Erasmus and Humanism – other key figures

ENGLAND

(a) John Colet
John Colet (1467-1519) was dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and the founder of St. Paul's School in London. A close friend and spiritual mentor of Erasmus and Thomas More. Noted for his own study of Paul's epistles, it was Colet's influence that directed Erasmus' attention to the Scriptures, and from him, Erasmus got his historical method of interpretation. Durant says of Colet that though he was "an asserter and defender of the old theology, he astonished his time by practicing his Christianity."

(b) Thomas More Thomas More (1477-1535) was a close friend of Erasmus. Well known for his book: Utopia, and to us as the "Man for All Seasons" - he was a lawyer, a family man and served as a councillor of Henry VIII - finally losing his head for refusing to go against his conscience and his Church in the matter of Henry's marriage to Anne Boelyn. Erasmus' A Praise of Folly's title (*Enconium Moreae*) is a pun on his name.

FRANCE

(a) Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples (1455-1536) was a philosopher and Biblical and Patristic scholar who influenced William Farel and John Calvin. He translated the New Testament into French, did commentaries on the Psalms and Gospels. Apparent sympathies towards the reformers brought Catholic condemnation of many of his works. It was the protection of King Francis 1 and Marguerite, Queen of Navarre that kept him untouched. A strong advocate of ecclesiastical reforms, he did not deem a separation from the Catholic Church necessary.

GERMANY:

(a) Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) was a professor of Latin and Greek in Wurtemburg, Stuttgart, and Heidelberg. Having a strong interest in Hebrew, during a trip to Rome in 1498, he took advantage of some learned Jewish Rabbi's to perfect his knowledge. He wrote a novel Hebrew lexicon/ Grammar in 1506 which was not a big seller, but which both Martin Luther and Huldrich Zwingli studied exhaustively. He got in trouble for his efforts to save Jewish literature from an orgy of burning by the Dominicans in 1514-16, the fall-out of which brought about the end of German humanism and severely damaged his career. An eye witness to the German Reformation, he did not join it, but despite his efforts, his grandson, Phillip Melanchthon became one of the Lutheranism's key leaders and ablest theologians.

(b) Ulrich von Hutten (1488-1523) was an outspoken critic of the Roman Catholic Church and adherent of the Lutheran Reformation. Unlike Martin Luther, von Hutten tried to enforce reformation by political and military means, too, and supported the Knight's War of 1522-23. Hutten tried to convince Erasmus of Rotterdam to side with the Reformation. Erasmus refused to take sides, and he also refused to see Hutten when the latter came to Basel in 1523, ill and impoverished, to see him. For the final 15 years of his life, Hutten was suffering of Syphilis, a new disease in Europe which had claimed ten million victims by 1510, a huge share of the world population at the time. Naturally there was great interest in finding a cure, and von Hutten identified, correctly, that the disease came from Columbus's first voyages to the Caribbean. He died of in seclusion on the isle Ufenau on Lake Zurich. Hutten's refuge to Ufenau and his death are the subject of a poem by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, Huttens letzte Tage.

Tasks

1. Go through each of these summaries and underline the key beliefs of each reformer.
2. In what ways were they similar, and in what ways were they different?