

Book reviews

Nathan Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples*, Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2019, xiv + 196 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-24928-1 (hardcover), 978-3-030-24931-1 (softcover), 978-3-030-24929-8 (e-book).

By many Erasmus is still considered as a cosmopolitan, proto-European proclaimer of tolerance, irenicism and moderation. We can think, for example, of the European Union’s Erasmus scholarship programmes that continue to propel students beyond the borders of their nations to different European universities. Nathan Ron argues in his *Erasmus and the “Other”* that the interpretation of Erasmus as a tolerant and moderate thinker is unwarranted. This book shows that Erasmus’s tolerance was decidedly limited to the Christian world, since Erasmus and his contemporaries considered Muslims and Jews as ‘others’ in varying degrees.

The concept of alterity has received increasing attention in early modern literature and often explores the formation of identities vis-à-vis a constitutive ‘other’, building on the work of Edward Said. *Erasmus and the “Other”* is an extensive account of Erasmus’s treatment and usage of the ‘other’. In Erasmus’s work, the ‘other’ mainly takes the form of non-Christians and different ethnic and religious groups: Turks (and Muslims in general), Jews, Amerindians, and Africans. Alongside Erasmus, the book takes into consideration the views on ‘others’ from a set of European thinkers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), Piccolomini (1405–1464), Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), Sebastian Franck (1499–1543), Michael Servetus (1511–1553) and Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563). In the exploration of the treatment of ‘others’ by these relatively progressive authors, the book is more concerned with the specific views on these “others” by the authors, rather than the role the “othering” served in the identity formation of the authors themselves.

The book is divided into two main parts: the first addresses the approach to Muslims, while the second focuses on the treatment of Jews and Judaism. In the first part, Ron convincingly shows that Erasmus conceptualized the Turks, the *genus Turcarum*, ‘as a loathsome race characterized by a repulsive set of corrupt mental defects, the sum of which was corruption and immorality’. (p. 29)

According to Ron, Erasmus contrasted the Christian *humanitas* with a Turkish *immanitas*, thereby effectively presenting the Turks as the 'other'. Erasmus's pacifism entailed the peace amongst Christians in Europe and the Turks were thereby actively excluded in his conception of peace. The book shows that the humanists Piccolomini and Francesco Filelfo (1398–1481) had considerable influence on Erasmus's worldview and probably inspired him to consider the Turks as having a Scythian origin, which referred to an inhuman and uncivilized culture, as well as the enemies of classical Graeco-Roman culture. Together with Nicholas of Cusa, Erasmus had the ideal of a unified Christian church, wherein Muslims should be converted to Christianity. Quite ironically, Erasmus's thought did inspire a relatively moderate and tolerant attitude towards Islam in later, sixteenth-century humanists, such as Sebastian Franck (1499–1543), Michael Servetus (1511–1553), and Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563).

The second section on the treatment of Jews and Judaism in Erasmus's work is somewhat shorter and contains six concise chapters, some of them a mere five pages long. In this section, Ron offers a revisionist reading of Shimon Markish, *Erasmus and the Jews*. Ron argues that Markish's characterization of Erasmus's approach to Judaism as 'a-semitism', an indifference towards all things Jewish, is misguided. On the basis of Erasmus's letters and works, Ron convincingly argues that Erasmus's anti-semitism was entrenched in contemporary, negative attitudes towards the theological core of Judaism as well as Jews. While Muslims often qualified as *semi-Christians*, Jews were lower on the ladder and often characterized as *non-Christians*. According to Ron, this had to do with the impossibility of converting Jews, who did not acknowledge Christ, while Islam did at least recognize Jesus as a prophet. Erasmus certainly disagreed with the theological core of Judaism, and these views had anti-Semitic implications. Even Jews who converted to Christianity, were seen by Erasmus as half-Jews or occult Jews; converts could thus never become full Christians.

At some points, Ron takes his subversive reading a bit too far. This is particularly apparent in the assessment of Erasmus's description of Matthew Adrianus as 'genere Hebraeus sed religione iam olim Christianus', which is translated as 'by race a Jew but in religion a Christian of long standing' (153). Here, the reference to race seems somewhat construed and it would have been more apt to translate it as 'of Jewish descent but a Christian by religion for quite some time now'. Furthermore, the quote is a small part of a letter, wherein Erasmus informed a friend about the famous Hebraist Matthew Adrianus, who recently arrived in Louvain. In this case, it seems more reasonable to read the reference to Adrianus's Hebraic descent as a credential of his Hebrew knowledge, since this small snippet of the sentence is followed by 'a physician by profession, so skilled in the whole of Hebrew literature that in my opinion our age has no

one else who could be compared with him'.¹ In this context Ron's conclusion that Erasmus thought that 'Jewish nature or essence was unchangeable, or in other words, once a Jew always a Jew' (p. 153) seems a bit far-fetched.

Throughout the book, Ron tends to offer presentist, moral judgment upon Erasmus. For example, Ron condemns Erasmus's citation of rumors that Jewish soldiers destroyed and looted Rome and all of Italy. He argues that Erasmus's 'reliance on dubious unidentified rumors, in order to cast such a grave blame upon Jews, as he did, should be utterly unacceptable' (p. 134). Elsewhere, Ron concludes that Erasmus was a racist: 'Erasmus establishes the criteria by which we may define him as racist'. (160) While it is certainly insightful and important to point out the anti-semitic and racist inclination of Erasmus, the casting of moral judgement upon a historical figure such as Erasmus does not further our understanding of Erasmus's moral frameworks nor its relevance for current debates about the merits of Erasmus as a historical figure. A second example is one of the conclusions in the final chapter of the book that supposes a 'traceable hierarchy of peoples and races in Erasmus' mind': At the top were the Christians, secondly half-Christians in the form of Muslims, thirdly the Jews and at the bottom of the hierarchy were black Africans. Erasmus himself, however, never referred to any classification or hierarchy of peoples. Ron is convincing when he argues that Erasmus considered Christians to be superior to Muslims and Jews, but the argument for a coherent hierarchy in Erasmus's mind is doubtful and presentist.

The critical assessment of Erasmus's views offers the opportunity to reconsider the characterization of Erasmus as the epitome of tolerance and pacificism. It seems, however, that the main goal of the book appears to be to judge Erasmus with a modern moral compass in hand. In the conclusion, Ron argues for the importance to 'expose past wrongdoings, to cope with them and be able to advance a reconciliatory process'. (171) Furthermore, Ron clearly shows that Erasmus can only be seen as tolerant and pacifist in the limited context of the Christian world. While Erasmus did want peace and concord between Christians, he was as hostile and condescending towards Muslims and Jews as most of his contemporaries. The book does not dethrone Erasmus as the "Prince of Humanists", yet it does put a timely and welcome big asterisk after that lofty title.

Koen Scholten, Utrecht University, k.scholten@uu.nl

1 Commodum huc appulit Mattheus Adrianus, genere Hebraeus sed religione iam olim Christianus, arte medicus; Hebraicae literaturae totius sic peritus ut mea sententia non alium habeat usquam haec aetas qui cum hoc conferri possit.' Erasmus to Gilles Busleiden, 19 October 1517, in *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami III* (Oxford, 1913), ep. 686, pp. 108–109.