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 a 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.

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 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 from 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.

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 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 was 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.

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.

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's 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's 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's most radical proposal, at the heart of *The Paraclesis*, that the Bible should be widely distributed in accessible translations. He proclaimed:

> *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]

Vernacular Bibles

When Erasmus appealed in *The Paraclesis* for the Bible to be translated into every language and given to every Christian, his opponents labelled him a "Wycliffite" and a "Hussite", after two notorious sects. John Wycliffe, a Catholic priest at Oxford University, argued in *The Truth of Holy Scripture* (1378) that all the teaching of the church should be tested against the Bible, which should be translated into the vernacular. With this encouragement his followers produced an English translation from the Latin Vulgate in 1384, and a second version in 1396, which was used in secret by the Wycliffite (or "Lollard") movement throughout the fifteenth century. His theology was also influential at Prague in Bohemia among the disciples of Jan Hus and in 1415 both men were condemned by the ecumenical Council of Constance (Konstanz) on the Swiss-German border. Hus was burned at the stake, but Wycliffe had already been dead for thirty years so his corpse was exhumed and burned instead.

The threat of Lollardy persuaded the Archbishop of Canterbury to forbid the translation of the Bible into English, a ban which remained in force until the 1530s. However, many other European languages had vernacular translations before the end of the fifteenth century. A German translation of the whole Bible was first published in Strassburg in 1466 and there had been nine versions by 1483. Translations were also produced in Italian, Dutch, Czech, French, Catalan, Spanish, and Portuguese before 1500. However, these were all made from the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus proposed beginning with the original biblical

languages of Hebrew and Greek, and for translations to be available to every Christian, not just to the literary elite.

The publication of Bibles was made possible by one of the great technological breakthroughs of the fifteenth century, the mechanical movable-type printing press. It was pioneered by Johannes Gutenberg, a goldsmith at Mainz in Germany, who printed 180 copies of the "Gutenberg Bible" (the Latin Vulgate) in 1455. Within half a century there were sixty printing presses in Germany and approximately 150 in Italy, mostly producing standard Catholic literature. The machine was exported from Cologne to England by William Caxton, merchant and diplomat, in the mid 1470s. Printed books enabled the rapid dissemination of ideas and quickly replaced expensive handwritten manuscripts. In the early sixteenth century this new technology was eagerly harnessed for Reformation propaganda.

Piety and profanity

Humanist scholars and preachers not only promoted biblical study, but used their literary and oratorical skills to demand a wider reformation of the Christian church. Despite the vibrancy and popularity of contemporary religion, they identified many areas which were in need of improvement. Their most frequent targets were scholasticism, superstition, and hypocrisy. Erasmus led the way with his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* ("*Handbook of the Christian Soldier*"), first published in 1503. It was a manual on interior spirituality, with an emphasis on moral behaviour rather than outward religious observance. In the preface to the new 1518 edition he famously declared, "*Monachatus non est pietas*" ("Being a monk is not the same as piety").[14] Erasmus insisted that true Christianity was not about "being an assiduous churchgoer, prostrating yourself before the statues of the saints, lighting candles, and repeating a certain number of prayers… God is appeased only by invisible

piety".[15] Unlike later reformers, he did not call for the abolition of pilgrimages or relics, but reminded his readers that this external devotion was less important than godly behaviour:

> *What is the use of being sprinkled with a few drops of holy water as long as you do not wipe clean the inner defilement of the soul? You venerate the saints, and you take pleasure in touching their relics. But you disregard their greatest legacy, the example of a blameless life.*[16]

The same point was made by Konrad Mutianus Rufus, a leading German humanist, who denounced the common belief that religious performance would win divine reward, observing that "only the ignorant seek salvation in fasts".[17]

In one of the essays in his *Adages*, Erasmus unpacked this theme further. He complained that much contemporary Christianity was about outward show which cloaked all manner of sin. In particular, he assailed the hypocrisy of bishops who dressed in gleaming robes with jewel-encrusted mitres, yet look underneath "and you find nothing but a soldier, a trader, or finally a despot, and you will decide that all those splendid insignia were pure comedy".[18] Erasmus lamented that so many Christian leaders were trying to "live so as to out-heathen the heathens in their passion for heaping up wealth, their love of pleasure, their sumptuous living, their savagery in war, and almost all other vices".[19] He especially chastised the conflation of spiritual and temporal realms, denouncing those war-mongering popes and bishops who were "well armed with javelins and missiles, but absolutely unarmed with Holy Scripture".[20]

Many others shared Erasmus's assessment of the needs of the church and joined his appeal for spiritual renewal. In Saxony, for example, Duke Georg described the church as no longer the "bride of Christ" but "a stinking decayed corpse".[21] Meanwhile in England, William Melton (Chancellor of York) portrayed the clergy as

indolent and ignorant, "a crop of oafish and boorish priests".[22] Soon afterwards his friend, John Colet (Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London), launched a blistering attack on the corruption of the church at the opening of the Canterbury Convocation (a synod of clergy) in February 1512. His provocative sermon was based upon St Paul's exhortation in the New Testament, "Be not conformed to this world, but be reformed in the newness of your minds" (Romans 12:2). Colet lamented that the church had become a "foul and deformed" harlot.[23] He lambasted clerical ambition, sensuality, avarice, and worldliness, complaining that many priests were entangled in secular affairs while ignoring their spiritual duties. Among the remedies which the dean proposed were a clampdown on simony (the purchase of ecclesiastical offices), absenteeism, and sexual immorality, and improved standards for ordination candidates.

Just three months after Colet's sermon, the fifth Lateran Council was opened in May 1512, in the Basilica of St John Lateran, Rome's famous cathedral. This grand gathering of bishops and cardinals called together by Pope Julius II was primarily intended as a demonstration of papal authority, in reaction against King Louis XII of France's attempt to sponsor a council at Pisa. Nevertheless, some theologians hoped they would address the pressing need for ecclesiastical reform. At the inaugural session Egidio da Viterbo (General of the Augustinian order) exhorted the bishops to seek the help of the Holy Spirit so that the church would be "cleansed from every stain it has received and… restored to its ancient splendour and purity".[24]

The Lateran Council continued to meet for five years, until March 1517, and did issue some reform legislation concerning the discipline of clergy and the censorship of books, but these measures had little impact. It was a wasted opportunity. As the council was about to be dismissed, Giafrancesco Pico della Mirandola addressed an oration to the pope, urging him to take action:

> *These diseases and these wounds must be healed by you, Holy Father; otherwise, if you fail to heal these wounds, I fear that God himself, whose place on earth you take, will not apply a gentle cure, but with fire and sword will cut off those diseased members and destroy them; and I believe that he has already clearly given signs of his future remedy.*[25]

These words were later seen as prophetic. Since the papacy did not appear capable of pioneering a reformation, the work would fall to others who would soon became Rome's most implacable enemies.

Folly and wisdom

In order to expose the weaknesses they perceived within the church, several humanists harnessed the genre of satire. It reached a far wider audience than any theological treatises could do. For example, in 1494 the German scholar Sebastian Brant published *Das Narrenschiff* ("*The Ship of Fools*") in Basel, a long comic poem describing over a hundred contemporary vices. It was no coincidence that a ship was also a popular metaphor for the church.

Erasmus adopted a similar approach in *Moriae Encomium* ("*The Praise of Folly*"), published in Paris in 1511. Speaking through the voice of Folly (foolishness personified), he lampooned contemporary society, much as a court jester was able to speak unpalatable truths no one else dared to tell. He mocked the foibles of a wide selection of people, ranging from schoolmasters, lawyers, and soldiers to orators, magistrates, and princes. Yet some of Erasmus's most caustic statements were reserved for the Christian church, which he castigated at length.

Folly derided the "sea of superstition" surrounding popular piety, such as the worship of fictitious saints.[26] She denounced the hypocrisy of those who lit candles to the Virgin Mary yet cared nothing about "emulating her chastity of life, her modesty and

love of heavenly things".[27] Similarly she rebuked ignorant pilgrims who neglected their wives and children in order to travel hundreds of miles to pay homage at the shrines in Jerusalem, Rome, or Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Next Folly targeted the scholastic theologians (such as the Thomists, Scotists, and Ockhamists), observing that "you'd extricate yourself faster from a labyrinth" than from their "subtle refinements" and "tortuous obscurities".[28] She also assailed the ubiquitous array of monastic orders, mocking their incomprehensible preaching, their petty rivalries, and their obsession with trivial issues such as the colour of their girdles or the breadth of their tonsures.

When addressing the highest echelons of the church, Folly was equally strident in her critique. Bishops were accused of neglecting pastoral responsibility for their flocks: "They don't even remember that the name Bishop, which means 'overseer', indicates work, care, and concern. Yet when it comes to netting their revenues into the bag they can play the overseer well enough."[29] Likewise cardinals were denounced for their avarice and their lack of desire to imitate the apostles.

When it came to the papacy, Folly showed no restraint. She drew a sharp contrast between the "pomp and pleasure" of the popes (the so-called "vicars of Christ") and the servant ministry of Christ himself.[30] She thought it ironic that the popes should boast of defending the church against its foes, when they were guilty of doing the worst damage:

> *As if indeed the deadliest enemies of the church were not these impious pontiffs who allow Christ to be forgotten through their silence, fetter him with their mercenary laws, misrepresent him with their forced interpretations of his teaching, and slay him with their noxious way of life!* [31]

This caustic humour struck a nerve and *The Praise of Folly* went through twenty editions in five years. It was translated into Czech, French, German, Italian, and English, and was the book which made Erasmus a household name throughout Europe.

Encouraged by the success of *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus continued to give vent to his criticisms of the church in the form of satire. He may have been responsible for an anonymous tract, *Julius Exclusus*, published after the death in 1513 of Pope Julius II, the infamous "warrior pope" (although Richard Pace, an English humanist and diplomat, has also been suggested as the author).

It took the form of an imaginary dialogue between the deceased pontiff and St Peter at the gates of heaven. The pope arrived wearing his glorious papal tiara and followed by a retinue of soldiers who had been killed during his military campaigns, but St Peter was appalled:

> *You've brought twenty thousand men with you, but not one of the whole mob even looks like a Christian to me. They seem to be the worst dregs of humanity, all stinking of brothels, booze, and gunpowder. I'd say they were a gang of hired thugs… And the more closely I look at you yourself the less I can see any trace of an apostle. First of all, what monstrous new fashion is this, to wear the dress of a priest on top, while underneath it you're all bristling and clanking with blood-stained armour?*[32]

The apostle interrogated the pope about his ministry and was forced to conclude: "I won countless thousands of souls for Christ; you led as many to destruction. I was the first to teach Christ to pagan Rome; you have been a teacher of paganism in Christian Rome."[33] At first Julius threatened to excommunicate St Peter with a bull (a formal papal pronouncement), his usual method of bringing earthly princes into submission. When that strategy failed, he planned to muster an army to break down the gates of paradise, just as he had forced his way into many earthly cities during the Italian Wars.

Erasmus's subversive and iconoclastic attitude to Christian piety was evident in his popular *Colloquies*, first published in 1518, with many expanded editions throughout his life. They took the form of comic dialogues, originally designed to help schoolboys learn Latin, but Erasmus quickly realized that they were an excellent way to communicate his views on religious and moral questions to an adult audience. They formed a collection of over sixty irreverent vignettes of daily life, addressing a wide range of subjects such as courtship, marriage, warfare, education, nobility, vows, gluttony, money, and monasticism.

Several colloquies tackled the twin themes of superstition and external religion. For instance, "The Funeral" contrasts the final days of two dying men – one obsessed by pretentious ceremonial, the other meeting his end with dignified prayer and Bible-reading. "The Fish Diet", the longest colloquy, takes the form of a conversation between a butcher and a fishmonger about church decrees (like fasting) and Christian freedom. They refer to the ludicrous instance of a young nun who was raped because she refused to break the rule of silence by crying for help. In "The Shipwreck", Erasmus portrayed the panic on board a sinking boat as passengers and crew foolishly beseeched the saints to rescue them. This theme was elaborated further in his best-known colloquy, "A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake", which mocks the gullibility of an imaginary visitor to England's major shrines at Walsingham in Norfolk and Canterbury in Kent. The benighted pilgrim paid devotion to milk from the breasts of the Virgin Mary and to precious rags on which St Thomas Becket had blown his nose, happily offering money for the privilege.

Many enjoyed Erasmus's irreverent wit. Yet others were scandalized and his writings were condemned by conservative theologians who began to doubt his orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Erasmus repeatedly insisted that he welcomed traditional dogma and devotion, if correctly taught and rightly applied. He had no desire to

challenge Catholic theology but only to expose flagrant moral abuse or superstitious practice. For example, when Maarten van Dorp of Leuven University rebuked *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus replied that he had only assailed "foolish or bad theologians who don't deserve the name" and that his attack upon the veneration of saints "always has some qualification" to show that he approved of the doctrine.[34] However, others who followed in Erasmus's wake were determined to push further than the Renaissance humanists had dared to go. New voices began to speak out, calling not just for improvement in Christian morals and education but for a deep reformation of the fundamental doctrines of the church.