Erasmus of Rotterdam: A Portrait. By **Christine Christ-von Wedel**. Translated by **Erika Rummel**. Illustrations by **Albert de Pury**. Basel: Schwabe Verlag 2020. 177 pp. $49.00 hardcover.

In 2013, Christine Christ-von Wedel published an expanded English translation of her intellectual biography, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity*. Taking its point of departure from the defining moment when Luther called Erasmus the "devil incarnate" in response to his edition of Hilary, the book reframed Erasmus historiography around the question of his historical (or historicist) approach. What outraged Luther "was Erasmus's attempt to understand Hilary within the context of his own time" (University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 9). This insight about Erasmus's historical hermeneutic methodology informed many new readings of Erasmus's theological positions in contrast to contemporary movements. The commanding book, built on decades of German scholarship, is vital reading for scholars of the period.

After such an achievement, this second biography may at first seem unnecessary. *Erasmus: A Portrait*, translated by another eminent Erasmus scholar, Erika Rummel, is more broadly accessible. More substantial than the earlier introductory biography of James McConica in 1991, or Rummel's own in 2004, this pithy life history operates as a précis of Christ-von Wedel's former intellectual biography while integrating aspects of social history and psychological motivation. It draws on developments in Erasmus scholarship—the role of vernacular medieval drama in shaping his theology, for example, or the importance of his historical method—while providing an updated account of his life in its context. The result is a more theologically oriented Erasmus than the one found in many former portraits, informed by recent cultural and literary approaches to theological history.

The book's seven chapters are structured by the itinerant scholar's geographical stations over the years: his youth in the Dutch monastery after his parents died of the plague; a short period of study in Paris to become a tutor; to England, then Italy, and back to England; a sojourn in Basel to work on the revised New Testament; four years in Leuven disputing with Luther; the last years in Freiburg and Basel. Much of the social context is illustrated by lengthy quotations from the *Colloquies*, Erasmus's semi-fictitious genre for instruction and social commentary. Nine cartoons of Erasmus and Luther by Albert de Pury adorn the volume. One has Erasmus seated at a table with a bearded devil and Luther exclaiming, "Looking at you, Erasmus, I see the *devil incarnate*!" Erasmus replies, "Tell me, Martin, have you been drinking again?" (79). The cartoons mirror the book's frequent comparisons between the two figures.

Erasmus was "embarrassed by his illegitimate birth" (9) and, significant to this account, covered up his parents' transgression by fabricating an elaborate story of how his father, believing his fiancée had died, was forced into the priesthood on false pretenses. The story may provide background for Erasmus's complexities of character: an advocate for honesty, yet "a master of equivocation" (11); a poet novitiate who wrote of homoerotic and heterosexual desire and yet ultimately sublimated sexuality to a life of celibacy; a man who "advocated marriage for priests" yet became indignant when the Protestant reformers married (15); a man who left the monastery but never all the trappings of monastic life.

After a stint in a college in Paris, Erasmus landed a position tutoring Lord Mountjoy, who brought him back to England, where he met humanists such as Thomas More and John Colet and found his "mission in life" (33–44): the New Testament project. This took Erasmus from England to Italy in search of texts and Greek study. During this

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itinerant period, with an incredible timeliness, he discovered and published Lorenzo Valla's earlier critique of the Vulgate against the Greek, bolstering his own project. After another long sojourn in England, he moved to Basel to publish his New Testament, when in 1514 he was ordered by his abbot to return to his Dutch cloister after over two decades' absence. (Why and how that could have been expected of the now famous figure deserves some explanation.) Erasmus boldly, though painfully, refused, listing his achievements to support his decision, including his forthcoming project: "I have also revised the whole of the New Testament based on a collation of Greek and ancient manuscripts and have annotated over a thousand places" (46). His abbot may have been scandalized by these thunderous words as many church authorities would be after its publication by Johannes Froben in 1516. While some conservatives balked at the new text and commentary, others ignited a revolution. Matthew 11:30, which Erasmus translated using the word *commodum*, "my yoke is easy/useful/pleasant" (51) had a long annotation which was translated into German and printed as a broadsheet, including the passage: "let us shake off the heavy yoke of human rule and take up instead the truly pleasant yoke of Christ" (51).

Erasmus was at first sympathetic to Luther's call for reform but cautioned against its destructive aspects. "Things are heading toward civil strife," he warned Melanchthon in 1520 (82). Yet, he defended Luther, and when the university in Leuven where Erasmus was staying condemned Luther's teaching in 1521, he returned to Basel to work with Froben on a third edition of the New Testament. In his published debate with Luther, the German reformer became pugnacious, and Erasmus's conciliatory defenses at times did his position more harm than good, for example, when he argued that "it is not expedient to tell the whole truth to ordinary people no matter how it is done." This hedging resisted the inevitable: dissemination by the "printing press" (106), as the author argues, but also translation into the vernacular. Latin was a less dangerous medium.

A question missing from much Erasmus biography concerns the economic realities of this expensive scholarly life: how much money came from tutoring, patronage, editing, and especially authorship, which was not then considered a profession, but which seemingly became one in his hands? This biography nonetheless luminously packs a great deal of value into a narrow room, particularly in the two longer chapters on Erasmus's sojourns in Basel, where his changes to the New Testament would shape theological debate for decades and even centuries to come.

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John of the Cross: Desire, Transformation and Selfhood. By **Sam Hole**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. xi + 221. $85.00 hardcover.

Few ideas in the history of Western Christian spirituality are as well-known or as influential as John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul." Yet, this idea has become almost a cipher, generally understood to refer to a period of spiritual difficulty or dryness but often referred to with little sense of its meaning within the context of John's own work, of sixteenth century Spanish history and culture, or of the history of Christian