

In Praise of Folly: A cursory review and appreciation five centuries later

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Desiderius Erasmus was a humanist reformer concerned with reforming the civil and ecclesiastical structures of his society. In reformed circles, much attention is paid to his role in the Lutheran controversy. Despite this, his powerful influence continues to this day. Erasmus' particular fool's literature, *Moriae Encomium* (1509), revealed his humanist concerns for civil and ecclesial society as a whole. He employed folly as a rhetorical instrument in satirical manner, evoking readers' amusement from numerous charges against the perceived multi-layered social reality of the day. Five hundred years later the person of Folly may still perform this same task in Christian society. That was Erasmus' point – the church is not to be seen as an island, it shares in the structures of society and is therefore still subject to its share of critical comments.

'Lof der Zotheid': 'n oorsig en evaluering vyf eeue later. Desiderius Erasmus was 'n humanis wat geпоog het om hom te beywer vir die hervorming van die burgerlike en kerklike strukture van sy tyd. In gereformeerde kringe word sy rol in die Lutherse twisgeskil beklemtoon. Sy verreikende invloed word steeds vandag gevoel. Erasmus se gekke-literatuur, *Moriae Encomium* (1509), het sy besorgdheid rakende die burgerlike en ekklesiastiese samelewing vanuit 'n humanistiese standpunt openbaar. Hy gebruik dwaasheid as retoriek en met behulp van satire vermaak hy die leser terwyl hy die veelvuldige lae van die sosiale realiteit van die dag ontbloot. Die personifikasie van die 'gek' of 'dwaas' is 500 jaar later steeds relevant vir hierdie rol in die Christelike samelewing. Erasmus was van mening dat die kerk nie as 'n eiland beskou moet word nie. Dit maak deel uit van die samelewingstrukture en is daarom steeds aan kritiek onderworpe.

Introduction

Despite being neither a reformer¹ nor a renaissance man,² Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466–1536) has not had favourable press in Protestant circles – in particular Lutheran and Calvinist. Yet, due to his *Novum Testamentum*, (Erasmus year 1516) it is said that 'The name of Erasmus will never perish' (DeJonge 1984; Olin 1987:1). He only ventured to write two theological treatises,³ *De libero arbitrio* (1526) and *Hyperaspistes*⁴ (1527). These were against Martin Luther's view that the will must be regarded as being enslaved to sin. Even before the reformation, Erasmus was the 'indisputable exponent of a theology of reform in a church, which had become all the time less Catholic and more Roman' (Akerboom 2010:234). It must, however, also be said that he 'did not promote a purely secular humanism'⁵ either (Rummel 2004:x), which Lawrence (1991:31) interprets as a 'Christian humanism'. Although Erasmus was eminently qualified to scrutinise Luther's quotes from biblical passages, to disagree with Luther was to face an insurmountable

1. More recently he is classed as a reformer as such and a critic of the church (cf. Rummel 2004:155–248). Tracy (1996:53) is of the opinion that 'To speak of Erasmus as a reformer may seem to claim too much.'

2. In Erasmus' quest for the rebirth (renaissance) of antiquity he chose not to take sides. For that reason he should be seen as both, or simply as a humanist (cf. Du Bois 1932:459). Although 'humanist' is sometimes seen in negative terms, applied to Erasmus it should be seen in the sense of striving for theological renewal in the church as a shift away from ritual. He longed for genuine Christian piety and a return to New Testament simplicity emulated by the Church Fathers. The polymath, Leonardo da Vinci, qualifies of course as the 'renaissance man', as Pope Julius II, and so on. Here was a move away from scholastic Aristotelianism to the contexts of the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations through their extant sources (Grendler 1983:92–93). See for instance Erasmus' *Antibarbarorum Liber* (1522), a book against barbarians – the case against religious persons suspicious of learning and of the classics, persons who loved arguments but had no passion for beauty (Tracy 1996:224–225, 243, 245).

3. Both works are also lumped under the title *Hyperaspistes* and denoted as volume 1 and 2.

4. Luther did not deign to answer these publications having said what he wanted to in his own publications such as the polemical *De servo arbitrio* (1525) as a rebuttal to Erasmus' *De libero arbitrio* (Akerboom 2010:233).

5. 'For humanism, by its very name and nature, has never been more or less than an ideal of a full and complete life for man on earth ... the creed of common-sense ... it is a code of action rather than a philosophy' (Du Bois 1932:446). It breaks philosophical sterility by allowing for passions, senses and reason.

stonewall⁶ that seemingly had little time for humanist dreams of a Christian renaissance (Adams 1945:133). With his critical corrections of Jerome's Vulgate, he faced criticism from hardline Roman Catholic traditionalists who appealed to the infallibility of the church and its papal pronouncements. Erasmus seemed to be at odds with many in his day.

What is striking about his *Instrumentum Novi Testamenti* was the return to original sources (*ad fontes*). This return to sources (literally 'fountains') was also displayed in his longing for a return to original Christianity⁷ in place of its caricature that was observed and captured in the wit and satire of his *Praise of Folly*⁸ (1509) volume. Unlike Luther claiming biblical support in his attempt to demolish the Roman religion, Erasmus simply revealed *religion de facto* and suggested a return to what it ought to be like.⁹

Desiderius Erasmus, the folly of his birth and life

Whether conscious or unconscious, folly may be traced to an early stage of Erasmus' public career. He, for instance, kept a barbarous translation of his father's name,¹⁰ Gerhard [beloved]. Desiderius (Latin) and Erasmus (Greek)¹¹ were incorrect translations seemingly intended to convey the same (Jebb 1897:2). Remarkably, he never learnt any other vernacular than the Dutch he spoke. He could of course, in the course of time, converse fluently with scholars anywhere in Latin and later in Greek (Jebb 1897:31). It was during his visit to Oxford that he met with members of the Oxford movement (*viz.* London movement) who were exploring ways and means on reforming the church from within a Christian humanist ideal. This was long before the reformation started at Wittenberg.

In particular, two Oxonians influenced Erasmus' career. John Colet (1457–1519) was lecturing on Paul's epistles, but in a manner which departed from the traditional scholastic approach.¹² Whilst Colet's lack of understanding Greek was

evident, he encouraged Erasmus to become proficient in the mother tongue of the New Testament (Jebb 1897:12). More to the point and regarding this article, was his friendship with a natural wit, Thomas More (1478–1535). Sight of the future Henry VIII (1491–1547) as a nine year old child made a deep impression on him. It resulted in a poem he sent to the young prince (Jebb 1897:14) who supposedly embodied the ideals of a 'humanist prince'.

Erasmus left England in 1500 and turned to the Greek language in earnest.¹³ In Italy he met with the *devotio moderna* and the new humanism (Olin 1987:2). Disgusted he returned to England in 1510 where the young prince he had seen as a boy, had now become king of England since 1509. He reached More's home at Bucklersbury and shared his thoughts about a satire that had brewing in his mind since crossing the Alps en route to England. More encouraged him to immediately put pen to paper and within a few days he wrote his famous satire, the *Moriae Encomium*¹⁴ (ME). Its popularity was probably the main reason why he was re-elected in 1513 to the Cambridge University chair of Lady Margaret, Professor of Divinity. This was significant, because 'If Erasmus was not universally acceptable to the schoolmen or to the monks of Cambridge, ... the general respect for his character and attainments carried the day' (Jebb 1897:28). By 1516 his Greek text of the New Testament was collated according to the best sources available to him. This was published in Basle and served the reformation.

Background to the *Moriae Encomium*

This article does not explore the subtle nuances detected by scholars of the influences which impacted Erasmus, for instance his indebtedness to Lucian. It gives a bird's eye view of the ME followed by a general analysis of its main figure, Folly, and explores some strains of possible relevance for the Christian community 500 years later.

Regarding the genre, Allen ([1668] 1913:iii) reminds the reader that 'The Praise of Folly is part of the so-called "Fool Literature" produced by the ferment of new ideas, which preceded the Reformation.' In other words, the Dame Folly was not his creation (Christ-von-Wedel 2013:4). Erasmus, at the age of 43 years, was without doubt aware of this literature (Allen [1668] 1913:ix, 3). A contemporary and similar example would be that of Sebastian Brant (1458–1521). He probably took his inspiration from the 'Plato's ship of fools' allegory Narrenschiff 1494 (Brant 2004).¹⁵ On the other hand,

6.Nevertheless something of the measure of Erasmus' spirit is gleaned from writing to Justus Jonas from Louvain on 10 May 1521. 'I wanted Luther to be loved in such a way that it might be safe to love him openly. Nor do I feel any differently about the wretches who attack me than I do about him. If they show the same energy in the virtuous preaching of Christ that they have in their attacks on me, I shall forget what I have suffered from them and welcome their new zeal for Christ. The noisy fellow who becomes Christ's harbinger I shall no longer hate' (Rummel 2003:211, letter 1202, 340 lines).

7.For Erasmus' views of the medieval heritage and scholasticism, see Bejczy (2001).

8.*Stulticiae Laus* [Latin] or *Μωρίας Εγκώμιον* [Greek]. It begins with the words '*Stultica loquitur*' [Folly speaks] (Radice 1974:30). Further play on the word is based on the Stoic premise that *stultitia* is the root of evil. I follow the translation of Radice (1974) and refer to page numbers and her paragraph or chapter divisions.

9.Insight into his personal determination was the adherence to the motto on the signet ring he wore, *Concedo nulli* [I give way/yield to no one], a gift from Alexander Stuart, illegitimate son of James IV of Scotland (Olin 1987:12).

10.There is some controversy about Erasmus' illegitimate birth and his rendering of the story (cf. Rummel 2004:2ff.). His mother's name was Margaret and he supposedly had an elder brother, Pieter.

11.The correct form is Erasmus.

12.Medieval scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and Albertus Magus (c. 1200–1280) followed Aristotelian reasoning trying to account for every contingent in creation subjecting it to a semblance of divine reason as employed by humans. Colet on the other hand allowed the text to speak for itself.

13.As a child Erasmus learnt that 'To know Greek was the next thing to heresy' (Jebb 1897:41). Before a hasty judgement is made, one has to remember that the bastion of Greek orthodoxy, Constantinople had been conquered by the Turks in 1453; the schism of the Christian church of 1054 was attributed to the Greek speaking orthodox community of the Eastern part of the former empire of Rome. He was supportive of the Scriptures being available in the vernacular languages (Grendler 1983:99).

14.Variouly translated, for example *Lof der Zotheid* (Dutch), *Éloge de la Folie* (French), *Das Lob der Torheit* (German).

15.Brant was a theologian emphasising moral stricture to regulate behaviour. An internet search will reveal a number of old and new plays, novels and films of the same name or with variations of the title.

Hieronymous Bosch (c. 1450–1516) caricatured Rome's offer of salvation in a pastiche of the same name.¹⁶ A possible interpretation of the ME is suggested by Furey (2005) who tries to apply an adjusted platonic division to the ME. Adams (1945:133) reminds the reader that the caricature of the book included both English and continental cultures.

Satire¹⁷ was the angled barb used by Erasmus to expose the accepted interpretations of life.¹⁸ It was basically a scrutiny subjecting sacred and secular living to the growing acceptance of humanist expectation. This approach generated new perceptions of values and norms with their accompanying standards. Hence, the use of satire came into play. With it a person may, for instance, be interpreted as frivolous, unconcerned, snarling and biting. Erasmus ([1668] 1913:2–3) was well-aware that this approach would not seem to become a Christian author and for that reason would invite criticism and even attack. Nevertheless, he determined 'to make some sport with *The Praise of Folly*' (Erasmus [1668] 1913:2). Later in his introduction Erasmus tempers this statement somewhat 'I have so moderated my stile¹⁹ that the understanding Reader will easily perceive my endeavours herein were rather to make mirth than bite' (Erasmus [1668] 1913:6).

As a humanist in the Italian renaissance, Erasmus became acquainted with the classical authors which kindled within him a desire to address the evils of his age (Jebb 1897:36). For him evil was consequential of ignorance. What separated him from the later reformers was his view that true knowledge was not only vested in Christian interpretation. Indeed, reading the classics taught him that truth is seminally distributed throughout the human race; evident in how each generation is taught by the former. Erasmus reasoned that the purer the knowledge, the purer the religion and its accompanying morality (Jebb 1897:37). In this sense Erasmus identified with all humankind as a man of the world. According to Jebb (1897:37), Erasmus was true to this idea. For instance, by 1527 copies of his *Enchiridion militis Christiani* [Handbook or Dagger of a Christian soldier or knight 1501]²⁰ were said to be available 'even in the smallest country inn' (Jebb 1897:42). It represented the humanist ideal of *ad fontes*, which Erasmus admired and subscribed to.²¹ Instead of paying overly much attention to Christian traditions and rites, it suggested that it was far better to behave according to the original Christian faith. This book found favour everywhere – amongst Roman Catholics and later also amongst Protestants.

Erasmus' thoughtful meditations whilst crossing the Alps by the Splügen Pass at Chur in Switzerland were deeply influenced by the memories of his stay in Rome. These were offset by his anticipation of an enlightened king, Henry VIII's rule. He was also looking forward to meeting with the witty Thomas More and how to join in witty repartee recounting his impressions of life in Rome (Adams 1945:131). At More's house in London he was encouraged to record his meditations and to recover his health, having suffered the passing of a kidney stone (Olin 1987:13). The ME was published two years later in 1511 and was revised in 1514.²² It became his most popular book – a bestseller all over Europe, with about 40 editions in his own lifetime²³ (Olin 1987:13).

Content of the *Moriae Encomium*

A cursory examination of the ME would probably miss that the title is a play on Erasmus' host's surname.²⁴ From the negative reception of his book it was clear that Erasmus had 'burrowed beneath the comfortingly familiar (multi-layered) topography of convention' (Furey 2005:480).

Erasmus' strategy in attempting to convince his audience was not to expound history, but to appeal for intellectual and moral betterment. He pursued a balance between 'pagan hedonism and Christian-pagan Stoicism and between Stoic optimism and Christian pessimism' (Du Bois 1932:448). Within these boundaries Erasmus pushed contemporary humanism to its logical conclusion. It developed into a commentary by man²⁵ (Erasmus, the mouth-piece of Folly) about man – the focus of its 68 chapters (cf. Radice 1974). Thematically its message was not primarily about God, nor of the devil or some force or principle. First and foremost it is about humankind and society or, to put it a bit more bluntly, man as the social fool. Society is characterised by a degree of madness. A contemporary social scientist said 'a human being is still an extraordinarily irrational creature ... [E]ach person is a creature of passions, of flesh and blood, a creature of impulses and desires' (Ellul 1981:48). One has to conclude with Erasmus (and by implication Ellul): society represents humanism at its best (Du Bois 1932:446). Whilst satire allows for mockery of this premise, Erasmus sought to awaken a desire for a return to a Christian society reflecting biblical foundations reminiscent of the Early Church (*ad fontes*).

16. A boat without a helmsman in the shape of a coracle, filled with debauched persons on their way to Fools Paradise (c. 1514). It has been interpreted as a mockery in its symbolism of the 'ark of salvation'. This is on display in the Musée du Louvre, Paris.

17. Adams (1945:133) suggests that irony reflects satire's technique.

18. Erasmus (1515) alludes to his use of the classics to this end in his letter to Martin van Dorp (<http://www.piney.com/ErasmusDorp.html>).

19. The spelling as in the original translation by John Wilson in 1668 (Erasmus [1668] 1913) has been followed throughout this article. Wilson's translation still serves.

20. See the play on the meanings of words, for instance *ἐγγεπιθίδιον*, is similarly used by Augustine (Olin 1987:9).

21. It was presumably this mentality that drove Erasmus to the task of discovering the Greek source of the New Testament in place of the Latin Vulgate.

22. Its negative reception and Erasmus' response are briefly covered by Furey (2005:479–480).

23. It is generally accepted that the anonymous satire, *Julius exclusus* [Julius excluded] (1513) is from Erasmus' pen. In it he seems to have become a bit bolder taking his satire to a more pointed level. Pope Julius II died on 21 February 1513 and the dialogue between Julius, Genius (daemon or inner spirit) and Peter takes some interesting turns when the pope finds heaven's portals locked – seemingly mocking the 'keys of St. Peter' (Mt 16:19), originally claimed by Peter.

24. *μωρία* [folly] and *μωρος* [being 'fool'] are perversions of his friend More's surname (Erasmus [1668] 1913:2). Erasmus ([1668] 1913:6) ends his letter to his friend saying 'Farewell, my best disputant More, and stoutly defend your *Moriae*.' In this writer's opinion, this seals the argument for joining the ongoing conversation of those who longed for a renewal, not only in society, but also of prevailing religion.

25. This is in the generic sense. The continued use of the term will determine its use contextually.

The Encomium falls naturally into three sections.²⁶ In the first section Erasmus shows that Folly is society's catalyst. Folly is born of the gods, yet without her the gods, the world and its rulers cannot operate (Radice 1974:31–33; cf. also p. 10). Folly is not only humankind's source of existence in the processes of marriage and procreation, but provides the essence to relationships which seems to make living worthwhile (Radice 1974:34). In like manner Erasmus pursues humankind and preoccupations with matters such as happiness, virtue, beauty and love, guided by 'a modicum, just a sprinkling, of reason' (Radice 1974:40). Hence the indispensable need for Folly, because without foolishness, madness or irrationality society could not operate. Wisdom alone does not foster friendship, and marriage is not a reality unless some folly allows for failure and expectations 'In short no alliance can be happy or stable without me' (Radice 1974:44). The implication being that nothing is realised in society or personally without some degree of foolishness. In reality that is how life is lived. Then again, if living is expressed as a divorce between wisdom and emotion, you are left with the rational wise man void of emotion and the fool without wisdom (Radice 1974:52).

In the second section of Radice's book (1974, chapters 31–47), class distinctions and airs become the focus. Sadly this is debilitated by exaggerated self-importance and much ado about theory in philosophy and theology. Yet, the happiest group comprises of 'idiots, fools, nitwits, simpletons, all splendid names according to my way of thinking' (Radice 1974:57–58). Erasmus' social interplay shows the sterility of wisdom alone as opposed to the emptiness of folly alone. He often resorts to words or phrases such as *madness, insanity, madman, one who is not so mad* (Radice 1974:62) to emphasise the ridiculousness of any approach to death, purgatory, claims to supernatural powers and more. Indeed Christians are led by priests who promote these matters (Radice 1974:66). They, and others of equal ridicule, revel in their offices, highlighting the essence of self-love (Radice 1974:68–69). Erasmus or Folly concludes (Radice 1974):

I hold the view that I am worshipped with truest devotion when all men everywhere take me to their hearts express me in their habits, and reflect me in their way of life – as in fact they do. (p. 72)²⁷

This hedonistic conclusion leads into the next section.

The third section (Radice 1974, chapters 47–68) changes direction somewhat. Erasmus introduces the Christian fool of which Christ was the biggest fool of all. Gospel foolishness clearly cuts through this parody of worldly wisdom buttressed by false promises and shifting premises. For Erasmus, Christian foolishness is unlike its pseudo-counterpart and therefore challenges society's worldly religion. Folly identifies a shift from pagan influences to Christian syncretism to the extent that identifying the one

from the other is virtually impossible (Radice 1974:71–74). Erasmus is searching for true religion. He was deeply influenced by his visit to Rome (Radice 1974:11). His disillusionment with what he encountered there allows Folly to ridicule its rank and file. What folly to suggest that avarice, wealth, power, rank and war could represent the true church (Radice 1974:80ff.). Whereas Folly acknowledges humankind worshipping her, the subtle contrasting play reveals true worship (Radice 1974:82). Folly deals with the absurdity of questions, which occupied scholastic theologians (Radice 1974):

Could God have taken on the form of a woman, a devil, a donkey, a gourd or a flintstone? If so, how could a gourd have preached sermons, performed miracles, and been nailed to the cross? (p. 81, cf. p. 89)

By way of resolution, Folly insightfully reveals that sometimes, before claiming explanation, it is prudent to give way to reverence (Radice 1974:84). Instead of the church leading by example, its prelates shamefully condone and follow the example of self-indulgent worldly princes (Radice 1974:93–95). There is little to distinguish clergy from laity regardless of status in the church. Folly points out the misuse of symbols²⁸ and concludes that the theatrical is as much represented in church as outside of it as is the power to maintain the semblance of difference between the sacred and the secular (Radice 1974:94–96).

However, Folly resorts to an even more radical manner of presenting her argument: the source of true religion, the Bible. With that in hand she wields the only valid source of true social criticism (Radice 1974:101ff.). She traces the use of words such as *fool, vanity, folly* in the Old Testament whilst showing the vestiges of wisdom in pagan writings, believing that they too reveal some grasp of eternal truth. Finally, she concludes with the followers of Christ²⁹ as being 'fools' for him (Radice 1974:107), for:

Christ too, though he is the wisdom of the Father was made something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind, when he assumed the nature of man and was seen in man's form; just as he was made sin so that he could redeem sinners. (p. 108)

Incisively, Folly concludes that Christianity with wisdom alone has no affiliation with folly (Radice 1974:110). It would prove to be sterile. Such a notion of sterility would contradict the message of scripture, which centers on Christian piety – a meeting of both as they do in Christ.

The ME concludes with Erasmus reminding his readers that it was Folly, a woman, who had been spouting forth. Her exit suggests that she leaves her initiates behind (Radice 1974:115) implying 'till next time'.

26. This also follows Radice (1974:7–8) who divides the Encomium into three distinct parts: a general Lucianic spirit underlying the satire exposing community (chapters 1–30), an attack on self-important self-delusions of community leadership (chapters 31–47) and Christian folly (chapters 47–68).

27. Here the humanist ideal awakens for Erasmus never deviated from his conviction that change comes about from a change in the heart.

28. To be or die outside of the visible church was to be *sine lux, sine crux, sine Deus* [without candles, cross or God] – prerogatives claimed by Rome (Drummond 1873:401).

29. Drummond (1873:200) mentions that Erasmus was sorry that he had mentioned the name of Christ in the context of satire. The reason seems to be that the majority of readers were superstitious and, sadly would lack necessary reverence for the Son of God.

A cursory appreciation and the question: 'Is it true?'³⁰

I want to link an appreciation of the ME to the question, 'Is it true?'. At Schulpforta, Karl Barth sketched the question into the context of preaching during a lecture to pastors. He pondered whether the expectant audience or congregation was persuaded that God was truly present during the preaching of the sermon (Barth 1978:107–109). To my mind the ME begs the question: Is folly ever present in human society? This calls for some comparative measurement and will be offered by way of contrasting and similar opinions expressed by various persons.³¹ I lean towards Kay's conclusion (1977:263) that the ME proves a maturing Erasmus' progress in terms of wisdom and humanity beyond the *Enchiridion*. As Lawrence (1991:31) notes, Erasmus had a complex mind and endeavours to understand him have resulted in many differing opinions.

A contemporary adapted novel commenting on Western society would be Douglas Adams' 'The hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy' (HG2G) (1995). Its satire is arguably as biting as the ME's, as is the range of the criticisms Adams employs.³² Much of what follows about the ME could also apply to this modern satire.

The ME was published before the nailing of the theses on Wittenberg's church door on 31 October 1517. Many of the theses echoed their same scandal with Erasmus as they did with Luther. Although Europe and England were dominated by the Church of Rome, there was no doubt in the minds of many that the church was in need of serious reform and renewal (Olin 1987:14). It was a tract for the times, revealing the Church of Rome's folly.

Regarding its particular style, Erasmus 'needed insults in order to cut through appearances and to locate the truth that conventional assumptions or worldly values had obscured' (Furey 2005:479). From Erasmus' own lips we read 'The truth of the gospel slips more pleasantly into the mind and takes firmer grip there if it is attractively clothed than it would if it were presented undisguised' (1515).³³ Erasmus seriously longed for such changes in the church. 'He is not playing the mocker or cynic or sceptic in this book, as some have mistakenly believed but the sincere reformer' (Olin 1987:14). In fact he wrote about his method, 'The same thing was done there under the semblance of a jest as was done in the *Enchiridion*' (Olin 1987:14; cf. Drummond 1873:203). Contrast this with the view that Erasmus 'lived in a system-

30. Karl Barth's question in 1922 as he interpreted it from the hearers of his theology. I will not compare the fascinating correspondence relevant to Thomas More's *Utopia* which together with the ME may be seen as companion volumes of humanist expression and ideals (cf. Olin 1987:21ff.; Hilbert 1999:40).

31. Kay (1977) covers some of the recent approaches in this regard.

32. While barely scratching the surface, Adams, for instance, pokes fun at lawyers drowning in paperwork, a shallow and biotic view of death. He uses technical terms with pseudo-science meanings and applications and time travels. Underlying Adams' journey is a quest for answers and the right questions to ask. See the God or Christian motif as early as page one (Adams 1945:1ff.).

33. It must be borne in mind that Van Dorp was offended by Erasmus' 'sharp-edged truth'.

less age or at least in an age of decadent, impotent systems' (Du Bois 1932:459).

Erasmus wanted to be known as a citizen of the world, 'the apostle of good learning and good morals' (Grendler 1983:89). As such his commentary on social living and expectations spanned wider than the church to include the societies he knew on the Continent and in England. Seminal to these communities were mixtures of pagan and Christian values. He objected to the folly of stoical morality (Tracy 1996:49),³⁴ which, in his opinion, debilitated and strangled expression in art and the joy of living. He was persuaded that reason alone was void of emotion. Wherever emotions are found and socially matures, it is not the result of calculated reason, but by its abandonment. Such extremity of abandonment, however, reveals the entrapment of humankind in the mesh of this world's spirit, identified as worldly folly (Tracy 1996:51). On the other hand such rhetoric may also be seen as a hermeneutical instrument employed in particular manner, viz. 'Erasmus promoted a different sort of folly that redeems by embracing its own manic absurdity' (Furey 2005:482). Partisanship in the ME is therefore questionable. Erasmus' rhetoric tars all sides. For Kay (1977:263) such criticism ignores the view that Erasmus trusted that his amused audience would be sensible enough not to fall for the 'sophistry of Folly's arguments and laughingly reject her debased view of human nature'. Adding to the fun was also spotting the misquoting of sources and twisting of well-known tales and illustrations, which Kay (1977:258–260) summarises as 'verbal-gymnastics'. Whilst a later audience than the 16th century one intended by Erasmus might still appreciate the more laughable statement, they may lose some of the subtleties. Nevertheless, the ME remains an amusing reading, revealing strains accompanying society in all generations.

There is, however, more seriousness attached to the ME than those, simply seeking to be amused. It served as an instrument for challenging prevailing culture, whether in the 16th century or beyond. No matter the age, it is, according to Hilbert (1999:41), 'dangerous preaching'. From that perspective it resonates with Erasmus' attempt to ridicule his own society and its prevailing culture. Accompanying Folly's social ridicule, Hilbert (1999:46ff.) reminds us that within ludicrous social structures pain, suffering and clinging to hope are very real experiences. He reminds us that it is the gospel narrative that gives and fills with hope. It is the latter that brings one to the core of the ME. Folly insisted that the adherents of Christ, in following his example, would convince others of a new way of living (Christ-von-Wedel 2013:69). Jesus' example, for instance, questions the persecution and death of heretics and brings the Aquinian approach to heresy under the loupe of Scripture (Christ-von-Wedel 2013:69).

Green (2004:69), on the other hand, reminds us that, whilst manifested social offence of this nature may differ from age

34. Tracy (1996:49ff.) discusses the range of influences and interpretations by scholars in Erasmusian literature in this regard.

to age and culture to culture, the gospel remains the supreme offence of God.

Some see three interlocking theological models underlying Erasmus' theology: the person of Christ, holy Scripture as means of knowledge, and the primitive church (Lawrence 1991:33ff.). The ME illustrates this together with the *Paraclesis* and the *Enchiridion* (Lawrence 1991:33). His focus on the scandal of the cross was to all of society, Jew and Gentile, a sign of utter defeat and contempt (Green 2004). Erasmus never deviated from the importance of conveying truth evident in his *philosophia Christi* [philosophy of Christ] (Von Dehsen 1999:62). Fundamentally his view was that it was pointless to teach anything if it did not transform the inner life.³⁵ In other words true religion reached beyond simply creedal statements refusing to serve as sterile confessions of those who do not evidence a change in their lives and the society they live in. Full restoration to original truth was the purpose of true knowledge for Erasmus. If the church captured that knowledge, society would be transformed.

It is these satirical and critical pronouncements that give the message of Erasmus its 'cutting edge' (Olin 1987:14). Watson (1979:353) proposes a carnivalesque sketch of Erasmus's environment: 'From Erasmus' perspective, Carnival is a time which by levelling ranks and mocking traditional "wisdom" leaves man with one remaining certainty: the truth of Christ.' Once that certainty is established, hope comes to the fore, joy resurfaces and the folly of Christ emerges as the wisdom for this world and the church. In Christ there is the promise of renewal, of birth and a new beginning. Extrapolated the application could be made to society and to the church.

Conclusion

Luther correctly diagnosed the theology of humankind's malady for every generation since the fall as being fallen into sin and in need for redemption. Erasmus similarly diagnosed the society of the day, but from a different perspective: Without exception everyone suffers from a bit of madness or in Ellul's words 'irrationality' (1981); some degree of folly reveals itself in all. These are not contrasting views; the latter simply affirms the former to a lesser degree in the manner of overt expression. For Luther the message was 'justification by faith' while, for Erasmus, it was a return to true knowledge humankind expressed societally.³⁶ In this manner Erasmus avoided the party spirit of Lutheranism. In his travels to the Netherlands, Italy and England, he discovered the deception of the religious Christianity of the day and this is what he brought to the fore in his book. Whilst Luther came to the problem from the standpoint of the Bible, chapter and verse, Erasmus came to it on middle ground. He challenged his readers to laugh with him, to ridicule and recognise social malaise all the while with effort towards establishing and

fostering true catholic unity and peace. But, as Olin (1987:26) says, his middle-ground mediation and enormous influence brought about little. He belonged to no one; no side could claim him for their own. Christ-von-Wedel (2013:62, 64) is of the opinion that it is 'the boldness with which Erasmus ridicules everything, including himself', which makes for its fascinating reading. The modern reader must, however, have some classical background to appreciate it fully.

In the third millennium, when it comes the *Encomium Moriae*, a person reading the book may soon reflect upon present day society and ponder on its particular strain of folly. This may be the result of a startling realisation that I, the reader, giggling and affirming what I am reading, am part of that same society. I, too, share in its culture and benefit from the folly of pseudo-Christianity. I, too, am under the loupe; part of the madness of the day, but as a Christian I am called to emulate the example of Christ and his disciples in society.

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35.This view is shared by the reformers of *doctrina* (cf. Fitzpatrick 2012 on Erasmus' views on human perfection).

36.Christ-von-Wedel (2013:71 cf. 76) puts it like this: 'God accommodates himself to humans; therein lies both his foolishness and the dignity of humankind.' With the ME, Erasmus entered into a theological debate dominated by scholastic theology.

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