

## Erasmus and the “Other”

Nathan Ron

# Erasmus and the “Other”

On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples

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Nathan Ron  
School of History  
University of Haifa  
Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel

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## PREFACE

This book, I dare say, is the first full treatment of Erasmus' views of the "other." The book explores how Erasmus viewed non-Christians and different races, including Muslims, Jews, Amerindians and black Africans.<sup>1</sup> It deals also with related issues such as waging a crusade against the Turks, war and peace in general, and the wishful thinking of converting the Turks and the Jews to Christianity.

Until the late 1960s Erasmus' attitude toward the "other" received little attention, if at all, in modern research. Prominent historians and monographers of Erasmus hardly dealt with it. Thus, Johan Huizinga's *Erasmus and the Age of the Reformation*, which appeared in 1924, reprinted in 1957, is completely devoid of the words Jew, Jews, Jewish, Judaism etc. Preserved Smith's very detailed monograph *Erasmus: A Study of His Life, Ideals and Place of History*, published in 1923, reprinted in 1962, has passim mentions of Jews, but lacks any focal treatment of the subject—there is no chapter or subchapter dealing with it.

<sup>1</sup>In referring to the indigenous peoples of America (central and south) I have avoided, as much as possible, using the term "barbarians" which was generally used by Bartolomé de Las Casas and Erasmus. I use the word 'Amerindians,' short for American Indians, which is the term found in the translations to English of Las Casas' writings, such as *In Defense of the Indians*, and A. Pagden and J. Lawrance's translation of Francisco de Vitoria, which contains the relection *On the American Indians*. Thus, *De bello contra Indos* is translated there as *On the War against the Indians* (p. 231). The reader should bear in mind that in this book this usage is entirely historiographical and of no legal or other denotation whatsoever.

The year 1969 marks some change with the appearance of Guido Kisch's *Erasmus' Stellung zu Juden und Judentum*, the first monograph (39 pages in all) dealing with part of the issue—not the “other,” but the Jews. Then came the translation from French to English of Shimon Markish's book—*Erasmus and the Jews* (1986).

It was fondly received. Erasmus' indifferent attitude, *a-Semitism*, as Markish called it, was warmly welcome and became almost *communis opinio*. Other monographs from that time on devoted a page or two, occasionally a few paragraphs, to Jews and Turks. The partial treatment of the issue was sometimes of high quality, as in Cornelis Augustijn's, originally written in German, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence* (1991), and in James D. Tracy's, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* (1996). However, a full comparative study, dealing with Erasmus' attitudes not just toward Jews, but also toward Turks or Muslims, Amerindians and black Africans, was hitherto not published, and this book is the first of its kind.

Unsurprisingly, Erasmus is the main focus of interest of this book. However, other figures are dealt with too. A gallery of Renaissance *personae* and their relevant outlook is situated in comparison to Erasmus. These are Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (=Pope Pius II), Nicholas of Cusa, Bartolomé Las Casas, Michael Servetus, Sebastian Franck and Sebastian Castellio. By employing such a method one can obtain some enlightening results, such as the intriguing influence of Erasmus on Las Casas' thought. Another result is the conclusion that Erasmus' attitude toward the Turks and Islam, as expressed in his *De bello Turcico* (1530) in particular, was significantly inferior, in terms of religious tolerance, to the attitude that Nicolas of Cusa demonstrated in his inspiring *De Pace Fidei* (1453).

Both “Eurocentrism” and “racism” are used in this book. A state of fluidity existed—still exists—between the two. The book's arguments are tested and approved against two reductive state of the art definitions of racism which require the existence of deterministic and unalterable characteristics of the “other” in order that racism would be recognized as such. Thus, Erasmus' smearing of a Cardinal as being born to a Jewish mother and stating that his appearance and manner of speaking clearly testify to his Jewishness, is a racist smear according to these definitions. Eurocentrism means the evaluation of the “other” by a set of values which are foreign to him, namely Christian-European values. Erasmus'

objection to the conclusion of international agreements between European states and the Ottoman empire, or Muslim nations in general, is one example of his Eurocentric worldview.

Erasmus was within the familiar tradition of contempt and denigration as far as the “others” were concerned, Jews in particular. Grading and degrading of peoples were imbedded in his thought. Turkophobic and racial antisemitic expressions stain his writings. Often they are religious/theological by their core, yet racial by their manifestations or implications. However, those voices which link, directly or indirectly, Erasmus’ pockets’ of racial antisemitism to Nazi antisemitism, or even to its Satanic aftermath, should be utterly rejected. Erasmus did play a distinct role in the evolvement of the longest hatred. Yet, his particular antisemitic effect on his contemporaries or later readers is unknown to us and cannot be measured. Most probably, it had less impact than the seeds of inflammatory antisemitism which Martin Luther planted. Overlooking Erasmus’ racial antisemitic expressions, or leniently judging them, are wrong. Linking Erasmus to Nazi antisemitism or to its aftermath, are a despicable absurdity.

Kiryat Bialik, Israel

Nathan Ron

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Nathan Ron

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- ASD *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969–).
- COE *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, vols. 1–3, ed. Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985–1987).
- Comment. Pius II. *Commentaries* 2 vols., eds. Margaret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta (Harvard, The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2003–2007).
- Cribratio Alkorani* *Nicolai de Cusa Cribratio Alkorani*. Edidit commentariisque illustravit Ludovicus Hagemann. XXXIX, 370 paginae. Hamburgi: in aedibus Felicis Meiner, 1986 (Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita; Volumen VIII).
- CWE *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–).
- De pace fidei* *Nicolai de Cusa De pace fidei. Cum epistula ad Ioannem de Segobia*. Ediderunt commentariisque illustraverunt Raymundus Klibanky et Hildebrandus Bascour, O.S.B. lviii, 135 paginae. Hamburgi: in aedibus Felicis Meiner, 1959 (Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita; Volumen VII). Editio altera. LVIII, 136 paginae; 2 tabulae. Hamburgi: in aedibus Felicis Meiner, 1970 (Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate

- academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita; Volumen VII).
- Ep *Opus epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906–1958).
- Hopkins *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei And Cribratio Alkorani in Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa* translated by Jasper Hopkins, 2 Vols. (Minneapolis/Minnesota: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001).
- LB *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera omnia. Edited by Jean Le Clerc. 10 vols. Leiden: Van der Aa, 1703–1706.*
- Opera* *Aeneae Syluij Piccolominei Senensis [...] Opera quae extant omnia*, (Basel: Henrich Petri, 1551; reprint Frankfurt, 1967).
- Orationes* *Pii II. P. M. olim Aeneae Sylvii Piccolominei [...] Orationes politicae, et ecclesiasticae.* Edidit Joannes Dominicus Mansi, Pars I (Lucae: Benedini, 1755).
- WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1929).