

Julius Excluded from Heaven by Erasmus

Source Analysis

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As Erasmus and his pupils entered Bologna in November 1506, they witnessed Pope Julius II's magnificent entry into the conquered city at the head of his army. This sight dismayed Erasmus. The discrepancies between Christ's representative on Earth, the Pope, and Christ himself appalled Erasmus and pushed him to write *Julius Excluded from Heaven*. The Pope's conquering of Bologna was symptomatic of a greater theme within the Church. By the end of the 15th century, the papacy's reputation had been damaged by the political and military endeavors of popes like Julius, paving the way for Erasmus' criticism and Luther's Protestant Reformation. Indeed, Erasmus' *Julius Excluded from Heaven* indicates that the current state of the Church – with its strong ties to the state, its corruption and its riches – had attracted much opposition. On the eve of the Reformation, Erasmus' piece marks the historical start of a great division within the Church.

In *Julius is Excluded from Heaven*, Erasmus takes on a satirical tone to denounce Pope Julius' actions and more widely, criticizes Roman Catholicism's recent state of affairs. The play, written following Julius II's death in 1513, sets Julius at the gates of heaven as he attempts to break in. The lock, however, is too strong for Julius and his entourage of soldiers. Saint Peter starts to question Julius, who not only reeks of wine but of disrespect for one of Jesus Christ's twelve Apostles and the first Pope. Julius agrees to convince Peter of his merits and thus a dialogue begins, where Julius' achievements and lifestyle are highlighted for how alien they are to Christ and his teachings.

Historically speaking, Julius II's election as Pope was from the beginning, marred in tricks and corruption. By dexterous diplomacy, he succeeded in tricking Cesare Borgia into voting for him using bribes and papal backing. Ironically, in 1505 Julius decreed that 'simoniacal' elections were invalid and that anyone "chosen in an election that been bought should be considered an apostate."ⁱ Following his quasi-unanimous election, Julius immediately began to rid himself of powers that limited his authority. He then used his influence to reconcile the two powerful

families of Orsini and Colonna and also united with much of the Roman nobility. Through such strategic partnerships, Julius created a buffer of security that he could use to set out against the Republic of Venice and reclaim control over the Romagna. Whether through the League of Cambrai or the 1510 Veneto-Papal alliance against France, Julius was constantly on the offensive as he attempted to restore the political and territorial integrity of the Papal States and curb Venetian influence. It is therefore no surprise that he is referred to as the “Warrior Pope.” When Julius returned to Rome after defeating Venice, he was as much a conqueror as Julius Caesar. Additionally, his papacy was marked by his patronage for the arts as he commissioned the rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica and Michelangelo’s decoration of the Sistine Chapel. Here, we have realized that much of Julius’ endeavors were politically and militarily motivated and that many, including Erasmus and Luther, found these roles unsuitable for the leader of Christianity.

Historical context places Erasmus’ play at the center of a time where the Pope’s actions were disconnected from the role given to him by Christ. Saint Peter tells Julius that admission to heaven is only for “those who have clothed the naked, fed the hungry, given the thirsty drink, visited the sick and those in prison.” Peter emphasizes that he who represents Christ should try to be like him, but this comment falls on deaf ears. Julius continues to boast about how safe from punishment the Pope is, how he convinces people that they owe their fortunes to him and how the Church sells indulgences at a cheap rate. Such clerical corruption was not uncommon; this looseness had started to be accepted as the status quo even, with priests taking concubines in for example. Moreover, in their discussion about Barbarians, Julius claims that they have a negative effect on the Church; importantly, he professes that “people are no longer frightened at our thunderbolts... let them think that a wicked Pope cannot hurt them, we shall be starved out.” Through this back and forth, we realize that Julius II and Saint Peter have completely different definitions of the Church. Julius prides himself on his fearsome reputation, to have filled Rome

with palaces, for revenues so vast and hoards of treasure – but forgets that the Church had nothing of all this when it was founded by Christ. Erasmus stresses this underlying theme of wealth, and seems to think that such riches are a hindrance to religious thoughts. Apostolic poverty, of the time of Peter, is far, far removed from Julius' leadership. The dialogue ends with Peter calling Julius "a very worldly tyrant, an enemy of Christ and a disgrace to the Church." The gates of heaven remain closed, and Julius is told to go build a paradise of his own with his army of rogues and money.

Peter exclaimed, "I used my power for the good of all: you have used yours to crush and vex mankind." Through Peter's words, it is clear that Erasmus was a proponent of reforming the Church from its "rampant abuses of the hierarchy."ⁱⁱ Whether through clerical corruption, unreligious wealth or misguided papal leadership, the Church was headed in the wrong direction. Erasmus advocated an evangelical piety that had all but disappeared, replaced by greed, a need for power and a rejection of spiritual duties. It was widely believed that the Church refused to reform itself despite the success of the Fifth Lateran Council instilled by Julius II. The papacy's reputation, it seems, had been far too damaged. Despite this criticism and Erasmus' call for reform of the Church, he desired only moral reform. Hence, he did not want an end of Pope rule but the renewal of Christian faith and life. This criticism and Julius' military campaigns came at a time of awakening national consciousness. With nationalism developing as an important force, it is no surprise that the Reformation first appeared in Germany where "animosity toward Rome [had] long existed and memories of the papal-imperial conflict lingered."ⁱⁱⁱ

Julius Excluded from Heaven represents common criticism of the 15th century Church. Its continued existence and its immense popularity at the time reveal some toleration and agreement with Erasmus' views. However, the treatment of criticism varied greatly between the more moderate Erasmus and the more radical Luther. In fact, Luther very much respected Erasmus for

his attack on the Church until he realized his moderation.^{iv} Testimony to this moderation is Erasmus' denial of authorship. Many claim that he denied authorship because his patron was Pope Julius II, who legitimized Erasmus' birth through papal dispensation^v. This fact illustrates his ties to the existing hierarchy and may taint his objectivity regarding the Church's actions. Nonetheless, this split in interpretation of the Church's misdoings illustrates a resulting split in ideology, where Erasmus wishes for a return to a spiritual Roman Catholic Church whereas Luther advocates for a complete split. This turning point in the religion can indeed be traced back to Julius II. Erasmus' relative moderation is clear in *Julius Excluded from Heaven*, as he never questions the need for a Pope but rather his actions. Criticism of Pope Julius II was in fact criticism of how the Church had been led far away from its spiritual duties and into politics and military interventions, but was not a statement of overhaul. Luther, however, "denounced the entire system of medieval Christendom" and the papal authority.^{vi} This split occurred along nationalist lines, and its effects can be directly observed in today's religious geographic distribution.

Julius II's attempts to strengthen the papacy did exactly the opposite: it weakened it. The Church's extravagant displays of wealth, its rampant corruption and its military and political dealings led to the alienation of many of its ardent followers. The Church had ceased representing the peace of Christ, and had become a usurper of wealth, power and the state. Two of these followers were Erasmus and Luther. Erasmus, believed author of *Julius Excluded from Heaven*, attacks Julius II and demands reform but remains true to Roman Catholicism. However, Martin Luther goes one step further in 1517, with his Ninety-Five Theses. Julius II's and previous Popes' ambition and greed, during a time of nationalistic awakening, led Roman Catholicism down a reformatory period. The Warrior Pope will not only be remembered for his great military prowess and his patronage of the arts, but also as a central catalyst in changing the course of Roman Catholicism.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid
- ^{iv} Gilbert, Bill. "The Northern Renaissance and the Background to the Reformation." *VLib*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Jan. 2014. <http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/00acknowledgements.html>.
- ^v Nauert, Charles. "Desiderius Erasmus." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 22 Sept. 2008. Web. 26 Jan. 2014. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/erasmus/>>.
- ^{vi} "Roman Catholicism on the Eve of the Reformation." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 24 Jan. 2014. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/507284/Roman-Catholicism/257696/Roman-Catholicism-on-the-eve-of-the-Reformation?anchor=ref479470>>.

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Julius Excluded from Heaven Timeline

- 1466
 - Erasmus is born in Rotterdam, Netherlands
- 1503
 - Giuliano della Rovere is Pope: Rovere becomes Pope Julius II, and bribed Cesare Borgia and others to be elected
- 1506
 - Swiss Guard: Julius II founds the Swiss Guard to provide a constant corps of soldiers to protect the Pope
 - St. Peter's Basilica: The first foundation stone is laid for the new Basilica, a project led by Pope Julius II
 - Erasmus Papal Dispensation: he was seeking papal dispensation to guarantee his eligibility for benefices; given to him by Julius II
 - Julius II enters Bologna: Erasmus and his pupils witness Julius II entering Bologna with his army
- 1508
 - League of Cambrai: The League fought against the Republic of Venice during "The War of the Holy League," also known as the "War of the League of Cambrai"
- 1511
 - Praise of Folly: An essay written by Erasmus and first printed in 1511; talks of corrupt Church practices among other things
 - Holy League: Julius II thereupon entered in the "Holy League of 1511"; he allied with Ferdinand II and the Venetians against France
- 1512
 - Fifth Lateran Council: Promised by Julius II at his election, the Council finally occurs where reformative issues are discussed; it is considered a success but the beginnings of the Reformation have already begun
- 1513
 - Julius II dies and Pope Leo X succeeds him
- 1514
 - Erasmus writes *Julius Excluded from Heaven*, following Julius II's death
 - Pope Leo X Indulgences: Pope agrees to allow the sale of indulgence in the diocese of Mainz
- 1516
 - Andreas Karlstadt wrote a series of 151 theses: shocked by large-scale corruption in Roman Catholic Church, he talks of reform
- 1517
 - The Ninety-Five Theses: Written by Martin Luther in 1517, these are widely regarded as the initial catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. The disputation protests against clerical abuses, especially the sale of indulgences
- 1521
 - Luther Excommunicated: Pope Leo X excommunicates Martin Luther
 - Diet of Worms: discussion of Martin Luther's theses and the Protestant Reformation
- 1522

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- 1524
 - o Erasmus' *Greek New Testament* is published with the sanction of Pope Leo X
 - o German Peasant's War: peasants sought freedom and influence, rhetoric that emerged from the Protestant Reformation
 - 1532
 - o 5 years following Machiavelli's death, *The Prince* is finally published
 - 1536
 - o Erasmus dies in Basel, remaining loyal to the Roman Catholic religion; his last words were, "Dear God"
 - o Calvin publishes the first edition of his seminal work *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
 - 1545
 - o Council of Trent: Council of Trent enacted the formal Roman Catholic reply to the doctrinal challenges of the Protestant Reformation
 - 1598
 - o Edict of Nantes: Grants limited toleration to the Protestants, which was ultimately revoked in 1685