

“The Mirror of the Prince”: Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Luther on Guidance for the Ruler

by Mark Sidwell¹

One challenge to discerning a Christian worldview is the scope of the task.² Although a Christian should consider every legitimate human activity in light of God’s revelation, analyzing a God-ordained institution such as human government is daunting because of the complexity of the subject. One aspect of discerning a biblical approach to government is measuring the character of rulers and the ethical framework they follow. Past writers have tried to instruct rulers about the path they should follow to achieve “success.” Some of these writers attempted to provide a Christian foundation for ethical rule, while others offered pragmatic approaches where ethics take the back seat. Such works may not provide a comprehensive biblical philosophy of government, but they perhaps provide a step toward considering this issue.

Political theory is a broad topic with a long history. In classical times Polybius devoted a section of his *Histories* to describing the constitution of the Roman Republic. During the Enlightenment Montesquieu wrote his *Spirit of Laws*, advocating the separation of powers in government, based on what he thought he observed in the British system. Some works of political theory are more narrowly, even individually, focused. Robert Kolb describes the genre of the “mirror of the prince,” a description of the good ruler and a guide to his behavior.³ Kolb classifies as belonging to this genre three roughly contemporary works by Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Luther. These men all wrote at the same time on the same topic. At times their treatment is similar. Yet frequently their approaches vary widely.

The Three Authors

Before looking more closely at these works, we should consider the background of the authors. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) was born in Florence, often considered the birthplace of the Renaissance. The city faced tensions between its traditional republican form of government and the

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² I would like to thank Dale Johnson and John Matzko for reading this article and providing helpful comments and suggestions.

³ Robert Kolb, “Luther on Peasants and Princes,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, New Series, 23 (2009): 137. This genre, often referred to under its Latin equivalent (*speculum principum*), has its roots in the Middle Ages but harks back to ancient works such as Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus* and Seneca’s *On Clemency*, written for the Emperor Nero. The appeal of such works to humanist writers of the Renaissance would be natural in their appeal to ancient models. Tangentially, John Calvin’s first published work was a commentary on Seneca’s essay. For a survey of this genre and its contributing authors, see Lester K. Born, “Introduction,” in Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Lester K. Born (1936; reprint, New York: Octagon, 1965), 99–124.

growing power of the wealthy Medici family, who translated their wealth from the banking trade into political dominance. When the Florentines expelled the Medici in 1494 to reestablish their republic, Machiavelli served the new government in various roles. Among his efforts was an attempt to organize a Florentine militia to reduce the republic's dependence on the mercenaries who were the mainstay of political power in Renaissance Italy. Unfortunately, when the Medici regained power in 1512, Machiavelli found himself ousted from position, banished, tortured, and placed under house arrest. Machiavelli spent his last years dedicating himself to writing and travel, mending his fences with the Medici to the point that they patronized some of his writing efforts. In other words, Machiavelli was a professional politician with practical experience, not simply a theorist.⁴

Machiavelli has been called the “father of modern political science.”⁵ In addition to *The Prince*, the greatest source of his fame, Machiavelli also wrote other works relating to political theory. His *Discourses on Livy* offered a commentary on the patterns that Machiavelli thought the Roman historian had provided for government. In addition, he wrote *The Art of War* and *Discourse on Reforming the Government of Florence*. His multivolume history of Florence included political analysis of the city's government and diplomacy, although opinions vary about the literary quality of that history.⁶

Desiderius Erasmus (1469?–1536) was born in Rotterdam, but he is better known as a cosmopolitan citizen of Europe. The illegitimate son of a Catholic priest, Erasmus had remarkable natural gifts which he honed, first in a school run by the Brethren of the Common Life and then, after ordination into the church, at the University of Paris. His scholarly achievements won him various teaching posts, including at Cambridge and Oxford. In addition, he made acquaintance with leading scholars of Europe, their common facility in Latin overcoming Erasmus' limitations in languages such as English. Even more than in his teaching, Erasmus made his mark as a prolific writer, and he was perhaps the leading intellectual figure of his day, both through his published works and his voluminous correspondence with contemporary leaders.⁷

⁴ On Machiavelli's life and career, see Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (New York: Vintage, 1994), which won the Pulitzer Prize; Miles Unger, *Machiavelli: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011); and John M. Najemy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For this topic in particular, a work of more specific interest is Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), a study of his religious views that argues that Machiavelli was not anti-religious or anti-Christian.

⁵ See Felix Gilbert, “Political Thought of the Renaissance and Reformation,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 4 (1941): 445–46, 450.

⁶ Stromberg writes, “Machiavelli was not a very good historian; in fact, he was an extremely poor one. (Let anyone who doubts this judgment be condemned to read through all of that endless and formless chronicle of intrigues, his *History of Florence*.)” Paul Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *Heritage and Challenge of History* (1971; reprint, Arlington Heights, IL: Forum, 1989), 33. For a less critical evaluation of Machiavelli's history of Florence, see John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 270–75.

⁷ On the life and career of Erasmus, a well-regarded recent study is Christine Christ von-Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). Still of value are older works on Erasmus, notably Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (1912; reprint, London: Phaidon, 1952), also reprinted as *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*; and Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969). On the political ideas of Erasmus, see James D. Tracy, *The Politics of Erasmus: A Pacifist Intellectual and His Political Milieu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); and Hans Trapman, Jan van Herwaarden, and Adrie van der Laan, eds., *Erasmus Politicus: Erasmus and Political Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

Erasmus has been called “the prince of the humanists” and the leading example of “Christian humanism,” labels that require some clarification. The idea of Renaissance humanism bears little relation to the modern atheistic “humanism,” except perhaps in that Renaissance thinkers also asserted human worth and emphasized human achievement. Rather, Renaissance humanism was an approach to learning distinguished by its sources and method. Scholars of this era often used the phrase *ad fontes* (“to the fountainhead,” or “to the sources”) to describe both their sources and their methodology. The sources were the writings of the ancients, the literature of the Greeks and the Romans. The methodology was to recover manuscripts of this ancient literature and to study them by the grammatical-historical method. Renaissance humanism focused on the meaning and message of the various texts as a source of wisdom for contemporary readers. Christian humanists, such as Erasmus, looked to the Scriptures (and also Patristic literature) as the guide for religious reform. With this goal in mind, Erasmus published numerous writings on the biblical text. Famously, he edited the first published edition of the Greek NT paired with his own fresh Latin translation. This work in particular shaped not only Renaissance scholarship but also the teaching and theology of the Protestant reformers.⁸

The best known of this trio is Martin Luther (1483–1546), who launched the Protestant Reformation. Events from Luther’s life such as the posting of the Ninety-five Theses (1517), the Diet of Worms (1521), and the publishing of the German NT (1522) are major milestones in the early history of the Reformation. Thanks to Luther’s loquaciousness and muscular style, we know much of his personal story, from law student to Augustinian monk, to priest and university professor, to reformer. Luther provides details not only of the events of his life but equally a view into his interior life. In scholarship Luther was the equal of his contemporaries Machiavelli and Erasmus, producing treatises, sermons, commentaries, and other works that centered on his theological concerns but also touched on his reflections on social, cultural, and political issues.⁹

Writers have commonly discussed Luther’s mark on political theory under his theology of the two kingdoms. The roots of his political ideas appear to emerge from Luther’s theological concept of the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*, that the believer is simultaneously justified and a sinner. According to Luther, the believer is a citizen of two kingdoms established by God, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. As a *justified person*, the believer is a citizen of heaven, and the world has no claim on him; as a *sinner*, however, the believer is a member of a state that exists to limit and regulate

⁸ Historians often distinguish the southern from the northern Renaissance. The south (primarily Italy) was where the Renaissance began and was characterized by a focus on the visual arts (e.g., the painting and sculpture of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, etc.). The Renaissance in northern Europe was more literary in focus as shown by the work of writers such as Erasmus, with the spread of their work fueled by the development of movable-type printing in that region. Of course, these characteristics are not mutually exclusive; there was literary achievement in the south, and notable works of art emerged from the north. One question worth considering is whether the difference in region plays any part in the contrast between Machiavelli in the south and Erasmus and Luther in the north.

⁹ There is an enormous literature on Martin Luther. Among the more helpful overviews are Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950; reprint, New York: Meridian, 1995), still a first-rate introduction after so many years; Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Image, 1992); and James M. Kittelson and Hans H. Wiersma, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

sin. Neither kingdom has authority in the other realm, the state having no authority in God's kingdom, and the believer having no authority (i.e., inherently, as a believer) to rule in the earthly kingdom. However, God rules over both kingdoms, and the Christian has duties to both kingdoms that must be followed, despite tensions and difficulties. There is no "Christian state," for the state exists to regulate the sinful.¹⁰ The summary of Luther's views as expressed in the two-kingdoms concept is helpful in understanding his ideas, but there has also been some controversy over his approach. Notably, some critics have charged Luther with fostering a political passivity that hampered the response of German Lutherans to tyrannical regimes such as that of the Nazis.¹¹ Others, however, have argued that such criticism misrepresents Luther's ideas and that he by no means abdicated a Christian's responsibility to challenge wrongdoing in the political realm.¹²

The three works to be considered here, all solid and revealing examples of the "mirror" genre, are *The Prince* by Machiavelli, *The Education of a Christian Prince* by Erasmus, and a commentary on Psalm 101 by Luther, what Luther's editor calls the reformer's picture of "the pious prince."¹³ Machiavelli wrote his work around 1513, after his dismissal from office in Florence by the Medici, although *The Prince* was not actually published until 1532. Erasmus addressed his work in 1515 or early 1516 to the Habsburg Prince Charles, heir to the Spanish throne and soon to be Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, as part of Erasmus' introduction to the imperial court.¹⁴ The occasion behind Luther's commentary is less certain. Internal evidence indicates Luther gave the original lecture around 1533.¹⁵ Kolb suggests Luther lectured on Psalm 101 following the elevation of Johann Friedrich the Elder as Elector of Saxony in 1532.¹⁶

Comparing the Contents

The focus here is not so much the substance of the views of these three men but on the method they followed. Helpful topics for comparing these works are their (1) purpose, (2) sources, (3) use of historical examples, (4) treatment of religion, and (5) description of the behavior of the prince. Making such comparisons, however, requires considering a preliminary question. Erasmus and Luther were

¹⁰ For an introduction to and overview of Luther's view of the two kingdoms, see Paul Althaus, "The Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments," chapter 4 in *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1972), 43–82; also note chapter 8, "The State," 112–54. Although generally used in relation to Luther's political teaching, the concept of the two kingdoms is by no means limited to Luther or Lutheran theology.

¹¹ One such critic was William Shirer, journalist and author of the best-selling *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960). Such criticism of Luther has even been called "the Shirer thesis."

¹² See, e.g., Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), which answers the Shirer thesis and other criticisms; and also John Warwick Montgomery, "Shirer's Re-Hitlerizing of Luther," *The Christian Century*, Dec. 12, 1962, 1510–12.

¹³ Martin Luther, "Psalm 101," trans. Alfred von Rohr Sauer, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, *Selected Psalms II*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 146n1.

¹⁴ Lester K. Born, "Erasmus on Political Ethics: The *Institutio Principis Christiani*," *Political Science Quarterly* 43 (1928): 520–21.

¹⁵ Luther, "Psalm 101," 149n11.

¹⁶ Kolb, 139.

what they appeared to be on the surface—men who sought to instruct princes on the proper conduct of rulers—but it has been debated whether Machiavelli actually believed the things he wrote. As far back as Spinoza and Rousseau, scholars have argued that Machiavelli intended *The Prince* as a satire rather than a genuine description of politics.¹⁷ Garrett Mattingly notes how the amoral autocracy described in *The Prince* contradicts Machiavelli’s political theory in his other writings, in which he was overtly pro-republican. Machiavelli’s own character as a conscientious administrator during his political career likewise clashes with the advice presented in *The Prince*. In short, Mattingly says *The Prince* reads like a parody of “the handbook of advice to princes.”¹⁸ Mary Deitz offers a variant on the satirical interpretation. She regards *The Prince* as a trap for the Medici, giving advice that if followed would discredit them and their regime and thus would promote the republicanism that Machiavelli cherished. According to these interpretations, the work ultimately subverts those who would embrace its ideas. Machiavelli is in fact highly moral, attempting to promote republicanism as a good.¹⁹

Purpose

For Erasmus and Luther, the purpose of their treatises was more straightforward. Erasmus himself contrasted his work with the subtle satire of his *Praise of Folly*, telling Martin Dorp, “In my *Education of a Prince*, I openly offer advice as to the type of training a prince should receive.”²⁰ Luther’s purpose was more incidental, drawn from the writing he happened to be explaining. He said Psalm 101 presented “a particular lesson for those high ranks in which one must maintain a court and court personnel,” with verses 2–4 showing how the king rules his kingdom spiritually and verses 5–8 how he rules “in secular affairs.”²¹ Unlike Machiavelli and Erasmus, who presented their advice to rulers as part of their hopes for service, Luther appeared almost reluctant to involve himself in politics: “For I have not been at court, neither have I any desire to be there; may God continue to spare me from it.”²²

Sources

All three men wrote within the context of Renaissance thought, with its stress on classical learning. Admittedly, Machiavelli cited few classical authors directly, but the historical examples he used showed

¹⁷ Garrett Mattingly, “Machiavelli’s *Prince*: Political Science or Political Satire?,” *The American Scholar* 27 (1958): 489.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 483–86.

¹⁹ Mary Deitz, “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986): 777–99. Deitz’s interpretation is debated further in John Langton and Mary G. Deitz, “Machiavelli’s Paradox: Trapping or Teaching the Prince,” *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987): 1277–88. Langton, by contrast, argues that Machiavelli sought to teach the prince, rather than trap him, so that the state would ultimately be transformed into a republic. Another way to explain *The Prince* in light of Machiavelli’s professed republican views is to see it as only an “emergency measure” until republican government can be restored. See Gilbert, 449.

²⁰ Erasmus to Martin Dorp, 1515, in *Erasmus and His Age: Selected Letters of Desiderius Erasmus*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, trans. Marcus A. Haworth (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 84–85.

²¹ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 147, 166.

²² *Ibid.*, 149.

a familiarity with classical learning.²³ Erasmus, as Born notes, “reinforced his ideas by constant references to classical antiquity in true humanist fashion,”²⁴ filling his work with quotations from Plato, Plutarch, Seneca, Cicero, and other ancient writers.²⁵ Although Luther had limited use for the humanist approach, he also made constant use of ancient authors, drawing from Terence, Ovid, Cicero, and other writers. Part of the explanation may be Luther’s view of government, reflected in his two-kingdoms theology, as being necessary to control the wicked: “the world must be ruled, if men are not to become wild beasts.”²⁶ There is a “spiritual government” that “should direct the people vertically toward God,” but “the secular government should direct the people horizontally toward one another.”²⁷ Because God has given government to restrain all people, not just Christians, those who would govern would do well to read “heathen books and writings” such as Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes, Cicero, and Livy, writers who understood humans in their horizontal situation and could offer useful counsel.²⁸ Erasmus and Luther agreed in the value of one ancient writer in particular, Aesop. Erasmus made a special point of recommending Aesop’s fables as suitable fare for educating the young prince. Luther also commended Aesop, saying there was “no finer book on worldly heathen wisdom” and citing one of the fables in his commentary.²⁹

Use of Historical Examples

All three men used examples from history, both positive and negative. Perhaps because their works were more didactic, Erasmus and Luther gave fewer specific historical examples. Erasmus, for instance, contrasted Solomon and Midas in their respective wisdom and foolishness when asked what each desired most.³⁰ On the whole, however, Erasmus usually cited proverbial wisdom rather than concrete illustrations. One figure who did appear in several places in Erasmus’ work was Alexander the Great,³¹ perhaps because Erasmus saw a parallel between the prince-heirs and emperors Alexander and Charles. Luther used even fewer historical examples than Erasmus. He noted the beloved Duke Frederick the Wise as embodying many virtues of the ruler, praised the example of Emperor Frederick III as an efficient ruler, and dismissed the otherwise commendable Emperor Sigismund as “too small for the things of his day.”³² Because he was lecturing on a psalm ascribed to David, Luther made many

²³ He did include one quotation from Virgil. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. W. K. Marriott (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1908), 130.

²⁴ “Erasmus on Political Ethics,” 524.

²⁵ For a listing and discussion of classical citations in Erasmus, see Born, “Introduction” to *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 94–98.

²⁶ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁹ Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 146–47. Luther, “Psalm 101,” 200, 209. Luther’s editor says the reformer actually began his own translation of Aesop a few years before this lecture but never finished it (200n55).

³⁰ Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 185–86.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 134–35, 201–2, 246–47.

³² Luther, “Psalm 101,” 158–59, 172, 173.

references to the king of Israel and his times. “Whoever is able,” said Luther, “let him be a David and follow his example as far as he can.”³³

By comparison, Machiavelli argued pragmatically from history, not from transcendent principle, to support his position, using many examples about how a prince should act. He named figures from ancient history who embodied the success of the prince, such as Alexander the Great in both his conquest and ensuing rule of the Persian Empire.³⁴ He offered an extended discussion of the comparative careers of successful leaders such as Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, Hiero of Syracuse, and even Moses.³⁵ Machiavelli did not neglect more contemporary notables. He highlighted the failures in Italy of Louis XII of France, the checkered career of Francesco Sforza of Milan, and the general shrewdness of Pope Julius II.³⁶ He devoted his most concentrated attention to Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI, dealing with Cesare’s dependence on his father for success.³⁷

Treatment of Religion

It is not surprising that Erasmus the Christian humanist and Luther the Protestant reformer differed in their approach to religion from Machiavelli, the pragmatic political schemer. Machiavelli tried to avoid dealing directly with religion. Although he cited Moses as an example of success, Machiavelli called him “a mere executor of the will of God,” unlike his secular examples.³⁸ Likewise he excluded ecclesiastical principalities from discussion because it would be “presumptuous” to discuss that which was “exalted and maintained by God.”³⁹ As for the prince himself being religious, “There is nothing more necessary to *appear* to have than this . . . quality.”⁴⁰ Erasmus, by contrast, said of the prince, “He should be taught that the teachings of Christ apply to no one more than to the prince.” The ruler should be “truly Christian” by embracing and emulating Christ.⁴¹ Just like any other Christian, the prince had to take up his cross to follow Christ, and the prince’s cross was to “follow the right, do violence to no one, plunder no one, sell no public office, be corrupted by no bribes.”⁴² Erasmus, says Phillips, “wrote not as a politician, but as a moralist,”⁴³ citing the Bible, notably the commands for a king found in Deuteronomy 17,⁴⁴ to bind the behavior of the ruler. Luther, as one might expect in a commentary, directly appealed to scriptural authority with a view to applying it to

³³ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 192.

³⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 29–32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42–45.

³⁶ See, respectively, *ibid.*, 22–26 (Louis XII), 50, 96–97, 111 (Francesco Sforza), and 57, 89–90, 124, 200–1 (Julius II).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50–59, 215–23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 140 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 148, 153.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴³ Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance* (New York: Collier, 1965), 129. See also this entire chapter of Phillips’ book: “Erasmus on Political Government,” 125–46.

⁴⁴ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 167.

human situations. The prince “rules his kingdom discreetly and uprightly and keeps it close to the Word of God.”⁴⁵ However, although a prince should practice “mercy and justice,” Luther did not mean divine mercy and justice but human rewards and punishments. Mercy without punishment fostered wickedness and punishment without mercy became tyranny.⁴⁶

Description of the Behavior of the Prince

Finally, the descriptions of the behavior of the prince reveal the nature of these works and the clearest contrasts among them. Here the reader finds many of those pungent “Machiavellian” comments that gave *The Prince* its reputation as an expression of *realpolitik*. Machiavelli advised the prince to inflict all the injuries on his opponents at once on taking power “so as not to have to repeat them daily.”⁴⁷ Luther gave counsel for the beginning of a reign of a different moral character: a good ruler will crush vice early in his reign before it can take root.⁴⁸ Machiavelli devoted a chapter to discussing why “a wise lord cannot . . . keep faith,” because others “will not keep faith with you.”⁴⁹ By contrast, Erasmus devoted a chapter of his book to how the prince should strive to keep faith as far as possible.⁵⁰ To Machiavelli a ruler, rather than pursue virtue, should measure his vices so that they do not cost him his state: “It is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated but it is very necessary to *appear* to have them.”⁵¹ Erasmus said rather that “there can be no good prince who is not also a good man,” that being a ruler required “kingly qualities of wisdom, justice, moderation, foresight, and zeal for the public welfare.”⁵² Luther did not expect perfection in a prince, but he did expect sincere goodwill, arguing that a key to David’s greatness was not that he never sinned but that he repented, unlike kings such as Saul who covered up their wrongdoing.⁵³ Machiavelli said that it was better that a ruler desire to be feared than loved, for “fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.”⁵⁴ Erasmus said of the ruler, “let him love, who would be loved.”⁵⁵ Machiavelli taught that preeminent of all the studies for a ruler was war, and he devoted Chapters 12–14 of *The Prince* to the topic.⁵⁶ Erasmus was nearly a pacifist, and his closing advice to

⁴⁵ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 166.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 152–53.

⁴⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 68.

⁴⁸ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 222.

⁴⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 138; see chapter 18, 137–41.

⁵⁰ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 238–40.

⁵¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 118, 139 (emphasis added).

⁵² Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 189, 140.

⁵³ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 224.

⁵⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 131.

⁵⁵ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 206.

⁵⁶ “A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules.” Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 111.

Prince Charles was that war should be a last resort for the prince and avoided as much as possible.⁵⁷ The princes in Erasmus and Luther closely resembled each other, while Machiavelli's stood in stark contrast.

Evaluation

Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Luther wrote these essays on political theory within a period of twenty years of one another. If Machiavelli was a realist, then Erasmus and Luther were idealists, not naïve optimists hopelessly out of touch with reality but men affirming a high standard for those who would govern. There is no evidence that any of these three read the work of the others, but it is hard to imagine Erasmus or Luther approving of Machiavelli's prince. By contrast, one can imagine Machiavelli's prince viewing the ideal ruler of Erasmus and Luther as unrealistic and ineffective. Conversely, Erasmus viewed anyone who corrupted a prince as "no different from one who has poisoned the public fountain whence all men drink."⁵⁸ Perhaps one might say that Machiavelli portrayed rulers as we often think they really are, but Erasmus and Luther portrayed them more as we would like them to be.

Noting the similarities between Erasmus and Luther on this subject should not blind us to the larger disagreements between these two men. Erasmus initially offered qualified praise of Luther, seeing him as a potential force for reform of the church. Ultimately, however, Erasmus found Luther too rough and too much a danger to the unity of the church. Luther, on the other hand, eventually considered Erasmus too cautious and therefore harmful to the cause of reform. Luther wrote to Johann Oecolampadius that Erasmus

has performed the task to which he was called—he has reinstated the ancient languages, thus defrauding godless learning of their crowds of admirers. Perhaps, like Moses, he will die in the land of Moab, for he is powerless to guide men to those higher studies which lead to divine blessedness. I rejoiced when he ceased expounding the Scriptures; for he was not equal to the task. He has done enough in exposing the evils of the Church, but cannot remedy them, or point the way to the promised land.⁵⁹

Nowhere were their differences more marked than over the issue of free will. Erasmus, responding to the views of the early reformers, wrote *The Freedom of the Will* (1524) offering a more or less semi-Pelagian view of human freedom. In reply Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), asserting an Augustinian view of the total corruption of the human will and the hopelessness of the human

⁵⁷ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 249–57. Lester K. Born, "Some Notes on the Political Theories of Erasmus," *The Journal of Modern History* 2 (1930): 231–36, surveys the evidence on Erasmus' opposition to war.

⁵⁸ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 134.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther to Johann Oecolampadius, 20 June 1524, *The Letters of Martin Luther*, selected and trans. Margaret A. Currie (London: Macmillan, 1908), 128.

situation apart from divine grace.⁶⁰ This theological difference helps explain the contrast in the agendas of the two men. Erasmus saw education of flawed humans as a means of reform in church and society. Luther saw the regeneration of helpless sinners as the only basis for genuine reform. However much Erasmus and Luther appeared as allies for reform, they had somewhat dissimilar foundations and goals.

To return to the original question: What do these authors teach us about human government in general and counsel to rulers in particular? With Machiavelli, the first inclination is to conclude that he teaches us nothing as it relates to a biblical worldview, except perhaps as he provides examples of flaws in human reasoning. But if we take the suggestion of some interpreters and view *The Prince* as a satire, we need to look more closely. A satire is like a mirror in a different sense than the theme of this article. A mirror reverses the image of the viewer; so to appreciate what a satirical Machiavelli is really saying, we would need to analyze his counsel to the prince through the lens of satire to see what he really means, perhaps finding the opposite of what he says. And to do justice to Machiavelli, it would also be good to study his other works, which are far less cynical in tone, to see what they might offer.

With Erasmus and Luther, who both follow an ethical framework consistent with Christian belief, we should likely consider the authority they offer for their counsel. It is tempting to see Erasmus, the Renaissance humanist, allowing for the authority of human wisdom while Luther, the Protestant reformer, affirms the authority of the Bible alone (with the references to the classics merely as illustrations of his points). Yet both referred to examples of classical learning and both used Scripture as a basis of their counsel. Luther does this obviously by expounding Psalm 101, but Erasmus also uses scriptural passages such as Deuteronomy 17.

Perhaps in considering how these three men influence our concept of a Christian worldview as applied to the ethics of rulers, we should focus on the method by which all three arrive at their conclusions. With this perspective, the emphasis is not so much on the counsel they give (although reading them is profitable) but how they sought to answer the question. Machiavelli used pragmatism as his touchstone: does this advice *work*? Even if we follow the interpretation that *The Prince* is a satire, though we may tease out a more moral view from Machiavelli, we have to admit that satire—although a useful literary device—is not the clearest method for teaching principle.⁶¹ In contrast to this pragmatism, Erasmus and Luther believed in a higher standard, a divine expectation of what is good and evil. They saw the ruler as responsible to an authority above him. They differed in details (although they certainly did not differ with each other as much as they did with Machiavelli). To different extents they used human wisdom and divine revelation. Unquestionably, they agreed that the ruler is responsible to a standard, and both rooted that standard—albeit in differing degrees—in divine revelation. Admittedly, Erasmus did not construct a comprehensive worldview as we use the term

⁶⁰ On their differences over free will, see J. I. Packer, “Luther Against Erasmus,” in *Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, vol. 4 (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1999), 101–19.

⁶¹ One should note that although *The Education of a Christian Prince* is a straightforward essay of instruction for the ruler, Erasmus was a master of satire as shown not only in his classic *Praise of Folly* but also throughout his writings. If indeed Machiavelli did write a satire, he did not demonstrate the skill of Erasmus in his satirical works in communicating his genuine message clearly to the reader. When one reads the satire of Erasmus, one knows his meaning.

today and perhaps even Luther really cannot be said to have formed an all-encompassing way of thinking about every aspect of life. The Reformed tradition proceeded more along these lines as shown by the programs of Zwingli in Zurich, Calvin in Geneva, and John Knox in Scotland.⁶² Ultimately, however, both Erasmus and Luther included an appeal to Scripture, the only dependable authority for life.

⁶² Without necessarily accepting all of his analysis, one can see in Niebuhr's discussion of "Christ the Transformer of Culture" something of this Reformed pursuit of a wider worldview. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 190–229.