

*Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind.*

Michael Massing.

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Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus enjoyed the sometimes heady, sometimes infuriating experience of becoming icons within their own life-spans. Their lives and ideas, actual or ascribed, quickly became polemical weapons for everyone involved in the day's religious disputes. Despite their initial affinity, both men were quickly characterized as friends or foes of the Gospel, the Catholic Church, or reform (by any definition). That appropriation continued for the next five centuries. Now, Michael Massing offers his own interpretation of their real and symbolic significance for "the Western Mind." His book has two principal goals: first, to tell their parallel stories to the American public; second, to argue about the different paths to modernity they embody. In the first respect, he succeeds brilliantly; in the second, less so.

Massing brings many skills to the table as a distinguished journalist and past MacArthur Fellow. His writing is lucid and engaging, bringing to vivid life all the familiar scenes and players, from Luther's multiple conversion experiences, to his showdown at Worms, to the battles of his later, troubled years. Manning masterfully conveys Erasmus's ideas and wit through primary documents, all within the context of the turbulent early Reformation period. Perhaps it is because he comes as an outsider not just to the period but to academe itself that Manning can provide such a fresh view of people and events already familiar. I myself learned a great deal from his extensive research (almost exclusively English language), not just anecdotally but also in conceptual analysis and exposition. He possesses an astute and lively mind, his innate curiosity visible on every page.

Unfortunately, that novice's eagerness has led him into some deeply troubling generalizations. As in days past, we are confronted with good Reformer and bad Reformer, judged by their impact today. Erasmus and his "rationalist, ethics-based, pluralistic, and internationalist creed" (799) suffered initial defeat but persevered through the centuries thanks to such like-minded individuals as Spinoza (whom Erasmus would have unquestionably denounced), Voltaire (of course), Stefan Zweig (yes), all the way up to the modern European Union. Luther, meanwhile, characterized by narrow religious bigotry, continued to plague Western history all the way up to the Third Reich and today's intolerant American evangelicals. In fact, before the twentieth century, Dr. Luther was the embodiment (at least among Protestants and Whigs) of human progress and liberation from the church and the Middle Ages. But the history-propelling role Luther played in a Hegelian universe—a framework still evident in this book—is now reversed and played instead by Erasmus, the patron saint of modern secular humanism, while Massing characterizes Luther's thinking as medieval (the ultimate insult). Most significantly, the book argues, these two ways of thinking continue today. To Massing, one of the many pernicious results of Luther's legacy is a largely Christian evangelical and intolerant US, opposed to a largely secular and tolerant EU.

I suspect that my personal likes and dislikes on many of these questions conform to Massing's. Martin Luther, as we all now know, was a notoriously difficult man to like at times (particularly during his execrable late life anti-Semitic ravings). But, like all of us, he was a complex individual, as was Erasmus, as were their contemporaries. One might argue that he was as accomplished a humanist as Erasmus, who could himself be as viperous and unforgiving (and scripturally fundamentalist) as the Wittenberg Reformer. Or, as progressives of a different generation, we could cast Luther as the brave pioneer of modern individualism and Erasmus as the faint-hearted defender of Catholic orthodoxy (since he never repudiated Rome). Both men were also deeply spiritual, an experiential reality too often obscured in an account more concerned with their cultural impact and legacy. Most importantly, they were not us, at least not in the form of highly idealized progenitors of two fundamentally different ways of thinking. There were many paths to modernity, and there is no reason to privilege this dialectical one, itself deeply problematic. (There were also many varieties of sixteenth-century Christians, but their place in Massing's schema—except for the reactionary Catholics—is far from clear.)

One might argue that a book like this benefits from a literary sweet spot: few academics will read it, and most non-academics will not notice or care that much about the book's thesis, as opposed to its engaging narrative. Indeed, other reviews and blurbs have likened the book to a long (over eight hundred pages) Great Lectures class, glossing over the arguments of the introduction and conclusion. But there is a real cost to indulging our own prejudices—and again I probably share many of his—by caricaturing individuals from the past to serve our purposes. Pedestals have always been precarious places for would-be heroes, and historians are rightly skeptical about what Luther and Erasmus alike would call idolatry. It might be tempting to think about “the Western mind” in these terms, but it is neither intellectually rigorous nor edifying.

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*The Dynamics of the Early Reformation in Their Reformed Augustinian Context.*  
Robert J. Christman.

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Recent Reformation scholarship has deepened our grasp of the influence of medieval Scholasticism on Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues, particularly through Heiko Oberman's research, and of monastic-mystical strains of medieval piety that shaped their thinking, especially through Bernd Hamm's work. Robert Christman places Luther and his associates squarely in the context of the reform efforts and ecclesiastical-political maneuvering of one monastic order in the German-speaking lands, led by Johannes von Staupitz and his fellow friars in the Lower German province of the