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#### ERASMUS, CONTARINI, AND THE RELIGIOUS REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

Though the paradigm of modernist progression has been challenged on many fronts, Erasmus and other sixteenth-century literati are still commonly viewed as people who led the way from a religious Middle Ages to a more godless modern era. *Erasmus, Contarini, and the Religious Republic of Letters* complicates this view by analyzing a unique realm of spiritualized scholarship that cannot fit easily into any conventional intellectual chronology. By analyzing the lives, work, and correspondence of Erasmus, Thomas More, Margaret More Roper, Reginald Pole, Gasparo Contarini, and Vittoria Colonna, this book demonstrates how these Catholic men and women of letters created a distinctive kind of religious community rooted in friendship and shared intellectual and spiritual pursuits. By spanning the too-frequently-respected gap between humanist reformers in Northern and Southern Europe, this book uncovers a widespread, if previously less visible, network that exhibited concerns we still grapple with today. And, in contrast to histories that focus on politics and new economies of representation, the book demonstrates how the religious search for meaning shaped contemporary assumptions about friendship, gender, and the value of reading and writing.

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Republic of Letters

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org  
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521849876

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First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Furey, Constance M.  
Erasmus, Contarini, and the religious republic of letters / Constance M. Furey.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-84987-6 (hardback)

ISBN-10: 0-521-84987-X (hardback)

1. Catholics – Intellectual life. 2. Catholic Church – History – 16th century.  
3. Europe – Intellectual life. 4. Catholic learning and scholarship. 5. Erasmus,  
Desiderius, d. 1536. 6. Contarini, Gasparo, 1483–1542. I. Title.

BX1795.L57F87 2006  
282'.4'09031 – dc22 2005017284

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84987-6 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84987-X hardback

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*In memory of Jim Furey*





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## Note on Texts

In cases where I did my own translations from primary sources that are not readily available, I quoted the original language in the notes. I also transcribed the original Italian for Vittoria Colonna's poetry, although it is available in a modern critical edition, because of the particular difficulties involved in translating poetry. In quoting early printed material, I have modernized punctuation and capitalization.



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## Abbreviations

- Allen P. S. Allen. *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*. 12 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906–1958.
- ASD *Opera omnia Desiderii Roterodami recognita et adnotatione critica instructa notisque illustrata*. Amsterdam, 1969–.
- CWE *Collected Works of Erasmus*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1976–.
- CWTM *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*. 15 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963–1997.
- LB *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia*. Ed. Johannes Clericus. 10 vols. Leiden, 1703–1706.



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## Acknowledgments

In writing a book about how scholars created a community for themselves, I have been the grateful recipient of support from existing institutions. The Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion and the Fellowship for Theological Educators at the University of Chicago gave me a chance to think through early versions of some of the ideas that have borne fruit here, thanks in no small part to the intellectual guidance provided by Stephanie Paulsell and Clark Gilpin. A summer faculty grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled me to significantly expand the scope of the project, and additional faculty fellowships from Indiana University made it possible for me to finish the book.

I have been fortunate also in the teachers, colleagues, and friends who have turned these institutions into communities. Susan Ashbrook Harvey inspired me, as she has so many others, to become an academic, and she remains a model still. Since my first year in graduate school, Susan Schreiner has been an exemplary advisor both personally and professionally. David Tracy and Rachel Fulton propelled me forward at crucial junctures with probing questions and insights. Various drafts of this study have benefited greatly from Jonathan Moore's editorial skills and critiques, and all of my thinking has been informed by a conversation with Rebecca Schorsch that began in the first week of graduate school and continues unabated. Indiana University has been a veritable trove of intellectually exciting and generous colleagues: Robert Orsi helped me frame the project in its present form, and for reading my work and encouraging it with perceptive comments I am particularly grateful to Jonathan Sheehan, Dror Wahrman, Sarah Knott, Konstantin Dierks (who deserves special thanks for reading first drafts of each chapter), Rebecca Wilkin, Ellen MacKay, and, among my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies, David Brakke, Richard Miller, Steven Stein, Mary Jo Weaver, and Steve Weitzman. Anthony Grafton, Elizabeth Clark, and Lu Ann Homza all

aided me through their own scholarship and specific suggestions about mine, Christopher Black gave the whole manuscript a remarkably generous reading, Elisabeth Gleason offered a well-timed comment that sent me down the path of investigating how my subjects created a new kind of religious life, Thomas Mayer read Chapter 2 closely and saved me from many errors, and Amy Hollywood's intellectual energy repeatedly gave me new enthusiasm for this project.

Andrew Beck, at Cambridge University Press, has been an ideal editor – encouraging, efficient, and thoughtful. I am grateful also to Marie Deer, who compiled the index, and three wonderful graduate students – Mark Wilson, Steve Taysom, and Ellen Muehlberger – for timely help.

Books, of course, spill out beyond the world of work, and so thanks are due also to my family. Spencer, Arlene, Gretchen, Felix, Sarah, Jon, and Grace have sustained me in numerous ways for many years. I appreciate Veronica's interest in a process that largely goes on beyond closed doors, but I appreciate even more her ability to pose (frequently) the crucial question: "Why are you going to work on your book?" Jason Fickel has been a partner in all things and my first and best reader. My mother, Peg Furey, has been generous both financially and emotionally, and an endless source of excitement and fun.

There is boundless sadness in the fact that I cannot show this book to the person who first taught me the joys of conversation. Although he believed in private satisfactions and would have questioned my desire to thank him publicly, I want nevertheless to record my gratitude to my father, Jim Furey, who offered me a vision of life in which questions are as exciting as answers.



SOME IDEAS AND PASSAGES IN THIS BOOK HAVE APPEARED IN EARLIER forms in articles I published in *Church History* and *Journal of Religion* and I am grateful to the American Society of Church History and to the University of Chicago Press for permission to reprint.

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## Introduction: Knowing Friends, Knowing God

But what a sidetrack our discourse is taking! My intention was to outline a way of life for you, not a course of study.

Erasmus, *Enchiridion* (1503)

**T**HIS DISCLAIMER SHOULD GIVE US PAUSE. ELSEWHERE IN ERASMUS'S great handbook of lay piety he tells Christians that they need knowledge as well as prayer to persevere against the forces of evil, and Erasmus was himself a great scholar. Together with his celebration of an interior piety accessible to lay people, his emphasis on the spiritual meaning of the Bible, and his critiques of ritualism, this assertion that learning is the cornerstone of a good Christian way of life is widely viewed as a hallmark of Erasmian spirituality. There are pungent critiques of scholarship in the *Enchiridion*, but this is because, as John O'Malley explains, Erasmus thought that so much scholarship was badly done. Like many other Catholic intellectuals, Erasmus blamed scholasticism for promoting the notion that theology was a contemplative discipline, divorced from piety and ministry. Contemporary theologians, he thought, subsequently promoted an arid intellectualism.<sup>1</sup> The easiest way to interpret Erasmus's claim that he had gotten waylaid by talking about scholarship, then, is to conclude that he was trying to get his readers to think about the relationship between learning and life. His basic message seems clear: People should look beyond narrowly defined academic disciplines in order to embrace the sort of knowledge that encourages virtuous living.

But Erasmus's dismayed outburst also betrays a notable uncertainty lurking at the edges of his confident message – an uncertainty about exactly how scholarship and spirituality ought to be merged. Post-enlightenment readers who are sympathetic with Erasmus often perceive his vision of Christianity as a prescient affirmation of their own intuitions. From this perspective, the claim that

learning is compatible with religion seems perfectly uncomplicated – as long as religion is redefined to exclude irrational notions of transcendence, sacramentality, or the superiority of specialists such as priests or monks. Yet Erasmus was addressing a spiritual elite. Not only was the *Enchiridion* – like everything else he wrote – in Latin, but notwithstanding the widespread assumption that its message was intended for a broad swathe of lay Christians, the work dealt with issues that Erasmus perceived as urgent for people like himself. “In sum,” as James Tracy puts it, “Erasmus was writing for cultivated souls who could understand themselves both as citizens of the republic of letters and as individual members of the Body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> For these sorts of people, whom I describe variously as intellectuals, literati, and men and women of letters,<sup>3</sup> the question of how to integrate learning and piety was at the heart of their search for meaning and salvation. Thus Erasmus’s exclamation of dismay gestures toward an urgent question that many Catholic literati shared: What was the relationship between what one studied and how one lived? How, in other words, should scholars spiritualize their work and live a religious life?

In Erasmus’s life, scholarship and spirituality were two sides of the same coin: A life of scholarship *was* a religious way of life. But instead of simply accepting the two as fixed images, Erasmus puzzled over them, looking from one to the other, testing and questioning their respective worth. Other highly educated people (Catholics in particular, for reasons I will discuss further on) did the same thing. For these literati seeking a meaningful way of life, there was no model ready to hand. Christian scholars traditionally had been housed in monasteries and universities, but many intellectuals in the sixteenth century shared Erasmus’s sense that monasticism was badly flawed, and that most of what university professors wrote and read about was hopelessly abstract and convoluted. The literati all believed that meaning was to be found through Christ, and that what one did on earth either precluded or enabled an eternal relationship with God; these convictions in themselves, though, did not answer their questions about how to live.

Moreover, sixteenth-century society posed numerous challenges for any Christians who hoped that life in the world could satisfy their need for meaning. Christian princes launched wars against other Christians; the violence reached a symbolic climax when the Christian emperor’s army sacked Rome in 1527. The dramatic expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and their continued presence in other European countries vividly brought home the point that the Christian goal of universality had yet to succeed even within Europe. The ominous advance of the Turks, who by 1529 threatened to attack the walls of Vienna, raised real fears about the survival of Christendom. Meanwhile, the growing influence of Martin Luther’s protest against the church (which

began in 1517) and the ensuing, increasingly intractable, conflict between Catholics and Protestants destroyed any illusions that Christians were unified. For many, including Luther, these were signs that the end of the world was imminent. Even for Erasmus and others who did not dwell on the apocalypse, these historical developments were harsh reminders that Christianity had not created peace, even among Christians within Europe.<sup>4</sup>

These violent conflicts created a high-pitched distortion that was hard to ignore, but the social and intellectual changes that resonated at a lower register were arguably more disturbing. The rise of centralized governments raised newly acute fears about tyranny, and the fact that a few key courts monopolized financial and cultural resources meant that in much of sixteenth-century Europe, patronage was both more crucial and more impersonal than it had been throughout the Middle Ages. The emergence of humanism, with its emphasis on the skillful use of language, inspired anxious questions about the relationship between inner virtue and external show. Good speech was a sign of virtue, but it also could be a remarkably effective source of deception. The widespread emphasis (at least among the upper classes) on flattery, praise, and gifts reinforced the belief that ambition could destroy society, and it spawned an elusive quest for sincerity.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, new intellectual movements undermined learned people's confidence about where and how to find truth, which resulted in what Heiko Oberman argues was a distinctive sense of crisis.<sup>6</sup> Old arguments about the relationship between the will and the intellect became newly urgent as intellectuals debated the merits of scholasticism (based on logic and philosophy) versus humanism (which emphasized rhetoric). Scholars recovered previously unknown texts by ancient Skeptics, and many literati found philosophical skepticism frightening but compelling: If skepticism undermined any claims to certain knowledge, it could also be used to support the notion that people were right to base their beliefs on faith rather than intellectual arguments. Moreover, the ideas developed by nominalist theologians were widely influential, in part because their basic claim that the human world was the contingent creation of an all-powerful God redrew the dividing line between sacred and profane, and underscored that words alone link the mind and reality, the soul and God. Although nominalist writing was highly technical and modeled on scholastic dialectic rather than humanist rhetoric, nominalism and humanism were similar in that both movements placed a new and unrelenting pressure on words. Humanist rhetoricians explicitly argued that good speech – eloquent, persuasive, compelling language – can change people; as preachers as well as professors, nominalist thinkers similarly emphasized that whether written or spoken, read or heard, words were supposed to appeal not to the mind but to the heart, not to reason but to faith. Thus nominalists and humanists

alike stressed that it was not enough for words to be comprehensible; they should also be transformative.<sup>7</sup>

For elite, highly educated Catholics, these political, social, and intellectual changes made spiritual meaning hard to find. Many prominent intellectuals, in Northern and Southern Europe alike, looked to the Gospels and to the Pauline letters in particular and found there a message that faith and love were the essence of Christianity. This widespread impulse has long been recognized as a significant feature of the sixteenth-century landscape, but there has never been consensus about what to call it. Early in the twentieth century a French scholar, Pierre Imbart de La Tour, coined the term evangelism (*l'évangélisme*), a label that recurs periodically but that never became popular in English-language scholarship (perhaps because “evangelical” is widely used to describe conservative modern Christian movements). Scholars who study Italy have long preferred the term *spirituali*, and scholars who want to talk about a movement of reform-minded Catholics in the North still often use the term Christian humanism (though most now agree that the term is misleading insofar as it implies there were non-Christian humanists at the time).<sup>8</sup> No matter whether these Catholics are described as Christian humanists, *spirituali*, or part of the movement of evangelism, it is generally agreed that they failed to influence the Church in their own day. Catholics like Erasmus did not revamp the church hierarchy, pastor to sick people, cultivate an educated populace, or successfully instill harmony between Protestants and Catholics. By the 1550s, zealous conservatives – led by Cardinal Giampietro Carafa, who became Pope Paul IV in 1555 – firmly controlled the Catholic curia, and the move to impose orthodoxy and confessional identity gained steam. It seems that highly educated, pious Catholics were too timid to forsake the Church, too invested in private spirituality to inspire real reform and – by implication – were important primarily insofar as they can be shown to represent the seeds of an enlightened modern Catholicism or a genealogy of moderates within the Church.<sup>9</sup>

These learned Catholics are, however, fascinating for the same reason that many were ineffective reformers: They found themselves straddling a yawning gap between their ideals and reality and struggling to regain their equilibrium. Buffeted by the bureaucratization and professionalization that took hold in the sixteenth century, they were further unsettled by the problems they encountered when they tried to get spiritual sustenance from books and ideas. They responded to these troubles by turning to each other and by using praise to affirm the boundaries and the spiritual value of their circle of friends.

The popularity of friendship among reform-minded Catholics is well-known but not yet fully analyzed. There are a couple of reasons for this. Because friendship seems timeless, it is difficult to historicize; because it is presumed

to be an essentially private relationship, it is tempting simply to interpret the enthusiasm for friendship – particularly among prominent people – as a sign of their lack of interest in social and political activism. This is how the *spirituali* in particular have often been interpreted. But in the sixteenth century, friendship had religious significance that should not just be taken for granted or dismissed as elitism. This insight is central to Alan Bray’s extraordinary recent book *The Friend*, which argues that from the Middle Ages well into the eighteenth century, friendships were not “set apart” or private but were instead public, religious relationships developed in order to navigate the dangerous world of public transactions. Building on a Durkheimian premise, Bray defines religion as a response to danger – an instrument people used to bind themselves together in conditions of peaceful coexistence, and he notes that friendship was persistently associated with the Eucharist – the rite that John Bossy (also drawing on Durkheim) established long ago was a successful instrument of social cohesion. In England this association persisted even after the religious reforms of the sixteenth century, and for Bray, the perdurance of this and traditional kinship networks explains why the significance of friendship changed little between 1300 and 1700.<sup>10</sup> I share Bray’s premise that religion is about relationships (as well as meaning), but I am more interested in how people subjectively experience the relationships they create than in the general contours of social solidarity that religion etches out. Thus in this study I focus on a narrow sliver of time in order to analyze how a subjective sense of crisis sparked by relatively subtle social and intellectual developments could change people’s perceptions of how and why specific kinds of relationships were meaningful. Catalyzed by the specific tensions and pressures of a particular historical moment, Catholic intellectuals sought out friendships with one another in order to demarcate a realm of spiritual meaning – a new kind of religious community bound together by affective relationships and shared interests in spiritualized scholarship.



THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THIS STUDY INCLUDE ERASMUS (1469–1536), Thomas More (1477–1535), and Margaret More Roper (1505–1544), from Northern Europe. As a famous scholar, Erasmus was supported by patrons, friends, and the proceeds from his published books. He wrote educational treatises, a collection of classical proverbs, scholarly editions and paraphrases of the New Testament, a handbook of Christian piety, over a thousand letters, and a controversial debate with Martin Luther about free will. Erasmus’s good friend Thomas More composed literary, apologetic, and exegetical works in both English and Latin, including several letters defending Erasmus and humanist studies. As a writer he is perhaps most famous

for *Utopia*, his book about an imaginary commonwealth, and notorious for his heated polemics against Luther and Matthew Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English. More had a wife and children, and he was a lawyer and Lord Chancellor for Henry VIII, but he is best known as a Catholic martyr who was executed by Henry's government in 1535 for his refusal to sign the oath that effectively affirmed Henry's break with Rome. One of his daughters was Margaret More Roper, a woman widely celebrated by More's peers for her skill in Latin and her exemplary scholarly mien. Educated at home by humanist tutors alongside her brother, sisters, and other members of More's large household, Roper wrote polished letters in Latin and English to her father and other learned men. In 1524, when she was only nineteen, Roper translated one of Erasmus's devotional works into English, and it appeared in print that year as *A devout treatise upon the Pater noster* with an anonymous attribution to a "young, virtuous, and well learned gentlewoman of nineteen years of age." Three editions of the work were issued by 1530.<sup>11</sup>

Our other main characters – Reginald Pole (1500–1558), Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542), and Vittoria Colonna (1492–1547) – were prominent *spirituali* who lived and worked primarily in Italy. Pole was born in England but spent most of his adult life on the Italian peninsula. His works included an encomium for a friend in humanist Latin, and a long epistolary treatise (*De unitate*) to Henry VIII defending church unity. A possible candidate for the papacy in 1549 and the Archbishop of Canterbury during the short-lived restoration of Catholicism in England in the 1550s, Pole was also investigated by the Roman Inquisition because of suspicions that he sympathized with the Protestant teaching that salvation was achieved through faith alone. Over the years his household included numerous scholars from England and Italy; he knew More and was one of the many men who spoke of Roper admiringly; he corresponded with Erasmus; and he was quite close to the Italians Colonna and Contarini. Like Pole, Contarini could claim noble status, and he spent years as a gentleman scholar before becoming a Venetian ambassador and, later, a cardinal who, together with Pole and others, took part in the papal reform commission that issued the *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia* in 1538. In addition to reams of letters, he wrote unpublished works of philosophy, theology, and history in Latin and Italian. He died in 1542, shortly after his controversial – and futile – attempt at Regensburg to get Protestants and Catholics to agree on a compromise doctrine of justification.

When Contarini died, Pole was the papal governor in Viterbo, near Rome; one of their mutual friends who had moved there to be near him was Vittoria Colonna. Colonna is best known in history as Michelangelo's beloved friend, but she is also famous as the first published female poet on the peninsula,

and she was a prominent figure on the literary scene as well as an active participant in ecclesial politics. Colonna wrote numerous letters, as well as Petrarchan sonnets and religious meditations in Italian, and she exchanged laudatory poems not only with men but also with other women, including Gaspara Stampa, a famous Italian poet, and Marguerite de Navarre, a writer and a French queen.

I chose these characters – women as well as men, Northerners as well as Southerners – because modern studies about intellectual Christians in the sixteenth century rarely look across these divides of gender and geography. We often study Southern and Northern European thinkers separately not only because of the linguistic and historical knowledge required to compare them, but also (and more fatefully) because of the enduring assumption that intellectual energy flowed northward over the course of the Renaissance – that the classical humanism revived by Italians was Christianized and revitalized in the Northern Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, scholarship about elite women in this period tends either to analyze them separately by focusing on their tenuous position as female scholars, or to analyze them alongside male intellectuals and evangelicals in a way that deemphasizes gender. These two approaches need to be synthesized.<sup>13</sup> A few highly educated lay women of the period were in fact part of the literati's network, and these women grappled with many of the same questions that perplexed their male peers. As women, however, their presence also had a gendered significance because they infused the intellectual sphere with an aura of feminized spirituality.

Important also is the fact that although my subjects stand in different places on the spectrum of lay to religious, none of them was a permanent resident of a religious order. More and Roper were not only lay but married, Colonna was a widow who never joined an order though she resided in convents, Erasmus reluctantly – or so he later claimed – joined a monastery of Augustinian canons in the Low Countries while still a teenager, but left in his twenties and spent the rest of his life working as a scholar.<sup>14</sup> Contarini never married but took orders only when he became a cardinal in 1535, when he was in his fifties. Pole, too, was unmarried. He became a cardinal in his thirties but was not ordained until he was fifty-six, when he became Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>15</sup> As these details suggest, the line between lay and religious was not clearly defined in ways we might expect. Throughout the Middle Ages, scholars often received the legal privileges accorded to clerics, whether or not the scholars were tonsured or ordained. Cardinals were not necessarily priests. And with the rise of humanism we can look to the case of Petrarch – who probably took minor ecclesiastical orders but who presented poetry as his religious vocation – to see that even for those who were officially “religious,” their church offices

did not necessarily determine their perception of what a religious life should be.<sup>16</sup> These blurred boundaries are relevant for our purposes because the Catholic literati studied here shared certain experiences and interests despite differences in their “lay” or “religious” status: Their daily lives and practices were not structured primarily by the traditions and communal customs of a religious order. As we will see, they created a new kind of religious life. This book attempts to explain why and how.



WE BEGIN IN CHAPTER 1 WITH THE TWO MOST WELL-KNOWN CHARACTERS in our group, Erasmus and More, and two very different visions of sixteenth-century Christianity. Because scholars regularly invoke Erasmus and More as representative figures, analyzing the generalizations about Christianity that the two are used to illustrate is a good way of clarifying what is at stake in my re-reading of their concerns. Specifically, when characterizing early modern Catholicism in particular, we continue to rely (albeit more implicitly than in the past) on two sets of dichotomy: medieval versus modern and fideistic versus intellectually optimistic. On the one hand, old questions about whether Christianity shed its medieval skin in the sixteenth century and emerged in a form more suited to modernity still structure our thinking, and it has proven difficult to create a narrative history of early modern Christianity that is not built around the drama this dichotomy provides. On the other hand, scholars still seldom assess the Renaissance and Reformation (whether Catholic or Protestant) as manifestations of the same culture, in part because the former seems to be aligned with intellectual optimism whereas the latter promoted fideism. A key indicator of the way these dichotomies can distort our vision is that Erasmus and More are often invoked together because they were great friends who publicly embraced humanist scholarship, yet they are also interpreted as men on opposite sides of the divide: More seems more “medieval” because he wore a hair shirt under his clothes and performed acts of penance alone at night, and because of his zealous fidelity to the institutional church and vehement condemnation of the vernacular Bible. Erasmus, by contrast, is most familiar as the model scholar and critic of superstition. I argue, though, that these contrasts (and the reliance on dichotomies that they represent) are misleading insofar as they obscure the fact that Erasmus and More both (like many other intellectual Catholics) were intensely interested in spiritualizing scholarship and in pursuing this work within the context of a religious community. The community they sought was neither a religious order nor the Church as a whole. Instead, they were interested in forging a noninstitutional community of friends and fellow scholars defined by a shared religious goal: to spiritualize their scholarly work and their relationships with

one another. Chapter 1 thus serves as a synecdoche for the rest of the book by describing how community was significant in their lives and their work on several overlapping levels: as a hermeneutic, a locus of spiritual practices, a manifestation of spiritual values, and a pathway for intimacy with each other and with Christ.

The next two chapters analyze the external and internal reasons why the Christian literati pursued community in the way that they did. Chapter 2 uses Pole's writings to argue that Catholic literati were motivated to seek meaning elsewhere because of their deep ambivalence about patronage, professionalization, and the failings of the institutional church. They did not simply retreat into the world of friendships, but insisted on the religious significance of the community their friends created. This argument is based on cross-cultural work about friendship and patron–client relationships by S. N. Eisenstadt and Luis Roniger. Starting with the premise that humans are social animals not only for material reasons but also for spiritual ones as well (that is, concerned with meaning, trust, and other nonutilitarian values, with or without reference to a deity), the authors trace how different social structures influence the sorts of relationships people develop in order to meet these needs.<sup>17</sup> In relatively simple, kinship-based societies, for example, both kinds of need can be met by extended family relationships. Things become more complicated in societies with more institutions and many different spheres.<sup>18</sup> When societies are highly developed and strong institutional structures have emerged, as in modern Western societies, the boundaries between institutional (or utilitarian) and affective (or spiritual) relationships are fairly clear. In other words, in these social contexts there is a clear assumption that relationships formed within institutions are governed by utilitarian calculations, and thus are not supposed to satisfy an individual's desire for relationships that address spiritual needs. In this sort of society, people tend to invest separate, private relationships – like friendships and companionate marriages – with spiritual value. In sociological parlance, Eisenstadt and Roniger conclude that the more institutionalized and differentiated the social order, the more people privilege the separate sphere of interpersonal relationships. This is the world modern Westerners live in: highly differentiated societies where people regularly assume that personal friendships are qualitatively different and superior to relationships that are established and regulated by institutions – for instance, between boss and worker, senator and constituent, or lawyer and client.

But in sixteenth-century Europe, these sorts of clear structural differences had not yet emerged. On the one hand, European societies were no longer feudal; they had some bureaucratic institutions in place and they were developing centralized state structures. On the other hand, systems that putatively

satisfied spiritual needs (patronage, professions, and the church) were becoming institutions or were responsible for more comprehensive institutional functions than they had been previously.<sup>19</sup> This created a situation that engendered ambivalence: When relationships that putatively embody trust and meaning are institutionalized, Eisenstadt and Roniger observe, people seek out other highly symbolic interpersonal relationships and “go beyond them into the realm of pure, undiluted meaning and trust, uncontaminated by exigencies of power or instrumental considerations.”<sup>20</sup> Thus Catholic literati who were part of the patronage system and deeply invested in intellectual status and the institutional church sought out a separate realm to satisfy their need for meaning. There was, however, a problem with this solution. The separation between realms was not easy to achieve, because patronage, professionalization, and the church – the very systems that motivated these literati to seek out other relationships – were themselves based on affective or spiritual claims.

The most obvious answer for learned types was to retreat to one’s study and pick up a book. Humanism, monasticism, devotional literature, and the evangelical emphasis on Scripture all taught that meaning could be found and the dross of daily life overcome by reading and writing. But when devout literati opened their books, they often encountered a new set of intellectual and psychological problems. Chapter 3 tracks this set of problems by focusing in particular on Contarini’s ambivalence about reading and Colonna’s uncertainties about writing. Colonna and Contarini gave voice to a question that many Catholic intellectuals confronted: How do reading, writing, and thinking engender knowledge of God? In part because of the intellectual trends that were emerging, this question struck pious men and women of letters as urgent and unanswered. Unlike their peers in religious orders who lived in a context where traditional answers were reinforced daily by ritualized prayer and devotional reading, the literati spent much of their time dealing with business, money, politics, or family. The men among them had official positions or had to support themselves with their work. Erasmus was a published scholar; More was paid for his work as a lawyer; Pole and Contarini became cardinals. The women did not hold public office but they too had busy lives outside of monasteries. What men and women of letters shared was a desire to find spiritual meaning, along with what was at times an acutely anxious awareness that this meaning was not always easy to discern, even when they concentrated on the books and ideas that promised religious enlightenment and pointed the way toward salvation.

These well-educated Catholics responded in two ways: by turning to each other; and by trying to create communally affirmed ideals that merged religious charisma with moderate, learned piety. The first response – forging

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