

RHETORIC AND THEOLOGY

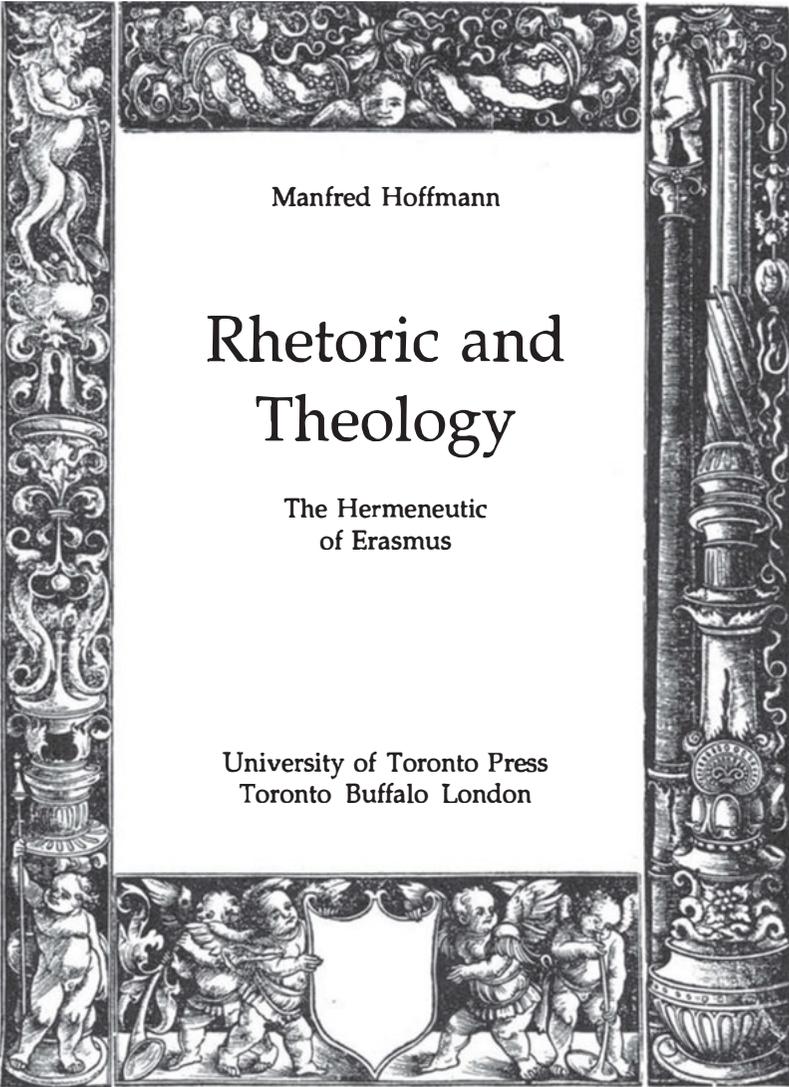
Departing from the traditional focus on Erasmus as philologist and moralist, *Rhetoric and Theology* shows how Erasmus attempted to interpret Scripture by way of a rhetorical theology that focuses on the figurative, metaphorical quality of language, with a view to moral and theological reform.

Manfred Hoffmann concentrates on the theological sources of Erasmus' hermeneutic from 1518 to 1535, especially the *Ratio verae theologiae*, the *Ecclesiastes*, and the exegesis of Old and New Testament texts. He shows that Erasmus' hermeneutic is based on the concept of language as mediation. Words do not have the power to represent the truth unambiguously, but they appeal to our understanding in ways that draw us to the truth through the process of interpretation. For Erasmus it is through allegory that the divine Word carries out its mediation between letter and spirit.

Erasmus used the tools of rhetoric to read and understand Scripture, and thereby constructed a theological framework that has a direct relationship with his hermeneutic. Rhetorical theologians imitate the invention, disposition, inverbation, and delivery of divine speech by clarifying its composition, ordering its subject matter, internalizing its content, and communicating its transforming power of persuasion. Rhetoric provided Erasmus with the tools for finding theological loci in Scripture, drawing from it a repertoire for knowing and living, and translating it into sacred oratory.

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Manfred Hoffmann

Rhetoric and Theology

The Hermeneutic
of Erasmus

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**RHETORIC AND THEOLOGY:
THE HERMENEUTIC OF ERASMUS**

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Introduction



After I had completed my book on Erasmus' theology, a theology informed by his theory of knowledge, his anthropology, and his ethics,¹ it became clear that the rhetorical matrix of his thought needed a more thorough treatment than I had been able to give at the time. That a coherent world view governed Erasmus' thinking had become fairly certain. Of course, his understanding of reality was neither derived from the metaphysical principles of the scholastic theologians nor arrived at, as theirs, by means of the cogent conclusions of a syllogistic, dialectical method. Even so, Erasmus saw all of reality, that is, nature, humanity, society, and history, ordered according to a univocal plan, the parts of which he thought were arranged in a harmonious whole. What can be called his ontology did not represent an abstract theory of being but sprang from a philosophy of the world and of human life that corresponded in large part to the Platonism of the church Fathers Origen, Jerome, and Augustine.

With the main characteristics of the Erasmian world view having come to light, it was necessary to examine the way in which this concept of reality is related to language. The daunting task that lay ahead consisted in finding out how the form of Erasmus' thought is informed by an equally comprehensive awareness of speech and interpretation. It seemed plausible to assume that an examination of his hermeneutic, especially his biblical interpretation, would reveal the way in which he combined ontology and rhetoric so as to construct a distinct theological framework. As if to complicate things further, a survey of the pertinent sources indicated that a study of his use of rhetoric could not confine itself to his introductory writings to the New

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Testament, particularly the *Ratio verae theologiae*, but had to take account of his actual exegesis of Old Testament and New Testament texts. Finally, to delineate his hermeneutic as a whole, one had to include an analysis of his handbook on homiletics, the monumental *Ecclesiastes*.

Other specialists had meanwhile grappled with part of the problem. J.W. Aldridge claimed the promising title *The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* for what turned out to be a disappointing study. While Aldridge was correct in emphasizing Erasmus' return to the biblical sources as well as his recognition of their authority for the philosophy of Christ, he not only failed to see Erasmus within the rhetorical tradition but also came to the questionable conclusion that his exegetical method so relied on historical factuality and on human erudition that he became a forerunner of modern historical criticism, in contrast to Luther then and Barth now.² This approach was criticized by J.B. Payne, who for his part still did not touch on the rhetorical nature of Erasmus' theology, even though he moved in the right direction by concentrating on the distinction Erasmus made between letter and spirit and on his use of an allegorical and tropological exegesis.³ T.F. Torrance more recently examined some of the sources that make up the basis of our study, yet without seeing Erasmus' hermeneutic within the context of his rhetoric, nor entering into a discussion with the current literature on the subject.⁴

Drawing lines from the rhetorical tradition of Italian humanism to Erasmus, C. Trinkaus was, to my knowledge, the first to suggest that Erasmus' theology is rhetorical in character.⁵ Moreover, M. O'Rourke Boyle pushed research forcefully forward by analysing, though sometimes with overdrawn conclusions, some aspects of Erasmus' rhetoric with respect to their classical derivation, especially where his *De libero arbitrio* is concerned.⁶ The most significant work, however, arrived on the scene with J. Chomarat's masterful study on Erasmus' use of grammar and rhetoric.⁷ No one in Erasmus studies can bypass these two massive volumes. Yet since Chomarat examined the full sweep of Erasmus' work, he viewed his biblical exegesis as part and parcel of a general literary method rather than specifically from the perspective of his theology. Chomarat therefore missed the chance of providing a synthesis of Erasmus' theological hermeneutic. Finally, P. Walter published an insightful examination of Erasmus' rhetorical exegesis.⁸ Even so, his reluctance to integrate

Erasmus' interpretation of Scripture into his overall system of thought as well as his neglect of the connection between hermeneutic and homiletics limited his view.

It is the intention of this study to show that Erasmus in fact espoused what can be called a *theologia rhetorica*. He committed himself to returning theology to its scriptural sources by means of the art of rhetoric, that is, by the knowledge of ancient languages and the humanist interpretation of literature. Purified in this way from textual corruption and liberated from misguided comments, Scripture would regain the original power of its divine authority. Its essential message, the philosophy of Christ, would engender the restitution of Christianity to its genuine ethos – much the same as it would restore nature to its original goodness. God's word would regenerate Christians to become believers who realize true religion in the world.

'In olden days,' Erasmus said, summarizing the history of theology, 'the Christian philosophy was a matter of faith, not of disputation; men's simple piety was satisfied with the oracles of Holy Scripture, and charity ... had no need of complicated rules ... Later, the management of theology was taken in hand by men nurtured in humane learning, but mainly in those fields of learning which today we commonly call rhetoric. Gradually philosophy came to be applied more and more, Platonic first and then Aristotelian, and questions began to be asked about many points which were thought to pertain either to morals or the field of speculation about heavenly things. At first this seemed almost fundamental, but it developed by stages until many men, neglecting the study of the ancient tongues and of polite literature and even of Holy Writ, grew old over questions meticulous, needless, and unreasonably minute ... By now theology began to be a form of skill, not wisdom; a show-piece, not a means toward true religion; and besides ambition and avarice it was spoilt by other pests, by flattery and strife and superstition.

Thus at length it came about that the pure image of Christ was almost overlaid by human disputations; the crystal springs of the old gospel teaching were choked with sawdust by the Philistines, and the undeviating rule of Holy Scripture, bent this way and that, became the slave of our appetites rather than of the glory of Christ. At that point some men, whose intentions certainly were religious, tried to recall the world to the simpler studies of an earlier day and lead it from pools most of which

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are now sullied to those pure rills of living water. To achieve this object, they thought a knowledge of the tongues and liberal studies (as they call them) were of the first importance, for it was neglect of them, it seemed, that brought us down to where we are.⁹

We shall argue that Erasmus intertwined his biblical scholarship with his overall understanding of language in such a way that rhetoric stood him in good stead for both interpreting the divine revelation in Scripture and construing from it a theological framework that raised his concept of reality to a higher level. In other words, he employed the art of rhetoric not only to read and understand Scripture but also to arrange theological *topoi* as highpoints of a comprehensive system that encompassed his ontology, anthropology, sociology, and ethics. For him the scope of theological language included the arenas of discourse concerning nature, human beings, society, history, and morality.

More precisely, we see Erasmus' hermeneutic as governed by the idea of language as mediation. Language, especially God's speech in Scripture, draws the reader into the truth through the process of interpretation. And it is the peculiar drawing power of allegory (the middle between the historical/literal and the spiritual/mystical sense of Scripture) that performs this metaphorical function. Here the divine word intercedes between heaven and earth as it translates the reader from the flesh into the spirit. This mediation through allegorical language engenders in the individual a harmonious consensus between word, truth, and understanding. It also generates true communication, love, and concord between human beings in society. The mediation of language therefore comes to fruition in individual and societal transformation. While Erasmus' dualistic view contrasted appearance with reality, letter with spirit, body with spirit, the visible world with the invisible world, and so on, the trichotomous framework he laid over this basic dualism introduced a process of mediation through which opposites are ultimately reconciled. The dynamics of mediation, central as it is in Erasmus' hermeneutic, informed all aspects of his world view.

Such a rhetorical theology had certainly to run afoul of what has been called dialectical theology. As soon as his edition of the New Testament had appeared (and especially when his *Annotations* and *Paraphrases* on the New Testament were published), Erasmus found himself entangled in a web of controversy with

scholastic theologians of various stripes: 'They try to convince the ignorant and unlearned that the study of the ancient languages and of what men call the humanities is opposed to the pursuit of theology, while in truth theology can expect more distinction and more progress from them than from any other subject.'¹⁰ Now the difference in general between the scholastic and humanist methodology was, according to E. Rummel, as follows: 'In their search for metaphysical truth, for a knowledge of God, and an understanding of the Bible, the scholastics used dialectical reasoning and in support of their arguments they cited most often the authority of medieval theologians, that is, their scholastic predecessors. The humanists, by contrast, used the philological approach and most often cited classical and patristic authorities.'¹¹

To be sure, Erasmus did not reject the proper use of logical reasoning within the purview of rhetoric, as long as such dialectic avoided 'a violent desire for disagreement' and prevented problems 'thorny and intricate because of superfluous difficulties' as well as questions which served to 'parade one's cleverness' instead of enabling one to arrive at a 'correct judgment of true and false.'¹² And as far as philosophy is concerned, Erasmus wrote: 'Not that I think ... that the inquiry in the three divisions of philosophy [sc rational, natural, and moral] or that the investigation of phenomena beyond this world should be entirely condemned, provided that the inquirer is endowed with rich talent and is purged of rashness in defining, of obstinacy, and of the bane of harmony, the stubborn passion to get the upper hand.'¹³ But he opposed 'academic theology, corrupted as it is by philosophic and scholastic quibbling'¹⁴ and abhorred 'the corruptions of the logic and philosophy which are now so tediously and wastefully ground into the young at our universities ... I can see many gifted minds put off from learning subjects that would be really useful ... In fact, in many institutions such subjects, together with theology itself, are no longer taught; and at the same time the ancient tongues too and human studies in general are neglected. Their youth is wasted solely in quarrelsome disputations and in bitter polemical pamphlets. This is a great scandal ...'¹⁵

On the whole, then, it appears that dialectical theology constructed a dogmatic system from subtle distinctions, abstruse questions, and syllogistic conclusions. It applied the laws of strict

logic to establish metaphysical principles once and for all. It erected an abstract structure of thought that, even as it was unrelated to the context of living language, was yet imposed on Scripture and reality. So Erasmus drew back from what passed for systematic theology, for its assertions precisely distorted the meaning of God's word in particular and the sense of language in general. Devoid of rhetorical prudence and failing to achieve harmony, dialectical theology was in effect as much useless for spiritual life as irrelevant to cultural progress. Erasmus turned instead to biblical interpretation in rhetorical terms. To put it simply, he abandoned the speculation on metaphysical problems in favour of understanding metaphorical language. Nevertheless, he did derive, as we shall see, rhetorical *loci* from his exegesis of Scripture and ordered them into a theological framework. This theological system, however, arranged as it was along the lines of divine speech, differed fundamentally from the dogmatic system of dialectical theology.

Erasmus made the aim of his life's work quite clear: 'My sole object has been my efforts should serve to some extent the public advancement of learning, and to arouse men's mind to embrace the pure teaching of Christ ... Heretofore, religious minds were chilled and sickened by a scholastic and argumentative theology, and they soon began to grow more cheerful when they tasted the gospel truth.'¹⁶ 'In all my work my sole object has been to resuscitate the humanities, which lay almost dead and buried among my own people; secondly to arouse a world which allowed too much importance to Jewish ceremonial to a new zeal for the true religion of the Gospel; and finally to recall to its sources in Holy Scripture the academic theology in our universities too deeply sunk in the quibbling discussion of worthless minor problems.'¹⁷ '[You] are well aware, I have no doubt, of the efforts I have hitherto expended, not only to advance the common good and the cause of the humanities, but in particular the knowledge of the gospel, to the benefit of all men and to no man's hurt.'¹⁸

The method of this study is primarily analytical where specific texts are concerned. But it aims also at a synthetic view of Erasmus' hermeneutic as it shaped, and in turn was shaped by, the structure of his theology. That is to say, although my interpretation rests on the exegesis of individual passages, it is not presented by juxtaposing, in a pedestrian way, a series of paraphrases on single texts in chronological sequence. Rather, I try to move

beyond a merely historical, grammatical exposition in that I compare a variety of points from different sources in order to arrive at a synopsis. Seeing the whole, after all, is the goal of rhetoric. In my synthetic approach, I took the clue from Erasmus himself, who moved from *varietas* to *harmonia*, from individual meanings to a common sense, from *sensus* to *consensus*, in an effort to integrate the parts of speech into their overall arrangement, without violating, of course, the particularity of the parts. For Erasmus and for this study, interpretation can transcend literal meanings as long as it does not infringe on basic hermeneutical principles.¹⁹

When I deal with a specific text, then, documentation is always specific to that text. But conclusions drawn from the comparison of a wide range of statements are documented by a number of references which together support a point made. In other words, my method aims at deriving from a conglomerate of representative references a sense of Erasmus' understanding of the synthesis between rhetoric and theology. I have learned that in order to arrive at synthesis, the interpreter must accommodate himself or herself to the author, in order to think along the same lines.²⁰

It must suffice at this point to sketch in broad strokes the outline of the present work to give the reader a first taste of its content.

Chapter one begins with a presentation of several images of Erasmus found in the scholarly literature since the nineteenth century. These portraits seem to have as a common feature an emphasis on the ambiguity of his person and work, and on the unsystematic nature of his thought, which is seen as limited primarily to ethical concerns. In search of a key to the heart of his thinking, we turn briefly to the history of rhetoric and humanism. Both the revival of Ciceronian rhetoric and the rediscovery of Plato by Italian humanists, along with the Platonism of church Fathers like Augustine, are seen as significant influences on the centre of Erasmus' thought. Ciceronian philological realism with its moral thrust coalesced with a concern for the metaphorical function of language. While Erasmus was convinced of the validity of the dichotomy of letter and spirit, he was also persuaded that allegory provided a metaphorical means to overcome this dualism.

For Erasmus, the theologian's true vocation arises from the

interpretation of the Bible. This conversation with Scripture aims at both personal transformation by the gospel truth and the ministry of teaching and preaching the word in such a way that it lends itself to the restitution of Christianity. The structure of Erasmus' theology will therefore become clear from the exegetical rules and principles of interpretation spelled out in the introductory writings to the New Testament, the *Ratio*, and in his handbook on preaching, the *Ecclesiastes*, and exemplified by his *Paraphrases* on the New Testament and his Old Testament *Commentaries* as well as other pertinent theological writings.

It was necessary in the first chapter to break the continuity of the argument in order to acquaint the readers with the overall structure and the essential statements of the two major sources, the *Ratio* and the *Ecclesiastes*. These rather lengthy analyses are supposed to give the readers an initial sense (in memory, as the rhetorical tradition suggests) of the topography of Erasmus' rhetorical theology. It is hoped that, drawing on the memory of this basic repertoire, the readers will find themselves more at home in the subsequent chapters, where particular points are taken up and integrated into the overall system of Erasmus' thought. Familiarizing the readers with this basic material at the beginning is all the more called for since these texts are unavailable in English.

What follows in chapter two is an overview of Erasmus' notion of language in general, his concept of literature and literacy, and his appreciation of the allegorical nature of Scripture. Language functions in his world of thought as a medium by which human beings become aware of themselves, of their place in nature, and of their role in culture. What is more, communication among human beings creates community, as the ideas and ideals expressed in language inform and shape their common life, whether in a positive or in a negative manner. Since language was debased in the past, it is the task of the humanist to restore its authenticity – a project that distinguished Erasmus' return to the sources from that of the Ciceronians and the scholastics alike. Looking then at the relationship of words and things enables us to become clearer about the type of ontology that supports Erasmus' rhetorical theology. A brief examination of the symbolic function of good literature leads finally to the focus on the incarnational nature and allegorical role of sacred letters, concentrated as they are in their *scopus*, Christ.

A detailed analysis of Erasmus' exegetical rules comes next in chapter three, with specific attention given to both his allegorical interpretation and his homiletical application of Scripture. Erasmus' rhetorical method concentrates on allegorical language for its ability to throw a bridge over the chasm between letter/flesh and spirit, the visible/material and the invisible/spiritual world, the law and the gospel. He modified the fourfold method of scriptural exegesis in such a way as to accommodate a humanist-rhetorical interpretation. While the historical sense remains the basis for any deeper meaning, it is the allegorical (Christological/ecclesiological) and the tropological (moral) sense of Scripture that is conducive to a metaphorical passage between history and mystery.

An examination of the relationship between allegory, accommodation, similarity, persuasion, and transformation widens the scope so as to clarify the Christological implications of Erasmus' emphasis on mediation. Scriptural language reveals the divine truth because in it Christ mediates between the letter and the spirit by accommodating himself to the human condition while remaining at the same time fully divine. As the supreme mediator, Christ is incarnate in the word. The expositor of God's mind, Christ persuades the reader to consensus, love, and concord, especially as truth is both hidden and revealed in Scripture.

The question of how rhetorical invention and disposition function in Erasmus' theology is the subject of chapter four. Here the general rules of grammar and rhetoric are applied to the interpretation of Scripture on its various levels corresponding to the historical, tropological, and allegorical methods of exegesis. Theological *topoi*, drawn from Scripture, are in turn instrumental for understanding the real meaning of the word. The theological implications of invention and imitation are explored, as is, especially, disposition since it arranges speech according to similarities and dissimilarities – an order of oppositions which is nevertheless brought into a whole by the introduction of a tripartite succession, with a middle link between beginning and end enabling a transition from start to finish. Thus the dynamics of a trichotomous sequence overcome a static dualism.

Since the true meaning of the biblical text derives from its reference to Christ (*harmonia Christi*), the theologian can extract from the story of Christ's accommodation of his teaching to various persons, times, and places (*varietas Christi*) the main *topoi*

of Christian doctrine. Even more, the *Elenchus* of the fourth book of Erasmus' *Ecclesiastes* suggests a systematic blueprint of his theological thought as a whole. Here he lays out a dualistic framework that contrasts two dominions, God's and Satan's. But both are arranged, despite their opposition, in the order of rhetorical disposition from beginning to progress to consummation. While each dominion is different in origin, association, laws, modes of behaviour, and ends, they both follow a tripartite sequence in which the middle is central to the progress between origin and outcome, whether in positive or in negative terms.

The fifth chapter deals with elocution, the art of expressing thought with appropriate words and in a proper order. It includes a detailed examination of the rhetorical devices Erasmus found suitable for the task of biblical interpretation and preaching. Speech must be organized in accordance with both the equity of nature and the harmony of Christ. Moreover, speech must be aptly expressed for the delivery of its message to be effective. Therefore, it is essential for theologians to recognize the grammatical, elocutionary, and moral virtues expressed in Scripture so as to be able to employ them in the persuasive genre of sacred oratory.

Following Erasmus' own emphases, we pay particular attention to the virtue of clarity and the vice (or virtue) of obscurity; to the method of collation that renders interpretation and speech appropriate; to the appealing power of the figures of speech (*jucunditas*) and their power to move an audience toward moral transformation (*vehementia*); to the central role allegory and metaphor play as the figures of speech most suitable for theological discourse because they are most frequently found in Holy Scripture; to prudence as the discriminating judgment by which interpreters and preachers recognize, and accommodate themselves to, the variety of persons, times, and places; to the virtue of moderation that pervades Erasmus' hermeneutic as a whole; and to *affectus*, a rhetorical and human virtue that draws the hearer to the moral life (*honestum, utilitas*), the final goal of suasive oratory. Last but not least, Erasmus correlated the classical virtues with the Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope, whereby faith perfects the natural intellect and charity perfects the natural desire for piety.

The conclusion reviews the whole argument. One point made there may serve here as a conclusion to this introduction.

Erasmus interwove a dualistic and a trichotomous framework of understanding. Although contrasting letter with spirit, appearance with reality, the visible with the invisible, he nevertheless emphasized a process of mediation through which oppositions are ultimately reconciled. It seems that the rhetorical notions of *topoi* and *via* answered to these two frameworks. The *topoi* motif, governed by the similarity-dissimilarity principle, suggests the stability and coherence of the ideal truth centred on Christ as *scopus*. The *via* motive, on the other hand, with its tripartite movement of beginning, middle, and end reflects the story of Christ's life, the development of salvation history, and the Christian's spiritual transformation. A dualistic layout of topics is therefore animated by the notion of mediation as a progressive movement between up and down, inside and outside, heaven and earth, beginning and end. So two patterns characterize Erasmus' way of thinking. It is the coordination of form and dynamic, system and development, circle and story, teaching and life, that brings the characteristic manner of Erasmus' rhetorical theology to light.²¹

In order to make further research on Erasmus' rhetorical terms easier, I have translated the respective Latin words strictly by their English derivatives, because those who have to rely on secondary literature alone are often confused by the variety of expressions chosen to translate the same Latin word. So for instance I have consistently used 'prudence' for *prudentia* rather than 'wisdom' or another term that might have been more flowing in English. The same goes for *adfectus* (affection) and other technical terms. Even though these latinized words may at times render my English less felicitous and more 'academic,' it stays closer to the sources and ensures clarity as to Erasmus' original vocabulary. Moreover, I have made a conscious effort to use gender-inclusive language except when paraphrasing or translating the sources. Finally, I include in my discussion of secondary sources works in German and French, in order to facilitate an international dialogue, which is as yet not quite frequent on either side of the language divide. In all this I have tried to be faithful to Erasmus' principle of communication, which I find central to his rhetorical theology.

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ONE

Erasmus,
Rhetorical Theologian



I IMAGES OF ERASMUS

The history of Erasmus interpretation has produced a puzzling variety of readings.¹ Despite repeated attempts at reducing his life and work to common denominators, the humanist has had a way of eluding his interpreters. For all the labels pinned on him, he remained an enigmatic figure. His personality cannot be clearly traced nor his place and role in history definitively fixed. If there is a basic theme running through most modern interpretations, it touches not on something certain but, ironically, stresses the ambiguity of his thinking and the ambivalence of his attitude.

Looking at Erasmus as both an unsystematic thinker and a 'man for all seasons'² could result in either positive or negative assessments. Those who came from a nineteenth-century liberal point of view tended to appreciate in him the broad-minded intellectual, impartial and adaptable, open to reason but critical of hypocrisy, fanaticism, and dogmatism. He was seen as a sceptic hiding behind the facade of the humanist. Modern liberalism had found its forerunner: a rationalist who espoused an undogmatic religion so general as to hold the ultimate truth in suspension, and a moralist who advocated so broad an unchurched fellowship of the spirit that he was willing to concede all sorts of personal convictions, if only they led to ethical improvement. Accordingly, he was heralded as a father of religious toleration and an early proponent of religious pluralism. No wonder, then, that his alleged relativizing of the truth and moralizing of religion squared readily with modern notions of histori-

cal contingency, social pluralism, religious individualism, and freedom of choice.

Liberal interpreters recognized in Erasmus their own ideas, ideals, and values. He appeared to them as a secularizer of the spirit and a prophet of positivism; a precursor of modern education and of research unhampered by dogmatic tutelage; a champion of freedom of thought and press; a rationalist like Montaigne or Voltaire, and a sceptic like Descartes; a scholar who preferred to be known for his philological work, a rhetorician and educator rather than a theologian; a moralist who, while prudently avoiding an open clash with the institutional church, doubted its doctrines as he advocated the restoration of Christianity along the lines of minimal beliefs and by means of the moral development of individuals.³

Like French, English, and American liberal interpreters, some German scholars aligned Erasmus with their world view and discovered in him the exponent of that type of undogmatic morality which they found in Jesus' teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.⁴ Lutheran confessional theologians, however, would see him through their church father's eyes and thus from a dogmatic perspective: Erasmus was a *vir duplex*, a two-faced compromiser avoiding a stand; a *homo pro se*, an isolated individual who shunned the community of believers, missed the certainty of faith, and therefore lacked spiritual depth and moral strength.⁵ Particularly in the controversy on the freedom of the will he was said to have been out of his depth as he exposed himself as a lightweight theologian.⁶

However, a new period in Erasmus interpretation, which according to some was even an 'Erasmus renaissance,' began during the first quarter of the twentieth century. It was ushered in by P.S. Allen's painstaking work on his letters and highlighted by the landmark biography of J. Huizinga.⁷ The critical edition of *Erasmi epistolae* threw so much light on the historical background of his life that the priming colours were available for painting a truer picture of his character.

As a result, Erasmus was depicted as an equivocating but pious intellectual. Plumbing the complexity of his psychological make-up brought to light the conflicting features of a Protean personality: an egocentric in need of friendship; a man who hated lies and yet bent the truth when expedient; an individualist at once desiring personal freedom and bowing to authority; a

hygiomaniac whose concern for his *corpusculum*⁸ was symptomatic of his fear of death while he yet extolled the happy life. A sensitive idealist and a captious critic at the same time, a believer in the perfectibility of human nature and yet an elitist who did not think highly of the lower classes, Erasmus appeared as a tragic figure since he failed to carry his ideas into practice for lack of singleness of purpose. In short, he was a visionary, too advanced for his own time, too utopian for this world even now.

Following Huizinga's lead in one way or another, more and more scholars began to disassociate themselves from the older stereotypes by increasingly nuancing the Erasmus picture. In spite of all his unattractive traits, they tried to do him justice by understanding him on his own terms. In fact, his too human, vulnerable disposition made him the more sympathetic in a time of cultural uneasiness. His character revealed more favourable traits, as for instance his steadiness in adverse circumstances.⁹ Moreover, his devotion to religious life came into view, particularly in terms of his Augustinian spirituality.¹⁰ Still, the liberal interpretation persisted, as in A. Renaudet's stress on the humanist's so-called modernism and on his aspiration to a third church of the spirit that was to transcend all denominational boundaries by returning to the essentials of Jesus' message.¹¹

It has been clear since the sixties that the newest phase of Erasmus studies was in the making, with the older picture being substantially revised. Just as the Amsterdam edition of his works¹² began to provide a critical text base for research in the sources, so the work of the Amsterdamer C. Augustijn not only helped to dispel inveterate clichés but also opened new insights, particularly into Erasmus' humanism and his relation to the Protestant reformation.¹³ Other studies focused attention on his theology and biblical interpretation,¹⁴ his relation to the classical and ecclesiastical traditions and to contemporary movements,¹⁵ his ecclesiology and ecumenism,¹⁶ his controversy with Luther,¹⁷ and his political theory and pacifism¹⁸ – to mention but the most important areas of research. Even though it takes time for the scholarly community to absorb and assess new findings, at least this much is now evident: A major shift is taking place at the cutting edge of Erasmus research.

Examinations into the humanist's philology and rhetoric, however, seem to have run on an independent track, with J. Chomarat's substantive work representing a milestone on this

path.¹⁹ While this line of research tended to minimize the contributions of studies on Erasmus' theological ideas, both sides came to similar conclusions in that they stressed that the ambiguity of his thought in reality represented an attempt to achieve consensus by discovering elements of truth on either side of an issue. But whereas those who worked on the linguistic aspects for the most part continued to see the sceptic and moralist, those who dealt with his religious thought found a generally orthodox believer who spared no effort to integrate reason and revelation, doctrine and life, faith and love.

2 HUMANISM AND RHETORICAL THEOLOGY

Even so, the question of whether Erasmus can be called a theologian has not yet been settled in the mind of everyone.²⁰ Was Erasmus a theologian at all, and if so, what kind of a theology did he teach? Certainly, he qualified for the title in that he was trained at Paris, acquired the degree of doctor of theology from Turin, was considered fit to receive invitations to teaching positions in divinity, was even offered the cardinal's purple, and was singled out by prominent patrons to take Luther to task in doctrinal controversy. Moreover, despite his caustic remarks on the unschooled, superstitious lot of the monks, he never renounced his vows as an Augustinian canon regular. And while he made a living as a freelance author, enjoying dispensation from priestly duties and dietary regulations, he remained true, in his mind at least, to his church and vocation. Still, did he consider himself a theologian?

Of course, he would not openly claim the title of theologian, partly out of modesty, partly for fear of being lumped with the scholastic crowd. He loathed the *neoterici* or *recentiores*, 'the modern class of theologians, who spend their lives in sheer hair-splitting and sophistical quibbling ...':

It is not that I condemn their learned studies, I who have nothing but praise for learning of any sort, but these studies are isolated, and not seasoned with references to any well-written works of an older age, and so they seem to me likely to give a man a smattering of knowledge or a taste for arguing ... They exhaust the intelligence by a kind of sterile and thorny subtlety, in no way quickening it with

the vital sap or breathing into it the breath of life; and, worst of all, by their stammering, foul, and squalid style of writing, they render unattractive that great queen of all sciences, theology, enriched and adorned as she has been by the eloquence of antiquity. In this way they choke up, as it were with brambles, the way of a science that early thinkers had cleared and, attempting to settle all questions ... merely envelop all in darkness. Thus you can see her, once supremely revered and full of majesty, today all but silent, impoverished, and in rags; while we are seduced by the attractions of a perverted and insatiable passion for quibbling. One quarrel leads to another, and with extraordinary arrogance we quarrel over insignificant trifles.²¹

Erasmus did not claim 'to be an expert in the rare science of theology, and yet I do not have so low an opinion of such brains or learning as I may possess as to think that I understand nothing that Augustine wrote ... In this affair my business is not with theological subtleties but with the correction of the text. I take upon myself a schoolmaster's part; questions of truth and falsehood I leave to those master-minds.'²² With understatement he wished to be known as a grammarian, as one whose calling it is to provide by his philological work services ancillary to the queen of sciences: 'If anyone says I am no theologian my answer is: I am playing the part of the grammarian. If they disdain the grammarian, let them take note that the emperor does not disdain the services of the barber or secretary. If they cry out that no one except a theologian can provide this service, my answer is: I am the lowliest of theologians and have taken on the lowliest task in theology.'²³

But then Erasmus could also turn the tables and say: 'There has been everywhere a lot of uneducated theologians, one like me you hardly find in many centuries.'²⁴ His conventional display of humility could not cover the fact that he did not mind others calling him a theologian and then some: 'Time was when hundreds of letters described me as the greatest of the great, prince of the world of literature, bright star of Germany, luminary of learning, champion of humane studies, bulwark of a more genuine theology.'²⁵ And Thomas More wrote to Dorp: 'He is not to be banished from the theologian's throne to the grammarian's footstool ... Erasmus is certainly not one of those grammarians

who has mastered no more than mere words, nor is he one of those theologians who know nothing at all outside a tangled labyrinth of petty problems ... He has gained something vastly more useful, a general command of sound literature, which means sacred letters especially but not at the expense of the rest.²⁶

Indeed, whenever Erasmus insisted that he was concerned with the restoration of languages and humanist studies, he never failed to add that he was also committed to the renewal of genuine theology and the promotion of the gospels and piety: 'I support the humanities ... I recall theologians to the sources and point out to them where true religion has its roots.'²⁷ In his description of the true theologian he gave his readers to understand that he was also speaking of himself or at least of the ideal with which he wanted to be identified, a theologian who first of all interprets and communicates the word of God: 'The foremost goal of theologians is to interpret the divine Scriptures with wisdom, to speak seriously and effectively of faith and piety, not to reason about trifling questions, but to drive out tears, and to inflame the hearts to heavenly things.'²⁸ And as for his lifework, he expertly went about the business of an academic theologian, producing a corpus of theological literature that runs the gamut from the textual criticism, translation, and exegesis of Scripture, to theological treatises, editions of church Fathers, apologies, meditations, devotional writings, sermons, catechisms, prayers, and hymns.

Strictly speaking, Erasmus was certainly no denominational theologian. Siding with neither party, he steered a middle course between extremes. Although he blamed the Catholic authorities for enforcing the status quo of a tradition which from good beginnings had fallen into abuse, he shunned both the Reformation and its left-wing offspring because they upset the established order. All the same, he did espouse a reform program of comprehensive scope, the *restitutio christianismi* informed by the *philosophia christiana*. Yet he was far from presuming that this movement should take on its own form and run its course apart from the institutional church.²⁹

Now the fact that Erasmus so strenuously resisted being identified with both Catholic scholasticism and Protestant confessionalism has led to the conclusion that even if he was a theologian he surely was not a systematician. His distaste for defini-

tions, his dislike of assertions, and the built-in flexibility of his thinking were said to have kept him from organizing his thought into a coherent whole. It is true, he made statements such as this:

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 there is great uncertainty about very many issues, and the mind of man suffers from this deeply ingrained weakness, that it does not know how to give way when 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 the absolute truth. In this regard certain men were so lacking in moderation that after defining everything in theology they contrived for those who are no more than men a new status of divinity, and this has aroused more questions and greater commotion in the world than the Arians in their foolishness once did. But certain pundits on some occasions are ashamed to have no rejoinder to make. On the contrary this is indeed the mark of theological learning: to define nothing beyond what is recorded in Holy Scripture, but to dispense in good faith what is there recorded.³⁰

His thinking does contain a strain of Ciceronian scepticism, as prominently expressed in *De libero arbitro*, for instance: 'And I take so little pleasure in assertions that I will gladly seek refuge in Scepticism whenever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of Holy Scripture and the church's decrees.'³¹ Even so, one must carefully assess the place and extent of his intellectual reserve before one consigns him to the camp of the doubters. Was the principle of suspended judgment (*epoché*), namely, that in certain cases 'it is more learned to be ambiguous and with the Academics to doubt than to make pronouncements,'³² so fundamental as to prevent him from ordering intellectual insights into some kind of structure? Or did it serve primarily to oppose certain kinds of systematic thinking, such as the late scholastic theology in Paris or Louvain and the dogmatic assertions of Luther?

Erasmus' misgivings about scholastic and confessional asser-

tions were no doubt caused by his aversion to absolute judgments: 'I assert nothing absolutely; I give the judgment of the church everywhere the reverence and authority which are its due; I am all for discussion, I decide nothing.'³³ He feared that because dogmatic statements claim certainty of truth for themselves, they exclude other options, pronounce differing insights to be false, and thus produce division instead of promoting unity. But unity and truth always belong together, for truth is not consistent unless it consists of harmony: 'No lie is so tightly put together that it is everywhere consistent with itself.'³⁴ In fact, unity and harmony rather than compelling proof or convincing argument are the evidence of the truth after all is said and done.

Erasmus' polemical scepticism is therefore symptomatic of a deeper 'hermeneutic of suspicion' that operated in his epistemology. This generic distrust had to do with his understanding of the relation between language and reality as it came to him through the tradition of Renaissance humanism, especially Valla.³⁵ The Italian humanists from Petrarch on had advocated Ciceronian rhetoric over against that application of Aristotelian dialectic which prevailed in the abstract conclusions of the philosophers, in the logico-semantic systems of the terminists and summulists, and in the speculative, metaphysical constructs of scholastic theologians.³⁶ While dialectical argumentation relied on cogent deductions from first principles to achieve certainty of truth, rhetoric followed an inductive process of persuasion toward verisimilitude.

This new style of speech, the 'New Learning,' was brought from Italy to the North by Rudolph Agricola, was propagated by Juan Luis Vives, and was cultivated by French, German, and English humanists alike.³⁷ Like the Italian humanists, Agricola replaced the formalist idiom of scholastic disputations with a humanist rhetoric of persuasion. But he took a different tack. While Valla had 'expanded the content of rhetoric to take in logic ... in Agricola's work, logic ... retained primacy over rhetoric ... Agricola had rhetoricized logic; but he had also devalued rhetoric, making it an appendage of logic.'³⁸ He redefined dialectic by associating it not only with the invention of *topoi* to determine probability but also with judgment which produces syllogistic reasons to establish certainty. Consequently, invention had become a matter of dialectic, and rhetoric was reduced to elocution.³⁹