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## Erasmus and Switzerland

by Edmund J. Campion

Although Erasmus (1467?-1536) lived in Switzerland for ten years, a longer period of time than in any country except his native Holland, and was, in fact, buried in Basel, scholars have written very little of substance on his lengthy connections with Switzerland and Swiss intellectuals and publishers. This is surprising because links between Erasmus and specific European countries have attracted a great deal of interest from leading Erasmus scholars. In his 1954 book *Erasme et l'Italie*, Augustin Renaudet examined the important connections between Erasmus and Italian theologians and philosophers.<sup>1</sup> Not only did Erasmus earn his doctorate in sacred theology at the University of Turin in 1506, but his first major works were published in Venice by Aldus Manutius. Until 1512, Erasmus made several extended stays in Italy and he had several influential friends in the Vatican. The pacifist Erasmus was, however, very displeased by the warrior Pope Julius II against whom he wrote a witty, satirical satire entitled *Julius exclusus e coelis* (*Julius Excluded from Heaven*). In this work, published anonymously in 1513 but clearly written by Erasmus, St. Peter does not permit Pope Julius II to enter heaven because this pope's undertaking of violent wars contradicted Christ's teaching of peace.<sup>2</sup> As a faithful Catholic priest who wanted to avoid conflicts with influential people at the Vatican, Erasmus wisely concluded that it was in his self-interest to leave Italy for England where his close friends John Colet, John Fisher, and Thomas More lived. Despite his departure from Italy Erasmus continued to correspond with Italian writers until his death in Basel in 1536.

Although Renaudet's book *Erasme et l'Italie* contains 450 pages, it is by no means the longest work on Erasmus and a specific country. That

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<sup>1</sup> Augustin Renaudet, *Erasme et l'Italie*, new preface by Silvana Seidel Menchi (1954; rpt. Geneva, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Although Renaudet (pp. 201-203) affirms that Erasmus did not write the *Julius exclusus*, almost all Erasmus scholars attribute this work to Erasmus and it is included in the English translation of his complete works called the *Collected Works of Erasmus* that the University of Toronto Press has been publishing since 1974.

honor belongs to the eminent French Renaissance scholar Marcel Bataillon whose 1937 book *Erasme et l'Espagne* is well over 800 pages long and Erasmus never set foot in Spain.<sup>3</sup> Marcel Bataillon does, however, explain in great detail Erasmus's profound influence on Spanish Catholic thinkers both during his lifetime and even after most of his works were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1559 near the end of the Council of Trent. Marcel Bataillon showed quite convincingly that post-Tridentine Spanish Catholics could still make clear use of Erasmus's works as long as they were careful to hide their imitation of Erasmian themes. In many cases, Catholic Spanish writers in the post-Tridentine Catholic Church simply needed not to name Erasmus or to give the title of the specific work by Erasmus that they were imitating. This gave them deniability so that they could avoid very real problems with the Inquisition.

Scholars have certainly not overlooked the fact that Erasmus lived and wrote in four other European countries other than Switzerland. In his two-volume biography of Erasmus entitled *Erasmus of Europe*, R. J. Schoeck describes quite well Erasmus's studies in classical literature and theology at the University of Paris between 1495 and 1501 and his subsequent studies at the University of Louvain, now located in Belgium but then a part of the realm of the Dukes of Burgundy, between 1502 and 1504.<sup>4</sup> Although Erasmus developed a solid command of Greek during these years in Paris and Louvain and published such important works as the first edition of his *Adages* (1500) and the *Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier* (1503), he encountered significant opposition from influential conservative Catholic theologians. His major adversary was Noël Bédé (1470-1537), an influential professor of theology at the Sorbonne, who strongly opposed Erasmus from the mid-1490s until the 1530s and especially disapproved of Erasmus's 1516 *Novum Instrumentum*, a critical edition of the Greek text of the New Testament which also contains a new Latin translation and very extensive critical annotations. Noël Bédé and an equally conservative Catholic theologian named Jacobus Latomus in Louvain persuaded their colleagues

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<sup>3</sup> Marcel Bataillon, *Erasme et l'Espagne* (Paris: Droz, 1937).

<sup>4</sup> R.J. Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: The Making of a Humanist, 1467-1500* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 196-205 and R.J. Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: The Prince of Humanists, 1501-1536* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 14-27. We will refer to this two-volume biography of Erasmus as Schoeck and we will indicate all references by volume and page numbers. Schoeck's biography of Erasmus is very reliable, but he is not necessarily correct when he affirms (Schoeck, I, 26-29) that Erasmus was born in 1467. In his book *Erasmus: A Critical Biography*, trans. John Tonkin (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993), 1, Léon Halkin argues that Erasmus may well have been born in 1466, 1467, or 1469.



in Paris and Louvain to denounce Erasmus's efforts to persuade readers that the New Testament permitted a wide diversity of possible interpretations.<sup>5</sup> It was largely because of these two conservative Catholic theologians that Erasmus felt obligated to refuse teaching positions in both Paris and Louvain, that were then the two leading intellectual centers of the northern Renaissance. Erasmus simply did not want to have to deal with such belligerent colleagues on a daily basis. There were excellent universities with brilliant students and magnificent collections of Latin and Greek manuscripts in both Louvain and Paris, but he would not have found in either city the peace and calmness that he needed for his extensive research and writing. From 1509 to 1514, he lived and taught mostly in England, but despite his close friendship with Thomas More, John Fisher, and John Colet, he never felt completely at home in England and he returned permanently to the European continent in 1514. Although Erasmus did live in the southwestern German city of Freiburg-im-Breisgau from 1529 until 1535, he eventually came to realize that the most tolerant European city was Basel, Switzerland. Although the residents of Basel largely converted to the newly Reformed Church during the 1520s, they were very respectful of Catholic theologians such as Erasmus and they treated him very well. He was free to practice Catholicism there and an ecumenical religious service that included a Catholic requiem mass was celebrated in Basel's Protestant cathedral after Erasmus's death in July 1536. The Protestants in Basel were more tolerant toward Erasmus than were Catholic theologians in Paris, Louvain, and many different German cities. In his excellent biography of Erasmus, R.J. Schoeck points out that Erasmus lived in Basel for ten years: first from 1515 to 1516, then from 1521 to 1529, and finally from 1535 to 1536. He suggests that Erasmus spent so many years in Basel because he wanted to be close to his publishers Johann and Hieronymus Froben who lived and worked in Basel, but this is by no means a complete explanation.<sup>6</sup> Before he began using the Froben press, he had previously had his books published by such distinguished publishers as Aldus Manutius in Venice, Dirk Martens in Antwerp, and Josse Bade and Gilles de Gourmont in Paris. Erasmus never felt the need to live in these cities for extended periods of time and he was able to correct galley proofs wherever he happened to be living. From 1514 until his death in 1536, Erasmus, in fact, worked closely with Johann Froben until Johann's death in October 1527 and then he worked closely with Johann's son Hieronymus, whether he was living in

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<sup>5</sup> Schoeck, II, 217-236.

<sup>6</sup> Schoeck, II, 283-297.



Basel, Louvain, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, or elsewhere in Europe. The reasons why Erasmus chose to live in Switzerland for so many years are more complicated than R.J. Schoeck would have us believe. This essay will examine why Erasmus felt more comfortable living in the largely Protestant city of Basel than in cities with large Catholic majorities such as Louvain and Paris.

From 1509 to 1514 Erasmus lived largely in England except for a brief trip to Paris to supervise the publication of his first edition of *The Praise of Folly* in 1511. While he was in England, Erasmus completed most of the work on his *Novum Instrumentum*, his massive establishment of the Greek text of his New Testament, his Latin translation of the original Greek text, and his critical annotation. Erasmus considered this to be his most important work because it would renew Biblical scholarship by giving people access to the original version of the New Testament, a more accurate Latin translation than the Vulgate version produced by St. Jerome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and insightful critical notes that would enable readers to understand the many different levels of meaning of the New Testament. Erasmus understood that his *Novum Instrumentum* would clearly provoke very negative reactions from conservative Catholic theologians such as Noël Bédard and Jacobus Latomus and he wanted to make sure that there were no major typographical errors in the first edition of his *Novum Instrumentum*. For this reason he decided to travel to Basel and to personally supervise the printing by Johann Froben. Erasmus especially wanted to make sure that his annotations, which included numerous references to such orthodox Catholic theologians as Sts. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure, were properly presented.

Erasmus lived with Johann Froben's family in their "Haus zum Sessel" in Basel briefly in the fall of 1514 and then from July 1515 to July 1516. R.J. Schoeck (II, 159) points out that "Froben had both his press and living quarters" in this residence. This arrangement was ideal for Erasmus because he did not have to leave the Froben house in order to check on the progress of the printing of his *Novum Instrumentum*. Johann Froben also made sure that the leading people in the religious and intellectual life of Basel made Erasmus feel extremely welcome in this Swiss city. Sebastian Brant (1458-1521), a learned classicist and Dean of the University of Basel's Faculty of Law, spoke with Erasmus on many occasions, and greatly impressed him. In a letter written from Basel to the Strasbourg scholar Jakob Wimpfeling, Erasmus paid extraordinary praise to this Swiss intellectual:

Sebastian Brant is a man apart; I set him outside any classification beyond all hazard. I think so highly of him, my dear Wimpfeling, I like and respect and venerate him so much, that it seems to add greatly to my happiness to have been allowed to see him face to face and converse with him.<sup>7</sup>

His first extended stay in Basel was intellectually very stimulating and Erasmus very much appreciated how well he was treated in Basel. He did not encounter fanatical opponents such as Noël Béda and similarly reactionary Catholic theologians. It was not just university professors and members of the Froben family who went out of their way to make Erasmus welcome in Basel. In a letter written on June 5, 1516 to his English friend and fellow Greek scholar Bishop John Fisher (1459?-1535), who was martyred on June 22, 1535, just two weeks before the martyrdom of Erasmus's friend St. Thomas More, who was executed on July 6, 1535, Erasmus describes other very enjoyable experiences in Basel. He had several discussions with a local Catholic priest named Wolfgang Capito, who, in Erasmus's opinion, was "a much better Hebrew scholar than Reuchlin and also a man of great experience in theological disputation" (CWE, 3, 294). On the same page in this English translation of this letter to Bishop John Fisher, Erasmus noted that both Fr. Capito and Johann Reuchlin (from the University of Tübingen) were diligent students of Greek. In a letter to Cardinal Raffaele Riario dated May 15, 1515, Erasmus assured this cardinal that Johann Reuchlin had "all Germany in his debt where he was the first to awake the study of Greek and Hebrew" (CWE, 3, 91). Erasmus then added that Reuchlin was "a man with an exceptional knowledge of the languages" (CWE, 3, 91). Italian scholars and cardinals at the Vatican considered Erasmus to be the most distinguished Greek scholar in all of Europe and Cardinal Raffaele Riario knew that Erasmus was not the type of person to praise the knowledge of those who were not truly learned in Biblical languages. In his letter to his English friend John Fisher, Erasmus noted that Father Capito was not a professor at the University of Basel but rather preached in a regular Catholic church in Basel. If ordinary parish priests in Basel are so learned in the two languages

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<sup>7</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 3, 29. In this essay, all quotations from Erasmus's correspondence that has already been translated into English come from this multi-volume translation of Erasmus's collected works. This translation began in 1974, but it is far from being complete. We will refer to this translation as CWE with the appropriate volume and page numbers.



in which the Bible was written, then Basel must be an exceptional city in which ordinary parishioners are exposed every Sunday to the essential Biblical truths as written in the original Hebrew and Greek. Erasmus seems to be suggesting to his English friend that their joint efforts to encourage the study of Greek and even Hebrew, a language that Erasmus himself never learned, has been extremely successful in the relatively small city of Basel.

It was not just priests and university professors who welcomed Erasmus to Basel. Christoph von Utenheim was then the Bishop of Basel. Erasmus explained to John Fisher that Bishop von Utenheim, “who was a man of great age but of most upright life and very learned, had shown him every sort of kindness and offered him everything” (CWE, 3, 294). Both the humble and the influential men and women whom he met in Basel treated Erasmus extremely well and shared with him their enthusiasm for the reform of Biblical studies and theology on which Erasmus had been working for so many years. Near the end of this letter to his close friend John Fisher, Erasmus pointed out the immediate and positive effect of the publication in Basel of his *Novum Instrumentum*. He shared his wonderful news with his English friend:

Many are taking this opportunity to read the Scriptures who would never read them otherwise, as they themselves admit; many people are beginning to take up Greek, or rather, this is now common (CWE, 3, 295).

For Catholic priests like Desiderius Erasmus and John Fisher whose fervent desire was that ordinary churchgoers would begin to read the Bible on their own and perhaps even begin to study Greek so that they could read the New Testament as it was actually written in Greek, Basel seems to be an extraordinary city in which sincere piety coexisted with a learned approach to theology and the study of the Bible.

One may wonder why Erasmus decided to leave Basel because he described it in such glowing terms to his correspondents. Basel was very different from Paris. No one in the Swiss city claimed that he was attempting to introduce unorthodox ideas into Catholic theology. The learned people whom he met in Basel understood that he wanted all Christians to discover for themselves both the rich complexity of the Bible and the saving message of what Erasmus called the “*philosophia Christi*” (“the philosophy of Christ”). With the help of Johann Froben, an intellectual circle formed in Basel around Erasmus within just one year. Erasmus dedicated his *Novum Instrumentum* in 1516 to Pope Leo X, who considered



Erasmus to be a totally orthodox Catholic theologian who had made the New Testament more accessible and understandable to practicing Catholics. With hindsight one could conclude that Erasmus should have stayed in Basel had he known that a monk named Martin Luther would publish in October 1517 his *95 Theses*. Within just a few years Martin Luther created his own church and many conservative Catholic critics throughout Europe blamed reformers such as Erasmus for this schism. There was no way that Erasmus could have possibly predicted that the faculties of theology in Louvain and Paris would be his leading Catholic opponents within just a few years. Theologians in Louvain and Paris developed the admittedly questionable claim that Erasmus's efforts to reform Catholic theology and to encourage new ways of interpreting the New Testament had unintentionally provoked the break-up of the Catholic Church. In his letter written to the eminent French humanist Guillaume Budé on June 19, 1516, Erasmus gave an explanation for his decision to leave Basel and this explanation is reasonable. Erasmus indicated that he had mistakenly thought that the libraries in Basel contained sufficient manuscripts and printed copies of Biblical and classical texts (CWE, 3, 305-306). Once he realized that he would not have access in Basel to primary texts in order to complete his research on Biblical and classical scholarship, Erasmus reached the difficult solution that he needed to leave the very pleasant environment of Basel for Louvain and Antwerp where the libraries were better than those in Basel.

Between the second half of 1516 and November 1521 Erasmus lived largely in Louvain, but he traveled fairly regularly to cities such as Brussels, Anderlecht, Antwerp, and Basel. During these years, Erasmus was very active in writing and completed many important works such as his *Colloquies* (1518), his *Ratio verae theologiae* (1518) (*Method of True Theology*), and his *Antibarbarians* (1520). Shortly after his return to Louvain, he received excellent news from the Vatican. Pope Leo X to whom Erasmus had dedicated his *Novum Instrumentum* in 1516 granted him a special dispensation so that Erasmus would never have to return to his monastery in Steyn, Holland that he had left in 1495 to begin his studies at the University of Paris (CWE, 4, 190-197). Pope Leo X wrote three separate letters on January 26, 1517 concerning this dispensation. The first was a formal letter to a papal nuncio named Andrea Ammonio indicating that Erasmus could live outside his monastery "in any convenient place of good repute" (CWE, 4, 191) and carry on his work as a priest and as a scholar at locations of his choosing. As he had always done, Erasmus would continue to "wear the reputable garb of a secular priest" (CWE, 4, 191). The same

day Pope Leo X wrote two personal letters to Erasmus in which he spoke both about his character and his contributions to scholarship. Pope Leo X praised him thus:

The uprightness of your life and character, your exceptional learning, and the outstanding merit of your virtues [...] are not only strongly corroborated by the wide renown of your published works but also commended to us by the opinion of the most learned men. [...] For we judge it right that your sacred industry, which toils incessantly for the common good, should be urged on by suitable rewards to yet greater undertakings (CWE, 4, 197).

One can easily imagine how pleased Erasmus was to receive such extraordinarily kind words from Pope Leo X, who recognized not only the exemplary nature of Erasmus's character, the high respect in which fellow scholars held his publications, but especially the importance of his work in enriching the spiritual lives of ordinary Catholics. The "common good" of which Pope Leo X speaks in this letter clearly refers to the spiritual realm that represents the true and eternal reality for the Vatican.

Although Erasmus hoped that the theologians in Louvain would be impressed by Pope Leo X's high praise for Erasmus, who had chosen to live among them, he soon realized that he had made a serious error of judgment by moving to Louvain. In a letter dated February 24, 1517 to Andrea Ammonio, Erasmus assured this papal nuncio that in Louvain he had "come to a blazing outburst of hostility from the theologians here" (CWE, 4, 256). Erasmus does not understand why they dislike him so strongly, but he is convinced that Edward Lee, Jacobus Latomus and other conservative Catholic theologians in Louvain will never react to his works in a fair and balanced manner and he was right, but it took him more than four years to conclude that he definitely needed to return to Basel.

Between 1517 and 1521, he wrote extensively and tried to stay by himself in Louvain. He did not believe that his three major works from this period, i.e. his *Colloquies*, his *Method of True Theology*, and his *Antibarbarians*, were in any way incompatible with the traditional practices and dogma of the Catholic Church, but his enemies in Louvain distorted whatever he wrote. In his witty *Colloquies*, he distinguished between true and false piety and encouraged his readers to imitate sincerely religious people and to see through religious hypocrites. In his colloquy "The Abbot and the Learned Lady" ("Abbatis et eruditae"), he contrasts an alcoholic monk with a married woman who spends her free time reading the Bible in Latin and Greek and discussing religious topics with her husband, who



encourages her in her efforts to learn more about the essential beliefs of Christianity. The monk makes the preposterous claim that women should remain ignorant and should participate with their husbands “in all-night parties and heavy drinking.”<sup>8</sup> In his opinion, alcoholism “relieves boredom” (*Colloquies*, 222) and is therefore worthy of our admiration. The learned and virtuous lady is clearly a much better Christian than this drunken monk with whom no sensible person would wish to identify. In a remark intended to shock the abbot, she suggests that if parishioners were asked to choose between a learned woman and a drunken priest to teach in a seminary or to preach sermons, the choice would not be difficult. The solution, of course, is for the abbot to change his ways and deal with his alcoholism and scandalous behavior. Erasmus is not really proposing that women be ordained to the priesthood, but he does suggest in this witty colloquy that women can play important roles in the spiritual and intellectual realms in Europe. He even refers to the well-educated daughters of Thomas More in England and the equally learned Pirckheimer and Blauer women in Germany (*Colloquies*, 223). Erasmus’s opponents in Louvain, however, chose to misinterpret his intentions and they suggested that he was anti-Catholic and wanted to change traditional practices in the Catholic Church.

In 1518, Erasmus’s relatively straightforward *Ratio verae theologiae* (*Method of True Theology*) provoked equally negative reactions from Louvain theologians. In his 1978 essay “The *Ratio verae theologiae*,” the Jesuit priest Fr. Georges Chantraine argues that his work was totally compatible with traditional Catholic theology because Erasmus indicates that the writings of respected Church fathers such as Sts. Augustine, Jerome, and Thomas Aquinas and the traditional teaching of Church councils are essential for the proper interpretation of Biblical texts.<sup>9</sup> In agreement with Pope Leo X, Erasmus argued that the exegesis of the New Testament should be based on the original Greek text and not on Latin translations, even on such a well-respected version as St. Jerome’s Latin translation that has traditionally been called the Vulgate. In his *Ratio verae theologiae* Erasmus does, in fact, praise St. Jerome whose works he had edited in 1516, but he does not believe that St. Jerome’s translation of the New Testament was necessarily based on the most accurate Greek manuscripts. Despite Erasmus’s very sensible method of interpreting the

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<sup>8</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Colloquies*, trans. Craig Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Chantraine, “The *Ratio verae theologiae*” in *Essays on the Works of Erasmus*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 179-185.



Bible from the prism of traditional Catholic theology, Jacobus Latomus of Louvain wrote a vitriolic work entitled *De trium linguarum et studii theologici* (March 1519) against Erasmus and later that year the Faculty of Theology in Louvain condemned Luther and suggested that Erasmus was as terrible a heretic as Luther. Although Erasmus responded to these rather wild accusations with a moderate book entitled *Apologia contra Latomi dialogum*, which was published in Louvain in late 1519, the damage had been done and the Louvain theologians had concluded that Erasmus was a heretic (Schoeck, II, 221). Erasmus understood that they would not listen to reason. He could not win. No matter what he wrote or did not write, the Louvain theologians under the leadership of Jacobus Latomus and Edward Lee kept affirming that Erasmus supported Luther's heresies. In an August 13, 1521 letter to Pierre Barbier, who was the secretary to Cardinal Adrian of Utrecht who served as Pope Adrian VI from January 9, 1522 to September 14, 1523, Erasmus complained that Edward Lee and other Louvain theologians had criticized him because he had not written against Martin Luther, although he had expressed displeasure with Luther's break from the Church of Rome. He explained very calmly that he had not written against Luther for two major reasons: "lack of leisure and the consciousness of my own ignorance" (CWE, 8, 277). How could he possibly write against Luther when he had not read any works by Luther because his own research on the Bible and patristic and classical writers left him no free time to read modern works of questionable orthodoxy. As a loyal Catholic, Erasmus preferred to read works by theologians such as Sts. Augustine, Jerome, and Thomas Aquinas whose orthodoxy no sensible person would ever question. Edward Lee, however, dismissed this very reasonable explanation as insincere. Earlier in the same letter to Pierre Barbier, Erasmus had described his unsuccessful efforts to get Louvain theologians to tell him which specific passages in his works upset them so that he could change these passages and make them more acceptable to his colleagues in Louvain. He asked two Louvain theologians Johannes Atensis and Nicolas of Mons, whose opinion the Louvain theologians respected, to examine his *Novum Instrumentum* that he was preparing for a second edition to be published by Johann Froben so that he could "correct" (CWE, 8, 273) his Latin translation and annotations to make sure that everything would be perfectly compatible with traditional Catholic teachings. Atensis and two equally conservative theologians Nicolaas Baechem, who was also called Egmondanus and Juan Luis Vives, who were then teaching theology at Louvain, all assured him that his second edition of the *Novum Instrumentum* contained nothing heretical and was in perfect conformity with orthodox Catholic theology

(CWE, 8, 273). In good faith, Erasmus relied on their assurances and submitted his text as revised to Johann Froben for printing. After his return to Louvain from Basel, he was astounded by the obvious bad faith shown by Atensis, Baechem, Vives, and other Louvain theologians. Erasmus describes to Pierre Barbier how the situation in Louvain quickly became intolerable for him. Erasmus wrote:

I was the object of attacks from time to time in sermons delivered to mixed audiences. Eventually Atensis in a very crowded lecture belabored me with such abuse that people generally expected to see Erasmus die of resentment or go into hiding. An appeal was made to laymen in high places in order to prejudice them against me. Men were sent to rant against me everywhere. The campaign was so intensely offensive that the mildest of men might have been driven mad with fury (CWE, 8, 274).

As Erasmus describes the deteriorating situation in Louvain, he had become the victim of a collective madness that had descended on this city. Instead of preaching the Gospel, priests ranted against Erasmus and unintentionally drove the faithful from their churches. Itinerant orators denounced Erasmus throughout Louvain and listeners concluded that Erasmus must somehow be a terrible threat to the common welfare and to the very existence of Catholicism. The clear intention of these outrageous and disparaging remarks was to reduce Erasmus to silence and to drive him away from Louvain. Erasmus prided himself on being a very reasonable man who reacted with moderation to unjust criticism, but even such a calm man as himself had his limits and he realized that it was in his self-interest to leave Louvain as soon as possible because of the very real threat that verbal intimidation might quickly escalate into acts of physical violence directed against him. The vehemence of the collective and irrational hatred for Erasmus in Louvain persuaded him that life would be much more pleasant and enjoyable in Basel where he had spent twelve very calm and intellectually stimulating months between the summer of 1515 and the summer of 1516. His printer Johann Froben had offered him an open invitation to return to Basel at any time. Erasmus came to realize that the Swiss were the most tolerant Europeans of his day, and consequently he spent most of the next eight years in Basel.

As the situation in Louvain was becoming completely intolerable for Erasmus, Pope Leo X, who had been the Supreme Pontiff since March 11, 1513 and had strongly supported Erasmus's efforts to reform the Catholic Church from within and to make Biblical exegesis more accessible to ordinary Catholics, died on December 1, 1521. In January 1522, the



Conclave of the College of Cardinals met at the Vatican to elect the new pope. Cardinal Adrian of Utrecht was chosen on January 9, 1522 and he selected the name of Adrian VI. After his death on September 14, 1523, there would be no non-Italian pope until Karol Cardinal Wojtyła of Poland became Pope John Paul II on October 16, 1978. Like Erasmus, Pope Adrian VI was from Holland and he was also very devoted to the “*devotio moderna*,” which encouraged people to develop their personal spirituality by careful meditation on the meaning of Christ’s teachings in our daily lives. The key work for Erasmus, Pope Adrian VI, and others committed to the “*devotio moderna*” was *The Imitation of Christ* by the German writer Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). This work of lay spirituality became enormously popular in Holland and encouraged people to read passages from the New Testament and then to try to understand how they could “imitate” the perfection of Mary and Jesus in their own lives. The “*devotio moderna*” encouraged people to appreciate the central importance of spirituality in their daily lives. His own move to the peaceful and tolerant city of Basel and the new reign of Pope Adrian VI combined to give Erasmus deep hope that things would improve. In a letter on April 21, 1522 from Basel to his friend Pedro Ruiz de la Mota of the Spanish city of Burgos, Erasmus spoke of Pope Adrian VI’s “scholarly wisdom and wise integrity” (CWE, 9, 61). Erasmus had high hopes for the papacy of his countryman.

Erasmus’s move to Basel went well. Johann and Hieronymus Froben went out of their way to make Erasmus comfortable in their complex of houses called “Zum Sessel” (Schoeck, II, 284). In October 1522, they purchased an adjoining house called “zur alten Treu” that they had modified. Erasmus did not like houses that were heated by stoves. He preferred fireplaces. The Frobens had the existing stove replaced by a large fireplace in “zur alten Treu.” Sixteen months later Erasmus had not forgotten this kindness by the Frobens. In a letter written from Basel on February 21, 1524 to Lorenzo Cardinal Campeggi, he expressed his profound thanks to the Frobens who had furnished his house with “an open fireplace” (CWE, 10, 185). In the same letter to Cardinal Campeggi, he claimed that the Frobens had probably saved his life by replacing the stove with an open fireplace. In reference to houses heated by stoves, Erasmus wrote: “Their stink is death to me if I have to endure it for a single dinner” (CWE, 10, 185). The Frobens were clearly sensitive to Erasmus’s preferences even in seemingly minor matters. The Frobens did not attempt to argue that houses heated by stoves were not fatal to people in Switzerland. They simply accommodated Erasmus’s whim and had the



house called “zur alten Treu” modified to satisfy their honored guest.

There was much in Basel to bring Erasmus joy. Basel is located near the French border and for that reason Erasmus had relatively easy access to French wines that he appreciated above wines from all other countries. He also found himself surrounded once again by many sympathetic scholars who were very supportive of his efforts to improve knowledge and understanding of the many levels of meaning in the Bible and to strengthen scholarship concerning both patristic and classical writers. Among the scholars and church leaders who made his second stay in Basel very enjoyable and intellectually stimulating were Basel’s bishop Christoph von Utenheim and the learned classicists Beatus Rhenanus, Bonifacius Amerbach, and Wolfgang Capito. When he arrived in Basel in late 1521, all seemed calm after the chaos and social disorder provoked by his opponents in Louvain. Those whom he met in Basel were indifferent to the irrational criticism that Jacobus Latomus, Edward Lee, Nicolaas Baechem, Juan Luis Vives and other conservative Catholic theologians in Louvain had leveled against him in 1521. His colleagues in Basel respected his work and appreciated the significance of his original contribution to theology and classical scholarship. Moreover, Erasmus came to recognize that Switzerland was a much more stable and tolerant country than other countries in which he had lived. In a letter written from Basel on February 1, 1523 to his friend Marcus Laurinius (1488-1546) in Bruges, Erasmus commented with evident satisfaction: “There are no tyrants in Switzerland” (CWE, 9, 376). The only tyrants in Switzerland are of a physical kind such as the kidney stones from which he had been suffering for many years (CWE, 9, 376). Erasmus believed that Switzerland was unique among the European countries that he knew because the Swiss did not allow their political leaders to govern in an arbitrary manner and to abuse their power by exploiting people. In his opinion, the reasonable and tolerant Swiss would never have permitted the collective and organized terror the he had experienced in Louvain shortly before his departure for Basel in late 1521. When disagreements occurred in Basel, the opposing claims were submitted to the Town Council, which then attempted to propose a solution to the different parties instead of arbitrarily imposing its will on others. In an August 1524 letter to Basel’s Town Council, he respectfully asked the municipal councilors to prevent the further distribution of a scurrilous pamphlet in which Guillaume Farel had denigrated not only Erasmus but also the pope. Erasmus did not want to see in Basel a repetition of the collective hysteria that had occurred in Louvain against him. Erasmus appreciated the fact that Basel offered abused citizens a legal method to

defend their reputation against specious attacks. Basel's municipal councilors strove to maintain civility and to protect people from libelous criticism. In Basel, even members in the minority in intellectual or religious disputes were entitled to be treated with respect, and this was an aspect of Swiss culture that Erasmus greatly appreciated. In a letter written from Basel on August 30, 1524 to his friend Agostino Scarpinelli, who was then the Milanese ambassador in England, Erasmus made the extraordinary comment: "I have become Swiss" (CWE, 10, 338). A modern critic named Jean-Pierre Vanden Branden badly misinterpreted this statement by suggesting that this must be "a witticism" ("une boutade" in the original French).<sup>10</sup> It is obvious that Erasmus did not intend this statement to be taken literally because he signed this letter just as he had all his letters and published works since 1509 as "Erasmus of Rotterdam" in honor of the city of his birth. He has not become "Swiss" in the political sense but rather in a moral sense. Being "Swiss" means for him being tolerant and respectful of the dignity and intellectual freedom of others. He does not think of himself as a citizen of the Swiss Confederation but rather as a citizen of the world who has come to appreciate the tolerance and respect for individual freedom that he associated with Switzerland, the country in which he lived for more years than in any country other than his native Holland where he lived for approximately the first three decades of his life.

In a letter written from the Vatican in December 1522 to his fellow countryman Erasmus of Rotterdam, Pope Adrian VI implored him to take up his pen and to write eloquently and persuasively against the new "heresies" (CWE, 9, 205) associated with Lutheranism. In this letter, which can be read in English translation in CWE, 9, 205-209, Pope Adrian VI developed very persuasive arguments that Erasmus could not refuse. Pope Adrian VI wrote to Erasmus:

You have great intellectual powers, extensive learning, and a readiness in writing such as in living memory has fallen to the lot of few or none, and in addition the greatest influence and popularity among those nations whence this evil took its rise, and these gifts you ought to use for the honour of Christ, who on his most generous munificence endowed you with them, and the defense of Holy Church and of the faith. And we have this particular reason for desiring you to do so, that in this best of all ways you may silence those who try to fasten suspicion upon you in

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Pierre Vanden Branden, *Erasmus ou l'Europe idéale* (Brussels: Presses universitaires européennes, 1998), p. 96.



connection with the business of Luther, and may crown the labours you have devoted for so long to the assistance of the humanities and the correcting and enriching of the Scriptures by this most sacred undertaking, than which none can be more pleasing to God, more welcome to true Catholics, or more worthy of you and your gifts, your learning, and your eloquence (CWE, 9, 205-206).

Pope Adrian VI makes several persuasive arguments in this long passage. First of all, he praises his fellow Dutchman Erasmus for his eloquence and scholarship that no other living scholar can equal. Pope Adrian VI is correct in noting that the Catholic Erasmus still has many connections with German correspondents who seem to be attracted by Lutheranism. Such German colleagues might well listen to Erasmus's arguments whereas they would most certainly not listen to the Pope or other leading Catholics especially since Martin Luther had already been excommunicated by the Catholic Church. Then Pope Adrian VI argues that Erasmus should undertake this project against Martin Luther not just because of his long friendship for the new pope but especially "in defense of Holy Church and the faith." Pope Adrian VI is making this request as the spiritual head of the Catholic Church that Erasmus should wish to defend because his entire scholarly career has dealt with the presentation and the support of the essential beliefs of Catholicism. As a Dutch cardinal, Adrian VI knew all too well about the very unpleasant events in Louvain that had caused his friend Erasmus to flee to Basel. He hopes that Erasmus's book against Luther's "heresies" will "silence" those unjust critics who have spread false rumors that Erasmus supported Lutheranism and not Catholicism. Pope Adrian VI strongly suggests that he will side with Erasmus against such malevolent critics at the faculties of theology in Paris and Louvain if Erasmus writes a work in support of the Catholic position on free will and against the Lutheran belief in predestination. Such an eloquent and persuasive work against the Lutheran positions would "crown his labours" as a Catholic theologian. Pope Adrian VI states that such a "sacred undertaking" would be "pleasing to God." Pope Adrian VI makes it quite clear to his dear friend Erasmus that he is not making this request just as a fellow Dutchman but as the anointed successor to St. Peter and as the spiritual head of the Catholic Church. The "true Catholics" whom this work by Erasmus will please are not angry theologians in Louvain and Paris but rather people like Pope Adrian VI, Bishop Christoph von Utenheim in Basel, Bishop John Fisher in Rochester, Thomas More in London, and other sincere Catholics throughout Europe who respected Erasmus's "learning and eloquence." Despite his general inclination to avoid controversy,



Erasmus felt obliged to accept such a sincere and considerate request from a pope whom he respected greatly. In his heart, Erasmus knew that he was a Catholic who wished to remain faithful to the vows that he had taken at his ordination in 1492. The ordination prayers state very clearly that an ordained priest is a “priest forever”, and Pope Adrian VI asked his fellow “priest” to come to the aid of their Church that needed Erasmus’s moderation and eloquence in its hour of crisis.

After some hesitation, Erasmus accepted Pope Adrian VI’s invitation and agreed to write a work against Martin Luther. In a letter written from Basel on March 22, 1523, Erasmus agreed to undertake this assignment in order to “promote Christ’s glory and the salvation of Christian people” (CWE, 9, 440). Life in Basel had been going well for Erasmus since his return in late 1521, and he believed that his friends in Basel and Pope Adrian VI would support him after the publication of his book on free will. In this same letter, Erasmus recognizes that his book will most certainly provoke negative reactions from Lutherans, but he is willing to take this risk because of his conviction that Christians will be reduced to despair if they think that they are predestined to heaven or hell and that forgiveness for their sins will have no real effect on whether they spend the next life in heaven or hell. Erasmus feels that an essential Catholic belief is that God forgives “all our offences as often as the sinner shows himself penitent” (CWE, 9, 440). Hope exists for sinners who make a sincere confession of their sins to an ordained priest. Erasmus firmly believes that predestination denies people meaningful hope and is incompatible with the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church. For him as for Martin Luther, there are times when a person must take a stand and here Erasmus had to take his stand. Near the end of this letter to Pope Adrian VI, Erasmus explained his basic motivation for agreeing to write a work for free will and against predestination. Erasmus wrote:

At the sweet name of liberty, all men will breathe afresh. Every method should be used to promote this, so far as it can be done without imperiling religion; steps should be taken to relieve men’s consciences of their burdens (CWE, 9, 440).

Penance or the sacrament of reconciliation, as it has been called in recent decades by Catholics, was such an important tenet of Christianity that Erasmus felt obliged to support this manifestation of “liberty.” People freely choose to sin, but they can also freely choose to repent and when this happens, God will relieve their “consciences of their burdens.” Erasmus believed that if people did not believe that their actions would have any

effect on their personal salvation, they would cease to believe in the essential reality of God's teaching of salvation.

It took Erasmus more than one year to complete the research for his treatise on free will (*De libero arbitrio*) and to write his treatise, which was printed by Johann Froben in late August or early September 1524, almost exactly one year after the death of Pope Adrian VI on September 14, 1523. One year later Martin Luther's very lengthy response *De servo arbitrio* (*The Bondage of the Will*) was published. Catholic and Lutheran positions hardened and both sides concluded that it was not possible to reconcile beliefs in free will and predestination. In his treatise, Erasmus tried to be very moderate. He complimented Martin Luther on the quality of his scholarship, but he asked why we should assume with Luther that every other Christian theologian from St. Augustine to St. Thomas Aquinas had misinterpreted the Bible by affirming the reality of free will. In agreement with Luther, Erasmus does not question God's omnipotence but he points out that God wants people to be saved, but God does not force people to lead virtuous lives. Erasmus wonders whether sin can have any meaning if we are totally unable to resist temptation. Erasmus affirms that it is perfectly possible to reconcile belief in free will and God's omnipotence. He made an important distinction that Luther rejected in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will*. Erasmus argues that God may well know that certain evil men and women will sin so egregiously and never repent for their sins that they will spend eternity in hell, but God does not force them to do that which displeases Him. Erasmus did not make any personal attacks against Martin Luther's character. He agreed with Lutherans that Luther was a morally good person. He simply disagreed with Martin Luther for theological reasons. Unlike Luther, Erasmus felt that it was possible to reconcile divine power and human freedom. In his lengthy response to Erasmus, Martin Luther completely rejected Erasmus's arguments and affirmed that people cannot earn heaven through their good works.

Although Erasmus correctly predicted that Lutherans would react very negatively to his treatise *On Free Will*, he was very pleased to discover that with the noticeable exception of Johannes Oecolampadius no one in Basel responded very negatively to his treatise *On Free Will*. Even conservative Catholic theologians who had previously criticized Erasmus very harshly responded very positively to Erasmus's arguments in favor of free will. In a letter written on October 21, 1525 from Paris, Noël Béda expressed real praise to Erasmus for his arguments against the Lutheran position on predestination (CWE, 11, 368-369). Noël Béda affirmed that no work other than Erasmus's treatise *On Free Will* could receive "a kinder reception from



Catholics” (CWE, 11, 370). This was exceptional praise from an influential Catholic theologian who had been writing against Erasmus for so many years. In this same letter to Erasmus, Noël Bédá explained that it was a pleasure for him to agree with the favorable opinion of Erasmus expressed in a letter written by Bishop Christoph von Utenheim of Basel to Noël Bédá (CWE, 11, 367). Noël Bédá assured Erasmus that he had placed no trust in a rumor unfavorable to Erasmus that had been spread by certain unnamed people in Besançon, France. This letter from Noël Bédá makes it clear that he was going out of his way to reestablish a good relationship with Erasmus because of Erasmus’s defense in his treatise *On Free Will* of the traditional Catholic position on free will and his criticism of the Lutheran belief in predestination.

The general reaction in Basel to his treatise *On Free Will* was generally very favorable. In a letter written in January 1525 to the Town Council of Basel, Erasmus mentioned with obvious pride that Ludwig Baer, a distinguished Catholic professor of theology at the University of Basel, had approved of his arguments in favor of free will. He reminded the municipal councilors in Basel that Professor Baer was “a man of great integrity, learning, and judgment, whose one finger is worth more than my whole body” (CWE, 11, 12). Ludwig Baer was the most respected Catholic theologian in Basel, and it was important for Erasmus that he had expressed clear approval for Erasmus’s *De libero arbitrio*. Noël Bédá’s October 21, 1525 letter to Erasmus indicated that Basel’s admired Catholic Bishop Christoph von Utenheim had also expressed great praise for Erasmus’s work *On Free Will*. Outside Basel even such an important Lutheran leader as Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560), who was the most important advisor to Martin Luther and used Erasmus’s pedagogical ideas in order to reform German schools and universities, reacted very mildly to his treatise *On Free Will*. In a letter written from Wittenberg on September 30, 1524, Melanchthon complimented his friend Erasmus on the “moderate approach” that pleased both him and Luther. Melanchthon had feared lest Erasmus condemn Luther in a heavy-handed manner. He recognized the usefulness of the balanced analysis of free will and predestination in the *De libero arbitrio* and he stated that it had been “a good thing for everyone to have this problem of the freedom of the will to be thoroughly discussed” (CWE, 10, 392). Melanchthon wanted to make sure that Erasmus distinguished between reasonable people such as himself and Luther and fanatics such as Johannes Oecolampadius. Philip Melanchthon knew how important Lutherans were reacting to Erasmus’s writing and he did not want to alienate such an influential writer as Erasmus, even though he realized that

Erasmus and he disagreed on many theological issues. On the same day, Joachim Camerarius (1500-1574), another influential Lutheran theologian in Wittenberg, also wrote to Erasmus and complimented him on the modesty in his treatment of the religious meaning of free will (CWE, 10, 395). Like Melanchthon, Camerarius also wanted Erasmus to distinguish between reasonable Lutherans and unnamed fanatics who “are devoid of common humanity and have no idea how to live in society” (CWE, 10, 397). Unlike Melanchthon, Camerarius did not name Oecolampadius, but the very similarities between these two letters written from Wittenberg on the same day to Erasmus by influential Lutherans made it very clear to Erasmus that they wanted him not to confuse them with such loud people as Johannes Oecolampadius. In his response written on December 10, 1524 to Philip Melanchthon, Erasmus assured his long-term correspondent that he certainly had not confused serious and sensible Lutherans with such “dreadful people” whose “reckless conduct obstructs the progress of the humanities and ruins the cause of the gospel” (CWE, 10, 442). Erasmus explained quite clearly that his intention in writing his *De libero arbitrio* was to define the Catholic belief in free will and to explain how the Catholic position on free will differs from the Lutheran belief in predestination. As a sensible and tolerant man, Erasmus respects the intellectual and religious beliefs of those to whom he writes. He assures Philip Melanchthon:

I have not tried to make you change your tune, if only because I realized I would be wasting my time. I am not the judge of another man’s conscience or the master of another’s faith (CWE, 10, 442).

This comment to Philip Melanchthon indicates very clearly Erasmus’s profound commitment to tolerance and respect. He was not so haughty as to believe that his treatise *On Free Will* would change the minds of his correspondent in Wittenberg or other Lutherans of good faith, but he expected his readers to respond calmly and reasonably to his arguments. In this same letter, Erasmus wrote twice about the obvious bad faith shown by Johannes Oecolampadius. First, he indicated that he asked Oecolampadius in person to give an “account of his beliefs,” but his “words fell on deaf ears” (CWE, 10, 443). Oecolampadius did not even have the common courtesy to explain his beliefs to Erasmus. Erasmus then pointed out that Oecolampadius had begun writing his criticism of *De libero arbitrio* “before the work was published” (CWE, 10, 445). Erasmus asks his German correspondent how Oecolampadius could possibly write against a book that he had not even read.



Erasmus's comments on Oecolampadius were, in fact, quite accurate and he hoped that the sensible Philip Melanchthon would want to discredit Johannes Oecolampadius, who was attempting to incite people in Basel against Erasmus. In a letter written from Basel on December 12, 1524 to the Catholic Duke George of Saxony, Erasmus explained that in all of his recent sermons Oecolampadius had taken "aim against the book *De libero arbitrio*" instead of talking about the Bible (CWE, 10, 461). Erasmus assumed that most reasonable Catholics and Protestants would conclude that a Christian preacher should explain the practical application of Biblical passages to the daily lives of churchgoers instead of making personal attacks against a writer with whose works most listeners were probably not well acquainted. Erasmus assumes that people hearing such sermons might well question the sincerity or the sanity of such preachers. In a letter written from Basel on January 25, 1525 to Oecolampadius, Erasmus denounces his book also called *De libero arbitrio*, which was printed in December 1524 by Thomas Wolff in Basel, in which Oecolampadius made the outrageous claim that Erasmus was no different from the Pelagians against whom St. Augustine had written so eloquently in his *Dialogue between Atticus, a Catholic, and Critobulus, a Heretic* (CWE, 11, 10). Oecolampadius claimed that Erasmus, who had affirmed the reality of free will, also believed in the heresy expressed by Pelagius and his followers called Pelagians who denied the reality of original sin, the reality of grace, and the necessity of the forgiveness of sins. This preposterous distortion of Erasmus's positions was clearly intended to discredit Erasmus by associating him with heretics whom St. Augustine had thoroughly discredited more than one thousand years before Erasmus's birth. Oecolampadius never responded to Erasmus's letter presumably because he could not support the arguments that he had made but not justified in his own *De libero arbitrio*. Erasmus hoped that reasonable Lutherans such as Melanchthon and Camerarius, whom he trusted, would make an effort to discredit Oecolampadius or perhaps even to reduce him to silence so that he could no longer create problems for Erasmus in Basel.

We do not know if Melanchthon or Camerarius intervened on Erasmus's behalf in order to restore civility in Basel, but Oecolampadius did remain as the Lutheran leader in Basel until his death in 1531. He was personally responsible for provoking rioting against Catholics in 1529 that caused Erasmus to leave Basel for the German city of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, where he lived for six years from 1529 to 1535 before his final return to Basel where he died in July 1536. In late December 1525, Martin Luther's *De servo arbitrio* (*The Bondage of the Will*), which was his

response to Erasmus's treatise *On Free Will*, appeared in print. To say the least, it was not a mild response to Erasmus's treatise that did not contain any attacks against Martin Luther's character. Erasmus expected Luther to respond forcefully to Erasmus's defense of free will and his criticism of predestination, but he did not expect the ferocity of Luther's attacks against Erasmus's moral character. Martin Luther argued that because Erasmus had rejected his interpretation of the Bible and his views on predestination Erasmus was necessarily an atheist. Erasmus did not receive a copy of Luther's lengthy book *The Bondage of the Will* until March 1526 and he was shocked by its contents. In a letter written from Basel on April 11, 1526 to Martin Luther, Erasmus accuses Luther of "malice" (CWE, 12, 136). Erasmus mistakenly thought that Martin Luther would respond with a "civility" worthy of Philip Melanchthon, who disagreed with Erasmus but never questioned Erasmus's sincerity or his commitment to Christianity. In words that are strikingly similar to Erasmus's criticism of Oecolampadius's unsubstantiated attacks against him, Erasmus asks Martin Luther:

What is the point of all these scurrilous insults and the false charges that I am an atheist, an Epicurean, a sceptic in matters belonging to the Christian faith, a blasphemer, and whatever else comes into your head—to say nothing of the many other accusations you claim to pass over in silence? (CWE, 12, 136).

Like Oecolampadius, Luther made unsubstantiated and disparaging judgments on Erasmus's religious beliefs and moral character in an effort to discredit him in the eyes of readers, but Erasmus sincerely regrets the adverse effect that Luther's work *The Bondage of the Will* may have on readers. Erasmus believes that the purpose of works dealing with spirituality and Christianity should be to enable readers to appreciate profound levels of meaning of religious truths in their daily lives. Erasmus reminds Luther: "It does not matter greatly what happens to the two of us" especially because Erasmus does not have long to live (CWE, 12, 137). Erasmus describes well how some readers may react to Luther's book *The Bondage of the Will*:

What distresses me, as it distresses all decent people, is the fact that because of your arrogant, insolent, and turbulent personality you cause a fatal dissension that unsettles the whole world, you expose good men and lovers of the humanities to the fury of the Pharisees, and you arm wicked and rebellious men for revolution (CWE, 12, 137).



The negative view of the future that Erasmus predicted in this letter to Martin Luther turned out to be accurate at least as concerned Basel. Inspired perhaps by Luther's personal attacks against Erasmus, Oecolampadius concluded that there was no reason for him to engage in rational discussions with Erasmus. He simply wanted to drive Erasmus from Basel so that his fellow Lutherans would no longer be bothered by the presence of the Catholic Erasmus in their midst. Until the death of the respected Catholic bishop of Basel Christoph von Utenheim in 1527, the residents of Basel would not allow Oecolampadius to impose religious intolerance on their city. Erasmus kept largely to himself and wrote such important works as his 1526 *Institutio christiani matrimonii* (*Institution of Christian Marriage*), in which he affirmed the equality between husbands and wives in Christian marriages, and his 1528 *Ciceronianus* (*The Ciceronian*), which illustrates how Christians can creatively adapt classical theories of rhetoric and persuasion in order to present more effectively the essential teachings of Christianity. Both works were printed by the Froben Press, which was directed by Johann Froben until his death in 1527 and then by his son Hieronymus with whom Erasmus had worked closely for many years. The Froben Press published all of Erasmus's works until his death in 1536.

Despite Oecolampadius's efforts, Basel remained a tolerant city. Catholics and Protestants freely practiced their religion. In his biography of Erasmus, R.J. Schoeck (II, 336-337) refers to R. Wackernagel's 1924 *Geschichte der Stadt Basel* (*History of the City of Basel*) and explains why Erasmus felt obliged to leave Basel so quickly in 1529. Ludwig Baer, the Dean of Basel's Faculty of Theology, had recently converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism, but he remained a very tolerant man. He asked Basel's Town Council in early February 1529 to establish religious freedom for Catholics and Lutherans in Basel and to specifically permit Catholic and Protestant churches to remain open in Basel. If approved, this would transform Basel into the first formally tolerant European city. By early 1529, the majority in Basel was Lutheran, but the city remained very tolerant. When Oecolampadius realized that the municipal councilors were favorably inclined to Ludwig Baer's proposal, he provoked two days of rioting on February 9-10, 1529. On the first day, an unruly mob threatened Basel's municipal councilors with physical violence if they formally approved religious tolerance in Basel. Oecolampadius also told the Town Council to forbid the public celebration of mass in Basel. When the members of the Town Council responded unfavorably to this overt intimidation, Oecolampadius modified his plans. The next day he led an unruly mob into numerous Catholic churches in Basel where statues of

saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary were either disfigured or destroyed and stained glass windows were broken. At that time, police forces did not exist in Europe and it was very difficult for cities to protect themselves from civil disorder by rioters. Oecolampadius imposed religious intolerance on Basel through brute force and terrorism. It became abundantly clear to Erasmus and other reasonable people in Basel that thugs had taken control of their city. Out of fear for his physical safety, Erasmus felt that he had no choice but to leave Basel. Erasmus was not alone in deciding to leave Basel in early 1529. Soon after the desecration of Catholic churches in Basel, most of the Catholic professors at the University of Basel also decided to leave Basel and accept positions at universities in Catholic cities. By 1529, Erasmus was at last sixty years old and he was in poor health. Although he had received invitations to come to Rome and Louvain, his health would not permit him to make such lengthy and exhausting trips. There was, however, a closer option for him. Archduke Ferdinand had invited him to live in Vienna or Freiburg-im-Breisgau, two Catholic cities under his control. Freiburg-im-Breisgau is located only about forty miles from Basel and most of this trip could be made by boat. He left for Freiburg-im-Breisgau on April 13, 1525 and he lived there for six years. Erasmus very much liked the residents of the generally tolerant city of Basel, but he realized that he could no longer live in Basel as long as the troublemaker Oecolampadius was still living in Basel and was provoking acts of violence against Catholics and the public practice of Catholicism. As his correspondence with Philip Melancthon clearly indicated, Erasmus respected the beliefs of Lutherans and never sought to limit their religious freedom. Erasmus realized that most Lutherans in Basel were tolerant people such as Ludwig Baer and its municipal councilors, but it would have required the use of a large military force to put an end to the violent rioting provoked by Oecolampadius. Basel's municipal councilors preferred to avoid violence and they hoped that sanity would return to their beautiful city after the death of the rabble-rouser Johannes Oecolampadius. As Erasmus himself argued in his famous adage "Dulce bellum inexpertis" ("Was is sweet to those who have not experienced it"), violence was never the appropriate answer to violence. A violent suppression of the rioting provoked by Oecolampadius might have created long-lasting hatred between Catholics and Protestants in Basel and perhaps even throughout the tolerant country of Switzerland. Erasmus and other reasonable people thought that Catholics and Protestants could learn to live together in peace and mutual respect. This is, in fact, what happened in Basel after Oecolampadius's death in November 1531. The Protestant leaders after him did not share his visceral hatred of Catholics and his



conviction that Catholics should not have any religious rights in places where Protestants were in the majority. The very existence of functioning Catholic churches in Basel offended the intolerant Oecolampadius who showed no respect at all for freedom of conscience and had no qualms in resorting to intimidation in an effort to impose his religious faith on all people in Basel. During Oecolampadius's lifetime, he succeeded in imposing his will on the residents of Basel through terrorism and threats of physical violence, but real tolerance returned to Basel after his death.

Erasmus's six years in Freiburg-im-Breisgau were productive and enjoyable. He purchased a comfortable house on Schiffstrasse and completed several important works in this southwestern German city, including an edition of Aristotle's works (1531) and a treatise on preaching called *Ecclesiastes* (1535). Although he was well treated in Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Erasmus's thoughts kept coming back to his eight enjoyable years in Basel and his publisher Hieronymus Froben, who continued to print his books in Basel. Erasmus knew that Basel had returned to its former religious tolerance after the death of Oecolampadius in late 1531 and it appears that Erasmus was looking for the appropriate time to return to Basel.

In May 1535, his friend Bonifacius Amerbach, who had recently been appointed the rector of the university of Basel, went to Freiburg-im-Breisgau and entreated Erasmus to return to Basel. He argued that Erasmus's presence in Basel would improve the university's reputation and attract more students to this university. Erasmus knew that Basel had become a more tolerant city since the death of Oecolampadius. Basel developed a very diplomatic solution to the question of religious practice. Basel officially became a Protestant city and Protestant prayers were said at city functions, but Catholics were nevertheless permitted to practice their religion and several Catholic professors remained on the faculty of the University of Basel. There was no formal declaration of religious freedom in Basel because such a proposal might have well provoked irrational reactions similar to the rioting in February 1529. The Protestant majority in Basel sought to work out an informal solution that protected the religious rights of the minority Catholics and the majority Protestants. Such a tolerant and sensible arrangement was exceedingly rare in sixteenth-century Europe. Shortly after his return to Basel, Erasmus came to realize how much better life was in Basel than elsewhere in Europe. Through his correspondents he learned about the killing of Protestants in France by the government of King Francis I, but he was absolutely shocked when he was informed of the martyrdom of his close English friends Bishop John Fisher on June 22, 1535

and Thomas More on July 6, 1535. Erasmus did not learn of the deaths of these courageous and learned men until late August. In a letter written on August 31, 1535 from Basel to his Polish correspondent Peter Tomiczki, Erasmus spoke of his profound grief. He first regrets the loss of the aged theologian John Fisher and then he states that “England will never have a holier or better man than Thomas More.”<sup>11</sup> He had long considered England to be a very stable country and he was amazed that England had become as violent toward religious minorities as France and his native Holland. It is significant that Erasmus stresses the spirituality of both martyrs in his comments on the deaths of these innocent and holy men. He concludes his meditation on the death of More with this terse comment: “It seems to me that I had been destroyed” (Allen, 11, 221). Although Oecolampadius disfigured statues in Catholic churches in Basel, intolerant people in Switzerland did not try to kill those of other religions. In a February 1, 1523 letter to Marcus Laurinius, Erasmus had pointed out that there were “no tyrants in Switzerland” (CWE, 9, 376). Twelve years later Erasmus understood that this insight was still true. Not only did the Swiss not kill members of religious minorities but they also granted them religious freedom. Some of the murderous “tyrants” were King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France. During his final stay in Basel, Erasmus realized that Switzerland was unique among European countries during his lifetime because only the Swiss truly respected freedom of conscience and religious liberty.

By early 1536, Erasmus’s health had gotten much worse and he realized that he would never leave Basel. He was living comfortably in Hieronymus Froben’s house “Zum Luft” and the Frobens took good care of him. He could still celebrate mass in their home, but he was basically homebound. When he died either late on July 11, 1536 or very early on July 12, 1536, people in Basel responded in a very ecumenical manner. The most beautiful church in Basel was then and still is the Münster, which was originally consecrated as a Catholic church and was later transformed into a Lutheran church. When Erasmus died, it was a Lutheran church. People in Basel decided to honor the memory of Erasmus, whom the learned then considered to be the leading European scholar, with a dignified Catholic

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<sup>11</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. P.S. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906-1947), 11, 221. Erasmus’s late letters have not yet been translated into English. For references to his late letters we will quote from Allen’s multi-volume Latin edition of Erasmus’s letters. We will refer to this edition as Allen and will indicate the appropriate volume and page numbers.



service in the Münster and to bury Erasmus in this church. A letter written by the Basel printer Johann Herwagen to Erasmus's friend Beatus Rhenanus, who lived in the Alsatian city of Sélestat, describes this impressive ceremony (Allen, 11, 344). Students from the University of Basel carried Erasmus's coffin to the Münster where a requiem mass was celebrated in a Protestant church for the repose of the soul of the most important Catholic theologian of the sixteenth century. After this mass, Erasmus's earthly remains were buried in this church where a plaque containing a Latin inscription still honors his memory. At a time when religious intolerance was so common in almost all European countries, it was extraordinary for Catholics and Protestants to join together in a religious service that not only celebrated the life of a distinguished scholar and lover of peace but also demonstrated the essential unity of Christianity about which Erasmus had written so eloquently especially after Lutherans separated from the Catholic Church. Such a public manifestation of respect by a religious majority for the rights of a religious minority could then have taken place only in the small but very tolerant country of Switzerland.

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Notes:

I wish to dedicate this essay to the memory of Georges May, who taught French for over forty years at Yale University. Professor May died in March 2003. He directed my doctoral dissertation at Yale in the 1970s. He was an excellent scholar and a perfect gentleman. His students and colleagues miss him.

*About the Author:*

Edmund Campion earned his doctorate in French at Yale University in 1976. He has been teaching French since 1977 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His scholarly interests have dealt largely with the influence of philosophy and theology on Erasmus and French writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among his major publications are his 1995 book *Montaigne, Rabelais, and Marot as Readers of Erasmus*, critical editions of Philippe Quinault's tragedies *Astrate*, *Bellérophon*, and *Pausanias*, and numerous essays on the Renaissance in scholarly journals such as the *European Legacy*, *Classical and Modern Literature*, and the *Ball State University Forum*.