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A Model for Christendom? Erasmus, Poland, and the Reformation

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This article examines the close ties that developed between Desiderius Erasmus and the Polish kingdom and the implication of these relationships on our understanding of the religious landscape of late medieval and early modern Europe. Few regions embraced Erasmus as enthusiastically as Poland, and nowhere else did he have such a concentration of allies positioned at the highest levels of society including the king himself. More than any other figure from western Europe, Erasmus helped shape the intellectual and religious agenda of the Polish kingdom during this period. A close analysis of this relationship expands our understanding of Reformation Europe in a number of critical ways. It brings Poland, normally viewed peripherally in this period, into key debates and discussions of the Reformation. Erasmus's relationship with Poland also speaks to wider issues and processes of change in the Christian world. As confessional distinctions were becoming more pronounced in the 1520s and 1530s and hope for ecclesial reunion receded, Erasmus looked to Poland as a model for Christendom. He held up the kingdom as an example of how difference could be accommodated and compromise could be reached through wise leadership in church and state.

While the newspaper editor Horace Greeley encouraged nineteenth-century Americans to go west, contemporary scholars who study the religious history of late medieval and early modern Europe have much to gain by turning to the east. Looking east to the lands beyond the Elbe has expanded our view of the religious landscape in a number of critical ways. This was the most pluralistic region of the continent. Here confessional dialogue was more than a conversation between Catholic and Protestant. It was a far broader discussion including groups such as the Utraquists, Uniates, Unitarians and the *Unitas Fratrum*.[1] Looking east also challenges our understanding of chronology. The model of decline and crisis often used to characterize the European church before Luther does not work

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[1]For an overview see Howard Louthan, "Multiconfessionalism in Central Europe," in *Multiconfessionalism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Thomas Max Safley (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 369–392.

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as well here. Bohemia experienced its own reform in the early fifteenth century. Lithuania did not officially embrace Christianity until the late fourteenth century, and there is debate concerning the full extent of Christianization in medieval Poland.[2] Poland is a particularly intriguing case study, for the fortunes of its church in the first half of the sixteenth century defy conventional categorization and offer a number of fascinating insights on the Reformation more generally.

The study of Reformation Poland in the Anglophone world is problematic. The last survey in English appeared nearly a century ago, and while scholars have paid some attention to the kingdom's fascinating anti-Trinitarian communities in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, historians have largely neglected developments of the earlier period.[3] In Poland the Reformation was not an "urban event," at least not in the same way that it was to the west. Though Prussian towns in particular showed an early interest in Luther, they did not become the dynamic center of a reform movement that swept through the kingdom. Even less was the Reformation a popular phenomenon. The peasants generally remained unaffected. There were no great revolts inspired by wandering radicals proclaiming a gospel of social equality on a scale akin to Germany.[4] Instead, reform began as a discussion among elites. It remained a vibrant and contentious debate many decades before it evolved into an actual movement with recognizable confessional communities vying with one another. One individual in particular assumed special importance in these early debates. Though he never accepted the invitation to settle in Cracow, Desiderius Erasmus was in some respects the very face of Polish reform in the 1520s and early 1530s. Erasmus's relationship with Poland is important for a number of reasons. More than any other figure from the west, Erasmus helped shape the intellectual and religious agenda of Polish society in this period. This

[2]Jerzy Kłoczowski, *Młodsza Europa: Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w kręgu cywilizacji chrześcijańskiej średniowiecza* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1988). Representative on crisis and decline is Winfried Eberhard and Ferdinand Seibt, eds., *Europa 1400: Die Krise des Spätmittelalters* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984). In recent years this model has been challenged in the west as well. See for example John van Engen, "Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church," *Church History* 77 (2008): 257–284.

[3]Paul Foxe, *The Reformation in Poland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1924). For Poland's radicals one can begin with G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd edition (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2000). Though there is considerable variation in how one defines Poland in this period, for this article we will be focusing primarily on the royal capital Cracow in Lesser Poland (Małopolska).

[4]Geographically, the exceptions to these generalizations tend to be found in the Baltic region. Danzig's reformation moment was most typically urban, and there was peasant unrest in ducal Prussia. Henryk Zins, "Aspects of the Peasant Rising in East Prussia in 1525," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 38 (1959): 178–187; Janusz Tazbir, "Ze studiów nad stosunkiem polskich protestantów do chłopów w XVI wieku," *Reformacja w Polsce* 12 (1956): 32–61.

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relationship also sheds a fascinating light on Erasmus's late career. At a time when attacks were mounting on his work and reputation elsewhere, his standing and influence remained high in Poland. Finally, the humanist's interaction with his Polish friends highlights the importance of the kingdom in a wider Reformation context. The discussions he prompted mattered as they addressed fundamental questions and issues facing Christendom in a critical period of transition.

I. Erasmus and Polish Elites

When, in September 1524, Erasmus wrote England's Archbishop Warham, "*Polonia mea est*," he was making no idle boast, for by this date a veritable cult of Erasmus had emerged among the kingdom's elites.[5] It grew and matured off mutual flattery. In his first surviving letter to a Polish correspondent, the royal secretary Justus Decius, Erasmus described the kingdom as one "flourishing in literature, law, customs and religion."[6] Several years later he wrote Cracow's wealthy banker Seweryn Boner praising Poland as the land of philosopher kings.[7] Fascinated by political developments in the east, Erasmus followed the deft maneuverings of King Sigismund I who on the great chessboard of central Europe shrewdly positioned his kingdom to counter the feints and challenges posed by the Teutonic Knights, Muscovites, Ottomans and Habsburgs. He wrote two letters to the prince extolling him as a wise statesman committed to peace among Christian nations.[8] Over his career Erasmus dedicated many of his treatises to his Polish friends and patrons. The Poles for their part responded in kind. Cracow's industrious printers busily produced new editions of his works, and while Erasmus politely refused the invitation to visit Poland, this did not hinder Poles from coming to Basel and Freiburg, a practice that in some student circles almost became a rite of passage. One enthusiastic visitor actually purchased the humanist's library under the condition it would stay with the Erasmus until his death.[9] Then there were the letters filled with flattering terms of endearment. Nearly one hundred have survived between Erasmus and his Polish friends. Poles addressed him as "dearest Erasmus,"

[5]P. S. Allen, ed., *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), vol. 5, letter 1488, 534–536; for a useful overview see G. H. Williams, "Erasmianism in Poland," *Polish Review* 22 (1977): 3–50.

[6]Allen, vol. 5, letter 1393, 343–345.

[7]Allen, vol. 9, letter 2533, 336–340.

[8]Allen, vol. 7, letter 1819, 59–65; letter 2034, 456–458.

[9]Konstanty Zantuan, "Erasmus and the Cracow Humanists. The Purchase of his Library by Laski," *The Polish Review* 10 (1965): 3–36.

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"best of friends" or even "my father."[10] There were physical tokens of affection as well. Pictures of Erasmus appeared in the homes of the kingdom's leading citizens. Poland's great Renaissance diplomat, Jan Dantiscus, hung a Holbein portrait of Erasmus in his episcopal palace while the Dutchman embellished his study with a bust of Dantiscus.[11] Cracow's bishop, Andrzej Zebrzydowski, had his sarcophagus in the city's Wawel cathedral inscribed with the motto, "Disciple and student of that great Erasmus."

What does all this mean? Polish scholars in particular have produced a substantial body of literature analyzing the close relationship that existed between Erasmus and Poland. They have often enlisted him as part of a triumphal nationalist narrative that contrasts what they perceive as the more tolerant culture of the kingdom with that of its neighbors.[12] It is difficult, however, to make broad generalizations concerning Erasmus's reception in Poland. In some circles, interest in Erasmus clearly was an intellectual fashion statement, a way to highlight one's social position and connections with the west. For others Erasmus articulated a bold and comprehensive reform program for church and state that should be emulated in Poland. Still others in more limited fashion saw him as a means to combat Lutheranism or address the failings of the kingdom's schools and university. Despite these different responses, Erasmus was clearly an influential figure. Elite society in sixteenth-century Poland, those with whom Erasmus interacted, comprised a relatively narrow class. For this investigation our primary focus will be Cracow, home to the royal court, the university, a critical episcopal office and a thriving mercantile community.[13] There was significant overlap between these groups. For example one of Erasmus's closest allies, Piotr Tomicki, was bishop of Cracow, chancellor of the university and vice-chancellor of the kingdom. Regardless, a consideration of Erasmus's impact in Poland may best begin with the university, for this institution was both the hub of the kingdom's humanist network and the point through which his ideas initially came.

Cracow's university was the second oldest in central Europe. Poland's last Piast king, Casimir the Great (1333–1370), established the school in 1364.

[10]Maria Cytowska, ed., *Korespondencja Erazma z Rotterdamu z Polakami* (Warsaw: Państowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1965), 11.

[11]Harold Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1989), 178; Feliks Koper, "Dary z Polski dla Erazma z Rotterdamu w historycznym museum Bazylejskiem," *Sprawozdania Komisyi do Badania Historyi Sztuki w Polsce* (1900): 110–138.

[12]See for example Paweł Kras, "Religious Tolerance in the Jagiellonian Policy during the Age of the Reformation," in *Die Jagiellonen. Kunst und Kultur einer europäischen Dynastie an der Wende zur Neuzeit*, eds. Dietmar Popp and Robert Suckale (Nuremberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseums, 2002), 131–138.

[13]There were of course other regions in the Polish lands where Erasmus did have an impact. See for example, his reception at the humanist academy in Poznań. Karol Mazurkiewicz, *Początki Akademji Lubrańskiego w Poznaniu (1519–1535)* (Poznań, 1921). My thanks to Natalia Nowakowska for this reference.

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Although it essentially disappeared at his death, the newly converted Lithuanian prince Władysław Jagiełło refounded it in 1400. Steadily growing over the fifteenth century, it had a significant impact on the cultural and intellectual life of the kingdom. The 1470s were a critical decade in this respect. In 1472 the Tuscan fugitive, Filippo Buonaccorsi (better known as Callimachus), turned up in Cracow. Involved in a plot to assassinate Pope Paul II, he had fled to Poland for refuge and eventually became one of the most powerful men of the kingdom as royal advisor and tutor. His cultural influence was even more important. Callimachus was a friend of the Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino and a member of the Roman academy of Pomponius Laetus. He brought humanist learning directly to Poland and set a standard many sought to emulate. In 1489 the great German humanist, Conrad Celtis, arrived in Cracow and joined forces with Callimachus with the formation of a *sodalitas litteraria vistulana*, a literary society loosely based on the Roman academies. Though he already had a degree from Heidelberg, he matriculated at the university as a student of arts. He was allowed to teach on an informal basis. His occasional lectures attracted significant notice, and during the two years he spent in Cracow, Celtis had a substantial impact on the growing humanist community.

By 1500 there was a significant humanist presence at the university potentially receptive to the work of Erasmus. Polish book catalogs and inventories of the period indicate that he was known in Cracow by the 1510s. Though we can identify specific professors who had begun to read him, it was the students, Germans and Silesians in particular, who became his greatest enthusiasts. Ironically, the key individual in Poland to draw these different threads together and transform passing interest in Erasmus into a more substantial literary and religious phenomenon was not Polish nor had ever met the Dutch humanist. Leonard Cox (fl. c.1512–c.1547) was a wandering Welsh scholar who was an exceptionally effective networker.[14] Far better known in Poland than Wales, Cox began his studies abroad in France where he worked with the printer and humanist Henri Estienne, the elder. Slowly moving to the east, he crossed the Rhine and studied with a young Philip Melanchthon in Tübingen and arrived in Cracow in September 1518 when he enrolled at the university. Cox stayed in the region for a decade and eventually became a professor of rhetoric at the university. A dynamic and energetic communicator, he stimulated interest in Erasmus through his lectures and facilitated contact between Cracow and Basel. He

[14]The best overview on Cox is Andrew Breeze, "Leonard Cox, a Welsh humanist in Poland and Hungary," *National Library of Wales Journal* 25 (1988): 399–410. More generally on humanism in Renaissance Cracow is Jacqueline Glomski, *Patronage and Humanist Literature in the Age of the Jagiellons: Court and Career in the Writings of Rudolf Agricola Junior, Valentin Eck, and Leonard Cox* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

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was a charismatic figure attracting influential patrons from across Polish society despite political rifts that often divided the kingdom's most powerful families. He united them all in their admiration of Erasmus. But though he knew royal secretaries, grand chancellors, bishops and even the kingdom's primate, he may have been even more effective with the students and masters, for he surrounded himself with humanists who saw themselves as a type of *sodalitas Erasmiana*. In 1527 at the end of his stay in Poland, Cox described the conversations of his students in a letter to Erasmus:

> We do not pass a day without mention of Erasmus. We stay with you my dear Erasmus in the morning. We eat with you at the midday meal, and we frequently wander about with you afterwards. We are with you at supper, and we pass the evening most pleasantly with you.[15]

Though obviously Cox was doing his best to flatter Erasmus, it cannot be denied that he was an effective promoter of the humanist. More lasting, though, than the initial excitement he generated through his lectures was his work with the printers. Printing came early to Cracow. The first shop opened in 1473, only three years after its beginnings in Paris, and the city quickly became an important hub for the entire region. Here, a Franconian printer, Sweipolt Fiol, produced the first book in Cyrillic characters in 1491.[16] The city also played a critical role in the development of Hungarian printing, and though other centers developed around the kingdom, more than two thirds of all titles published in Poland during the sixteenth century were from Cracow printing houses.[17] The industry had done so well that when Andrzej Krzycki, one of Poland's most colorful humanists, wrote Erasmus a lengthy letter in 1525 in an attempt to entice him to Cracow, he could rightly boast that, were Erasmus to come, he would be greeted by many "Frobens" who would eagerly publish his work.[18] Krzycki's reference to the Basel printing house was apt. In fact one businessman had already emerged as Erasmus's great champion in the city, the Silesian Hieronim Wietor.[19] Wietor originally had come to Cracow to study at the university. Intrigued by the new printing industry but unable to compete with the more established houses, Wietor

[15]Allen, vol. 7, letter 1803, 2–5.

[16]Aleksander Sokolyszyn, "Sweipolt Fiol: The first Slavic printer of Cyrillic characters," *American Slavic and East European Review* 18 (1959): 88–94.

[17]Jan Pirożyński, "Cracow, the Center of Polish Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Printing," in *Villes d'imprimerie et moulins à papier du XIVe au XVIe siècle*, ed. Fernand Vercauteren (Brussels: Centre Culturel du Crédit Communal de Belgique, 1976), 139–163; on Hungarian material see *Biblioteka Jagiellońska. Katalog wystawy rękopisów i druków polsko-węgierskich XV i XVI wieku* (Cracow: Gebetner & Wolff, 1928).

[18]Allen, vol. 6, letter 1652, 236–239.

[19]On Wietor see Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, ed., *Drukarze dawnej Polski od XV do XVIII wieku*, vol. 1 Małopolska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1983), 325–352.

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moved to Vienna where he began his work in the profession. He eventually returned to Cracow and in time set up his own shop. There he specialized in the new humanist studies. Within the kingdom Wietor's house produced the first book printed in Greek (1524) and quickly became the place where many young humanists turned for encouragement and support. He even won the support of King Sigismund who granted him chancery privilege naming him "our printer in Cracow."[20] Wietor consciously saw his establishment as part of the vanguard attacking scholastic influence at the university, and it seemed only natural that he would become Erasmus's principal publisher in the kingdom. *The Complaint of Peace* was the first text to roll off his press (1518). For the next eight years he held a virtual monopoly on Erasmus's work.[21] Scholars such as Cox first collaborated with Wietor, but soon other printers joined in as well. Between 1518 and 1550 they produced forty editions of Erasmus's writings.[22] It is important to note that Wietor's efforts to promote Erasmus extended beyond Poland. In 1533 he produced the first extant book printed in Hungarian, a translation of the Pauline epistles funded by a wealthy noblewoman. In its preface Wietor cast this project as an Erasmian undertaking reminding his readers that the humanist encouraged all women to read the Bible.[23]

Wietor reminds us that Cracow's intellectual dynamism in 1500 was at least in part a product of its multi-ethnic composition. Here was a Silesian who worked in Vienna, settled in Cracow and published books for a Hungarian audience. The city lay on the juncture of two important trade routes and by 1500 had a population of approximately 20,000. An Italian visitor who passed through in the sixteenth century was able to identify houses belonging to Flemish, French, Italian, Turkish, Muscovite, and even Persian traders. In total, fifteen ethnic groups lived in Cracow and its immediate environs.[24] A sampling of Erasmus's letters suggest some of this diversity as

[20]Cited in Magda Teter and Edward Fram, "Apostasy, Fraud and the Beginnings of Hebrew Printing in Cracow," *Division II Faculty Publications*, Paper 49 (2006): 35.

[21]Jacqueline Glomski, "Erasmus and Cracow (1510–1530)," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 17 (1997): 12–13.

[22]Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa and Janusz Tazbir, "The Book and the Reformation in Poland," in *The Reformation and the Book*, ed. Jean-François Gilmont (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 413; Anna Lewicka-Kamińska, "Erazm z Rotterdamu w Polsce," in *Erasmiana Cracoviensa* (Cracow: Nakładem Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 1971), 106.

[23]Natalia Nowakowska, "Reform before Reform? Religious Currents in Central Europe, c. 1500," in *Brill Handbook for the Reformation in Central Europe*, eds. Howard Louthan and Graeme Murdock (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014). For a fuller discussion of this project see Pál Ács, "The reception of Erasmianism in Hungary and the contexts of the Erasmian program: the 'cultural patriotism' of Benedek Komjáti," in *Whose Love of Which Country? Composite States, National Histories and Patriotic Discourses in Early Modern Central Europe*, eds. Balázs Trencsényi and Márton Zászkaliczky (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 75–90.

[24]See the report of Cardinal Gaetano in J. Gintel ed., *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce*, vol. 1 (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971), 188; Henryk Samsonowicz, "Gesellschaftliche Pluralität und

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his Cracow correspondents included recent immigrants from Alsace, Silesia, the Palatinate, and upper Hungary. Apart from the university Erasmus attracted a following from three overlapping social groups: Cracow's industrious burghers, the royal court, and the church. By the end of the fifteenth century, a wealthy merchant class, primarily of German origin, had won the support of the king and dominated the city's administration. It was this class in particular that was among Erasmus's most enthusiastic readers in Poland. Typical in this respect was his relationship with Seweryn Boner, an astute financier who established a successful banking house with commercial ties to both Germany and Italy. Boner saw the advantages of sending his sons to study with Erasmus, and for his part Erasmus was quick to recognize the benefits of a relationship with the wealthy Cracow family. He dedicated an edition of Terence's comedies to his two young boys. The letters from Erasmus to the children are marvelous examples of the humanist as pedagogue while his carefully modulated flattery to the father illustrates how Erasmus worked hard to cultivate potential patrons upon which much of his livelihood rested.[25] Also instructive was his relationship with the Thurzo clan, a family of Austrian descent who had settled in Cracow and made their fortune in the region's mining and smelting business. The family formed one of the most effective networks for the dissemination of Erasmian thought in east central Europe. Two of the sons, Johannes and Stanislaus, entered the church becoming bishops of Breslau (Wrocław) and Olomouc respectively. They corresponded and exchanged gifts with Erasmus as their episcopal courts became important humanist centers in their own right. A third son, Alexius, was for a time one of the most powerful men in Hungary, a close advisor to the king and a key figure in Erasmus's expanding web of contacts in the Hungarian kingdom.[26]

Beyond Cracow's printers and patricians, Erasmus also developed connections with individuals close to the Polish king. In the 1530s he began corresponding with the poet and churchman Jan Dantiscus who, despite his modest background, eventually served three Polish kings as secretary and diplomat.[27] At the other end of the social spectrum, Erasmus cultivated a relationship with the great magnate Krzysztof Szydłowiecki, who had been a

Interaktion in Krakau," in *Krakau, Prag und Wien*, eds. Marina Dmitrieva and Karin Friedrich (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000), 118; best on the city in the early modern period Janina Bieniarzówna and Jan Małecki, eds., *Dzieje Krakowa*, vol. 2, (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994).

[25]Allen, vol. 9, letter 2533, 336–40; letter 2584, 401–403.

[26]On the Thurzo family see Peter Bietenholz, ed., *Contemporaries of Erasmus*, vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 322–325.

[27]Allen, vol. 10, letter 2643, 13–16.

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playmate of the young Sigismund, served him while the prince was governor of Silesia, and ultimately became the king's grand chancellor.[28] Erasmus's closest connection at court, however, was with the king's enterprising secretary, Justus Decius. An Alsatian emigrant, Decius was Erasmus's ally and intermediary at court. Decius passed on gossip and often served as a conduit for those who wanted to send Erasmus money.[29] Erasmus eventually attracted the attention of King Sigismund himself who praised the humanist as a man of "great knowledge and prudence who above all has a most noble heart filled with concerns for the general peace and harmony of Christendom."[30] Erasmus's letters to the king were veritable encomiums of Sigismund's virtues. So laudatory, in fact, the first was published by Wietor in 1527.[31]

Although Erasmus had an impact on the court, city and university, his influence was arguably greatest on the church. In the late medieval period the Polish church was actively involved in the great debates dividing western Christendom. They sent delegates to the councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basel and were strong supporters of conciliar reform.[32] Developments in the sixteenth century, however, concerned them as they cast a wary eye toward Luther. In this climate of change and uncertainty, Erasmus forged significant ties with some of Poland's most prominent churchmen. He had connections with two of its primates: Jan Łaski the elder and Andrzej Krzycki. Krzycki, in fact, modeled much of his own literary career after Erasmus. Krzycki's nephew, Andrzej Zebrzydowski, actually studied with Erasmus in Basel before returning home and pursuing an ecclesiastical career. He became bishop of Cracow in 1551. Erasmus's closest friendship in the kingdom was with one of the most influential figures of early sixteenth-century Poland, Bishop Piotr Tomicki whom we have already noted was also an important figure at both the royal court and university.[33] Unlike most of Erasmus's Polish liaisons where he served either as mentor or sought favor and patronage, this was a relationship between peers. They belonged to the same generation, and their careers featured a number of important parallels, an observation that Tomicki noted in one of his letters.[34] Over time a deep and genuine friendship developed between the two. They shared similar ideals

[28]Allen, vol. 6, letter 1752, 413–414; vol. 7, letter, 1820, 65.

[29]See for example Allen, vol. 7, letter 1958, 337–338; vol. 8, 2175, 190–191; vol. 10, 2874, 309–313.

[30]Allen, vol. 7, letter 1952, 331–332.

[31]*Des. Erasmi Roterodami Epistola ad Inclytum Sigismundum Regem Poloniae* (Cracow: Wietor, 1527).

[32]Best here is Thomas Wünsch, *Konziliarismus und Polen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998).

[33]Anna Odrzywolska-Kidawa, *Biskup Piotr Tomicki (1464–1535): kariera polityczna i kościelna* (Warsaw: Semper, 2004); *Podkanclerzy Piotr Tomicki (1515–1535): polityk i humanista* (Warsaw: Semper, 2005).

[34]Allen, vol. 11, letter 3014, 127–129.

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and ambitions and looked to each other for emotional support and advice. It was to Tomicki that Erasmus first turned when he learned of the execution of one of his dearest friends, Thomas More. Scholars have even speculated that Tomicki instructed the architects who designed his funerary chapel, one of the most important Renaissance structures in Cracow, to base their plan on an iconographic scheme inspired by Erasmus.[35]

II. Poland and Erasmian Spirituality

What general characteristics mark Erasmus's relationship with his Polish friends? The correspondence elucidates an important but frequently overlooked aspect of his career, what John O'Malley has described as the "Erasmus nobody knows." While scholars have devoted significant attention to Erasmus the biblical scholar or humanist critic, they have given far less attention to an interior Erasmus.[36] The Dutchman's interaction with the Poles offers fascinating insights into an Erasmian spirituality. We discover an individual who offers a devotional model of interior vibrancy and passionate intensity. Toward the end of his life he confided to Tomicki that, though his writings had many uses, his foremost priority was promoting the growth of piety.[37] For Justus Decius, he wrote a treatise on the Lord's Prayer that was neither an abstract theological reflection nor a detailed scholarly commentary but a simple prayer book intended to aid the believer in daily private worship.[38] For Primate Jan Łaski, he dedicated his four-volume edition of Ambrose. In his lengthy introduction, Erasmus saluted the bishop of Milan as a great model for all pastoral work. For the primate's nephew, Hieronim, he dedicated his most important work on prayer, *Modus orandi Deum*.[39] The cultivation of pastoral virtues was a central theme in his correspondence with Tomicki.[40]

[35]Jerzy Miziołek, "The Bishop Piotr Tomicki Chapel in the Cracow Cathedral and its Altarpiece Depicting 'The Adoration of the Magi,'" in *Die Jagiellonen*, 391.

[36]John O'Malley and Louis Perraud, eds., *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 69 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), xi.

[37]Allen, vol. 11, letter 3049, 217–222.

[38]Erasmus, *The Lord's Prayer* in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, eds. John O'Malley and Louis Perraud, vol. 69, *Spiritualia and Pastoralia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 55–77.

[39]Erasmus, *Modus orandi Deum* in *Collected Works of Erasmus,* vol. 70*, Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, ed. John O'Malley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 141–230. The Belgian historian Léon Halkin aptly characterizes the *Modus orandi Deum* as "Erasmus's principal contribution to the art of piety." See Hilmar Pabel, *Conversing with God: Prayer in Erasmus's Pastoral Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 28.

[40]See here Erasmus's extended discussion with Tomicki concerning the practical lessons Seneca could offer contemporary church leaders (Allen, vol. 8, letter 2091, 25–39) as well as the discussion concerning Erasmus's forthcoming publication of his *Ecclesiastes*, a long awaited handbook for preachers (Allen, vol. 11, letter 3049, 217–222).

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A second major feature of his interaction with Polish colleagues was a desire for peace and unity in the church. It is important to remember that the Erasmus we encounter in the Polish context is a late Erasmus, one who had openly broken with Luther. He feared that Luther's reform program would lead to a permanent split in the Christian community. Through their letters we find Erasmus and Tomicki following the latest news concerning efforts to reunite Christendom, though over time their correspondence grew increasingly pessimistic as confessional tensions continued to rise.[41] To Justus Decius, who in his later years was openly sympathetic to Lutheran teaching, Erasmus explained a more general principle that informed his doctrinal views. Though he admitted "the points that Luther presses home, if treated with moderation, come in my opinion rather closer to the vigor of the Gospel," Erasmus had no intention of leaving the church. "I stay with what is handed down by the Church, the interpreter of Scripture."[42] For Erasmus it was the *consensus ecclesiae* that was so important in determining matters of belief and the key to recovering ecclesial unity. In a letter to the Nuremberg humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, discussing the Eucharistic controversies, Erasmus argued, "I cannot be untrue to the *consensus ecclesiae*."[43] His correspondence with his friend and personal physician, Jan Antonin, also reflected these values. Concerns about the church weighed heavily on both of them. Antonin sent Erasmus two books from now Bishop Krzycki whose later more serious writings addressed the failings of church and state while highlighting the shortcomings of the Lutheran alternative. In a letter actually written a month after Erasmus's death, Antonin spoke with great feeling on the execution of Thomas More and the broader crisis facing the Christian community. Concurring with his friend's sentiments on the necessity of Christian unity, he praised Erasmus's final work, *De puritate ecclesiae christianae*, as a "jewel of great value."[44]

Antonin's reference to this treatise is especially relevant in our context. This "jewel of great value" was a commentary of Psalm 14. Though Erasmus the biblical scholar is best known for his work on the New Testament, his first published commentary on a biblical text was on Psalm 1, and over the course of his career he produced eleven studies on individual Psalms. The majority of these expositions belong to his mature years including six he composed between 1530 and his death in 1536. Scholars have linked Erasmus's interest in the Psalms to a broader irenic agenda. The Psalms were part of a liturgical legacy that crossed confessional lines, a common form of

[41]Allen, vol. 8, letter 2173, 187–189; vol. 10, letter 2713, 91–2; vol. 11, letter 3000, 78–79.
[42]Allen, vol. 8, letter 2175, 190–191, cited in James Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 197.
[43]Allen, vol. 6, letter 1717, 350–352.
[44]Allen vol. 11, letter 3137, 345–347.

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corporate prayer and devotional piety. As such, Erasmus used them as a means to plot a middle course in an attempt to bring warring sides together.[45] Several of these are important in our discussion. In a 1535 letter to Tomicki, he referred to a commentary on Psalm 38 (1532) he had written for Bishop Stanislaus Thurzo of Olomouc.[46]

Erasmus's commentary on this Psalm is arguably his clearest statement on human fallibility on matters of doctrine. Musing on the verse, "I shall guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue," Erasmus stated directly:

> I do not know whether anyone can be found among the whole race of mortals who has never offended in word—apart from Christ alone; or whether there is any book, among all the categories of writing which exist, which is free from any hint of error, apart from the scriptural canon.[47]

He follows this assertion with an extended litany of the failings of the Church Fathers. Tertullian was a great teacher, but he succumbed to the errors of the Montanists. Cyprian lived a holy life, but his views on baptism were problematic. Irenaeus was learned, but his understanding of the resurrection was flawed. The teachings of later figures such as Bernard, Aquinas and Gerson were also not free from error. Erasmus eventually reaches the papacy itself as he queries, "are not many of the things stated in the papal decrees and decretals now regarded as heretical?" Even collectively the church can stray, for councils, too, are not immune from error.[48] Erasmus, however, was not suggesting a program of radical skepticism. Instead as a good historian, he argued that church doctrine is historically contingent. It is fluid and develops over time dependent on circumstance and context. The mistakes of these great church leaders, what he calls "minor faults," should not destroy their memory and reputation, for as Erasmus concludes:

> It is a mark of Christian kindness not to make rash judgments and to forgive human error in others, while not forgetting one's own weaknesses; to put a favourable interpretation on anything which has been ambiguously expressed and to express sincere approval of things which have been well said.[49]

Erasmus clearly hoped that this spirit of charity would become a virtue for the church of his day. Erasmus's commentaries on Psalms 83 (1533) and 14 (1536) are in many ways a pair. Written in that critical period of confessional

[45]See the introductory remarks in Dominic Baker-Smith, ed., *Collected Works of Erasmus,* vol. 63*, Expositions of the Psalms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), xiii–xiv.

[46]Allen, vol. 11, letter 3049, 217–222.

[47]Erasmus, *An Exposition of Psalm 38* in *Collected Works of Erasmus,* vol. 65*, Expositions of the Psalms*, ed. Dominic Baker-Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 42.

[48]Erasmus, *An Exposition of Psalm 38*, 43, 51, 52.

[49]Erasmus, *An Exposition of Psalm 38*, 59.

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negotiation between the 1530 Diet of Augsburg and the 1541 Colloquy of Regensburg, these commentaries were his attempt to bring the two confessional sides together. He dedicated the first to Julius Pflug, the irenic advisor of Duke George of Saxony, and the second to the customs official, Christoph Eschenfelder, whom Erasmus saw as an exemplar of lay Christian piety. Both were quickly translated into English and became part of Thomas Cromwell's campaign to create a middle ground between older forms of traditional piety and newer expressions of evangelical devotion. More generally, all three of these commentaries were part of what may be called an "interim strategy," a period for confessional tempers to cool before contentious issues could be placed before a general council.[50] Erasmus's exposition of Psalm 83 appeared three years after the Diet of Augsburg under the title *De sarcienda ecclesiae concordia*. Though Erasmus had not attended the diet, he had been active behind the scenes and was in contact with the imperial chancellor Mercurino Gattinara just before his death in June 1530. Scholars have argued that the arguments he put forward in the commentary may have originally been intended for the assembly.[51] The text unfolds slowly as he develops his arguments around the central verse of the Psalm, "How lovely are thy tabernacles." Erasmus contrasts the ideal church as expressed in these verses with the divisive Christian community of his day and asks how unity can be restored. His goal is to create space where divergent views can coexist peacefully. Toward that end, he adopts a variety of tactics. Broad and ambiguous language can be used to accommodate a range of beliefs. "Let us agree that very much is to be attributed to faith, so long as we concede . . . that faith extends far wider than most people think."[52] He continues by arguing that there are certain issues that need not be resolved immediately. Perhaps most importantly, he returns to the theme of charity in his discussion of the patristic term *synkatabasis*, which he defines as "a spirit of moderation and compromise" that "soothes the bitterness of our quarrels."[53]

As evident through his expositions on the Psalms, the late Erasmus was attempting to stake out a position that simultaneously recognized the need for reform and the reinvigoration of lay piety while recommitting itself to a united body of Christ. Ten years earlier he had written Charles V's advisor Jean de Carondelet, "the sum and substance of our religion is peace and

[50]*Collected Works of Erasmus*, 65:xii–xiv.

[51]Erika Rummel, "Erasmus and the Restoration of Unity in the Church," in *Conciliation and Confession*, eds. Howard Louthan and Randall Zachman (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 63.

[52]Erasmus, *On Mending the Peace of the Church* in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 65:202.

[53]Erasmus, *On Mending the Peace of the Church*, 213. For a fuller analysis of this text see Erika Rummel, "Erasmus and the Restoration of Unity in the Church," 62–72.

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concord. This can hardly remain the case unless we define as few matters as possible and leave each individual's judgment free on many questions."[54] While theological options continued to narrow, Erasmus was moving in the opposite direction and trying to create space. How difficult this task was becoming may be most evident in his final confrontation with Luther. In 1533, in a pair of letters to Bishop Tomicki, Erasmus mentioned his work on a catechism, *An Explanation of the Creed*, that he was dedicating to Thomas Boleyn, the father of the unfortunate Anne. As he outlined basic Christian beliefs, Erasmus also reviewed certain doctrinal controversies of the early church but did so with a degree of latitude and considerable caution for "not even the minds of the seraphim comprehend the divine nature as it is."[55] While Erasmus prized his theological imprecision as a virtue, others were decrying it as a vice. The broad and ambiguous wording of the catechism was ultimately too much for Luther who responded with a withering blast. "[Erasmus] insists so much on heresies and schisms which troubled the church from its very beginnings that he practically asserts that nothing has ever been certain in the Christian religion."[56]

III. Poland—An Erasmian Model for Christendom

The reputation that Erasmus had developed as a slippery man became ever more pronounced late in his career. He regularly noted the growing opposition he faced in his correspondence with his Polish friends. To Tomicki, he expressed his frustration with the Sorbonne theologians who scoured his writings for errors. With Decius, he wryly noted in one letter both the fury with which Luther attacked him and the poisonous accusations of his Catholic opponents.[57] Erasmus, of course, had always courted controversy, but the rhetoric directed against him was decidedly more virulent in those later years. He was alternatively a "stratagem of Satan," a "restless parasite," and an "enemy to Jesus Christ."[58] Even more worrisome, however, was his ebbing influence across the continent. The 1520s was a critical decade in this respect. In central Europe his evangelical critics stepped up their attacks. In the Low Countries and France, Catholic scholars such as Jacques Masson and Noël Béda spearheaded the opposition as they

[54]Allen, vol. 5, letter 1334, 173–192; cited in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 63:lvii.

[55]Erasmus, *An Explanation of the Apostles' Creed* in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 70:261.

[56]Cited in Irena Backus, "Erasmus and the Spirituality of the Early Church," in *Erasmus's Vision of the Church*, ed. Hilmar Pabel (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1995), 112–113.

[57]Allen, vol. 9, letter 2600, 419–20; vol. 11, letter 2961, 30–35.

[58]Cited in Bruce Mansfield, *Phoenix of his Age: Interpretations of Erasmus 1550–1750* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 4.

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assailed his work on the New Testament. Spanish mendicants successfully petitioned the Inquisition to begin a formal investigation of Erasmus's writings. In Italy his former friend, the influential Girolamo Aleandro, had now turned against him and worked determinedly to undermine his influence.[59]

Not so in Poland! The response of Jan Łaski the younger (better known in the west as Johannes a Lasco) to the publication of *De concordia* is typical in this respect. This Łaski, the nephew of the Polish primate, had actually lived a number of months with Erasmus in Basel. The wealthy Pole had underwritten the costs of the household, negotiated the sale of Erasmus's library and more generally was critical for promoting the Dutchman's interests in the kingdom. While many Catholic and Protestant leaders peremptorily dismissed Erasmus's conciliatory tract as useless, Jan Łaski enthusiastically opined in a 1534 letter to Justus Decius:

> I wish there were people who would follow his [Erasmus] advice and take action accordingly, who would free themselves of their urge to differ, who would soften their enduring and perhaps exceedingly stubborn determination to antagonize one another and instead strive as much as they can, to be more tolerant of each other.[60]

In Poland, Erasmus remained influential through his death in 1536. The first anti-Erasmian tract was not printed in Cracow until 1540. At an important national synod in 1551, Catholic leaders encouraged the clergy to read Erasmus's *Enchiridion* and *Modus orandi Deum* alongside Augustine and other Patristic writers. It was not until the beginning of the 1570s that church authorities in Poland finally grouped Erasmus with Calvin, Luther, Servetus, and other "heretics."[61] Back in the 1530s, Erasmus's relationship with Piotr Tomicki was an accurate barometer of his standing in Poland. As a royal advisor, Tomicki recommended an educational program for the royal heir, prince Sigismund, based on the *Institutio principis christiani*. Tomicki saw Erasmus's handbook with its pacifist overtones as the ideal guide for the enlightened Christian ruler.[62]

[59]For a summary see Erika Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics*, 2 vols. (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1989).

[60]Hermann Dalton, ed., *Lasciana* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1973), letter 39, 175–176; cited in Peter Bietenholz, "Concordia Christiana: Erasmus's Thought and Polish Reality," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 21 (2001): 60. For the broader reception of *De concordia* see Rummel, "Erasmus and the Restoration of Unity in the Church," 66–70.

[61]Maria Cytowska, "Érasme en Pologne avant l'époque du Concile de Trente," *Erasmus in English* 5 (1972): 15. Jacqueline Glomski has looked most closely at the early period and has suggested a chronology that has Erasmus's influence peaking by 1530. Glomski, "Erasmus in Cracow," 16.

[62]Bietenholz ed., *Contemporaries of Erasmus*, 3:328.

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The correspondence between Erasmus and Tomicki, especially in their later years, is particularly revealing. An ailing Tomicki wrote Erasmus in April 1535 commiserating with his friend's failing health. He passed on his best wishes, for "I know how much you have given to the entire Christian world . . . through your writings you have aided the kingdom of Christ." Erasmus's response may have surprised him, for he replied in August that Pope Paul III had offered him a cardinal's hat.[63] Though Erasmus made this remark almost in jest, indicating that he was far too old for such an honor, Tomicki took the proposal quite seriously and wrote his friend an impassioned response. The excited bishop declared, "I feel that your letter has brought me back my strength, a cure for my disease!" He passed the news to King Sigismund who also shared his enthusiasm. Tomicki then continued to list the various reasons why Erasmus should accept the position. Age was no excuse, for death comes to young and old alike. With Erasmus's wisdom, maturity and experience one year in that position would benefit Christendom far more than a lengthier term of a lesser man. As the letter progressed, Tomicki's tone became increasingly strident as he nearly insisted that Erasmus accept. Disobeying the pope in this matter could in fact be construed as a sin. Tomicki saw this opportunity as one last chance to address the problems of a weakened and divided Christian community. The wise and tempered leadership of Erasmus would complement the other distinguished figures the pope had raised to the cardinalate: the conciliatory Venetian Gasparo Contarini, the learned ally of Copernicus, Nicholas Schönborn, and the veteran papal diplomat, Girolamo Ghinucci.[64]

While Tomicki saw Erasmus as the ideal Christian statesman, Erasmus described the Polish kingdom in almost utopian terms. His was an idealized if not exoticized view of this distant land positioned on the edge of the Christian and hence civilized world. When he first wrote Decius in October 1523, he marveled at its vast geographic expanse stretching "from the Vistula to the Tauric Chersonese [the Crimea], from the Baltic to the Carpathians." He was fascinated by its wars and praised its king "for his many great victories over his Tatar and Muscovite enemies, victories needed more than any others to protect the boundaries of Christendom."[65] In his late years in particular, he saw Poland as one of the few beacons of hope in the gathering night. His mood may have been blackest when he wrote Tomicki in February 1535. He reported that in Württemberg Duke Ulrich had abolished the mass. England had imprisoned his friend Thomas More and declared that any acknowledgement of the pope as head of the church was

[63]Allen, vol. 11, letter 3014, 127–9; letter 3049, 217–222.
[64]Allen, vol. 11, letter 3066, 240–246.
[65]Erasmus, *The Lord's Prayer*, 58.

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punishable by death. In France Henry II was either burning Protestants or sending them off to the galleys, and closest to home the Anabaptist plague was spreading from the besieged city of Münster, now miserable in its suffering, into the surrounding region of lower Germany even penetrating most lamentably "my own Holland."[66] Against this backdrop Erasmus clearly perceived Sigismund and Tomicki as twin bastions of stability protecting a fragile peace. Poland offered a model for the rest of the Christian world.[67]

Erasmus's idealized views of Poland are very much on display in the 1527 letter to King Sigismund. Erasmus immediately drew attention to the king's work negotiating peace between Christian princes as he asserted, "peace for the Commonwealth and the saving of Christian blood is more important for you than expanding your territory through force of arms." Though in a more strident tone he saluted Sigismund's military success against the Russians and the Tatars, a people the humanist described as little more than wild beasts, it was the king's "matchless prudence and restraint" that he most celebrated.[68] In a letter the following year, he elaborated upon this theme and drew a series of parallels between wise Sigismund and the sage Solomon. By avoiding unnecessary wars, they presided over a peaceful period of growing prosperity.[69] Erasmus never really understood Polish politics, the pragmatic reasons that pushed Sigismund to negotiate a treaty with the Teutonic Order or the shrewd logic behind his decision not to seek the Hungarian throne. Instead he attributed his own principles and view of an ideal world to describe what he saw occurring in Poland.[70]

A final testimony to the place Poland occupied in his imagination can be found in an edited collection of his correspondence, *Aliquot selectae epistolae*. Erasmus appended twenty letters to his commentary on Psalm 14 that he published with Froben in 1536. Erasmus, of course, worked very hard to shape his public persona. Carefully sifting through his voluminous correspondence, Erasmus over the course of his long career published several collections of his own letters. *Aliquot selectae epistolae* was the last of these volumes he actually edited, and as such it is in many respects a final statement of how he wanted to be remembered.[71] *Aliquot selectae epistolae* stands out from Erasmus's earlier edited collections in several important

[66]Allen, vol. 11, letter 3000, 78–79.
[67]Allen, vol. 7, letter1919, 274–275.
[68]Allen, vol. 7, letter 1819, 59–65.
[69]Allen, vol. 7, letter 2034, 456–458.
[70]On his understanding of Sigismund see Danièle Letocha, "Quand Érasme se fait politique: la première lettre à Sigismond 1er le Vieux," *Renaissance and Reformation* 12 (1988): 251–271.
[71]Léon-E. Halkin, *Erasmus ex Erasmo. Érasme éditeur de sa correspondance* (Aubel: P. M. Gasson, 1983), 195–203; Charles Béné, "Le *De Puritate Tabernaculi*: Testament spirituel d'Erasme?," 199–212.

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ways. The letters run chronologically from 1522 to 1536, a range significantly longer than his previous epistolary editions. The percentage of letters addressed to Erasmus in this volume is also higher than normal. There is a letter from a pope and a king and eight either to or from high-ranking bishops. Ever embattled, Erasmus obviously was seeking outside attestation of his work and character. More specifically, Erasmus was rallying support for his late reform agenda. He tells his readers that both Clement VII and Cardinal Cajetan approved *De concordia* and includes a letter where Paul III lavishly praises both his piety and learning.[72] Significantly, Erasmus also selected two letters from Jacopo Sadoleto, the humanist bishop of Carpentras who endeavored to bridge the growing Protestant/Catholic divide. Additionally, there were letters to and from his most influential ally at the court of Charles V, Mercurino Gattinara, the Italian statesman who articulated an Erasmian view of a universal Christian empire. What is most interesting in our context, however, is the place of Poland in this collection. Over a third of the letters were written either to or from Poles. The volume's first three letters were from Polish correspondents. Three of the four bishops he selected were Poles including Stanislaus Thurzo, the Cracow native who praised Erasmus's commentary on Psalm 38, that plea for goodwill and forbearance for those with divergent theological views.[73] The individual who figures most prominently in the entire collection is Piotr Tomicki, with a fifth of the correspondence dedicated to him. The volume in fact begins with a stirring eulogy of Tomicki. Erasmus had learned of his friend's death and had written to console his nephew, Andrzej Krzycki, now Poland's new primate. In what was his last letter to a Polish recipient, Erasmus lamented the passing of his friend whose life had meant so much to so many. The church had lost a model bishop, the king a discerning advisor and the kingdom a judicious chancellor. Erasmus found in Tomicki all those virtues he valued so highly: wisdom, humility, love of scripture, and charity. Tomicki, perhaps more than any other of his contemporaries, best embodied for Erasmus his great ideal of learned piety.[74]

IV. Conclusion: Erasmus, Poland and the Reformation World

Scholars do need to consider more carefully the place Poland occupied in Erasmus's imagination, most especially in his late career. While options for confessional accommodation were closing and while Erasmus's own influence was waning across Europe, Poland stood out as an exception on

[72]Erasmus, *Aliquot epistolae selectae* (Basel: Froben 1536), H1r-H3r; E2v-E4r.
[73]Erasmus, *Aliquot epistolae selectae*, F6v-F7r.
[74]Erasmus, *Aliquot epistolae selectae*, D3v-D4v.

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both fronts. Erasmus saw the kingdom as a place where reforms could be initiated, where serious problems could be addressed without sundering the unity of the church. At the same time Poland needs to be taken more seriously as a locus of reform. Erasmus's access to the highest echelons of Polish society was unparalleled. Nowhere in Europe did he ever experience a similar reception. Approximately two-thirds of his Polish correspondents had direct connections with the royal court. Though Poland as a composite monarchy was a decentralized state, the concentration of his allies at the kingdom's center and within its most important institutions was striking testimony of his standing in that society. But what exactly was Erasmian reform? Although he had friends and followers in influential positions, how did they understand his ideas, and what vision did they have for Poland? Here the story becomes even more interesting, for as we have noted, the late Erasmus was a particularly enigmatic figure who seemed to revel in his ambiguity. He was a slippery character or as Luther once famously stated, an eel. "No one can grasp him but Christ alone."[75] Poland may be the best place on the continent to examine these ambiguities and how they played out over the course of the sixteenth century. Those whom he influenced in the kingdom interpreted him very differently. The Erasmus whom most Poles encountered was a figure who had already rejected Luther. Bishops such as Andrzej Krzycki and the church's rising star, Stanislaus Hosius, clearly used Erasmus as a weapon in their fight against Lutheran incursions. In 1527, Hosius helped published an Erasmus letter in Cracow where the humanist upheld a traditional Catholic understanding of the Eucharist.[76] On the other hand, Jan Łaski the younger saw Erasmus offering an ideal model for Protestant reform that could unite and bring the disparate strands of the movement together. Łaski would even assert in 1544 that had Erasmus lived he would have approved of his decision to leave the Roman church.[77] Finally there were figures like the royal advisor, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski. Frycz, who oversaw the transport of Erasmus's library to Poland after the humanist's death, found within his writings the inspiration for a thorough reform of state institutions, and a vision of a church that, though not breaking with Rome, exercised a significant degree of autonomy.[78]

[75]Cited in Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus. His Life, Works and Influence*, trans. J. C. Grayson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 3.

[76]This letter was appended to Erasmus's letter to King Sigismund. *Des. Erasmi Roterodami Epistola ad Inclytum Sigismundum Regem Poloniae &c. . .* (Cracow: Wietor, 1527), Biiir-Bvv.

[77]A Lasco to Bullinger, March 1544, in A. *Johannis a Lasco Opera*, vol. 2, ed. A. Kuyper (Amsterdam: F. Muller, 1866), letter 16, 568–569.

[78]Most important is his *De Republica emendanda*. The literature on Frycz in western languages is thin. Best is André Séguenny and Wacław Urban, eds., *Andrzej Frycz Modrzweski,* vol. 18*, Bibliotheca dissidentium* (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1997).

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Perhaps even more importantly, Erasmus's relationship with Poland speaks to wider issues and processes of change in the Christian world. The dilemmas he faced and the opposition he encountered as reflected in his correspondence with his Polish friends highlight a fundamental shift that was occurring within the Christian community. In this respect the decade stretching from the Diet of Augsburg (1530) to the Colloquy of Regensburg (1541) was particularly critical concerning the direction of the church. Charles V had entered Augsburg with grand hopes of reaching a lasting compromise with his Protestant subjects. Though they never achieved that settlement, Augsburg did open a period of fevered negotiations. Debates at Leipzig (1534, 1539), Haguenau (1540), and Worms (1540/1) continued the dialog between Protestants and Catholics and laid the groundwork for the Colloquy of Regensburg where compromise seemed within reach. In Rome, too, this was a period of multiple options. A remarkably broad range of views characterized the pontificate of Paul III (1534–1549), the pope who had praised both Erasmus's piety and his desire for peace. During his reign a reform commission issued its famous report, the *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*, which directly acknowledged the church's ills as a result of its own weaknesses and failings.[79] The pope enlisted the emperor and the king of France to push for a general council. He raised to the cardinalate an extraordinary group of men representing very different visions and models of reform. While the earlier events of the Reformation may have been more dramatic, including Luther's 1517 declaration at Wittenberg, his defiant pose at Worms, and the cataclysmic Peasants' War, this later period was more consequential in determining the ultimate trajectory of the church. With the failure of negotiations in Germany and the emergence of a more austere Roman regime after the passing of Paul III, possibilities were narrowing. Under the centralizing pressures of church and state the options that had been available were giving way to more tightly regulated and more narrowly defined ecclesial communities where the split in Christendom was permanent. This is the lasting significance of Erasmus's relationship with Poland. It offers us one of the best windows into this period before the possibility of reconciliation had receded altogether. It captures the tensions and challenges of this pivotal moment and highlights the alternatives before the church. Indeed, after Erasmus's death, Poland affords an excellent vantage point to examine his contested legacy as his intellectual and spiritual heirs engaged each other in stormy debates on fundamental issues on the nature of the church, the question of reform, and the problem of unity.

[79]For a brief commentary and edited translation see John Olin, ed. *The Catholic Reformation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 182–197.

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