

Erasmianism in Modern Dutch Historiography

Jan van Dorsten and Roy Strong once described Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Governor-General of the rebellious Dutch provinces, paying his respects to the statue of Erasmus on the Rotterdam market square in 1585. Commenting on this scene, they wrote: “Whether Leicester grasped the message of liberal reform and religious tolerance which the statue embodied, is difficult to say”. Later Van Dorsten regarded this as a problematic and anachronistic remark and explained that, in Leicester’s time, the name and person of Erasmus may have called up entirely different associations. He now doubted whether in 1585 Erasmus’s statue radiated such a message; maybe Erasmus was merely considered to be a very famous and incomparably learned scholar, automatically deserving a statue in the town where he was born. In short: Van Dorsten later thought his earlier interpretation of Leicester’s confrontation with Erasmus’s statue more in keeping with twentieth-century than with sixteenth-century ideas about Erasmus. Moreover, he observed that it was not at all clear how well-known and how influential the works and thoughts of Erasmus were in his homeland at the time of Leicester’s visit to Rotterdam, which was also a crucial moment in the history of the Revolt of the Netherlands and the formation of the Dutch Republic.¹ Elsewhere, Van Dorsten referred to the many historians of the Dutch Republic who regarded the policy of toleration not only as politically and economically feasible for the young state, but also linked it with “a so-called Erasmian tradition lurking vaguely in the background”.² It is the word “so-called” which renders this quotation particularly fascinating. It seems to imply that Van Dorsten did not think that this “so-called Erasmian tradition” in Dutch history had, so far, been properly studied. Also, he had pointed out that ‘Erasmian’ as a virtual synonym for ‘tolerant’, applied especially, but not exclusively, to the early modern period, had invaded historiography and literary studies only fairly recently. He explained: “The point is simply that more and more people use it, as Strong and I used it, to mean “liberal, tolerant, and pacifist” (in the modern sense of these words).” For him, however, ‘Erasmian’ in this sense was a “poorly-defined term”, which had been loosely coined by apparently

¹ J. van Dorsten, “The famous clerk Erasmus”, *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 10 (1980) 296-302, esp. 297-298; J. van Dorsten - R. Strong, *Leicester’s Triumph* (Leiden-London 1964) 38-39; on the appreciation of the statue in the second half of the sixteenth century see B. Mansfield, *Phoenix of His Age. Interpretations of Erasmus c1550-1750* (Toronto etc. 1979) 119.

² J. van Dorsten, ‘Temporis filia veritas: learning and religious peace’, *The Anglo-Dutch Renaissance. Seven Essays* (Leiden etc. 1988) 38-45, esp. 45.

unthinking modern scholars. He himself did not trace the history of the adjective and its meaning in modern historiography, but he did suggest a link between the development of the term during the twentieth century with “an increased interest (because of two world wars and what came after) in the roots of pacifism”.³

It may not be possible to remedy the flaw Van Dorsten detected in modern scholarship and pull the rabbit out of the hat, presenting a perfect definition of the term in its historical context. It may be worthwhile, however, to examine — although perhaps not comprehensively or conclusively — the use of ‘Erasmian’ and ‘Erasmianism’ meaning ‘tolerant’ and ‘tolerance’ in modern historiography. After a short exposition of the problem in general special attention will be paid to the way the term is used in reference to the history of the Revolt of the Netherlands and the Dutch Republic.

Outside the Netherlands, ‘Erasmian’ as a synonym of ‘tolerant’, ‘peace-loving’, and the like seems to have become more prominent since the Second World War. A few examples may suffice to make this point clear. In the late sixties Hugh R. Trevor-Roper introduced an ‘age of Erasmus’ in his article on the religious origins of the Enlightenment. According to Trevor-Roper this age had been, like the ages of Bacon and Newton, an interlude of truly cosmopolitan “intertrafficque of the mind”, free from ideological strife and full of peace and tolerance among intellectuals. Erasmianism — i.e., active tolerance combined with love of intellectual and religious peace — had lived on as an undercurrent in Catholicism and Protestantism alike. Over the centuries it had survived bitter attacks by Calvinism and Tridentine Catholicism, and finally emerged triumphantly in the Enlightenment.⁴ Reacting to Trevor-Roper’s ideas Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, in her book *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, discovered something like “an international peace movement” during the whole of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century: “‘Erasmian’ trends were persistently propelled throughout the entire century-and-a-half of religious warfare. Wandering scholars, intellectual emigrés and religious refugees not only found shelter in the homes of merchant publishers, they also found like-minded colleagues and publication outlets there.”⁵ And indeed, it was not difficult to find people in the sources who fitted Eisenstein’s description. To give only a few examples: Robert J.W. Evans detected a number of them in Central Europe and analyzed their activities in his books on the court of Rudolf II at Prague and on the early centuries of the Habsburg Monarchy: Erasmian tolerance was found even at the imperial courts of Ferdinand I and Maximilian II. It never seemed to be as strong as in Spain in the first decades of the sixteenth century, where, according to Marcel Bataillon, it derived its main support from the court of Charles V until it left Spain in 1529.⁶

³ Van Dorsten, “The famous clerk Erasmus”, 298.

⁴ H.R. Trevor-Roper, ‘The Religious Origins of the Enlightenment’, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change and Other Essays* (London 1967) 193-236, esp. 200.

⁵ E.L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change. Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge etc. 1979) 449.

⁶ R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World. A Study in Intellectual History 1576-1612* (Oxford 1973); R.J.W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550-1700* (Oxford 1979); M. Bataillon, *Erasmisme et l’Espagne*. D. Devoto - Ch. Amiel ed. (3 vols., Geneva 1991).

In French historiography Lucien Febvre contributed an interesting short article, 'Erasmus dans son siècle' (originally a lecture given to the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 1949), in which he defended the view that Erasmus gave the people of his time — and especially the emerging bourgeoisie — exactly what they wanted most: a very free, very tolerant, very simplified religion, putting morals before doctrines, and peace before war. Erasmus had affected, as Febvre formulated it, tolerant, cultured and pacifist minds, and the Erasmian was religious out of sheer modesty: by implication, he would never use force on the conscience of his fellow-men.⁷ It is interesting that more or less the same point was made by the Dutch historian H.A. Enno van Gelder in his book *The Two Reformations in the Sixteenth Century*, who acknowledges his indebtedness to Lucien Febvre and Augustin Renaudet, who took a similar view, in the preface of the second edition.⁸ A powerful and convincing image of Erasmian humanism as a movement finding adherents in practically the whole of Europe since the late twenties or early thirties, 'Erasmian' being virtually synonymous with tolerance and irenicism, was created by Joseph Lecler in his well-known *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme*.⁹

In her books on the Valois tapestries and on the theme of Astraea — the Just Virgin of the Golden Age — in the sixteenth century, Frances A. Yates turned Catherine de' Medici into a staunch and constant Erasmian; rather surprisingly, because usually the Queen Mother, at least for the period after the Peace of Saint-Germain (1570), is considered to have condoned a policy which, in the end, led to the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, although her personal tolerant attitude to Protestants and her efforts to pursue a conciliatory policy during the sixties are not in doubt. For Yates, the word 'Erasmian' was clearly and simply synonymous with tolerant, which was, in its turn, the same as a 'politique' attitude in the last phase of the French civil wars of the sixteenth century.¹⁰

These authors — and many others — obviously consider 'Erasmianism' to be a kind of influential international or rather supranational movement of long standing at most, or at least an equally long-lived mental attitude of certain important intellectual and political circles. Either way, it is never clearly defined either in political, social or ideological terms. It seems to function, however, as a useful concept which helps to explain certain trends in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century history. In the Netherlands, however, a very different picture emerges. Although the supranational concept of Erasmianism is not totally absent, it is very much relegated to the background. For a number of Dutch historians, Erasmianism somehow became an essential part of Dutch national history in early modern times or was even regarded as a

⁷ L. Febvre, *Au cœur religieux du XVII^e siècle* (2nd ed., Paris 1969) 73-81, esp. 81: "L'homme d'Erasmus (et je cite Groethuysen) est "religieux par modestie"."

⁸ H.A.E. van Gelder, *The Two Reformations in the Sixteenth Century. A Study of the Religious Aspects and Consequences of Renaissance and Humanism* (2nd ed.; The Hague 1963) 171-173, Preface to the second printing. Cf. A. Renaudet, *Études Erasmiennes (1521-1529)* (Paris 1931).

⁹ J. Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (Paris 1955).

¹⁰ F.A. Yates, *The Valois Tapestries* (2nd ed., London 1975); F.A. Yates, *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London-Boston 1975) esp. 147. See on the Massacre of St. Bartholomew and Catherine de' Medici: N.M. Sutherland, *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew and the European Conflict 1559-1572* (London 1973) and A. Soman ed., *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew* (The Hague 1974).

constant feature of national character. It implies aversion to religious persecution and fundamental tolerance of dissidents as long as they do not disturb the peace and is sometimes even seen as an ever-present undercurrent in Dutch history. It is difficult to give a satisfactory answer to the question how this came about and why the Dutch claimed Erasmianism for themselves, while the rest of the world did not and was content to see 'Erasmians' everywhere. To trace the history of the terms 'Erasmian' and 'Erasmianism' in this sense from its obscure beginnings to the present would be a formidable task, but it is perhaps feasible to make a few remarks about the meaning of these terms in the works of modern Dutch historiography.

One of the most obvious places to look for the emergence of this modern kind of 'Dutch Erasmianism' is Johan Huizinga's last chapter of his biography of Erasmus, which was first published in 1924 in an English and a Dutch edition. Huizinga paints an image of Erasmus the idealist, who is not quite in tune with his age because he is not a fanatic — like Luther, Loyola or Calvin — but, on the contrary, a moderate spirit whose ideas would be taken up again during the Enlightenment. Huizinga draws attention to the importance of figures like Erasmus as both exponent and leader of the large group of moderates who occupied the centre of the stage during the sixteenth century and eschewed the extremes of strife and intolerance. To Huizinga, this is a genuinely Erasmian attitude and he does not doubt that, to a great extent, Erasmus himself did create this Erasmianism through his writings, as he was the only humanist whose readership encompassed the entire intellectual world in every religious and political camp. The ill-fated efforts of the irenicists to end the religious conflict through compromise were rooted, in Huizinga's view, in this Erasmian spirit. Although Huizinga had severely criticised Erasmus throughout his book for his lack of heroism and for his refusal to take a firm stand in the controversies of his own time, he drew attention to his positive influence during his own time and in later centuries in the biography's last chapter.¹¹ He then proceeded to connect this positive influence to the Erasmian spirit prevailing in the Netherlands. In a way, this spirit was superior to Erasmus himself because it could be regarded as a source of Erasmus's own Erasmianism. In the closing words of this chapter and, thus, of the book itself Huizinga wrote: "Nowhere did this spirit take root as easily as in the country, which had given Erasmus life", — without offering further explanation for this remarkable phenomenon.¹²

Huizinga did not think Erasmus's political views, especially his repeated indictments of bad rulers, had had any influence on the Dutch Revolt against their overlord, the King of Spain, because they were too far removed from political reality: "The Beggars were not sons of Erasmus, and the political resistance was founded on more real grounds than the meditations of the *Adagia*", he wrote. At the same time, however, Huizinga credited the leader of the Revolt, William of Orange with Erasmian traits. But it was the Dutch town magistrates of the Republic, the backbone of society in this new state, whom Huizinga unreservedly praised as "deeply steeped in the Erasmian spirit". Their benign wisdom had, in his view, made Dutch history

¹¹ J. Huizinga, *Erasmus, Verzamelde Werken* 6 (Haarlem 1950) 181-184.

¹² Huizinga, *Erasmus*, 185.

much less violent and cruel than that of the surrounding countries, they had been in charge of a social and political system which was, at the time, the admiration of the rest of Europe. In Fruin's footsteps, Huizinga defended the view that it had been those magistrates, not the Protestant ministers, who had put a stop to witch-hunts in the Republic while they still raged everywhere else — this, too, was in keeping with the spirit of Erasmus. According to Huizinga, Erasmus had detected virtues in his countrymen (in his *Adagia*) which were genuinely Dutch and genuinely Erasmian at the same time: “gentleness, benevolence, moderation and widespread general education. No romantic virtues, perhaps — but are they the less beneficial for it?”¹³

Huizinga's message was clear enough: Erasmianism in all its manifestations was innate in the Dutch. It is possible that he based this view on the nineteenth-century Dutch cultural historian Conrad Busken Huet (1826-1886), who had adapted Napoleon's remark “La France est de la religion de Voltaire” to Dutch history in maintaining that “La Hollande est de la religion d'Erasmus” and has ever been like that since the sixteenth century.¹⁴ Huizinga's admiration of this ‘Erasmian spirit’ in Erasmus himself and, consequently, in the Dutch grew during the decades after his biography was first published — that is, in the thirties and forties, at a time when Huizinga was not alone in longing for the virtues of moderation and tolerance. In his book *Nederland's beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw*, published during the Second World War (1941), he repeated his view of Erasmianism as the dominant key-note of Dutch life and culture at the time of the Republic. The quatercentenary of Erasmus's death in 1936 had taken place under a cloud of anxious forebodings, and in a foreword to a Swiss edition of his Erasmus-biography, also dated 1941, Huizinga called the last five years the most ‘un-Erasmian’ since 1536.¹⁵

Not every Dutch historian shared Huizinga's positive view of the Erasmian Dutch. Admiration for the ‘Erasmian spirit’ of the Dutch Republic is conspicuously absent from the description of the position of the Catholics in that state by the Catholic historian L.J. Rogier in the authoritative and voluminous post-war history of the Netherlands, the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*. But even he concedes that the regents, like Erasmus, had been toying with a political concept in which tolerance played an important part.¹⁶ In the same work, however, the Calvinist historian A.J. Roelink expressed the view that Erasmian ideas survived among the Dutch in an outlook which was widely shared. According to him, it encompassed predilection for religious

¹³ Huizinga, *Erasmus*, 184.

¹⁴ C. Busken Huet, *Het land van Rembrandt* 1 (2 vols.; 2nd rev. ed.; Haarlem 1886) 209: “Nederland is roomsch geweest; Nederland is gereformeerd geworden; doch toen de revolutionaire beweging, die aan het protestantisme te onzent de overwinning verzekerde, had uitgewerkt en de landaard weder bovengekomen was, heeft de nederlandsche beschaving, blijkens de gematigdheid van vorsten, regenten, geleerden, en kunstenaars, zich aan de zijde van den Rotterdammer geschaard. *La Hollande est de la religion d'Erasmus*, is gedurende meer dan driehonderd jaren, ondanks de gereformeerde staatskerk en den heidelbergschen katechismus, eene getrouwe beschrijving van de stille algemeene denkwijz der Nederlanders geweest.”

¹⁵ A. van der Lem, *Johan Huizinga. Leven en werk in beelden en documenten* (Amsterdam 1993) 169-170. See also A. van der Lem, *Het Eeuwige verbeeld in een afgehaald bed. Huizinga en de Nederlandse beschaving* (Amsterdam 1997) *passim*.

¹⁶ L.J. Rogier, ‘De protestantisering van het Noorden’, *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 5 (Utrecht etc. 1952) 326-364, esp. 338.

individualism and distaste for systematic doctrinal theology. This outlook implied an abhorrence of religious persecution and, in a later period, led to libertinism and Arminianism. As his main witness Roelink invoked Hugo Grotius who had stressed the influence of Erasmus and Heinrich Bullinger in the Netherlands as against the supporters of Calvinist teachings.¹⁷ Such notions were not unlike the ideas of certain nineteenth-century church historians at the university of Groningen, who, to their delight, had discovered a typically Dutch national brand of tolerant theology before the Reformation, of which Thomas à Kempis, Wessel Gansfort and Erasmus were considered the foremost exponents.¹⁸ They can also be found playing the same role in one of the most widely read popular handbooks of Dutch history, *De lage landen bij de zee* by Jan en Annie Romein, first published in 1934 and many times reprinted and re-edited since. The authors name Gansfort, Rudolf Agricola and Erasmus as the fathers of Dutch Christian humanism who deeply influenced a number of others of later periods and “who perhaps represent the best of Dutch culture in so far as it was specifically Dutch”. Huizinga’s Erasmian regents also parade on the pages of this handbook: it is suggested that Erasmian tolerance was taken up consciously by the regents as soon as they came to power.¹⁹

In more recent handbooks Erasmian attitudes and Dutch history are still sometimes linked together. The new *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, written and published in many volumes during the late seventies and early eighties, is a notable exception: Erasmus himself hardly figures there (he appears almost exclusively in his capacity as humanist pedagogue) and there is no trace of Erasmianism: all-encompassing theories about the nature of the spirit of a nation, presented in grand style as Huizinga did, obviously had gone out of fashion. Seventeenth-century Erasmian regents are again found in Horst Lademacher’s recent monumental handbook of Dutch history from the beginnings to the present day, *Die Niederlande*, with the almost Erasmian sub-title *Politische Kultur zwischen Individualität und Anpassung* (1993). In his general introduction on the characteristics of the seventeenth century, however, Lademacher did not describe the Dutch Golden Age as such in Erasmian terms. In his view solely the principle of religious tolerance in the Dutch Republic carried an Erasmian stamp. On the other hand, the notion that there did exist a specifically Dutch kind of religious feeling or theology lives on in his remark that religion in the Netherlands had its roots in the *Devotio Moderna*, Thomas à Kempis and Erasmus.²⁰ In a recent textbook for history students, Erasmus is also mentioned as a major influence of Dutch religious thinking in the first decades of the sixteenth century and on Arminian theology almost a century later.²¹ Elsewhere, the general

¹⁷ A.J. Roelink, ‘Reformatiorische stromingen in het Noorden’, *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 4 (Utrecht etc. 1952) 264-280, esp. 268, 279. Grotius had remarked in his political pamphlet in defence of the Remonstrant regents, *Verantwoordingh van de wettelijcke regeringh in Holland* (Amsterdam 1622) that the Protestant ministers followed Calvin, and the regents Erasmus.

¹⁸ J. Huizinga, *Geschiedenis der universiteit gedurende de derde eeuw van haar bestaan, 1814-1914, Verzamelde Werken* 8 (Haarlem 1951) 150-151.

¹⁹ J. and A. Romein, *De lage landen bij de zee* (6th ed., Amsterdam 1976) 176-177.

²⁰ H. Lademacher, *Die Niederlande. Politische Kultur zwischen Individualität und Anpassung* (Berlin 1993) 153-154, 237.

²¹ S. Groenveld - G.J. Schutte, *Nederlands verleden in vogelvlucht. Delta 2 De nieuwe tijd: 1500 tot 1813* (Leiden-Antwerp 1992) 54, 173.

unwillingness of local powers in the Netherlands to persecute heretics in the early sixteenth century has been linked, but only in an indirect way, with Erasmus and Erasmianism.²²

In another recent university textbook Huizinga was both emulated and answered. In his contribution on the history of the Dutch Republic for the new *Geschiedenis van de Lage Landen* A. Th. van Deursen addresses the problem of the nature of Dutch culture. He informs his readers that there had been a long-standing quarrel — among historians of different persuasions — about the question whether Dutch culture of the seventeenth century had been Calvinist or Erasmian. He considers this to be a futile discussion because, according to him, setting Erasmus against Calvin creates a false dilemma. His solution of the problem is quite simple: “European culture of the seventeenth century rested on two pillars: Christianity and the classics. They were inseparable, not because that is in their nature — for both can very well exist on their own — but because history has inextricably intertwined them.” Erasmus and Calvin themselves, Van Deursen argues, were examples of this cultural complexity, because they incorporated both Christian and classical elements which were essential to them: “Take away the Christian element from Erasmus, and he is not himself any more. Release Calvin from classical traditions and he has become unrecognizable.” In seventeenth-century Dutch culture the two elements were also combined, but, Van Deursen insists, the Christian element comprises more than only Calvin and Calvinism just as the classical element includes more than Erasmus’s intellectual interests.²³ In this way Van Deursen with a true coup de théâtre achieves an unexpected harmony out of hitherto dissonant sounds. He accomplishes this feat by dissociating Erasmus from tolerance and Calvin from intolerance and associating them with the more neutral and much larger fields of Christianity and the classics. Moreover, he treats Dutch seventeenth-century culture as dependent on European culture and in doing so starts to liberate Dutch Erasmianism as well as Dutch Calvinism from their ties to a purely national background.

In his monumental book *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall (1477-1806)* Jonathan Israel uses the term Erasmian and treats of Erasmus’s influence in his homeland. He detects, for instance, “the appropriation of Erasmus by Dutch humanists and crypto-Protestants as the central figure in Dutch culture” during Erasmus’s lifetime.²⁴ In the wake of H.A. Enno van Gelder and Alastair Duke he describes Dutch society in the twenties and thirties of the sixteenth century as “heavily permeated with Protestant ideas, as well as Erasmian sentiments”.²⁵ Israel quotes Grotius’s well-known statement about the preachers following Calvin while the regents preferred Erasmus, as a reliable source for Dutch Erasmian attitudes concerning the relation between church and state in the Republic in general and especially during the years

²² J.J. Woltjer - M.E.H.N. Mout, ‘Settlements: the Netherlands’, Th.A. Brady Jr., - H.A. Oberman - J.D. Tracy ed., *Handbook of European History 1400-1600. Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation 2 Visions, Programs and Outcomes* (Leiden 1995) 389.

²³ A.Th. van Deursen, ‘De Republiek der Zeven Verenigde Nederlanden (1588-1780)’, J.C.H. Blom - E. Lamberts ed., *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden* (Rijswijk s.a.) 118-180, esp. 141.

²⁴ J. Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall (1477-1806)* (Oxford 1995) 53.

²⁵ Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 122.

of political crisis and religious strife between Arminians and strict Calvinists in the early seventeenth century. Arminians were, indeed, often accused by their opponents of following Erasmus.²⁶ Especially for the first culturally and politically formative decades of the Republic Israel attaches great importance to a “remarkable mix of values at the root of the new Dutch culture, blending Erasmian tolerance, freedom of conscience, outward submission, and an uncompromising stress on the high moral purpose of education and literature”.²⁷ Unlike Huizinga and Van Deursen, however, Israel does not describe Dutch culture as a whole as Erasmian. He treads his path with great circumspection and is far removed from Huizinga’s categorical statement or Van Deursen’s startling reconciliation of seeming opposites.

So far, the term ‘Erasmian’ or ‘Erasmianism’ in Dutch historiography has been found to be in use for aspects of sixteenth and early seventeenth religious history, particularly in relation to aversion to persecutions, religious individualism, tolerance, libertinism and Arminianism, and in political history where the term is applied to the general outlook of the regents, while a few attempts have been made — by Huizinga and Van Deursen for example — to use the term in order to label Dutch seventeenth-century culture as a whole. In addition, ‘Erasmian’ has been quite a popular epithet for individuals. It has often been attached to one protagonist of the Dutch Revolt in particular: William of Orange. It is not surprising that the ‘Erasmian’ nature of this prince’s policies has also influenced scholarly interpretations of the Revolt itself. One could again quote Huizinga, who cautiously wrote about the Erasmian mentality of William of Orange, although he knew it was not absolutely certain that the Prince had read any of Erasmus’s works.²⁸ Since Huizinga, however, other scholars have treated the subject, sometimes with considerably less circumspection. In his lecture about William of Orange and the Dutch state (1966) Rogier even acclaimed Erasmus as the patron saint of the House of Orange, in particular of the Prince himself.²⁹ For E.H. Waterbolk, the toleration policy of William of Orange — a policy which was doomed to fail after 1579 — was unquestionably founded on his Erasmianism, which was, in its turn, firmly linked with the virtues of mercy and pity, even towards his enemies, notwithstanding his usual political opportunism: “Voilà pourquoi Guillaume d’Orange est unique parmi les hommes politiques et voilà pourquoi nous devons toujours et toujours de nouveau attirer l’attention sur lui”. Although Waterbolk quoted many examples of William’s Erasmian notions and actions, he ascribed only a moderate humanist educational background to the Prince; the level of his intellectual pursuits being far below that of, for example, his father-in-law Maximilian, Count of Buren, who was able to recite Homer in Greek in the presence of Erasmus.³⁰

²⁶ Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 369, 392-393, 429-430, 514.

²⁷ Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 568.

²⁸ Huizinga, *Erasmus*, 184.

²⁹ L.J. Rogier, ‘Oranje en de Nederlandse staat’, *Herdenken en herzien* (Bilthoven 1974) 271-292, esp. 271.

³⁰ E.H. Waterbolk, ‘L’Erasmianisme de Guillaume d’Orange’, *Verzamelde Opstellen* (Amsterdam 1981) 84-93, esp. 93; see also E.H. Waterbolk, ‘Humanisme en de tolerantiegedachte’, *Opstand en pacificatie in de lage landen* (Gent 1976) 299-315. For links between William of Orange and humanism cf. M.E.H.N. Mout, ‘Het intellectuele milieu van Willem van Oranje’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 99 (1984) 596-625.

The Erasmianism of William of Orange got a considerably worse press in the commemorative volume *Willem van Oranje. Een strijd voor vrijheid en verdraagzaamheid* (1984) written by A.Th. van Deursen and H. de Schepper for the general reader. Van Deursen mentioned the Prince's Nicodemism, which particularly showed in his dealings with the German Lutheran princes in connection with his intentions to marry Anna of Saxony in the early sixties. This Nicodemism Van Deursen regarded as the reprehensible drawback of the Prince's Erasmianism. Here again, the influence of Erasmus on the Prince of Orange is presupposed, although the author concedes that it is impossible to know how strong and profound it had been. Moreover, Van Deursen — to put it mildly — has no great admiration for the Erasmian attitude to the Church of Rome as he perceives it; an attitude which might, according to Van Deursen, have well been shared by William of Orange. Erasmus's statement "I tolerate this church until I see a better one" cannot, in Van Deursen's view, come from any deep religious conviction: "Anyone who thinks like that ... does not really believe: he judges". In the footsteps of many scholars before him, Van Deursen interpreted William's famous speech in the Council of State of 31 December 1564 as truly Erasmian, its essence being a plea for freedom of conscience and religion and a condemnation of Philip's policy of severe repression of heretics. As Van Deursen put it: Orange's "words were those of an Erasmian. He did not appeal to the Bible, but to his own judgement: I cannot approve of princes ruling over consciences. His motivation of tolerance is more rooted in humanism than in the Christian religion itself."³¹ Here the author clearly equals 'Erasmian' only with humanist, not with religious ideas — such a division between humanism and the Christian religion would perhaps have surprised William of Orange no less than Erasmus himself.

Returning to Jan van Dorsten and his "so-called Erasmian tradition lurking vaguely in the background" it is perhaps time to ask what conclusion can be drawn from this modest tour d'horizon. Erasmianism has been ghosting around Dutch modern historiography for quite a while, but it has never been properly studied or even defined in relation to its different uses. It has been credited, though, with a great, sometimes even overwhelming impact on Dutch history and society. Erasmianism has been detected as an important ingredient in a specifically Dutch pre-Reformation theology, an Erasmian mentality is supposed to pervade the defence of tolerance during the sixteenth century, including the period of the Revolt of the Netherlands and the outlook of its leader William of Orange. Erasmus has been called a central figure in Dutch sixteenth and early seventeenth century culture, the Erasmianism of the regents has been held responsible for the politico-religious settlements in the religiously pluriform society of the Dutch Republic. Dutch culture in the seventeenth century or even Dutch culture as a whole has been called Erasmian, or a combination of Erasmian and Calvinist.

It would perhaps be wise to suggest to put the terms 'Erasmian' and 'Erasmianism' on ice for a while, until a new generation of scholars has examined more closely the

³¹ A.Th. van Deursen, 'Willem van Oranje', A. Th. van Deursen - H. de Schepper, *Willem van Oranje. Een strijd voor vrijheid en verdraagzaamheid* (Weesp-Tielt 1984) 104, 113, 116-117.

real problem behind it all: the intellectual and mental foundations of Dutch history in early modern times, that is from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards right up to the first half of the seventeenth century, the time of the formation and first flowering of the Dutch Republic. Much more work has to be done, for example, on the vast topic of the reception of Erasmus's works in the Netherlands.

The very special role ascribed to 'Erasmianism' in Dutch history had better disappear, to be replaced, in the course of time, by a different framework for Dutch early modern cultural and intellectual history, in which this history is much more firmly linked to developments in the rest of Europe and studied in a European context more than is now often the case. If 'Erasmianism' then reappears as a workable and well-defined concept for understanding certain strains in early modern Europe, including the Netherlands before the Revolt and the Dutch Republic, so be it. If this does ever come about, it will undoubtedly be a very different concept from the polymorphous and rather vague one discussed here. In the meantime it is perhaps a good idea if historians were to avoid unsustainable generalizations.