

## Introduction

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the adjective ‘Erasmian’ means — since the end of the nineteenth century — ‘pertaining to, characteristic of, or after the manner of Erasmus’, specifically designating ‘the system of pronunciation he advocated for classical Greek’. The meaning of the noun ‘Erasmian’ is given as a follower of the great humanist or a person who shares his views. In the same dictionary, ‘Erasmianism’ is described as a rare noun occurring since the middle of the eighteenth century. There is no reason to assume that the word is much more common in any other Western European language such as French, German or Dutch. Nevertheless, the term ‘Erasmianism’ occupies a certain position in the world of scholars studying the early modern period, particularly Humanism and the Reformation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Its meaning, however, is usually not clearly defined. There are as yet no learned contributions available in which a comprehensive ‘Begriffsgeschichte’ of Erasmianism is attempted. Of course, the recently published *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* includes a comparatively long lemma on Erasmus, but the preceding lemma is not ‘Erasmianism’ and the next is ‘Erastianism’.<sup>1</sup>

More than twenty-five years ago, Marcel Bataillon produced two fundamental short articles on the subject: ‘Vers une définition de l’Érasmisme’ (1969) and ‘À propos de l’influence d’Érasme’ (1970).<sup>2</sup> In the second article Bataillon warned against applying the term ‘Erasmianism’ too loosely to certain currents in intellectual history showing an obvious but complicated intertwining, such as ‘Erasmianism’ and ‘Illuminism’. Writing about Juan de Valdés as an ‘Erasmian’ he concluded: “Il pourrait nous mettre en défense contre l’emploi trop général d’images trop faciles: courants qui mêlent leurs eaux et auxquels l’érasmisme viendrait tout naturellement mêler les siennes, greffe de érasmisme sur le tronc d’un illuminisme préexistant auquel il emprunterait sa sève. On pourrait — image pour image — admettre que dans le cas de Valdés ... l’érasmisme affiché eut quelque chose d’un masque. Et si l’Inquisition espagnole identifia systématiquement érasmisme, illuminisme et luthéranisme (de même que le maccarthysme américain d’il y a vingt ans identifiait antinationalisme, pacifisme et communisme) ce n’est pas une raison pour fermer les yeux à ce que cet

<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*. Ed. H.J. Hillerbrand (4 vols.; Oxford 1996) 2, s.v.

<sup>2</sup> M. Bataillon, *Érasme et l’Espagne*. Ed. D. Devoto - Ch. Amiel (Geneva 1991) 3, 141-154; 305-312.

‘amalgame’ comme tactique de la répression put avoir d’approprié à la tactique défensive de certaines de ces victimes”.<sup>3</sup>

What is in a word? In the first article Bataillon defined ‘Erasmisme’ as ‘le mouvement suscité par Erasme en son temps’<sup>4</sup> of which the main features could — and should — be studied; a movement including Erasmus’s posthumous influence which assumed different guises in different countries. In the Netherlands, for instance, the term ‘Erasmian’ or ‘the Erasmian tradition’ is sometimes used — by journalists and politicians mostly, but also by scholars — in such a way to make it virtually indistinguishable from ‘tolerant’ and ‘toleration’, specifically with regard to the Dutch Republic — which came to an end in 1795 — but also to later phases of Dutch history, sometimes even including the contemporary Netherlands. The reason for this is that the term has acquired a function in an attempt to explain certain features of Dutch cultural history which are often assumed to be permanent if not eternal. ‘Erasmianism’, implying aversion to persecution and love of fundamental tolerance towards dissidents or other deviants as long as they do not disturb the peace, is supposed to have been an undercurrent in Dutch history since the sixteenth century. It provides both a key-note and a (quasi-)historically founded explanation for religious, political and social tolerance for which the Dutch deem themselves still famous.

This Dutch brand of ‘Erasmianism’ does make a brief appearance in this volume, but is not its proper subject — far from it. The contributions focus on two general questions: in the first place, whether Erasmianism and Erasmian Humanism existed as a recognizable attitude during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and, in the second place, whether Erasmianism represented a definable middle way between the confessional conflicts in early modern times. If it did, the question arises how important and fruitful — or how marginal and barren — this Erasmianism was until well into the seventeenth century. The treatment of these topics is geographically limited to those countries where Erasmus himself was active: Italy, the Netherlands, the Holy Roman Empire, Switzerland, and England.

As a starting-point the contributors to this volume considered the effect of Erasmus’s ideas, particularly about religion and politics (including social issues) in his own time. Can Erasmianism during that period already be seen as offering specific guidelines for dealing with the confessional strife of the day? How were these Erasmian ideas communicated to those who were ready either to consider them with sympathy or to damn them, or would want to take any stance in between these two positions? Also, the question is asked what Erasmianism did mean during a later period, i.e. after Erasmus’s death. The second half of the sixteenth and the first decades of the seventeenth century is, after all, the time in which different regions saw different solutions to the religious, political and social problems brought about by Reformation and Counter-Reformation. What, if anything, did Erasmianism mean in relation to the great issues of the day: schismatic movements versus aspirations to religious unity, aversion to dogmatism versus insistence on its necessity, sustained efforts at

<sup>3</sup> Bataillon, ‘A propos de l’influence d’Erasme’, 312.

<sup>4</sup> Bataillon, ‘Vers une définition de l’Erasmisme’, 141.

religious reform versus confessional rigidity, the attitude of the established churches versus dissidents and vice versa, the emergence of ideas of religious toleration as part of the modernization of political theory? By studying such topics it is hoped light is thrown on both the idea and the reality of 'Erasmianism'.

The volume begins with Cornelis Augustijn's thought-provoking treatment of the question whether or not the term 'Erasmianism' is meaningful and useful for present-day scholars of the early modern period: 'Verba valent usu: was ist Erasmianismus?' It is followed by two contributions concentrating on typical features of Erasmian Humanism: Jozef IJsewijn brings these out by comparing Erasmian to contemporary Roman Humanism, personified by Ianus Corycius, and Erika Rummel focuses on Erasmus's peculiarities in combining scholarly communication with an avoidance of risks: he was, as she puts it, 'Willing to Publish but not to Perish'. The spreading and reception of Erasmus's ideas in general is the subject of two articles: by James Kelsey McConica on England, and by Silvana Seidel Menchi on the question of the spreading of Erasmianism in Spain and Italy, and the forces which sought to hinder it. Erasmianism as a factor in the political life of the Holy Roman Empire is studied by Eugène Honée, writing on the negotiations about the religious problems in the German Diets during Erasmus's lifetime (1524-1530), and by Heribert Smolinsky, writing on religious settlements in the United Duchies of Cleve during a later period. The articles by Marc Lienhard and Siegfried Wollgast deal with closely related subjects — Erasmus and the radical Reformation, and Erasmus and the history of nonconformist thought respectively. Edwin Rabbie contributes a piece on a social theme: the rejection (by Johannes Diätenberger) and the acceptance (by Martin Bucer) of Erasmus's ideas on divorce. Erasmianism in the field of theology is represented by the studies of Peter Walter on the Erasmian ideas of Claude d'Espence, and of Barbara Henze on Erasmian traits in the works of Georg Witzel and Georg Cassander. Erasmianism in the Early Reformation in the Netherlands and the use of Erasmus's image during the years of strife between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants at a much later, but equally crucial period of the Dutch Reformation — the beginning of the seventeenth century — are treated by J. Trapman and H.J.M. Nellen respectively. Finally, M.E.H.N. Mout contributes a piece on Erasmianism in modern Dutch historiography.

The colloquium 'Erasmianism: Idea and Reality' was held in Amsterdam, 19-21 September 1996. It was organized and for the most part funded by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. It was prepared by the editors of this volume — Heribert Smolinsky, Hans Trapman and Nicolette Mout — and initially also by Anton Schindling, who regrettably was unable to take part in the colloquium because of commitments elsewhere. Heribert Smolinsky acted as the *trait d'union* between the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Gesellschaft zur Herausgabe des Corpus Catholicorum. The organizers are very grateful to the Academy and to the Board of the Gesellschaft for financial and all other support they gave to the colloquium. The volume contains contributions based on all the lectures given at the colloquium except one which was not offered for publication. It is very sad that Hans R. Guggisberg who, at an early stage of the preparations, had promised to come and

deliver a lecture, died before the colloquium took place. The organizers remember him as a devoted scholar and a warm-hearted friend, who had a special place in his heart for Erasmus and his times and for the history and culture of the Netherlands at large. Finally, the organizers want to offer their thanks to Ms Manita Kooy of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences who took impeccable care of the material side of the colloquium and in this way contributed much to its success.