinary men, were subject to this process of perfection and despite having the living Christ as their companion and teacher they did not reach a high level of perfection while Jesus was alive. Erasmus described how, near the end of his life on earth, Jesus told them plainly about his coming suffering and death but he urged them to be mindful also of his

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19 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 37.

20 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 37.

21 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 38.

22 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 42.

coming resurrection. They could not bear it because 'they loved Jesus with great affection, but a human kind of affection. For they had not yet received the heavenly Spirit who would perfect in them what was still imperfect'.[23] Even Peter, the apostle chosen by Jesus to lead his church, is depicted as being all too human. In fear, he warned Jesus but Jesus rebuked him.[24] When Erasmus described how Jesus gradually shaped the minds of his disciples so that they would become strong enough to withstand his death on the cross he made it clear that this was an image of the same process which takes place in the Christian heart. The incorporation of the spirit of Christ gradually accustoms the Christian to follow Christ even to the cross.[25] Erasmus said that it was 'a difficult journey to go up to Jerusalem. It needs strong and valiant men in whose hearts this world no longer has a place.'[26] The apostles were not yet strong enough to cope with this mystery. Jesus again told them about his death and resurrection and again in their imperfection they began 'dreaming of a material kingdom'.[27] Erasmus then described how instead of rebuking them he told them that he would reveal the way of salvation to them. This he did by asking them 'are you able to drink from the cup from which I am now preparing to drink? Are you able to receive the baptism which I am about to receive?'[28] Later he said 'let your only endeavour be to emulate me'.[29] Jesus then explained his mission on earth to save all mankind: 'Let anyone who follows me do as I do, just as I simply obey the commands of the Father right to the cross.'[30] Erasmus' comment on this was that 'the freer a man is from all carnal

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23 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 106.

24 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 106.

25 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 28.

26 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 128.

27 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 129. The whole eschatological fervour of the early sixteenth century is absolutely absent in Erasmus. He saw all references to the kingdom of Christ on earth in the same way as his interpretation of this verse.

28 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 129.

29 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 130.

30 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 131.

affections the better prepared he is for the battle of the cross'.[31]

Because, by its nature, the process of perfection was a gradual one the method of perfection had to be divulged to the aspiring Christian in stages also. Erasmus was very aware of the difficulty of communicating such esoteric truths. In his *Paraphrase on Romans* he said:

> Paul knew and saw certain things which it was unlawful for one to say, and he knew to what extent milk and to what extent solid food were needed. He knew the stages of growth in Christ, and what had to be applied to each one.[32]

In interpreting Jesus' method of teaching from a boat offshore as being an image of the best way to impart the Gospel truth, he advised the teacher of the gospel that he should adapt himself to the limited understanding of his hearers 'for they cannot as yet follow you'.[33] He went on to say that 'at first the doctrine must be adapted to their uneducated minds until they have made progress'.[34] Erasmus believed that it was for this reason that Christ taught in parables, that is in similes, because this is the simplest and most suitable way of teaching uneducated men.[35] He did, however, have some reservations about this style because he though that unless the hearer participated by doing his utmost to understand the lesson then the parable could be completely misinterpreted. 'Unless one listens attentively it is a tale rather than a parable. Not everyone has ears to hear the evangelical parables, for under their lowly and

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31 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 132.

32 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 13.

33 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 55.

34 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 55. This is the special quality of *prudentia* which Erasmus thought was essential for the Christian preacher, it is the equivalent of the humanist art of rhetoric. It is not, however, really the same as that quattrocento discipline which Trinkaus identified as the *theologia rhetorica*. The emphasis which the earlier humanists placed on the necessity for eloquence in the art of persuasion led them to value eloquence above all but Erasmus was always more concerned with persuasion itself rather than eloquence. See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, vol 2 (Chicago, 1970) 610 ff.

35 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 55-6.

laughable garb they conceal heavenly wisdom'.[36] The participant had to experience the truth of this process at each stage in order to progress. There is a great emphasis here again on the fact that experience is the key to understanding. Erasmus reported that Jesus wanted the disciples to 'hear and see' his words. In other words they had to experience the truth with at least two of the senses. His view of the esoteric nature of scriptural truths is also revealed in his interpretation of the incident where the apostles who did not understand the parable of the sower asked Jesus to explain it to them. Erasmus said Jesus warned them 'that we must not disclose everything to everyone, but that the gospel doctrine must be dispersed only at the appropriate time and according to the understanding of the listeners'.[37] Jesus told them that they were allowed to know the truth but that for those people who were 'excluded from the inner circle, all is conducted in parables, whether I speak or act before them. For they do not have suitable ears or suitable eye's.[38] Not only the words of Jesus but his actions and very life itself were the raw material for deciphering this truth. Erasmus also told the reader in his *Paraphrase on Mark* that he wanted him to take note

> not only of Jesus' words, but also how he conducted himself throughout his life. None of this was done by chance but rather by a divine plan and for the instruction of mankind. For there is nothing that does not have an exemplary character displaying godliness for us, nothing that does not reflect ancient prophecy or express a figure by which, in a dark manner, the law had designated Christ or a meaning forecasting future events.[39]

This idea that the very events of Christ's life were allegories for the process of perfection which the individual Christian had to experience in order to attain a state in which he incorporated Christ was a crucial factor in his exegesis and the beliefs he thus extracted from Scripture. He believed that Christ consciously

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36 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 56. This is clearly a Silenus image which Erasmus was the first European writer to adopt from Plato's *Symposium* and apply it to Christ and the Christian message. See JD Tracy *Erasmus: The Growth of a Mind* , (Geneva, 1972) 214. See also *Sileni Alciabiades* , in MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times*, (Cambridge, 1980) 77ff.

37 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 57.

38 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 57.

39 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 135.

constructed his life in order that it would be a precise image of this process so that we could 'hear and see' the truth and thus properly digest and understand it. Erasmus did not, however, believe that the multitude would always be excluded from the full gospel truth because he depicted Jesus saying:

> do not think that it is my wish to keep always a secret what I now entrust to you in secret...At present I hide many things from the multitude because they are not capable of understanding, and even if they were capable, the time has not yet come. Truly, when the time comes, there is nothing so secret among us but it must be divulged; nothing so arcane but it must be openly preached to all.[40]

Jesus then told the disciples that everything must take second place to this. They must do it day and night. 'Woe to him who does not bring forth the good seed entrusted to him, who conceals the light given to him'.[41] In conformity with this precept Erasmus devoted the whole of his own life to bringing forth the truth of Scripture as he saw it.

In order to highlight the underlying message of *Mark*, Erasmus again interpreted the baptism of Jesus as a paradigm of perfection. He wrote that 'in the Lord was expressed in corporeal form what happens spiritually to all men who in sincere faith receive the evangelical baptism. The body is bathed with water and the spirit is anointed with invisible grace.'[42] He went on to expound in the same way on Jesus' actions immediately after his baptism. 'Jesus, therefore, showing in his own person what he wanted us to do, was immediately after his baptism driven into the wilderness by the power of the Spirit.'[43] There he prayed and defeated Satan. In doing this Erasmus believed 'he showed that the new recruit must flee the common multitude until he has tamed the flesh, defeated Satan, and acquired the true strength of the Spirit by meditation on the divine law and

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40 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 59.

41 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 59.

42 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 19.

43 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 20.

by devout prayers.'[44] Thus he saw Jesus' actions, not as an historical account, nor, in the usual way, as a model for imitation, but as secret instruction to the Christian. The actions of Christ had to be deciphered and mined for their secret meaning and not copied slavishly and unknowingly. He argued that Jesus, by retreating to the wilderness in order to avoid the crowds he was attracting

> teaches us what we must do. He who has the power to work evangelical miracles does not seek a large but an enthusiastic audience...No one follows Jesus unless he is burning with an ardent desire for him. He who has left behind the luxury of cities and follows Jesus through rough and pathless country follows him to his own great benefit. For he who loves truly follows the beloved through everything: through ignominy, famine, loss of substance, exile, prison, torture, and death.[45]

In this action of Christ the aspiring Christian learns the great difficulties which have to be overcome in the process of perfection. This will serve to strengthen one's resolve when these difficulties arise because Scripture will have demonstrated that they are necessary and will pass. Later in the *Paraphrase* Erasmus interpreted a third retreat of Jesus in a yet different way. Jesus got into a boat to preach because the crowd of people wishing to hear him was too large. Erasmus saw this as a covert instruction to those who wish to teach the Gospel message to others:

> understand, O teacher of the gospel what this image means - flee the crowd - but still teach, if the crowd might overwhelm you withdraw to the boat of the gospel "which knows no earthly upheaval" and from where you can teach in peace.[46]

Erasmus believed that the miracles Jesus performed were also meant to convey this secret teaching. He argued that the spiritual element of the miracles was, in fact, far more miraculous than their physical manifestations. He said that the people who experienced miracles thanked Jesus more for physical healing than

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44 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 20.

45 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 30.

46 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 55. Erasmus followed this advice himself and throughout his life he left the crowd behind and from the relative solitude of his study he worked incessantly to preach the Gospel of Christ.

spiritual healing but that this was the wrong way around.[47] When he was interpreting a series of miracles in the piece Erasmus started the section by stating that: 'just as Jesus' words often take the form of a parable, so his actions, too, are frequently parables'.[48] He then demonstrated this idea by expounding on the miracles. First, he said of the cure of a deaf-mute that 'these things were done apart from the crowd. For we must not make the profane crowd witness to the evangelical initiation, lest they mock what they do not yet understand.'[49] He then said that Jesus was anxious in case people would interpret the miracle as being an indication of his wonderful human powers rather than God's power working through him. 'Let man keep silent about whatever great deed he has done so that man's glory be kept hidden and God's glory be proclaimed!'[50] As a consequence of this view of the secret meaning of miracles he said that 'all the miracles worked by Jesus were to our benefit.'[51] The people who were healed in the flesh were not necessarily the true beneficiaries of Jesus' actions. He was performing miracles which would be effective, in the far more important spiritual realm, for all the future generations of mankind. In this way Jesus was the source of all salvation. Erasmus went on to interpret the miracle of loaves and fishes as meaning that the 'bread of the gospel is sufficient to our salvation'[52] and that

perhaps the apostles will add some epistles, But this is insignificant and of very little importance compared to the provisions of the Gospel. This allowance has been made for the

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47 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 100. Erasmus was no lover of the idea of miracles. In the preface to his edition of the letters of St Jerome he said 'miracles..are confected by fabulists to bamboozle the vulgar'. See E F Rice, 'The Renaissance Idea of Christian Antiquity: Humanist Patristic Scholarship' in Albert Rabil, ed., *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms and Legacy*, (Pennsylvania, 1988) 19.

48 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 96.

49 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 96.

50 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 96.

51 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 97.

52 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 99.

sake of certain fastidious people, but we must not ask for more.[53]

Jesus satisfied all and there were even seven baskets left.[54]

In his exposition of the cure of a blind man Erasmus gave an excellent and detailed example of how to interpret Jesus' actions as an allegory of the method of perfection. He explained that in the process of the cure Jesus touched the man to show us that 'no one can seek salvation from the Lord Jesus unless he is first touched by him. For the first touch makes a man know himself.'[55] Clearly, Erasmus did not simply mean a physical touch he is implying that when Christ has penetrated a man's psyche he begins to see the world and himself in a new and real way. He went on to argue that Jesus could have healed the man by a word but he chose instead to 'show his disciples by a figure the struggle which was necessary in order to be able to lead men to the recognition of the truth when they have already grown old in their error'.[56] In other words it was more important for Jesus to demonstrate the way to spiritual life for all men rather than simply cure one man of a physical ailment. There were several steps in the process. First, Jesus led the man out of the village to demonstrate that the aspiring Christian must reject the views of the majority of people. Then Jesus spat on his eyes and touched them with his hands. At this stage the blind man still did not open his eyes so Jesus asked him what could he see and at the sound of Jesus' voice the man said he could see 'men, like trees, walking about'. Jesus touched him again until he could see clearly.[57] Erasmus interpreted this as meaning that men who are without the Gospel light see

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53 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 99.

54 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 100. This was not Erasmus' usual opinion of St Paul whom he generally reveres, although he did frequently claim that St Paul is often obscure. See *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrases on Romans and Galatians,* 13-14, where Erasmus quoted Origen and St Peter's second letter as saying that St Paul is complex and 'there are certain things hard to comprehend in the Pauline letters, which those who are not very learned and not very strong might distort to their own ruin'. The general thrust of his point, however, is that Jesus is sufficient to our salvation and this is his usual stance.

55 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 102.

56 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 103.

57 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 103.

worldly things in a disproportionate way but when they receive the light they realize the insignificance of those things that seemed huge to them when their sight was faulty.[58] Then Erasmus, using Mark's voice, points out that, because of men's initial blindness, perfection must be taught by degrees until the students of Gospel philosophy reach the stage where 'great mysteries and a more solid doctrine must be communicated to them, which will make them discern everything more clearly'.[59] The *philosophia Christi* will gradually transform the individual and conquer his blindness until he can absorb and fully understand the whole Christian mystery.

This belief in the value of Jesus' life as a paradigm of salvation was the basis of a kind of practical redemption process rather then one which was solely a cosmic mystery. In this way the Redemption of mankind was effected by 'faith in the Gospel' in a practical sense. This is not to say that Erasmus ever denied the mystery of Redemption in the sense of God sending his Son to redeem fallen man but, as was his usual approach to mysteries of faith, he agreed with Socrates saying 'the things which are above us are nothing to us'. What he always emphasized as being worthwhile were those elements of the perfection process which we could understand and participate in. His belief that ordinary men could incorporate Christ and, in a sense, actually become Christ and participate in the process of saving others can be seen as a dilution of the redemptive mission of Jesus, but this is not really so. He believed that if we could understand the hidden meaning of Scripture by reading Jesus' actions and words allegorically we would then recognize the truth of the process by putting it into practice. There is always a great emphasis in Erasmus' writings on living out the truth of Scripture. It is never enough to just know of a truth it must also be lived.[60] This in turn would engender faith within our souls in the greater mystery of Redemption. This faith in turn would lead us on to greater understanding and towards perfection. Faith, therefore, was an essential pre-requisite for perfection.

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58 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 103.

59 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 104.

60 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 102.

Continuing his interpretation of Jesus' miracles Erasmus commented on the cure of another blind man. This time the blind beggar was healed because despite his infirmity he had recognized Jesus as the Son of God. Erasmus explained that this was an example of Jesus expressing 'in a corporeal image' what his death 'would effect through faith in the Gospel teaching'.[61] This message being conveyed was that 'Jesus...grants salvation in return for faith, not works'.[62] The whole process of salvation was one of seeing properly. Ordinary men are blind and they see everything backwards. They value the worthless and despise the precious.[63] Erasmus interpreted the blind-beggar incident thus:

> disregarding everything else, he wished nothing but vision to discern God and his Son, Jesus. To know him is to have eternal life. To know is to see. O truly evangelical prayer! How few words in it and how much faith! Indeed this is the short prayer that reaches heaven.[64]

Erasmus believed that salvation was a process of knowledge and true vision. Knowing Jesus meant knowing everything he did and said and truly understanding the spiritual meaning of his life. The process was only completed, however, when Jesus was emulated in all that he did and was. 'It is not enough to know Jesus; you must follow him when you have recovered your sight.'[65]

> Unless you recover your sight you cannot follow Jesus on his journey. For who would follow a man who willingly surrenders his life to death unless he discerns by his faith that temporary ignominy is the way to eternal glory; corporeal torment is the way to eternal joy; death is the way to eternal life.[66]

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61 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 133.

62 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 134.

63 This, of course, is the theme of the *Moria*.

64 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 134.

65 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 134.

66 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 134.

This was how redemption was effected through knowledge of Scripture. Faith was an essential pre-requisite for salvation but unlike the Lutheran *sola fide* it was not the only pre-requisite. Erasmus did not believe in the idea of good works being essential for salvation either. The proper incorporation of Christ would result in the true Christian acting in a moral way but simply acting out moral behaviour itself was useless to salvation.

Erasmus interpreted an additional miracle of Jesus as a metaphor for another important element of perfection. The vital starting-point of the process of perfection was an attempt on the part of the aspiring Christian to know himself. In doing this man would come to know his faults and weaknesses and could then begin to tackle their eradication. Erasmus explained that the healing of a woman with an issue of blood was a metaphor for the way in which Christ loves the sinner who recognizes him or herself as such. He described how Jesus asked who had touched him and the woman, in response, shook off her shyness and told him everything about herself.

> She kept nothing secret, she did not cover up the long-standing disease, the frustrated skill of the physicians, the furtive touching of Jesus' garment, the faith she had in him. The Lord Jesus loves this kind of confession, which makes the sinner recognize himself and attribute all the glory for his restored health to God.[67]

The sinner had to acknowledge the abjectness of the state his self-examination revealed. Erasmus was aware that this was no easy task and, moreover, it was one which it was not necessarily possible to complete properly in this life. Even the apostles and St Peter himself had experienced this difficulty. Erasmus said of Peter at the time of Gethsemane that he 'did not as yet know himself'.[68] This, however, was the *sine qua non* of Erasmus' concept of the perfection process. If the aspiring Christian could not recognize his faults then there was no possibility of even starting on the way of salvation.

The weaknesses in human nature which this self-examination would expose were not meant to overwhelm. Erasmus' reading of Scripture assured him that

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67 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 70-1.

68 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 161.

Jesus had used his life and teaching to give many examples of how weakness was itself a useful, and, actually essential, part of the process. The state of perfection would be achieved, in practice, through weakness. In this sense weakness was not to be shunned. Erasmus interpreted the incident where Jesus was asleep in a boat when a storm blew up and the apostles were afraid as an example of this mechanism in action. He said that Jesus was aware that there were many men who would oppose the spread of Gospel truth. 'To strengthen his disciples against such men and to teach them that no storm, however fierce, ought to terrify those who wholeheartedly believe in the Lord Jesus, he allowed his disciples to incur danger to the point of despair!'[69] They were terrified and woke Jesus who immediately calmed the storm. Erasmus said this showed that although they had faith in Jesus, their faith was not yet perfect. The deeper meaning, however, was that Satan arouses such storms in men's hearts and that when this happens the troubled Christian should arouse Christ within himself and tranquility would then return.[70] In this way he would train himself to be strong in the face of temptation just as Jesus trained his apostles. He allowed them to reach the very point of despair implying that the greater the weakness the better the opportunity for overcoming it and thereby strengthening the better part of human nature. Jesus artificially created a situation of desperation for the apostles in order that they might achieve a higher level of awareness and thus strengthen themselves for the next attack. As if to underline the importance of this point Erasmus later used the example of a different storm where the apostles were again afraid in order to reiterate it. In this incident Jesus walked on water to help them. 'He seems to desert them for a while to exercise them in adversity and to teach them a firm faith in himself.'[71] Again, Jesus used a situation of adversity to test and strengthen the apostles but in fact he never really deserted them. He consciously left them in danger because it was conducive to their perfection. Clearly, Erasmus thought that we cannot always see the true value of seemingly bad life circumstances.

By degrees Erasmus approached the central point of this idea. He described the

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69 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 63.

70 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 64-5.

71 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 86.

imperfection of Peter, the man chosen by Jesus to lead the church after his death, who, out of human fear, warned Jesus of the danger he was in. Jesus rebuked him saying:

> Take your place behind me, This task which I am carrying out is no human task. You are still harbouring human affections, you do not know God's plan. If you are to be my disciple you must emulate my death, not impede it.[72]

Erasmus commented that in this passage Jesus was calling everyone to participate in the same process; this message was for all men, not just Peter.[73] All must emulate Christ in his suffering and cross. All must be willing to abandon their very lives for Christ. This was the ultimate weakness through which true strength would be achieved. 'But whoever exposes his life to the danger of death out of love for me and for the constant profession of the Gospel will through me save his life, which would otherwise be truly lost.'[74] This idea is epitomized for Erasmus in the metaphor of the *cross*. He explained that the meaning of the crucifixion was that

> whenever the storm of persecution breaks loose, we must take up our cross; though even in peaceful times no one will be without his cross, for it is not easy to renounce one's natural emotions and the pleasures and enticements of this world, to castrate one's flesh, to refrain from excess, to suppress desire, to harness anger, and to dismiss feelings of revenge.[75]

These enticements of the world have to be killed in us. Erasmus believed that the person who embarked on the path towards true Christianity would be impeded by the world at every turn. He put these words into the mouth of Jesus:

> the world will rise and use every war engine against those who proclaim my name, It will threaten them with disgrace and exile, imprisonment, torture, proscription, and death. For this

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72 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 106.

73 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 106.

74 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 107.

75 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 107-8.

nation is evil and will always have more bad than good men, and among them it will be considered the worst crime to profess my name.[76]

The principal mystery of the cross was that it was a metaphor for the central aspect of the perfection process. Like Jesus, it was necessary for man to die to the world, that is the vices of the flesh, and also to all worldly values and honours because they were utterly opposed to those of Christ. Anyone who did this could then be reborn with him forever. The word Erasmus used in his *Paraclesis* for this process of rebirth was *instauratio*, which means renewal.[77] It cannot have escaped the attention of this innovative philologist that the term contained the stem of the Greek word for cross: σταυροσ. This combined with the *ratio*, or philosophical system, contained in the mystery of the cross when incorporated by man would achieve a transformation which would lead to perfection. The power of the cross, for Erasmus, lay in the fact that it was a wonderfully intricate symbol of this secret method. Man, for him, is designed in such a way that he achieves spiritual strength by enduring weakness. Weakness of the flesh also functioned in another related way as an instrument of perfection. Erasmus pointed out that Jesus had consciously used 'the tenacious malice of Judas for our salvation'.[78] Without the fleshly instincts of Judas the plan of salvation would have foundered. This is as near as Erasmus comes to having a worked-out concept of evil. He used precisely the same idea in interpreting the actions of the high priest Caiaphas. He said 'Caiaphas is Satan' and he is

the source of this whole tragedy. All ignominy suffered by Jesus, every destructive act - if it be destructive - came from Caiaphas; who carried out a most sacred thing without knowing it, For he presided over the sacrifice without which no man could attain salvation.[79]

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76 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 108.

77 Leclerc, Jean, ed., *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia*, 10 vols, (Leiden, 1703-6) V 141f. MA Screech argues that the phrase in the *Paraclesis* contains 'a sustained architectural metaphor. Human nature after the Fall of man became like a ruined building; Christ restored it to its original well-founded goodness'. See his *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*, (London,1980) 79.

78 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 161.

79 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 170.

In this way the Erasmian system envisioned that all of God's creation participated in perfection. As a dimension which God has allowed, even evil and the devil were vital components of the perfection process. He argued that the afflictions which beset all of our lives

> open up for us the way to immortality: Since, indeed, we have taken up this new example from Christ and received from him an excellent doctrine, namely, that the virtue of endurance is strengthened by bearing evils, we become, by endurance like gold from the fire, better tested and approved by God and men.[80]

Erasmus found this idea, also, in St Paul's letter to the Romans where he showed that Christ conquered sin through sin. He wrote:

> and it was provided by the wonderful and secret plan of God that the way by which our well-being was restored would correspond to the way in which we had suffered ruin. Accordingly, through Adam alone, who first transgressed the law of God, sin crept into the world.[81]

Sin came into the world by means of a man and according to God's secret plan it was also conquered by a man. 'The goodness of Christ altogether conquers the wickedness of Adam' because Jesus Christ was 'likewise a man.'[82] Erasmus' reading of Paul made it vital for him that Christ was truly a man. It was absolutely central to his version of the salvific process. 'It was appropriate, furthermore, for flesh to destroy flesh, sin to conquer sin, and death to overcome death.' And so God sent his son down to our level and made him a lowly and weak man so that he could save mankind. 'Even though he is a stranger to all contagion of sin, nevertheless he was dressed in the same flesh in which other sinners are clothed. For he assumed the nature common to all and

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80 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphraseon Romans,* 33. This concept is also in the *Enchiridion,* see *CWE,* 66, *Enchiridion,* 49-51. It is clear from his poems that Erasmus was aware of this mechanism as early as 1499. See Erasmus' poem about the fall of man and its consequences in which he said that death would only be cured by death, pain by pain and wounds by wounds. *CWE,* 85, *Poems,* 110: 285ff.

81 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 34.

82 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 35.

lived as a sinner among sinners.'[83] Thus Christ was not merely a man but he was also, crucially, a sinner. He had to take on sin in order to conquer it for the sake of mankind. This, of course, was more than the Paris theologians and their ilk could swallow and Erasmus was duly accused of blasphemy.[84] He was always aware of the dangers of stretching orthodoxy beyond its limits but it was crucial to his salvific thought that only sin itself could overcome sin therefore Christ had to be a sinner.[85] This is the mystery of the cross. In this way Erasmus always emphasized the role of flesh in salvation. Since it was only by overcoming the flesh that man could perfect himself, the flesh was, therefore, an essential part of the process. That apparently hopeless and impossibly weak event, the crucifixion, was, in fact, the wonderful and glorious act that effected the salvation of mankind. When Christ died on the cross he demonstrated in the most graphic and simple way possible that man must die to the world in order to rise again to a new life. He also showed that Christ is crucified by the world because the world is opposed to the spirit of Christ. Flesh overcomes flesh that is the process.

The opposition of the world meant that the process was not an easy one. Erasmus saw it as a struggle, or even a war, to the death. He knew that the aspiring Christian had to fight with every fibre of his being in order to achieve victory.

> Victory does not come to the sluggish, you must take up arms lest the enemy who lurks everywhere find you unprepared and unarmed and overcomes you. Directly the world will assail you, Satan will assail you, your own flesh will assail you. You must go on fighting to go on winning. And the battle will not end until your life ends. Yet the more often you defeat your

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83 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 45.

84 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 150. Noel Beda, of the faculty of theology at Paris, twice accused him of blasphemy on account of this.

85 See also the *Praise of Folly,* in which Erasmus wrote of Christ, 'he assumed the nature of man and was seen in man's form: *just as he was made sin so that he could redeem sinners*'. (my italics). Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 198-9; and *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 45.

enemy, the weaker he will depart from the battlefield and the stronger you will be.[86]

Again, Erasmus found his main source for this in *Romans*. His paraphrase of St Paul's description of his own inner struggle for perfection is a perfect example of his view of the nature of the struggle. Paul longed for good 'by mind and reason' but desire and obedience to the flesh prompted him to do what was shameful.[87] He perceived two men in himself; the external man prone to vice and the internal one who loved goodness.[88] The human soul was designed by God for struggle and that struggle produces transformation. The struggle was manifest in Paul when he said: 'I do not seem to be the one doing what I do. For who would do what he does not wish to do?' He went on to say that we take our identity from our better part but despite this he was conscious that he could not actually do what his own reason dictated.

If one does not seem to do what he does against his will, when I do what I do not wish to do according to the better part of man, it does not seem to me that I do what I do, but rather the power of sin itself implanted in the grosser part of me.[89]

The law was not a sufficient remedy for this state of struggle. Erasmus paraphrased Paul thus: 'the law does not remove this baser self from me; nevertheless, if at any time I attempt to obey the law, it forces me to acknowledge that my evil is deeply implanted and impressed upon my mind.'[90] Despite his attraction to the goodness which was outlined in the law he was nevertheless unable to achieve it, torn in struggle between opposites. 'For the inclination to sin is so deeply fixed in the flesh, and the habit of committing wrong is so powerful, (as if now a part of my nature), that like some unwilling and struggling captive I am dragged into sin.'[91] The antidote to this negative

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86 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 21.

87 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 43.

88 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 44.

89 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 44.

90 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 44.

91 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 44.

situation was not the law but Christ. Erasmus, quoting Paul, said: Christ allows us to conquer sin the law does not.[92] Knowing the precepts of the law was not enough, man needed the *philosophia Christi* to discern the method of perfection.

While this process of struggle was explicit in St Paul, Erasmus also found evidence of it in the scriptural account of the life of Jesus himself. He interpreted the incident in which the apostles were unable to cast out a demon from a boy as being an example of how Jesus taught them what they needed to do in order to aid sinners in their struggle against personal evil and towards ultimate salvation. His interpretation rests on the fact that he saw the demon not as an evil spirit but as evidence of a spiritual struggle between the good and evil impulses within the soul of the young boy. This is not at all what the Gospel says but it was Erasmus' own view of the spiritual or true meaning of the passage.[93] He wrote: 'tenacious is the evil to which the sinner is accustomed from tender years'.[94] The boy's peculiar behaviour was a demonstration of the fact that 'a struggle had begun between his spirit, wishing to repent, and his desire, recalling him to his old ways.'[95] To Erasmus the manifestation of an apparent evil spirit represented the fact that 'the evil was fierce and had turned into second nature'. [96] Jesus cured the boy and told the disciples that in order to help sinners 'you must pursue their vice in such a manner that you are seen to take an interest in the victim's salvation but with the realization that human effort is nothing without Christ secretly lending his voice'.[97] As a result of Jesus' intervention the boy's soul was calmed and a new equilibrium was established. 'He is at rest and quiet who before was moved by tides of desire, ambition, wrath, envy, and avarice in turn and carried away as if by the impulse of an

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92 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 44.

93 Mark 9:17-29.

94 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 113.

95 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 113.

96 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 114.

97 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 114.

impure and violent demon.'[98] Here Erasmus showed that he believed the demon in question was not some mysterious metaphysical entity but rather the base and worldly passions which had to be eradicated in the true Christian. He then emphasised that the reason the apostles could not cure the boy themselves was because they had not yet reached a state of perfection. Jesus told them that the demon in question was a spiritual type which could only be expelled by 'prayer and fasting'.[99] The function of prayer was to strengthen faith which was essential to the work. He said that 'by fasting, which includes abstinence from all carnal desires, the rebellion of the flesh is put down'.[100] Thus the spiritual state of the gospel preacher was intrinsic to his efficacy.[101] 'The greater our self-confidence grows, the more our power of working miracles decreases. The more the power of the flesh is subdued in us, the stronger the power of the Spirit grows.'[102] So it was essential to pray and mortify the flesh continually, in order that the spirit of Jesus might flourish in the heart. Here, as always, Erasmus' emphasis was on interior qualities rather than external ones. It is more important that a preacher has engaged in the perfection process than that he has been ordained, or elevated in the church, or has received a university education. His efficacy does not depend on his office or status but on the state of his soul.

Although Erasmus saw the perfection process as being a very difficult type of warfare, he nevertheless believed that once the seed of Christ had been properly sown in a man whose heart was well-prepared to receive it, an irresistible force of nature would take over and ensure that it grew to full perfection. He said that

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98 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 114.

99 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 115.

100 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 115.

101 This is the theme of Erasmus' work on preaching, *Ecclesiastes sive de ratione concionandi.* Jean Leclerc, ed., *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia,* 10 vols (Leiden, 1703-6) V, 767-1099. He also alluded to it throughout the *Paraclesis* where he argued that the most important aspect of the theologian's work was the transformation of his own heart and that anyone who had truly incorporated Christ whether that person was a 'common labourer or a weaver' qualified for the title of theologian. JC Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation,* (New York, 1976) 98. See also Hilmar Pabel, 'Promoting the Business of the Gospel: Erasmus' Contribution to Pastoral Ministry', in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook,* 15 (1995) 58.

102 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 115.

this seed 'grows in fortune and misfortune, and at every opportunity provided by those who support it or fight against it. For what has been sown by him whose will no one can resist cannot fail to sprout.'[103] This was how Erasmus interpreted the parable of the sower. He said that the sower sows his seed and then he sleeps. The seed meanwhile grows without anyone's labour 'driven by the hidden force of nature'.[104] He believed that 'nature has its own steps and maintains them without the sower's effort after the seed has been sown'.[105] He described how the seed germinated and grew shoots and corn and he said that 'by these hidden advances nature takes care that no one notices the progress, though he notices that progress has been made'.[106] This secret element in the perfection process was also addressed by Erasmus in the *Antibarbari* when he spoke of the promise Jesus made to mankind that when he reached heaven he would then draw everything in creation up to him. Erasmus interpreted this as meaning that 'all things, whether hostile or heathen or in any other way far removed from him, must be drawn, even if they do not follow, even against their will, to the service of Christ'.[107]

Thus the whole of creation tends towards the perfection of Christ.[108] This is consistent with the fact that Erasmus thought that all of creation was made to benefit man. Man is the centre of nature and the perfection of man is its purpose. Christ, by a process of attraction, draws all created things to serve his purpose and, as we have seen, even sin and weakness have their place in the grand Erasmian scheme of things. They too are drawn to serve the perfection process. The perfection of man is Christ. The process is one of incorporating Christ and becoming a son of God with him. Erasmus likened this attractive

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103 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 61.

104 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 60.

105 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 60.

106 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 60.

107 *CWE*, 23, *Antibarbari*, 59.

108 Erasmus was careful not to overstate his case here and edge into the condemned concept of *Apokatastasis* favoured by Origen. See MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London,1980) 164-5.

force to fire. He said that the

> fire of the divine Spirit that takes away from and purges the mind of all carnal affections and somehow transforms into God whatever it seizes, so that those who before were concerned with earthly things now disdain them and are carried away to heavenly things. Whoever is seasoned with this salt cannot be turned away from the purity of the gospel spirit by any enticement. Whoever is purged by this fire will disdain all harmful designs of his persecutor.[109]

This state of near perfection in which a man could withstand the enticements of sin was expressed, for Erasmus, in the scriptural concept of the second-coming. In the Gospels Jesus promised a second-coming:

> the Son of Man whom you see humble now and whom you will soon see as the most abject of men will appear in the majesty of his Father with all the angels and his chosen disciples. Nor is this time very far off. There are men here who in their lifetime will see the coming of God's kingdom in its power.[110]

Erasmus, in interpreting this, said that the apostles did not understand what Jesus' words meant

> because their meaning was not unequivocal. For only after his death, resurrection, ascension, only after the Holy Spirit had been sent from heaven, was it that the power of that mustard seed unfolded, that is, the power of evangelical teaching.[111]

Although Erasmus accepted the doctrine of the second-coming as a future event which, according to Scripture, would usher in the end of the world,[112] he also believed that the account of the second-coming had a more immediate meaning for man. He believed it signified a personal, spiritual second-coming and as such it was consistent with the fact that Jesus had said some of his disciples

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109 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 120.

110 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 108.

111 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 109.

112 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 61.

would experience a second-coming before they died. For Erasmus this second-coming of Christ was a metaphor for the stage of the perfection process which man arrived at when he reached the point at which the slings and arrows of the world did not affect him and he was then above all of the influences of Pharisees, scribes, kings and all the worldly powers. Some of Jesus' audience in Mark's Gospel would achieve this perfection and they would experience the second coming of Christ as the culmination of the process on earth. First, Christ opened man to the way of the cross and an understanding of the true reality of existence. Then by dying to that old view of the world man would experience the second coming of Christ in glory within his own soul. In other words, he would incorporate the spirit of Christ and reject the values of the world. Erasmus stated that Jesus taught 'the beginnings of the Gospel in Christ then progress by means of the Holy Spirit and finally perfection again in Christ'.[113] So it was a process which started with a kind of first coming of Christ entering into the life of the aspiring Christian, then, through the Holy Spirit, he would progress in the way of the Gospel until he achieved a point where he could receive the second-coming of Christ in completion of the process. Continuing his exegesis of this theme, Erasmus interpreted the next verse of Mark, in which Jesus led three of his disciples to a high mountain and showed them a vision of his future splendour, as meaning that Jesus revealed to Peter, James and John 'even before his death a taste of his future majesty, as far as human nature can comprehend it!'[114] Again, Erasmus asserted that this was not a one-off event. He believed that 'even today Jesus considers some chosen men worthy of being carried off to the mountain of pure contemplation, of being given a taste of eternal bliss through secret inspiration'. This was not the stage of perfection achievable on earth but it was a foretaste of future perfection after death. It is likely on account of this and other references to such a state that Erasmus was describing a personal experience.[115] In the Gospel of Mark Jesus showed his three disciples a vision of his majesty, but it translated into a foretaste of eternal

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113 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 61.

114 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 109.

115 For a thorough and scholarly discussion of the concept of ecstatic experience in Erasmus' writings see MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) For reference to this particular Gospel incident see 191 ff.

bliss for them. The apostles, who had not as yet experienced the second-coming of Christ misunderstood the vision he had shown them. Erasmus explained that when these disciples began to discuss the resurrection they thought the glory of his kingdom would come soon after this event. When they asked Jesus about this he

> gave an ambiguous reply to the question of his disciples, for they were not yet capable of understanding the whole mystery. For they shrank from the things that were of greater concern to themselves and dreamt only of the glory of the kingdom, of which they had had a taste.[116]

Thus they saw the second-coming in the traditional way of the end of days. But Erasmus interpreted it as something which was of 'greater concern to themselves': that is, the perfection of Christ which they would soon each experience personally. It was a personal second-coming rather than the cosmic one to come. 'They did not understand that this too was the kingdom of God: that once the Gospel had been propagated the heavenly Spirit would subjugate the power of this world and of Satan'.[117] Jesus did not wish them to know when the kingdom would come. Because of their weakness he allowed them to dream it would be soon.[118] Erasmus gave a further example of how the apostles were not yet ready to understand the nature of the second-coming and Jesus' death when he again described their reaction to Jesus' account of his forthcoming death and resurrection.[119] 'They could not as yet conceive in their minds the mystery of the cross, nor could they conjecture the purpose of his death'.[120] Even at this point, having followed Jesus for years they were clinging to worldly emotions.

> They still knew only human wisdom. For it was God's plan to be reconciled with mankind

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116 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 111.

117 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 111.

118 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 111.

119 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 116.

120 *CWE*, 49, *Paraphrase on Mark*, 116.

through the sacrifice of the "immaculate sacrificial lamb",[121] and to forgive all men's sins on account of their faith. But the disciples kept dreaming of some worldly kingdom.[122]

Because they could not understand the mystery of the second-coming they argued among themselves about who would be chief among them in this new earthly kingdom. In Erasmus' estimation, Jesus was aware of their weakness and he tried to correct it. 'To tear this emotion - by far the most fatal one - from their hearts' Jesus told them: 'the first shall be last'.[123] Erasmus used the scriptural account of the confusion of the apostles in relation to the resurrection to expound his own view of the second-coming. The gospel verses he was paraphrasing did not mention this personal second-coming at all. It is indicative of Erasmus' rationalist mind-set that he did not emphasize the more mysterious cosmic event, but rather, he construed the verses in a way which was amenable to personal experience and beneficial to perfection. This personal second-coming of Christ, the transforming element and result of internal struggle, was far more important to Erasmus than a cosmic mystery which could not assist the perfection process in the here and now. He always used Scripture to this purpose.

The role of Scripture in the perfection process was paramount for Erasmus. Man could achieve perfection by means of faith in what was expounded in Scripture. It was not, however, as a series of precepts for living the good life that Scripture was primarily useful; its true usefulness lay only in its exposition of the method of perfection. The letter of the 'law', as Erasmus termed it, 'has no power to make anyone righteous and innocent before God as judge'.[124] By 'law' Erasmus not only meant the Old Testament but he also meant any reading of the New Testament which was literal and did not penetrate to the deeper

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121 4 Peter 1:19.

122 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 116. Many of the radical reformers adopted this concept of a worldly kingdom which was contrary to Erasmus' interpretation, and although there is some evidence that a number of them were influenced by Erasmus' emphasis of the spirit, rather than the letter, of Scripture it is clear that they were mistaken in their interpretation of his position as a whole.

123 *CWE,* 49, *Paraphrase on Mark,* 116.

124 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 24.

spiritual meaning. He, nevertheless, believed that the law had its place in the process of perfection. It was useful because it outlined the nature of sin: 'to understand one's own sickness is a considerable step on the road to health'.[125] It was a useful and necessary first step but it was not sufficient to perfection. For this Christ was needed. He argued that the letter of the law should be shunned in favour of the new spirit. 'The law revealed sin and did not add strength to enable us to fight back against our vices', it was Christ who did that.[126] He asserted that Christ is 'the central point of the whole law'.[127] We can see clearly here that for Erasmus both Christ and the law are eternal concepts. In his *Paraphrase on Romans* when he condensed the argument of the piece, he said Paul teaches

> that the true sons of Abraham are those who imitate the faith of Abraham, and those are truly Jews who profess Christ, that true righteousness and perfect salvation are conferred on an equal basis upon all, without the help of the law, through the gospel in faith alone in Jesus Christ.[128]

He underlined this later by arguing that 'Abraham was righteous because he believed in Christ'.[129] St Paul did not say this, the verse in question makes reference to Abraham's faith in God.[130] Erasmus, however, was at pains to show that Christ was the fulfilment of the law and that the law was never enough on its own. He argued that outward signs of righteousness such as circumcision were useless if a person did not live a good life. Conversely, he said that God would regard the heathen as circumcised if 'he achieves what is the essence and goal of the law, namely, a sound and pure life; and if he trusts

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125 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 24.

126 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 43.

127 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 22.

128 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 10.

129 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 28-9.

130 1 Romans 4: 3: 'Abraham believed in God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'.

and obeys Christ who is the fulfilment of all laws'.[131] Indeed the true Jew would be a follower of Christ: 'one becomes a true Jew only when his mind has been purged of sin and is inclined toward Christ'.[132] The law is not only perfected in Christ it is superseded by Christ. He quoted Paul who said 'I Paul...until recently subject to the law of Moses, now freed from Moses, I have been made a servant of Jesus Christ'.[133] The law was that part of Scripture which pertained to the flesh; Christ, on the other hand, embodied the Spirit. The law is given to us for a time but then when we advance to the Spirit of Christ we are no longer under the law. This is not simply an historical phenomenon but it is also part of the progression to perfection. 'We ceased to owe anything to the flesh after we began to be one with Christ.'[134] This is why Erasmus always opted for the allegorical sense of Scripture: the hidden meaning under the Silenus-like exterior story of ordinary men full of human frailties and the apparently terrible failure of the cross. This duality of the spirit and flesh was an all-pervading concept in Erasmus' thought. Its source was St Paul, transmitted through Origen in particular, who saw the spiritual and the carnal in all things particularly in man himself. Erasmus paraphrased the concept as he found it in St Paul thus:

There are two kinds of Judaism, two kinds of circumcision, two kinds of descendants of Abraham. There are two parts of the Mosaic law: one carnal, the other spiritual - the body and soul, as it were, of the law. Baptism is twofold. In the first kind, we are cleansed from our former sins by a sacred bath, and in the second we die with Christ, having renounced the passions of the world. There is a double burial: a bodily burial in which Christ was buried for three days; and a spiritual burial by which we are freed from the vices of the world and rest quietly in Christ. There is a twofold resurrection: one which preceded in Christ and will follow in man; and another in which we are restored to life from our former sins and progress from virtue to virtue, in this respect practicing as far as possible the future life. There is a double righteousness, that of God and that of men, There is a double judgement, that of God and that of men. There is a double glory or praise, one according to God, and another according to

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131 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 22.

132 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 22

133 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 13.

134 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 47

men.[135]

Erasmus' paraphrases breathe this concept of the dual nature of all creation. He saw everything in this way because of his particular reading of Scripture. He was in the world but not of it. His wonderful satirical *Moria* is, perhaps, the best exposition of this concept. It is an examination of the concept of Folly, first, as the base ridiculous impulse in man and the world and then, when he has expanded it and mined its depths, he showed it to be a sublime impulse which leads to the Cross and perfection.

Erasmus believed, however, that full and ultimate perfection was not granted in this life because man on earth being composed of body and soul was thus bound by the body which was still subject to death and sorrows.[136] He said that while

> we receive a pledge of our salvation from Christ, nevertheless he did not grant us full salvation here, but wanted us to wait for it in the age to come... In truth, our perfect salvation is dependent on future events.[137]

He thought that this fullness of perfection would come at 'the resurrection of our bodies when we will leave behind the pain of this whole mortal existence and reign forever with the immortal Christ'.[138] Erasmus' Platonism never led him into the neo-Platonic heterodox position of denying the resurrection of the body and the unity of body and soul.[139] The body was a vital component of perfection. It was by means of the senses that man was able to experience and thus verify the truth of Christ. He said that those who had experienced the truth of Christ on earth should then believe in this future fulfilment of the promise of

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135 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 11.

136 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 48.

137 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 49.

138 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 48.

139 See MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 155-8. Screech shows that Erasmus was aware of this potential pitfall and deftly side-stepped it.

salvation. Again, he emphasized experience as essential to faith. He wrote:

there remains only the glory to be fulfilled but how can we doubt it when we have experienced the rest: freedom from sin, to be innocent, to have pure affection to be incorporated with Christ, to have his Spirit as a pledge?[140]

Here he was addressing the person who having engaged in the perfection process had therefore experienced the truth of Christ as portrayed in Scripture. The method of perfection in all its stages which Erasmus believed was described in Scripture was verified through personal experience of the process. The partly perfected individual would then know that Scripture embodied the truth of existence and it would be a small step to accept the account, outlined in Scripture, of the time to come. Erasmus, himself made this leap of faith when he accepted St Paul's view of the cosmic dimension of the perfection process. His own belief in the importance of the flesh in the process of perfection meant that he had no difficulty in accepting the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Moreover, he also accepted the same idea on the macrocosmic scale. In paraphrasing St Paul he wrote of the end of time: 'the whole structure of the world awaits this time, as if longing for the day on which the glory of the sons of God will be brought to light after their number has been completed'.[141] He believed that the end of time depended on all of the sons of God reaching perfection and so the human perfection process had cosmic implications. He believed that the same struggle for perfection which took place in man also occurred in the cosmos.

For we see that all the elements of the world are altered by so many transformations and are subject to so many corruptions - that the sun and the moon, (apart from the fact that they labour almost in vain to restore things which are always transitory), feel their own defects, and the stars fight with the stars. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the whole crowd of angels, contemplating our calamities from above, are moved by a kind of pious compassion towards us and, as far as they can, grieve for us in our misfortunes. Thus, does not the whole cosmos

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140 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 50-1.

141 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 48.

groan with us and as though in childbirth desire an end to its labour and pains?[142]

This struggle would not end until all the sons of man had been perfected. He argued that until then

even the world itself seems to participate in some way in human misery...This is because earth, water, air, the very celestial bodies, and finally even the angels themselves were created especially to serve the requirements of men. Consequently the world itself is not going to be free until perfect freedom comes to the sons of God. In the meantime, the world endures servitude unwillingly. For even in things without a mind there is a certain native craving for perfection, It endures, however, out of obedience to him by whose will it has been given over to this servitude.. (until) the sons of God have been fully liberated from every taint of mortality, then even the world itself will cease to be subject to the inconveniences of immortality.[143]

The world, which was created for man, in order to allow him to reach perfection will not be free of the slavery of mortality and sorrow until God's purpose for it has been completed. Then like the fleshy element in man, the cosmos itself will become perfect. This was the cosmic dimension of the perfection process as Erasmus read it in Scripture.

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142 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 48-9.

143 *CWE*, 42, *Paraphrase on Romans*, 48.

Terminus

The main themes of Erasmus' *philosophia Christi* are all contained in the richly allegorical device he chose for himself: the symbol of Terminus. In 1508 Alexander Stuart, son of the king of Scotland and a pupil of Erasmus, gave him an old Roman gem which had an image of the god Terminus on it. After this Erasmus made the image his seal and emblem and added the words *cedo nulli* which later became *concedo nulli*.[1] Terminus was the Roman god of boundaries and was thus also seen as the god of Death: the ultimate boundary. The god Terminus had been the subject of discussion by the Aldine circle around the time Erasmus was there. One of this group, Gyraldus, expounded on it in his *Aenigmata* in which he outlined how Terminus would not yield to Jove when he removed all the other gods from the Capitol.[2] Hence the motto concedo nulli. Clearly, in this context, the device and motto could have been seen as an act of defiance against the Roman pontiff. It may appear odd that Erasmus, the man of peace, should have adopted such a motto and he was, in fact, later accused of arrogance on account of it. In 1528 he found it necessary to defend himself against these accusations by elucidating the meaning of his Terminus. In a letter to Alfonso Valdes, a secretary of Charles V, he explained that the words were spoken by Death and not Erasmus. He also argued that he used the device to remind himself to correct his life because Death was a boundary which did not yield to anyone.[3] While this was no doubt true it was also the case that Erasmus himself never yielded to anyone in relation to his own deeply held convictions about the truth of existence. He never compromised the fundamental elements of these beliefs in any way. He guarded his intellectual liberty with ferocity and

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1 See RH Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom,* (London, 1970) 110 - 1 for a depiction of Holbein's drawing of Erasmus and Terminus.

2 Edgar Wind, '*Aenigma* Termini' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 1 (1937-8) 66-9.

3 Letter to Valdes, translated in Johan Huizinga,*Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*, (New York, 1957) 245-9. Alfonso de Valdes was a nobleman from Cueneca in Castile. He began his career as a member of the secretarial staff of Charles V and by 1526 he was imperial secretary. He became Erasmus' staunchest supporter at the imperial court and defended him against the attacks of the friars in 1527. In 1530 when Gattinara died Valdes took over his role of mediator between Catholics and Protestants at the Diet of Augsburg. Despite the failure of this effort he never lost hope of a re-united Christendom. When he died of plague in 1533, Erasmus lost a valuable friend in the Spanish court.

tenacity and was prepared to forgo even the basic necessities of life rather than submit to restrictive patronage. Erasmus' dearly-held belief that each man had to find his own way to perfection meant that slavish imitation, even of Christ, was useless in this quest.[4] In that sense Erasmus believed that man must yield to no-one in his quest for perfection. Moreover, he also believed that the true Christian would not yield even to death itself. Christ had conquered death for all of his followers.

In the same letter, Erasmus also argued that the device appealed to him not only for its allusion to the story of the god Terminus but that he also valued it for its obscurity. The true worth of an emblem, for him, was that it was a way of portraying hidden truths. Writing on the Aldine device of a dolphin wound round an anchor he said that it was a symbol for the saying 'Make Haste Slowly'. He pointed out that this kind of pictorial symbol originated in Egypt where it had been called a hieroglyph. This, he explained, was the term used for

> enigmatic carvings which were so much used in early times, especially among the Egyptian soothsayers and priests, who thought it wrong to exhibit mysteries of wisdom to the vulgar in open writing as we do; but they expressed what they thought worthy to be known by various symbols, things, or animals, so that not everyone could readily interpret them. But if anyone deeply studied the qualities of each object, and the special nature and power of each creature, he would at length, by comparing and guessing what they symbolised, understand the meaning of the riddle.[5]

Clearly then, Erasmus knew and expected that his own emblem would be examined by everyone in order to decipher its hidden meanings. In one sense Terminus, the boundary god, can be interpreted as a reference to the Erasmian idea that we must stay within the bounds of our own capabilities. He expounded on this concept in his exposition of the adage, 'You Move What Should Not Be

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4 See above in Chapter 3 on the *Ciceronianus*.

5 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times*, (Cambridge, 1980) 6. Erasmus was probably influenced in this matter by Ficino who in the *argumentum* before his *Pimander* attributed the invention of the hieroglyph to Hermes. As compared with the talisman the hieroglyph is not magical. It is a way of stating hidden truths in the sacred Egyptian writing. See Francis Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (London, 1982) 163.

Moved'.[6] Here he explained that the source of the adage was Plato's Laws in which the philosopher had outlined a law that he called 'the statute of Jove, god of boundaries, about not altering bounds or frontiers'.[7] Plato had added to this the epigram 'not Death himself grasps what may not be moved'.[8] Erasmus believed that stretching too far above one's abilities was dangerous because after a certain point there would be no way of verifying anything and personal verification was essential to true knowledge. He thought that many theologians, notably the scholastics, suffered from this malady. Socrates maxim, 'The things that are above us are nothing to us', was another way of expressing this idea. Erasmus was fond of this saying and praised its author for bringing down philosophy 'from contemplation of natural phenomena into the midst of human life'.[9] In his exposition of the Socratic maxim he said that it was 'a remark of Socrates which discourages us from restless enquiry into heavenly things and the secrets of nature'.[10] More specifically, he added that it could be used particularly 'against those who talk loosely about...the mysteries of theology'.[11] The search for truth and knowledge always started, and indeed ended, with man. Erasmus was only interested in the study of natural phenomena and the cosmos as a means of understanding the creator and the purpose of creation, and never as an end in itself. The purpose of true philosophy for him was to elucidate the nature and method of human perfection. He doubted whether this perfection could be reached on earth and like Plato he believed that philosophy was a preparation for death.[12] Thus his emblem Terminus, the god of death, was a reminder of the true philosophy.

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6 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 44.

7 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 44. The Plato reference is to *Laws,* 8: 843 a.

8 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 44.

9 *CWE,* 9, *Letters,* 1334: 251.

10 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 48.

11 *CWE,* 32, *Adages,* 48.

12 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 202. This commonplace is from Plato, *Phaedo,* 67 e.

The precise nature of the Erasmian concept of true philosophy can also be discerned in this device. As a leading humanist Erasmus was engaged in a new movement which was exploring classical literature. In that literature men were discovering new ways of looking at themselves and their place in the cosmos. Most of what we would now call the occult philosophy of the Renaissance was at least partly concerned with discovering new means of achieving human perfection. Men such as Pico, Reuchlin and Cornelius Agrippa explored Cabbala to find new ways of understanding the process of perfecting human nature. Ficino used Neoplatonism and Egyptian hermeticism in the same way. All of these men were, and remained, Christians. They were syncretists and although they believed in the supremacy of Christ's message they sought further knowledge and verification of the Christian truth by means of an outside philosophy.[13] Prior to this the scholastics had used Aristotelian philosophy extensively in Biblical exegesis but during the middle ages the growing tendency in Aristotelianism to deny that the immortality of the soul could be proven philosophically meant that it was becoming problematical as a religious instrument.[14] These Renaissance humanists, rejecting scholasticism, attempted to fill the philosophical gap with other ancient thought-systems all of which had Platonic leanings. Erasmus, like the Renaissance syncretists, rejected Aristotle as an instrument of exegesis in favour of a more thorough-going Platonism but at the same time he differed fundamentally from them. Unlike them, he did not believe that Christianity needed an outside philosophy as an instrument of understanding or verification. He thought Christ 'was enough all by himself'. The Renaissance search for an ancient system of knowledge was a useful, but not essential, task for Erasmus. Scripture was a philosophy, or, more precisely, it contained a philosophy for those who could discern it. As a humanist he valued classical literature highly. As a syncretist he believed that the *logos* had operated throughout human history in man and therefore man before Christ had access to the truth of Christ thus he did not disparage the explorations of his

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13 See Francis Yates, *The occult philosophy in the Elizabethan age,* (London, 1985) chapters 1-6. Yates has shown that from the time of Pico and Ficino an attempt was made to verify Christian truth by reference to Cabala, Hermeticism and Neoplatonism.

14 During Erasmus' lifetime the battle over Aristotelian dominance in matters philosophical and theological raged, and, in 1513, after much debate the fifth Latern Council pronounced on it. The decree *Apostolici Regiminis* was issued which confirmed the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and required philosophers to teach it in the universities.

contemporaries into the mysteries of the ancients.[15] He held, nevertheless, that the true philosophy had never been expounded as clearly by anyone as it had been by Christ in his teaching and in his life. Therefore, the best classical writings were aids to perfection but the truest and best philosophy was that of Christ. This is what he meant by the term *philosophia Christi* and it may well have been his awareness of the contemporary search for a new philosophy together with the scholastic use of Aristotle which led him to adopt the term in opposition to these systems. The Terminus symbol then, in depicting true philosophy, was in fact a symbol of the *philosophia Christi*.

The device consists of the upper torso of a youth with flying hair embedded in a cubiform base which looks like a block of stone. In 1519 Erasmus commissioned the artist Quentin Metsys to make a medal for him with the Terminus image on one side and a portrait of himself on the other.[16] It has Terminus and *concedo nulli* written on it with *mors ultima linea rerum* [17] on the circumference and in Greek,*ορα τενοσ μακρογ βιογ.*[18] Erasmus sent copies in bronze or lead to his friends as a memento. The total image is a perfect depiction of the unity of opposites within which man is compelled to live on earth. The optimism, energy and innocence of youth embedded in the dead, limited, reality of stone is a perfect depiction of the Erasmian notion that man must ever strive to reach the limits of his capabilities while always living within those limits. It is the union of spirit and flesh. The young man, who has the face of Erasmus, is animated by spirit and the rock is a depiction of the flesh in the Pauline sense of earthly material things. As we have seen Erasmus believed that man was made up of opposite natures:

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15 Erasmus approved of both Ficino and Pico; He was also in contact with Reuchlin, Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus. while he approved of the humanistic efforts of these men, however, he was never attracted to any of the systems they were uncovering and developing. For an interesting discussion of Erasmus' views on Cabbala, see W L Gundersheimer, 'Erasmus, Humanism, and the Christian Cabbala' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (26) 38-52.

16 Erwin Panofsky, 'Erasmus and the visual arts' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969) 215-6.

17 Horace, *Epistolae,* 1:16,79.

18 This means, contemplate the end of a long life.

man is a marvellous creature composed of two or three very diverse parts, a soul which is like a divinity and a body which is like a brute beast...If the body had not been added to you, you would be a divinity; if the mind had not been bestowed upon you, you would be a beast. These two divergent natures were joined together in happy concord by the supreme craftsman, but the serpent, the enemy of peace, split them apart again in unhappy discord, so that now they cannot be separated without the greatest torment or live together without incessant warfare.....Such is their confused turmoil and strife that they seem to be distinct from one another, although they are one.[19]

This is the state of ordinary humanity, an unhappy state of disunity of warring factions of body and soul. He said of the body that 'since it is mortal, it pursues temporal things; since it is heavy, it sinks downward, On the contrary, the soul remembering its heavenly origin, strives upwards, with all its might and struggles against its earthly burden,'[20] This is the Terminus image. It is a depiction of human nature but it is more. Erasmus believed that this disunity was only an illusion: the two natures were, in reality, one. Reality, for Erasmus, was always the unseen spiritual state. What he meant was that the perfection of man or his true state was one in which the two natures were united harmoniously. Indeed, the process of perfection itself involved the interaction of both natures: the ultimate state of harmony or the union of opposites is perfection. In rather Platonic terms Erasmus believed in some prior state in which the two natures had been joined in harmony with the mind freely and willingly commanding the body.[21] This state was destroyed by sin which caused the caused a state of warfare among the two natures in which the body tyrannized the reason.[22]

Terminus is a symbol of the Christian struggle and as such it embodies the truth

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19 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 41.

20 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 41.

21 The pre-existence of souls is a Platonic commonplace, see for instance, *Phaedrus*, 249 c. This concept was opposed to the church doctrine of creationism and therefore heterodox. See *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 41-2.

22 *CWE*, 66, *Enchiridion*, 41-2.

contained in the *philosophia Christi*. Throughout Erasmus' writings the Platonic and Pauline opposition of spirit and matter is a constant theme. In the *Moria* there is a description of the real state of man which is very evocative of the Terminus emblem:

Christians come very near to agreeing with the Platonists that the soul is stifled and bound down by the fetters of the body which by its gross matter prevents the soul from being able to contemplate and enjoy things as they truly are.[23]

Erasmus' Folly then goes on to say that Death is a liberation from the fetters of the body when the mind unshackled can see the true reality.[24] In this sense the Terminus image is very similar to the devices used by two of Erasmus' printers. Aldus and Froben. Aldus' dolphin wound round an anchor and Froben's serpents wound around a staff have are clearly similar symbols. In his exposition of the adage, *Festina lente,* Erasmus acknowledged that Aldus and Froben were engaged in the same work of restoring ancient literature.[25] In the same text he examined Aldus' device for its secret meaning. First he looked at the dolphin which he said was the fastest of all fish and asked 'what symbol is better suited to express the ardent and dauntless activity of the mind, than the dolphin?'[26] Erasmus then interpreted the image as representing a dynamic union or harmony of opposites in man. He cited an example from the *Iliad* in which Homer depicted Pallas standing behind Achilles and 'restraining the hand already moving to his sword'. He says 'thus you may call these violent impulses the dolphin, and the anchor is controlling wisdom.'[27] He went on to say that

some natures need the spur, others the rein, and so the ancients rightly curled the dolphin round the anchor, because one must be tempered by the other, and both united, so as to

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23 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 202.

24 Betty Radice, trans., *Praise of Folly,* (London,1986) 202.

25 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 14.

26 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 8-9.

27 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 16.

produce the kind of balanced character which Plato imagined resulting from a fusion of Music and Gymnastics, if both were practiced.[28]

Erasmus believed that this union of opposites was a fundamental law of human existence. He said that 'just as life is nothing other than the union of the body and soul, so health is the harmony between all the parts of the body'.[29] Moreover, this harmony was an underlying law of all nature and not just applicable to man. He saw the universe as an ordered entity in which there was perfect harmony among the celestial bodies and the elements.[30] In his *Querela Pacis,* Erasmus described peace as the perfect expression of this cosmic harmony. He argued that the whole of nature was governed by this law, animals, plants and even seemingly inanimate stones exhibited this attractive force.[31] Finally, in the piece, he equates this law of attraction, which underlies all harmony, with love. This, for Erasmus, was one of the central mysteries of Christianity. The distinguishing mark of Christians was that they loved one another.[32] He believed that Christ came to bring the precept of evangelical love to mankind.[33] The Christian law of love was the attractive force in the universe. In the *Antibarbari,* when he was outlining the wonderful harmony of creation in which God is omnipresent and all-powerful, he then described how he believed the law of attraction underlay all progress in creation. Thus he thought the purpose of the law of love was the transformation of creation. In Christian terms this meant that Christ, the *logos*, continually perfected all of creation by means of the attracting power which united opposites and transformed them into a new and more perfect creation. This was the underlying harmony in a seemingly discordant world. 'There is a great discord in nature which is the

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28 MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times,* (Cambridge, 1980) 17.

29 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 294.

30 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 294.

31 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 294. The stone in question is the loadstone or magnet.

32 *CWE,* 27, *Querela Pacis,* 301-3.

33 *CWE,* 42, *Paraphrase on Romans,* 58 and 76.

completest concord'.[34] Erasmus emphasized the attractive force of Christ in his commentary on Christ's promise that if he was 'lifted up from the earth', he would 'draw all' unto himself.[35] This is Christ as the attracting transforming power of creation. As we have seen he depicted this power of Christ by means of an image in the letter dedicating his 1518 edition of the *Enchiridion* to Paul Volz.[36] In this image he put Christ at the centre like a fire drawing all men and transforming them into himself.[37]This was Erasmus' concept of a truly Christian society and his view of a perfectly functioning psyche, but on another level it was also how Erasmus saw the cosmos. This fundamental power of attraction was the perfecting transforming law of love, and love, for Erasmus, was synonymous with God: God was love. He wrote about this in the *Enchiridion* when he described the death of the soul. He believed that this could happen before the death of the body and that the person in this state while still physically alive was spiritually dead. He said that this happened 'because its life is not present, which is God. For where God is, there is love, God is love'.[38] This is the divine creative transforming power of attraction.[39] Thus the Terminus image was used by Erasmus to represent the creative, perfecting law of love which united all opposites into an harmonious whole.

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34 *CWE,* 23, *Antibarbari,* 61.

35 *CWE,* 23, *Antibarbari,* 59, the verse is John 12:32. This concept of Christ drawing all things good and bad to himself is also reminiscent of Origen's view that in the end even the devil will be saved: the *Apokatastasis,* which is based on Acts 3:21.The clearest statement of this Origenistic concept is in Jerome *Ep. ad Pammachium et Oceanum,* 7. MA Screech has argued that there is no evidence in the writings of Erasmus for a sympathy with this doctrine. See MA Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly,* (London,1980) 165. This doctrine was condemned by the Council of Constantinople and, thus, Erasmus would never allude to it overtly.

36 *CWE,* 66. *Enchiridion,* 14-16.

37 *CWE,* 66. *Enchiridion,* 14.

38 *CWE,* 66. *Enchiridion,* 28.

39 Erasmus may have found this concept of perfection through attraction in Plato`s *Republic*,, 490 b, where Plato describes how the philosopher ever strives after true being 'until he has attained the knowledge of the true nature of every essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul, and by that power drawing near and mingling and becoming incorporate with very being, having begotten mind and truth, he will have knowledge and will truly live and grow; and then and not till then will he cease from his travail.' Jowett , version, 269.

Terminus, however, was the god of boundaries and death and as such was not usually used to represent the union of opposites. The union of opposites, in its ultimate sense of the uniting of that which was above with that which was below during the Renaissance was often associated with Mercury or Hermes. Traditionally he was the messenger of the gods and between gods and man. The question then arises as to why Erasmus did not use Hermes as his symbol, since it would have been a more obvious reference to his important concept of the union of opposites. The answer is consistent with Erasmus' attitude to the Hermetic, Neoplatonic and Cabbalistic philosophies which had experienced a resurgence from the time of Ficino in Florence. If Erasmus had used Hermes he would have run the risk of being associated with the occult philosophy of the Hermetic writings. His determination to avoid this is apparent from a small incident which is portrayed his letters. In 1514, one of Erasmus' correspondents, Zasius, called him *Termaximus*. This is a humanist word-play on Terminus but, of course, it can also be associated with the Greek *Trismegistos:* the supposed author of the *Hermetica*. Zasius here appears to have understood the use Erasmus had made of Terminus as a cover for Hermes. Erasmus let this pass until 1523 when he made a very angry complaint to Zasius about it.[40] He refuted the remark both in a letter to Zasius and, significantly, to the pope, Adrian IV.[41] Clearly some implication must have been drawn by someone in the papal circle from the original letter and it is a measure of Erasmus' determination to remain free from any taint of heretical thought that he found it necessary to refute a remark that had been made in jest nine years

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40 See G. Clutton, '*Termaximus* a humanist jest' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 2 (1938-9) 266-8. The 1514 letters are *Ep.* 317 and *Ep.* 319. The 1523 letters are *Ep.* 1352 and *Ep.* 1353. Johann Ulrich Zasius was born at Freiburg im Breisgau. He was both clerk of the court at Freiburg and a lecturer on law at the university. He was a humanist of note and was in written contact with a very wide circle of the leading humanists of Europe. One of his most outstanding achievements was the Freiburg law code of 1520 which cogently fused the law of Freiburg with Roman law. This later influenced other German codifications and remained in force until the 19th century. His talents were not confined to the law and Erasmus called him 'the only German who knows how to express himself'. (Ep.408) The two were on friendly terms and Zasius admired Erasmus as a Catholic reformer but in the end he thought Erasmus too cautious in his dealings with the reformers. There are no recorded letters between the two in the period 1524-9 and this might reflect some difficulty which would explain why Erasmus decided to defend himself against the *Termaximus* remark so many years after it had been made.

41 *Ep.* 1352.

previously. The Mercurial association with Hermeticism meant that Erasmus could not, therefore, adopt a simple Mercurial symbol as his device. Notwithstanding this, the important Christocentric image used by Erasmus to depict the creative transforming aspect of Christ was probably modelled on a description of Mercury and his followers. Erasmus found this image in the writings of the Greek medical writer Galen which he later translated.[42] In the piece the followers of Mercury are ranged about the god in concentric circles just as the followers of Christ are in the Erasmian image. There is a circle which contains

> all honourable professional men who do not run, shout, or jostle. The god is in their midst and his followers around him, each man in his station, none deserting the rank assigned him by the god, Some are very close to him and surround him in set order: geometricians, arithmeticians, philosophers, physicians, astronomers, and grammarians. These are followed by a second circle of painters, sculptors, writers, carpenters, architects, and stonemasons. Thereafter comes a third class comprising the representatives of the remaining arts, each arranged in order, but in such a way that all face their common god and equally obey his commands.[43]

Then Galen describes a fourth class of people selected by the god and standing apart from the others Mercury chose these specially not on account of their

> career, ancestry, or possessions: he honours those who live a life of virtue and excel in the arts, those who follow his commands and practice their arts lawfully, Such men he cherishes and ranks above the others, keeping them his close associates forever.[44]

He thought that Socrates, Homer, Hippocrates, Plato and their devotees were in this class.[45] The resemblance to Erasmus' Christocentric society in which it is Christ who is at the centre of the three circles of people is remarkable. Although this translation of Galen was published by Erasmus in 1526 and his

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42 *CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 217-48.

43 *CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 227.

44 *CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 227.

45 *CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 227.

Christocentric image was published in 1518, Erasmus may nevertheless have had access earlier to the Venice edition of Galen which was published in 1490.[46] Clearly Erasmus saw Mercury as a suitable symbol for the transforming power of Christ since he was willing to interchange the images. His device the seal of Terminus has concentric circles around the Terminus image. This may also be a reference to Galen's image. The Terminus image of the unity of opposites lies in the centre of concentric circles just as Galen's Mercury, and Erasmus' Christ do. Christ was, for Erasmus, the embodiment of the ultimate opposites of man and God, flesh and spirit. Another possible Mercurial allusion is apparent in the Metsys medal which depicts Terminus' cubic base emerging from a pile of earth. This is significant because the heap of stones or ἑρμειον was used in depictions of Mercury. Erasmus was aware of the fact that Mercury, like Terminus, was an ancient boundary god because he made reference to it in his adage *Mercuriale* and in the same adage he also described the heap of stones, or ἑρμειον which were commonly laid out for the god.[47] BC Bowen has shown how Erasmus' depictions of Mercury in the *Adagia* influenced Alciati in his famous emblem book. This Erasmian influence actually led Alciati to conflate Mercury and Terminus. In the 1546 version of the *Emblemata* his second Mercury emblem is simply called Terminus. Clearly, then, Erasmus' contemporaries could read his symbol as a Mercury. Erasmus, whether consciously or not, aided this when he translated Galen's treatise on the liberal arts and medicine. While this was certainly a suitable subject for a learned humanist, Erasmus was not particularly interested, or expert, in the field of medicine. This treatise, in addition to the concentric depiction of Mercury's followers, also contained a description of Mercury which was very similar to Erasmus' Terminus. Mercury,'the lord of reason and father of all the arts' was depicted as 'a graceful young man' whose 'countenance is cheerful, his glance

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46*CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 226 ff. Erasmus actually used the 1525 Aldine edition of Galen for his translation but this does not preclude the possibility that he had access to the earlier,1490, edition of Pincio de Cuneto. In his exposition of the adage, *Festina lente*, Erasmus said that when he was at Aldus' house the local scholars had been incredibly generous in lending him manuscripts. See MM Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times*, (Cambridge, 1980) 14. Moreover, the ideas of Galen had been freely available in the west since the twelfth century when Latin translations were produced from the Arabic.

47 BC Bowen, 'Mercury at the Crossroads in Renaissance Emblems' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 48 (1985) 222-8. The adage is iv. vii,4.

spirited, and the base on which he stands is of all shapes the most solid and least moveable; a cube supported on all sides by its four corners'.[48] The only difference between this image and the Terminus image was that the Mercury had a complete body while the Terminus was an upper torso only. The similarities, however, are striking. The graceful spirited young man combined with the solid immovable cube is the same harmony of opposites which are represented by Terminus. Erasmus then changed Galen's interpretation of this image and said: 'Sometimes even the god himself is represented by this figure'.[49] Galen had written that sometimes the god was adorned with this figure.[50] The change is significant because Erasmus' closest readers would have been aware of his device and now he was making it plain that, at least the cube, if not the whole image represented Mercury as well as Terminus. As boundary gods they could both be seen to represent the union of opposites inasmuch as a boundary is a point or line where two spaces or entities meet. Death is the boundary between the material world and the spiritual one. It is the point at which they meet.

The whole dynamic of the *philosophia Christi* can be seen as a union of opposites. The opposites are the human and the divine. The entire key to Erasmus' thought system lies in his concepts of Christ and man. His Christ is more human than orthodoxy and his man is more divine and so the two come closer together in Erasmus than in any of his contemporaries. The secret of the *philosophia Christi* is that as God became man, so man can become God. In uniting his two parts, man can achieve perfection and immortality. In this way he then yields to no-one, not even death.

The boundary god was also a suitable image for the enigmatic Erasmus because he chose to impose a limit or hermetic seal on himself and his writings. Balthasar Hubmaier said of him that he wrote carefully but spoke liberally.[51] He was treading a very dangerous line because his views were complex and subtle

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48 *CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 226.

49 *CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 226.

50 *CWE*, 29, *Ex Galeno versa*, 226; The Greek verb at issue is κοσμουσιν, see, *ibid.*, footnote 17, 467.

51 See Leon-E Halkin, *Erasmus*, (Oxford,1994) 166.

and easily misunderstood. He was a master of self-creation.[52] What we have in his writings and the details of his life is exactly what he wanted us to have. His letters are a rich source of information on his everyday life but they are also wholly unsatisfying. He tells us about his likes and dislikes with regard to food and lodgings but we never really get to know the secrets of his heart. His true feelings about friends and companions or the momentous upheavals that surrounded him remain shrouded beneath the measured comments of his writings. The man who was so profoundly devoted to his perceived task that he spent every waking hour furthering his goal can only really be glimpsed in his writings. Erasmus devoted his whole life and all of his energies to his goal. He had no other hobbies or pastimes; he had no single close companion to whom he devoted time and emotion. He was rather Christlike in being above personal human attachments, and yet he so loved his fellow man that he devoted all of his own life to a task whose sole end was to further the salvation of humankind. He expressed this best himself when he told his friend, Justus Jonas, in 1518: 'for praise of my learning or my literary skill I care nothing; one thing seriously gives me pleasure, if what I write makes anyone better, if my productions contribute to the glory of Christ'.[53]

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52 See Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters,* (Princeton, 1993).

53 *CWE,* 6, *Letters,* 145: 876.

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