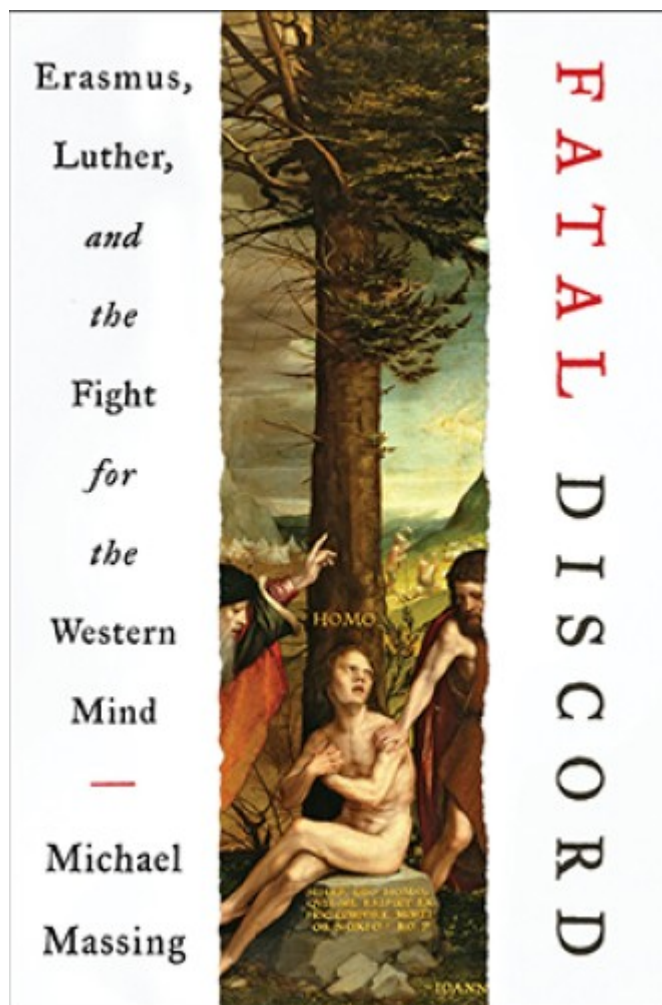


The world Erasmus and Luther shared

## Each created a new model for church. Each paid a price.

by [Ralph Keen](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue

### In Review



### Fatal Discord

Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind

By Michael Massing  
Harper

Desiderius Erasmus is not much more than a name and a book, *The Praise of Folly*, which is often appreciated more for its satire than its seriousness. Martin Luther is much more than a name, and more than a single book, too. These two contemporaries, arguably more than any figures, ushered in the early modern era. In the wake of last year's Luther celebrations, it is good to have a book that connects the Reformer with the revolution in the world of learning associated with the humanist Erasmus.

In chapters that alternate between Erasmus and Luther, Michael Massing presents them as both partners and counterparts: the scholar who shrinks from controversy but ignites it anyway, and the preaching academic whose biblical interpretation precipitated an enduring division in the Western church. Both were participants in the Christian humanism of northern Europe, but they held divergent views about the relation of tradition to church reform. Both were outsiders to the elite echelons of the social order, and each was dependent on patrons both noble and ecclesiastical for the success of his work. Both acknowledged the authority of a unified patristic tradition but argued strenuously about theologies of human freedom and grace.

One challenge in a work of comparison is holding a productive tension between the two subjects, neither accentuating their differences so as to make their contemporaneity ironic nor joining them as representative figures of their time, two sides of the same coin. Preserving a balanced diptych, without overemphasizing differences or making either a representative figure of the times, is difficult, especially when the image of the introverted scholar Erasmus can be contrasted with that of the robust iconoclast Luther. In fact, Erasmus's circle, although it was dominated by fellow humanists, also included Henry VIII (for whom Erasmus composed a notable Latin poem) and noble patrons whom he met through the efforts of the humanist statesman Thomas More. As for Luther, generally thought to have occupied a more prominent stage, he was with some exceptions (e.g., the Diet of Worms) visible to the world mainly through his writings, and his contacts with rulers were more often than not through correspondence with their agents.

Massing's narrative is organized around the two figures in some measure of isolation: the chapters for each, when read in sequence, form a relatively independent biography. Erasmus's life was far more social and eventful than is

usually assumed, and Luther's was interwoven with scholars and diplomats without whom evangelical reform would not have succeeded. In impressive detail, Massing presents Erasmus in his world and Luther in his, both realms more colorful and contentious than popular images of the two would suggest. The supposedly pusillanimous Erasmus was embroiled in controversies within the Catholic Church as bitter as those that Luther engaged in opposition to the church.

Massing is adept at depicting controversy, whether it be over the warring peasants or Louvain theologians. Despite a few lapses (like seeming at one point to attribute to Luther Paul's precept in Romans 13:1), Massing correctly presents the conflict between radicals and their rulers as a dispute rooted in contrasting ideas of evangelical freedom, one antinomian and the other supporting civil order as divinely instituted. Massing rightly sees the Two Kingdoms doctrine as the point of contention, with the leaders of the rebellion falling prey to a confusion of realms and Luther subsequently clarifying the distinction in ways that appear, in the hindsight of almost five centuries, authoritarian.

During the same time, Erasmus was fending off attacks against his edition of the New Testament and commentary on it, his criticisms of Scholasticism, and his questioning of rules like fasting and clerical celibacy. In his own way he was the creator of a new model for the church, and was pilloried by the ecclesiastical old order as vociferously as Luther was. Erasmus's antagonists are less well known than Luther's and his story less often told. As a result, Massing's depiction of Erasmus's role in the shaping of early modern Christianity will be illuminating for many readers.

In provocatively joining two biographies, Massing provides a close rendering of the events and theological tensions that form the hinge between the late Middle Ages and the early modern era. Those interested in humanism and the Reformation will have much to savor.

*This article was updated on October 3 to clarify the reviewer's critique of the way the author writes about Luther and Romans 13:1.*