

# The true image of Erasmus

Leo Molenaar

## 1. Erasmus: the 'first' and the 'second' image.

This essay is about our image of Erasmus, hence about what we think of him, and about the relevance for our time of certain aspects of his way of thinking and working style. I'd like to start with the 'first' image. In the Erasmus year of 2008<sup>1</sup> there appeared to be not just one but two images of Erasmus. The 'first' image, as defined among others by Hans Trapman in the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen catalogue<sup>2</sup> to the 2008 Images of Erasmus exhibition, is that of an impressive character deserving of emulation. The 'second' image, as sketched by a couple of Rotterdam cultural pundits and as confirmed daily by sources on the Internet, apparently shows Erasmus as basically an anti-Semite, a Muslim hater, an opportunistic weathercock and even as a warmonger urging war against the poor Turks. As members of the board of the foundation Huis van Erasmus (House of Erasmus)<sup>3</sup> we obviously support the 'first' image, and with good reason.

Last year we introduced an educational project created by our member of the board Louise Langelaan for ca 12-year-old children: *Erasmus in the classroom*, which was used by dozens of primary schools. Even so, former colleagues of the secondary Erasmus Gymnasium (Grammar School) also wanted to participate in the project with their ca 14-year-old students. One of them came up with the bright idea to give her students an obligatory assignment to write a letter to Erasmus, which would be marked. Now, *Erasmus in the classroom* deals with such tricky questions as 'tolerance', or Erasmus' ideas about the then raging 'war against the Turks'. However, a quarter of the total of ninety letters was about Erasmus' alleged hatred of the Jews, a problem not touched upon in our text. Apparently, the 'second' image of Erasmus had forcefully foisted itself upon these youngsters via Google, via the Internet, or after a few hints. And these students, all of them, took umbrage at Erasmus.

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<sup>1</sup> The following Erasmus year is 2011; it will then be 500 years since the publication of *In Praise of Folly*.

<sup>2</sup> *Images of Erasmus*, Peter van der Coelen, Hans Trapman, Christian Rümelin, Alexandra Gaba-van Dongen, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> [www.huisvanerasmus.nl](http://www.huisvanerasmus.nl).

They said that they blamed Erasmus for writing that he wasn't a 'Reuchlinist', because the latter humanist, contrary to Erasmus, had championed Jewish rights. Others wrote that his diatribe against the poor Jew Johann Pfefferkorn was a disgrace. Someone concluded that Erasmus had been a source of inspiration for Martin Luther, who had let fly at the Jews in a terrible way. One girl wrote she could neither understand nor accept the fact that Erasmus' anti-Semitism had led him to turn against Reuchlin, and that it saddened her to learn that centuries after his death, and after the Holocaust: 'your ideas about the Jews are still alive'. One boy stated: 'You didn't accept the Jews, you were prepared to do your utmost to be rid of them.' Another girl accused Erasmus of being a yes-man and wrote that never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined 'you to be anti-Semitic'. Some students concluded that although they were proud of the name of their school, their pride had been shaken.

Over the last twenty years I have been editing anniversary books for my school, which have always contained aspects of Erasmus' ideas. In both the previous and current anniversary books numerous students have had their say on hundreds of pages. Recently, I took part in a continuation of the above-mentioned discussion when supervising their essays for the anniversary book on subjects like: "Was Erasmus really that tolerant?", "What is the score on Erasmus' reputed women-friendliness?" or "How do Erasmus' ideas about peace relate to European integration?" Because of the many sources on the Internet the presentation of their questions has become more poignant and very critical. Well then, if this 'second' image of the intolerant, unworthy Erasmus forces itself upon young people so dominantly it seems to me that our generation of educators cannot keep silent or limit their reaction to implicit publications. Silence implies consent. We shall have to enter the debate.

So we are condemned to intellectual honesty. That is: we who work for the foundation Huis van Erasmus and the Erasmushuis foundation<sup>4</sup>, we who work at the Rotterdam schools, the Business school, the University, and in the city, Erasmus' city. During the past Erasmus year some 450 first and second formers of the Erasmus Gymnasium (Grammarschool) discussed study hand-outs about Erasmus based on the *Erasmus in the classroom* project in fifty primary schools in the region, in more than a hundred groups, altogether some 3000 children. Afterwards, in a procession, a *pompa*, more than a thousand of them decked the statue of Erasmus in the Grote Kerkplein with a laurel wreath, on 28 October 2008. But if 'the second image' of Erasmus is predominantly true, such homage is wide of the mark.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.erasmushuisrotterdam.nl](http://www.erasmushuisrotterdam.nl).

Is the 'second' image correct, or is the 'first' image in outline still standing up? And if the 'first' image should turn out to be adequate, isn't it time many more people took up arms, and very publicly counterattacked the propagandists of the 'second' image?

The first part of this essay deals with these questions. I'll start with the easiest subject of Erasmus and war (par.2), on the basis of articles by Jan van Herwaarden. From there, by way of Erasmus' attitude towards the Turks by Ronald Giphart (par.3), I'll move on to showpiece Marcel Möring, and also to our students, with Erasmus' reputed hatred of the Jews (par.4) I'll return to the source: ad fontes, old sources and new.

In the second part, from par.5, I'd like to touch upon the broader perspective by going into questions raised in current publications. The first question, by Carel Peeters, concerns the reception in the Netherlands of Erasmus' character: hasn't our one-sided emphasis on his reasonableness, tolerance, mildness and geniality robbed us of a view of his militancy, his venom and lethal irony? And if so, isn't this part of the explanation for the spineless, molluscous form in which Dutch 'humanism' often manifests itself? Wouldn't an effort to achieve a more militant humanism be appropriate?

The second question, raised by Guido Vanheeswijck, is whether it isn't high time for a conscious transformation of that age-old, Dutch, passive pluralism, in which collaboration at the top between groups and people of different political ideology and religious persuasion has meant the exclusion of all involvement with what is taking place inside the respective ideological and religious groups (or 'pillars'), to an active pluralism in which the collaboration of groups and persons implies a mutual discussion about each others' background and motives. In his opinion that would herald a restoration of the public debate Erasmus once participated in with courageous and sharp-witted contributions. I will discuss this in par.6.

The third and last 'question' I would like to raise in par.7 concerns Erasmus and Free Will in response to a recent book by Dawkins. It is Free Will that, even today, still makes the distinction between the real, red-haired and unpredictable Marjolein Kriek on the one hand, and her human genome, symbolized by the allegorical Reboot-statue on the other, which, even though it tells us a lot about her, still cannot predestine her.

## 2. Erasmus: advocate of 'just wars' (Van Herwaarden).

Until quite recently Erasmus was considered a fervent pacifist, as he wrote two lyrical 'theoretical' texts about peace: the adage *Dulce Bellum Inexpertis*

(War Is Sweet to Those Who Don't Know It)<sup>5</sup> and the tract *Querela Pacis* (The Complaint of Peace)<sup>6</sup>. In these texts he shows himself to be an almost absolute pacifist: a war always does as much harm to both victors and vanquished, so that it is better for both sides not to wage war at all, and to submit all disputes to arbitration. Nevertheless, the experts know that in a contemporary publication, *Institutio principis christiani* (The education of a Christian Prince)<sup>7</sup>, at the age of fifty, he writes to Charles V that as a last resort he should be willing to take up arms in self-defence against an enemy waging a war of conquest. Erasmus was a pacifist, indeed, but not at all costs.

In 1998 the then holder of the Rotterdamse Erasmus Chair, Jan van Herwaarden, studied a text by Erasmus, *Consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo* (*Consultation on starting a war against the Turks*)<sup>8</sup>, which showed that, in 1529, he had called for the taking up of arms in defence of the Christian world. Van Herwaarden reacted as if stung: “Here we see the pacifist Erasmus teetering on the edge of credibility. However much his remarks are to be understood within the context of his own times, we are here approaching the limits of tolerance. Quite in keeping with the lines of thought underpinning crusading ideology, Erasmus urged that Islam should as much as possible be brought to its knees by way of conversion. Erasmus, admittedly, postponed the moment of engaging in war as long as possible and kept harping on the internal dangers for the commonwealth. But a war against the Turks was justified, anyhow. This makes it inevitable that Turkish blood shall be shed...”<sup>9</sup> And, soon enough, Van Herwaarden found many seeds of these bloodthirsty ideas about the Turks in Erasmus’ early writings.

What were the actual facts of the case? In his - at that time - topical treatise Erasmus advocated the right of the European people to defend themselves against the aggression of the Turkish armies, which had crushed large parts

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<sup>5</sup> *Adagia* (*Adages*), advance notice of a volume of the collected work Desiderius Erasmus, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, Amsterdam, expected in 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *De Klacht van de Vrede* (*The Complaint of Peace*), Desiderius Erasmus, Ad. Donker, Rotterdam, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> *Opvoeding* (*Education*, volume 3 of the collected works of Desiderius Erasmus, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, Amsterdam, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *De Turkenkrijg* (*On the war against the Turks*), Desiderius Erasmus, Ad. Donker, Rotterdam, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> *Erasmus van Rotterdam: Beeld en Werkelijkheid* (*Erasmus of Rotterdam, Image and Reality*), J. van Herwaarden, pp. 191-215 of the *Rotterdam yearbook 1998*, Rotterdam Municipal Archives, 1998, quotation on p. 202.

of Eastern and Southern Europe. They hardly met with any resistance because the Christian Princes of Western Europe were fighting each other to the death. In his treatise Erasmus analysed the origin of the Turkish people as well as their despotic constitution in terms that were rather unflattering for the enemy, and argued that these truly did not offer a perspective to humanism, and that, therefore, he considered it justified for people to defend themselves: “should we voluntarily lay our heads on the Turkish chopping block?” Erasmus didn’t think so. Being a devout Christian, he didn’t think Islam a pleasant alternative to Christianity either. At the time, the Turkish armies were encamped outside Vienna, the heart of Europe, and the Renaissance of culture and science was at stake. On prints depicting war in the days of Erasmus in Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (‘Images of Erasmus’, 2008) we could see that the Turkish aggressors had added one more element to war crimes against the people: where the Romans used the cross for their victims, the Spanish Catholic Inquisitors used the stake and the garrotte, the Turks introduced impalement stakes, hoisted upright, inserted through anus and mouth. Who could blame Erasmus for urging self-defence against these conquerors? The accusations Van Herwaarden levelled at Erasmus that in that case ‘Turkish blood would be shed’ lack all sense of realism. In those days rivers of blood were flowing: Greek, Armenian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Hungarian, French, German and Turkish blood. Erasmus did not live in the days of Van Herwaarden’s Turkish-Dutch cafés.

But perhaps Erasmus went beyond the pale and, and so he, too, called for a crusade against the Turks, as Van Herwaarden suggests? No he didn’t, for Erasmus was afraid that his plea for self-defence against the Turks would be misused for a crusade. He refused to give carte blanche to the Christian princes, who were behaving unchristian-like in all respects. He had always violently opposed the crusades, which is why, at the end of his treatise, he said ‘no’ to a war of aggression against the Turks. He said ‘yes’ to self-defence.

Ten years on, Van Herwaarden’s thinking has not developed. During the Erasmus year, in a series of articles in the Turkish-Dutch paper Zaman, he compared Erasmus’ ideas to those of the Afghan-Turkish philosopher Mevlana Rumi (1207 - 1273). Both are reputed to be ‘non-violent’, Van Herwaarden wrote, but is this true of Erasmus? Quote: “Erasmus unmistakably and whole-heartedly abhorred violence, but in his thinking about war and peace there always remain the vestiges of the time-honoured concept of the ‘just war’ as it has generally been and still is accepted ever since Church Father St Augustine. It is remarkable that even today wars like

the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan are legitimised with similar arguments.”<sup>10</sup> What Van Herwaarden is saying here and in so many words is that Erasmus the pacifist based his arguments on the notion of ‘just war’, which in our times would imply Erasmus’ approval of the American invasion of Iraq. There’s nothing to justify this supposition! No one knows the letter of Erasmus’ writings better than Van Herwaarden, but he doesn’t understand the latter’s versatile mind.

### 3. Erasmus: a ‘seething hatred of the Turks’ (Giphart).

In Erasmus’ writings there is not much about Muslims or Islam. In the southern part of the European continent, in what today are Spain and Italy, many Christian thinkers of his time had lived together with Muslims and Jews who could very often boast of a much richer culture. In some places there had been a lively exchange between cultures and their intelligentsia. Among other things, this had resulted in texts about mutual tolerance. In 1492, when Erasmus was about 25 years old, the victory of the Christian royal couple in Spain put an end to such coexistence. Hordes of people fled the violence of the Christian victors: Muslims to Northern Africa and Jews to the Low Countries. Muslims played no part in Erasmus’ Northern European world, except in the form of the Turkish aggressor who commanded armies consisting mainly of Muslims. The Popes in those days proclaimed a holy war against the Turks, and Christian rulers, too, tried to mobilize the people against them.

In that chaos of passionate feelings against the Turks, Erasmus remained amazingly cool and calm. In his writings, about peace for instance, he refuted the arguments against the Turks. In our educational project, *Erasmus in the classroom*, we listed a number of the prevalent excuses for war against the Turkish infidels, together with Erasmus’ commentary:

“Excuse 1: The Turks are criminals. Erasmus: the Christians commit far more serious crimes among themselves; Excuse 2: The princes claim they are defending religion. Erasmus: they covet Istanbul’s riches; Excuse 3: The aim of the war is to defend religion. Erasmus: if so, war is a very bad means indeed; Excuse 4: War is good, because the Turks are monsters. Erasmus: killing is monstrous, too, and, besides, these people too have their holy book; Excuse 5: We are going on a crusade to bring the true faith. Erasmus: Christianity is in a bad way indeed if its survival depends on the waging of war.”

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<sup>10</sup> *Erasmus, Mevlana en de dansende derwisjen ( Erasmus, Mevlana and the dancing dervishes)*, J van Herwaarden, pp. 37-60 of *Mevlana en Erasmus*, Cihan Okuyucu and Jan van Herwaarden, Türkevi Productions in cooperation with. Time Media Group, Amsterdam, 2008, quote p. 39.

Our text for children illustrates in a nutshell Erasmus' consistent attitude with regard to respect for the Turks as fellow men.

Even later, in *Consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo*, written when he is over 60, he repeats all those arguments against 'the ignorant mob' who think 'that anyone has the right to kill a Turk as one would a mad dog for no better reason than that he is a Turk. If this were true, then anyone would be allowed to kill a Jew, too, yet if he dared to do so he would not escape the long arm of the law!' Erasmus also repeats his pious argument that "the worst Turk lives in our own minds": "greed, avarice, lust for power, self-satisfaction, impiety, a craving for luxury, hedonism, fraudulence, spiteful hatred, envy". Only after destroying these vices in our own souls with the sword of the spirit may we then go to war against the Turks. In his pious text, which is a commentary on a Psalm in the Bible he speaks about the 'slaying of the Turk within', by which he didn't mean actually killing real Turks, but conquering sin, 'the Turkishness' as he calls it rather unflatteringly, in the soul of Christians. Only an incompetent amateur can read this as an incitement by Erasmus to kill Turks: we'll come back to this when dealing with authors Giphart and Möring.

Even so, Erasmus here and there lashes out vehemently and critically at Islam, and especially at the prophet Muhammad. He cannot appreciate that religion at all, and observes that their prophet must have been a noxious, criminal character, because, as a man he had himself put on a level with God. However, he does not advocate a violent confrontation with the Muslims, but on the contrary, pleads for coexistence and tolerance. In the end, everyday life will decide who converts who in the long run: the Muslims the Christians, or, and that is what Erasmus hopes for, the Christians the Muslims. For - as I have said before - in large parts of Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as in Spain and Portugal, such coexistence was a fact: large numbers of Muslims, Christians and Jews were living in close proximity. And so it cannot be that the local majorities start extirpating minorities everywhere. A couple of years later, around 1533, Erasmus further develops these thoughts in the context, moreover, of the coexistence of catholic and protestant Christians, who are also on the brink of annihilating each other, and formulates the beginning of a sort of 'theory of tolerance'. The seed for this theory had already been sown in his *Consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo*. Halfway through the book he unfolds the following thought: "A Christian magistrate has the right to punish Jews when they break the laws that everyone is subject to, and which they themselves accept. Therefore, when they are executed, this is not because they profess a different religion. Christianity is spread by persuasion, not by force. It is sown, not rammed down throats. The same right, which allows for punishment to be meted out

to Jews and Christians alike, was also given to the heathen princes with respect to Christians. Even the Turks would have it if we, God forbid, lived under their rule in some system of law. Whoever thinks he will fly straight to heaven after being killed in battle against the Turks, is far off the mark.

It's funny, this shift in perspective after 500 years. In those days the Christians were a bunch of morons that were promised paradise by backward priests and monks, these days the morons are the Muslims and their idiotic imams. What these lines by Erasmus actually say in so many words is that the local authorities must be respected by the inhabitants of a region, Christian, Jew, Turk (Muslim) or heathen alike. If people stick to the rules of law, they are entitled to live their lives in safety under this local authority, protected from violence or arbitrary rule. For all people obey the same law. This should especially hold true for a Christian government, but Christians and Jews may also expect such treatment from Turkish authorities. Erasmus here expresses his criticism of developments in Spain, and his hopes for a restoration of the law in the regions conquered by the Turkish armies. He unfolds a broad perspective on peaceful coexistence, for which his contemporaries were not ready by far. So, strong feelings of aversion to Islam and Muhammad do not appear to stand in the way of Erasmus' plea for the coexistence of Muslims and Christians.

When we compare this exposition about and by Erasmus with the views of another Rotterdam cultural pundit, in this case Ronald Giphart, then we observe the following remarks in his column *Good manners* of 30 October 2008 in the newspaper *De Volkskrant* about the celebration of the Erasmus year: "Another observation is that this 'Rotterdammer' [Erasmus] had a seething hatred of Turks. So, just for the sake of comparing these two thinkers: what Islamic Moroccans are to Geert Wilders today, Islamic Turks were to Erasmus, for why not compare these two thinkers. Erasmus even wrote an epistolary pamphlet (*On the War against the Turks*, 1530, still available in the bookshops), in which he explained to a Cologne friend that the Turkish infidel was not a man but a beast trying to undermine civilization. 'If we want to get rid of them once and for all, we shall first have to cast out from our minds the worst sort of Turk' he wrote." End of quote.

For Giphart Erasmus and Wilders are on a par. Add to this a misinterpreted quotation about killing the Turk within our own mind. This is poverty; this is the hype, the delusion of the day. In a special issue about Erasmus in the *NRC* newspaper of 8 October, Rotterdam author Marcel Möring made a case for hatred of Jews, so Ronald jumped on the bandwagon of hatred of Muslims.

4. Erasmus: only “tolerant of those who, like him, were fellow Christians” (Marcel Möring).

What author Marcel Möring blames Erasmus for in his column *Erasmus and Bartje*<sup>11</sup> is that he isn't as tolerant as people think he is; it would be more correct to call him intolerant. The Erasmus the Rotterdam authorities adore is, according to Möring, a kind of Bartje, an empty icon, and he writes: “As men the Turks had to be converted to Christianity, but as Turks they had to be killed.” Much earlier therefore than Giphart, Möring had fallen into the trap of Erasmus' texts about destroying the ‘Turkishness’ in our own souls. With regard to the Jews, Möring chooses two quotations, which, in his opinion, are quite damning. Thus Erasmus wrote that “Judaism is the most pernicious plague and bitterest enemy of the Law of Jesus Christ” and if Erasmus had his way “the Old Testament could be chucked out into the paper recycling bin if that helped to restrict the influence of Judaism”. Möring's opening sentences therefore suggest that in reality the ‘tolerant’ Erasmus is a killer of Turks and a hater of Jews, although he offers no proof of either. It seems as if Erasmus fiercely opposes ‘Judaism’, the Jewish faith, and that he is battling against a rival belief. But for Möring the controversy about Erasmus is already settled when he concludes by simply using question marks: “Multicultural? Peaceful integration? Cosmopolitan? From Rotterdam?” Möring opts for a different PR-man for Rotterdam: he prefers Pierre Bayle, the French asylum seeker and Renaissance philosopher, who lived in the city at least half his life.

Our students of the Erasmus Grammar school took the matter much further than Möring, downloaded quotations from the Internet and did not hesitate to openly call Erasmus an anti-Semite as that term bounces off the screen. They mentioned for instance Erasmus' outburst against Pfefferkorn, the Jew of Cologne, or they quoted humanist Johannes Reuchlin who, in his defence of Jews, was said to have been let down by Erasmus. Was Erasmus an anti-Semite in these specific cases?

The general answer to the reproaches made by Möring and the students on the subject of Jews and Erasmus' attitude towards the Turks run along the same lines. Erasmus takes a strong position in the battle between Christianity and Judaism. Erasmus was greatly troubled by the contents of the Jewish Old Testament, for its God is not a Christian God; it is a God

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<sup>11</sup> *Erasmus en Bartje*, in a special issue of NRC Next entitled *Erasmus in Rotterdam*, 8 Oktober 2008. **Bartje**, a poor boy from a peasant family, was the main character in a series of very popular books. He became the icon of the Dutch province of Drenthe.

who exists purely for the Jewish people and, moreover, this is a cruel God who has the Jews depopulate the Promised Land to the last baby and old man. Erasmus considered the rituals, which also troubled him in the Catholic Church, as incriminating in Judaism: circumcision, festive days, the Sabbath or dietary laws. Erasmus opposed them with the *Philosophia Christi*, the quiet communion with God in one's personal, everyday dealings. This did not actually require rituals, ornaments or costly buildings. He advocated more austerity in the Catholic Church and strove to free it of all those unnecessary elements which to him served as a model for the Jewish religion. However, all this did not prevent Erasmus from defending and speaking up for rights of the Jews, and strangely and interestingly enough in this specific case it is the two men Pfefferkorn and Reuchlin, mentioned by our students, who play a part here.

The story begins with the Anne Frank Foundation, which published a picture book<sup>12</sup> by theologian Hans Jansen in 1989 about anti-Semitism, containing the following proposition, derived from Professor Heiko Oberman: "In his intolerance towards Jews Erasmus exceeds Luther." And Luther was a true anti-Semite who wanted to strike at the Jews with expropriations and deportations. Reverend Jansen's evidence was mainly based on a fierce outburst in a letter from Erasmus to the Christian baptized Jew Johannes Pfefferkorn: "a total madman, an impudent rascal, we do not call a Jew and a half, but one whose actions show he is a super-Jew. The devil, that eternal enemy of the Christian religion, could not have wished for a better instrument than such an angel of Satan, transformed into an angel of light, which, pretending to defend the Christian religion, everywhere destroys what is most important and best about our religion, i.e. the visible unity." In Erasmus' opinion Pfefferkorn had had himself baptised in order to infect the world with his "Jewish poison". This sordid torrent of abuse caused some of our students to quit and develop a dislike of their school patron.

But what was the case? Pfefferkorn, the converted Jew, was employed by the Christian Dominican inquisitors in Cologne. He took part in the hunt for heretics, for dissenting Christians and had taken upon himself a special mission concerning Jewish immigrants. They had arrived in the Low Countries with their holy books with Hebrew texts and Pfefferkorn had proposed to Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg to publicly burn all Hebrew books. However, those days saw the emergence of humanists who mastered the languages of the Bible, especially Greek and Hebrew to enable them to

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<sup>12</sup> *Antisemitisme. Een geschiedenis in beeld (Anti-Semitism. An illustrated History)*, J.Boonstra, H.Jansen, J.Knieszmeier, published by the Anne Frank Foundation and SDU Publishers, The Hague, 1989.

make better, philologically correct translations of the Old and New Testament. For the same purpose humanist Reuchlin had studied Hebrew and he opposed this pursuit of Hebrew and the Jews. So he was a supporter of Erasmus who had studied Greek for the same reason. Reuchlin stood up for the right of the Jews to keep their texts and Erasmus was in total agreement. After all, burning these books would signify a heavy blow to the humanists' effort to stimulate a culture of philology. Pfefferkorn then went a step further by also accusing humanist Reuchlin of heresy. This explains Erasmus' frenzied outrage against Pfefferkorn, which wasn't directed at a poor Jew but at a mad, anti-Semitic street fighter out to kill the Jews in the Low Countries. Erasmus also thought that Pfefferkorn might have harmed the Christian cause on purpose by feigning to renounce Judaism, a thought which according to Erasmus scholar Simon Markish had been whispered to him by Reuchlin himself.

Alright, my students say, but what about deserting his buddy Reuchlin, as it says on the Internet? This came about later, while two developments were taking place in the background: Reuchlin's interest in Hebrew led him to study the Jewish Kabbalah that he wanted to blend with Christianity, and, moreover, he was seeking contact with church Reformist Luther. Both developments led to Erasmus beginning to oppose Reuchlin (which explains the quote "I am not a Reuchlinist"), but that no longer bore any relation to the question of supporting the Jews' right to their own holy books and language. The danger of misinterpreted articles on the Internet and the significance of schools and teachers for educating students in how to deal with the information on the Internet are obvious here. (The same theme is discussed by Carla Hoekendijk in this e-book). So in this matter Erasmus spoke up for the interests of Jewish immigrants.

Erasmus an even worse anti-Semite than Luther? Shame on the vicar's head of editor Hans Jansen. I asked the Anne Frank Foundation whether they had perhaps recalled that patent mistake in their 1989 publication. The answer was that they had had a new article published on this subject in 2005. So I looked up *Fifty questions about anti-Semitism*<sup>13</sup> by Jaap Tanja. And see what it says here: Luther is still a serious anti-Semite, Calvin is an ordinary anti-Semite and Erasmus is no longer an anti-Semite. "Oops, Sir, that must be a mistake", said my students, who thought this was just not done. I agree with them that enormities or conscious mistakes of the Jansen calibre ought to be rectified by the same foundation in a new edition of the same subject. When asked, Tanja made a restriction that the new publication does not give a

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<sup>13</sup> *Vijftig Vragen over Antisemitisme (Fifty Questions about Anti-Semitism)*, Jaap Tanja, published by the Anne Frank Foundation and Boom Publishers, 2005.

definite answer, but nevertheless it is crystal clear that their approach to Erasmus has thoroughly changed

So Erasmus was not an anti-Semite. He was a declared opponent of the Jewish religion and its customs, but he defended the rights of Jewish people. He saw little point in converting the Jews to Christianity. Apostle Paul had preached to all mankind about the Jewish Christ, Son of God, and Erasmus probably wanted to leave it to his God to decide what to do with his chosen people on Judgment Day.

Erasmus: an oppressor of Jewish people, their customs, their language, their property or their synagogues, like our students thought? It is a foul tale. Yes indeed, the reader has to put up with the occasionally blunt and outspoken criticism of Jewish people's practices and institutions, but after all, Erasmus was the satirist and polemist for whom little or nothing was sacred. Isn't that what popular writers of the Möring/Giphart type want? Why then such furious diatribes addressed to an early predecessor of 'columnism'?

##### 5. A militant humanism in the spirit of Erasmus (Carel Peeters 2008).

In an article in (the Dutch weekly) *Vrij Nederland*<sup>14</sup> Carel Peeters makes an observation which might shed some light on the background of some of the misunderstandings about Erasmus. He blames modern humanism for being toothless and faint hearted. He relates this to the wrong idea about Erasmus as a person, who – in Peeters' opinion – had two sides to him: the moderate beside the nasty vicious one. He pleads for a return of the vicious Erasmus and for a wholesome balance between the two sides of his personality. A passage from Thomas Mann (1935) could serve as a key quotation here: "All humanism carries an element of weakness within, which is related to its rejection of fanaticism, its tolerance and its love of doubt, in short: to its natural goodness, but may - in certain circumstances - prove fatal. What we could do with now would be a militant humanism which discovers its manliness and realizes that the principles of freedom, tolerance and doubt should not let themselves be exploited and run over by a fanaticism that knows no shame or doubt".

And indeed, my students had imagined Erasmus as a kind of teddy bear, a moderate, mild, cuddly old soul, writing reasonable things about fair and honourable matters. And what they got was a vicious, satirical and offensive writer. This mistaken idea also plays tricks on the cultural pundits of

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<sup>14</sup> *De andere Erasmus: een militante humanist (The other Erasmus: a militant humanist)*, Carel Peeters, *Vrij Nederland*, no. 45, 2008

Rotterdam. Van Herwaarden was expecting an absolute pacifist and got an Erasmus who went with the flow of events. In the same way that in 1933 in spite of everything, many pacifists wanted to defend themselves against the rise of Hitler-Germany, Erasmus could not escape having to express himself publicly in favour of self-defence and against the Turkish conquerors. Probably Giphart had the same moderate image of Erasmus in mind and was amused to read a couple of Google texts which toppled his preconceived image of Erasmus. As far as Möring is concerned, he will believe in Erasmus' anti-Semitism because that is what he has been told by various sources. He confuses being critical of the Jewish faith with the conclusion that one would want to oppress people on account of that very faith. They are two different matters that need to be distinguished.

Actually, the subject is constantly about understanding the complex Erasmus, that communion of opposites: he is brave but careful, he is moderate but sharp, he is a pacifist and a realist, he criticizes people strongly but is prepared to live together with them, etcetera. In many publications authors choose a single point of view: biographer Johan Huizinga<sup>15</sup> goes for his alleged cowardice regarding the Reformation; biographer Bart de Ligt<sup>16</sup> singles out his absolute pacifism and heroic courage; author Jan van Herwaarden chooses his fickleness and his opportunism. Each person selects one aspect of Erasmus with which the person in question can best identify himself.

As far as militant humanism is concerned, I think that begins at home. Erasmus, who is an icon of Dutch humanism after all, has been tackled numerous times over the last few decades. Who or what is prepared to stand by him, look and see whether what is said is correct and if not, retort in public? Where is the militancy of contemporary humanists?

Our own *House of Erasmus* had a typical experience. Together with the Rotterdam Dialogue Academy, a Turkish-Dutch organisation, we organised a debate about the correspondence between the thinking of our Erasmus and their Fethullah Gülen. We organised a meeting in the Erasmus year on the ideal date of 28 October. Former Prime Minister van Agt was asked to open the meeting, which he did. And then – out of the blue – this Gülen is declared the most influential intellectual in the world, via a smart lobby for an Internet election of a North American magazine, and a week later a Nova

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<sup>15</sup> *Erasmus*, Johan Huizinga, Ad. Donker, Rotterdam, 10th revised edition 2001.

<sup>16</sup> *Erasmus. Begrepen uit de geest der Renaissance (Understanding Erasmus in the spirit of the Renaissance)*, Bart de Ligt, Van Loghum Slaterus' Publishers plc, Arnhem, 1936.

(television) broadcast completely wipes the floor with Gülen in a Cold War-like documentary.

Our board of directors wrote a long letter to the national Humanist Society, which had urged us to postpone this meeting. Quote: “We cannot be moved to the conclusion to break off relations with a discussion partner by the facts or non-facts presented in the Nova documentary. As far as we are concerned the programme can go ahead. Should there be definite cancellations, we will fill the gap. Besides, it might be a good thing to not only look into the doings and dealings of the people of the Dialogue Academy but also to consider the methods and the motives underlying documentaries such as the one by Nova on 4 July. Our opinion is that the latter are not conducive to the integration of – this time – our Turkish Dutch citizens in their first or second homeland.”

In return we received a letter from Ineke de Vries, national director of the Humanist Council in which we were once again urged to call off the Symposium. She saw no need for verbal communication. A grant from the Rotterdam department was off. This is the molluscous, spineless faint-heartedness of Dutch Humanism that Peeters refers to. Hiding behind the established order, demonstrating fear of contamination. Should we - humanists – give in to the anti-Islamhypes of the media? Go ahead and engage in free debate, give your own opinion. A verbatim report of the symposium will be available shortly<sup>17</sup>.

#### 6. Tolerance and active pluralism (Guido Vanheeswijck, 2008)

The fascinating discourse<sup>18</sup> by Flemish Vanheeswijck is of a historical and dialectic nature and what it amounts to is this. In Erasmus’ time the ‘umanisti’ invented the ‘public sphere’. They sought a rational sphere where all the men of letters of Europe could take part in a debate. Only then did private opinions and personal contributions to the debate develop. The discussion was addressed to anyone who could read Latin and wanted to be a citizen of the Republic of Letters. In later centuries, at the time of the great ideologies and nationalism of the European States, it became more and more customary that discussions did not go beyond personal ideology and

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<sup>17</sup> *Erasmus en Gülen, Inspiratoren voor vrede en dialoog (Erasmus and Gülen, sources of inspiration for peace and dialogue)*, Iris Creemers, Leo Molenaar, Gürkan Çelik, Liesbeth Levy, Henri Krop, Pim Valkenberg, Damon Publishers, Budel, 2009

<sup>18</sup> *Tolerantie en actief pluralisme. De afgewezen erfenis van More, Erasmus en Gillis (Tolerance and active pluralism. The rejected heritage of More, Erasmus and Gillis)*, Guido Vanheeswijck, Pelckmans and Klement, 2008.

nation, which is why in the Netherlands a reformed churchgoer could simply ignore the arguments and motives of a sociologist and vice versa. This is when - out of aversion and indifference - the custom developed to not exchange thoughts. This passive pluralism was taken for 'tolerance'. Humanists snapped up the 'niche' left open by others and in their turn shied away from a heated debate with others about what fundamentally moved them. Today, as the world is blossoming again with the Internet and new relations are developing everywhere, just like in Erasmus' days when the art of printing was invented, humanists should be tolerant, cooperative, reasonable and understanding on the one hand (just like Erasmus), but at the same time be venomous, persistent, villainous and fierce when it comes to beliefs they denounce, even the opinions of those they are working together with (just like Erasmus): they should propagate active pluralism. Here Hegel and Marx would add that it is the 'negation of the negation'.

The previous stories fit within the plea for the 'active' half of the concept of active pluralism. We saw Erasmus writing and debating with others whom he plied with a continual stream of opinions and advice – free and unmasked. His disapproving opinions about the prophet Muhammad, about Jewish customs or the constitutional law of the Turks, were no reason for him to persecute or discriminate Muslims, Protestants or Jews but rather for coexistence. Our critics of Erasmus were not prepared for the sharp criticism from a man they expected only moderation and mildness of. Many of us, out of arrogance, habit or laziness, have lost the capacity for curiosity. If we were more inquisitive about the ideas of other people and cultures, an active attitude would be obvious. In a segregated society we did not enquire what motivated others; now it is time to seek mutual agreement and dialogue and also to present private opinions clearly and elegantly. If this could be done in a calm and collected way, for which a dose of Erasmian fairness and moderation would be useful, much would be gained for political democracy.

#### 7. Marjolein Kriek and predestination.

In his previously mentioned discourse Carel Peeters places very great emphasis on Erasmus' *De libero arbitrio* (On free will). Here Erasmus is bowing and scraping in the direction of Luther, who has resigned himself to the election by God, the predestination. Erasmus on the other hand, sticks to the essential difference that for man's eternal salvation it does make a difference whether he did good works during his lifetime. And Carel Peeters is jubilant: "His plea for free will, together with Pico della Mirandola's *On the dignity of Man* (1486), was a major step in humanism", "a lifebuoy for European cultural history."

Peeters held a plea at this same spot three weeks ago against a new predestination doctrine looming large from the direction of modern science, as expressed by among others one of the main characters in Houellebecq's novel *The Elementary Particles*, who believes that everything in a human being is genetically determined and that nothing or no one can do anything about it. The complete gene chart of the bases A, C, G and T in a human's chromosomes, as the text says on the Reboot statue of Marjolein Kriek, can indeed be interpreted as highly anti-humanist.

Recently I took great pleasure in reading the book called *The God Delusion*<sup>19</sup> by biologist Richard Dawkins. He had reserved one paragraph (5.6) to float an idea, namely to 'explain' the human susceptibility to inheriting cultural ideas within a cultural circle with the help of the concept of memes. Via these memes and complexes of memes (memeplexes) the transmission of culture and the stability of religions could be explained. These memes have no material carrier other than the genes on the chromosomes as in the image of Marjolein, but are to be found in the brain, or somewhere else. If we were to replace the concepts of meme and memeplex of Dawkins' medical biology by idea and ideology, then we would suddenly find ourselves in the field of sociology, psychology and cultural history. And my thought was: do we really need this hypothesis of Dawkins, five hundred years after the theological predestination of Luther and Calvin? A cultural predestination on the basis of postulated memes? I'd rather have Erasmus' hypothetical view of man, where upbringing plays a central part, where an uncouth bear cub can be licked into shape by the assiduous licking of the mother bear. Isn't this Erasmian thought supported by adopted children from Korea, the Philippines, Kenya or Columbia who go on to university if they have the necessary support from their family? Erasmus wrote that people are not born but made<sup>20</sup>. It is a good thing to keep this truth in mind against the force of that other truth of the human genome.

Leo Molenaar is a historian and biographer, board member of the foundation House of Erasmus, project leader of the Erasmus year of the Erasmian Grammar School, bearer of the Erasmus badge.

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<sup>19</sup> *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006

<sup>20</sup> 'Non nascuntur sed Finguntur' does not belong to the adages. It is one of the sententia, an aphorism of Erasmus himself. The translation of the complete sentence that contains the aphorism, reads: "However, people, and take that from me, are not born but formed". Cf *De opvoeding van kinderen in Opvoeding (The Education of children in Education)*, part 3 of the collected works of Desiderius Erasmus, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genneep, 2006