

THE INTELLECT-WILL PROBLEM IN THE THOUGHT OF SOME NORTHERN RENAISSANCE HUMANISTS: COLET, ERASMUS, AND MONTAIGNE

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In an earlier essay I have dealt with the intellect-will problem in the thought of Nicholas of Cusa.¹ In the present article I will treat the same question in the thought of three other Northern-Renaissance humanists: Colet, Erasmus, and Montaigne. Finally in my "Summary and Conclusion" at the end of this essay, I shall endeavor to draw some comparisons and contrasts covering all four of the men.

1. *John Colet*

Colet's View of Man's Nature

John Colet (d. 1519), perhaps most famous as an English educator in Oxford and London, adhered to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, involving inherited guilt and universal human depravity.² When Adam sinned the whole race sinned so that his descendants were born with depraved natures and perverted intellects and wills, subject to the sentence of eternal death. Leland Miles suggests that Colet argued for a tendency to evil in fallen man with no "absolute obliteration of free will."³ Ernest Hunt quotes Colet to prove that his concept involved total depravity of reason and will in relation to spiritual matters:

¹ See *AUSS* 12 (July 1974): 83-93. The introductory section in that earlier essay (pp. 83-84) outlines more specifically the particular problem treated in both articles, and it may therefore be useful to reread that section as an introduction to the material being presented now.

² Leland Miles, *John Colet and the Platonic Tradition* (La Salle, Ill., 1961), pp. 88-89.

³ *Ibid.*

His fall is total: after the Fall "man had no whole and undefiled nature, no unclouded reason, no upright will. Whatever men did among themselves, was foolish and wicked." The whole of humanity has been corrupted by the Fall; the sequel of Adam's primal sin was "one long course of downfall, stumbling, error, and deception amongst men"; man was unable to "establish anything sure, anything holy, anything wholesome, anything to please God or benefit mankind"; the life, laws, customs, and deeds of mankind were polluted and foul.⁴

In *An Exposition of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Colet describes man as comprising "a sentient body" and a soul or "inner man."⁵ Because of man's fallen condition the body, with its passions and desires, is in complete control of the soul. "From its violence and tyranny the soul, that is, the poor inner man, being weak and powerless by reason of Adam's unhappy fall, has been incapable, with all its efforts, of releasing and liberating itself."⁶ The soul consists of two parts: intelligence or heat, and will or light.⁷ The "most excellent" part of the soul is the intellect.⁸ In the absence of divine aid the will is unable to assume dominance over the clamorings of the body, and the intellect is unable to grasp any worthwhile knowledge of God.

Colet's teaching of the bondage of the will before justification is based on the doctrine of single predestination (by contrast with double predestination). The sins of men are foreknown by God, but not predetermined by him. In respect to the damned, God's foreknowledge is distinct from his predetermination, so that he is in no way responsible for evil.⁹ Colet did not assert, as Luther did, that all things, whether good or evil, happen of necessity.¹⁰ Rather, he urged that "God's foreknowledge and

⁴ Ernest William Hunt, *Dean Colet and His Theology* (London, 1956), p. 11.

⁵ John Colet, *An Exposition of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. H. Lupton (Farnborough, Hants., Eng., 1873, 1965), p. 16. Hereinafter referred to as Colet, *Romans*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London, 1957), pp. 80-81.

truth" are not "the cause of sin being committed; nor is a sin, though foreknown, in any degree the cause of God's foreknowledge appearing true."¹¹ Unregenerate men have no power to choose goodness, much less to perform it; but they are, nonetheless, totally responsible for their depravity and ultimate ruin.

In the case of the elect, on the other hand, Colet equates God's foreknowledge with his foreordination.¹² The decision to deliver them from bondage to the sentient body, so that the soul (intellect and will) might henceforth rule and dictate behavior consistent with its will, was an arbitrary one made by God before Creation. Those alone can come to God whom he calls, and these are the ones "whom he has foreordained, purposed, promised, elected and predestinated."¹³ "For what he has determined and promised in the future, depends not on the will of men, but on his own power and choice."¹⁴ Those whom God has thus chosen cannot resist his grace.¹⁵ Colet defines grace as "divine mercy," the love which is infused into man by the Holy Spirit so that men will love him in return.¹⁶ Colet's position is simply that apart from grace man has no free will either in the sense of power to choose holiness or in the sense of capacity to implement choice. A few years later Luther was to enunciate the same doctrine.

The man whose will is thus bound was described by Colet in Neo-Platonic terms as the victim of "multiplicity." He is enslaved by the multiple urges of his fleshly self. Justification was defined by Colet as reconciliation with God which renders possible a consolidation in "unity."¹⁷ The three steps in restoration to unity are hope, faith, and love (in that order). Hope engenders purification, unity, existence, and power; faith results in light, intellect,

¹¹ Colet, *Romans*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 32, 34, 37-38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10; Miles, p. 92.

¹⁶ Miles, p. 92.

¹⁷ Hunt, pp. 110-111.

and knowledge; and love motivates heart, will, and goodness.¹⁸ The establishment of these three qualities in the soul results in man's restoration to his genuinely authentic selfhood.

We may conclude therefore, that by hope we have existence; by faith, knowledge; and by love, goodness; and that in these three consist the life and growth of the soul, whereby it lives, and has being, knowledge, and love of God; whereby it stands, and preserves and sustains itself; whereby also it reigns—in the body and binds it in obedience to itself; whereby, in a word, the whole man is good, beautiful, and happy.¹⁹

Miles traces the epistemological tradition by which purification (hope) was a prelude to knowledge (faith). Plato, Paul, Augustine, and Dionysius substantially agree that the first infused grace produces purification.²⁰ To Colet, the knowledge which results from faith is beyond natural reason. It is a mystical knowledge, "a kind of light infused into the soul of man from the divine sun, by which the heavenly verities are known to be revealed without uncertainty or doubt; and it as far excels the light of reason, as certainty does uncertainty."²¹ This mystic knowledge, resulting from union with the divine, is the only true wisdom, as far as Colet is concerned. It can be "received and delivered by those who were utterly devoid of the dark wisdom that consists in human reason."²² It is wisdom "only from God in Christ."²³

Colet and Philosophy

Despite Colet's insistence that authentic knowledge and wisdom are available only to the believer who has entered into a mystic union with God's Son, he recognizes that the other two sources

¹⁸ Colet, *Romans*, p. 62; cf. Sears Jayne, *John Colet and Marsilio Ficino* (London, 1963), p. 65.

¹⁹ Colet, *Romans*, p. 62.

²⁰ Miles, pp. 124-126.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²² John Colet, *An Exposition of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. J. H. Lupton (Farnborough, Hants., Eng., 1874, 1965), p. 19. Hereinafter referred to as Colet, *Corinthians*.

Ibid., p. 11.

of knowledge identified by Neo-Platonism are valid, even if to a much lesser degree. "Men are taught by God in three ways . . . by his sensible creation, by his spiritual and angelic creation; and by His Son."²⁴ Even though he rejected the natural theology of the scholastics, Colet was prepared to concede that the visible universe is a source of very limited understanding of ultimate truth and wisdom.²⁵ According to Miles, Colet's authorities for this were Paul (Rom 1:20) and Plato (Laws 12:967, 968).

It is true that Colet regarded the Bible as the one ultimate standard of truth.²⁶ In this he was in accord with the 16th-century Reformers. Eugene F. Rice argues that Colet entirely repudiated philosophy as a source of truth.²⁷ Rice refers to the three positions on the question of faith and reason outlined by Wolfson.²⁸ First is the double-faith theory in which true faith is acceptance of Scripture with or without the assistance of philosophy. Second is the single-faith theory by which a rational approach to Scripture utilizes the aid of philosophy. Third is the authoritarian single-faith theory which requires acceptance of Scripture without any help from philosophy. Rice is convinced that Colet adhered to the single-faith theory of the authoritarian variety, Hunt agrees:

The Bible held the whole truth. That was Colet's conviction. "In the choice and well-stored table of Holy Scripture all things are contained that belong to the truth." So convinced was he of the all-sufficiency of the Bible that he discouraged the use of pagan authors as an aid to the understanding of it. "Now if any should say, as is often said, that reading pagan authors helps us to understand the Holy Scriptures, let them consider whether the fact of placing such reliance on them does not make them an obstacle to such understanding. In so doing you distrust your ability to understand the Scriptures by grace alone and prayer, and by the aid of Christ and of faith." And so he urges that "those

²⁴ Miles, p. 122

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123, 143.

²⁶ Hunt, p. 62.

²⁷ Eugene F. Rice, "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," *HTR* 45 (July 1952): 152.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

books alone ought to be read in which there is a salutary flavour of Christ; in which Christ is set forth for us to feed upon."²⁹

Miles, Cassirer, and Jayne disagree with Rice, Hunt, and Hyma on this question of Colet's willingness (or unwillingness) to use philosophy as a handmaiden to theology. Miles and Cassirer refer to Colet's opinion that one who bears the true spirit of Christ is far more a Christian than one who has never heard of him.³⁰ Miles cites Colet's statement in his exposition of Romans: "The Gentiles had for their guidance philosophers who were taught by observation of nature; the Jews had prophets who were taught by the angels; and lastly we Christians have Apostles, who were *fully taught* by Jesus."³¹ Miles is convinced that Colet recognized various means used by God throughout history to reveal truth. Colet rejected Ficino's and Cusa's universalism, staunchly maintaining that God's media of revelation are distinctly superior. Only Christians can receive the "full truth." But "Colet intermittently takes the position to which Augustine finally came, namely, that Greek (and Jewish) philosophy, while inferior, contain some degree of truth, and can be accepted and used wherever they are verified by, or at least do not conflict with, Christian authority."³² Hence Miles sees Colet as standing somewhere between Tertullian's unequivocal rejection of philosophy and the radical humanism of the Florentine Neo-Platonists.³³ This is tantamount to placing Colet, on this question, squarely within the Clementine-Augustinian tradition.

Jayne bolsters Miles' argument.³⁴ His study of Colet's annotations in the margins of Ficino's *Epistolae* has emphasized that Colet was interested in Platonism mainly in the years at Oxford. He found it a fruitful source of material for his theological lectures

²⁹ Hunt, p. 102.

³⁰ Miles, p. 23; Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (New York, 1963), p. 77; Colet, *Romans*, pp. 87-88.

³¹ *Ibid.*, citing Colet, *Romans*.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁴ Jayne, pp. 77-78.

on the Bible. Although he rejected Ficino's speculative, intellectual approach, he incorporated many Platonic and Neo-Platonic features into his lectures. Insofar as Platonism seemed consistent with Paul, Colet used it even though in certain key issues there was, in fact, a significant contradiction between the two sources. Jayne pertinently remarks, "Colet would obviously not have revived a school if he had not believed that moral training involves intellectual discipline."³⁵

Was Colet a Humanist?

Rice takes great pains to convince us that John Colet was not a humanist.³⁶ He presents two main arguments. First Colet held the traditional medieval Augustinian concept of wisdom as divine knowledge, rather than the classical view of wisdom as natural human perfection, an active commitment of virtue. It was towards this latter definition that Renaissance humanism tended. Second, Colet accepted only revelation as the means of achieving wisdom, whereas the Renaissance humanists exalted reason as its primary source. In regard to the first point, it is interesting to consider the classical definitions of wisdom which Rice gives in his book *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*. Plato, for example, said that wisdom was a contemplation of eternal, immutable, and intelligible Ideas; and Aristotle defined wisdom as a knowledge of the first causes and principles of things and called it a "divine science."³⁷ Rice prefers to accept as *the* classical definition of wisdom that held by Cicero and Seneca: a moral virtue which is an imitation of reason and nature. This concept Charron accepted, and hence he was a true Renaissance humanist. It seems not inappropriate to point out that if we were to accept the definition of wisdom given by the two most influential classical philosophers, Colet would have to be regarded as considerably more a humanist than Charron.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁶ Rice, "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," p. 142; cf. Eugene F. Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), pp. 19-29.

³⁷ Rice, *Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, p. 1.

Sears Jayne rejects Rice's contention that Colet's concept of wisdom was essentially contemplative and, therefore, subversive of the Renaissance human, ethical, and moral bias.³⁸ Colet, he says, was a voluntarist. His concern was moral action and ethical reform. Whereas Ficino emphasized the intellectual faculty of the soul, Colet emphasized its moral faculty.³⁹ It was the good works which the regenerated man could do through the power of the Holy Spirit that Colet consistently extolled.⁴⁰ If Rice should object that Renaissance humanism exalted the efficiency of man's free will in the ethical enterprise, by contrast with Colet's annihilation of free will, the answer could be given that Colet considered the *regenerated* will as decidedly effective.⁴¹ The doctrine of faith formed by love, to which Colet gave credence, allowed for a certain distinct autonomy of will after justification.

Rice's second suggestion, that true Renaissance humanism employed human reason as the primary means of attaining wisdom, in contrast to Colet's reliance upon revelation, would appear to be a serious exaggeration.⁴² It is not entirely true, for example, as Rice says, that "for Erasmus the insights of wisdom are natural products of the human reason."⁴³ As we shall see in the next section, Erasmus too had considerable respect for revelation as a source of wisdom. As indicated above, Colet did give some credence to the insights of philosophy. If a humanist must be one who accepts only the presumed classical means of achieving wisdom, i.e., natural reason, there can be no such thing as Christian humanism. We would be in the invidious position of having to exclude such great Christian scholars as Erasmus and Melancthon from the humanist camp.

Perhaps it is more correct to define a humanist as one who

³⁸ Jayne, pp. 70-73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁰ Colet, *Corinthians*, pp. 32, 129, 139-140, 142-143.

⁴¹ Rice, "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," p. 148.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 147.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

acknowledged some place for human intellect and reason in the study of human behavior and its causes, and sometimes in the critical study of Christian sources (Scripture, the Fathers, philosophy), but not in the dialectical investigation of first causes and the nature of absolute truth. If this is correct, both the secularists and the revelationists can be included. Colet does not completely divest human intellect of insight into matters human. Nor does he regard philosophy as completely devoid of truth consistent with the Christian message. He does not, however, go so far as Luther, who regarded philosophy as decidedly harmful and advised against its use.⁴⁴ Hence we may justifiably regard Colet as a humanist.

2. Erasmus of Rotterdam

In his article "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," Rice describes the gap between Colet's theology and Erasmus' humanism as similar to that between Erasmus and Luther.⁴⁵ He says that the medieval Augustinian tradition, of which Colet was a part, differs from humanism in that it continued to define *sapientia* in terms of Christian revelation. "It is precisely this disassociation of wisdom and revelation which is the novel element in the humanist conception of sapientia."⁴⁶ Hence the humanist definition of wisdom is closer to the Ciceronian. Rice presents Erasmus and Conrad Celtis as typical representatives of the trend. They wished to invest wisdom with much of its old ethical and scientific meaning. For Celtis *sapientia* involves "a love of astronomical and physical investigation."⁴⁷ Rice fails to indicate the distinction between Celtis and Erasmus on the question of science. Speaking of Erasmus, Preserved Smith explains:

⁴⁴ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1963, 1966), pp. 4, 9-11; cf. William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther's Religious Thought* (Mountain View, California, 1971), p. 89.

⁴⁵ Rice, "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," pp. 141-163.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Then, again, he had no interest in science. While Leonardo was experimenting in anatomy and physics and accumulating facts about geology and astronomy, while Copernicus was working out the most momentous discovery that has ever dawned upon the human mind, while Vives, who was well known to Erasmus, was stating that men should no longer rely on authority but should look at nature for themselves, the attitude of Erasmus was intensely conservative. Like Socrates, he not only did not care for natural science, he actively disliked it as leading men's thoughts away from the more important problems of moral philosophy.⁴⁸

Rice indicates that Erasmus shared Celtis' ethical concept of wisdom. This is the emphasis, he says, in the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*.⁴⁹ Even though Rice recognizes that Erasmus found in Christ the ultimate source of wisdom, it was wisdom resulting from an imitation of his virtues rather than from acceptance of revelation. "For Erasmus the insights of wisdom are natural products of the human reason."⁵⁰ Erasmus promised immortality to the follower of Ciceronian ethics.⁵¹ He emphasized antique virtue as sufficient for salvation. "The rigid identification of *sapientia* with revelation gradually gives way to a *prisca sapientia* whose primary source is the natural reason of the classical moralists. Colet classified wisdom under faith and illumination; Erasmus and Celtis under reason and *humanitas*."⁵²

In order to test the validity of Rice's assertions we need to investigate further the questions he discusses. First, what was Erasmus' concept of wisdom? Was it wholly human and ethical or was there a revelational element? Second, what were the means emphasized by Erasmus, with which man might achieve wisdom? Did all depend on human intellect and will or was there a distinctly divine ingredient?

⁴⁸ Preserved Smith, *Erasmus: A Study of His Life, Ideals, and Place in History* (New York, 1923, 1962), p. 35.

⁴⁹ Rice, "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," p. 145.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Erasmus' Concept of Wisdom; the "Philosophia Christi"

According to Lewis W. Spitz, even though Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* at times sounds like Ovid and Cicero, who saw in nature and reason the source of good ethical conduct, the more predominant motif is, in fact, the true *sapientia* "which comes from above and which can best be learned from the Wisdom incarnate. Erasmus does not stand on naturalistic ground, antique or modern."⁵³ Similar ambivalence is evident in Erasmus' colloquy, "The Epicurean." The best things in life are enjoyed to the full by the religious man. Indeed, Christ was the greatest philosopher and the leading Epicurean. Nevertheless, Christian piety is linked with the transcendent God, and union with him, rendering possible release from the limitations of nature, is man's highest good.⁵⁴

There is an undoubted ethical emphasis in the *Enchiridion*. The virtue of the Stoics and the probity of the Christians are spoken of as wisdom.⁵⁵ But the ultimate revelational nature of wisdom is very much in evidence.

On the other hand, the author of wisdom—rather, Wisdom itself—is Christ Jesus, who is the true light, the only light dispelling the light of worldly folly; the radiance of His Father's glory who, according to Paul, was made our wisdom when He became the redemption and justification for us who have been reborn in Him . . . and following His example, we can overcome our enemy, wickedness, if only we are wise in Him, in whom we shall conquer. . . . For, as Paul says, in the eyes of God there is no more profound folly than worldly wisdom: it must be unlearned by one who wishes to be truly wise.⁵⁶

Erasmus worked for the rebirth of letters (*renascentes litterae*), and a restitution of Christianity (*restitutio Christianismi*).⁵⁷

⁵³ Lewis W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 207-208.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

⁵⁵ Raymond Himelick, trans., *The Enchiridion of Erasmus* (Bloomington, Ind., 1963), p. 59.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

⁵⁷ Spitz, pp. 203-204.

Christianity could be restored only by attention to its earliest literary sources. In the preface to his Greek New Testament he urged renewed attention to the commandments of the Founder of the Faith, to evangelical and apostolic sources.⁵⁸ The reform which he had in mind involved a critical use of the Scriptures, Church Fathers, and *bonae litterae*.⁵⁹ The term he gave to the resultant world-view was "philosophia Christi." Both Agricola and Abelard had used the term before him. It described an eclectic Christian philosophy of the kind advocated by Justin Martyr who in the 2d century A.D. wrote his two apologies and the *Dialogue with Trypho*.⁶⁰ Erasmus thought it much worse for a Christian to be ignorant of Christ's teaching than for Aristotelians to be ill-informed as to the true teachings of Aristotle. The Stoics, Epicureans, Socrates, and Aristotle taught truths which were later reiterated by Christ; but he taught them best, and perfectly practised what he preached. J. Huizinga concludes that Erasmus' classicism "only serves him as a form, and from antiquity he only chooses those elements which in ethical tendency are in conformity with his Christian ideal."⁶¹

The Means of Achieving Wisdom

It is not true, in Smith's estimation, that there was no mystical ingredient in the piety of Erasmus, that it was all ethical.⁶² The influence of the Brethren of the Common Life stayed with him and imparted a recognition of the role of the spirit. From the Florentine Platonic Academy Erasmus derived much of his respect for Greek philosophy and for the right of reason.⁶³ His religion became a life (as distinct from a creed) in which

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Johann Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (New York, 1924, 1957).

⁶² Smith, pp. 52-53.

⁶³ Ibid.

revelation and reason were linked in somewhat tenuous co-existence.⁶⁴

Although Erasmus sometimes divided man into the threefold division of body, soul, and spirit, usually he spoke of only the two components, body and spirit.⁶⁵ The two main powers of the spirit were understanding and will. He related faith to understanding and love to will. Faith was a "cognitive principle for spiritual truths."⁶⁶ Understanding and knowledge are essential to faith. Faith is not primarily an existential experience for Erasmus. This is why in the *Enchiridion* he offers knowledge as one of the two vital weapons for the Christian. The other is prayer.⁶⁷ The three sources of knowledge which he stressed are Scripture, the early-church Fathers, and the philosophers.

For Erasmus, the Scriptures were paramount as the source of truth.⁶⁸ His exegetical method called for the use of intellect and reason. It was the historical-grammatical method, which employs both literary and textual criticism. His work on the Greek text of the New Testament and the Greek and Latin Fathers earned him the reputation of being a founder of modern textual criticism. But he favored the allegorical method of interpretation by which hidden meanings are looked for beneath the superficial and the literal.⁶⁹

In respect to philosophy, Erasmus rejected Scholasticism out of hand. In his *Ratio verae theologiae*, he contrasts the theology of the scholastics with that of Origen, Basil, and Jerome.⁷⁰ The older theology he likens to a golden river, the scholastic to a small rivulet which has been polluted. On the other hand, pagan authors should be studied. The philosophy of the Greeks com-

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York, 1969), pp. 60-61.

⁶⁶ Spitz, pp. 231-232.

⁶⁷ Himelick, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁸ John C. Olin, ed., *Luther, Erasmus and the Reformation: a Catholic-Protestant Reappraisal* (New York, 1969), p. 102.

⁶⁹ Himelick, p. 53.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 213. (See Erasmus, *Opera Omnia*, 5:82.)

prised a kind of natural gospel.⁷¹ The classics were Erasmus' source for his conception of *humanitas* as virtue, morality, and integrity in the Roman sense.⁷² In fact, he was prepared to credit some of the classical writers with a measure of inspiration. In the colloquy, "The Godly Feast," Erasmus puts these words into the mouth of Eusebius:

On the contrary, whatever is devout and contributes to good morals should not be called profane. Of course, Sacred Scripture is the basic authority in everything; yet I sometimes run across ancient sayings or pagan writings—even the poets'—so purely and reverently expressed, and so inspired, that I can't help believing their authors' hearts were moved by some divine power. And perhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand, and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar. Speaking frankly among friends, I can't read Cicero's *De senectute*, *De amicitia*, *De officiis*, *De Tusculanis quaestionibus* without sometimes kissing the book and blessing that pure heart, divinely inspired as it was.⁷³

The real point seems to be, not that Erasmus attempted to separate faith and reason, as Rice would have us believe, but that he sought to draw reason into the realm of faith, in the sense that he used philosophy, not as a handmaiden of theology, but as a rational contributor to that instructed faith which he saw as vital to the good life.

Erasmus' Concept of the Will

In his *Discourse on Free Will* (1524), Erasmus defended two main theses: (1) that the doctrine of absolute necessity in all happenings is false, and (2) that the free will of man can accomplish something. Grace is essential, but man's will is free to choose the good and to co-operate with grace. In relation to the first point, Erasmus rejected the teachings of Colet and Luther on the question of predestination. Colet, as we have seen, identified or "coalesced" God's foreknowledge and predestination

⁷¹ Smith, p. 34.

⁷² Spitz, p. 211.

⁷³ Erasmus, *Ten Colloquies*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (New York, 1957), p. 155.

in the case of the saved. Both Colet and Luther, with some shade of difference, looked upon the will of the justified man as not being the cause of his justification; rather, God's arbitrary predetermination was the cause. Erasmus saw God's foreknowledge as compatible with human freedom of choice. "Foreknowledge," he said, "does not cause what is to take place. Even we know many things which will be happening. They will not happen because we know them, but vice versa."⁷⁴ Bainton brands this argument as specious:

There can be sure foreknowledge only of that which is definitely fixed. A man can, of course, foresee that which he has not foreordained, but if there is only one God, there is no other on whom to lay the responsibility for the predetermination. A single omnipotent and omniscient God can foreknow only what He has foreordained. Luther insisted on this squarely. And he was convinced that he understood the mind of Paul.⁷⁵

Perhaps Erasmus was more Pauline than Bainton suggests. In Rom 8:29, 30 predestination of those "to be conformed to the image of his Son" comes after foreknowledge, and the call comes after the predestination. In Rom 9, the crucial chapter over which Luther and Erasmus argued so bitterly, God is not spoken of as predetermining the faith of the spiritual seed of Abraham, but rather the fulfillment of the promise to those foreknown to have faith. It would seem highly possible that an omnipotent and omniscient God could foreordain that his human creatures should have freedom of choice. Of course, if they chose evil, God could be blamed for granting them such freedom. But since he exercised his omnipotence to the extent of refraining from coercion in either direction, man is responsible for the results of his own choice.

This was precisely Erasmus' point. After the Fall and before the gift of special grace, human reason, intellect, and will were

⁷⁴ Ernst F. Winter, trans. & ed., *Erasmus-Luther Discourse on Free Will* (New York, 1961), p. 49.

⁷⁵ Bainton, p. 190.

weak but not entirely extinct.⁷⁶ By free will before grace, Erasmus meant freedom to choose either good or evil.⁷⁷ Whether he credited man's will with the capacity to implement the choice before grace is a moot point. He claimed that "they had a will tending to moral good, but incapable of eternal salvation, unless grace be added through faith."⁷⁸ Again and again he asserted man's incapacity to perform good works apart from grace.⁷⁹ This rather tends to weaken respect for his favorite classical authors who were not Christians. Hence he adds:

The fact remains that there have been philosophers who possessed some knowledge of God, and hence perhaps also some trust and love of God, and did not act solely out of vainglory's sake, but rather out of love of virtue and goodness, which, they taught, was to be loved for no other reason but that it is good.⁸⁰

Erasmus told Thomas More that if it were not for Paul's authority to the contrary, he would have been inclined to believe that man by his natural powers could earn the lesser merit (*meritum de congruo*).

After the reception of grace, Erasmus thought, reason is restored and will is strengthened to cooperate.⁸¹ "Thus faith heals our reason which has suffered through sin, and charity helps our weakened will to act."⁸² By means of this "operative" grace man is capable of performing ethically good works which render him an eligible applicant for "ultimate" grace by which sin is finally and irrevocably eradicated.⁸³ The recipients of "operative" grace are, therefore, able to "trust in their own works."⁸⁴ Here is the semi-Pelagian element in Erasmus' theology.

⁷⁶ Winter, p. 22.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 22-23, 25-26, 29-30.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 22-24.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

⁸¹ Bainton, pp. 188-189.

⁸² Winter, p. 24.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

After reception of "operative" grace, man has now both the freedom of choice and a certain capacity to earn merit by the implementation of the choice. Colet substantially agreed. Luther vehemently disagreed, recognizing neither free choice nor an independent power of cooperation with grace. Significantly, Melancthon rejected predestination and took a position somewhere between Erasmus and Luther on the question of the will.⁸⁵ He agreed with Erasmus that before grace man has freedom to choose. The power to implement the choice is available only after grace, but the works are works of faith, not works of meritorious cooperation. On this latter point he agreed with Luther against Erasmus. Perhaps, in the final analysis, Melancthon can be regarded as more Pauline than Colet, Luther, or Erasmus.

It is strikingly evident that Erasmus did not regard the primary sources of wisdom as natural reason, the classical moralists, and the autonomous exercise of the will in the direction of ethical goodness—despite Rice's insistence to the contrary. Nor did Erasmus promise immortality to the follower of Ciceronian ethics. In fact, revelation and grace are very basic to the Erasmian system of thought. If Rice's definition of a humanist were correct, Erasmus would not qualify.

3. *Montaigne*

Montaigne as a Humanist

Philip P. Hallie furnishes us with a definition of a humanist which "fits Montaigne like a glove" but which, when applied to the other personalities discussed in this essay and my previous one, fits only where it touches.⁸⁶ The humanists were those scholars concerned with grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. The only "philosophy" of the humanists was

⁸⁵ Clyde Leonard Manschreck, *Melancthon the Quiet Reformer* (New York, 1958), pp. xiii, 60-63.

⁸⁶ Philip P. Hallie, *The Scar of Montaigne: an Essay in Personal Philosophy* (Middletown, 1966), pp. 9-10.

moral philosophy. Their special interest did not include logic, the natural sciences, metaphysics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, law, and theology. "A humanist is somebody more interested (via his interest in antiquity) in ways of using language and of living than he is in knowledge of the conclusions of such fields as physics, mathematics, or theology."⁸⁷ The humanists rejected the Scholastic quest for God. "They were not interested in what was external to man, nor were they interested in the externals of men."⁸⁸ They sought to understand "the ways men encounter various subjects, the ways they engage in their various occupations, the ways they live in their various stations."⁸⁹

Hallie offers Erasmus, along with Montaigne, as a prime example of his definition. He spares us Rice's emphasis on autonomous reason as the humanist means of achieving wisdom, presumably because this would not fit Montaigne. But his definition does not fit Cusa, Colet, or Erasmus. As we have seen, these three did not make any radical separation of the realm of faith from the realm of reason and will. There was a distinct theocentric element in the thought of Cusa, Colet, and Erasmus. "Philosophia Christi" does not fit comfortably into Hallie's definition.

On the other hand, the idea presented by Rice, that the humanists exalted man in relation to the cosmos, extolling the independent potential of his intellectual and voluntarist powers, does not apply to Montaigne. He deemphasized man's ascendancy in the universe, taking the Skeptic view that he is not the ruler over the rest of creation but is on "the same footing" as the animals.⁹⁰ As an orthodox Skeptic following the lead of Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne valued life according to nature.⁹¹ By "nature" he did not mean the laws of nature discovered by

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 49.

human reason alone. He meant "the passions . . . whereby hunger drives us to food and thirst to drink."⁹² In other words, "nature" has reference to the drives which are characteristically experienced by both men and animals.

Moreover, what sort of faculty of ours do we not recognize in the actions of the animals? Is there a society regulated with more order, diversified into more charges and functions, and more consistently maintained, than that of the honeybees? Can we imagine so orderly an arrangement of actions and occupations as this to be conducted without reason and foresight?"⁹³

This is a salient motif in the "Apology of Raymond Sebond." If Colet demoted human reason by subordinating it to grace, Montaigne devalued it by asserting its inability to arrive at any certain truth whether in the philosophical or the natural realm. Rice's contention that for the humanist "the insights of wisdom are natural products of the human reason,"⁹⁴ excludes Montaigne from the humanist fraternity. On the other hand, the definition of a humanist provided in this essay—as one who acknowledges some place for human intellect and reason in the study of human behavior and its causes—allows for the inclusion of Montaigne. Obviously, his reason was not dormant in the recognition of the endless variety of beliefs, customs, and standards in the world and the acceptance of the provinciality of his own mores. His point was that "we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in."⁹⁵ Reason does have some place in his system, but not for the discovery of unequivocal truths, not as the source of wisdom.

Montaigne's Skepticism

Skepticism was a large ingredient in Montaigne's personal philosophy. He maintained that Skepticism rescues the mind

⁹² Ibid., p. 32.

⁹³ Donald M. Frame, trans., *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford, Cal., 1958), p. 332.

⁹⁴ Rice, "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," p. 146.

⁹⁵ Hallie, p. 19.

from the sea of doubt and anxiety associated with the search for philosophical certitude.⁹⁶ As a Skeptic he rejected metaphysical laws as well as any concept of natural law underlying the positive laws of a nation.⁹⁷ The laws, customs and beliefs of any society he regarded as local and relative.⁹⁸ His motive for accepting the mores of his own society was expediential, not metaphysical or moral.⁹⁹ His concern was his own "health," which he defined as the psychological peace resulting from orientation to the accepted order of society, with minimal concern for any specialized knowledge of man and the cosmos.¹⁰⁰ But "health" was more than that. It involved toleration of other people's ideas and ways of doing things. "In fact, for him, health and the recognition of variety in the world are much the same thing."¹⁰¹ This life in accordance with health is life in conformity to the "Practical Criterion."¹⁰² Montaigne is categorized as a moderate Catholic and a "Politique" because his acceptance of the Practical Criterion rendered him tolerant of any religious or political world-view.¹⁰³ In this regard his philosophy was to "live and let live."

As a Skeptic, Montaigne rejected "Indicative Signs," defined as dialectical proofs of the Absolute, but also as hidden "substances" or "laws" or "essences."¹⁰⁴ "Recollective Signs," which refer to experience that relates to other parts of experience, he accepted as valid. He held that "no one claim about facts beyond experience is in the end more certain (or uncertain) than any other."¹⁰⁵ Indicative Signs (antitheses) could be very numerous.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Montaigne tolerated them all, but he dignified none of them as truth.¹⁰⁶

Montaigne's philosophy implies the relativity of all scientific knowledge. He spoke of the very real possibility of Copernicus being replaced by some other astronomer who would upset his theories. Since there are no eternal guarantees of truth, fashions of thought will come and go.¹⁰⁷ "In short, the truth of our impressions is relative to ourselves; there may be as many different kinds of truths as there are different kinds of animals. As for the independent, essential nature of objects 'behind' those impressions these conflicting impressions and effects lead us to suspend judgment."¹⁰⁸

Acceptance of religious, political and cultural custom was not a contradiction of Montaigne's subjective philosophy, but was rather a part of it. He did not put religion into one compartment of his existence and the Skeptic's life according to nature into another compartment. Religious conformity and tolerance for the sake of peace and "health" was adjustment to the real situation of life. It was not based on the conviction of the truth of religious propositions but on the practical expedient of "hunting with the pack." It was dictated by the Practical Criterion.

Since, as a Skeptic, Montaigne identified no universal truths which are valid for all men, his humanism was not likely to become the kind of educative program envisioned by Erasmus and Melancthon. His philosophy amounts to this: Do your own thing within the context of the demands of your own society.

. . . Montaigne usually spoke not in terms of "us" but in terms of *me*, this particular man, with this particular name—a particular man whose particular yearnings and insights and impulses overflowed the categories or methods of any school.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

The Apology of Raymond Sebond

The essay, the "Apology of Raymond Sebond," effectively illustrates Montaigne's understanding of the intellect-will problem. The essay was written between 1575 and 1580 as a defence of Sebond's natural theology. It is a Skeptical essay written to defend an orthodox Catholic theologian.¹¹⁰ Montaigne attempts to disarm both Sebond and his opponents so as to demonstrate the weakness of human reason.

One objection to Sebond's dialectical arguments, which Montaigne regards as somewhat mild, is that matters of faith are separate from matters of reason and, therefore, Sebond's dialectical enterprise was fruitless.¹¹¹ Montaigne has two answers. First, although reason provides no ontological proof, it has considerable psychological value for the believer. It proves nothing, but bolsters the attitude of faith.¹¹² Second, faith cannot be separated from things human. It is always conditioned by the subject who adheres to it. Grace is never undefiled by the human recipient.¹¹³ Otherwise, everyone would believe the same way and there would be no variety. At first sight, this seems inconsistent with Montaigne's ultimate appeal to revelation and grace.

For to make the handful bigger than the hand, the armful bigger than the arm, and to hope to straddle more than the reach of our legs, is impossible and unnatural. Nor can man raise himself above himself and humanity; for he can see only with his own eyes, and seize only with his own grasp. He will rise, if God by exception lends him a hand; he will rise by abandoning and renouncing his own means, and letting himself be raised and uplifted by purely celestial means. It is for our Christian faith, not for his Stoical virtue, to aspire to that divine and miraculous metamorphosis.¹¹⁴

What is the use of revelation and grace if there is no universally valid perception of it? Why does Montaigne talk about the divine

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Frame*, p. 457.

at all if the apprehension of it is so individualized and fragmented? He speaks elsewhere of the Fideist's simple faith in God as one of the sources of stability and peace. But in Montaigne's view this is a highly subjective experience which is culturally, psychologically, and biologically determined. Revelation in any ultimate sense is rejected. Because it is received by a particular subject, it is distorted by subjective experience. Therefore revelation, like reason, is unable to result in any certain and unvarying truth.

"He will not try to distinguish the ray of divinity from the human being who 'lodges' it in his mind; he will simply look at the whole man."¹¹⁵ Since each and every individual experience is valid, we should be tolerant to all. This is different from Nicholas of Cusa's universalism because it is based on a slightly different premise. Nicholas says that there is some of the same ultimate truth in all men. Therefore a universal religion should be possible. Montaigne says that the divine ray is diffused differently in each man. Therefore religious unity is unrealistic. Tolerance is the watch-word.

Montaigne prized complete, untrammelled freedom of the will. His thought on this question was in no way determined by metaphysical or theological considerations. Freedom, however, was not of the antinomian variety. It involved easy-going conformity to customary law and the pressures of habit and tradition.¹¹⁶ Although his public life made demands upon him contrary to the dictates of his free will and conscience, he attempted to fulfill his obligations to society while maintaining an unswerving loyalty to his unique authentic selfhood.¹¹⁷

4. *Summary and Conclusion*

The new approach to matters divine led the Northern humanists discussed in this and my previous essay to new conclusions

¹¹⁵ Hallie, p. 43.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

about man and his ethical capacities and responsibilities. Nicholas of Cusa asserted that natural reason cannot find out God. Intellect is "detained in ignorance" apart from grace, and will is impotent apart from Christ. But both intellect and will are activated and empowered by a mystical union with the Divine. This was no radical separation of faith and reason but a redefinition of the relationship between faith-grace and intellect-will. That Cusa respected the use of natural reason in the natural realm is demonstrated by his interest in mathematics, astronomy, and history.

John Colet made a distinction between intellect, which after reception of grace apprehends God, and that reasonable capacity by which man studies the phenomenal world. It is will in the realm of the spiritual, not will in the amoral affairs of daily life, which to Colet is in bondage apart from grace. As a voluntarist he saw regenerated will as effective in the area of morals and ethics. His system is, therefore, somewhat similar to that of Cusa. Erasmus gave a larger place to human intellect and will than did Colet and Cusa, but sought to draw reason into the area of faith by making it, along with revelation, a means to the ethically good life. Montaigne repudiated both reason and revelation as sources of unvarying truth in either the spiritual or the natural realms. Reason has psychological and homiletical value, and human will is entirely free.

Therefore none of the four writers studied fits into Rice's definition of a humanist as one who sought by means of autonomous human intellect and will the natural human virtue which Cicero valued so highly. The tentative, alternative definition suggested here is that a Renaissance humanist was one who acknowledged some place for human intellect and reason in the study of human behavior and its causes, and sometimes also in the critical study of Christian sources (Scripture, the Fathers, philosophy), but not in the dialectical investigation of first causes and the nature of absolute truth.