

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM: THE "THIRD PARTY" IN THE  
QUARRELS OF THE PAPAL CHURCH AND THE PROTESTANTS*Wolfgang Christian SCHNEIDER*University of Hildesheim, Institute of History, Marienburger Platz 22, D-31141 Hildesheim, Germany  
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## ABSTRACT

*Within the mental and religious troubles of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and the search for an immediate spiritual life there were two major positions. There was the institutional Church, with all its power. And there were increasingly violent groups of theologians who stood in opposition to it. But there was also a third side, a third party, which consciously stood aside from this, coming as it did from a position of humane understanding, ascribing free will to men, and propagating a peaceful tolerance of the different ways to God, whose thought is accessible to no-one. That was the position of Erasmus.*

*Key words: devotio moderna, reformation, merit before God, doctrine of grace, slavish will, free will, the human point of view*

ERASMO DA ROTTERDAM:  
LA "TERZA PARTE" NELLE DISPUTE TRA PAPATO E I PROTESTANTI

## SINTESI

*Due erano le posizioni principali all'interno dei problemi mentali e religiosi agli inizi del XVI secolo in merito alla ricerca di una vita spirituale immediata. C'era la Chiesa istituzionale, con tutta il suo potere. E c'erano gruppi di teologi sempre più violenti che stavano in opposizione ad essa. Ma c'era anche una terza via, una terza parte, che si fece consapevolmente da parte, partendo da una posizione della comprensione umana, volendo attribuire alle persone il libero arbitrio e propagare una pacifica tolleranza nelle vie verso Dio, il cui pensiero non era accessibile. Questa era la posizione di Erasmo.*

*Parole chiave: devotio moderna, Riforma, meriti davanti a Dio, dottrina della grazia, volontà servile, libero arbitrio, il punto di vista umano*

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century a new perception of man came into view, not only in the arts, but equally in philosophy and theology. In the main part this was rooted in a new spirituality, a new form of piety, which – while rejecting the dominating Aristotelianism of the universities and the ecclesiastical hierarchy – was searching for a direct access to a spiritual experience. Important impulses were given by Geert Groote and Thomas à Kempis, forming the *devotio moderna*. Nicolas of Cusa brought this to bear on a high level. He showed that the intensification of the religious experience opens a new liberty towards the surrounding concrete reality (see Bocken, 2005; Bocken, 2012; Schneider, 2010a; Schneider, 2010b). At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century similar phenomena came to light in southern Europe, for instance in the Florentine Academy.<sup>1</sup> There it was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), equally engaged in philosophy and in theology, who demonstrated the new view in his speech *De dignitate hominis* in 1486/1496 (Garin, 1942). But at the same time there was a tendency to resist any thought of a sovereign human self, and it was Savonarola, a friend of Giovanni Pico, who represented this position in a radical way. In the area of the Lower Rhineland Erasmus combined the humanistic point of view with a deep religiosity in the tradition of the *devotio moderna*.<sup>2</sup> Everywhere the demand for a deeper self-justified spirituality but with practical realisation arose – and that was combined with endeavours towards a *reformatio* of the church. The Curial Church and the Papacy were largely unable to deal with these new impulses in a positive manner. But an increasingly theologically informed laity and an academically educated, urbane priesthood – partly in the religious orders – gave backing to such conceptions. The new art of printing served as an appropriate platform. Exemplarily this is shown in the case of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola. Shortly after 1500 – unsuccessfully – he traced out proposals for a reform council, whose pre-reformatory ideas found expression in prints in Basel und Strassburg.

Soon there evolved from this wrestling for a reform within the church a decisive struggle for a reformation against the constituted church. The stand made by the Wittenberg professor Martin Luther against several grievances became the torch: in many places displeasure broke out about the ineffectiveness of the reform efforts and the self-righteousness in the outer appearance of the church. Increasing bitter quarrels occurred on how to handle the “reform” or “reformation” of the church, and how to handle the spiritual life of the believers. Finally this led to the splitting of the Christian Church of the West – into the papal Roman Church on the one hand and the different Churches of the “Reformation”, of the “Protestants”, on the other, while other spiritually minded people wanted to be independent of any form of Church and formed simple evangelical communities. There were prosecutions and military conflicts.

1 Indeed adherents of the *devotio moderna* had contact to members of the Florentine academy. Wessel Gansfort, who was formed by the *Devotio moderna*, saw the efforts of the Ficino circle to defend an independent position of philosophy opposite theology nearly as an intellectual *superbia*. For that and the Renaissance Character of the *Devotio moderna* see Hyma, 1924; for the situation in Florence see p. 200.

2 There are many studies about Erasmus (and his controversy with Luther). In the most cases the studies approach it from a decisive confessional point of view. This is evident even for Huizinga, 1958, who describes it from a Mennonite point of view. Important are in general: Freitag, 1964, 551–599; Bainton, 1972; Halkin, 1992.

## THE PROBLEMS OF THE TIME

In the light of the increased self-understanding of men such questions were raised – with urgency – as: what position men could have in general, what could be the relation between men and God, what could be the freedom of men before God, and wasn't there an immediate way to the Divine? Thus the position of the Church as an institution was questioned. For if the new freedom of men could be founded on an immediate relation to God, the mediation by the Church was unnecessary, and any sacramental actions by the clergy were useless. Therefore the sacraments as such were superfluous, primarily the sacraments not mentioned in the gospel. But even the two that were left, baptism and holy communion, became doubtful, because the new self-understanding of man required an immediate participation within the sacramental proceeding, a concrete inner acceptance. Thus for some critics of the church baptism and communion were thought to be dependent on spiritual acceptance by the single believer, which meant that only spiritually self-determined men (and therefore only adults) were able really to receive baptism – therefore making necessary a new baptism, the first valid and real one. Luther opposed that, and coined for such "spiritual independents" the abusive name "Wiedertäufer" ("Anabaptists"). They were to be eradicated. In Zürich Zwingli actually had his Anabaptist competitor Felix Manz executed (for him see Krajewski, 1962). But at the same time Luther adopted in his doctrine of the transubstantiation within holy communion [Abendmahlslehre] the principle of a necessary inner activity of the believer: The transubstantiation happens within the faithful acceptance by the receiver.

Even more important was the question, what and how the new self-understanding and autonomy of man should be in respect to God: could there be any human autonomy in the presence of God, a freedom of man, could man have any merit before God? There were different positions. Influenced by his study of Augustine, Martin Luther was inclined to deny all human freedom in the presence of God, which removed any possibility for man to earn merit in the face of God. For Luther all things were subordinated to the destinations of God – almost in the sense of a predestination. Man, he said, is justified only by his belief in God, a belief that delivers the self and all in total to the grace of God.<sup>3</sup> Followers of Luther like Ulrich von Hutten, Melancton und Andreas Karlstedt radicalized this in different ways.

On the other side stood the representatives of the Roman Church, which in general (and just like Luther) accepted Augustine's doctrines, but – influenced by Aristotelian scholasticism – they lessened the dependence on God by the idea of a mediating position of the church and claimed by that means not only a position of power for the church – they also opened a space for men, giving them the possibility, to gain merit in accordance with the non-Augustinian tradition and the common piety of the people.

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3 See for example WA, Luther: Probationes conclusionum /.../, XVI; WA, XVIII; WA, I, 355–365, 360–361. Yet in a letter to Johann Lang (1<sup>st</sup> of March 1517) Luther's position is manifest: aliud est iudicium eius, qui arbitrio hominis nonnihil tribuit, alius eius, qui praeter gratiam nihil novit. In a similar way Luther wrote (9<sup>th</sup> November 1512) to Spalatin: Erasmuma cognitione gratiae longinquum esse. In general this idea is constitutive for: De servo arbitrio, WA, XVIII, 600–787.

It is within this field that the frontiers of the theological and philosophical quarrels of the years after 1517 moved. Two big parties arose with harsh boundaries, and at the end there were fierce clashes of factions which finally ended in violence, armed conflicts and executions of "heretics" on both sides.

## ERASMUS IN CONFLICT

In view of the fact that Erasmus had often taken a positive attitude to the efforts of a *reformatio ecclesiae*, and that after the publication of Luther's theses in 1517 he had criticised the anti-Lutheran publication of the Dominican Silvester Mazzolini (i. e. Prierias) and finally in his *Colloquia* formulated some concrete statements against the Roman See, the humanist followers of Luther, especially Ulrich von Hutten, had anticipated that Erasmus would join the Lutheran party. At the same time the Pope himself and the humanist followers of the Roman church asked Erasmus to join their fight against Luther's efforts. Henry VIII, for instance, whom Erasmus had met during his stay in England, called upon him to write something about free will against Luther.

For some time Erasmus kept silence in public and discussed the questions only in letters to several personal friends,<sup>4</sup> trying to keep the dispute strictly to theological matters.<sup>5</sup> Like Luther he rejected the practices of indulgence and the claims of the Roman See – which Luther attacked – in several writings. He himself inserted critical passages regarding the ecclesiastical states in some of his works, which could not please the supporters of the papacy: for instance a passage in the new edition of the "Enchiridion" (1518), in which he attacks monasticism, and a passage in the "Notes on the New Testament" (1519), in which he attacks the papal practise of giving dispensations for nearly all wishes and the flat Aristotelianism of the papal theologians. Finally he wrote a critical passage in his *Ratio verae theologiae* (1519), in which he deals with the claims of primacy of the see of Rome. In his letter to Luther of May 30<sup>th</sup> 1519 he even encouraged the Wittenbergian to hold his ground (EE, III 605, line 1-10, 52-55, Nr. 90).

But with regard to these critical points, Erasmus always took the human into account, seeing the things criticised as resulting from human error, which could and should be corrected. He looked at the actual performance of a Christian life – his personal legacy from *devotio moderna*. From that point of view he saw in Luther no blame and therefore asked Luther's prince, Frederick the Wise, to protect the Wittenberg professor. But regarding the actions of Luther he also demanded that where there were divergent opinions, these should be treated with respect, and that generosity should be shown in judgement (see Bainton, 1972, 150).

This in turn the squabblers on both sides – who reduced everything to fundamentalist principles – didn't want to hear. Luther accused Erasmus of not really being interested in the dogmatic principles. And that was not totally wrong, but in a different way than Luther meant: It was Erasmus' deep religiosity, his inclination to the piety of the *devotio*

4 See Bainton, 1972, 147 sqq., and esp. EE, III 939, Erasmus' Letter to Frederick the Wise, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1519.

5 Like e.g. on the question of purgatory.

moderna combined with his humanist point of view, which determined his position: For him the most discussed dogmatic questions exceeded the capacity of human knowledge. He therefore differentiated between a few fundamental items of Christian belief, which should be obligatory for every Christian, and many other religious matters that either went beyond any human clarification or were of less importance for a good and moral life. Most of the items that Luther wanted to be discussed he therefore thought to be unimportant or hidden in God's will.

The polarization spread and so did the verbal violence. Nothing displeases squabblers more than the sight of a sovereign spirit who seems to regard the dispute with which they are so obsessed as something that is not really essential or even exaggerated. The more violently Luther and his followers stood up to the Papists, the more Erasmus held back. To him, who was as urbane as he was pious, Luther and his followers gradually appeared as men of intentional discord, which in turn angered the Lutherans, moving them to demand statements from Erasmus in their favour. And, failing in that, they began to revile him (see for that Freitag, 569 sqq.).

On the other side the opponents of Luther gathered themselves, some of them former friends of Erasmus. The circle around Jacob Hoogstraten, the Inquisitor of the diocese of Cologne, and professors of the University of Leuven, Erasmus' own university, were their leaders: They called for an expert opinion of the University of Cologne, which then condemned some of Luther's statements as heretical and demanded the burning of his books.

Erasmus deplored such condemnations in a letter to Cardinal Wolsey in England, and in a letter to Melancthon commented positively on Luther's frank reply to the two universities that had condemned him. Finally, on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1520, Leo X. published the bull *Exsurge domine*, which condemned different elements in Luther's teachings (see Bainton, 1972, 153; Halkin, 1992, 175). It was not until the autumn that the bull was delivered to Luther by John Eck, because the German bishops had tried to prevent this. On October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1520, some books of Luther's were burned in Leuven. And Erasmus was drawn into the conflict by the opponents of Luther, when for instance the Rector of the University of Leuven, Nikolaus Egmont, denounced Erasmus from the pulpit as a Lutheran (EE, IV 1153, 262; 1113, lines 16-20).

In the summer of 1520 Luther published his two most polemical writings, in which he strongly opposed the Pope's position and called upon the princes of the empire (including the emperor) to take measures against the papal church. The first was *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in which he didn't distinguish between the person and the office of the Pope – something which Erasmus had always proposed. Then came *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in which Luther noted how the Church was held captive by the traditional doctrine of the sacraments. Erasmus was also sceptical on some of these points, but he refused, again, to accept an individual viewpoint as absolute and universal. His humane and humanistic position rejected any theological fundamentalism, precisely because he in his piety generally perceived the human model in every theological statement and by that respected the consensus of the Church's tradition. Erasmus was as pious as – in recognition of human possibilities – he was sceptical regarding the validity of fundamental theological statements. He refused to give up the church as a

spiritual unity. Erasmus not only took into account the possibility of human mistakes, and criticized them, he also saw – quite self-critically – the basic inability of people to make comprehensive statements about God – or more precisely: he rejected the idea that one's own statements about God could be immovably valid while other responsibly witnessed statements about God were condemned.

## ERASMUS' OBJECTIONS

In his social dealings with the "know-all" in matters of the divine, Erasmus, with his piety, his scepticism and mental acuity, and also with his peaceable nature, increasingly found himself at a disadvantage. At first he might have thought of mediation, but now he saw that neither side wanted to be mediated. A letter from Erasmus to Marcus Laurinus in Bruges shows these difficulties, and the attitude of Erasmus; it deserves to be quoted:

I hate the discord, not only because of the teachings of Christ, but also from some hidden force of nature. I do not know if one can suppress one or the other of the two parties without the risk of a general destruction. No one can deny that Luther calls for many reforms that should not be deferred. [...] But each side harassed me and each side accuses me. My silence over Luther is interpreted as consent, while the Lutherans blame me, I would have left the gospel because of anxiety. Luther's invective may be excused only by the fact that our sins might deserve to be chastised with scorpions. [...] The malicious pretend that the Pope was the Antichrist, the bishops were deceivers and the Holy See was an abomination before God. If I told that to a good pope, I would be unjust, and to a bad pope, I would only irritate. They say, I interpret the 9th Chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans about the doctrine of predestination in a wrong way. This question, wasn't it discussed even before the birth of Christ? I think it's better not to lose one self in an impenetrable abyss. I can not be other than I am. I can not help but abhor the discord. I need to love peace and harmony. I see how much darkness is in all human affairs. I see how much easier it is to arouse anxiety, as to appease. Those, who began the tumult claimed to be moved by the Holy Spirit. This (kind of spirit) has never pushed me (EE, III 967, 589; cfr. Bainton, 1972, 166 f.).

When Hutten then attacked him, accusing him of inconsistency and of backsliding from previous statements, Erasmus explained in his apology a few things in more detail:

I prove to hear both sides, I love freedom. I don't like to serve one party and I can not do it. I've said that one can not suppress the entire teachings of Luther, without having to suppress a good part of the gospel. When I initially endorsed Luther, I do not see why I should approve of everything he has written since then. I've never called Luther a heretic, I complained about and turmoil. At the same time I have always disapproved the tyranny and the vices of the (institutional) church (EE III 933).

And later on he continued:

He (i.e. Ulrich von Hutten) says that one must be willing to go to into death for the Gospel. I would not refuse if the situation required it, but I'm not ready to die for the paradoxa of Luther. [...].

And he lists these doxai in detail, most of them are questions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy but such questions as human free will and the goodness of human work are also mentioned. Erasmus points out how peripheral it all is:

“Because of such things I would not take any man’s life, nor would I let mine. I wanted to be a martyr for Christ, if I had the power for that. A martyr for Luther I do not want to be”; and later he adds: “Why plunging the whole world into turmoil because of such paradoxa, some of which are incomprehensible, and some can be discussed, and some are completely useless. The world is full of passion, hatred and war. What will be the end, if one proceeds with bulls and stake? There is no great deed to burn a little man. But it’s a great feat, to instruct and convince him.” (EE III 933, 28. III. 1519; cfr. Bainten, 1972, 168 f.).<sup>6</sup>

Obviously this last is not – like the previous points – aimed at the fundamentalist followers of Luther, but at the equally fundamentalist followers of the Roman See. Indeed, all these brawlers surrounded Erasmus, everyone wanted to have a word from him for their own benefit, the supporters of Luther as well as his opponents:

“I’ve been asked by the pope and the emperor, kings and princes, by the most learned and most faithful friends, to write against Luther. But certainly I will either write nothing or in a way, that does not please the Pharisees”, he said in a letter to Zwingli (EE, V 1299, Z. 58; cfr. Bainton, 1972, 170).

Thus Erasmus is fighting on two fronts, against both the stubborn, intolerant reformers and the power-hungry Roman hierarchy, unwilling to reform. Both sides murdered in the name of Christ.

But Erasmus focused on the essential and on the limited possibilities of human knowledge: therefore he distinguished between the basics (fundamenta) of faith, and what was subordinated or, because of the inadequacy of human knowledge, inaccessible or irrelevant in matters of faith (adiaphora).<sup>7</sup> Most of that which had caused the discord he saw as belonging to that area of adiaphora. But there was still a last point on which Erasmus, forced by his very nature, held a fundamentally different position to Luther: that was the question of free will.

Already in the context of his reflections on iustitia, which he understood as a question of the justification of man before God, Luther had met Erasmus’ interpretation of St. Paul’s

6 The expression “paradoxa” probably aims at Luther’s interpretation of divine grace, predestination and the problem of human good will.

7 See Erasmus’ argumentation in his edition of Hilarius; cfr. EE, V 1334; Bainton, 1972, 174 f.



Letter to the Romans and had seen himself in contradiction to this. Through Spalatin, the secretary of Frederick the Wise, this was communicated to Erasmus, and Spalatin reported the opinion of the unnamed critic: A look at Augustine would have taught Erasmus a lesson. At the time Erasmus didn't react to this information, but it is remarkable that even at this early "coincidence" the core of the later discussion was being touched upon.

In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 Luther had expressed his idea that "the free will after the sin in paradise, even if he does his best, will do a mortal sin."<sup>8</sup> A similar point was made by Luther in his paper *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in which he declared that good works, if done because of the thought of winning merit before God, are damnable sins. Both issues were connected and stood in contrast to the Roman theology of merit, in particular, they referred to the question of indulgence, which Luther had attacked in his theses of 1517. The basis of indulgence was the idea of a treasure of merits and grace, collected by the saints and administered by the church. This was, however, set aside by Luther's doctrine of divine grace – the doctrine of an initial, comprehensive and fundamental sinfulness of man (the "original sin", explained by Augustine), which did not concede a merit to any human being, not even to the saints. For Luther man was totally dependent on the grace of God, thus every valid activity of man was understood as an act of God. When the title spoke of "freedom" this therefore meant only a freedom from the church as an institution, and postulated instead of that a total unfree servitude of men to God.<sup>9</sup> This indeed fundamentalist view with its pessimistic view of mankind contradicted completely the view of Erasmus, who in his deep devotion kept up a belief in the creatureliness of men. Within the Roman theology of merit, there was assumed in a restricted way a free-reliant action of man before God, and Erasmus followed that position, which fitted in with his humanist point of view and with his scepticism about all the – privately justified – statements about God's will and thinking.

## ERASMUS' HUMANE POSITION

From all sides urged to choose a position – of course, one's own – in April 1522 Erasmus announced a reply to Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*. But again he hesitated for some time, only in April 1524 – after the failure of Pellikan's attempt to mediate between Erasmus und Luther in October 1523 – to take up the question in his book *De libero arbitrio*. (EE, V, 445 f.; cfr. Halkin, 1992, 178 f.). Erasmus begins his work on the free will with basic considerations. He notes: "I don't presume to have a doctrine (doctrina) or sanctity, nor I do trust my intellectual possession, yet I would like to bring forward with diligence what moves my spirit." (EAS, IV, I, b 9) If one tries

8 See WA, Luther: *Probationes conclusionum /.../, XIII and XIV*; WA, I 355-365, 359–360. For Luther's position see Freitag, 1964; Zickendraht, 1909.

9 Karl Marx found for that the precise sentence: "Indeed Luther defeated the servitude coming from devotion, because he has set the bondage of belief in their place. He shattered the faith in authority because he restored the authority of faith. He transformed the priests into laymen because he turned laymen into priests. He freed people from the outer religiosity because he made religiosity the inner man. He emancipated the body from chains because he put the heart in chains." in: Marx, 1968, 386.



to set up a doctrine (*docere conabitur*), Erasmus declares, he would not consciously (*sciens*) “resist the truth”. In contrast to Luther’s self-understanding Erasmus doesn’t claim a deeper spiritual knowledge, he just wants to declare his thought. To those who encounter such an effort with insults, Erasmus replies with the request of the Letter of Peter: “with gentleness and reverence to give any answer, which requires accountability.” (EAS, IV, I, Peter 3.15) For him it is not about the controversy, but about an honest, polite (*civilis*) examination of the material: meaningful statements of the Gospel on human freedom and free will. He comes to the conclusion that from the times of the Apostles up to his own time no author had denied completely the force of a free will, with the exception of Mani (EAS, IV, I b 2). This remarkable mention of Mani shows that Erasmus was aware where Augustine got his pessimistic view of human nature from. He sums up the introduction: “I have achieved the intention of this book in half, if I can convince the reader that it is better not to contend for things of this kind [those are theological questions] too petty” (EAS, IV, I b 10).

In the following, Erasmus develops his position in detail, providing a solid discussion of Bible passages with the tools of scholasticism. In doing so, Erasmus doesn’t simply pursue a conservative line, as determined by the authority of the Roman See. That is shown especially at the end of his paper. There he goes a long way towards meeting his Lutheran opponents with his mediating explanation of free will:

In my opinion It would have been possible, to define the Free Will in a way, that every (false) confidence in our merits and all the other constraints, which Luther avoided, would have been avoided, and by the same time the disadvantages (of Luther’s teaching), which we have explained above, would have been avoided, and the benefits, that Luther admired, would not have been lost: that delivers the decision of those, who think the first impulse, which excited the heart, entirely attributed to the grace, and only later ascribe some Moments to the will of men that has not escaped the grace of God. But because of all that happens there are three parts, the beginning, the progress and the completion, they attribute the first and third part to the grace, only in the progression, they explain, the free will effects something, but only so that to the same indivisible work two causes meet, the grace of God and the will of man, and that in such a way, that Grace is the first cause and the will of man is the second cause, which can not cause anything without the first, while the primary cause is self-sufficient. /.../ This mixture of causes results, that man should ascribe his salvation wholly to God’s grace, because it is very little, what is effected by this free will, and just that, what the free will can do, is God’s gift, that before all created the free will, and freed and sanctified it too. And so they are reconciled (if they are to reconcile anyway) – they, who deny, that man has some good, what he does not owe to God. (EAS, IV, IV 8)

## ERASMUS – THE THIRD PARTY

This is the ultimate offer of understanding of Erasmus – in a truly comprehensive and important question. In his later work, in the *Hyperaspistes*, in which Erasmus an-

swered Luther's reply *De servo arbitrio*, working out his thoughts in detail, he remained completely in this position: In all his piety, yet because of his piety, his *devotio*, Erasmus recognizes a free-reliant being and ability to act of mankind. Otherwise, in the case of a total dependence of mankind on God's grace, piety falls: because piety requires a Self and an Other. Within a Self that is subsumed in an Other, there can be no piety, because the alternative is missing – just like the position within a fully programmed machinery, where the only possibility is to fulfil the program: there is a lack of circumstances, which might generate a distant position, from which one could look at the whole, "in freedom" or "in piety". Without such a view from outside "in freedom" there remains only the pure obedient fulfilment or a laming predestination.

Erasmus thinks from the human being, from the human being that is seeking God. Luther thinks from his – ultimately very private – experience of God, that he made absolute, while the Roman Church thinks from the acquired institutional possession of the mediatorship of the divine in combination with the techniques of Aristotelian scholasticism.

To the attempt to defuse the discussed problems with the remark, that Luther proceeds from the newly discovered inner life of man and assumes that as the criterion for his considerations, may be countered, that Erasmus likewise starts with this inner life, but combines it with a knowledge and acceptance of the interior wealth of each individual human being as such, forming a human dignity, even, though diminished, in the face of the divine. His thought is based on a humble sovereignty which leads to the acceptance of others as others, which Luther didn't know and was unable to practise. A sentence like Luther's: "The one, who crushed Erasmus, strangles a bug, and it stinks dead even more than alive" is fundamentally alien to Erasmus, because he knows that the verbal denigration of the other and the violence in the word is followed by an manifest denigration in deeds and a concrete killing of others. This knowledge induces Erasmus to recall the cited request of Peter (EAS, IV, I, Peter 3.15) at the beginning of his deliberations on the "free will". Erasmus' commitment to a peaceful settlement rises accordingly in equal parts from an originally open and therefore undogmatic piety and from an appreciation of human dignity.

Thus Erasmus is a humanist in the full sense of the word: though he is deeply convinced of the creatureliness of human beings, he looks as a human from the human point of view, in all humility, because he knows God's view is inaccessible. He evaded all the dissensions, all the divisive factions which dominated the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and he did it in the sure knowledge of the disastrous consequences of the discord dispute. As much as he called for a the new spiritual depth of humanity and supported the efforts for a religious reform of the Church, and doing so shared the concern of the supporters of the "Reformation", so intensively he dissociated himself from the absoluteness of the fundamental interpretation of grace and the accompanying rejection of free will as well as the rejection of meritorious works and the intermediary function of the church by the "reformers".

With his text *De libero arbitrio* Erasmus was, finally, a "third party": criticized and offended by the fundamentalistic Protestants, by Luther (who answered with *De servo arbitrio*) and his followers and by the adherents of Calvin, as well as by the blunt representatives of the curial Roman Church – and he has remained in that discord until

modern times. Today, however, his modesty and peacefulness, his position of tolerance and spiritual self-restraint, with a sympathetic view of others and of the human condition, appears as an exemplary and likewise necessary position for a "third party". In our days, in which the confessional conflicts have become less intense in Europe, it is obvious that Erasmus's position, and in general the position of a religious, both sceptical and humane "third party", one which Erasmus represented almost alone, can be seen as an appropriate one to adopt within the confessional quarrels of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### ERAZEM ROTTERDAMSKI: »TRETJA STRANKA« V SPORIH MED RIMOKATOLIŠKO CERKVIJO IN PROTESTANTI

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#### POVZETEK

*Okrepljena samopodoba ljudi je leta 1500 povzročila nove težave in čeprav so izkušeni ljudje vedno bolj čutili, da so se osvobodili neposrednih institucionalnih vezi, se je pojavilo vprašanje, kako naj človek razume in ovrednoti svojo novo neodvisnost pred Bogom. Po navadi je to zahtevalo neposredno izkušnjo Boga, in sicer v vsakdanjem življenju, kot se je razvilo od začetka 15. stoletja z gibanjem devotio moderna, in prav tako tudi v smislu duhovnega poglobljanja v notranje življenje človeka. To je pripeljalo do splošne kritike institucionalne cerkve, ki je svojo lastno identiteto našla v razkošju in izkazovanju moči. Prihajalo je do prekanj in sporov, ki so se začeli zgolj z nasilnimi besedami, končali pa tudi z nasiljem do tistih, ki so svojo duhovnost izražali na svoj način. Sprva se je Luther obrnil proti zunanemu delovanju cerkve, toda kmalu je element odrešenja videl v temeljnem premiku od ideje o resnični vrednosti človeka do popolne predaje notranjega človeka božjemu usmiljenju. Pri tem mu je bilo vseeno za druge verske izkušnje in izkušnje Boga. Podobna stališča sta zavzela tudi Zwingli in Calvin. Tudi onadva sta se obrnila proti spiritualistom, za katere je izkušnja Boga igrala odločilen dejavnik. Luther, Zwingli in Calvin so se vedno bolj borili proti institucionalni cerkvi, ki je želela obdržati svojo zunanjo moč in tudi glavno vlogo pri posredovanju z božjim. Ker predstavniki institucionalne cerkve niso bili sposobni dojeti »pozunanjenja« cerkve ali omejiti svojih zahtev po moči (saj naj bi predstavljali Bogu lastno institucijo), so zavrnilo vse zahteve po reformaciji in spremembah. Erazem Rotterdamski se je znašel v osamljenem položaju. Zavrnil je »pozunanjenje« in zunanjo moč cerkve ter ostro kritiziral pogoje institucionalne cerkve, a je vse skupaj videl kot problem človeka – in v človeka je zaupal tudi takrat, ko mu je spodletelo. Čeprav je priznaval prevlado božjega usmiljenja, je človeku pripisoval svobodno voljo in svojevrstno vrednost. Zavzel se je za to, da se priznajo omejitve človeških sposobnosti, še posebej v luči dejstva, da človek ni mogel izjaviti ničesar o božji milosti ali neizmerljivosti božanskega, in zahteval pristop do različnih*

*načinov doživljanja Boga, ki temelji na teologiji. Erazem je v tem, ko je poskušal igrati vlogo posrednika in mirtelja, na koncu ostal sam – »tretja stran« oz. »tretja stranka« v verskih sporih 16. stoletja.*

*Ključne besede: devotio moderna, reformacija, zasluga pred Bogom, nauk o milosti, suženjska volja, svobodna volja, človeški vidik*

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