

Erasmus: *The Praise of Folly*

Erasmus was the most famous scholar of his day and a great admirer of the Greek and Roman civilizations. Alarmed by conditions within the Church, Erasmus prepared his own Greek and Latin translations of the New Testament by going back to the original texts. He hoped to remove the errors made in earlier translations and force the Church to reexamine some of its beliefs. In the Praise of Folly, Erasmus used his sharp wit to ridicule some of the religious practices of sixteenth-century Europeans.

To the class of fools who listens to ghost stories and tales of miracles belong those people who believe in the silly but pleasing notion that if they look at a picture of St. Christopher, they will not die that day. This group also includes those who believe that if they offer a greeting to an image of St. Barbara they will return safely from battle. These fools have found a new Hercules in St. George. They seem to adore even his horse, which is decked out in gorgeous trappings. They make additional offerings in the hope of gaining new favors. One would think that his bronze helmet was half divine, the way people swear by it.

And what should I say about those who delude themselves with the comfort that comes from imaginary pardons for their sins when they pay for indulgences? They have taken to measuring their time in purgatory by years, months, days, and hours, calculating how much they subtract from their time there with each payment. There are plenty of those who rely on certain little magical certificates and prayers to win riches, honor, future happiness, health, perpetual prosperity, long life, a lusty old age—even, in the end, a seat at the right hand of Christ in heaven. But they are not anxious for the end to come. They will content themselves with the joy of heaven only after they must finally surrender the pleasures of this world, to which they so lovingly cling.

The trader, the soldier, and the judge think that they can clean up the sins of a lifetime by donating a single ill-gotten coin. They flatter themselves into believing that all sorts of dishonesty, drunkenness, quarrel, bloodshed, evil, and treason can be taken care of with a contract in which they pay a particular price to obtain salvation.

As for the theologians, perhaps the less said the better, since they become quite irritable unless they can force you to give up those beliefs that you worked out through honest reason and scholarship. And if you do not give them up, they brand you as a heretic, for it is their custom to use all manner of thunderings to terrify those whom they dislike.