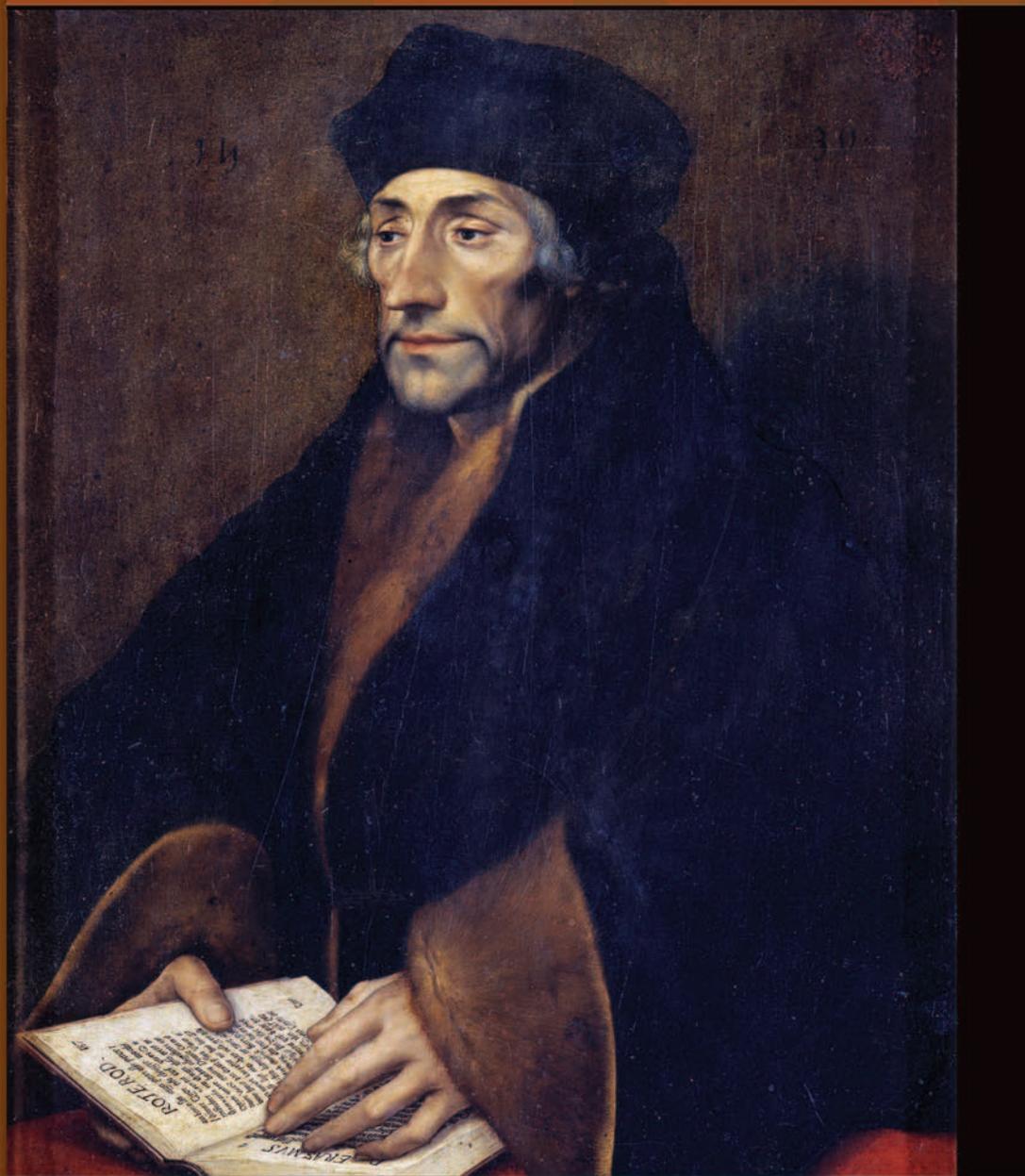


SPIRITUAL LEADERS AND THINKERS

# DESIDERIUS ERASMUS



SERIES INTRODUCTION BY  
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**SAMUEL WILLARD CROMPTON**

**SPIRITUAL  
LEADERS AND  
THINKERS**

**DESIDERIUS  
ERASMUS**

# **SPIRITUAL LEADERS AND THINKERS**

**JOHN CALVIN**

**DALAI LAMA (TENZIN GYATSO)**

**MARY BAKER EDDY**

**JONATHAN EDWARDS**

**DESIDERIUS ERASMUS**

**MOHANDAS GANDHI**

**AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI**

**MARTIN LUTHER**

**AIMEE SEMPLE McPHERSON**

**THOMAS MERTON**

**SRI SATYA SAI BABA**

**ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA**

**EMANUEL SWEDENBORG**

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# **DESIDERIUS ERASMUS**

**Samuel Willard Crompton**

Introductory Essay by  
**Martin E. Marty, Professor Emeritus**  
University of Chicago Divinity School

 **CHELSEA HOUSE**  
P U B L I S H E R S  
A Haight's Cross Communications Company  
Philadelphia

COVER: Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus by Hans Holbein the younger  
(1497–1543).

## CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS

VP, NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT Sally Cheney  
DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION Kim Shinnars  
CREATIVE MANAGER Takeshi Takahashi  
MANUFACTURING MANAGER Diann Grasse

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SERIES AND COVER DESIGNER Keith Trego  
LAYOUT 21st Century Publishing and Communications, Inc.

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A Houghton Mifflin Company 

[www.chelseahouse.com](http://www.chelseahouse.com)

First Printing

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Crompton, Samuel Willard.

Desiderius Erasmus / Samuel Willard Crompton.

p. cm.—(Spiritual leaders and thinkers)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7910-8101-X

1. Erasmus, Desiderius, d. 1536. 2. Reformation—Biography. I. Title. II. Series.

BR350.E7C75 2004

282'.092—dc22

2004011113

All links and web addresses were checked and verified at the time of publication.  
Due to the dynamic nature of the web, some addresses and links may have  
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# Foreword

**W**hy become acquainted with notable people when making efforts to understand the religions of the world?

Most of the faith communities number hundreds of millions of people. What can attention paid to one tell about more, if not most, to say nothing of *all*, their adherents? Here is why:

The people in this series are exemplars. If you permit me to take a little detour through medieval dictionaries, their role will become clear.

In medieval lexicons, the word *exemplum* regularly showed up with a peculiar definition. No one needs to know Latin to see that it relates to “example” and “exemplary.” But back then, *exemplum* could mean something very special.

That “ex-” at the beginning of such words signals “taking out” or “cutting out” something or other. Think of to “excise” something, which is to snip it out. So, in the more interesting dictionaries, an *exemplum* was referred to as “a clearing in the woods,” something cut out of the forests.

These religious figures are *exempla*, figurative clearings in the woods of life. These clearings and these people perform three functions:

First, they define. You can be lost in the darkness, walking under the leafy canopy, above the undergrowth, plotless in the pathless forest. Then you come to a clearing. It defines with a sharp line: there, the woods end; here, the open space begins.

Great religious figures are often stumblers in the dark woods.

We see them emerging in the bright light of the clearing, blinking, admitting that they had often been lost in the mysteries of existence, tangled up with the questions that plague us all, wandering without definition. Then they discover the clearing, and, having done so, they point our way to it. We then learn more of who we are and where we are. Then we can set our own direction.

Second, the *exemplum*, the clearing in the woods of life, makes possible a brighter vision. Great religious pioneers in every case experience illumination and then they reflect their light into the hearts and minds of others. In Buddhism, a key word is *enlightenment*. In the Bible, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” They see it because their prophets or savior brought them to the sun in the clearing.

Finally, when you picture a clearing in the woods, an *exemplum*, you are likely to see it as a place of cultivation. Whether in the Black Forest of Germany, on the American frontier, or in the rain forests of Brazil, the clearing is the place where, with light and civilization, residents can cultivate, can produce culture. As an American moviegoer, my mind’s eye remembers cinematic scenes of frontier days and places that pioneers hacked out of the woods. There, they removed stones, planted, built a cabin, made love and produced families, smoked their meat, hung out laundered clothes, and read books. All that can happen in clearings.

In the case of these religious figures, planting and cultivating and harvesting are tasks in which they set an example and then inspire or ask us to follow. Most of us would not have the faintest idea how to find or be found by God, to nurture the Holy Spirit, to create a philosophy of life without guidance. It is not likely that most of us would be satisfied with our search if we only consulted books of dogma or philosophy, though such may come to have their place in the clearing.

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard properly pointed out that you cannot learn to swim by being suspended from the ceiling on a belt and reading a “How To” book on swimming. You learn because a parent or an instructor plunges you into water, supports

you when necessary, teaches you breathing and motion, and then releases you to swim on your own.

Kierkegaard was not criticizing the use of books. I certainly have nothing against books. If I did, I would not be commending this series to you, as I am doing here. For guidance and courage in the spiritual quest, or—and this is by no means unimportant!—in intellectual pursuits, involving efforts to understand the paths others have taken, there seems to be no better way than to follow a fellow mortal, but a man or woman of genius, depth, and daring. We “see” them through books like these.

Exemplars come in very different styles and forms. They bring differing kinds of illumination, and then suggest or describe diverse patterns of action to those who join them. In the case of the present series, it is possible for someone to repudiate or disagree with *all* the religious leaders in this series. It is possible also to be nonreligious and antireligious and therefore to disregard the truth claims of all of them. It is more difficult, however, to ignore them. Atheists, agnostics, adherents, believers, and fanatics alike live in cultures that are different for the presence of these people. “Leaders and thinkers” they may be, but most of us do best to appraise their thought in the context of the lives they lead or have led.

If it is possible to reject them all, it is impossible to affirm everything that all of them were about. They disagree with each other, often in basic ways. Sometimes they develop their positions and ways of thinking by separating themselves from all the others. If they met each other, they would likely judge each other cruelly. Yet the lives of each and all of them make a contribution to the intellectual and spiritual quests of those who go in ways other than theirs. There are tens of thousands of religions in the world, and millions of faith communities. Every one of them has been shaped by founders and interpreters, agents of change and prophets of doom or promise. It may seem arbitrary to walk down a bookshelf and let a finger fall on one or another, almost accidentally. This series may certainly look arbitrary in this way. Why precisely the choice of these exemplars?

In some cases, it is clear that the publishers have chosen someone who has a constituency. Many of the world's 54 million Lutherans may be curious about where they got their name, who the man Martin Luther was. Others are members of a community but choose isolation: The hermit monk Thomas Merton is typical. Still others are exiled and achieve their work far from the clearing in which they grew up; here the Dalai Lama is representative. Quite a number of the selected leaders had been made unwelcome, or felt unwelcome in the clearings, in their own childhoods and youth. This reality has almost always been the case with women like Mary Baker Eddy or Aimee Semple McPherson. Some are extremely controversial: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stands out. Yet to read of this life and thought as one can in this series will be illuminating in much of the world of conflict today.

Reading of religious leaders can be a defensive act: Study the lives of certain ones among them and you can ward off spiritual—and sometimes even militant—assaults by people who follow them. Reading and learning can be a personally positive act: Most of these figures led lives that we can indeed call exemplary. Such lives can throw light on communities of people who are in no way tempted to follow them. I am not likely to be drawn to the hermit life, will not give up my allegiance to medical doctors, or be successfully nonviolent. Yet Thomas Merton reaches me and many non-Catholics in our communities; Mary Baker Eddy reminds others that there are more ways than one to approach healing; Mohandas Gandhi stings the conscience of people in cultures like ours where resorting to violence is too frequent, too easy.

Finally, reading these lives tells something about how history is made by imperfect beings. None of these subjects is a god, though some of them claimed that they had special access to the divine, or that they were like windows that provided for illumination to that which is eternal. Most of their stories began with inauspicious childhoods. Sometimes they were victimized, by parents or by leaders of religions from which they later broke.

Some of them were unpleasant and abrasive. They could be ungracious toward those who were near them and impatient with laggards. If their lives were symbolic clearings, places for light, many of them also knew clouds and shadows and the fall of night. How they met the challenges of life and led others to face them is central to the plot of all of them.

I have often used a rather unexciting concept to describe what I look for in books: *interestingness*. The authors of these books, one might say, had it easy, because the characters they treat are themselves so interesting. But the authors also had to be interesting and responsible. If, as they wrote, they would have dulled the personalities of their bright characters, that would have been a flaw as marring as if they had treated their subjects without combining fairness and criticism, affection and distance. To my eye, and I hope in yours, they take us to spiritual and intellectual clearings that are so needed in our dark times.

Martin E. Marty  
The University of Chicago



# 1

## Summons from England

*“ . . . ‘What we do expect is that you should foster and encourage those who are scholars.’ ‘Of course,’ [King Henry VIII] replied, ‘for without them we could scarcely exist.’ What better remark could be made by any king?”*

—William Blount,  
Lord Mountjoy of England,  
in a letter to Erasmus

**D**esiderius Erasmus was in Rome in the spring of 1509. The consummate scholar and man of letters had been in Italy for the last three years, translating, editing, and spending time in Venice with his printer, the esteemed Aldus Manutius. Sometime in the summer of 1509, Erasmus received a letter from William Blount, Lord Mountjoy of England. Blount, who had been a friend and patron to Erasmus in the past, gave Erasmus the exciting news that King Henry VII had passed away and had been succeeded by his son, 18-year-old King Henry VIII. Blount was enthusiastic:

I am quite sure, my dear Erasmus, that, the moment you heard that our sovereign lord, Henry the Eighth, had succeeded to the throne on his father's death, every particle of gloom left your heart. For you are bound to repose the highest of hopes in a prince whose exceptional and almost more than human talents you know so well, particularly since you are not merely his acquaintance but his friend.<sup>1</sup>

Erasmus, who was Dutch by birth, had stayed in England between 1499 and 1500. During that time, he had made the acquaintance of Henry VIII, then Prince Henry, and the two had developed a long-distance friendship based on their mutual love of Latin scholarship. The young Henry was a far cry from the bloated tyrant he later became as king. In his youth, Henry Tudor was handsome, scholarly, and well liked. William Blount went on to describe how the old king's death and the new king's accession had brought joy to England:

Oh, Erasmus, if you could only see how happily excited everyone is here, and how all are congratulating themselves on their prince's greatness, and how they pray above all for his long life, you would be bound to weep for joy! Heaven smiles, earth rejoices; all is milk and honey and nectar. Tight-fistedness is well and truly banished. Generosity scatters wealth with unstinting hand.<sup>2</sup>

The expression "tight-fistedness" was a glancing reference to the deceased King Henry VII. He had been known for unremitting

thriftiness, to the point of being a miser. Now, his son appeared ready to open the coffers to men of merit, like Erasmus:

Our King's heart is set not upon gold or jewels or mines of ore, but upon virtue, reputation, and eternal renown. Here is a mere sample: a few days ago, when he said that he longed to be a more accomplished scholar, I remarked, "We do not expect this of you; what we do expect is that you should foster and encourage those who are scholars." "Of course," he replied, "for without them we could scarcely exist." What better remark could be made by any king?<sup>3</sup>

Blount's letter set Erasmus thinking. He had been in Italy for three years, and he had accomplished much good work. He had published a new version of his famous *Adages* and was well along in his study of Greek. Unfortunately, he had failed to find a good and lasting patron, someone who could remove from him the burden of earning his daily bread. Lack of money had been a constant theme in Erasmus's life up to this point. Perhaps William Blount was suggesting that King Henry VIII would now become the long-sought-after patron. Indeed, William Blount closed his letter with an earnest request for Erasmus to come to England:

I am distressed to hear that you have fallen sick in Italy. You know that I never pressed you to go to Italy, but now that I observe the literary experience and personal reputation you have acquired there I am very sorry not to have accompanied you; for my belief is that such a high degree of scholarship is worth the price of hunger, poverty, and illness, even death itself. Enclosed with this letter you will find a bill of exchange for the money. So look after your health and come back to us as soon as you can. Yours with all his being, William Mountjoy.<sup>4</sup>

Erasmus may well have grimaced as he read these words. What did Lord Mountjoy or any other English lord know about hunger or poverty? They had never been forced to beg for their pay as Erasmus had. The more he thought about it, the more Erasmus was convinced that it was time to leave Italy. He had

gone there seeking the humanistic scholarship of the day and the manuscripts that provided access to the great learning of early Christian times. He had found both and had done his best to profit from them. Now it was time to return to northern Europe.

Erasmus, however, had a bitter memory of England. During his year in the island kingdom, Erasmus had earned what came to about 20 pounds sterling, a large amount for such an impoverished scholar and a sum he planned to take with him to Paris. Neither William Blount nor anyone else had warned Erasmus that the miserly King Henry VII had created a new law, one that forbade the departure of currency from England. The customs inspectors at Dover had taken away about 18 of Erasmus's 20 pounds, and the bitterness from this loss still lingered. Perhaps this was why William Blount had so fervently described the new king as a man with open pockets (to learn more about this monarch, enter the keywords "King Henry VII England" into any Internet search engine and browse the listed sites).

Now, a year later, Erasmus made his way north across the Italian Alps. He rode on horseback with two or three companions. As he left Italy, Erasmus began to write, on horseback, the first words of what would become his most famous book, *The Praise of Folly*. Perhaps he knew that his decision to leave Italy and go to England was folly. Or perhaps he knew that the best efforts of human beings often go astray. In any case, he penned the opening words to what became one of the first best-selling books of modern times (it remains in print to this very day):

At what rate so ever the world talks of me (for I am not ignorant what an ill report Folly has got, even among the most foolish), yet that I am that she, that only she, whose deity recreates both gods and men, even this is a sufficient argument, that I no sooner stepped up to speak to this full assembly than all your faces put on a kind of new and unwonted pleasantness.<sup>5</sup>

Erasmus had launched upon the greatest literary venture of his career. His name would remain permanently entwined with the Goddess of Folly.

# 2

## Erasmus, His Brother, and the Brethren

*“ . . . there is nothing on earth more pleasant or sweeter than loving and being loved, so there is, in my opinion, nothing more distressing or miserable than living without being loved in return . . . ”*

—Erasmus, in a letter to his friend Servatius

**M**uch controversy surrounds the early years of Desiderius Erasmus. The controversy exists because Erasmus spent much of his adult life trying to escape from his humble and painful origins. He never wanted to be reminded that he, the son of a priest, was born out of wedlock.

The facts of Erasmus's early years are hazy at best. Erasmus often cited the year 1466 when asked about the year of his birth, but some evidence points instead to the year 1469. The place of his birth is also a matter of dispute. Erasmus later called himself "Erasmus of Rotterdam," but evidence suggests that he was actually born in nearby Gouda. In either case, we can safely assume that Erasmus was born in the late 1460s, somewhere near the heart of old Holland.

Today, we often use the word "Holland" to describe what is properly titled the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This is because many people are familiar with Holland as a place of wooden shoes, comfortable and snug houses, and dykes and dams used to hold back the sea. All these stereotypes have some basis in fact, and Holland has provided much of the character that later became the center of Dutch, or Netherlandish, culture.

One stereotype that has come down to us is of the Dutch being sturdy, self-reliant people. They bravely reclaimed their land from the sea, and they built dykes and dams that became the wonder of the engineering world. It would be pleasant to think that Erasmus venerated his Dutch upbringing, but he did not. Later in life, he poured scorn on the country of his youth, describing its people as boorish and lacking in literary culture. If this seems like serious ingratitude, one has to remember that Erasmus spent the most lonely and poverty-stricken years of his life in Holland.

#### **FAMILY HISTORY**

His father was a priest named Gerhard (his surname is not known). Almost nothing is known about him except that he was man of some learning who treasured his Latin books above all else. The priest must have passed this trait on to his son, for Erasmus always cherished books above all his other possessions.

Erasmus's mother was named Margaret (again, there is no surname recorded). She took care of Erasmus and his older brother, Peter, until Erasmus was about 13. Then she died of the plague, leaving the two boys to their own fate. Their father had apparently disappeared. Erasmus almost never mentioned his mother, either in his letters or otherwise. Perhaps the memory was too painful for him to summon up; perhaps he felt she had been a disappointment as a mother. Whatever the story, we know even less about Margaret than we do about Gerhard. The question that has sparked more interest is how a Roman Catholic priest could have fathered a child.

The situation was more common than people in the modern world might think. By about 1450, Europe had become more secular and less religious than it had been 100 years earlier. Many people expressed dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church, which had been rocked by scandals surrounding worldly popes and councils. More than a few churchmen, even pious ones, took concubines or wives.

Whether he was born in 1466 or 1469, Erasmus entered the world in one of the less prestigious regions of Europe. Holland had been governed by its counts for generations, but the counts owed allegiance either to France or to the Holy Roman Empire, which corresponded roughly to modern Germany. Holland was therefore a province, and it sometimes changed hands when different dynasties intermarried. The Dutch were an independent people in spirit, but in practical fact, they were subjects of the count who was, in turn, a subject of the king or emperor.

### **THE BRETHERN OF THE COMMON LIFE**

Erasmus and his brother Peter became public wards after their mother's death. The two were given into the care of a religious group called the Brethren of the Common Life. Founded in Holland about 100 years earlier, the Brethren differed from other monastic orders in that its members did not take solemn vows—they could always choose to leave the Brethren. In other ways, however, the Brethren followed the same strict code that most

monastic orders observed. Members swore to chastity, poverty, and obedience. Neither Erasmus nor his brother was pleased to be part of this ascetic brotherhood that chose to deny the world.

One of the earliest of Erasmus's letters that has been preserved was sent to his older brother. Even though they lived close to each other, the brothers wrote far more often than people do today; this was their primary method of communication. In the letter, Erasmus accused his brother of neglecting him:

Have you so completely rid yourself of all brotherly feeling, or has all thought of your Erasmus wholly fled your heart? I write letters and send them repeatedly, I demand news again and again. I keep asking your friends when they come from your direction, but they never have a hint of a letter or any message; they merely say that you are well. Of course this is the most welcome news I could hear but you are now more dutiful thereby. As I perceive how obstinate you are, I believe it would be easier to get blood from a stone than coax a letter out of you.<sup>6</sup>

While he implored his brother to communicate more frequently and more fully, he also emphasized how much his brother meant to him:

If you desire to know what I am about, I love you intensely, as you deserve; your name is on my lips and in my heart; I think of you and speak of you often with my friends, but none more often more intimately, or pleasantly than with Servatius, our fellow-countryman.<sup>7</sup>

There is no record of an answer. We hear almost nothing of Erasmus's brother after this, and can only wonder whether there was some reason for their separation. Was there some great wound or hardness between them? Historians do not know.

By 1487, when Erasmus wrote this letter, his familial relations had all but disappeared. His mother was dead, his father's fate was unknown, and his brother had turned away from him. When later in life Erasmus seemed suspicious of human nature