Laughing is fun. Most of us enjoy a good laugh. So did those who heartily laughed at the bruised and blood-strewn wretch hanging on the Cross. In *Messiah* Handel makes their laughter grow from a hesitant titter to an assured guffaw, swelling up in a torrent of jeering from *hee! hee! hee! to ha! ha! ha!*

Those scoffers were laughed at in their turn. The Father in Heaven laughed them to scorn.

What can that mean?

There is laughter amongst the Prophets. Jesus may or may not have laughed on this earth, but, say some, he laughs now. At whom?

Joy, happiness and laughter are found in many a Christian home, many a Christian writer. Millions of the faithful follow their daily round with laughter in their hearts. But there have always been Christians who feel ill at ease with happy laughter: 'Can it,' they wonder, 'have any place at all in an evil, unjust, faithless, suffering world?' Yet evil, injustice, heresy and suffering can be laughed away. Many banish joy and laughter from this vale of tears: laughter is for the elect in Paradise. (Some at least of that laughter in Paradise is brutish and nasty.)

Rarely has laughter been more pervasively present than during the Renaissance and Reformation. Laughter echoed round the Western Church as it set out to purify itself, and sought its soul. Erasmus and Rabelais, two of the greatest laugh-raisers ever, lived then, wrote then, thought then, and they influence us still. Both had been monks. Both became secular priests. Both were well aware of the Christian
dimension of their laughter. Neither was a prisoner of a narrow view of the Church.

This is not a book on Erasmus and Rabelais – and certainly not a study of the whole range of their laughter – but I look to them for examples. Christian laughter is a maze: you could easily finish snarled up within it. Erasmus and Rabelais often serve here as guides, even as exemplars. That they can do so is, for me, providential: I have lived with them both for almost as long as I can remember. It is enriching to share in Christian laughter as those clerics practised it.

This book is ‘all my own work’ – or rather, it is all my own work and that of the young people I have taught and listened to over a lifetime. Everything I say about laughter goes back to study and reflection arising from time spent talking and listening in seminars at home and abroad. (The quest started decades ago in the barracks during the 1939–45 war.) To all who have listened and argued I am grateful. Experience suggests that these pages will tempt many to get to know Erasmus and Rabelais better, or to look at them afresh. That will be a by-product. It is Christian laughter itself which will, I hope, exercise its fascination.*

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* In the early 1950s in Birmingham I put a postgraduate on to Laurent Joubert’s French treatise on laughter. He drifted away, finishing nothing. He may not have learned much, but I did.

One of the earliest lectures I ever published was on laughter: it was given under my name and that of Ruth Calder, one of my students.

Over the years colleagues have sent me studies. I particularly recall three good books: Joel Lefebvre’s Les Fols et la Folie: études sur les genres du comique et la création littéraire en Allemagne pendant la Renaissance, Klincksieck, Paris, 1968; Daniel Ménager’s La Renaissance et le Rire, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1995; and an interesting collective volume, L’Umanesimo e ‘la Follia’ – Scritti di Castelli, Bonicati, Mesnard, Chastel, Secret, Klein, Edizioni Abete, Rome, 1971. Readers might like to compare with them what is said in this book. We have all gone our own way. The most recent article on laughter I have been sent is ‘Un Etron dans la cornucopie: la valeur évangelique de la scatologie dans l’œuvre de Rabelais et dans Marguerite de Navarre’. It is by Yvan Loskoutoff and appeared in La Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France, XCV, no. 6, Paris, 1995, pp. 906–32.