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## ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM: RELIGIOUS REFORMER, REVOLUTIONARY OR REACTIONARY?

### Summary

Erasmus's great erudition in classical and Christian writing, his civility, and his stress on reform of the Catholic Church as well as a network of contacts made him a respected and admired figure in progressive circles of his age. Erasmus's fame was great as long as Church reform was a dream rather than reality. However, his moderate, "liberal" attitude did not serve him well when the time had come to take side in a mortal struggle between the reformers and the defenders of the Church. He then became a hated figure for the Protestants and the Catholics.

**Key words:** Erasmus of Rotterdam, Catholic Church, proto-liberalism

### 1. Introduction

Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) has not always been a darling of European intellectual salons, or whatever the terms have been used throughout the last 500 years to denote continental elites and, partly, public opinion. While today he is a symbol of pan-European community and civilization, a patron of scholarly network promoted by the European Union, an epitome of a "European" whose nationality is barely noticeable, and whose erudition and civility are legendary, in the past, especially during the Reformation and soon afterwards, he was often maligned, ridiculed and held in contempt. For the Catholics he was a revolutionary, irresponsibly challenging authority, and undermining the faith and order. In turn, for the Protestants he was a coward, a meek man of letters (a contemporary term for an intellectual), who had run away from the recovered truth (Christianity purified by the Reformation). A reactionary, indeed, as the enemies of the old order later branded him.

Looking from today's perspective, however, Erasmus seems to have been neither a religious reformer, nor revolutionary nor reactionary. His interest and work covered areas much larger than purely religious reform. Thus the first term – religious reformer – although close to the essence of his activity, cannot be regarded as satisfactory. As far as the remaining two terms are concerned, Erasmus wished to see a change without disruption of the peace and the unity of Christendom. He abhorred either partisan spirit

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on the rostrum or the battlefield as a means for promoting the purity of Christian dogmas. The reforms, which he recommended, however radical could they have appeared, were conceived *sine ira et studio* and could have been subordinated to a rational discussion. For these reasons he cannot be thoroughly identified with any side of the fanatic struggle between the Reformers and the Catholics. Thus characterization of the Humanist as either revolutionary or reactionary does not suit him well. We could say he was either all – religious reformer, revolutionary and reactionary – or someone else. But who?

Erasmus appears to have been a fairly typical progressive man of *bonae literae* (good letters) striving for the advancement of mankind in a more human and, in his case, also godly direction. Lack of more adequate terminology compels us to make of him a proto-liberal.

Proto-liberalism does not mean here an affinity to a specific ideology. As understood in this paper, it means an attitude toward the surrounding reality, characteristic throughout the history of modern Europe for the enlightened men of letters. Disregard for the status quo, a firm condemnation of abuses and persistent demand for wholesale reforms that would bring about a more just and rational world to epitomize this attitude. Some of these men had been fortunate enough to die before the postulated changes actually took place. Those that did die, had a good chance of being hoisted upon a pedestal from which they were admired by the successive generations. Some, however, had an occasion to witness the transformations which they had advocated. Then, if they had not been burned, guillotined, hanged or shot, they were accused by their opponents of cowardice, treason or irresponsibility, while the successive generations held them guilty of either liberalism or conservatism. Erasmus has the dubious honor of belonging to this latter controversial group.

## 2. The Humanist

The ultimate goal of Erasmus' work was the moral amelioration of the society [Tracy 1972 p. 10]. Only good letters, consisting of two virtually equal parts, the inheritance of antiquity and the biblical Christianity, led to that final goal. Thus, the cause of good letters became the most cherished value throughout Erasmus' life.

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of the classical thought on Erasmus<sup>2</sup>. Greece and especially Rome were his teachers. They made him a scholar, an excellent Latin stylist, an educator, and a thoughtful writer. They shaped his mind and injected a sense of rationalism, which he did not overcome even in his theological writing. To promote his beloved antiquity, the Humanist advocated the reform of education. He rejected scholastic teaching based upon the dialectics. In schools, boys developed skills in arguing rather than acquiring knowledge – a charge that sounds odd in our time,

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<sup>2</sup> More Roman than Greek philosophy formed Erasmus. Had he paid more attention to Plato and Aristotle he would have been more careful in his reformatory zeal. An ideal *polis* can be built in speech rather than in reality, as Plato suggests in *The Republic*. If one builds an utopia and attempts to remove various social ills, evil just takes on other forms, but does not disappear from social life. Cf. [Schall 1984 p. 32].

when schools and universities seem to care more about arguing skills than knowledge. Furthermore, the rigid rules, which governed behavior and learning, did not awake in students a desire to study but resentment toward it. Erasmus proposed reading of the classics instead. This would foster a spirit of generosity, gentleness, charity and other qualities that make up the *humanitas* [Tracy 1972 p. 168].

In order to bring closer the ancient thought to the contemporaries, Erasmus edited a number of classical authors and devoted some of his books directly to that goal. The *Antibarbari* was mainly concerned with classical learning; his *Adagia*, a collection of classical epigrams, were written to deliver ancient wisdom in a capsulated form; the *Familiar Colloquies*, a textbook of Latin style, was intended, in turn, to make learning an easy and pleasant task. Erasmus' naive belief in the power of education aroused his suspicion toward anyone educated in the old way. Even Martin Luther, in spite of his opposition to scholasticism, was a scholastic for Erasmus because his education proved the lack of connections with the cause of good letters [A letter to Mosellanus 1519, quoted by: Tracy 1972 p. 180]. An understanding of the Scriptures, the second part of good letters, could only benefit from the study of the authors recommended by Cicero and Quintilian. "The boy who learned Lucian (...) would better appreciate the genuineness of the Gospel" [A letter to Mosellanus 1519, quoted by: Tracy 1972 p. 180]. Erasmus himself applied this method in his theological writing. He founded it upon a synthesis of the Scripture and of the classical philosophy. His ideal of Christianity: was inwardly related to all the truths of antiquity, to the stoic mastery of self and faith in predestination, to the Platonic idealism. Plato, he soon discovered, was a theologian, Socrates a saint, Cicero inspired, and Seneca not far from Paul. "Their philosophy," he once said, "lies rather in the affection than in syllogism; it is life more than a debate, and inspiration rather than a discipline; a transformation rather than a reasoning. What else, pray, is the philosophy of Christ?" [Smith 1923 pp. 53-54].

In the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, a guidebook for "a Christian soldier" Erasmus left a relatively minor role to the dogma and mysticism. In addition to prayer, he elevated knowledge and a simple reason: "This, therefore, is the only way to virtue; first, that you know yourself; second, that you act, not according to the passions, but the dictates of reason" [Himelick 1970 p.70]. In another passage he admonished: "Knowledge is of a greater use to the good life than beauty or bodily strength or money" [Himelick 1970 p. 96]. Yet in another he reminded: "This is the point of that remark of Socrates (...) – that virtue is nothing but the knowledge of what to avoid and what to cultivate. (...) Socrates (...) argues convincingly that knowledge contributes so much to every virtue of importance that vices spring up in no other way than from false beliefs" [Himelick 1970 p. 132]. The *Enchiridion* abounds in examples of ancient virtues as opposed to Christian vices:

"How many examples there are among pagans of men who from their sound management of public affairs brought nothing back (...) but an honorable reputation who held (...) virtue dearer than life. (...) And I need not mention (...) a thousand fine examples of all the virtues which we read of everywhere – to our great shame, indeed – in the annals of Spartans, the Persians, the Athenians, the Romans. (...) One rarely

finds such spirits, such examples among our courtiers and churchmen – or, let me add, among our monks!” [Himelick 1970 p. 135].

The *Enchiridion* seems to have advocated so rational a theology, in significant part based on the thoughts and deeds of the pagans, that later both “revolutionaries” and “reactionaries” had doubts if the book still represented Christian theology [Smith 1923 p. 222].

Erasmus identified the reform of the Church with the cause of good letters. The Reformation, however, forced him to choose between the two: he was either to side with the reform or with the good letters. As long as he could he had tried to be neutral. He defended the reformers against assaults of “the Christian Pharisees” (Catholic hierarchy), their common enemy, but that commitment had clear limits. “I try to keep neutral, so as to help the revival of learning as much as I can,” he argued in a letter to Luther in 1519, still believing that he and the Reformer had similar goals [Smith 1923 p. 222]. But the course of the Reformation extremely alarmed him. It endangered the peace in Christendom and the cause of good letters. Luther “from whom he [Erasmus] had hoped a real counter-agent against the forces of evil had not only doomed himself to perish but had acted so as to make the Pharisees in the opposite camp all the stronger” [Smith 1923 p. 242]. Thus the humanist could not support the man who threatened the cause of learning. “Whatever happened to Luther good letters might still be preserved” [Tracy 1972].

### 3. The intellectual and the church.

“The world is coming to its senses as if awaking out of a deep sleep. Still there are some left who recalcitrate pertinaciously, clinging convulsively with hands and feet to their old ignorance. They fear if *bonae literae* are reborn and the world grows wise, it will come to light that they have known nothing” [Huizinga 1957 p. 103]. In this manner Erasmus spoke about the “tyranny” of the medieval church. The priests, monks, and scholastic theologians preached a religion of ceremonies and kept the believers away from the true light of Christianity. They limited faith to prayers, observances of holy days, fasts, confessions, indulgences, pilgrimages, and veneration of relics. “We kiss the shoes of the saints and their dirty handkerchiefs and we leave their books, their most Holy and efficacious relics, neglected,” he despaired [Huizinga 1957 p. 101]. The demand for the scrupulous observance of prescribed acts led to anxiety and fear among the lay folks. They were threatened by the clergy with hell even if they did not fast on Fridays or did not pay the tithe. Erasmus did not reject all Church tradition and dogmas, yet he wholeheartedly opposed the reduction of piety to outward ceremonies only. The clergymen responsible for it were the “Pharisees,” their religion nothing other than “Judaism,” i.e., formalized and ritualized creed.

Erasmus also condemned the church hierarchy’s preoccupation with political power and worldly honors. In *Julius exclusus* he mocked the Pope Julius II who appears in his full splendor at the gates of Paradise and is denied entry, for in Heaven his pontifical pride, earthly glory and military victories count for nothing. In criticizing the clergy and

rituals of the Humanist frequently applied sarcasm and ridicule, which sometimes sounded very much like a blasphemy. Perhaps he did not realize that undermining the status quo, however bad it was, does not necessarily lead to the enlightened changes and better world.

To replace “Judaism,” Erasmus put forward his own concept of Christianity – the “philosophy of Christ.” His interest in it had been growing “until, from a small seed, it waxed a tree that overshadowed all other business of life” [Smith 1923 p. 52]. Erasmian philosophy of Christ was an undogmatic religion that, in addition to classical antiquity, turned to the original meaning of the Gospels. Accordingly, every Christian is obliged to develop spiritually. At the beginning such a “man should provide himself with two weapons (...) prayer and knowledge. (...) Neither should be unsupported by the other” [Himelick 1970 p. 47]. Then, as he is already armed with prayer and knowledge, he ought to set Christ before himself as the only goal in his life. Erasmus urged such a conscientious Christian to “direct all your efforts, all your activities (...) to His direction. Think of Christ (...) as nothing other than love, candor, patience, purity” [Himelick 1970 p. 94]. Personal imitation of Christ freed from the falsehood of ceremonies would lead to spontaneous ethical piety. In this way, liberty would finally replace fear as a motive for moral and religious acts [Tracy 1972 p. 169].

Calls for a return to the original sources of Christianity also implied a new philological analysis of the Holy Scripture. Erasmus did not accept the fact that the Church regarded the Latin *Vulgate* as the only pure form of the Scripture. Since there existed older, less corrupted Greek texts, they ought to be the source for new editions and translations. Concerned with the purity of translation, Erasmus, in his own Latin edition of *Novi Testamenti*, departed not only from the *Vulgate* at some dogmatically important points but also in annotation suggested some interpretations, dubious from the strictly Catholic point of view<sup>3</sup>. His rejection of the *Vulgate*'s passage “do penance” (Matthew 3: 2) and rendering the Greek text as “be mindful,” or “come to yourselves” worked “so powerfully in Luther’s mind that it became the starting point of the Reformation.” [Smith 1923 p. 165-166].

#### 4. The philosopher and the prophet

“Erasmus laid the eggs and Luther latched the chickens”, sounded an outcry of the Catholic zealots as the Reformation unfolded. And it might have seemed that they were right. Both, the Humanist and the Reformer demanded a return to the Bible and early sources of Christianity, paid attention to the prosperity of good letters, condemned the abuses of medieval Church and scholastic theology, rejected rituals and ceremonies and stressed inner piety. The important differences between them were overlooked, initially even by Erasmus<sup>4</sup>. In Luther’s revolt and his early activity, the Humanist perceived an

<sup>3</sup> E.g. in the first two edition he omitted the passage concerned with the nature of the Trinity (John 5:7). See: [Smith 1923 p. 165-166].

<sup>4</sup> Luther originally was full of admiration for Erasmus. Cf. Ernst Voss, “Erasmus Roterodamus in His Relation to Luther and Melancthon,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 26, 4 (Oct., 1927): 565-66. Only

opportunity for the Church to reform itself. Due to the Reformer's boldness, Erasmus' rational scheme of a more human and godly world would finally have a chance to succeed. "Erasmus' conception of the great intellectual crisis of his days was distinctly dualistic," says Huizinga, and then he continues: "He saw a struggle between old and new which, to him, meant evil and good [Huizinga, *Erasmus*, p.103]. This simple outlook, however, was shaken over the course of the Reformation. Although Erasmus shared Luther's view on the old Church, he was unable to understand either his radicalism or dogmatism<sup>5</sup>. For, according to Erasmus, the conflict needlessly focused on the dogmas, which should be left to God, instead of centering on Church errors which prevented piety from flourishing<sup>6</sup>.

Yet, Luther was not the man Erasmus wished him to have been. He moved quickly from a mere condemnation of abuses of the Church to the creation of his own theology and Church. In contrast to Erasmus, Luther was not a rational philosopher whose thought matured gradually. The idea of salvation by grace came to him as a sudden illumination of divine truth. The rest of his uncompromising conduct was a logical consequence thereof. Luther became a prophet of a new creed in which he revealed the true meaning of the Gospels. The peace in Christendom, cause of learning and the likes were not of the foremost importance to him. Luther could not be a moderate or seek compromises when God's law was at stake.

The Prophet as well as his adversaries did not intend to fulfill Erasmus' dream about the better world. In 1520 the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* threatened to excommunicate the Reformer if he did not recant his teachings. Luther, in turn, burned the bull and the codex of the Canon Law, and attacked the Catholic sacramental system in the *Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Erasmus was shocked! The peace of Christendom was disrupted; chances for a rational program of Church reform were reduced more than ever, while the Pharisees' strength was elevated. He wished to remain neutral in the midst of this conflict. Against accusations of sympathizing with Luther he countered: "Luther is absolutely unknown to me, nor I have time to read more than a page or two of his books"<sup>7</sup>. But he avoided an open condemnation of the Reformer and the cause of reforms. When pressed by the Catholic opinion, he unwillingly joined the lists

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their later differences concerning free will changed Luther's attitude from admiration to contempt (ibid. 567-68). See also Constance M Furey, "Invective and Discernment in Martin Luther, D. Erasmus, and Thomas More," [Luther, Erasmus, More 1998: 475-78].

<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Melancthon Erasmus wrote: "I favor Luther as much as I can, even if my cause is everywhere linked with his," see: [Bainton 1969 p. 159]. In turn, to Luther he complained: "Why don't you cry out against bad popes rather than against all popes? Let us not be arrogant or factious," [Bainton 1969 p. 159].

<sup>6</sup> In one of his letters Erasmus wrote: "I agree with you that it would be simple to say merely that Christ is present in the sacrament and leave the matter to God" (Bainton, *Erasmus*, p. 222). In "A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will" he argued: "It is more devout to adore unknown than to investigate the inexplicable. How many quarrels have arisen from investigation into distinction of persons in the Holy Trinity, the manner of procession of the Holy Spirit, the virgin birth? (...). What are the results of these laborious investigations except that we experience a great loss of concord, and love other less, while we wish to know too much?" [Winter, 1986 p. 10].

<sup>7</sup> A letter to Cardinal Wolsey, quoted by [Smith 1923 p. 222].

against Luther, but chose the field, in which he truly disagreed with him – the question of free will.

Luther's belief that man owes salvation exclusively to grace, that before God he has no merits but sins, that God preordains who is damned and who saved, seemed preposterous for Erasmus. If this were so, God would be a tyrant. Why, then, had Christ wept over the presaged destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 23: 37). "If all had happened merely through necessity, could Jerusalem not have been justified in answering the weeping Lord, 'Why do you torment yourself with useless weeping? If it was your will that we should not listen to the prophets, why did you send them? Why do you blame us for what you willed?'" [Winter 1986 p. 37].

Grace is lent to all people, even to obdurate sinners. And they have free will to accept this gift or reject it:

God had wanted the Pharaoh to perish miserably (...). The will of God, however, did not force him to persist in his wrong. Thus a master may give an order to a servant whose bad character he knows (...). The master knows beforehand that the servant will sin, and thus display his real character (...). In a certain sense, he wills his destruction and his sin. Nevertheless, this does not excuse the servant, for he sins out of his own malice [Winter 1986 p. 50].

If Erasmus had hoped that his politely skeptical treatise *De libero arbitrio* would not incense Luther, he was definitely wrong. For Luther, the question of free will was not a matter of an intellectual discussion but that of life and death. One is either on the side of true faith, or he is a deceiver, a devil incarnate. Moderation had no place in a world of partisanship and fanaticism<sup>8</sup>.

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In our introduction Erasmus was termed a proto-liberal. On the one hand, proto-liberalism could be seen in his ultimate aims and, on the other hand, in his attitude towards the antiquity, the existing order, and the Reformation. Erasmus was not merely a scholar interested in knowledge for its own sake. His scholarly activity was subordinated to a noble task of moral rejuvenation of the society, in other words, to the salvation of men's souls. Such a lofty goal called for substantial changes in the status quo. In this he seemed a revolutionary. Yet, he was not ready for a revolution – the destruction of the existing order and erecting a new. Such a perspective scared and abhorred him, and he rested it with his whole heart. For the reformers, therefore, he could be perceived as a reactionary.

The term "progress" was invented and began to be worshiped during the Enlightenment. The humankind of Erasmus' age was not yet sufficiently grown up to discern the progressive truth that any improvement lies forward not backward. Dialectically,

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to theological arguments, Luther loved to employ insults, even vulgarities to deprecate his enemies, including Erasmus. Although the language of the epoch was much more lax in this respect and even Erasmus used obscene allusions in his satires, still Luther excelled in it. Cf. Furey, "Invective and Discernment in [Luther, Erasmus, More,]" 469, 2013 472-78].

Erasmus reached further back, to antiquity, to find the progress of his age. The classical inheritance comprised for him everything that the progressive man of letters could have possibly dreamt of. Acquisition of that inheritance became a “holy mission” for our proto-liberal.

Everything outside of the world of good letters seemed obscure, “medieval,” “gothic” and evil for Erasmus. His indignation at the corruption of the Church and at devaluation of Christian virtues, as well as his search for true piety led him to attacks on the basic Catholic dogmas and to contempt, mockery and ridicule of the “Pharisees” and their “Judaism.” In the meantime, the fundamentals of the existing order were being shaken. As a result, the last chapter of his life was disappointing. The change brought about by the Reformation differed greatly from Erasmus’ expectations. The Reformers and their followers were not well-mannered scholars or peace loving humanists who depended on reason in their thoughts and deeds. Instead of a better world, dogmatism and intolerance triumphed on both sides. In this conflict Erasmus was viewed by both Catholic and Protestant zealots as being too ambivalent. To the former he was too reformist; to the latter too conservative, and nowhere being regarded as a trustworthy ally. And this was the tragedy of Erasmus of Rotterdam<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> I borrowed this expression from Harry S. May’s book, titled *The Tragedy of Erasmus* (New York: Piraeus Publisher, 1975). It advertises itself as a psycho-historic approach to Erasmus, though in fact deserves no attention except for a splendid title.