

From Paul Johnson, A History of
Christianity . p. 267

SOME TIME BETWEEN 1511 AND 1513, two of Europe's leading scholars paid a visit to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. One was John Colet, Dean of St Paul's and founder of its new grammar school; the other was the Dutchman Erasmus, author of the leading spiritual handbook for Christian laymen, and of a much-admired satire on the Church, *In Praise of Folly*. In one of his later *Colloquies*, Erasmus left an account of their visit, and it would be hard to conceive of a more poignant little episode, on the eve of the Reformation, than this confrontation between the shrine of the martyred clerical triumphalist, and the two earnest apostles of the New Learning. Both the scholars were pious men, and their visit was reverent. But Erasmus's account makes it clear they were deeply shocked by what they saw. The riches which adorned the shrine were staggering. Erasmus found them incongruous, disproportionate, treasures 'before which Midas or Croesus would have seemed beggars'; thirty years later, Henry VIII's agents were to garner from it 4,994 ounces of gold, 4,425 of silver-gilt, 5,286 of plain silver and twenty-six cartloads of other treasure. Colet infuriated the verger who accompanied them by suggesting that St Thomas would prefer the whole lot be given to the poor. He added insult to injury by refusing to give a reverential kiss to a prize relic, the arm of St George, and by treating an old rag supposedly soaked in St Thomas's blood with 'a whistle of contempt'. Two miles from the town, outside the Harbledown almshouse, the Dean's impatience with 'mechanical Christianity' was further tested when a licensed beggar showered them with holy water and offered St Thomas's shoe to be kissed: 'Do these fools expect us to kiss the shoe of every good man who ever lived?' he asked furiously. 'Why not bring us their spittle or their dung to be kissed?' After this memorable encounter, the two men rode back to London.