

# Erasmus as Reformer: Humanism and Piety—Scholarship and Tolerance

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## Abstract

Erasmus was an older contemporary of Luther, who agreed with Luther that reform was most necessary for the church, but he did not take the side of Luther because his approach to reform was very different from the one of Luther. This paper will consider some important aspects of Erasmus's approach in comparison with Luther's positions. Central in Erasmus's view of reform was a return to the Scriptures: a return to the original texts (not the Vulgate), a return to the philosophy of Christ (not the scholastic speculations of his time), and a return to the Fathers as models of Bible readers (particularly the Greek Fathers, Origen). Erasmus did not see the core of the Gospel so much in particular doctrines (orthodoxy) but rather in the practice of Christian life (orthopraxis). In this perspective, Erasmus could tolerate theological errors in Origen as well as in Luther, as long as the basic commitment to the Gospel and the church was assured. Therefore, Erasmus blamed those Catholic theologians who were keen and quick to condemn Luther rather than to enter into serious theological dialogue with him. Erasmus's *De Libero Arbitrio* was an attempt to model such a dialogue, but the times were not favourable for it.

**Keywords:** Erasmus; Luther; Reformation; Humanism; tolerance



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## Reform by Means of a Return to the Scriptures: Biblical Humanism

It has been said that Erasmus<sup>1</sup> laid the egg of the Reformation, but that Luther was responsible for hatching it.<sup>2</sup> Like Luther, Erasmus was very concerned about the state of affairs in the church and he committed himself to the movements of renewal and reform, as can be seen not only in his *Laus Stultitiae*, but also in his letters and other publications. He agreed with much of Luther's criticism, but he disagreed with his "method and the occasion adopted" (see DeMolen 1973, 127).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Erasmus agreed with Luther that what the church needed was that "the pure study of the Bible and the Holy Fathers" would "be returned to honour" (Lienhard 1987, 270). However, Luther thought of a total overhaul and he was passionately committed to it. He wrote: "It is impossible to reform the church ... unless one uproots radically the canons, the decretals, scholastic theology, philosophy, logic as they are taught today" (Lienhard 1987, 270). Erasmus was deeply concerned about the reform of theology: he promoted the humanist approach to theology, but he kept his distance from the scholastic debates, while Luther involved himself in these debates with his own theories on justification, grace and freedom. Erasmus, on the other hand, did not believe that what was needed were more scholastic disputes and the stirring up or confusing of the masses. Instead, he expected reform to come from a return to the text of the New Testament and the promotion of evangelical piety:<sup>4</sup>

He wished to fill the world with the *philosophia Christi*, the simple, pious, and practical Christianity which would best serve the world. To achieve this, as many people as possible had to read the New Testament. But not the Vulgate, which was full of all sorts of obscurities. A new more readable and clearer translation was necessary, and that was

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- 1 Erasmus has been assessed in many, sometimes contradictory, ways—even as cold and uncommitted in contrast with the passionate and heroic stand of Luther (see the overviews by Mansfield 1979; 1992; 2003).
  - 2 See, for instance, T. M. Reynolds (1977, 18 and 32), who concludes: "If properly understood, then, the charge that Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it was a substantially accurate one" (32).
  - 3 He continues in this same letter addressed to Albert of Brandenburg in 1519: "Even though Luther has written somewhat intemperately, I think that the blame should rest on these very happenings [the abuses in the church]." About the debates on the powers of the pope he blames not the pope but those claiming powers for the pope merely to their own advantage: "And yet some who are causing these tumults are not doing it from zeal for the pontiff, but are abusing his power for their own enrichment and unjust domination" (DeMolen 1973, 127).
  - 4 As opposed to scholastic theology, Erasmus wanted to return to a non-polemical but pious reading of the Scriptures: "Erasmus in his *Paraclesis* (1516) offered his description of how Scripture should figure in life. Its verses should accompany the plowman at his plow, the weaver at his shuttle, and the wayfarer during the weariness of his journey. The New Testament should be translated into all tongues and read by all nations. There is no need for brawling and contentious books; the human doctrines in them lead to despair because these books are so dark, crafty, and contentious. But the doctrine in the Gospels found by those who have the plain and simple hearts of children leads the reader to wax strong in Christ" (quoted by Coogan 1986, 488).

Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum*, from 1519 entitled *Novum Testamentum*. (De Jonge 1980, 384–85)<sup>5</sup>

Erasmus was sympathetic with Luther's commitment to the reform, but he was worried about his approach. In 1520, when Luther was about to be condemned as a heretic, Erasmus wrote to Georg Spalatinus, the librarian and secretary of Frederick, elector of Saxony:

I pray that Christ the Almighty will so temper the pen and mind of Luther that he will procure for evangelical piety the greatest possible amount of good, and that he will give certain people a better understanding ... In the camp of those who oppose Luther I perceive many who smack of the world more than of Christ ... I would prefer Luther to refrain from these contentions for a little while and to expound the Gospel simply, without admixture of personal feelings; perhaps his undertaking would succeed better. (DeMolen 1973, 128)

Erasmus judged that in view of the climate of their times, “not always is the truth to be put forth. And it makes a wide difference in what manner it is set forth” (DeMolen 1973, 128).

Erasmus, like Luther, felt that the way towards reform was a return to the Scriptures. He did not expect any improvement in the life of the church from new scholastic theories, certainly not from proclaiming these to the crowds. Scholastic arguments about the “truth” appeared to Erasmus as “barren dogmatism” of the kind he had experienced during his theological studies in Paris.<sup>6</sup> Instead of this kind of dispute about “truth” Erasmus wanted a theology that would be able to stir the people to repentance and

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5 On the historical context of this focus on Christ, human and divine, at the time of Erasmus, see Ph. Denis 1987.

6 As a student in Paris he [Erasmus] wrote to one of his English friends (1497): “What if you saw Erasmus sit gaping among those blessed Scotists ... They assert that the mysteries of this science cannot be comprehended by anyone who has any commerce at all with the Muses or with the Graces ... Sweet Grey, do not mistake me. I would not have you construe this as directed against theology itself, which, as you know, I have always regarded with special reverence. I have only amused myself in making game of some pseudo-theologians of our time, whose brains are rotten, their language barbarous, their intellects dull, their learning a bed of thorns, their manners rough, their life hypocritical, their talk full of venom, and their heart as black as ink ...” (DeMolen 1973, 18).

improvement.<sup>7</sup> He saw both Luther's "doctrine" about free will<sup>8</sup> and his whole approach as the wrong medicine. The right approach, according to Erasmus was that of biblical humanism. In line with the humanist movement, Erasmus wanted to make the study of the Scriptures in the original languages together with the commentaries of the Greek and Latin Fathers the core of his renewal of the study of theology. He felt that scholastic theology had shifted away from "from pastoral and practical piety to theoretical and dialectical intellectualism" (Scheck 2016, 8). He was inspired by persons like Origen of Alexandria (see Decock 2011) and Jerome who had become for him models of both biblical scholarship and solid piety. In his *Ratio Verae Theologiae* (1518) he explained his approach to theology and he insisted on the crucial role of piety, on commitment to what one teaches, and on integrity of life.<sup>9</sup>

From the side of the theological establishment at the universities, Erasmus's approach to theology was forcefully rejected. Jacobus Latomus, one of the theologians in Leuven,<sup>10</sup> disputed the need for the study of Hebrew and Greek and considered reading the Fathers as dangerous. All of these could lead to heresy, but the safe teaching should be found in the great scholastic doctors. Furthermore, Latomus judged that Erasmus:

... minimized the objective content of the revealed truth which the theologian studies with the aid of reason enlightened by faith in favour of a subjective surge of the heart, of purity in one's Christian behaviour, of conformity to the evangelical virtues.

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7 The comments by William J Bouwsma for the fourteenth century were still applicable in the social context of Erasmus: "In the context of this crisis, the rivalry between humanist rhetoricians and scholastic dialecticians for religious and cultural influence takes on its full significance. From the standpoint of the humanists, the lifeless abstractions of scholastic discourse might in some sense be 'true,' but they were incapable of moving human beings to reform their own lives and devise remedies for the general evils of their age in a situation in which any delay invited catastrophe. But what dialectic could not bring about, they were convinced, rhetoric could, with God's help, accomplish" (Bouwsma 1987, 241).

8 On Luther's need for clarity, see John O'Malley's comments on Luther: "Though he later repudiated the sources, substance, and procedures of scholasticism, he never rid himself of disputatiousness and a yearning for the unambiguous position. Erasmus hated the scholastics even before he knew them, and he never assimilated their principles despite his stay at Paris. Luther was raised a scholastic, and in some residual way he remained one for the rest of his life. In other words, whereas a certain ambiguity was germane to Erasmus' whole intellectual and religious enterprise, clarity and distinction were what Luther had been taught to prize from the very beginning ... He [Luther] also rejected scholasticism's attempt to resolve its questions in terms of metaphysical coherence and to structure its answers in terms of the comprehensive schema of a *Summa*. But he retained the *sic-et-non* style of posing the questions, and he even prolonged this style into answer by way of paradox" (O'Malley 1974, 58).

9 Chantraine (1978, 180) comments on this work: "At the heart of Scripture, as at its sanctuary, lies the mystery. The Holy Spirit alone is able to penetrate it; submissiveness to the Holy Spirit alone prepares one to understand Scripture."

10 See the discussion in Scheck (2016, 30–34) on Jacob Latomus Masson's critique of Erasmus.

Scholastic theology could not accept to give the primacy to the spiritual subject at the expense of the body of doctrines. (Godin 1982, 438)<sup>11</sup>

Erasmus's reply to Latomus is very significant:

As Plato says: "A man who is on fire with the love of wisdom is neither totally without wisdom, nor completely in control of it." Long before our time Augustine taught us to approach the study of sacred literature with a mind as pure and as free from vice as it could possibly be. Paul numbers that power of prophecy which enables us to expound the Scriptures and their mysteries as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Understanding the mystic texts with your mind is not enough: you must understand them with your soul as well.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense Erasmus was sceptical about the value of the scholastic disputes in as far as these gave the impression of being "in control of the truth"; as if true faith consisted mainly in holding the right theories. This also explained his reluctance to get involved in the condemnation of Luther, while the whole process of condemnation was driven by the traditional theologians.<sup>13</sup>

It was in view of this kind of "biblical humanism" that Erasmus prepared a new Latin version of the New Testament based more closely on the Greek texts so that as many people as possible would be able to be in touch with the original text.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Erasmus's biblical humanism, which he also called the *New Learning*, or the *Good*

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11 My translation of the original French text: "*de minimiser le contenu objectif des vérités révélées qu'étudie le théologien à l'aide de sa raison éclairée par la foi, au profit d'un élan subjectif du coeur, de la pureté du comportement chrétien, de la conformité aux vertus évangéliques. La Scolastique ne pouvait admettre ce primat donné au sujet spirituel au détriment du corps des doctrines.*"

12 *Apology against Latomus* (LB, v. 9:89; quoted by Scheck 2008, 142).

13 On Erasmus's views on doctrine, see the study by Christine Christ-von Wedel 2013.

14 The biblical humanism of Erasmus was first based on his conviction that a direct contact with the teachings of Jesus, as found in the New Testament, should be the core of theology and not primarily the great medieval masters. Textual criticism and philological work were at the service of his primary concern. Already in 1505 he had published Lorenzo Valla's *Annotations on the New Testament* in which Valla critically examined the Vulgate translation against the Greek manuscripts available to him and showed how the Vulgate could not be relied on. As Rummel (2004, 73–89) has shown, Erasmus experienced endless criticism from the side of the Catholic theologians, mainly on account of his philological work which appeared to them as "Lutheran" and in any case heretical: "Pelagianism, Arianism, and unorthodox sacramentology" (Coogan 1986, 476).

*Letters*, was not a kind of secular humanistic movement as opposed to religion, but an evangelical movement as opposed to the scholastic approach of his time.<sup>15</sup>

In 1516 Erasmus was the first scholar to produce a printed version of the Greek New Testament. In this famous publication, the *Novum Instrumentum*, Erasmus offered together with the Greek text his new Latin translation, which was accompanied by 450 pages of *annotationes*. These included, besides discussions on the text, also interpretations of the Greek and Latin Fathers.

## Luther's Response to Erasmus's Text in 1516

Luther consulted Erasmus's edition and became a great admirer of Erasmus. Already in 1516 he first approached Erasmus via George Spalatinus, librarian of the Saxon Elector Frederick the Wise. In this communication Luther exhorted Erasmus to focus more on justification and on original sin, and he commended that he should pay more attention to Augustine.<sup>16</sup> One can imagine that Erasmus was not impressed by these suggestions and that he immediately sensed that Luther's approach was not in line with his own biblical humanism.

In his own approach Erasmus was in no hurry to agree with Augustine's (and Luther's) interpretation of Romans 5:12, ἐφ' ᾧ, as referring to original sin.<sup>17</sup> The Latin text used by Augustine translated the original ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον as *in quo omnes peccaverunt*. In his first edition, the one Luther had read, Erasmus simply remarked that instead of the Vulgate interpretation of the Greek ἐφ' ᾧ, another and more obvious interpretation was to take it as a causal conjunction, *quatenus*, meaning "in as far as all men sinned," as had been done by a number of early interpreters. As philologist he could agree with this latter group since this interpretation made sense in terms of Paul's common use of ἐφ' ᾧ. We see here an important principle in Erasmus's research: besides his

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15 Erasmus feared that his approach would be confused with the movement of Luther and bring his approach in disrepute; this was a very realistic fear, as we can see from later developments. The formulation by Rummel (2004, 92), "Erasmus seemed preoccupied with the fate of the humanistic movement and frequently voiced fears about the New Learning becoming entangled in the religious question," may give the impression of an opposition in Erasmus's mind between humanism and religion. However, he saw his humanistic movement as a means for the restoration of the true religion of Jesus.

16 See Coogan (1986, 478) and Huizinga (1952, 139), who summarised it as follows: "... in the Epistle to the Romans, Erasmus had paid too little attention to original sin: he might profit by reading Augustine."

17 Erasmus's interpretation of Romans 5:12 and 14 became the target of an endless string of attacks from Catholic scholars (as well as from Lutherans) (see Coogan 1986). Erasmus's biblical humanism encouraged an approach to the text that steers away from polemics, which often distorts Scripture, but looks for the meaning of the texts by means of philology and confirmation by the early exegetical tradition. He replaces scholastic dialectics by humanist grammar. "Because his exegesis favours moral philosophy over hair-splitting theology, leans toward pluralism in the interpretation of passages, and shuns doctrinal apologetics, his annotation to [Romans] 5:14 (1516) illustrates how a 'Hellenist' [as opposed to a Scholastic 'Pharisee'] interprets Paul" (Coogan 1986, 489).

philological approach he also paid careful attention to the exegesis of the Fathers and he found that, in this case, Augustine was not in line with the majority. Therefore, in this first edition Erasmus drew no doctrinal conclusions from this phrase and the issue of original sin was simply omitted at this point. Luther, like many other Catholic theology professors, was obviously not satisfied with this omission. Apparently, Erasmus never replied to Luther's first approach.

When some years later, in 1519, Luther wrote a flattering letter to Erasmus in view of securing his support, Erasmus replied that he did not want his own biblical humanism to be seen as tied up with Luther's reform (see Rummel 2004, 91–93). In fact, even later on, he regularly claimed that he had no special interest in Luther's theological arguments. Furthermore, he was adamant that Luther should discuss his theological opinions with scholars like himself and not confuse the faithful by preaching and printing these views. In any case, he did not want his humanist theological project, the *Good Letters*, to be seen as associated with Luther's reform. He expressed himself in this sense in a letter addressed to Cardinal Wolsey on May 18, 1519:

Luther is no more known to me than any stranger he might meet; and as for the man's books, I have not had the time to turn over more than one or two pages ... The man's life is by a wide and general consent approved; and it is no small presumption in his favour, that his moral character is such that even his foes can find no fault with it. If I had ample leisure to read his works, I do not claim so much authority as to pass judgment upon the writings of so important a person ... They [Luther's writings] were followed by one or two pamphlets about confession and penance; and when I became aware that some persons were intent upon their publication, I did my best to discourage it, that they might not strengthen the prejudice against *Good Letters*. (DeMolen 1973, 122–123)

## **Erasmus as Philologist and Interpreter, at Home in the Patristic Tradition**

As a result of his conversion experience, Luther came to interpret Romans 1:17 in his own personal way and articulated his understanding of justification, grace, human freedom, works, and so forth in ways closest to, but still beyond, Augustine's polemical anti-Pelagian writings. Under the power of his conversion experience he felt that none of the Fathers had fully grasped and articulated the message of Paul. Luther measured all the Fathers against his own understanding, as he expressed this later in one of his *Tischreden*:

Ever since I came to an understanding of Paul, I have not been able to think well of any doctor [of the church]. They have become of little value to me. At first I devoured, not merely read, Augustine. But when the door was opened for me in Paul, so that I understood what justification by faith is, it was all over with Augustine. (Scheck 2008, 175; *Luther's Works* 1955–1987, 55, 49)

Luther and Melanchthon held that the purity of the Gospel was lost as soon as after the death of the Apostles, Origen being the main culprit, followed by Jerome. God had

raised up Augustine to undo the damage to some extent, but in the end Luther was the one whom God raised up to fully restore the pure doctrine and so to re-establish the true church and inaugurate the last age of the world.<sup>18</sup>

Here we see a radical difference between Luther's approach to the Fathers and that of Erasmus. For Erasmus, philological research into the Scriptures needed to be embedded in a firm grasp of the development of the interpretations of all the Fathers, of the Greek as well as of the Latin tradition. In this he stood clearly in the humanist tradition. Furthermore, with Petrarch, humanism returned to the Augustine of the *Confessions* instead of the Augustine of the doctrines, which had been until then the focus of the theologians. The humanists "sought to absorb not so much his doctrine as his spirituality" (Bouwsma 1987, 244).<sup>19</sup> Lorenzo Valla drew the attention to Jerome's biblical *erudition* as another dimension of humanist studies. In line with this twofold humanist tradition, Erasmus was throughout his whole career very deeply immersed in editing the works of the Fathers.<sup>20</sup> He was looking for the common views in the tradition and he was able to relativise what was uncommon. He knew the history of theology very well and understood them "in the light of the opinions and customs prevailing in their own century, rather than measuring them by modern standards" (Scheck 2008, 71). He was able to appreciate the development,<sup>21</sup> while Luther and Melanchthon saw theological development as deviation from the purity to be found only and without alteration in Paul, as understood by Luther.<sup>22</sup> Erasmus, on the other hand, critically evaluated the interpretations of Origen, Jerome, Augustine and all the interpreters in the light of what was later on broadly accepted in the church. Scheck formulates this well with regard to Erasmus's approach to Origen:

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18 See Schulze (2001) on Luther's and Melanchthon's evaluation of the history of the church from the death of the Apostles until the time of Luther (also see Scheck 2008, 174–204).

19 "As Petrarch remarked in connection with a famous passage in Augustine's *Confessions*: 'If the Scriptures infused true faith into Victorinus when he was an old pagan, God speaking through them and softening the hardest breast, why should they not infuse into me, a Christian, a firmness of true faith and works and love of a happier life'" (Bouwsma 1987, 244).

20 "Erasmus completed editions of the writings of Jerome (1516), Cyprian (1520), Arnobius (1522), Hilary (1523), John Chrysostom (1525), Irenaeus (1526), Athanasius (1527), Ambrose (1527), Augustine (1529), Gregory of Nazianzus (1531), Origen (1536)" (Scheck 2008, 130).

21 See Christ-von Wedel 2013. According to one reviewer of Christ-von Wedel, "The book is important because it addresses the complex issue of the relationship between Erasmus's historical consciousness and his theology—ultimately one of the main lines that distinguished him from (and drew the ire of) both his Catholic and reformed critics. What emerges from this thorough and insightful study is an Erasmus comfortable with ambiguity on matters of faith, where such ambiguity would support an understanding of Christian doctrine that 'fit with the times'" (Crane 2015, 165).

22 "Thus for Melanchthon, the aim of critical study of the Fathers is to find in their teaching the unimpaired faith of the 'Church' ... Roman Catholics like Erasmus thought in terms of dogmatic progress according to which God willed that certain parts of the original revelation be understood with increasing comprehension over time" (Scheck 2008, 184–185). However, the Roman Catholic scholastics did not display any historical sense either in their inability to accept Erasmus's interpretation of Romans 5:12.



The principle that is involved here is a programmatic one: Erasmus tends to follow Origen particularly where Origen was himself followed by other writers whom Church tradition recognizes as orthodox. Conversely, Erasmus's distrust of Luther's theological judgment is focused precisely on the fact that Luther tends to attack those aspects of the Catholic exegetical tradition that had always received broad approval. (Scheck 2008, 137–138)

Because of this sense of history, for example, Erasmus felt free to criticise Thomas Aquinas when he ignored the interpretations of Origen and Didymus merely on the grounds that they were involved in heresy as seen from a later point in history.<sup>23</sup> However, for Erasmus the biblical text always remained the primary source, and so, for instance, he agreed with Luther's criticism that the Dominicans esteemed the views of Thomas "almost more than the four Gospels" (DeMolen 1973, 127).

For Erasmus, Origen began to occupy a very special place among the Fathers after he had been introduced to his works by the saintly French Franciscan, Jean Vitrier, during the winter of 1501–1502 (see Godin 1968). As a result of this encounter, Erasmus developed a great admiration for Origen, not only as a scholar but also as a committed follower of the *philosophia Christi*.<sup>24</sup> While Origen had remained ambiguously attractive in the West throughout the Middle Ages,<sup>25</sup> a new wave of interest in him had developed first with the Italian and later with the French humanist movement.<sup>26</sup> Erasmus learned to appreciate Origen for his philological skills and for his concern to move people towards spiritual improvement, different from the scholastic debates about truth. As Erasmus commented: "It is one thing to scrutinize the truth in a scholastic argument, it is another thing to move the feelings of people towards improvement by the power of one's oratory."<sup>27</sup> Especially, Erasmus recognised in Origen an outstanding model and

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23 The statement was made against Aquinas who, in the discussion of Gal 2:11, wanted to omit Origen and Didymus the Blind from the "authorities" on the interpretation of that passage, "veluti infames de haeresi." Erasmus appreciated Origen very much, particularly his understanding of the Greek text but not his theological speculations: "*At ego in Scripturarum enarratione unum Originem decem orthodoxis anteposuerim, exceptis aliquot dogmatibus fidei*" (LB, v. 6:808–809).

24 According to Coogan, "Because Erasmus calls his way to justification *philosophia* and not *theologia Christi*, one is hardly surprised to find reason and will playing very prominent roles vis-a-vis faith and grace" (Coogan 1986, 493). However, this sounds like uninformed speculation; in using the word "*philosophia*" Erasmus is recalling the language of the Early Church; for a thorough examination, see Chantraine (1971).

25 In spite of his condemnation in 553 AD by the 5th Council of Constantinople. On the enduring influence of Origen in the Latin West, see De Lubac (1998, v. 1, 161–224).

26 See the survey by Scheck (2008, 158–168). Scheck concludes: "The chief result of this survey is the finding that Erasmus was the heir of an Origen renaissance and not the author of it. His support for Origen was mild compared with that of his contemporaries, and unlike others he never denied the presence of serious errors in Origen's writings" (158). On the diversity of interests in Origen during the Renaissance, see Pouderon (2016). On the widely different views on Origen in France at the time of Erasmus, see Godin (1982, 417–448).

27 "*Aliud est in scholastico conflictu veritatem scrutari, aliud est affectus hominum orationis impetu rapere ad meliora*" (LB, v. 9, 819B; quoted by Godin 1982, 439). Erasmus was more interested in the rhetorical power than in the power of logic and dialectics.

guide for biblical scholars: as witness to the original Greek text, as gifted commentator, and as fountainhead of subsequent interpretations.<sup>28</sup> Strikingly, Erasmus claimed that he received more inspiration from one page of Origen than from 10 pages of Augustine.<sup>29</sup> It is also significant that his very last publication, which appeared two months after his death, was the edition of Origen’s works.<sup>30</sup>

### *De Libero Arbitrio*

All along, Erasmus kept away from polemics against Luther. Basically, one can accept that Erasmus did not expect any good for the church from such scholastic disputes. Although he agreed with Luther that the church definitely needed strong medicine, he thought that “drugs wrongly given [would] make the sick man worse.”<sup>31</sup> In 1521, after Luther’s excommunication early that year and his appearance at the Diet of Worms a few months’ later, Erasmus wrote to Archbishop William Warham: “Luther’s movement was not connected with learning, but it has brought learning into ill-repute.” In other words, Luther’s approach was not part of his own approach, but it cast a strong suspicion on it. This worry must have moved him to finally take up his pen against Luther: “I suppose I must write something about him. I will read his books and see what can be done” (DeMolen 1973, 134).

Finally, in 1524, Erasmus published his *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*. In this way Erasmus hoped to return the theological discussion on this difficult topic to a reasonable and civil exchange of views between scholars (a diatribe, but not in our modern sense).<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, Erasmus turned to Origen, who had argued in favour of free will against Gnostic teachers and all those who believed in fate. He considered that the issue of free will had been thoroughly treated by Origen, first in his *De Principiis*, 3:1 and then in his great commentary on Romans 9:6–24 (both extant in full only in a

28 See Scheck (2008, 133–139), who comments and develops the assessment by Godin (1982). Of course, Jerome was also a great model of the *docta pietas* (see Rummel 2004, 448 and Erasmus’s *Life of Jerome*).

29 “*Aio me plus pii affectus colligere ex una pagina Origenis quam ex decem Augustinis*” (LB, v. 9, 708E). Scheck (2008, 135–136) points out that these comments were made in the context of controversies over Romans and that Erasmus must have been referring to Origen’s commentary on Romans, “which far surpasses in breath and detail anything Augustine has left behind as commentary on Romans” (Scheck 2008, 136).

30 See Godin (1982, 559–674); Scheck (2008, 168–169); Scheck (2016). The argument of Charles Béné (1969; 1987) that later on in his life Erasmus turned away from Origen and turned more to Augustine is not convincing. Béné concluded that the thesis of Godin “*ne peut contester l’effacement progressif d’Origène, Érasme lui reprochant de plus en plus nettement et son hyperallégorisme, et ses positions hérétiques*” (239).

31 To Archbishop William Warham in 1521 (DeMolen 1973, 134).

32 Although according to McCutcheon (1997, 40), “Erasmus’ equivocations over form begin with the bilingual title he gives his work—‘*diatribe sive collatio*.’ On the simplest level synonyms of ‘treatise,’ the Greek and Latin words between them connote a range of feelings from hostility to cordiality. It is as though from the outset Erasmus provides himself with two personae—one sympathetic to Luther and the other harsh—for an internal colloquy. In the course of the treatise Erasmus alternately compliments and castigates Luther, just as he slips into and out of dialogue.”

translation by Rufinus).<sup>33</sup> Erasmus agreed with Origen that the way God’s providence and saving action fit together with human freedom and responsibility are “beyond our comprehension.”<sup>34</sup> The exegetical efforts of Origen to explain the difficult texts make it clear to Erasmus that Luther’s *claritas* of the Scriptures does not apply here. To Luther, the issue was not only clear but of absolute importance for eternal salvation, as he declares in his reply to Erasmus, *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525):

I hold that a solemn and vital truth, of eternal consequence, is at stake in this discussion; one so crucial and fundamental that it ought to be maintained and defended even to the cost of life, though as a result the whole world should be, not just thrown into turmoil and uproar, but shattered in chaos and reduced to nothingness.<sup>35</sup>

To Erasmus, on the other hand, holding this or that scholastic theory is not a matter of eternal salvation. He may recall the words of Thomas a Kempis in the *Imitatio Christi*, I:3: “What great profit is there in great argument about hidden matters and obscure, ignorance of which brings us no condemnation in judgement?” Erasmus had no intention to reform scholastic theology, but rather to destabilise their claims by means of his humanistic approach “to explain nothing more than what has been handed down in Sacred Scripture.”<sup>36</sup>

Erasmus selected the rhetorical form of the diatribe inspired by Lucian of Samosata (see Bacchi 2019) as a model for his time, to make clear how he thought such matters should be handled: not as a matter of death or life, not in hot disputation, but in civil and reasonable openness to the arguments (see Rummel 2009, 292). While Luther viewed his theological work as a tragedy and made his assertions with passionate commitment, Erasmus asks in an entertaining way: “Does Erasmus dare to take on Luther as a fly might an elephant?”<sup>37</sup> He continues:

And I take so little pleasure in assertions that I will gladly seek refuge in Scepticism ... and so I will act as disputant, not as a judge; as an inquirer, not as dogmatist; ready to learn from anyone, if truer or more reliable arguments can be put forward.<sup>38</sup>

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33 Origen’s discussion on human freedom has been collected by Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa in the *Philocalia* 21–27.

34 See the quote in Origen’s Commentary on Romans 12:3–5 on how God decides which places to give to each one in the church “according the measure of faith” (Scheck 2008, 56).

35 Translation from McGeown (1999). Original Latin: “*mihi rem seriam et necessariam aeternamque in hac causa peti, talem ac tantam, ut eam assertam et defensam oporteat per mortem quoque, etiam si mundus totus non solum conflictari et tumuahuari debeat, verum etiam in unum chaos ruere et in nihilum redigi*” (W.A. XVIII 625).

36 Letter to the Archbishop of Palermo on January 5, 1522, quoted in Coogan (1986, 489).

37 Quoted by Bacchi (2019, 123; CWE 76, 6).

38 Quoted by Bacchi (2019, 123; CWE 76, 8).

For Luther, however, all was clear and luminous; he knew what the Scriptures meant and therefore there was no need for the philological expertise from sceptical and unenlightened grammarians like Erasmus.<sup>39</sup>

After Luther's negative reply, Erasmus still attempted to continue the dialogue in *Hyperaspistes* 1 and 2 (1526–1528) but Luther did no longer reply.<sup>40</sup> The following was, as it were, Erasmus's final challenge to Luther:

Now if this matter has been sufficiently demonstrated to be such that it is not expedient, as far as piety is concerned, to scrutinise it too closely, especially among the uneducated; if I have shown that this opinion [free will] is based on more numerous and more evident passages of Scripture than the other; if it is plain that Holy Writ is in many passages obscure and figurative, or even at first glance to be in disagreement with itself and that on that account, whether we wish it or not, we must depart from it verbally and literally somewhat, and must modify the sense by interpretation; and if finally there is set forth the many inconveniences, I will not say absurdities, which would follow if free will were once entirely taken away, and if it were openly brought to pass, by the accepting of this judgement of which I have spoken that nothing of those things would perish of which Luther piously and in a Christian manner had discussed—about supreme love for God, about abolishing trust in our merits, our works, our endeavours, and about transferring such to God and his promises—I would now desire the reader to weigh this and say whether he would think it just to condemn this judgment of so many of the Doctors of the Church which the consent of so many ages and peoples has approved, and to take in its place certain erroneous opinions on which the Christian world is now convulsed? (DeMolen 1973, 154–155)

The approach of Origen and of Erasmus was to take the texts on God's justice and human responsibility as the basic message of the Scriptures. However, they pointed out a number of texts that seemed to contradict this basic message. Origen had interpreted

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39 Luther followed Augustine's *De Magistro* and his *De Doctrina Christiana*, that "*Qui non intelligit res, non potest ex verbis sensuum elicere*" (*Tract. 29 in Johannem*). According to Luther, Origen and Jerome did not "understand" Paul's teaching on justification by faith and therefore all their skill with words failed. One's presuppositions will affect the way one constructs the meaning of the words and the sentences. Hence for faith, as understood by Luther, the Scriptures are clear: "... if faith merely listens to Scripture, Scripture becomes clear, so clear and luminous to faith, that without any of the Fathers' and doctors' glosses faith says 'that is right—I too believe that'" (Schulze 2001, 622). Erasmus, on the other hand, used his grammatical observations as a subtle means to destabilise the certainties of the theologians. One can imagine him saying with tongue in cheek: "I am writing notes, not passing laws; I propose matter for discussion, not for immediate adoption" (Rummel 2004, 85). One should ask whether Rummel is correct in thinking that Erasmus was *unaware* and was "boldly" (82) or "blissfully ignoring the fact the verbal changes he made affected the meaning of the passage" (85).

40 On these works, see Scheck (2008, 254–255, notes 15 and 16). Scheck (2008, 255, note 16) points out: "It eventually led Luther's right-hand man, Melanchthon, to embrace the Catholic position on the issue of the debate (free will) and to suppress Luther's doctrines of double predestination, total depravity, and irresistible grace 'as Manichean and Stoical ravings'."

these difficult and obscure texts as best as he could according to the rules of grammar, but ultimately in a way that would be in accord with the rule of faith.<sup>41</sup>

Erasmus hoped—against hope?—to open a real dialogue on the matter. He recognised Luther’s pious and Christian concerns about “abolishing trust in our merits,” but he also asked his readers to judge whether Luther’s condemnation of “the consent of so many ages and peoples” was just. However, the circumstances for such a dialogue were unfavourable at that time and remained unfavourable until after Vatican II. Finally, on October 31, 1999, as one of the fruits of years of ecumenical dialogue, this dialogue bore some decisive fruits in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (1999).<sup>42</sup>

## Erasmus: A Man of Dialogue and Peace

Erasmus was in no way inclined to join the Catholic theologians in their attacks against Luther. This appeared to Erasmus as a dead end and of no benefit for the renewal of the church and of the faithful. He therefore wanted to keep his neutrality in the battle between the two parties, although he was pressurised from both sides.<sup>43</sup> He wanted to make it clear that his “*philosophia Christi*” had nothing to do with Luther’s movement but he also wished to disassociate himself from the scholastic theologians and from their

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41 According to Origen in *Princ.* 3,1, 17: “And this is a point which I wish impressed upon those who peruse these pages, that with respect to topics of such difficulty and obscurity we use our utmost endeavour, not so much to ascertain clearly the solutions of the questions (for every one will do this as the Spirit gives him utterance), as to maintain the rule of faith in the most unmistakable manner, by striving to show that the providence of God, which equitably administers all things, governs also immortal souls on the justest principles, (conferring rewards) according to the merits and motives of each individual; the present economy of things not being confined within the life of this world, but the pre-existing state of merit always furnishing the ground for the state that is to follow, and thus by an eternal and immutable law of equity, and by the controlling influence of Divine Providence, the immortal soul is brought to the summit of perfection.” This is Rufinus’s translation, but, the *Philocalia* reads: “But observe whether, besides our desire to investigate (the truth), we do not rather strive to maintain an attitude of piety in everything regarding God and His Christ, seeing we endeavour by every means to prove that, in matters so great and so peculiar regarding the varied providence of God, He takes an oversight of the immortal soul.”

42 For the text of the agreement see [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html). On the scholastic background and the challenges ahead in view of the more recent philosophical development of the views on human freedom, see Ruhstorfer (2004).

43 In 1521, after Luther’s excommunication, Erasmus wrote to Peter Barbirius: “I saw the peril of neutrality, but I cannot be a rebel. Luther’s friends quote, ‘I came not to send peace on earth but a sword.’ Of course, the Church requires reform, but violence is not the way to it” (DeMolen 1973, 133). He also explains to Leo X why he has not made any reply to Luther: “I gather from what I have seen that Luther rejects the modern hair splitting and superfluous subtleties in the explanation of Scripture and inclines to the mysticism of the early Fathers ... first, because to reply to him I must first have studied what he has said attentively, and for this I have no leisure” (DeMolen 1973, 129, on September 13, 1520).

ways of responding to Luther.<sup>44</sup> In line with his humanist approach he did not put his trust in refining doctrinal issues and in feeding them to the faithful. For him, living according to the Gospels was more important than scholastic disputes.

Erasmus did not support the plans to excommunicate Luther. He drew attention to the moral quality of Luther's life and held that he should not be judged only on account of his doctrines.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, he was questioning the motives of those theologians who so vehemently attacked Luther and wanted his condemnation.<sup>46</sup>

Even errors in doctrine should not be seen as automatically resulting in exclusion from eternal salvation (considering the case of Origen).<sup>47</sup> With regard to the disputes of his time (for instance, on the exact nature and consequences of original sin), he appealed for an acceptance of our limitations in interpreting the mysteries of the Scriptures, humbly waiting, even for the "face-to-face" of the *Eschaton*, instead of bitter arguments, insults and even threats of force and torture:

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44 On May 18, 1519, Erasmus wrote to Cardinal Wolsey: "I did my best to discourage it, that they might not strengthen the prejudice against *Good Letters* ... Whatever exertions I have hitherto made have been made for the assistance of honourable studies and the advancement of the Christian religion; and all persons *on every side are* [my italics] thankful for what so far has been done, except a few theologians and monks, who have no wish to be wiser or better than they are" (DeMolen 1973, 125). After Luther's condemnation he wrote to Lorenzo Campeggio, December 6, 1520, from Leuven: "I have myself simply protested against his being condemned before he has been heard in his defence. If we want truth, every man ought to be free to say what he thinks without fear. If the advocates of one side are to be rewarded with mitres and the advocates of the other with rope or stake, truth will not be heard ... Then came the terrible Bull, with the pope's name upon it. Luther's books were to be burnt, and he himself was denounced to the world as a heretic" (DeMolen 1973, 129).

45 See DeMolen 1973, 126 (to Luther) May 30, 1519, from Leuven: "a great part of this crowded university is infected with the malady" (= calumny without having read Luther's works "especially when with unanimous consent the author's personal character was commended"); see also DeMolen (1973, 122, to Cardinal Wolsey, May 18, 1519): "... The man's life is by a wide and general consent approved; and it is no small presumption in his favour that his moral character is such that even his foes can find no fault with it."

46 See DeMolen (1973, 127, to Albert of Brandenburg, October 19, 1519): "Luther has reacted against excessive statements on indulgences, the power of the Roman Pontiff, some conclusions of St Thomas which the Dominicans esteem almost more than the Four Gospels ... what I do question, however, are the method and the occasion adopted [by Luther] ... Even though Luther has written somewhat intemperately, I think that the blame should rest on these very happenings ... And yet some who are causing these tumults are not doing it from zeal for the pontiff, but are abusing his power for their own enrichment and unjust domination."

47 See the discussion in Scheck (2008, 168–172): "It seems that Erasmus assessed Origen's errors as being primarily intellectual mistakes and did not detect in him any emotional attachment to heresy or malicious intent. On the contrary, Erasmus rated Origen very highly in terms of emotional/inner disposition that is displayed in his writings" (Scheck 2008, 171–172).

Embrace what you are allowed to perceive, venerate from afar what you are not allowed to perceive, and look in awe with simple faith on whatever it is that is concealed from you. Keep far away from impious curiosity. (Quoted by Rummel 2004, 48)

Differences over doctrinal issues should be discussed among specialists in a context of reasonable argument, as Erasmus had attempted to model such a discussion in his *De Libero Arbitrio*.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, Erasmus saw that in the heat of the disputes the Scriptures were distorted into weapons in defence of this or that theological position. By means of his philological and patristic research he discretely aimed at depriving the theologians of some of their trusted weapons.<sup>49</sup>

Erasmus very pointedly expressed his vision for the interpretation of the Scriptures in a letter to the Archbishop of Palermo on January 5, 1522:

Rather, the task of theological learning is precisely this: to explain nothing more than what has been handed down in Sacred Scripture; however, what has been handed down should be propagated in good faith. Many problems are now being set aside for referral to an ecumenical council. It would be much better to reserve them for that time when we shall see God, not indirectly and obscurely, but face to face ... Formerly faith consisted in life rather than the profession of creeds ... When faith began to be in books rather than in hearts, there were almost as many faiths as men. Creeds increased and sincerity decreased. Contention grew hot and love grew cold. The teaching of Christ, which initially knew no hair-splitting, began to depend on the support of philosophy. This was the first stage in the fall of the Church ... From there it has come to terror and threats. When life leaves us, when faith is in the mouth rather than the heart, when we lack knowledge of the Sacred Scriptures, we drive men to believe what they do not believe, to love what they do not love, to understand what they do not understand. What is coerced cannot be sincere, and what is not voluntary cannot please Christ. (Quoted by Coogan 1986, 489)

Within such a frame of thought he hoped that reconciliation between Luther and the pope would be possible with the required good will on both sides.<sup>50</sup> In 1523 he wrote to Pope Adrian VI warning of the danger of atrocious bloodshed and appealing for a

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48 What Erasmus likes about Origen and dislikes about Tertullian (and even about Luther): “*nam hic plerumque disputat et inquit, Tertullianus asseverat ac pugnatur*” (Godin 1982, 436, referring to Allen, v. 5, Ep 1232, 573, 18–19).

49 Lee’s arguments against Erasmus displayed the worries of the Catholic dialecticians at the universities generally that his humanist approach “stressed life not doctrine, freedom not authority, and irenicism not weapons against heretics” (Coogan 1986, 491).

50 He wrote to Lorenzo Campeggio on December 6, 1520: “As to Luther himself, I perceived that the better a man was the less he was Luther’s enemy ... I approved of what seemed good in his work. I told him in a letter that if he would moderate his language he might be a shining light, and that the Pope, I did not doubt, would be his friend” (DeMolen 1973, 129).

reconciling approach: “I perceive that a different line of treatment is most pleasing to your gentle nature, that you would rather cure than punish.”<sup>51</sup>

It is clear that Erasmus agreed with Luther on the need for reform, but he thought that Luther’s approach was excessive. While he did not agree, it is striking that he nevertheless did not exclude the possibility that in one way or another God could be at work in him. Erasmus’s response to Luther receives some light from a letter to the Duke of Saxony written in 1524, where he models his stance after that of Gamaliel in Acts 5:34–39:

Scandalous monks were ensnaring and strangling consciences. Theology had become sophistry. Dogmatism had grown to madness, and, besides, there were unspeakable priests, and bishops, and Roman officials. Perhaps I thought that God was using Luther ... Luther could not have succeeded so signally if God had not been with him ...

If you put the fire out by force, it will burst up again. I trust, I hope that Luther will make a few concessions and that the Pope and princes may still consent to peace. May Christ’s dove come among us, or else Minerva’s owl. Luther has administered an acrid dose to a diseased body. God grant it prove salutary. (DeMolen 1973, 151–152)

If Erasmus distanced himself from both Luther and the scholastic theologians, where did he find himself?<sup>52</sup> It seems as if he saw the pope in an idealistic way as the one who was meant to be above the theological disputes and to protect those who defended the Scriptures and their ancient and common interpretation.<sup>53</sup> More realistically, he could hope that the papal environment would have more appreciation for his humanistic ideals.<sup>54</sup> Beside the fact that Erasmus saw himself as following in the footsteps of Jerome, whom Pope Damasus had encouraged in his work as translator, he could recall how Lorenzo Valla had been protected from the Inquisition by Pope Nicholas V by making him his secretary. It is a fact that Erasmus kept close contact with the popes: he dedicated his first edition of his *Novum Instrumentum* to Pope Leo X; the second edition

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51 “I observe it to be favoured by men that this evil should be remedied by severity, but I fear that the event may hereafter prove to have been unwise counsel. I see a greater chance than I could wish that the matter may end in an atrocious slaughter ... It is evident that there will be no need of my advice should there be the decision to overcome the evil by imprisonment, scourgings, confiscations, exiles, rigorous penalties and death. However, I perceive that a different line of treatment is most pleasing to your gentle nature, that you would rather cure than punish” (DeMolen 1973, 143, to Pope Adrian VI, from Basel on March 22, 1523).

52 The Council of Trent was more critical of some aspects of Erasmus’s views on original sin and infant baptism (see Coogan 1986, 503): “On 9 June 1546, theologians at Trent, debating heresies on original sin, listed nine kinds of errors, the third of which links Erasmus by name with Pelagius on account of his failure to signify that Paul spoke of original sin in Romans 5.” See also Jedin (1957–1961, v. II, I53). See v. II, 388, for Trent’s rejection of Erasmus’s thoughts on infant baptism.

53 Erasmus tended to lay the blame for the abusive practices on the pope’s underlings (see Rummel 2004, 92, referring to Erasmus’s first communication with Luther).

54 “Although the lurid aspect of the papacy of the era has been exaggerated, it is almost impossible to exaggerate the achievement of the cultural aspect” (O’Malley 2010, 171); see also the detailed study on the sacred oratory at the papal court (1450–1521) by O’Malley (1979).



included a kind reply from Leo X. In fact, he enjoyed the protection of the popes in various ways: Pope Adrian VI, as chancellor of the University of Leuven, refused to authorise an investigation into Erasmus's writings. "Even just before his death Adrian intervened on Erasmus's behalf with the Sorbonne" (Scheck 2016, 198). Pope Clement VII expressed his concerns to the Inquisitor-General when they were investigating Erasmus and no censure or condemnation was issued.<sup>55</sup> Luther's experience and view of the popes were, of course, totally different (see for instance Whitford 2008).

## Conclusion

It appears that Erasmus was deeply concerned about the state of the church and human society of his time. His main aim in all his intellectual achievements was to serve the church and society by leading all Christians back to the life-giving source of the Scriptures instead of the barren cisterns of scholastic theology and of the preaching on indulgences. He found a model for such reading of the Scriptures in the church Fathers. Rummel appears to have isolated Erasmus's intellectual concerns from this over-all commitment to the wellbeing and peace of the church and society, when she writes:

His [Erasmus's] actions [distancing himself from Luther] were determined primarily by intellectual concerns: a sceptical epistemology and the desire to protect humanistic studies from the opprobrium adhering to the reformers (Rummel 2004, 105).

His sceptical epistemology was in line with that of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa (and Paul in 1 Cor 13:8–12), and others, who clearly saw the limitations of human knowledge about matters divine and knew that the full light will only shine on us at the Parousia. He resisted in particular the over-confidence of scholastic theologians in defining truths. He found a similar over-confidence in Luther's reliance on his own judgment over against the common and widespread interpretations of the church, especially as found in the Fathers.<sup>56</sup> By means of humanistic studies he aimed to take away some of the weapons theologians were using in their arrogant theological debates. It was his way of reminding them of their limitations when it comes to claiming a final grasp on the mysteries, but at the same time his way of focusing on the essentials, the *philosophia Christi*. These intellectual concerns were very deeply rooted in his commitment to the reform and renewal of the church, while at the same time preserving a fragile peace. The history of Western Europe after his death proved that his concerns about peace were

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55 See Rummel (2004, 80–81). Rummel also reports on the actions of the Paris Faculty of Theology against Erasmus, the grammarian, who pointed out that it was up to theologians to interpret the Scriptures (Scriptures:81–82). The humanists had claimed that editing and translating texts was the domain of philology. Of course, drawing a clear line between the two is not possible. In any case, whatever Erasmus said here and there, he did not intend to leave the theological task untouched by his textual studies. His work on the text was meant to destabilise some of the "certainties" of the theologians and move the attention back to the texts.

56 Rummel (2009, 293) quotes a word of instruction from Erasmus to the Christian scholar: "Distrust your own judgment, submit yourself to the Holy Spirit, our teacher, that He may shape and form your judgment."

more than justified<sup>57</sup> and in response to the violent chaos Enlightenment radicalised his scepticism.

## Abbreviated Editions and Translations of the Works of Erasmus

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CWE = *The Collected Works of Erasmus*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–

LB = Erasmus, Desiderius. *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera omnia*. Recognovit Johannes Clericus. Lugduni Batavorum: Peter Vander, 1703–1706.

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57 Luther wrote in a letter of 1524, that “Erasmus should have remained simply a spectator of the Lutheran tragic drama” (Bacchi 2019, 124). Erasmus’s reply was, “let me not be a spectator and watch the tragedy unfold—I only hope it does not have a tragic ending!” (quoted by Bacchi 2019, 124; CWE 10, 255).

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