

# Erasmus of Rotterdam and his Approach to Tolerance

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<https://doi.org/10.5507/aither.2020.009>

## ABSTRACT

The main focus of the article is to study two of Erasmus' approaches to tolerance that are connected with the vision of unity and peace and the humanistic emphasis on dialogue. The justification of tolerance, which is most typical for Christian humanism as a whole, is to be found in many of Erasmus' works. Attention is initially paid to Erasmus' understanding of tolerance on the background of his central concept of *philosophia Christi* and around his antidogmatic and tolerant concept of Christianity. Tolerance is fundamentally connected to ideas about religious peace, piety and concord (*pax, pietas, concordia*). Tolerance also represents for Erasmus the beginning of self-mastery in the sense of enduring the differences and respecting the opinions and practices of others. Self-mastery is a prerequisite for a true dialogue. This does not mean unlimited tolerance for all opinions but a peaceful and moderate dialogue between opponents. This kind of dialogue is a necessity for the search for truth.\*

\* This is an extended and revised version of the paper presented in the conference of the annual meeting of American Philosophical Association in Baltimore, 4–7 January 2017. I would like to thank Prof. Mario Turchetti for providing me his study on tolerance. The abbreviations of the primary sources are as follows: ASD (*Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*. Amsterdam, 1969–), LB (*Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia*. Leiden, 1703–6).

*Let us resist, not by taunts and threats, not by force of arms and injustice,  
but by simple discretion, by benefits, by gentleness and tolerance  
(...sed simplici prudentia, sed benefactis, sed mansuetudine et tolerantia).<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

The question of tolerance is an inherent part of European history as there have been attempts to define tolerance from ancient times to the early modern period.<sup>2</sup> This article does not claim to be an exhaustive overview of the discussion on medieval and premodern theories on tolerance in general, its purpose is to focus on one kind of tolerance represented by the eminent humanist and one of the

main figures of European intellectual life during the Renaissance, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536). Erasmus occupies a highly important place in the history of tolerance, so important that Wilhelm Dilthey calls him the „Voltaire of the sixteenth century“.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars include him among early modern theoreticians on tolerance and celebrate him for promoting religious tolerance.<sup>4</sup> The justification of tolerance, which is most typical for Christian humanism as a whole, is to

1 Epistola de philosophia evangelica (1527) in Erasmus 1961, p. 9. English citation from Huizinga 1957, p. 152.

2 Forst 2012.

3 Dilthey 1991, p. 42.

4 Zijlstra 2002, p. 209.

be found in many Erasmus' works and represents a kind of humanistic approach to tolerance.<sup>5</sup> Although Erasmus did not write a thematic treatise on tolerance, the very term is to be found throughout his works, in *Enchiridion militis christiani* (1503), *De libero arbitrio* (1524), *Institutio principis christiani* (1516), *Quarela Pacis* (1517) among others, in many *Letters* and commentaries of the New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

I will focus on two of Erasmus' main approaches to tolerance that are connected with the vision of unity and peace and the humanistic emphasis on dialogue.

### — TOLERANCE AS A PATH TO PEACE

After the breakdown of European religious unity in the 16th century, there arose a problem of religious tolerance, which would centre on peaceful coexistence in a divided Christian world.<sup>7</sup> In this situation, the first theories of religious tolerance were based specifically on an emphasis on unity among different people and the common acceptance of ethical aspects in order to weaken dogmatic aspects and legitimize diversity based on mutual brotherly love. Erasmus never stopped expressing his own anxiety in the face of barbaric manifestations of intolerance and violence in Christian society. Erasmus was seriously concerned about global political

and religious conflicts and misunderstandings, as well as quarrels within Christianity itself.<sup>8</sup>

The pre-modern approach to religious tolerance can be defined from different theoretical backgrounds. Although the Middle Ages have a reputation of being an intolerant period, the simplified assumptions on unlimited intolerance during this epoch have been changed by modern scholarship.<sup>9</sup> However, Perez Zagorin argues that „the critical test of such a theory [of toleration] in Christian and Catholic Europe is its attitude to heresy and heretics and hence its willingness to argue against the long-standing Christian theory of religious persecution.“ Zagorin stands by the view that most medieval thinkers fail this test and „it was not until the religious conflicts generated in the sixteenth century by the Protestant Reformation... that genuine theories of religious toleration first made their appearance in Europe“.<sup>10</sup> What was advocated by sixteenth-century defenders of religious liberty was not toleration in the modern sense, meaning the right of dissent, but toleration in the ancient sense, meaning a willingness to put up with dissenters until the truth is made clear.<sup>11</sup> The origins of the modern doc-

5 On the humanist theory of religious toleration see Remer 1996, particularly on Erasmus see pp. 43–101; Kamen 1967, pp. 24–30; Hoffmann 1982, pp. 80–106; Remer 1994, pp. 305–336.

6 Bejczy 1997, pp. 365–384.

7 Zagorin 2006.

8 Buzzi 2013, p. 29.

9 To mention some works and studies on pre-modern discussion on tolerance, Laursen 1999, especially the annotated bibliography in pp. 229–245; Kaplan 2007; Nederman, & Laursen 1996; Guggisberg 1983, pp. 35–50; Zagorin 2006; Bejczy 1997; Laursen, Nederman 1998; Solari, 2013, pp. 73–97.

10 Zagorin 2006, pp. 313–314.

11 Erasmus 1993a, p. 209n; Turchetti 1991a, pp. 15–25.

trine of tolerance can be found in the 15th century within a group of humanists devoted to themes of platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. In particular, the idea of *concordance* between religion and philosophy and the idea of *pia philosophia*, in which they found the deepest meaning of the tradition of classical philosophy and Christian patristics, biblical revelation and ancient Jewish wisdom, became the theoretical ground for such intellectuals as Nicholas Cusanus, Marsilio Ficino or Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.<sup>12</sup> The *irenica* tendency, which also marked, for instance, Cusanus' writing on peace (though to a lesser extent) can be found most of all in Erasmus who spent his life in pleading for unity in balance and avoiding conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Erasmus, like other eminent sixteenth-century scholars of every confession, proposed a definition of the fundamentals that he hoped would reunite Christians. Erasmus' search for the unity of Christians (*unam sanctam*) is expressed in the principle that there is no other God than God but there are different perspectives on him.<sup>14</sup> For Erasmus the highest goal is *pax* or *concordia*, the preservation of the harmonious unity of the Church. The *concord* is enjoyment of the goodness of all and the aim of Christian life:

*Where mutual concord prevails, no one lacks for anything; where discord*

*prevails, even those who have good things cannot enjoy them. Let us all, from the greatest to the least, labour to patch together peace and concord among Christians.*<sup>15</sup>

The preservation of unity comes at the cost of renouncing some traditional Christian practices and declaring them "things indifferent" (*adiaphora*). The "tolerant" acceptance of nonconformist religious views, beliefs and practices is based on the distinction between what is religiously essential and what is merely doctrinal. Tolerance is not primarily understood as a formal "declaration," or "edict" that protects practitioners of minority religions or dissenters. For Erasmus, heretics must be helped to return to true faith without coercion because the illness of heresy cannot be treated with violence. It is important to note that Erasmus claimed to have never said that capital punishment should not be inflicted on heretics. Rather, he only advocated preventive measures for heresy in order to cure it before heretics had to be put to death, which was only done if no other remedies were effective.<sup>16</sup> However, killing heretics, violence and war is in principle a greater evil than the evil of tolerating heretics. They should be tolerated or accepted until reconciliation and concord is achieved.<sup>17</sup> In a letter to Jean de Carondelet, Erasmus points out that:

12 Pintacuda 1985, pp. 131–151; Euler 1998; Cantimori 2009; Lecler 1960; Forst 2012, p. 77.

13 Forst 2012, p. 98; Lecler 1960, p. 103; Olin 1975.

14 Halkin 1987, p. 105.

15 Erasmus 1993c, LB X 1671A / ASD IX-1 208, p. 142.

16 Compare with Erasmus's *Apologia ad monachos Hispanos* (1527). Coroleu 2008, p. 89.

17 Laursen 1999, pp. 7–24, especially pp. 12–13.

*The sum and substance of our religion is peace and concord. This can hardly remain the case unless we define as few matters as possible and leave each individual's judgment free on many questions. This is because the obscurity of most questions is great and the malady is for the most part intrinsic to our human nature: we do not know how to yield once a question has been made a subject of contention. And after the debate has warmed up each one thinks that the side he has undertaken rashly to defend is absolute truth.*<sup>18</sup>

The aim of a tolerant attitude towards heretics is “concord” and “peace”, the practice of tolerance includes “charity”, “lenity”, “gentleness”, “moderation” and “divine condescension, accommodation” (*synkatabasis*).<sup>19</sup> “Condescension” means, for Erasmus, that *sometimes the pious and simple minded ought to be tolerated, even if (they are joined) with some error (pius ac simplex affectus interdum tolerandus est etiamsi sit cum aliquo conjunctus errore)*.<sup>20</sup> In his letters, Erasmus calls for moderation, discussion and patience with others.<sup>21</sup> Tolerance is understood as moderation, as a creation of a model atmosphere of peaceful coexistence among the followers of different

religions.<sup>22</sup> He recommends moderation in serious issues: *whenever there was need for serious advice, I have, as I said, always advocated moderation.*<sup>23</sup> In another text, he even praises himself for his ability to approach various controversial issues in a moderate way: *I am thankful for one thing at least, that so far I have been able to preserve my old moderation in replying.*<sup>24</sup> In *The Sponge of Erasmus against the Aspersions of Hutten*, he also emphasises his moderate spirit:

*I have constantly declared, in countless letters, booklets, and personal statements, that I do not want to be involved with either party. I give many reasons for my position, and there are others I have not disclosed. But in this respect my conscience does not accuse me before Christ, my judge. Amid all the upheavals of our day, amid so many dangers to my reputation and even my life, I have kept my counsels moderate, so as not to be the author of any disturbance, nor to support a cause of which I did not approve, nor in any way to betray the truth of the gospel.*<sup>25</sup>

Although the term *tolerantia* is found in Erasmus’ work mostly in its classical and biblical sense as endurance or bearing of suffering, the term is fundamentally connected to ideas about religious

18 Erasmus 1979, pp. 100–101.

19 Turchetti 1991b, pp. 379–395; Lugioyo 2010, pp. 31–32. On the Old Testament and Patristic meaning of *synkatabasis* see Dreyfus 1984, pp. 74–86; Boersma 2017, pp. 72–73.

20 Erasmus 1533, 85; ASD V-3, 305, ll. 668–670.

21 Erasmus 1993b, LB X 1609e / ASD IX-1 374, p. 317: I have always urged people to moderation and tranquility, and still do.

22 Bejczy 1997, pp. 365–384; Turchetti 1991a, pp. 15–25.

23 Erasmus 1993c, LB x 1668b / ASD IX-1 202, p. 135; LB X 1639E / ASD IX-1 138, p. 60; LB X 1650B / ASD IX-1 162, pp. 88–89.

24 Erasmus 1992, p. 92.

25 See note 23.

peace, piety and concord (*pax, pietas, concordia*).<sup>26</sup> In *The Epistle against the False Evangelicals* he says:

*As for the things that are pious, let us agree about them in a Christian spirit. In things not very conducive to piety, and yet not obstacles to it, let us allow each person to content himself as he sees fit; let each, testing all things, hold to what he supposes good. Difficult matters, and those that seem not yet fully discussed, let us put off until another time, so that, in the meantime, a benevolent harmony may prevail among people disharmonious in their opinions; until God may deign to reveal these things to some one.*<sup>27</sup>

Tolerance is the result of Erasmus' humanistic spirit and strong belief that *philosophia Christi* transcends all na-

tionalisms and confessions in a supra-national and supra-confessional humanism.<sup>28</sup> Tolerance helps guarantee religious unity and demonstrates Christian solidarity which opposes nationalism, chauvinism and narrow-minded religious and political thought.<sup>29</sup> Erasmus' statements on excessive nationalism should be seen within the context of his persistent efforts to enhance *concord* among scholars all over Europe, to establish peace and unity among divided Christians and to unite Christian rulers.<sup>30</sup>

Tolerance springs from philosophy and from the Christian religion, from the *irenica* concept of the Church.<sup>31</sup> As Hilmar Pabel rightly points out, for Erasmus the ecclesiastical *concord* ranks above all other virtues, and no vice is more intolerable than that of discord in the church.<sup>32</sup> Peace, love and piety were central to Erasmus' *philosophia Christi*, the teaching that there is a simple Christian way of life, which is to be guided by studying the sacred Scriptures and classical thought.<sup>33</sup>

Around the central concept of *philosophia Christi*, Erasmus, created an

26 For "tolerantia" as a Christian virtue see Bejczy 1997, p. 358n. Bejczy states that in *Epistola de philosophia evangelica* "Erasmus retained the term at 2 Cor. 1:6 (Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. New King James Version) in his New Testament translation and added it at 2 Thess. 1:4 (...so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and [a]tribulations that you endure) and James 5:11 (Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord - that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful)."

27 Erasmus 1993a, LB X 1583D / ASD I -1 301, p. 245; Cf. Erasmus 1986, p. 302: Christ is consistent when he bids men learn one thing from him: to be gentle in spirit, not at all aggressive.

28 In *Querela pacis* (1516) he openly criticizes the armed conflicts between human beings of the same or of different faiths. Cf. Huizinga 1957, p. 152; Papy 2008, p. 41.

29 Kamen 1967, pp. 24-29.

30 These ideas are later echoed in visions of John Amos Comenius and his long-ing efforts to establish unity and peace through education and general emendation of all society. Cf. Matula 2011, pp. 209-229.

31 Pabel 1995, pp. 57-93.

32 Pabel 1995, p. 83.

33 Schoeck 1993, p. 37. For more on *Christi philosophia* see Eden 2001, p. 8.



antidogmatic and tolerant concept of Christianity, by returning to biblical and patristic sources. The concept of tolerance is essentially related to the ethical content of the gospel message and the commandment to love one another. Love as the supreme commandment calls for leniency/benevolence towards those of other faiths. Only love tolerates their differences while at the same time trying to lead them to truth with patience and modesty.<sup>34</sup> In *Querela pacis* Erasmus says:

*Please note that Christ asks for his people a special sort of concord: he said not that they should be of one mind but that they might be one, and not just in any way, but, as he said, we are one who are united in the most perfect and inexpressible way; and incidentally he indicated that there is only one way for men to be preserved - if they unite among themselves to foster peace.*<sup>35</sup>

Erasmus' tendency towards pacifism compels him to search for grains of truth in both of the opposing parties in order to avoid conflict and extreme statements. The *irenic spirit* combined with the *moderate spirit* with regard to ultimate truth arose from the command of St. Paul to welcome weak believers,

but not to criticize their opinions or perplex them with discussion.<sup>36</sup>

*Nevertheless, if there is someone among you, perhaps a Jew by race, who, because he has grown accustomed for so long to his former practice and life, is still rather superstitious, and whose faith has not grown in him enough to enable him to exclude all observance of the former law, he must not be immediately excluded with contempt, but instead he must be attracted and encouraged by gentleness and courtesy until he too begins to advance and receive the strength of faith. This will come about more readily through good-will than through contentious arguing... In order that peace and concord exist everywhere among you some things must be ignored, some endured, some interpreted with more kindness. This forbearance and sincerity has great force to produce a mutual fellowship of life. Peace will never remain firm among many unless in some things one gives way in turn to another, inasmuch as there are various opinions among people.*

Erasmus, following St. Paul's tolerance and support for anyone whose faith is imperfect until he advances to better things (Romans 14:1), emphasizes vigilance against the dangers of one's own pride as well as vigilance against infection with diseases of the soul, such as

34 Forst 2012, p. 106; Svatoš, & Svatoš 1985, p. 57; Bainton 1951, pp. 32–48.

35 Erasmus 1986, p. 330: In concord, small things grow; in discord, even great things decline. Compare with Sallust, Jugurtha, 10.6: Concordia parvae res crescunt, discordia maxumae dilabuntur. See also Wiedemann 1993, pp. 48–57.

36 Romans 14: 1. Compare with Erasmus' paraphrase on the Epistle to the Romans in Erasmus 1984, p. 373.

anger, envy and self-love.<sup>37</sup> In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus explains that anyone can succumb to depraved and violent behaviour, and that tolerance and leniency is a kind of remedy for personal injuries and for the destruction of personal and civil life.

*When fierce sorrow of mind goads you to revenge, remember that there is nothing less like anger than what it falsely imitates, namely, fortitude. Nothing is quite so womanish, nothing has so much the quality of a feeble and degraded mind, as to take delight in revenge. You are zealous to appear brave by not suffering an injury to go unavenged, yet in this same way you display your childishness, for you are not able to temper your mind (an act proper to a man). How much stronger and more generous it is to reject another's folly than to imitate it! Yet someone has done harm, he is violent, he insults you. The more wicked he is, the more you should beware lest you become like him. What evil is this madness, that you avenge the depravity of another only to become more depraved yourself? If you hold abuse in contempt, all men will know you have been undeservedly abused. But if you are aroused, you will furnish a better reason for being inflicted with it. Then reflect upon what*

*a thing it is, if an injury has been received, that it is in no wise removed by revenge, but is rather spread thereby. For what will be the end of mutual injuries if anyone continues to retaliate his own pain by revenge? Enemies increase on both sides; the pain becomes very raw. The more inveterate it is, surely the more incurable it becomes. Yet by leniency and tolerance sometimes even he who has done the injury is cured, and, having returned to himself, from an enemy becomes the surest of friends. ...*<sup>38</sup>

In the *Liber de sarcienda ecclesiae concordia* (1533) Erasmus recommended “a moderate condescension” to both sides in religious disputes, “moderate condescension” being a measured form of mutual accommodation that did not impinge on the essentials of Christian faith. An open dialogue with a respect for freedom and without threat or pretence is a path to avoiding the violent repression of dissidence. Erasmus understood that a Socratic emphasis on dialogue, on moderation instead of fighting (*polemos*), is a way to avoid pride and arrogance. It means that both sides of different parties (Catholics and Lutherans) must accept the essential religious teachings: the primacy of Gospel, the mission of the Church, purification of religious institutions and piety. In the name of peace and mutual tolerance, both parties must care about these religious essentials with charity and love, so as to avoid divisions and disturbances.

37 Pabel 2018, pp. 25–26. Cf. Erasmus 1984, ROM 14.23–15.4 / LB VII 826, p. 83: But whenever error arises out of weakness, he who is held in the grip of error deserves to be taught and admonished; he does not deserve to be despised or ridiculed. Schoeck 1993, p. 374; Martin 1998, pp. 249–290.

38 Erasmus 1953, p. 376.



<sup>39</sup> This kind of tolerance is based on the belief that saving Christian unity should be based on the recognition of the outward indifference to other religions.

Undoubtedly, Erasmus is a good example of mild-mannered views and arguments against the “forcing of consciences” in religious matters.<sup>40</sup> Christianity provided a cogent set of arguments in favour of forbearance, such as the conviction that the Christian’s conscience should not be forced in matters of faith. Erasmus argues that the conversation about religion might go better if the participants adopt certain practices of speech, a sense of irony, an *irenica* approach to opposition and the habit of critical thinking.

### — TOLERANCE THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF DIALOGUE

Erasmus focuses on the impossibility of using power to force people to think in an orthodox fashion. This idea is indirectly linked back to the ancient and medieval idea that a reasonable dialogue guided by tolerance is the best way to make our “brothers of reason” more virtuous. Erasmus’ pedagogy, which is the very basis of a new, humanistic search for the sources of Christendom itself and at the same time a new spiritual command to choose the rhetoric of dialogue, tolerance, understanding and self-criticism, is an invitation to inner change for the human being. Similarly to Peter Abelard, he revives and rephrases „saintly Socrates“ and Christ

for his own time.<sup>41</sup> Erasmus revived the old veneration of Socrates as a bearer of the Logos and made him an important model for Christians.<sup>42</sup> Erasmus often mentioned Socrates as an example of „tolerantia“. <sup>43</sup> In *Disputatiuncula*, combining the humanistic spirit with the peace of Christian revelation, he draws a comparison between Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and Socrates in his cell.<sup>44</sup> Jesus is compared to Socrates and Erasmus suggests that one ought to be as patient as Socrates.<sup>45</sup> In *Adage* “Nosce teipsum” (*Know thyself*, I vi 95) moderation is celebrated and recommended as the middle state between two extremes (overestimation and underestimation of one’s own abilities). The sources of all human troubles are blind self-love and despair:

*The first of these [Delphi maxims] is γνῶθι σεαυτόν, Know thyself, which recommends moderation and the middle state, and bids us not to pursue objects either too great for us or beneath us. For here we have a source of all life’s troubles: every man flatters himself, and blinded by self-love takes to himself*

<sup>39</sup> Pabel 2018, p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Head 1997, p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> Bartholin, & Christian 1972, pp. 1–10; Weintraub 2000, pp. 259–270.

<sup>42</sup> Bakker, pp. 391–407; Edwards 2017, p. 141: It is no surprise that Erasmus, as a connoisseur of both Jerome and Augustine, should have grasped the latent analogy between the Christ of the Gospels and the Socrates of the aporetic dialogues.

<sup>43</sup> Bartholin, & Christian 1972, pp. 1–10. See also Bejczy 1997, p. 358n.

<sup>44</sup> See also Taylor 2019, p. 86; Lochman 1989, pp. 77–88. On Socrates and tolerance see Fiala 2005, pp. 4–17.

<sup>45</sup> Eden 2001, p. 26 and 56.

*without deserving it all the merit that he wrongly denies to others.*<sup>46</sup>

Karl Popper, in his essay „Toleration and Intellectual Responsibility”, characterized Erasmus as a follower of Socrates in his insights into human ignorance and moderation.<sup>47</sup> Erasmus’ defence of tolerance derives from Socrates’ insights and has ethical consequences such as self-awareness of the fallibility of human knowledge and openness to rational discussions which avoid personal attacks. Although scepticism is a persistent attribute of any philosophical dialogue, it does not mean that it necessarily leads to toleration. However, a philosophical dialogue is tolerant because toleration facilitates the discovery of what is most probably the truth.<sup>48</sup> *Dialogue* is an important rhetorical tool for Erasmus – he made use of it to deal with religious issues. It does not mean that Erasmus discussed all religious issues in a dialogue form because the fundamentals of faith cannot be discussed, only „the non-essential doctrines“ (*adiaphora*) can be questioned.<sup>49</sup> When the issues debated

are not essential to salvation, the speakers may adopt a sceptical attitude towards their own beliefs. Scepticism led Erasmus to the conviction that many theological debates cannot be decided and only the doctrinal *adiaphora* can be discussed in a tolerant and peaceful dialogue, not the fundamentals of faith.<sup>50</sup> The superstructure of the essential belief is too complex for a human being to judge. Erasmus’ dislike of scholastic rational theological discussions led him to suggest a kind of sceptical or moderate position which should be used within the Church. In his most famous treatise *Praise of Folly*, where Erasmus pleads for tolerance and for light to shine on the dark areas of man’s world, he states that:

*...for such is the obscurity and variety of human affairs that nothing can be clearly known, as has been correctly said by my Academics, the least impudent of the philosophers.*<sup>51</sup>

*Dialogue* is the best way in which to compare different opinions and decide which one is the most probable considering the strengths and weaknesses

tinguished between akineta, “immoveable” articles of faith based on clear scriptural precepts; *adiaphora*, which allowed room for disputation; and human laws and customs that were subject to change and could be adapted to the circumstances. The last category contained many practices, he said, that could either be “tolerated or corrected.” Some matters did not require an official pronouncement at all, but could simply be “left to the judgment of the individual.”

46 Erasmus 2001, p. 95. Erasmus also wrote the famous ‘Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis’ in his *Convivium religiosum* (Colloquia 16), ASD I. 3, p. 455. Cf. Huizinga, 1957, p. 105.

47 Popper 2000, pp. 190–191.

48 Erasmus’ *De libero arbitrio*, composed in the form of a diatribe is a kind of philosophical dialogue. The debate between Luther and Erasmus about the reality of free will shows Erasmus’ moderate position. Cf. Erasmus, & Luther 2013; Murray 1920; Remer 1996, p. 92.

49 Remer 1994, pp. 305–336. On the difference between akineta and *adiaphora* see Rummel 2000, p. 129; Erasmus dis-

50 Remer 1994, pp. 305–336.

51 Turchetti 1991b, pp. 379–395; Popkin 2003, p. 8; Erasmus 2015, p. 85.

of each position. The adoption of the ancient argument for the impossibility of epistemological certainty led the opponents to a peaceful solution of the religious issues that they discuss. Preference is given to making mistakes, since mistakes offer all participants of the dialogue the opportunity to learn about the truth. The so-called „sceptical view“ should be understood as the consideration of several opinions before giving preference to the one that is most valid. Erasmus was not a sceptic in the sense of ancient pyrrhonism because pyrrhonism often took on the appearance of neo-socratism, Socrates being the most famous teacher of ignorance.<sup>52</sup> Erasmus' familiarity with Academic scepticism led him to express his scepticism towards scholastic or intellectual theology. Anti-intellectualism and dislike of rational theological discussions led Erasmus to suggest a kind of sceptical basis for remaining within the Church.<sup>53</sup> It is important to point out that Erasmus clearly expresses his position on the limits of scepticism in connection with Scripture when he claims that:

*Wherever the meaning of the Scripture is clear I will allow no scepticism. The same goes for the decisions of the church.*<sup>54</sup>

52 According to Emmanuel Naya, it explains how Socrates was linked to the sceptical attitude and pyrrhonism. Cf. Naya 2008, p. 24.

53 On Erasmus' scepticism and dispute with Martin Luther see Popkin 2003, p. 7 and 219.

54 Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes* I. Citation from Backus 2009, p. 67n. Erasmus described

The aim of a philosophical dialogue is the search for truth; the gentleness of language and respect for each other eliminate any combat and personal humiliation. Erasmus' type of *dialogue* aims at a common discovery of truth or the closest approximation of it. The participants of the dialogue searching for the truth adopt the sceptical stance towards the issue under discussion (Erasmus presupposed a monistic conception of truth, which excludes ideas that contradict accepted truth from the discussion). The dialogues open the sphere of doctrinal diversity. Another important point for philosophy is the active engagement of the participants of the dialogue to re-evaluate their opinions on various topics. To discover the truth, the speakers must be free to question the other speakers' views, as well as their own. They must respect each other because social interactions promote the discovery of truth. It should be emphasized that the philosophical *dialogue* is different from public oratory and speech. The philosopher is freed from political, juridical and personal issues and in this way shows his tolerance to other opinions. Philosophical *dialogue* should be restrained, free from all passions that conflict with human reason. The ideal of philosophical *dialogue* consists in the creation of a tolerant and peaceful environment for a debate where the interlocutor's mind is not affected by any

himself as one who loved dogmatic assertion so little that he would seek refuge in scepticism wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of Scripture and the church's decrees. Cf. Erasmus 1993, p. 410; Penelhum, 1983, pp. 18–22.

psychological disturbances. Intolerance is manifested in the emotional manipulation of an audience in public speeches.<sup>55</sup> Tolerance or moderation is closely connected to human wisdom and extended to self-understanding. The practice of an attitude tolerant to opponents comes from the knowledge of human nature and non-distance from ourselves. Distance from ourselves, indifference to our fellow beings and self-destruction demonstrate how little one understands himself. Tolerance represents the beginning of self-mastery in the sense of enduring differences and respecting opinions and practices of others. Self-mastery is a prerequisite for a true dialogue. For Erasmus it does not mean unlimited tolerance to all opinions, but a peaceful and moderate dialogue between opponents which is a prerequisite for the search for truth.

## CONCLUSION

In the sixteenth century the word 'tolerance' (*tolerare*) should be understood as a grudging and temporary acceptance of an unpleasant necessity, rather than approval of pluralism or open-minded acceptance of multiple value systems.<sup>56</sup> In times of religious conflicts, intellectuals sought ways to reconcile hostile parties and subsequently to carry out a peaceful and stable organization of Christian society. Erasmus, like other great intellectuals between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such as Nicholas Cusanus or John Amos Comenius, was

seen as a representative of humanistic ideals whose main aim was peace and reconciliation.<sup>57</sup>

The Erasmian vision of the restoration of religious consensus comes from various angles. The idea of the re-unification of divided Christians dominates in Erasmus' approaches on tolerance. The most important philosophical element of his vision of *concordia* is based on his view on human incapability to reach the definite truth.<sup>58</sup> Erasmus justifies toleration because he believes it reveals more truth and establishes peace.<sup>59</sup> Tolerance is then naturally connected with social contact which promotes the discovery of truth.

Consequently, tolerance does not mean indifference or passivity; on the contrary, it is a dynamic force, virtue, self-master, which creates individual respect for others, it helps to build a dialogue, peace and concord. Erasmus, as a follower of ancient philosophy (Socrates and the Stoics) is a promoter of tolerance as a kind of self-mastery. Tolerance is a virtue of the mind, which helps to attain self-mastery, to properly judge others and search for truth. Therefore, tolerance is not a weakness but a spiritual power of Christians. At the same time, tolerance as a form of patience with nonconformist religious views seems to be justified by reasons concerning the integrity and peace of the religious community.<sup>60</sup>

55 Remer 1994, pp. 305–336.

56 Head 1997, p. 97. Cf. Grell, & Scribner 1996.

57 Cf. Blum 2010, pp. 271–284; Matula 2005, pp. 381–399.

58 See note 54.

59 Remer 1994, pp. 305–336.

60 Heyd 2008, p. 173.

Erasmus' approach to tolerance should be seen against the background of its historical and ideological circumstances. He represents the form of tolerance founded on *irenism* and the principle of dialogue as a path to truth and reconciliation. Even though the achievements of Erasmus in the field of religious conciliation were minimal,<sup>61</sup> Manfred Hoffman emphasizes that „Erasmus' attitude towards toleration in general and toward religious toleration in particular has repeatedly been emphasized as one of the most significant elements, if not the singularly determinative factor, of his legacy for Western civilization.“<sup>62</sup> If

we agree with Henry Kamen's statement that the notion of toleration is one of the fundamental achievements of western civilisation, then we must see Erasmus as an essential part of this achievement.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the fact that his treatises are stigmatized by the conditions of his time, the historical situation and specific philosophical and theological resources, his endeavour to build the foundations for a peaceful and tolerant society should be appreciated even today when modern societies are threatened by a sophisticated suppression of human dignity, intransigent fundamentalism or religious sectarianism.

61 Kamen 1967, p. 28.

62 Hoffmann 1982, p. 80.

63 Kamen 1997, p. 36; Olsen 2007, pp. 1–20; Soifer 2009, pp. 19–35.



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