

IN PRAISE OF FOLLY

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS, 1509

This is a scathing satire on the corruption of the medieval Church, from a humanistic point of view. Erasmus devoutly wanted to reform and simplify the Church of his day, yet remained a member of it all along, and clashed with Luther over his separation from Rome.

ON THEOLOGIANS

But perhaps I had better pass over our divines (theologians) in silence and not stir this pool or touch this fair but unsavory plant, as a kind of men that are supercilious beyond comparison, and to that too, implacable; lest setting them about my ears, they attack me by troops and force me to a recantation sermon, which if I refuse, they straight pronounce me a heretic, For this is the thunderbolt with which they fright those whom they are resolved not to favor . . . Besides, while they explicate the most hidden mysteries according to their own fancy- as how the world was first made; how original sin is derived to posterity; in what manner, how much room, and how long time Christ lay in the Virgin's womb; how accidents subsist in the Eucharist without their subject.

But these are common and threadbare; these are worthy of our great and illuminated divines, as the world calls them! At these, if ever they fall athwart them, they prick up- as whether there was any instant of time in the generation of the Second Person; whether there be more than one filiation in Christ; whether it be a possible proposition that God the Father hates the Son; or whether it was possible that Christ could have taken upon Him the likeness of a woman, or of the devil, or of an ass, or of a stone, or of a gourd; and then how that gourd should have preached, wrought miracles, or been hung on the cross; and what Peter had consecrated if he had administered the Sacrament at what time the body of Christ hung upon the cross; or whether at the same time he might be said to be man; whether after the Resurrection there will be any eating and drinking, since we are so much afraid of hunger and thirst in this world. . .

Add to this those their other determinations, and those too so contrary to common opinion that those oracles of the Stoics, which they call paradoxes, seem in comparison of these but blockish and idle- as 'tis a lesser crime to kill a thousand men than to set a stitch on a poor man's shoe on the Sabbath day; and that a man should rather choose that the whole world with all food and raiment, as they say, should perish, than tell a lie, though never so inconsiderable. And these most subtle subtleties are rendered yet more subtle by the several methods of so many Schoolmen, that one might sooner wind himself out of a labyrinth than the entanglements of the realists, nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Occamists, Scotists. Nor have I named all the several sects, but only some of the chief; in all which there is so much doctrine and so much difficulty that I may well conceive the apostles, had they been to deal with these new kind of divines, had needed to have prayed in aid of some other spirit.

Paul knew what faith was, and yet when he said, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen," he did not define it doctor-like. And as he understood charity well himself, so he did as illogically divide and define it to others in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter the thirteenth. And

devoutly, no doubt, did the apostles consecrate the Eucharist; yet, had they been asked the question touching the “terminus a quo” and the “terminus ad quem” of transubstantiation; of the manner how the same body can be in several places at one and the same time; of the difference the body of Christ has in heaven from that of the cross, or this in the Sacrament; in what point of time transubstantiation is, whereas prayer, by means of which it is, as being a discrete quantity, is transient; they would not, I conceive, have answered with the same subtlety as the Scotists dispute and define it. . . .

And how great a happiness is this, think you? while, as if Holy Writ were a nose of wax, they fashion and refashion it according to their pleasure; while they require that their own conclusions, subscribed by two or three Schoolmen, be accounted greater than Solon's laws and preferred before the papal decretals; while, as censors of the world, they force everyone to a recantation that differs but a hair's breadth from the least of their explicit or implicit determinations.

MONKS THAT CALL THEMSELVES RELIGIOUS

And next these come those that commonly call themselves the religious and monks, most false in both titles, when both a great part of them are farthest from religion, and no men swarm thicker in all places than themselves. Nor can I think of anything that could be more miserable did not I support them so many several ways. For whereas all men detest them to the height, that they take it for ill luck to meet one of them by chance, yet such is their happiness that they flatter themselves. For first, they reckon it one of the main points of piety if they are so illiterate that they can't so much as read. And then when they run over their offices, which they carry about them, rather by tale than understanding, they believe the gods more than ordinarily pleased with their braying. . . And yet, like pleasant fellows, with all this vileness, ignorance, rudeness, and impudence, they represent to us, for so they call it, the lives of the apostles.

Yet what is more pleasant than that they do all things by rule and, as it were, a kind of mathematics, the least swerving from which were a crime beyond forgiveness- as how many knots their shoes must be tied with, of what color everything is, what distinction of habits, of what stuff made, how many straws broad their girdles and of what fashion, how many bushels wide their cowl, how many fingers long their hair, and how many hours sleep; which exact equality, how disproportionate it is, among such variety of bodies and tempers, who is there that does not perceive it? And yet by reason of these fooleries they not only set slight by others, but each different order, men otherwise professing apostolical charity, despise one another, and for the different wearing of a habit, or that 'tis of darker color, they put all things in combustion. And among these there are some so rigidly religious that their upper garment is haircloth, their inner of the finest linen; and, on the contrary, others wear linen without and hair next their skins. Others, again, are as afraid to touch money as poison, and yet neither forbear wine nor dallying with women. In a word, 'tis their only care that none of them come near one another in their manner of living, nor do they endeavor how they may be like Christ, but how they may differ among themselves. . . .

But Christ, interrupting them in their vanities, which otherwise were endless, will ask them, “Whence this new kind of Jews? I acknowledge one commandment, which is truly mine, of which alone I hear nothing. I promised, 'tis true, my Father's heritage, and that without parables, not to cowls, odd prayers, and fastings, but to the duties of faith and charity. Nor can I acknowledge them that least acknowledge their faults. They that would seem holier than myself, let them if they like possess to themselves those three hundred sixty-five heavens of Basilides the heretic's invention, or command them whose foolish traditions they have preferred

before my precepts to erect them a new one.” When they shall hear these things and see common ordinary persons preferred before them, with what countenance, think you, will they behold one another? In the meantime they are happy in their hopes, and for this also they are beholding to me.

THE LIGHTS OF THE WORLD REDUCED TO A MERE WALLET

Nor are princes by themselves in their manner of life, since popes, cardinals, and bishops have so diligently followed their steps that they've almost got the start of them. For if any of them would consider what their alb should put them in mind of, to wit, a blameless life; what is meant by their forked miters, whose each point is held in by the same knot, we'll suppose it a perfect knowledge of the Old and New Testaments; what those gloves on their hands, but a sincere administration of the Sacraments, and free from all touch of worldly business; what their crosier, but a careful looking after the flock committed to their charge; what the cross born before them, but victory over all earthly affections- these, I say, and many of the like kind should anyone truly consider, would he not live a sad and troublesome life? Whereas now they do well enough while they feed themselves only, and for the care of their flock either put it over to Christ or lay it all on their suffragans, as they call them, or some poor vicars. Nor do they so much as remember their name, or what the word bishop signifies, to wit, labor, care, and trouble. But in racking to gather money they truly act the part of bishops, and herein acquit themselves to be no blind seers.

In like manner cardinals, if they thought themselves the successors of the apostles, they would likewise imagine that the same things the other did are required of them, and that they are not lords but dispensers of spiritual things of which they must shortly give an exact account. But if they also would a little philosophize on their habit and think with themselves what's the meaning of their linen rochet, is it not a remarkable and singular integrity of life? What that inner purple; is it not an earnest and fervent love of God? Or what that outward, whose loose plaits and long train fall round his Reverence's mule and are large enough to cover a camel; is it not charity that spreads itself so wide to the succor of all men? that is, to instruct, exhort, comfort, reprehend, admonish, compose wars, resist wicked princes, and willingly expend not only their wealth but their very lives for the flock of Christ: though yet what need at all of wealth to them that supply the room of the poor apostles? These things, I say, did they but duly consider, they would not be so ambitious of that dignity; or, if they were, they would willingly leave it and live a laborious, careful life, such as was that of the ancient apostles.

And for popes, that supply the place of Christ, if they should endeavor to imitate His life, to wit His poverty, labor, doctrine, cross, and contempt of life, or should they consider what the name pope, that is father, or holiness, imports, who would live more disconsolate than themselves? or who would purchase that chair with all his substance? or defend it, so purchased, with swords, poisons, and all force imaginable? so great a profit would the access of wisdom deprive him of- wisdom did I say? nay, the least corn of that salt which Christ speaks of: so much wealth, so much honor, so much riches, so many victories, so many offices, so many dispensations, so much tribute, so many pardons; such horses, such mules, such guards, and so much pleasure would it lose them.

You see how much I have comprehended in a little: instead of which it would bring in watchings, fastings, tears, prayers, sermons, good endeavors, sighs, and a thousand the like troublesome exercises. Nor is this least

considerable: so many scribes, so many copying clerks, so many notaries, so many advocates, so many promoters, so many secretaries, so many muleteers, so many grooms, so many bankers: in short, that vast multitude of men that overcharge the Roman See- I mistook, I meant honor- might beg their bread. . .

A most inhuman and abominable thing, and more to be execrated, that those great princes of the Church and true lights of the world should be reduced to a staff and a wallet. Whereas now, if there be anything that requires their pains, they leave that to Peter and Paul that have leisure enough; but if there be anything of honor or pleasure, they take that to themselves. By which means it is, yet by my courtesy, that scarce any kind of men live more voluptuously or with less trouble; as believing that Christ will be well enough pleased if in their mystical and almost mimical pontificality, ceremonies, titles of holiness and the like, and blessing and cursing, they play the parts of bishops. To work miracles is old and antiquated, and not in fashion now; to instruct the people, troublesome; to interpret the Scripture, pedantic; to pray, a sign one has little else to do; to shed tears, silly and womanish; to be poor, base; to be vanquished, dishonorable and little becoming him that scarce admits even kings to kiss his slipper; and lastly, to die, uncouth; and to be stretched on a cross, infamous.

FOLLY QUOTES CHRIST IN HER PRAISE

You have heard from how great an author how great praises of folly; and to what other end, but that without doubt he looked upon it as the one thing both necessary and profitable. “If anyone among ye,” says he, “seem to be wise, let him be a fool that he may be wise.” And in Luke, Jesus called those two disciples with whom he joined himself upon the way, “fools.” Nor can I give you any reason why it should seem so strange when Saint Paul imputes a kind of folly even to God himself. “The foolishness of God,” says he, “is wiser than men.” Though yet I must confess that Origen upon the place denies that this foolishness may be resembled to the uncertain judgment of men; of which kind is, that “the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.”

But why am I so careful to no purpose that I thus run on to prove my matter by so many testimonies? when in those mystical Psalms Christ speaking to the Father says openly, “Thou knowest my foolishness.” Nor is it without ground that fools are so acceptable to God. The reason perhaps may be this, that as princes carry a suspicious eye upon those that are over-wise, and consequently hate them— as Caesar did Brutus and Cassius, when he feared not in the least drunken Antony; so Nero, Seneca; and Dionysius, Plato— and on the contrary are delighted in those blunter and unlabored wits, in like manner Christ ever abhors and condemns those wise men and such as put confidence in their own wisdom. And this Paul makes clearly out when he said, “God hath chosen the foolish things of this world,” as well knowing it had been impossible to have reformed it by wisdom. Which also he sufficiently declares himself, crying out by the mouth of his prophet, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and cast away the understanding of the prudent.”

And again, when Christ gives Him thanks that He had concealed the mystery of salvation from the wise, but revealed it to babes and sucklings, that is to say, fools. For the Greek word for babes is fools, which he opposes to the word wise men. To this appertains that throughout the Gospel you find him ever accusing the Scribes and Pharisees and doctors of the law, but diligently defending the ignorant multitude (for what other is that “Woe to ye Scribes and Pharisees” than woe to you, you wise men?), but seems chiefly delighted in little children, women, and fishers. Besides, among brute beasts he is best pleased with those that have least in them of the foxes’ subtlety. And therefore he chose rather to ride upon an ass when, if he had pleased, he

might have bestrode the lion without danger. And the Holy Ghost came down in the shape of a dove, not of an eagle or kite.

And Christ himself, that he might the better relieve this folly, being the wisdom of the Father, yet in some manner became a fool when taking upon him the nature of man, he was found in shape as a man; as in like manner he was made sin that he might heal sinners. Nor did he work this cure any other way than by the foolishness of the cross and a company of fat apostles, not much better, to whom also he carefully recommended folly but gave them a caution against wisdom and drew them together by the example of little children, lilies, mustard-seed, and sparrows, things senseless and inconsiderable, living only by the dictates of nature and without either craft or care. Besides, when he forbade them to be troubled about what they should say before governors and straightly charged them not to inquire after times and seasons, to wit, that they might not trust to their own wisdom but wholly depend on him.

THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION'S ALLIANCE WITH FOLLY

But not to run too far in that which is infinite. To speak briefly, all Christian religion seems to have a kind of alliance with folly and in no respect to have any accord with wisdom. Of which if you expect proofs, consider first that boys, old men, women, and fools are more delighted with religious and sacred things than others, and to that purpose are ever next the altars; and this they do by mere impulse of nature. And in the next place, you see that those first founders of it were plain, simple persons and most bitter enemies of learning. Lastly there are no sort of fools seem more out of the way than are these whom the zeal of Christian religion has once swallowed up; so that they waste their estates, neglect injuries, suffer themselves to be cheated, put no difference between friends and enemies, abhor pleasure, are crammed with poverty, watchings, tears, labors, reproaches, loathe life, and wish death above all things; in short, they seem senseless to common understanding, as if their minds lived elsewhere and not in their own bodies; which, what else is it than to be mad? For which reason you must not think it so strange if the apostles seemed to be drunk with new wine, and if Paul appeared to Festus to be mad.

There are also in each several things several degrees wherein they disagree among themselves. And first as to the senses, though all of them have more or less affinity with the body, yet of these some are more gross and blockish, as tasting, hearing, seeing, smelling, touching; some more removed from the body, as memory, intellect, and the will. And therefore to which of these the mind applies itself, in that lies its force. But holy men, because the whole bent of their minds is taken up with those things that are most repugnant to these grosser senses, they seem brutish and stupid in the common use of them. Whereas on the contrary, the ordinary sort of people are best at these, and can do least at the other; from whence it is, as we have heard, that some of these holy men have by mistake drunk oil for wine.

Again, in the affections of the mind, some have a greater commerce with the body than others, as lust, desire of meat and sleep, anger, pride, envy; with which holy men are at irreconcilable enmity, and contrary, the common people think there's no living without them. And lastly there are certain middle kind of affections, and as it were natural to every man, as the love of one's country, children, parents, friends, and to which the common people attribute no small matter; whereas the other strive to pluck them out of their mind: unless insomuch as they arrive to that highest part of the soul, that they love their parents not as parents- for what did they get but the body? though yet we owe it to God, not them but as good men or women and in whom

shines the image of that highest wisdom which alone they call the chiefest good, and out of which, they say, there is nothing to be beloved or desired.

And by the same rule do they measure all things else, so that they make less account of whatever is visible, unless it be altogether contemptible, than of those things which they cannot see. But they say that in Sacraments and other religious duties there is both body and spirit. As in fasting they count it not enough for a man to abstain from eating, which the common people take for an absolute fast, unless there be also a lessening of his depraved affections: as that he be less angry, less proud, than he was wont, that the spirit, being less clogged with its bodily weight, may be the more intent upon heavenly things.

In like manner, in the Eucharist, though, say they, it is not to be esteemed the less that 'tis administered with ceremonies, yet of itself 'tis of little effect, if not hurtful, unless that which is spiritual be added to it, to wit, that which is represented under those visible signs. Now the death of Christ is represented by it, which all men, vanquishing, abolishing, and, as it were, burying their carnal affections, ought to express in their lives and conversations that they may grow up to a newness of life and be one with him and the same one among another. This a holy man does, and in this is his only meditation. Whereas on the contrary, the common people think there's no more in that sacrifice than to be present at the altar and crowd next it, to have a noise of words and look upon the ceremonies.