Mutianus Rufus and Natural Religion: A Test Case

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Mutianus Rufus and Natural Religion: 
A Test Case

The relationship between classical philosophy and Christian piety in the thought of Renaissance humanists poses certain questions that are answered periodically but which perennially recur. In part, this may be because these questions arise out of issues that go beyond the historian's craft to the most fundamental choices facing the human understanding. In part too, the enormous complexity of humanist expression makes interpretation difficult and allows the currents of historical sensibility to manifest themselves in analysis.

In the text that follows, I will seek to give examples which indicate to me that the currently general understanding of humanist piety may have led to incorrect conclusions about the stature and clarity of thought of one figure in particular, the German humanist Mutianus Rufus. It seems to me unarguable that the greater appreciation of the difficult, ambiguous, and often idiosyncratic character of humanistic writings is a genuine triumph of modern historical scholarship. Such contributions as Charles Trinkaus' resolution of the question of Valla's 'Epicureanism' by an examination of the role played by the 'Epicurean' portions of the text in the larger argument of the whole work\(^1\) are unambiguously fine and emulable. The implicit rule of such investigations, namely that one can only try to elicit from the structure and content of the author's entire opus what his view of the limits of piety were, and that one may only seek to represent clearly his own understanding of himself (rather than 'History's' or one's own), may be reasonably taken as correct. The spirit of impartiality and tolerance which seeks to trace sympathetically the outlines of an individual's often complicated and contradictory thought is surely that of good scholarship.

Yet it would be a misconception of that spirit to recoil in distaste from

the possibility that individual humanists existed who thought deeply and sensitively about the attempt to synthesize classical philosophy with Christ's revelation, and not only came to the conclusion that it could not be done, but also to the view that the former was a preferable guide to the good life. If there were such men, it does their memory no honor to think of them as essentially pious but thoroughly confused, without at least examining the possibility that what we see as confusion is only a result of insufficiently careful and sympathetic attention to a deliberately difficult style of expression. Thus, it would seem to me a misconception of the spirit of good scholarship to apply the criteria of contextuality, difference of audience, and rhetorical and ironic tone to a figure such as Trinkaus' Valla, but to refuse to apply them to a figure such as Mutianus.

It is all the more important to apply such criteria wherever they appear to be relevant, in the light of the valuable work done in the last two decades by D. P. Walker and others in the field of esoteric writing and symbolism in the Renaissance. They have taught us once more the great and valuable lesson not to expect that everything in a humanist text will be explicit and immediately clear. One of the most noteworthy observations is, I believe, Walker's remark that the Platonic Epistles, with their counsel to concealment, were in great favor among fifteenth-century humanists. Yet it would take at least another essay to explain why the attention devoted to esoteric writing and symbolism in the Renaissance has not yet caused the question of humanist piety to be raised afresh. Let it suffice for the moment to note that most of such study has been in the field of Neoplatonic thought, which shares with Christian theology, historically, ontologically, and in the mode of expressing its tenets, a revelatory, poetic, and allegorical character. As a consequence, the alternative of a non-Neoplatonic, prosaic, and ultimately political esotericism has not been sufficiently explored in this area.

Thus, the example of Mutianus Rufus may perhaps not be most interesting as a study in piety or heresy, but rather as a study in the possible existence of a non-Neoplatonic esotericism. Yet, despite this, the con-

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2 D. P. Walker, 'Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists,' Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 16 (1953), 100–121. Also his unpublished article 'Esoteric Symbolism,' February 1961, which he most kindly allowed me to read. See also, Image and Symbol in the Renaissance, Yale French Studies, 47 (1972), for a recent collection of scholarship in this area.

3 Walker, 'Orpheus the Theologian,' p. 106.
tent of his views cannot be separated from judgments about the form he put them in. And though I am fully aware that conviction can only be arrived at, if at all, through the multiplication of examples far beyond the compass of this article,4 I hope it will be nonetheless worthwhile to open up at least the twin question of esoteric form and content, by looking at some of Mutianus' letters.

Mutianus Rufus is a good test case for the existence of a nonpoetic prudential writing. His letters teem with references to the need for cautious expression of high truths5 and he refused to publish anything during his lifetime.6

Mutianus' desire for obscurity was central to his life. Thus he has not fared well at the hands of modern historians. Returning from his Italian studies which had brought him into contact with Ficino's circle, he deliberately settled into the anonymity of a canonry in Gotha around the turn of the sixteenth century. What little mark he made on history came from his influence on bright young students at the University of Erfurt whom he invited out to his retreat, named Blessed Tranquillity, for good companionship and deep talk about the new learning. He published nothing during his lifetime but was said to have left behind a book on rhetoric which he entrusted to Melanchthon.7 The great reformer suppressed it because it treated the Greeks inadequately.8

Mutianus supported Reuchlin quietly, but chastized him for imprudence. Mutianus is no longer thought to have had any direct part in writing the Letters of Obscure Men9 but is still credited with a kind of spiritual paternity through his influence on Crotus Rubeanus.10 Mutianus was initially cautiously favorable to Luther but soon turned against him. Consequently he lost almost all his disciples who had turned from the new learning to the newer piety. The peasant wars and the destruction of his canonry embittered him. In the last years of his life he conceived the theory that the Reformation was actually a Jewish and urban

4 My unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The Esotericism of Mutianus Rufus: An Analysis of the Urban Correspondence" (Harvard, 1973), seeks to provide that proof by repeated examples, a few of which have been selected for this article.
6 Ibid., pp. 76–77.
8 Krause, Hesse, p. 46.
9 Walter Brecht, Die Verfasser der Epistulae Obscurorum Virorum (Strasbourg, 1904), pp. 4 and 6.
10 Max Brod, Johannes Reuchlin und Sein Kampf (Stuttgart, 1965), pp. 249–250.
plot. He failed to persuade the Elector Frederick of this.\textsuperscript{11} Mutianus died in poverty in 1526.

Seen in this somewhat harsh light, he lived at best a life of wasted potential. All that keeps him in posterity's mind, besides his contemporary reputation, is the collection of letters saved by his correspondents. Some were salvaged by that industrious disciple and scholar Joachim Camerarius.\textsuperscript{12} The bulk of the surviving correspondence consists of the Frankfurt Codex of letters to Mutianus' closest friend, Heinrich Urban, steward of the Georgenthal monastery in Erfurt.\textsuperscript{13} Urban was a man whom Mutianus often praised for prudence but who is not known to have been of any literary distinction.\textsuperscript{14}

These letters have not lifted Mutianus either to esteem or notoriety in the historical imagination. Many are prosaic, dealing with business, intrigue, gossip, and requests for a supply of butter. Others abound in literary allusion or banal moralizing. Still others develop theological or philosophical arguments in elliptical and perplexing ways. Some letters do all three. The letters contradict each other and sometimes individual letters contain gross contradictions on elementary matters. Out of this relatively unpromising material a few dicta have piqued the curiosity of historians. For instance Jean Seznec has noted Mutianus' revelation that 'there is one god and one goddess' as evidence of the mortal grip Neoplatonic imagery had on Christian humanists.\textsuperscript{15}

Remarks like that, however cryptic, beg for explanation. Martin Luther did not have much difficulty, being unencumbered by any reluctance to diagnose heresy. Luther remembered Mutianus as an atheist who had left behind a book of godless writings since he was too frightened to publish them while alive. According to Luther, Mutianus was one of a sodality of Epicureans that included Erasmus and Crotus. They

\textsuperscript{12} Joachim Camerarius, ed., \textit{Libellus Tertius Epistulae E. Hessi et al.} (Leipzig, 1561), and \textit{Libellus Novus} (Leipzig, 1568).
\textsuperscript{13} This collection is now in the library of the University of Frankfurt-am-Main. Gillert and Krause, the two modern editors of the correspondence, disagree on whether the manuscript is Urban's copy of the originals or a still later copy. Gillert, who claims that the copy is Urban's own, seems to have the documentary evidence of other writings in Urban's hand and thus the better of the argument.
\textsuperscript{14} Gillert, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, pt. i, p. 343, sufficiently refutes Kampschulte's notion that Urban was the author of a devotional poem published under the name of 'M. Marulus' in 1514 by Hans Knapp.
did not believe in God because they thought that they could have done a better job of creation had they divine powers. They did not understand that this world prefigures the next as a painting represents its subject matter.  

The more tolerant modern view of Mutianus was established by F. W. Kampschulte in his seminal contribution to the history of German humanism, *Die Universität Erfurt*. Here Mutianus appears not as an atheist but an eccentric. His fear of publishing, his desire for obscurity, the occasional and shocking impiety are all *merkwürdig*. They are all the product of some psychological or intellectual confusion. In every such remark one can discern, according to Kampschulte, Mutianus’ pique against his surroundings. More recently, Lewis Spitz has discovered in Mutianus an ‘almost schizophrenic’ inability to reconcile his philosophical and theological views ‘so that he was reduced to inaction’. However, like Kampschulte’s Mutianus, Spitz’s is essentially pious. Though he traveled to the ‘thin edge of historic Christianity,’ Mutianus ‘never ventured very far beyond the shelter’ of the faith taught him at Deventer by the Brethren of the Common Life.

Though Luther’s judgment is perhaps equal to the modern view in its contempt for Mutianus, the two differ in essentials. Where Luther diagnosed atheism, modern scholars discern vague but eccentric piety. Where modern scholars see only subjective confusion, Luther suspected prudence and concealment. It is thus of great importance to know if in Mutianus’ case there is the possible existence of a kind of prudential writing which seem self-contradictory to the straightforward modern reader but contains a consistent, though somewhat concealed teaching. Perhaps Mutianus’ fear of publication and the apparent inconsistency of the letters stem from the same source: prudence.

The importance of the question transcends the particular case of Mutianus. For, despite the sophistication and care taken in the interpretation of obviously allegorical or symbolic writing in the Renaissance, lack of familiarity with non-symbolic esoteric writing could lead to the expectation of a modern kind of straightforwardness in writers that

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leads in turn to a potential denigration of their seriousness. Thus Machiavelli is often criticized for letting his feelings run away with him in the last chapter of The Prince, once its inconsistency with the rest of the work has been discovered. Similarly, a standard interpretation of John Locke maintains that he never clearly understood his principles but merely inherited them from others. If in fact Machiavelli and Locke, or Mutianus or other pre-Enlightenment writers, deliberately wove into their work inconsistencies and difficulties as a test to divide careful from careless readers, our understanding of our tradition would be gravely flawed without an appreciation of their techniques.

Leo Strauss is the scholar to whom we owe most of our knowledge of the traditions of philosophical esoteric writing. He speaks of ‘an earlier type of writers’ who

... believed that the gulf separating ‘the wise’ and ‘the vulgar’ was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of ‘the few.’ They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men. Even if they had nothing to fear from any particular quarter, those who started from that assumption would have been driven to the conclusion that public communications of the philosophic or scientific truth were impossible or undesirable not only for the time being but for all times. They must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group of pupils or by writing about the most important subject by means of ‘brief indication.’

Strauss understands the origins of this kind of writing to be Socratic philosophy. Socrates was the founder of political philosophy, ‘the first who called philosophy down from the heavens.’ Like all philosophers his goal was knowledge of the whole. However, he devised an approach which took the human things seriously and did not reduce them to the divine or natural things. Socrates started from common opinion and asked the question what something is. The world of common opinion, precisely by being taken seriously, reveals itself as self-contradictory and points beyond itself to wisdom. But the world of opinion does present for itself and its inhabitants a comprehensive view of the whole. There is thus a tension between the views of men and the wisdom of philosophy. For, as Plato indicated in the Republic, the only place the two

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21 Federico Chabod, Machiavelli and the Renaissance, tr. David Moore (Harper, 1965), pp. 146–147, presents a typical example.
23 Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe, Ill., 1952), p. 34.
24 Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago and London, 1953), p. 120.
would coincide would be in the state ruled by philosophers, who are, it happens, men whose real interest is not in ruling but in being left alone to study philosophy.  

Philosophy then poses a threat to all morality held by convention. But philosophy may not ignore the threat it poses to convention precisely because it depends on common opinion as its starting point. The Socratic philosopher is not a hermit but depends on certain political conditions favorable to philosophy. Prudence in expression becomes therefore a theoretical as well as a practical necessity. Philosophy must not gain a reputation as subversive of common decency or as opposed to the principles of the regime. It must also take care not to corrupt the young. As the Platonic epistles and the career of Alcibiades indicate, potential tyrants as well as potential philosophers are attracted to daring and unconventional thought. Potential tyrants become actual ones who are notoriously intolerant of philosophical views other than their own.

The letters of Mutianus Rufus offer explicit support for the view that such a political, philosophical, non-Neoplatonic esotericism existed in the Renaissance. Mutianus tells his friend Urban that ‘we know mysteries are not to be published but are rather to be suppressed silently or handed on covered by fables and enigmas, lest we strew pearls before swine.’ He notes that the golden codices are not to be trusted to the inexperienced and that what displeases donkeys truly pleases the more elegant. Mutianus asks Urban to believe the learned and the good and not the inexperienced vulgar. Mutianus advises another friend to hide the arcana with veils, lest the illiterate become seriously angry with him and his. He says that the best reason for learning has been hidden for over a thousand years.

Mutianus is also fond of the terseness that Leone claims Aristotle used to conserve knowledge and that Strauss calls ‘brief indication.’ After announcing that there is one god and one goddess, he continues:

But beware that you enunciate these things. For they are hidden like the mysteries of the Eleusinian goddesses. Fables and layers of enigmas are to be used in the sacred matter. You, being favored by Jove, that is the best, greatest god, may silently despise the

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25 Ibid., p. 143.
26 Gillert, Der Briefwechsel, pt. i, pp. 6–7.
27 Ibid., p. 30.
28 Ibid., p. 35.
29 Ibid., p. 61.
30 Ibid., p. 67.
minute gods. When I name Jove I understand Christ and the true God. Enough of these excessively soaring things.\textsuperscript{31}

Elsewhere Mutianus gives an account of the Jonah story in which the whale becomes a bathtub and the gourd a bathing cap. He comments: ‘This is ridiculous, but I have more ridiculous things, which nevertheless are called sacraments in Latin, mysteries in Greek.’ After this not entirely lucid observation he adds tersely enough: ‘Of which I will not speak.’\textsuperscript{32}

We have here the insistence on the gulf between the vulgar and the wise and the technique of ‘brief indication.’ In Mutianus’ reproach to Reuchlin for imprudence we have an explicit development of a politically based prudential writing. This reproach puzzled the great Ludwig Geiger who asked of Mutianus:

Was he an hypocrite? . . . Was it fear? Who can solve this riddle, whose solution would be important if it only concerned the individual but which becomes of highest importance since it perhaps characterizes an entire age?\textsuperscript{33}

Mutianus begins by citing classical authorities who celebrate tranquillity in the face of the troubles of others. Crotus has convinced Mutianus that Reuchlin has been condemned.

What do you think was the cause that he was condemned? We must concoct verisimilitude since truth conceals itself from us. Among the credulous mob the Jewish madness is hated. No one will have changed the opinions of the vulgar without danger. Socrates was somewhat daring, he was compelled to die. Aristotle dissented from the vulgar, he did not venture to proclaim it openly. Plato yielded to the Athenians, lest they might twice sin against philosophy. Our Johannes wrote against burning the books of the Hebrews with a free style, more ostentatiously—to say what I feel—than is suitable for common utility.\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 73. ‘Ridiculum hoc est, sed habeo magis ridicula, que tamen latine dicuntur sacramenta, grece mysteria. De quibus non dicam.’


\textsuperscript{34} Gillert, Der Briefwechsel, pt. I, p. 331. ‘Quid putas, in causa fuit, ut sit damnatus? fingamus verisimilia, quoniam veritas nos ipsa latet. Invisa est apud credulum turbam Judaicae demencia. Vulgi opiniones sine periculo nemo mutaverit. Audebat aliquid Soc-
Mutianus is thus concerned about the prejudices of the vulgar. However, he emphasizes that he approves of Reuchlin’s views.

Even so the liberty of the writer does not offend me. I praise talent, I admire multiple doctrine and the antique, but I know the mill ass in the Gospel who deters us from offending the simple.35

At this point Mutianus inserts a typically puzzling passage. Shortly after saying that he approves Reuchlin’s liberty he speaks as if the very secrets he approved are now damnable.

'I would not believe the Gospel,' said Augustine, 'unless the Church had received it.' However, what the Church approves, what is held evil, that our Smoky [Fumus] subverts with a sinister interpretation. The liberty of disputing is not given to us as philosophers. One must speak to the rule.36

This passage seems to have driven one commentator to the view that Mutianus adhered to a double truth theory, believing as a Christian what he denied as a philosopher.37 However, Mutianus has actually only made a distinction between liberty of thought, which he praises in the first passage, and liberty of disputing, which he rejects in the second.

Mutianus gives his reasons for the distinction. First: ‘The enemies of the cross, by witness of Pope Leo, lie in ambush, not only for our deeds but also for our words.’38 In other words, personal prudence is a justifiable motive. But Mutianus gives another reason.

Moreover in this catholic sect are many, indeed most, indeed almost all who are petty and feeble for whom the work must be milky food, not solid, [and] whom the head of this orthodox sect calls to himself by the singular privilege of love. ‘Let the little ones come to me and do not wish to prohibit them, for of such is the kingdom of the heavens.’ ‘And who shall have scandalized one of these little ones, it is expedient for him
that a mill stone be hung on his neck and he be submerged in deep seas.' Therefore, he ought to act more modestly, spare the ears of the monastics, not offend the pious ears of the simple and prefer the opinion of the vulgar to proper honors. To refute the authority of the Church when you are a member of this body is both contumelious and full of impiety, though you may have discovered errors. We know that much is made up by the wisest men, we are not ignorant that men are deceived by religion to put life in order. The simple reader understands in one manner, the erudite in another. The former is content with a rude history, the latter, however, imbued with mysteries, lays open anagogy, allegory and tropology. Nevertheless, by no means ought we announce the mysteries or weaken the opinion of the multitude without which neither would Caesar retain the empire, nor the pope the Church nor we [retain] our own for long. All would revolve in antique chaos. Not laws and good customs but force and lust would dominate. For that reason, most learned Capnion, leave us the paternal religion, lest you so cherish the Jews that you harm the Christians. . . . Believe me, you are never able to prepare glory for yourself unless you keep safe and acknowledge religion, as a partaker of the cross which guards and cherishes the common utility of all.39

Nothing could be clearer than this passage. Almost all men are intellectual children who need the myths of religion to prevent them from giving unbridled vent to their passions. Christianity is the paternal religion; its preservation serves the common utility. Mutianus freely concedes that the wise are wiser than the pious men who are deceived by religion. Yet religion must be preserved for political reasons. There is thus no question of a double truth theory here. The philosopher knows the truth, or at least more of it than pious men. But part of

the truth is that though the beliefs of the childish many are wrong they should not be deprived of them nor ‘enlightened.’ Philosophy itself depends on the existence of political conditions in which force and lust do not dominate. Mutianus was surely thinking of such classical examples as the Thucydidean description of the anarchy in Corcyra when he argued that the loss of religion leads to the rule of chaos. But he would in fact live to see his fears fulfilled in the storms of the Reformation and the Peasant War in which an entire generation of German humanists turned from classical letters and philosophy to increasingly sterile discussions of dogmatic theology.

If then political prudence is the substance of Mutianus’ reproach to Reuchlin, it takes no great leap of the imagination to form the hypothesis that Mutianus may well apply that very standard to his own writing. The letter cited here is notable in the correspondence for its surprising openness, but even in the cited passages an eye to the distinction between what something actually says, as opposed to what it appears on casual inspection to say, is useful.

How, if at all, can the pious passage which cites Augustine and speaks of the enemies of the cross be reconciled with the rest of the argument? It is true that the passage gives a more pious tone to the proceedings. However, as noted before, the argument is unaffected by the pious tone. Mutianus decries the liberty of disputing, not of thought. The ‘enemies of the cross’ turn out to be merely the enemies of Reuchlin against whom one should take prudent measures. But the pious tone is undercut even as it is struck. The sentence ‘However, what the church approves, what is held evil, that our Smoky subverts by a sinister interpretation’ underlines the necessity of political prudence. Mutianus has already alluded in this letter to the fate of Socrates, the model for the problem of the tension between philosophy and politics. Here Mutianus presents as a charge against Reuchlin the charge that was preferred against Socrates. The reference to Reuchlin as Fumus strengthens the point. Reuchlin was usually called Capnion by his humanist admirers. By putting the name into Latin, the language of the letter, Mutianus calls attention to the literal meaning of Reuchlin’s name. Since Mutianus also speaks of book-burning in this letter, the allusion to Reuchlin’s possible fate is pretty clear. Indeed, Mutianus argues in another letter that burning a man’s books is equivalent to burning him. Elsewhere Mutianus

makes the pun’s point explicit in an imaginary dialogue with Jovianus Pontanus where he warns Pontanus to be more prudent lest from a Jovianus he become a Fumianus.41

There is then every reason to examine Mutianus’ letters with a view to the possible existence of prudential motives and techniques which might, if understood, reconcile apparent contradictions and leave us with an enhanced respect for his abilities. Yet one great objection immediately arises. It might be granted for argument’s sake that Mutianus refused to publish during his lifetime because of political prudence. Yet surely his private letters, especially those addressed to his trusted friends, need not have been written as though they might be read by the many. Why should the writing be esoteric if the audience already was?

Several points contribute to a response to this objection. First, we must distinguish between correspondents. Mutianus trusted some only slightly or not at all. He confesses to carrying on a duplicitous correspondence with one Heinrich Musardus.42 Others, like Crotus or Herebord von der Marthen, Mutianus liked but considered rash and imprudent.43 Only the correspondence with his best friend, Urban, seems based on almost complete trust. Even here some of the most interesting letters are written in the early period in which Mutianus is feeling Urban out and testing the developing friendship.

Yet we cannot conclude that the later letters to Urban are necessarily and simply explicit. Mutianus was seriously worried by the possibility of letters falling into the hands of strangers or going astray. Complaints about the possible untrustworthiness of couriers are frequent in the correspondence. So are cautions against sending unsealed letters.44 Mutianus was also worried that a letter or its content might pass from the receiver into the wrong hands.45 This actually happened when Mutianus placed Luther behind Erasmus and Melanchthon in the order of praise. Mutianus subsequently complained bitterly to the letter’s recip-

41 Ibid., p. 345.
42 Ibid., p. 296.
43 See for example Mutianus’ comment to Urban, ibid., p. 267, and his complaint to Herebord, p. 238.
44 Ibid., pp. 5, 18, 19, 30, and 145–146. Also see pt. I, p. 246, for Mutianus’ violent reaction to an attack on a bishop’s courier and pt. I, p. 254, for another complaint about the negligence of couriers.
ient, Justus Jonas, that the remark had brought the wrath of the Lutherans down on him. Thus Mutianus could never be at ease in writing, whoever the audience.

The fear of letters going astray was not such an eccentric quirk in the sixteenth century. There were good theoretical and practical reasons for this concern. Pico, in his praise of secret writing, cites the Platonic Epistles where Plato tells Dionysius that he only expresses his thoughts about the highest things in difficult formulations even when writing to friends, so that if a letter goes astray he is protected. Walker emphasizes the importance of the Platonic Epistles to the esoteric writers of the Renaissance.

The private humanistic letter was also a less private document than a contemporary private letter. Werner Kaegi discusses a signal example of the dangers of publication in his article on the relationship between Hutten and Erasmus. Erasmus wrote a letter containing an ambiguous defense of Luther to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz but sent it to Hutten, whom he asked to judge by Albrecht’s temper whether to show the defense of Luther to him or to have it destroyed. Hutten, however, had the letter printed. Erasmus later complained about Hutten’s action. Kaegi rightly refutes Paul Kalkoff’s assertion that Erasmus had actually intended the letter to be published and states: ‘But such indiscretions were frequent and Erasmus took this possibility into account from the beginning in composing his letters.

The humanistic letter was not only more likely to reach a larger audience than the recipient but was also composed according to a different set of rules than the contemporary private letter. Even where no high philosophic matter was at stake, these rules emphasized prudence and rhetorical courtesy above all else. Erasmus and Vives, who both wrote guides to humanistic letter writing, are enlightening in this respect.

In his De Conscribendis Epistulis Vives’ cardinal rule is to consider to whom and of what you write. Equality or inequality of position, the degree of friendship, fortune, and erudition all play a role in determin-

46 Ibid., pt. II, p. 262, contains the initial remark while the complaint is found in pt. II, p. 281.
49 Werner Kaegi, ‘Hutten und Erasmus,’ Historische Vierteljahresschrift, 22 (Leipzig, 1924), 221. ‘Doch solche Indiskretionen waren häufig und Erasmus nahm auf diese Möglichkeit bei der Abfassung seiner Briefe von Anfang an Rücksicht.’
ing the approach to be taken. You should consider well if the recipient is ‘acutus an hebes.’ You should praise according to what you want from the recipient. Thus you should call a man clement if you seek forgiveness. You should write reverently to a fortunate or supercilious man, openly to a rude or dull man, briefly to one occupied, more fully to one at leisure. To a sure friend Vives says you should write openly and with great faithfulness. To an unsure one, however, you write doubtfully but so that he believes himself cherished and in turn cherishes you.

It is evident how important it is in such letters to read between the lines. Praise of a man for clemency may only indicate that the writer wants clemency. Indeed, by extension it may indicate that the writer believes the recipient lacks that very virtue since he cannot count on its spontaneous presence.50

In De Ratione Conscribendis Epistolas Erasmus discusses the point. He does not emphasize the need for prudence either as explicitly or repeatedly as Vives. However, he writes:

For that is the proper gift of friendship that admonition should be free and mutual and the like which will pertain to this sentence. Because if we write to a tyrant, a king or to another powerful one whose ears admit utterly no reprehension, him we reprehend by praising falsely. For when we speak of many virtues in him, from which he is most alien, when also we execrate in others some abominable vice from which we say that he is immune, silently we admonish the perceptive one what he ought to change, what to follow. I surmise that those praises of princes were devised by the same plan so that under the appearance of praise of their vices they might be admonished without offense, without shame.51

It thus appears that almost any humanistic letter written according to Erasmian and Vivesian rules must be read between the lines. The author is open only to rude or dull men or to his most trusted friends. In case of doubt candor should not be presumed. Praise or examples of con-

51 Desiderius Erasmus, De Ratione Conscribendis Epistolis (Amsterdam, 1670), pp. 350-351. 'Id enim proprium amicitiae munus, ut libera fit admonitio ac mutua & similiter quae ad hanc sententiam pertinebunt. Quod si Tyranno, Regi, aut aliqui potenti scribimus, cujus aures nullam omnino sint reprehensionem admissurae, eum false laudantes reprehendemus. Quum enim multas in eo virtutes prae dicamus, a quibus est alienissimus; quum item in aliis quaedam abominanda exsecravmur vitia, a quibus illum immunem esse dicimus, tacite admonemus agnoscentem, quid mutare, quid sequi debet. Hoc equidem consilio laudationes illas Principum repertas fuisse augorur, ut sub laudis specie suorum vitiorum sine offensa, sine pudore, admonentur.'
 conventio nal sentiment might well be attempts to win over doubtful friends or to placate censorious superiors or colleagues.

Erasmus and Vives developed general epistolary rules for humanists who published other works and did not necessarily have a concept of a secret teaching to be kept from the vulgar. They both published voluminously. If one adds to their general prudential rules Mutianus’ fear of letters going astray, his unwillingness to publish in his lifetime (he compared himself to Socrates and Jesus in that respect), and his well-developed teaching of the political reasons for philosophical prudence, one has good reason for looking at all of Mutianus’ letters with a critical eye.

Two other reasons may also be added. Alexander Kojeve, the great Hegelian, emphasizes the love of ingenious play as a motive for esoteric writing. Mutianus explicitly avows his love of elegant play and jokes. Below we shall see Mutianus excuse blasphemy by saying that he was only playing freely with a friend. The second reason lies in the particular relationship between Mutianus and Urban.

When Mutianus compares himself to Socrates and Jesus he points out that though they did not publish their disciples kept their thought alive. If anyone was to serve that function for Mutianus it was Urban. Urban saved many of Mutianus’ letters including those which Mutianus explicitly asked to have destroyed. This indicates first that Urban thought these letters should survive and give posterity some idea of Mutianus’ thought. Second, it shows that Mutianus knew that his letters to Urban were usually saved since he felt it necessary to ask Urban specially to destroy particularly compromising ones. Thus Mutianus can be assumed to have known he was not only writing for a contemporary audience.

Urban was Mutianus’ closest friend. Yet the friendship developed in intimacy as it developed intellectually. We shall examine here two examples of that development. First we shall inspect the formal letter of introduction in which Mutianus establishes the ground rules for a philosophical friendship. Then we shall look at one of the key letters in the correspondence in which Mutianus imparts a mysterious teaching about the nature of Being. In these letters we shall catch a glimpse of a philosophic education in progress. Erasmus in the cited passage spoke of

the *agnoscentem*, the perceptive, educable stranger, who can be taught through indirection, by relying on his own ability to judge critically what he is reading. Such an education, especially one designed ultimately to impart mysteries which would corrupt the vulgar, must proceed cautiously in moving from the exoteric to the estoeric. The student must neither be corrupted into antinomianism nor must his piety be offended so that he becomes his teacher's accuser. The early letters to Urban are full of pedagogical expressions such as 'do you finally understand the mystery?'  That we may begin to examine what mystery there may be, let us turn to the first example.

On June 29, 1505, Mutianus wrote Urban what is probably the first letter of the correspondence. The two men knew each other from university days and the letter mentions a recent conversation but the letter has all the marks of a formal introduction. The letter is addressed to 'my Urban, most memorably gifted with the urbanity of Demosthenes, Plautus, Cicero.'  We shall come across the reference to urbanity once more at the letter's end. Here it strikes the keynote of eloquence and wit. The letter opens with small talk about the weather garnished with a relevant citation from the *Georgics*. Mutianus then speaks of their common friend Georg Spalatin. Mutinus uses Spalatin as the means to lead the subject from the most general things to the real issue, relations between Urban and himself.

I decided to begin a friendship with your monastery through Spalatin that he might be like a mediator between us like Christ between God and man. Because, as the philosophers teach, extremes cannot be joined without a medium.

Mutianus apparently desires a friendship with the whole Georgenthal monastery and not Urban. Yet he continues:

But you may say: we magnify your benevolence, Mutianus. For you will be useful as well as an ornament to us if you wish to imitate your two brothers the cook and the chancellor. Dearest, Urban, I beseech you to drop that opinion of me. My plan is one thing, the practice of my brothers another. They served kings and courts, glory and wealth and gained a great name among the unlearned. They are therefore not to be blamed, rather praised, because the one wished to get an honest patrimony for his

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55 Ibid., p. 133.
56 Ibid., p. 4. 'Urbano meo Demosthenis, Plauto, Ciceronis urbanitate memoratissimi predito. . . .'
57 Ibid., pp. 5–6. 'Ego constitui per Spalatinum auspiciari amiciam cum cenobio vestro, ut esset ille quasi mediator inter nos sicut Christus inter Deum et hominem, quia coniungi extrema, ut philosophi docent, sine medio non possunt.'
children, the other to benefit himself and us and both wished to make the Mutian family illustrious. Truly that is not my mind. All the Muts have fallen, only Mutianus remains. And so, content with little I do not seek popular glory and riches. If I can be of use to you and yours by the ornaments of good arts you will not ask in vain. But if you long for that which the vulgar admire in famous doctors you differ totally from my manners/morals. My life rests indeed on the leisure of piety and doctrines. Our study is of God and holy men and of the cognition of the whole of antiquity. If the same thing delights you I delight and rejoice. If you feel differently from me you are utterly deceived.

After all it is a friendship with Urban, not with the monastery, that Mutianus wants. Mutianus sets a test for Urban by putting the vulgar view in his mouth. Is he merely one of the vulgar or can he live up to the other-worldly standards Mutianus has set? These standards mix classical learning and Christian piety freely under the general rubric of the contemplative life. The test presents no challenge to Urban’s piety; he must only be of unworldly character and minimally tolerant of classical learning to pass.

But Mutianus is not content to present himself merely as a high-minded, ethical, reforming Christian humanist. The letter takes its first turn.

By why recently, while we were at one, did I speak irreligiously? My Urban, with friends I thus play freely. Nonetheless, that garrulity of mine repents me, especially when, unknown to me, your scribe was sitting nearby. For we know that mysteries are not to be published but either suppressed in silence or handed on by some envelope.

58 This translation of mores follows Allan Bloom’s translation of mouers in his edition of Rousseau’s Letter to M. D’Alembert (Ithaca, 1968), p. 149. The Latin, like the French word, can mean both manners and morals. The difference of emphasis can be at times significant so this admittedly clumsy construction seems useful. Here, for instance, both meanings are present.

of fables or enigmas, lest we put pearls before swine. Because of this, Christ, the master of Life, left nothing written and they who wrote the evangelical history used many layers of parables. Truly as I think, nothing said then might have the slight stain of great sin. For I always look to that word of the psalm writer: ‘In my whole heart your speech is hidden that I should not sin against you.’ Theodotus, a writer of tragedies, was blinded when he wished to transfer some things from the Judaic mysteries to a certain fable. Therefore let it not be that we enunciate to profane ears those things which it is not permitted to speak to man according to Paul the author. There is perhaps greater blame in this, that as if unmindful of having received a gift, I have not thanked my Urban. I demand that I be absolved and offer myself to you in thanks and I wholly hand myself as well as this hasty letter over to you as a pledge of my observance towards you. Farewell and love your urbanity which is a virtue between two vices, austerity and bomolochia which in Latin is called scurrility and a bomolochus a buffoon.60

A superficial reading of this passage might leave the reader with the impression that Mutianus has said something irreligious to Urban and is apologizing. He has some obscure thoughts about secret teachings but does not say what they are. The obscurity of the letter may be explained by its admittedly hasty composition. It ends with flattery and the repetition of a pun that seemed weak the first time.

Looked at more closely a different picture emerges. Mutianus has previously mixed Christian with classical references. Now he raises the question that might follow from such a mixing and that historians have had to ask about Mutianus. If he is so pious why does he say impious things? Mutianus firsthedges. He was only playing. This is plainly insufficient since blasphemy is not entirely excused by frivolity. Therefore he drops this feeble excuse and repents. But his repentance is ambiguous. He repents ‘especially’ because the scribe was present. The word ‘espe-

60 Ibid., pp. 6-7. ‘Sed cur nuper, dum una essemus, irreligiose loquebar? Mi Urbane, amicis libenter sic ludo. Penitet nihilominus istius garrulationis, presertim cum assederit nobis ignotus mihi scriba tuus. Scimus enim mysteria non esse vulganda sed esse vel suprimeenda silentio vel per quedam fabularum atque enigmatum involucra tradenda, ne suibus demus margaritas. Ob id magister vite Christus nihil scripto reliquit, et qui scripsenturum historiam evangelicam, usi sunt multis parabolaram integumentis. Verum, ut puto, nihil tum dictum, quod peccati magni labeculam habeat. Nam semper respcio ad verbum illud psalmographi: “In toto corde meo abscondi eloquia tua, ut non peccem tibi.” Theodotus, scriptor tragediarium, cum nonnulla ex mysteriis Iudaicis ad fabulam quandam transfrere vellet, captus est oculis. Abis ergo, ut prophanis auribus enunciemus ea, que non licet auctore Paulo homini loqui. Hac fortasse maiorem habet culpam, quod tanquam immemor accepti muneris non egì gratias Urbano meo. Peccasse confiteor. Absolvi me postulo et pro actione graciarium offero me tibi et trado me totum et hanc subitariam epistolam mee erga te observantie pignus. Valeas feliciter et ama tuam urbanitatem, que virtus media est inter duo vitia, austeritatem et bomolochian, que latine scurrilitas dicitur et bomolochus scurra.’
cially’ leaves open the possibility that there was another reason for his penitence. But we never hear what that reason might be since he devotes himself exclusively to the reasons stemming from the presence of the scribe. Thus the ‘especially’ turns out to be a rhetorical bridge to the next stage of the argument and not a term of distinction.

Mutianus repents because he spoke in the presence of the scribe. He was not ‘at one’ with Urban and thus was not merely playing freely with a friend. He was in effect in public and repents of saying what is only proper in private. Thus the confession of error is a false one in respect to irreligiosity. The next sentence asserts that mysteries are either to be suppressed or masked in fables. Besides giving the most explicit indication possible of allegiance to a doctrine of esoteric writing, Mutianus here establishes the inescapable implication that the irreligious statement is one of those mysteries that should not be revealed to the vulgar. What he first called irreligious is now qualified as a high mystery unfit for public consumption. Mutianus thus reinforces the irreligiosity of what he said by treating it as a secret teaching. He thus excludes the possibility that he is sincerely penitent for the content of the remark.

The religious references that follow add to the general tone of piety. Yet they also raise disturbing questions. Is the true Christian teaching something that ordinary Christians would consider irreligious? Is Mutianus comparing himself here to Christ as a ‘master of life’ and knower of secrets?

The passage containing the references to Christ, Paul, and Theodotus has another function. After establishing the central point of the argument, namely that the irreligious can be the mysterious truth, Mutianus, now buries it in pious examples. He also minimizes the irreligiosity by speaking of the ‘slight stain of great sin.’ Certainly it is hard to believe that anything was said which was as fundamentally irreligious as the assertion that the irreligious is the high truth.

The argument takes another turn at this point. Mutianus claims that he follows the Psalmist’s precept to hide speech lest one sin against the speaker. In this case of course Urban has said nothing. The only speech that would be practically harmful in this situation would be Urban’s denunciation of Mutianus for impiety. Thus the appeal to the Psalmist’s authority is better read as an appeal to Urban to guard Mutianus’ speech in his heart. The example of Theodotus bears this out. Mutianus has just revealed something about the nature of mysteries to Urban (namely that they may appear as blasphemies), and thus stands in danger of
punishment. If Urban denounced him as impious he would be punished, and justly too in that he then would have entrusted his teaching to the wrong ears. Yet the reference to Theodotus also warns Urban to keep silent. Mutianus admonishes Urban directly with the reference to Paul: 'Let it therefore not be that we enunciate. . . .' These direct appeals to Urban have the effect of defining the nature of the friendship Mutianus wants. He and Urban will enjoy the knowledge of secret teachings which are held irreligious by the many. This in turn gives substance to the requirements of otherworldliness and contempt for glory that Mutianus had demanded earlier. Then the requirements seemed moralistic and banal. Now they appear as the necessary conditions for a life spent pursuing truths that can never find popular favor.

Just as the passage justifies the earlier, abstractly stated preference for the contemplative life, this passage concretely justifies esoteric writing while discussing it in a dogmatic, assertive way. Mutianus gives no explicit reasons for esoteric writing except the fine pearllike nature of the doctrines. What they are he does not say except to indicate that they may be irreligious. Yet this passage is itself written to be read with a little care. Thus it reveals a test for the friendship more important than the one explicitly stated. The real test for Urban is not whether he is base and worldly or high and spiritual but whether or not he can read carefully.

Mutianus takes care to cover himself at all points. A careless reader would not see that the apology is bogus in regard to blasphemy and real only in regard to prudence. Thus he would miss the central teaching of the letter and would have to content himself with the high-sounding platitudes of the appeal for probity in the first part of the letter. If Urban is careful but unsympathetic he will not be able to prove anything. Mutianus makes sure of this by inserting the claim that the letter was composed hastily. That claim, if correct, would refute any reading which, like this one, discerns careful composition. However, it is undermined by the arrangement of the whole letter and notably mocked by the conclusion of the letter in which it itself appears.

By suggesting that he bears more blame for not thanking Urban for the gift Mutianus raises the obvious question: more blame than what? The only thing he has assumed blame for in this letter is imprudence. Thus Mutianus completes the tactic of minimization by making the original charge of impiety disappear completely. The greater sin is a social peccadillo, the lesser is imprudence. Then, like a coda in a light
key, Mutianus repeats the theme of confession and request for absolution. Here the tone is even more obviously elegant and urbane than before where, though the confession was false, it contained an unstated truthful confession of great seriousness. It is thus appropriate that the letter end with a reference to urbanity which moderates between scurrility and austerity. Thus urbanity seems here to be identical with moderation itself.

We have followed the letter as it proceeded from the most general subjects to the most intimate by graded steps. Mutianus moved from the weather to friendship with the monastery, to friendship with Urban, to a moral and finally an intellectual definition of friendship. The final references to urbanity as a mediating virtue lead the reader back to the letter’s beginning. First, they recall the pun in the salutation. Urbanity then was empty of content. Now it has come to mean the kind of moderating playfulness that makes such a philosophic friendship possible, a quality of joking about the things the pious hold sacred but staying within bounds. Second, the sentence recalls the reference to Spalatin mediating between Urban and Mutianus as Christ does between God and man. It is clear from the letter that being ‘at one’ is crucial to the friendship and that it does not need any external mediator like Spalatin to prosper. Or rather, Spalatin’s Christ-like mediation is replaced by the mediating virtue of urbanity. These references to the beginning are just obtrusive enough to give the lie to the claim that the letter was written without care. However, a careful and unsympathetic reader would not be able to denounce Mutianus in the face of this disclaimer of intention.

While the previous letter speaks of mysteries but tells the reader little about them, the following letter deigns to impart one. But the real mystery that is imparted is not the same as the one apparently taught.

To Heinrich Urban, a Brahmin Cistercian, by reasons, his patron in the retreats of the Valley.

We admire two things in divine Bernard, celebrated author of the monastic life: that he was an autodidact and that he bore inflicted injury patiently. For although Jerome the Stridonian in the prologue of the ancient mystery testifies that no one is perfect without teaching, nevertheless Pliny proves that Mamilius, a senator noble in the greatest disciplines, was not taught, also that the sculptor Syllanion and Epicurus the philosopher were their own masters. Also that polymath Aurelius Augustinus says in the fourth book of the Confessions ‘I read and understood by myself the Aristotelian predicates.’ Thus [is] our Bernard, without doubt a man of the first name among the holiest whose family today extends widely, an observer of the heavens, so learned by assiduous reading and acumen of talent that he is called mellifluous by his own. His
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divine soul imitated true wisdom which is in heaven, Christ the King who preaches that injury is to be suffered. Thus he bore affliction moderately as he prayed there should be forgiveness for the violent. Indeed, what does Bernard do? There came to him someone (I do not know who), under the Cistercian yoke. Admonished by him that he could prosper elsewhere if he might wish, impatient at the repulse he suddenly struck the abbot a blow. Those who were standing nearby would have avenged so impious a deed if the authority of Bernard had not forbidden [the use of] force to repel force. 'It is necessary,' said the most holy father, 'for me to forgive others whom by Christ the saviour who is the true ... [lacuna in the manuscript] all is forgiven.' Oh voice worthy of imitation! You grandsons of Bernard in the Georgian hermitage are not so patient. You get angry because of a light crime. What else are you than the brothers of Bernard, the sons of Christ? To know [how] to endure is a true and indubitable virtue and especially Christian. The most strong, heavenly Christopher, once struck by the prefect of the Samians, said, 'I would hit you back but that Christian piety, which I cultivate, prohibits it.' But what is the point of this relation? It concerns the lordly suffering of these days. What kind of injuries did Christ not bear with equanimity that he might thoroughly teach us patience? Oh how much ingratitude, how much arrogance holds us! We do not wish to be called brothers, not fathers, but lords. Christ assumed the servile body and went on the cross which is a servile punishment. If he [was] a servant in what way [are] we lords? Gregory, the first of the Roman pontiffs, called himself a servant of the servants of God. For he thought that he was not ornamented but heavily burdened [onerari] by the appellation of lord. And the god-equal virgin, saluted by the celestial messenger and taught the very famous and ineffable mystery, did not call herself the mother of the lord nor daughter nor wife but handmaiden. Similarly, the more abjectly monks depress themselves the more sublimely are they lifted into heaven. Wherefore, my sweetest Urban, if the dogs of the night bite you and attack your life and manners/morals with petulant words (as they are sarcastic), let there occur to you Christian fortitude and the humility of our Redeemer and most of all the admirable tolerance and gentleness of the mildest leader of your order. If, however, pernicious adulators will have saluted you as revered, learned, talented, prudent, holy, humane, you may say with the prophet, 'Give the glory not to us but to your name,' and pray God that you become worthy of that which is attributed to you. Stupid mortality thinks [it] something to bear a magistracy in a monastery and to enjoy imaginary power. From this arise emulations and hates. The hooded magi would act well enough among themselves and their life would doubtless be safer and more blessed if, living more by the spirit than the flesh according to the example of the ancients, they would refer all sayings, doings, thoughts [there] whence whatever has a good name in the lands flows down just as from a most fertile fount. For the lucid precept of the Lord illuminating the eyes of the mind has two headings: that you should love God and men just as yourself. This fundamental principle, pleasing to heaven and men, makes us participants in celestial matters. This is the natural law, not written on stone tablets like the Mosaic, not incised in bronze like the Roman, not printed on papers and skins but poured in our hearts by the highest teacher. Whoever devours this memorable and salutary eucharist piously enough has done the divine matter signed with a happy mark. For the mystic oblation is of old Palestine and conceals the true body of Christ, that is peace and concord, with bread and wine. Nor can there be any host holier than
mutual charity. And so there are no prayers in the Christian religion more famous than that most ancient one which the Church pours out for all peoples on the day of St. Venus, not even excluding those who are enemies, outside the confession, that we may convoke all men as much as is in us by divine words. [In this we are] far more benign than the Jews who do not indeed show the way to the erring unless [they be] their own or thirsting at the fountain. Of whom I do not know how much it is from impudence or, should I say, ignorance, that they say that Christ’s body was taken by the disciples from the sepulchre, kept among bushes and grass but was finally recovered by scouts sent in the public service. Less silly are the Mohammedans and the Turks who jeer that the true Christ was not affixed to the cross but someone else who will have been extremely similar to Christ. This is reported by Marsilio Ficino in that volume which Spalatin recently bought. The conflicting ones do not fall so far short of the opinion of the most learned. For Ambrose writes that Pilate did not see the true Christ. This, which ought to be arcane, I do not wish to enunciate. It establishes enough that Apollonius of Tyana, by the witness of Philostrate, when he was accused before Domitian was seen suddenly to have vanished from that judgment and to have been nowhere. Give ear, I am unable not to breathe upon some mystery. Plato and Aristotle and Manicheus and Ambrose opine the true man to be soul which if we are silent does not appear. Apollonius was silent, therefore he was not seen. The true Christ is soul and spirit which can neither be comprehended nor held with hands nor seen. Socrates said to the youth, ‘Speak that I may see you.’ Now you understand, Urban, that by speech alone we manifest the soul and the God of this smaller cosmos which dwells in the heaven either of the breast or the head. Whence we are called familiars of heaven if we will have lived spiritually or philosophically or Christianly, obeying more the soul than the appetites. But lest I seduce your sanctity from the academy and the Christian portico to the impious way which vexes us philosophers, I sound the retreat and I ask you that you love me with that your singular love. I now go to the first supplications because of God, mindful of you, requiring back your prayers to Christ. Farewell, venerable father. The Ides of April.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{61}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 84–87. 'Hainreico Ourbano, Bragmane Cistercensi a rationibus, suo patrono in Vallensi latebra.

'S. Miramur in divo Bernardo, monastice vite celebri auctore duo precipua, quod et ab\textsuperscript{astro}\textsuperscript{a}\textsuperscript{X}\textsuperscript{TO} suerit et illatam infram patienter tulerit. Quamquam enim Hieronymus Stridonensis in prologo veteris mysterii testetur neminem sine docente perfectum esse, Plineus tamen probat Mamilium senatorem maximis nobilem disciplinis doctore nullo fuisse, Syllanion quoque statarius et Epicurus philosophus se ipso magistros habuere. Aurelius item Augustinus ille polygraphatos libro confessionum quarto: “Aristotelica” inquit “predicamenta solus legi et intellexi.” Sic Bernardus noster, vir haud dubie primi nominis inter sanctissimos, cuius familia hodie late patet celestium contemplatrix, tantum assidue legendo et ingenii acumine didicit, ut a suis mellifluus dicatur. Imitatus est veram sapientiam, que in celo est, divinum animum suum Christum regem, qui ut ferendam esse injuriam precepit, ita illatam adeo moderate tulit, ut veniam sit percussorum. Age vero, quid Bernardus? Venit ad eum nescio quis subiturus iugum Cistercensie. Monitum ab eo posse aliubi quoque proficere, si vellet confestim impatiens repulse pulgo abbatem pulsavit. Fuisserit statim, qui aderant, ulti tam impium facinus, nisi Bernardi auctoritas vim vi repellere vetuisset. “Oportet,” inquit sanctissimus pater, “me aliis ignoscere,
cui a Christo servatore, qui verus est . . . toties ignoscitur.” O vocem imitacione dignam!


Deumque orabis, ut fias eo dignus quod tibi tribuitur. Stulta mortalitas putat aliquis esse magistatum in cenobio gerere et frui imaginaria potestate. Hinc oborintur emulationes et odio. Satis commode agerent inter se cucullati magi esse vita eorum procul dubium ac beatior, si exemplo veterum spiritu magis quam carne viventes omnia dicit, facta, cogitata ad Deum referrent, unde, quicquid in terris boni nomen habet, velut ex uberrimo fonte, non equanimiter Christus, ut nos pacientiam edoceret? O quanta ingravitudo, quanta superstia nos tenet! Non fratres, non patres dici volumus, sed domini. Christus servile corpus induct in crucem, quod est servile supplicium, actus. Si ille servus quomodo nos domini? Gregorius primus pontificum Romanorum se servorum Dei servum appellavit. Arbitrabatur enim se domini appellatione non ornari, sed graviter onerari. Et deipara virgo a celesti nuncio salutata praeclarumque et ineffabile mysterium edocta non se domini matrem, non filiam, non sponsam dixit, sed ancillam. Similiter quo se abiectus monaste deprimunt, eo sublimius in celum evehuntur. Quare, mi suavissime Urbanse, si te mordent lucernarii canes et vitam ac mores tuos, ut sunt dicaces, verborum petulancia lacessunt, occurrtitur tibi Christiana fortitudo et humilitas Redemptoris nostri et potissimum mitissimi ducis tui ordinis admirabile tolerantia et mansuetudo. Sin autem te permitti adulatores reverendum, doctum, ingeniosum, prudentem, sanctum, humanum salutaverint, dices cum prophet: “Non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam.”

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Deumque orabis, ut fias eo dignus quod tibi tribuitur. Stulta mortalitas putat aliquis esse magistatum in cenobio gerere et frui imaginaria potestate. Hinc oborintur emulationes et odio. Satis commode agerent inter se cucullati magi esse vita eorum procul dubium ac beatior, si exemplo veterum spiritu magis quam carne viventes omnia dicit, facta, cogitata ad Deum referrent, unde, quicquid in terris boni nomen habet, velut ex uberrimo fonte, non equanimiter Christus, ut nos pacientiam edoceret? O quanta ingravitudo, quanta superstia nos tenet! Non fratres, non patres dici volumus, sed domini. Christus servile corpus induct in crucem, quod est servile supplicium, actus. Si ille servus quomodo nos domini? Gregorius primus pontificum Romanorum se servorum Dei servum appellavit. Arbitrabatur enim se domini appellatione non ornari, sed graviter onerari. Et deipara virgo a celesti nuncio salutata praeclarumque et ineffabile mysterium edocta non se domini matrem, non filiam, non sponsam dixit, sed ancillam. Similiter quo se abiectus monaste deprimunt, eo sublimius in celum evehuntur. Quare, mi suavissime Urbanse, si te mordent lucernarii canes et vitam ac mores tuos, ut sunt dicaces, verborum petulancia lacessunt, occurrtitur tibi Christiana fortitudo et humilitas Redemptoris nostri et potissimum mitissimi ducis tui ordinis admirabile tolerantia et mansuetudo. Sin autem te permitti adulatores reverendum, doctum, ingeniosum, prudentem, sanctum, humanum salutaverint, dices cum prophet: “Non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam.”
Between 1506 and 1508 Mutianus wrote the Cistercian Urban a series of letters dealing with the virtues and origins of monasticism. He traces the origins of the order back from Bernard to Benedict and from there to Pythagoras.\textsuperscript{62} This letter is the climax. Properly for a culmination it leads monasticism back to its religious origins and offers a decisive judgment on it. However, this judgment is somewhat concealed.

The obvious problem presented by this letter is the connection between the first and last parts. Spitz refers to this text when he speaks of Mutianus' approximation of the Docetist teaching on the crucifixion which led him to the thin edge of historical Christianity.\textsuperscript{63} Yet this learned foray appears in the context of pious praise of Christian humility. If there is, as we shall argue, a flat contradiction between the two themes the question of the intentional or accidental nature of the contradiction naturally will arise.

To see if there really is a contradiction we must trace the letter's argument before we contrast its start with its end. The salutation gives warning of the problem to come since it equates Christian with pagan monasticism in a startling way. Mutianus praises Bernard. He briefly mentions Bernard's merits as an autodidact but leaves the subject quickly to strike the letter's main theme: the virtue of Christian humility.

It is worth noting that Mutianus does not present a rational argument in favor of the world- and self-denying virtues. He once states dogmatically that endurance is a true and unquestionable virtue. For the rest he merely cites examples. In the first relevant sentence he speaks of Bernard's imitation of true, heavenly wisdom, The story about Bernard depends entirely on imitation. Bernard can serve as a model of restraint for his monks because Christ exists as a model for him.

After telling the story Mutianus launches into a formal and pathetic oration to the monks full of rhetorical questions, direct address, and expostulation. No argument is presented but they are adjured to imitate Bernard and other exemplary Christian figures. In six repeated separate examples Mutianus hammers home the point that humility, patience, cosmi, qui in celo sive pectoris sive verticis habitat. Unde dicimur celo familiares, si spiritualiter, vel philosophice vel christiane vixerimus animo magis quam appetitu ob- temperantes. Sed ne sanctitatem tuam ab academia porticuque Christiana ad impiam viam, que nos philosophos fatigat, seducam, cano receptui teque rogo ut ames me amore illo tuo singulari. Ego nunc propter Deum ad primarium supplicia vado tu mem or tuas ad Christum preces reposcendo. Vale, pater venerabilis. Idibus Aprilis.'

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 53.

\textsuperscript{63} Spitz, Religious Renaissance, p. 142.
and forbearance are all especially Christian virtues which Christ’s life itself exemplifies. The conclusive example of Christian humility that Mutianus cites is the crucifixion. ‘Christ assumed the servile body and went on the cross which is a servile punishment. If he was a servant, in what way are we lords?’ Nothing could be clearer. If God’s Son let himself suffer a slave’s punishment men should imitate him. Mutianus does not here countenance the possibility that God’s Son did not endure a servile punishment. If that were so the entire force of the argument from example would be dissipated and there would remain no clear reason for men to undergo ascetic restrictions.

At this point a change takes place in the letter’s tone and direction. Mutianus ends his public speech to the monks and begins to talk to Urban. The tone is no longer as exalted and the argument undergoes a shift. It appears now that humility is not the only divine quality since Mutianus speaks of giving glory to God. For the moment this remains merely a rhetorical device in praise of human humility but the theme of the gloriousness of divinity is one that will flower later with curious results.

Mutianus begins a philosophy lesson in speaking to Urban. The monks, apparently despite Bernard’s example, are worldly. Living properly means living by the example of the ancients according to the spirit and not the flesh. The distinction between spirit and flesh is another that will prove important later in the letter, but is only imparted to Urban and not his fellow monks. Mutianus then reveals that there is an inner natural moral law which makes it possible for men to be participants in celestial things. Mutianus seems to forget the crucifixion in this passage and the need to imitate Christ’s suffering since following the inner law seems to suffice. In fact the imagery indicates the shift from moral example to intellectual education that has taken place. God is the highest teacher who presents a lucid precept that illuminates the eyes of the mind. Mutianus is in fact here restating an understanding of the eucharist previously imparted.64 There he argued that living well is the true eucharist but that the theologians who believe that the ritual itself contains something sacramental are in error.65

64 Gillert, Der Briefwechsel, pt. 1, pp. 39-41.
65 Ibid., p. 41. ‘Regnum Dei non est cibus et potus iusticia secundum fidem et secura tranquillitas cum humilitate.’ Illum calicem salutis accipiam et nomen Domini invocabo. Iustum panem angelorum utinam digne comederemus. ‘Meus cibus est,’ ut inquit eterna veritas, lex viva caput ecclesie, ‘ut faciam voluntatem eius, qui me misit et impleam opus.
Though there is obviously a difference and perhaps even a tension between the praise of Christians’ self-denial and this universalistic, essentially ethical teaching which identifies Christianity with the law of nature there is nothing unusual or shocking about it, taken by itself. There is perhaps something a little surprising in the reference to St. Venus. Mutianus certainly follows a well-known tradition in contrasting Christian universalism to Jewish particularism, but it now appears that there is something archetypally universal in classical paganism and its erotic festival of equality.

It also appears in retrospect that the contrast between the Mosaic and Roman laws and the natural law is also a contrast between national and universal law. Thus the remark about the ‘mystic oblation’ being of old Palestine and concealing by its bread and wine the true ethical meaning of the sacrament seems to point to a kind of Jewish narrowness in the conventional understanding of Christianity itself. The tensions between Christianity commonly understood and the natural law are thus perceptible but faint.

At this point, however, Mutianus returns to the subject of the crucifixion which he raised originally in honor of the season and as the climactic example of Christian humility. Now he turns to it by denouncing the Jewish teaching that denies the resurrection. However, the Moslem teaching which denies the reality of the crucifixion but holds that a double was crucified instead turns out not to be so far from the mark. The reason, Mutianus says, is an arcane one. He makes a great show of not wanting to tell the secret, thus making it all the more interesting and attractive to his reader. The secret turns out to be what Spitz calls Docetism. This ‘Docetism’ lies in the radical devaluation of the body and the emphasis on the sole reality of the spirit to an almost ludicrous extent. Because spirit alone is real and expresses itself through speech, silence equals invisibility. The view of divinity as too fine and glorious to be touched by gross corporeality and hence by physical suffering is precisely the Docetist heresy that Spitz discerns here.

eius.” Si ergo Dei cibus est obedere mandatis divinis, si maximum mandatorum est, ut Deum et proximum diligamus, cogita, mi Urbane, an illi mori recte vescantur cibo Dei, qui vorant hostias et contra Christiane gracie sacramentum pacem turbant et odia seminant. Nos, ut corpus Domini decentiam capiamus, non solum mystice, ut supra dixi, sed etiam visibiliter vel, ut theologoi loquentur, sacramentaliter, parabo nobis vestem nuptialem sanctis et piis affectibus veluti gemmis ornatam, ut luceant opera nostra coram hominibus et beata tranquillitas inaugurant.
The examples that Mutianus chooses to enforce his point are interesting for two reasons. First, they extend the universalism of his Christianity. Now they include Apollonius of Tyana, a late classical miracle-working competitor of Christ, and the dualist opponents of Christianity, the Manicheans. At this point it appears that the true teaching about the nature of spirit is the possession at least as much of the opponents of Christianity as of Christians like Ambrose. Since Mutianus includes the Jews among the diversi who are not so far wrong (because only their teaching and that of the Moslems have been mentioned so far), it follows that the superiority of Christianity to Judaism is maintained at the level of metaphor alone. Christianity stands for universalism, Judaism for particularism. Yet with the inclusion of Aristotle, Apollonius, and the Manicheans in the ranks of the knowers of the mystery, universalism transcends the Christianity which earlier served as a metaphor for it.

The second point of interest about the examples is that they are inappropriate. In the case of the crucifixion Christ was visible on the cross but apparently not really there in His Being. In the examples someone is invisible through silence though he is really there. The inappropriateness reveals an underlying point of emphasis, however. Mutianus uses the examples to inculcate the doctrine that body is wholly illusion and spirit alone real. He abstracts completely from the possibility of the Word made flesh, from the possibility, in short, of God’s Son putting on the servile body to assume a servile punishment.

We thus have here a flat contradiction between the first part of the letter with its oration urging the monks to imitate Christ and the secret teaching to Urban which shows that Christ did not do that which the monks are urged to imitate.

The original subject of this and the previous letters in the series was the praise of the peculiar virtues of the monastic life. Those appeared to be the opportunities afforded the contemplative life and, more importantly, the moral discipline which makes men gentle and humble. This morality is inculcated by the example of Christ, not by Socratic dialectic or vulgar threats of divine punishment. An appeal to imitate a model requires two conditions to be effective. The original, imitable action must be known actually to have happened and it must be possible for men to imitate it. Mutianus’ ‘Docetist’ teaching on the crucifixion denies both conditions.

66 Ibid., pp. 53ff.
The path to this contradiction was the gradual revelation of an increasingly universalist, apparently Neoplatonic teaching about the true nature of religion. By erudition and apparently errant rambling from subject to subject this winding path effectively conceals the radical difference between its start and finish. But the Neoplatonic teaching of spirit and flesh and of man the lesser cosmos has a substantive effect as well. We have already noted the tensions between Christianity and Mutianus’ natural religion. With the addition of its ‘Docetism’ the letter’s argument strikes at the Christian understanding of sin itself. The crucifixion gains its cosmic significance from the understanding of man as fundamentally imperfect. Only then does the love of God for man as expressed in the sacrifice of His Son appear in its full mercifulness and absolute necessity. Divine intervention is only necessary if man is incapable of dealing with evil himself. There, as both Augustine and Kierkegaard demonstrate, Christianity directly opposes classical philosophy. Augustine criticizes Plato, who thought that sin lay in the body and could be controlled by the rational soul. In fact, he argues, sin lies in the soul itself and thus cannot be corrected by the soul. Indeed, Augustine understands sin precisely as a lack, an inability to control oneself. Mutianus’ ‘Docetism’ withdraws from man the consolation of divine grace to remedy his necessary flaw since God did not suffer pain out of love for mankind.

If Mutianus only denied the reality of divinity taking humanity’s body and sins on its shoulders, he would have had to raise the problem that tormented Luther: how can it be required of man that he obey an unfulfillable law before which he is always condemned? However, by teaching Urban the doctrine of man as the lesser cosmos Mutianus removes the problem. If man contains God within himself and can become a participant in celestial matters by obeying the Golden Rule then there is no need for divine grace to rescue man.

The doctrine of an immanent godhead need not deny the necessity of grace. Meister Eckhart argues that the inner godhead must be turned outward to the transcended godhead to achieve salvation, while if it

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contemplates itself inwardly it is no godhead but emptiness. Mutianus
is far from such mystical paradoxes here. Ethical action appears suffi-
cient for perfection in this letter. Seeing with the eyes of the mind is
enough for the salvation of men whether they have heard the Christian
revelation or not.

If the effect of the revelation of the natural law and of the mystery of
the reality of spirit have as their effect the overthrow of ascetic morality
as inculcated by example it would follow that the real mystery is not the
'Docetism' that Mutianus so prominently points to, but its ethical con-
sequences. It is thus worth noting that there is an apparent contradic-
tion between the teaching of man in microcosm, containing divinity
within him, and the 'Docetist' teaching which radically separates the
divine from the human. Both doctrines, however, serve as means to one
end in that both deny the view that man's state is radically defective and
in want of transcendental correction. One teaching undermines the sup-
posed disease, the other attacks the supposed cure.

Ultimately a choice has to be made between Socrates and Jesus, be-
tween the stories of the death of the blame-assuming God and the story
told in the Phaedo of the death of the blameless man. Mutianus' Neo-
platonic and 'Docetist' teachings are the means to a Platonic choice in
that they destroy the possibility of the Christian alternative.

Why, however, does Mutianus choose to clothe his Platonic views?
Leaving aside considerations of personal prudence, it appears from the
speech to the monks that monastic morality, though it is based on false-
hood, is a good thing in the world. It serves to combat the arrogance
and fanaticism of the vulgar, the lucernarii canes. As exoteric morality
though, it can only be maintained if its basis is never revealed. It must
thus be presented dogmatically in a tone of expostulation and high
moral uplift. Only the potentially rational man who can see truth
through speech can be trusted to behave decently without negative and
particular codes like the Mosaic or Roman law or appeals to a humanity
contradicted by the nature of things.

If our reading is correct the technique spoken of in the previous letter
is used here. The revelation of the mystery of the falseness of Christian
morality is at once suggested and concealed by the fable of Apollonius'
silence before Domitian. However our conclusion raises in acute form
the question about all reading between the lines. Is it arbitrary and will-

69 Meister Eckhart, A Modern Translation, tr. Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York,
full? Perhaps the two parts of the letter were not meant to be closely compared and perhaps Mutianus' was himself blinded by the intervening erudition from seeing the contradiction to which his conclusions led him. Perhaps, as historians from Kampschulte to the present have believed, Mutianus was an essentially pious son of Deventer addled by high-flown Italian doctrines.

It is first necessary to comprehend the force of this assumption. To maintain it one must assert that Mutianus seriously revealed as a great secret that Christ had not and could not have assumed a servile body and suffered a servile punishment, some two pages after he had explicitly said that Christ had indeed assumed a servile body and suffered a servile punishment. We are to assume that this error was made by an extremely erudite man, well versed in late classical disputes between Christians and pagans70 who claimed in addition to have read all of Augustine.71

Were there no evidence on the other side such an assumption would still seem somewhat carefree. Yet there is much evidence to contradict it. First, it is a sensible rule that a man who speaks of concealing mysteries with enigmas and fables is more likely to be concealing things in his writing than someone who has never heard of the possibility.72 Second, the difference between the style and the address of the two parts of the letter clearly shows that the first is directed in a public way to an audience of monks, the second, containing the Neoplatonic and 'Docetist' teachings, is directed to Urban alone. Thus contradictions in teaching between the two sections quite rationally may be attributed to differences in audience, especially in an author who is as conscious of the distinction between the vulgar and the rational as Mutianus.

The third and most powerful piece of evidence against the notion of an inadvertent contradiction lies in the beginning of the speech to the monks. Mutianus insists that the story of the crucifixion is a moral example. Indeed, his excuse for speaking of the monastic life is the 'lordly suffering of these days.' In his speech Mutianus points six times to the moral consequences of imitating Christ, culminating in the example of the crucifixion. Thus it is quite incredible that Mutianus was struck by a fit of total amnesia about the possible moral consequences of the true teaching.

A final indication of the letter's argument can be found in the con-

70 Gillert, Der Briefwechsel, pt. I, p. 73, for one example.
71 Ibid., p. 412.
cluding apology. Since Mutianus has never wavered in his explicit identification of the universal natural law with Christianity why does he have to apologize at all? The apology itself is strange. Mutianus sounds the retreat lest he seduce Urban from the academy and the Christian portico to the impious way which vexes 'us philosophers.' The phrase 'academy and Christian portico' contains clear references to Platonism and Stoicism. How then can there be a distinction between the academy and Christian portico and the path of the philosophers since the Platonists and Stoics are philosophers too? The very fact that Mutianus includes himself among the impious philosophers in an apology that is supposed to protect piety is strange too. The apology has, in fact, a genuine and a bogus level. It is bogus in that on its own terms, which identify philosophy and Christianity, and which use 'spiritually, philosophically, christianly' as identical terms, no apology is needed. It is genuine, though, precisely because the fact that apologies are necessary for seducing someone from Christianity to philosophy indicates the false and exoteric nature of the easy identification between Christianity and philosophy. Christians do not accept the identification and philosophers know that; though convenient, it is ultimately wrong. Despite that the philosopher will leave the many their 'milky food.'

Here the milky food is the Christian teaching of sin taken on the Saviour's shoulders. As Augustine makes clear, sin is ultimately a teaching of hope since it implies the existence of justice in the world. But Mutianus believed (discussing the resurrection) that 'it is better to rise from ignorance to knowledge than to hope in the future.'

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73 Augustine, The City of God, Bk. xiii, 1-5, pp. 412-416.
74 Gillert, Der Briefwechsel, pt. I, p. 134. 'Illud hic subiiciam: Longe melius esse ab ignorantia ad scientiam consurgere quam sperare futura.'