

Desiderius Erasmus. *Controversies: Clarifications Concerning the Censures Published at Paris in the Name of the Theology Faculty There.*

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Erasmus has had to wait until the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for all that he wrote to begin to be edited and published in critical editions, both in Latin (in Amsterdam, the North-Holland Publishing Co.) and in English translation (the University of Toronto Press). The issues that animated Erasmus and his

contemporaries are today alternative orthodoxies of the same religion that live (in most places) harmlessly side by side. The great divide occurred during Erasmus's lifetime. Before and during this revolution he sought to empower people through education and to provide tools for their education, including their religious education. But doing so placed him in jeopardy of his life, something that leaps out of every page in the volume here under review. He is in conflict with the theology faculty at the University of Paris, and most especially with its leader, Noël Bédá, whom Erasmus had known since their student days in Paris and to whom he had written a long, irenic letter just before Bédá took full aim at him (see CWE11, letter 1581, 130–62).

The political situation contributed to the intensity of the debate. King Francis I left a power vacuum in Paris when captured by the Spanish and sent to Spain as a prisoner, where he remained for one year (1525). During this period the theological faculty censured Erasmus (who had been invited to Paris by the king), charging him with responsibility for the growing instability of the Christian world. The most serious charge, because the most threatening to him personally, was that Erasmus was in some way in league with Martin Luther, not because he agreed with Luther's theology (he had written a tract challenging Luther's theology in 1524) but because of texts he wrote for the laity (his *Colloquies*) in which he held some religious practices up to ridicule, such as the efficacy of a religious cowl to aid healing, of vows to a saint to cure a disease, or (in the colloquy *The Confession of a Soldier*) of sacramental confession. Erasmus's debate with his fellow Christians about religious practice has as its backdrop his philological and theological texts on the New Testament. We see both levels mixed together here. Erasmus is being attacked for the irreverence of texts he wrote primarily for lay Christians, but what the theologians want to undermine is Erasmus's theological orthodoxy, the legitimacy of his entire enterprise, especially his publication (the first) of the Greek New Testament, his translation of it into Latin (which challenged the Vulgate by its very appearance), and his annotations and paraphrases, both of which rendered him, in the eyes of the Paris theology faculty, as dangerous as Luther. Erasmus took his critics seriously and tried to clarify their misinterpretations of his words. The situation was an impossible one. Erasmus was attacking and his critics were defending the scholastic theological method, then several hundred years old. But the context of their debate was a religious-political revolution in which religious practices as well as theologies that developed completely independently of Erasmus were being challenged from many quarters.

If the Paris faculty of theology had succeeded in censuring Erasmus and in gaining the approval of the political powers for such censure, the consequences could have been fatal for him. The earnestness and thoroughness with which he responds to the charges made against him by the theologians in the texts translated here are evidence enough that he felt a clear and present danger. He does not emerge from this encounter as wishy-washy, but as staunch in his religious posture as the members of the theology faculty are in theirs, even though he has no church

or faculty to which to appeal for support. He was a courageous scholar, who shows here that that term is not an oxymoron. This book illustrates both the context and the content of the conflicts clearly and is well produced in all respects from end to end.

There is a very good contextual introduction by the volume editors that guides the reader, but not overmuch.

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