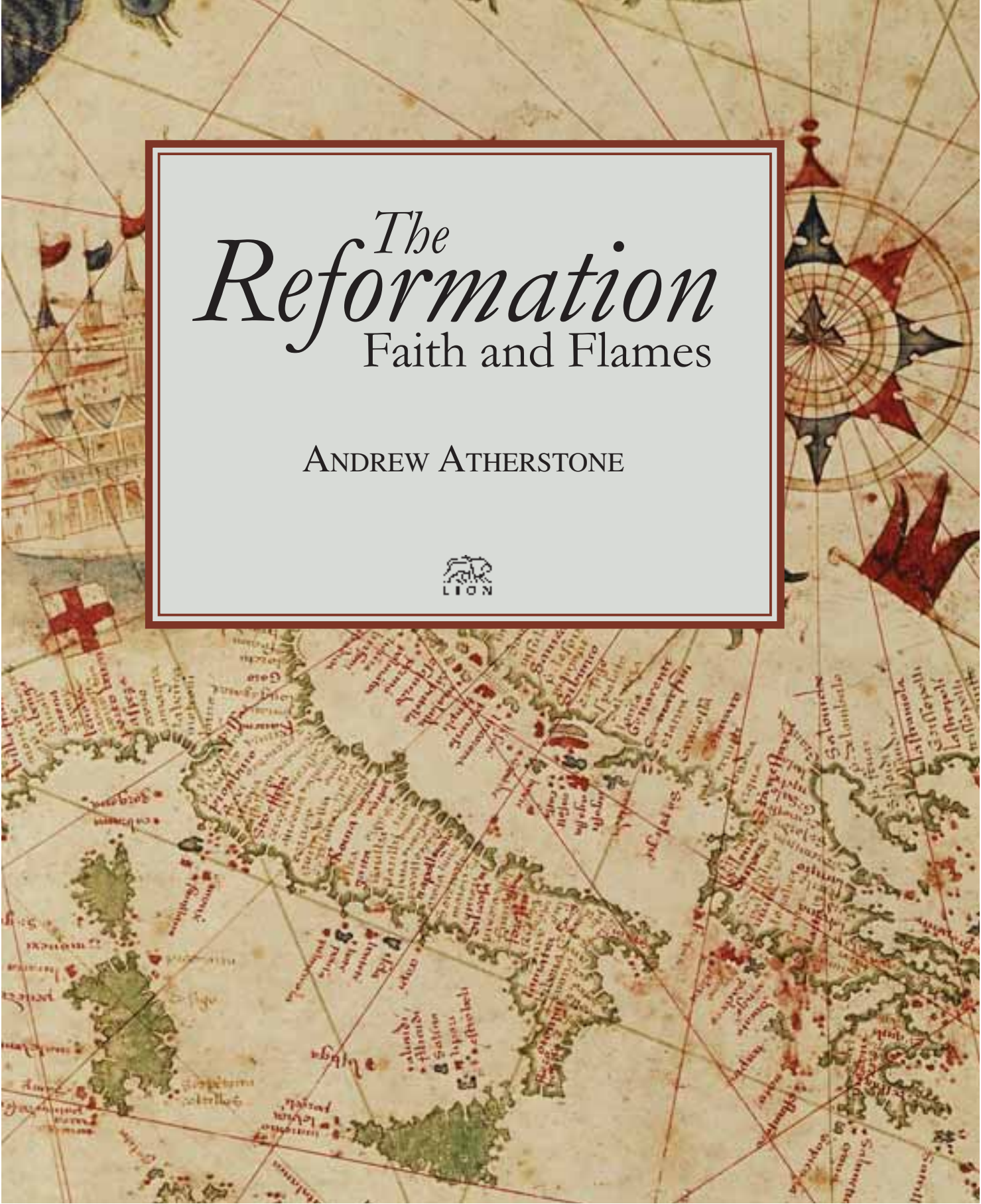

The Reformation
Faith and Flames

ANDREW ATHERSTONE

LION

For my beloved children –
John, Anna, and Kate

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Picture on previous page: Europe and the Mediterranean basin, from the 1502 Catalan Mappamundi by Alberto Cantino, made for Ercule d'Este.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

SEEKING SALVATION

The sixteenth-century reformation was one of the most dramatic and significant series of events in the history of Christianity. It sent shock waves through the western world and changed the face of Europe forever. Its impact upon the church has sometimes been likened to a second Day of Pentecost, a crucial turning point and a moment of crisis. To some, this cataclysmic rupture in the fabric of catholic Christendom was interpreted as the labour pains of Christianity reborn. As one historian has put it, "No other movement of religious protest or reform since antiquity has been so widespread or lasting in its effects, so deep and searching in its criticism of received wisdom, so destructive in what it abolished or so fertile in what it created."[1]

The reformation was brought to birth in different locations and at different stages by a complex permutation of factors. In part it was driven by socio-economic developments, such as urbanization, rising literacy, the creation of wealth, and popular unrest. In part the motivations were political, concerning dynastic survival, patriotism, civic pride, and independence. However, at the most fundamental level the reformation was a theological movement. It was dominated by questions about God and the church, about life and death, heaven and hell. It divided Europe into two religious camps. "Catholics" emphasized their loyalty to the historic teaching of the old church, as represented by ecumenical councils and the pope in Rome. "Evangelicals" (from the New Testament word *evangel*, meaning "good news") claimed to have rediscovered the Christian gospel which had lain hidden during the Middle Ages. Yet the terminology was

inexact. Catholics insisted they were the true guardians of the gospel, while evangelicals maintained they were the true representatives of the apostolic church.

Among the vast array of theological arguments during the reformation, the most crucial one was about salvation: "What must I do to be saved?" Or, to put it another way, "How can humanity enjoy relationship with Almighty God? How can men and women be assured of a place in heaven?" The evangelical reformers answered these questions in a radically different way from their catholic contemporaries. Having re-examined the Bible texts, they came to the conclusion that salvation was a free gift from God, received through faith alone in Jesus Christ. This theological rediscovery was the founding principle of the European reformation and had massive implications for the Christian church. Tens of thousands lost their lives, and nations went to war, over the question "What must I do to be saved?" Catholics and evangelicals offered incompatible answers, but all were agreed on the eternal significance of this most important of questions.

This book tells the story of the sixteenth-century reformation from its origins in the European renaissance to its dénouement in the wars of religion. It is a tale of the clash of ideologies, of men and women driven to heroic feats and desperate measures, of families and communities forever divided, of armies routed and bishops burned, of quiet scholars and trenchant preachers, of fickle kings and anarchic prophets, of courageous faith and unlikely friendships. This is the account of Christianity in crisis as the people of Europe engaged in their common quest for eternal salvation.

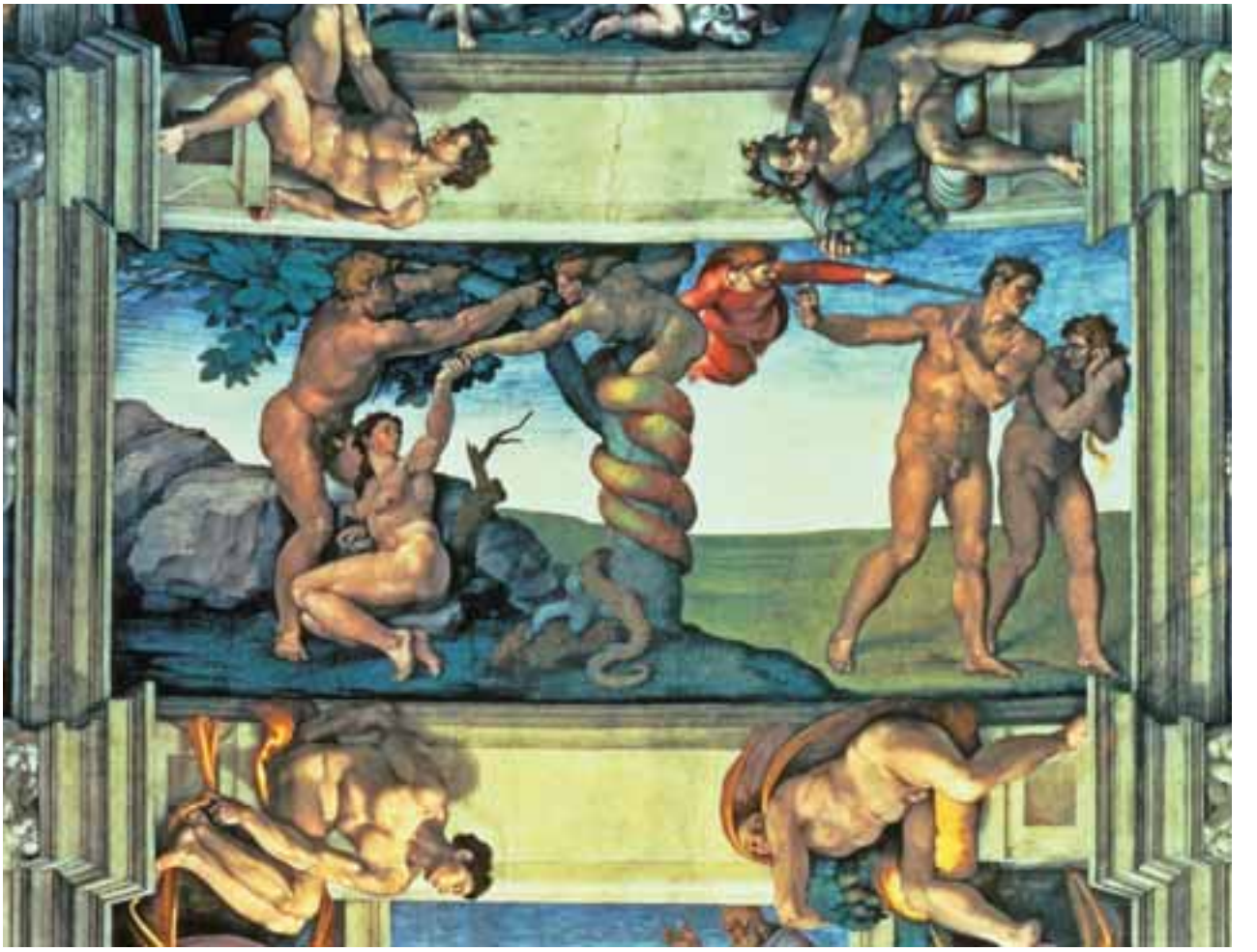

Europe in the early sixteenth century.
Holy Roman Empire
Habsburg Territories
0 400 km
0 300 miles
SCOTLAND
Edinburgh
Dublin
York
ENGLAND
London
Calais
Netherlands
Antwerp
DENMARK
Copenhagen
Hamburg
Bremen
Wittenberg
Münster
Magdeburg
Cologne
HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE
Leipzig
Frankfurt
Mainz
Normandy
Paris
Nuremberg
Strassburg
Regensburg
Augsburg
Bavaria
Blois
Basel
Munich
Zürich
FRANCE
Swiss Confederation
Tyrol
Geneva
Milan
Venice
Bologna
Florence
PAPAL STATES
Rome
Naples
Santiago de Compostela
NAVARRE
Valladolid
ARAGON
Barcelona
Madrid
Toledo
PORTUGAL
Lisbon
CASTILE
Valencia
Seville
Granada
Granada
Mediterranean Sea


SWEDEN
Stockholm
Kalmar
Knights of the Sword
Riga
MUSCOVY
Moscow
Teutonic Order
Prussia
Wilno
Lithuania
nburg
Warsaw
POLAND
ony
Prague
BOHEMIA
Cracow
Austria
Vienna
Buda
HUNGARY
MOLDAVIA
Black Sea
OTTOMAN EMPIRE
Constantinople

1 THE DAWN OF A GOLDEN AGE

In many ways the Christian church in Europe at the start of the sixteenth century was flourishing. The vast majority of people across the continent enjoyed participating in its activities, contributed cheerfully to its ministry, and expressed confidence in its spiritual provisions. The ancient traditions and rituals of the church shaped the daily lives of men and women in every community, whether in a prince's palace or a peasant's cottage. From cradle to grave, the church offered spiritual nourishment to every individual via the sacraments, beginning with baptism and ending with extreme unction (anointing with oil at the point of death). Religious festivals, feasts, and holy days were celebrated with enthusiasm and gave a pattern to the year, recalling significant events in the life of Jesus

Michelangelo was commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1508 to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The central sections are from the book of Genesis, here showing the Fall of Adam and Eve.



Christ and the Virgin Mary, or the heroic deeds of the saints. Processions, pilgrimages, and "mystery plays" (dramas of Bible narratives) provided regular entertainment and communal participation. Countless thousands travelled to the Holy Land or to Europe's major shrines to prove their dedication to God, to fulfil a vow or to seek a blessing. Churches, chapels, and monasteries dominated the landscape. Devotees gave liberally to fund the ministry of the clergy, or to build new cathedrals, chantries, colleges, and schools. Listening to sermons was also a popular pastime and large crowds flocked to hear travelling evangelists. Christianity was deeply embedded in the European way of life. The medieval church was a remarkably durable, flexible, and energetic institution, which was widely expected to go from strength to strength.

One sign of vitality was the array of innovative renewal movements which blossomed in every generation. Far from being a static and monolithic organization, the church welcomed regional diversity and encouraged new expressions of Christianity. For example, the fifteenth century saw the rise to prominence of the Brethren of the Common Life, a confraternity founded in the Netherlands by Geert Groote. Their emphasis upon private prayer and personal holiness became known as *devotio moderna* ("modern devotion"), a form of piety popular among both laity and clergy. Its theology was best expressed in *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418) written by Brother Thomas, a monk at Kempen in Germany. Another sign of revitalization was the resurgence of the papacy. It had recovered from the traumas of the Papal Schism when two rival popes vied for power between 1378 and 1417 in France and Italy. The divisions were slowly healed and in the 1450s Pope Nicholas V began an ambitious project to rebuild Rome as a glorious capital city for the reunited church. His vision for a rejuvenated Vatican, with St Peter's Basilica at its heart, was maintained by his successors.

Nicolaus Copernicus, Polish clergyman and pioneer astronomer.

The catholic church was also linked inextricably with the most significant renewal movement of the fifteenth century, the intellectual and cultural revolution labelled "the Renaissance" ("the Rebirth"). First associated with a network of scholars, poets, philosophers, and artists in Italy, it flowed across the Alps into the rest of Europe. The renaissance was marked by an explosion in knowledge, creativity, and discovery in fields as diverse as history, cosmology, architecture, linguistics, geography, technology, mathematics, and political theory. It was the age of polymaths such as Leonardo da Vinci and Niccolò Machiavelli. In Rome, the papacy demonstrated its commitment to intellectual pursuit with the founding of the Vatican Library in 1475, the largest library in Europe. Leading renaissance artists like Botticelli, Raphael, and Michelangelo received major papal commissions to decorate the Sistine Chapel and other buildings in the Vatican. Meanwhile in Poland, the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, canon of the cathedral at Frauenburg (Frombork), discovered the "heliocentric" order of the universe. He circulated his mathematical calculations to friends as early as 1514, though he held back from publishing them for thirty years because they appeared to challenge the "geocentric" worldview of the Bible.

While Copernicus explored the heavens, a "New World" was opening up to European adventurers across the oceans. The Genoese colonist, Cristoforo Colombo, traversed the Atlantic on behalf of Fernando and Isabel of Aragon and Castile, and his convoy sighted land in October 1492 at what is now the Bahamas. Conquistadors soon moved beyond the Caribbean into Mexico and Peru, encountering ancient American peoples such as the Incas and the Aztecs. The discovery of this vast new continent provided unparalleled opportunities for evangelism and acquisition, winning souls for God and gold for the Spanish treasury. Meanwhile in 1497 Vasco de Gama sailed down the west coast of Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope, sponsored by King

Cristoforo Colombo and his troops arrive at Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti) in 1492, seeking gold from the Taíno inhabitants.

Manuel I of Portugal, pioneering lucrative trade routes to India, China, and Japan. In Africa itself, the powerful ruler of Kongo, Nzinga Nkuvu, accepted baptism at the hands of Portuguese missionaries and was renamed King João I. Although he grew disillusioned with Christianity, his son Mvemba Nzinga (King Afonso I from 1509) was a zealous convert and established Kongo as a strategic catholic kingdom. Catholicism was quickly becoming a global religion.

BACK TO THE SOURCES

Renaissance scholars were eager to rediscover the wisdom of ancient civilizations, especially the Greco-Roman world. With the motto *ad fontes* ("back to the sources") they sought to reappropriate classical texts which had been forgotten in medieval Europe. Re-engagement with the writings of Plato, Cicero, Seneca, Galen, and others helped to stimulate contemporary advances in philosophy, law, and medicine. The study of Greek was especially in vogue as manuscripts from the decimated Byzantine empire, which fell to Islamic conquest in 1453, began to circulate in western Europe. This network of scholars were known as the "humanists", from *studia humanitatis*, the classical university curriculum (not to be confused with modern secular humanists). They were optimistic about the potentiality and progress of the human race, as expressed in *De Hominis Dignitate* ("*On the Dignity of Man*"), an oration from 1486 by the Florentine philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: "O great and wonderful happiness of man. It is given to him to have that which he desires and to be that which he wills."[1]

The renaissance humanists helped to renew the theology of the catholic church in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries by challenging the dominance of the "scholastics". This philosophical movement was divided into rival "schools" – most notably the *via antiqua* ("old way") associated with Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, and the *via moderna* ("new way") associated with William of Ockham. Yet the scholastics held in common a desire to fuse the philosophy of Aristotle with the teaching of the Bible, exemplified by Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* in the 1260s. Humanists began to use the name Duns – or "dunce" – as a term of abuse for stupid and pedantic authors who were well schooled in philosophy but ignorant of authentic Christianity. For example, Erasmus of Rotterdam derided the scholastics in 1499 because they "merely envelop all in darkness" and "spend their lives in sheer hair-splitting and sophistical quibbling".[2] He rejoiced in the overthrow of Aquinas and the rediscovery of New Testament Christianity, and prophesied: "we may shortly behold the rise of a new kind of golden age."[3]

One humanist who put his linguistic training to good use was the fifteenth-century Italian scholar Lorenzo Valla, who served in the court of Alfonso the Magnanimous, king of Sicily and Naples. He researched the so-called *Donation of Constantine*, a document which purported to show that in the early fourth century Emperor Constantine the Great

had bestowed the entire western half of the Roman empire upon Pope Sylvester I and his successors. The *Donation* was often used by the papacy to defend its territorial power, but Valla proved that it was a later forgery. Next he put the Bible itself under the spotlight. In his *Collatio Novi Testamenti* he probed the accuracy of the "Vulgate", St Jerome's fifth-century Latin translation of the Bible, the standard version in use throughout western Christendom. Valla compared it with three codices of the original Greek text and noticed some significant discrepancies. For example, Jesus proclaimed at the start of his ministry, "*Metanoeite*, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17), which Jerome translated as "Do penance" instead of "Repent". This had encouraged an emphasis in the medieval church upon outward religious ceremonial instead of an internal change of heart. Likewise the angel Gabriel greeted the Virgin Mary as *kecharitomene* (Luke 1:28), which Jerome translated as "full of grace" instead of "highly favoured". This allowed Mary to be viewed as a source of divine grace and encouraged the growth of popular devotion to Mary in the Middle Ages. Valla warned that scholastic theologians such as Aquinas had fallen into error by using Jerome's mistranslations. This accusation had the potential to shake the foundations of the church, but Valla's conclusions remained buried among his manuscripts for fifty years.

Thomas Aquinas, the most influential scholastic theologian. The dove signifies inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

BIBLE SCHOLARSHIP

Christian engagement with the original text of the Bible leaped forward at the start of the sixteenth century. Hebrew was little studied, even within the universities, but since the 1480s Johannes Reuchlin (a leading German humanist) had been collaborating with Jewish scholars to learn the language and to standardize its form in print. In 1506 he published *The Rudiments of Hebrew* (both a grammar and a lexicon), which opened the doorway to a better understanding of the Old Testament in Christian Europe.

A thirteenth-century fresco in Quattro Coronati church, Rome, portraying the supposed "donation" of authority over Western Europe from Emperor Constantine to Pope Sylvester I.

Cardinal Ximenes de Cisneros, Spanish humanist and Bible scholar.

Meanwhile another group of humanists at Alcalá University in Spain were engaged in a landmark project to publish the entire Bible in its original languages, under the guidance of Cardinal Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros, Archbishop of Toledo. It was called the "Complutensian Polyglot Bible" because Alcalá was known in Latin as "Complutum", and was printed in six folio volumes with parallel columns of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. The work was dedicated to Pope Leo X, and Ximenes expressed his hope that "the hitherto dormant study of Holy Scripture may now at last begin to revive". The cardinal observed that with access to the original text, the Bible student could "quench his thirst at the very fountainhead of the water that flows unto life everlasting and not have to content himself with rivulets alone".[4] Although the volumes were printed between 1514 and 1517, they were not officially published until 1522, which allowed Erasmus to steal ahead and win the plaudits as the first person to publish the Greek New Testament.

Erasmus was the leading humanist scholar in northern Europe, a prodigious polymath, born in the Netherlands but a ceaseless traveller among the *literati* of France, England, Italy, and Switzerland. His vast array of publications included manifestos on education and eloquence, collections of proverbs, devotional and doctrinal treatises, biting satire, and volumes on philology and classical studies. His love of antiquity and early Christianity was seen in his devotion to St Jerome, whose writings he set out to edit. Erasmus called Jerome "the supreme champion and expositor and ornament of our faith", with rhetorical ability which "not only far outstrips all Christian writers, but even seems to rival Cicero himself".[5] As part of his research into Jerome's Vulgate, Erasmus mastered Greek and also tried to learn Hebrew, but stopped because he was "put off by the strangeness of the language, and at the same time the shortness of life".[6] During his hunt for Bible codices in numerous monastic libraries and archives, he stumbled across a manuscript copy of Valla's *Collatio Novi Testamenti* at Parc Abbey near Leuven in 1504 and published it the following year. A decade later, Erasmus was ready with his own edition of the Greek New Testament, published in Basel in February 1516, alongside a revised version of the Vulgate and his annotations on the text. It was dedicated to Pope Leo X, who welcomed this biblical scholarship as a blessing to the church, encouraging its author, "you will receive from God himself a worthy reward for all your labours, from us the commendation you deserve, and from all Christ's faithful people lasting renown".[7] The first two editions sold 3,000 copies. It was a cornerstone in the Erasmian campaign not just to revive classical scholarship, but to renew the Christian church.

The most widely read section of Erasmus' ground-breaking *Novum Testamentum* was his passionate preface, *The Paraclesis*, an exhortation for Christians to re-engage with the Bible and a critique of contemporary church practice. He declared it "shameful" that those who claimed to follow Jesus Christ knew so little of his teaching, unlike Jews and Muslims who were well versed in their holy books.[8] He lamented that the church paid more attention to pagan philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, or scholastic authors like Aquinas and Scotus, than to Christ and the apostles. Religious orders such as the Benedictines, Augustinians, and Franciscans revered the rules of St Benedict, St Augustine, and St Francis but seemed to hold them in greater honour than the instructions of Christ. Likewise, Erasmus mocked those who clung to religious relics rather than the Bible:

> *If anyone shows us the footprints of Christ, in what manner, as Christians, do we prostrate ourselves, how we adore them! But why do we not venerate instead the living and breathing*

> *likeness of him in these books? If anyone displays the tunic of Christ, to what corner of the earth shall we not hasten so that we may kiss it? Yet were you to bring forth his entire wardrobe, it would not manifest Christ more clearly and truly than the Gospel writings.*[9]

He urged his readers to covet the Bible: "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".[10]

Erasmus' favourite phrase to encapsulate the Christian message was *philosophia Christi* ("the philosophy of Christ"), which he summarized as a concern for inner piety and moral lifestyle, rather than outward religious duty or dogma. He argued that the best Christians were not necessarily divinity professors in the university or monks in the cloister, but anyone who modelled virtue, "even if he should be a common labourer or weaver … Only a very few can be learned, but all can be Christian, all can be devout, and – I shall boldly add – all can be theologians".[11] Unlike Aristotelian philosophy, which required intricate knowledge of obscure academic literature, he believed that the Christian gospel could be easily understood by the learned and the unlearned alike. All that was required was "a pious and open mind, possessed above all with a pure and simple faith".[12] This led logically to Erasmus' most radical proposal, at the heart of *The Paraclesis*, that the Bible should be widely distributed in accessible translations. He proclaimed:

Erasmus at work in his study, painted by Hans Holbein the Younger in 1523.

> *I would that even the lowliest women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but also by Turks and Saracens. … Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at his plough, the weaver should hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveller lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind! Let all the conversations of every Christian be drawn from this source.*[13]