

# ERASMUS

## EXAMPLE OF TOLERANCE AND RADICALISM

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### 1. Introduction

Tolerance may be defined as the inclination and capacity of a state or people to respect the conviction, religion, language or culture of a minority or other people. Historically, tolerance and intolerance have played an important role. Some parts of the world have been completely ruined when people are obsessed by intolerance towards other people.

Holland is generally identified as one of the more tolerant European countries. This is often ascribed to the fact that for a long period in the history of the country, power was spread over a large number of cities (having some form of self-government by a municipal oligarchy, also strongly influencing the central governments of the provinces). Also in practice a tolerant attitude was introduced in the contacts with foreign people who were, or could become, trade partners. However, there was also some sort of philosophy that originated from a widely spread sense of what I should like to describe as a "tolerant radicalism", of which Erasmus may be seen as the greatest example.

In the history of the Low Countries, the gaining influence of Reformation and – partly as a result of this – the struggle for liberation from the Spanish (= Habsburg) domination, certainly had intolerant moments. Also in a later stage, when the Republic had been established, religious conflicts appeared to win from tolerant feelings. The few political murders the Netherlands had: the execution of John of Barneveldt (1619) and the lynching of the brothers De Witt (1672), all originated from this kind of intolerance.

In the end, we see every time tolerance overcoming intolerance, even when the opposing parties stick to their opinions. This, in fact, is a form of coexistence of people living in one society. Tolerance does not necessarily involve that people should make concessions or leave their point of view, even a radical position may be combined with a tolerant attitude.

One of the best European paradigms to be found, is, no doubt, Desiderius Erasmus, the famous humanist. In Rotterdam, his native city, the statue of Erasmus survived the German bombing in the beginning of the Second World War. Its inscription says: "here rose the Sun (in 1469) and set down in Basle (1536)". The makers of this statue, which, by the way, is the oldest in the Netherlands as it dates from 1622, did not exaggerate when comparing Erasmus with the sun. However, because of his tolerance and radicalism as well, Calvinist clergymen and their adherents opposed for many decades the erection of this statue. It is

not that easy as many encyclopedias and dictionaries say: "Erasmus believed in moderation and the middle way."

Erasmus combined tolerance and radicalism, and I hope to make clear in this paper that it was no lack of courage that he could not chose for either one of the adversaries in his turbulent time.

## **2. Erasmus versus Luther**

The most obvious way to demonstrate Erasmus' amalgamation of tolerance and radicalism, is comparing his ideas and attitudes with those of his contemporary Martin Luther (1483-1546).

If you visit the Wartburg, the castle near Eisenach in East-Germany, the place to which Luther fled after having defended his ideas at the Reichstag in Worms (1522), they will show you the ink spot on the wall made by the great Reformer. He would have thrown an ink pot to the head of the Devil, who would have had a fruitless conversation with him. It would have been unthinkable for Erasmus to have any conversation with the Devil, because he did not believe in him. Luther was apparently standing with one leg in the Middle Ages, Erasmus was thus enlightened that incidents like this could not occur.

Erasmus was a critic of his time and he did this in such a radical way, that he, in fact, is leaving reformers like Luther or Calvin, far behind him. One of the best examples is his pacifism, which, in his time, was very rare. In his writing "Dulce bellum inexpertis" (War sweet by ignorance), Erasmus states: "Who calls war sweet, ignores it... War is the shipwreck of all good things... When animals attack each other, I can understand, but people should know that war in itself means injustice, as war usually never afflicts those who launch and conduct it, but the whole load falls on poor and unguilty people, who have nothing to hope from victories and defeats. Right is not achieved by violence and war, on the contrary, one war initiates another and from one war there are coming two."

In spite of his revolutionary behaviour, Luther remained a reactionary. When the German princes started their first war of religion against the peasants (1525), Luther stimulated them by saying that these peasants were "dogs that should be beaten". Erasmus, who hated violence also from the side of the peasants, actually defended them against Luther. He criticized him for having incited the princes against "defenceless peasants" only for the reason that they have another opinion on the point of "authority", which, in fact, "has nothing to do with religion." "Really", he writes in a personal letter to Luther, "I should have wished you another character if I did not know that you are so extremely satisfied with the one you have!"

Long before Luther did, Erasmus directs the weapon of his deadly sarcasm against the practice of indulgence. Luther, in fact, like the other reformers, used ideas of Erasmus, however, he did it by agitation in a knocking-off tone. Erasmus was more patient because he believed in mankind and had no reason to hurry. Often, when Luther had difficulties, he conjured Erasmus to choose his

side. Erasmus refused because he did not share Luther's way of interpretation, and not only because he could smile compassionately about Luther's fear for the devil. It was a deep, fundamental difference that separates the two men. In the eyes of Luther, man is powerless, delivered to divine powers. Man is only good if he is bearing God in his mind, and he is bad when he is ruled by the Devil. Neither good works, nor regret about evil acts will have any influence. All is depending on God's salvation; human will is powerless, according to Luther.

Erasmus is miles away from such a passivity. He believes mankind can, by reason and good schooling, come to a higher moral life. He rejects Luther's fatalistic view that man does not have room for human development, leaving no other choice than obeying the higher powers which decide over him. Luther could never forgive Erasmus that he had openly attacked him on this point. Very angry, he said at the occasion of one of his table speeches "This I will put in my last will, and therefore I take all of you as my witnesses, that I see Erasmus as the greatest enemy of Christ, as there has not been one in thousand years. He, who crushes to death Erasmus, is killing only a bug. One that stinks dead more than alive."

Erasmus was not suited for discussion at such a level. He worked as an independent scientist and publicist, and relatively he had a lot of readers, spread over many countries, who took notice of his views which, indeed, went much farther than those of his contemporaries. The historian Johan Huizinga says that Erasmus "seems to deviate from the general tendency of his time. Among all those passionate, very vigorous characters, Erasmus is standing as a man with too little prejudices, with a little too good taste."

After meeting the son of Columbus, Erasmus wrote about the necessity of equality of all races. Equal opportunities for women also belonged to his views. In his "Colloquia" he reelevates a dialogue between an abbot and a lady. The abbot disapproves the fact that the lady is reading Latin books. Such books are weakening the brains of a woman, who does not have many, according to the abbot. The lady replies "I do not know how many brains you men are left, but I plan to use the few I possess for useful studies rather than for prayers and drinking-bouts all night long. Formerly", she continues, "unlearned abbots seem to have been seldom; now they are general. If you don't care, it will get so far that we, women, will give colleges on theological subjects and will preach in the churches. We will wear your bishop's mitres!"

According to another Dutch historian, Jan Romein, it was Erasmus' ideal to combine Antiquity and Christianity to a harmonious unity. This appeared to be an illusion, but the influence of this illusion remained. His tolerance, the precondition for this harmonious unity, found a fruitful soul in his native country as soon as the municipal patriciate came to power in the Netherlands. For this patriciate, a moderate independency in religious matters proved to be the most fruitful method for government, politically and economically.

Thus the words of the great humanist influenced the ideas of the majority of the magistrates and scientists. They also influenced the more moderate Anabaptists. Jan Romein states that there is a link between the ideas of Erasmus and the movement of the Anabaptists and the later Baptists in the Netherlands. These had very radical ideas and remained to have them (after their violent experiment in Münster), and were adherents of persuasion and opposed against doctrine and organisation. The first Dutch "Protestants", the Sacramentalists of +- 1520, had the same ideas, based on practice and (good) intentions.

Still according to Jan Romein, there is not only a connection between Erasmus and the later developments in the Netherlands, but also an influencing effect of his ideas on the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish (Habsburg) domination. In any case he stimulated critical thinking about authority. In his "Adagia" (1515) Erasmus characterized "the eagle as the image of the king..., because it is a meat eater, a robber, a destroyer, lonely it is hated by all, the pest for all... As far as history goes back, you can hardly find one or two monarchs whose regrettable foolishness did not bring distress and misery to the people." In his "Encomium moriae" (Praise of foolishness) Erasmus ridiculizes all powers of his time. Where Luther demands full submission to worldly government, Erasmus stands up for the right of (peaceful) insurrection in his "De libero arbitrio".

Of course, Calvinism also influenced Dutch society very much. As far as not already converted to (Ana)baptism, artisans, farmers and fishers were highly attracted by this new form of reformation. It only came after 1560, not directly from Geneva, where Jean Calvin had created his theocratic city-state, but via England and France. Calvinism had intolerant aspects and seemed to be in continuous conflict with the ideas of Erasmus that had already settled in the Netherlands. Notions like God's grace to which men are delivered, the dogma of predestination, the Old Testamentic idea of a people chosen by God, could not fit into Erasmian thinking. While Erasmus had wished to revive Antiquity, which could be of help for the renovation of the Church, Calvin was hostile to Renaissance, as he feared it would be detrimental to his Reformation.

Later on, Calvinism in the Netherlands was highly penetrated by Erasmian thought. This has led from time to time to purges (like the conflict between the theologians Gomarus and Arminius, which also had political consequences), in the end tolerance was victorious.

### 3. Conclusion

"La France est de la religion de Voltaire", Napoleon would have said in the first years of the nineteenth century. The cultural historical author Conrad Busken Huet added to this sentence, at the end of that century: "La Hollande est de la religion d'Erasmus... in spite of the Reformed Church and the Heidelberg Catechism." For the Erasmian way of thinking has become "the silent general way of thinking" in the Netherlands. Generally spoken this is true. This has to do with the famous Dutch tolerance, it also means an explanation for the radical

character of certain aspects of Dutch society, as it appears in the history. One need not only refer to the Dutch Revolt, which led to a Republic with best possible guarantees for freedom and tolerance at the time. Also one should refer to the Patriotic movement in the seventies and eighties of the eighteenth century, bearing in it the democratic ideas which were introduced all over Europe by the (later) French Revolution.

In the example of Erasmus we see that he is not only more tolerant than reformers like Luther and Calvin, he is at the same time much more radical and consequent. There is no reason at all to associate the tolerance of Erasmus with indifference or lack of opinion, or just moderation and preference for the middle way.

This is not a general opinion. In modern eyes, as well as in ancient protestant eyes, it is a weakness, not to say characterlessness, that Erasmus did not openly opt for the party of Luther. Why did not he join the movement that, in fact, he had initiated himself? According to Erasmus' biographer Antoon Vloemans, "they always say that he did not have the courage to suit the action to the world. This judgement has become, up to the present day, even a condemnation. However", continues Vloemans, "this view means great injustice to Erasmus' character... Much more courage was needed to remain independent, than belonging to either one of the parties: Roman Catholic or Lutheran." Vloemans adds that, if Erasmus had chosen, he would have had a much more easier life than ever travelling from one place to another. At his time, almost every scientist put himself under the protection of one of the powers. Luther was supported by Frederick (the Wise) of Saxonia, one of the mightiest men who even could not be neglected by Emperor Charles V. due to his influence in Germany. Erasmus had many opportunities to enter into the service of one of the great men, or the Church, but he preferred to remain independent. This speaks well for his courage and his sense for making radical choices.

Concluding, I hope to have made clear with the example of Erasmus that

- 1) tolerance does not involve aiming at moderation and the middle way;
- 2) radicalism may quite well amalgamate with tolerance.

#### 4. Literature used for this paper

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