Erasmus's Christian humanism

History 100, May 3, 2006

Erasmus, by Hans Holbein, 1523
“Malice is the sin most hated by God. And the aim of malice is to injure others whether by fraud or violence. But since fraud is the vice of which man alone is capable, God loathes it most. Therefore, the fraudulent are placed below, and their torment is more painful.”

—Dante, *Inferno* (canto 11); Virgil explains to Dante the organization of Hell.
The “studia humanitatis”

Grammar
- Poetry

Rhetoric
- History
- Moral philosophy

Orator: *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, a good man skilled in speaking (Quintilian, from Cato the Elder)
Erasmus's project

- Restoring classical eloquence (Adages, translations of Lucian and other pagans)
- Restoring Christian antiquity (Church Fathers through Augustine)
- Turning Christian intellectuals from systematic theology to moral philosophy
- Using pagan antiquity for Christianity—as Erasmus saw it
Erasmus’s hero: St. Jerome

- Eloquent
- Skilled in languages
- Virtuous
- Scholarly but not pedantic

*St. Jerome, by Albrecht Dürer, 1514*
Erasmus’s attack on superstition

• The cult of the saints has gone beyond veneration to superstition (colloquy on “The Shipwreck”)

• Christians are consumed with external ceremonies but neglect inner spirituality
Erasmus’s attack on theology

• Theologians condemn their enemies unjustly

• They address trivial questions while neglecting important ones

• They set a bad example; it is better to lead a good life than to know subtle distinctions
The *philosophia Christi* (philosophy of Christ)

- Christian belief seems mad in the eyes of the world (*Praise of Folly*)

- Christ’s philosophy is neglected, though worldly philosophy is pursued and theologians split hairs

- But Christ, the only divine philosopher, stated his ideas in a way all could understand

- Scripture, correctly translated, should be available to all.
Matthew 4.17: μετανοεῖτε translated as resipiscite (come to your senses), not poenitentiam agite (do penance)

“Johannine comma” (1 John 5.7) omitted: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.”
Erasmus’s fate

- “Luther affair”: Erasmus hesitates
- Luther attacks Erasmus over free will
- Catholic Church condemns Erasmus after his death in 1536