

## LIST III HT

### HIU33116. Are we free (to be good)? Reading Erasmus and Luther (Graeme Murdock)

Assessment: one essay.



Lucas Cranach, 'Luther' (c. 1532), and Hans Holbein, 'Erasmus' (1523)

In 1524 Desiderius Erasmus published a short text, *On Free Will*. Erasmus' scholarly reputation was already well-established- not least through one of the greatest achievements of the Renaissance, his 1516 Greek *New Testament*. Erasmus was also well-known for his 1511 satirical attack on European culture and the church, *In Praise of Folly*. Erasmus' text on the freedom of the will was in part an attack on the ideas of Martin Luther. Luther had launched his dramatic career in 1517 with his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, and in 1522 Luther published a German *New Testament*. Luther was quick to respond to Erasmus' challenge and in 1525 published *On the Bondage of the Will*. At the end of his life Luther wrote that he would not object if all his books were burned (the Catholic authorities had attempted to do so)- except for *On the Bondage of the Will* and his *Catechism*. This debate between Erasmus and Luther went to the very heart of what we have come to call the Reformation- the keystone to modern European culture. Erasmus and Luther examined the nature of God and of humanity in concise and clear arguments. Do human beings have free will? Can we choose to be good? The exchange was remarkable for its intellectual significance but also extraordinary as a public debate in the context of the new communications universe of print. Was it right that such texts be made available to Europe's reading public? Who had the authority to decide the truth? Erasmus' conclusion suggested 'as to which side is right, let the reader be judge'. Luther meanwhile concluded that his 'case against free choice is unanswerable'. Erasmus responded with two (rather dull) volumes in reply- which Luther ignored. This module is devoted to a contextualised reading of these two texts on the freedom or bondage of the will, and to analysis of the significance of this debate.