

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



# Ron, Nathan. Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples

William Barker

Volume 43, numéro 1, hiver 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070213ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34133>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Barker, W. (2020). Compte rendu de [Ron, Nathan. Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 273–276. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34133>

**Ron, Nathan.**

***Erasmus and the "Other": On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples.***

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Pp. xiv, 196 + 1 ill. ISBN 978-3-030-24928-1 (hardcover) £51.99.

When we read Erasmus, we can't get around the profound discomfort that comes when we encounter his obsession with the papal envoy (and later cardinal) Girolamo Aleandro. This scholar had been Erasmus's former bed-mate in the Venice workshop of Aldus, they had exchanged friendly letters in early years, and Aleandro was—in Erasmus's own words—"unquestionably the best scholar of our age in the three tongues" (*Collected Works of Erasmus*, Ep 1341A:1365). But now that Aleandro has travelled north to suppress Luther and his supporters, Erasmus cannot shake the fantasy that Aleandro is actually a "Jew," a betrayer of the gospel—"his conceit is uncontrollable, his greed insatiable, his lust as unspeakable as it is unbounded" (*Acta academiae Lovaniensis contra Lutherum* in *Opuscula* ed. Ferguson, 316–17, trans CWE 71:103, also in Ron, 158). Aleandro, he says, is the "blood brother of Judas" (CWE 71:103). In his characterization, Erasmus clearly connects treachery, greed, and sexual perversion with the word "Jew." His suspicion even drove him to think that Scaliger's 1531 oration attacking the *Ciceronianus* was by the treacherous Aleandro instead (François Rabelais wrote to tell him that Scaliger did in fact exist).

It would be easy, as so many have done, to portray Erasmus as having been captured by one of those passing spells of paranoia that sometimes afflicted him. Many commentators tell us he was not a Jew-hater. After all, didn't he reject Pfefferkorn, a virulent anti-Semite (who had been born a Jew) and give his support to Reuchlin, the scholar of Hebrew? Didn't he enthusiastically praise the Jew Matthias Adrian for taking the Hebrew professorship at the Collegium Trilingue in Louvain? Erasmus certainly never wrote a book like Luther's *On the Jews and their Lies*. By contrast with so many of his contemporaries, including the saintly Thomas More (who wished to kill all the Lutherans), Erasmus appears to have been relatively tolerant and cosmopolitan in his outlook.

In his book, Nathan Ron carefully unpacks the contradictions and complications of Erasmus principally in relation to Turks (Muslims) and to Jews, where race and religion are folded together. He asks if Erasmus really is a great figure of tolerance and peace. While Erasmus opposed war between

Christians, for example, he supported war against the Ottoman Turks. Such contradictions are not just in relation to Erasmus but are also questions for humanist doctrines of learning and education that lead up to our own time. After all, Erasmus, whose name now labels a massive pan-European academic exchange program, is seen as *the* exemplary scholar. Ron shows us that Erasmus was broad-minded for his time, yet remarkably narrow by the standards of our own. We can criticize him for not being as wise as we are, or we can look at him carefully, to learn something about our own blindness. The latter is what Ron sets out to do in this book.

Ron begins his study with the Turks, whose swift drive under Soleiman the Magnificent to the gates of Vienna in 1529 had terrified Europeans. Erasmus, as mentioned, was all for overcoming the Turks. The Turks were barbarians; they represented *immanitas* or savagery, the opposite of *humanitas*. It was better to convert than to kill, but if there was no conversion, death by warfare was acceptable, certainly by 1529. Erasmus seems to have forgotten Pindar's comment that "War is sweet to those who have not tried it." Chapters 2, 3, and 4 in Ron's book provide a detailed account of Erasmus's opinions, set in the general framework of his intellectual predecessors and contemporaries. Chapter 5 compares his views on Islam with Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–64), who favoured a conversion of the Turks. (After all, Muslims were already *semichristiani*.) Chapter 6 is a discussion of the four kinds of barbarians in the work of Bartolomé de Las Casas, who owed some of his ideas to Erasmus, though Erasmus never accepted slavery. Nevertheless, neither Erasmus nor Las Casas had the understanding of Montaigne, who could see how freely we apply the word "barbarian" to the unknown other. Erasmus, despite his failure to understand the other at a distance, was moved to tolerance to those closer by, and in chapter 7 Ron argues that this tolerance, his hatred of war, his unconventional readings of biblical texts, and his progressive thought in certain areas of intellectual inquiry in fact influenced other writers, who in turn seem more open to Turks and other barbarian peoples.

The last part of the book, chapters 8 through 13, provides a detailed analysis of the question of Erasmus and the Jews, a debate that finds its present-day origin in the work of Guido Kisch who in 1969 had claimed to find an explicit *Judenhass* throughout Erasmus. Shimon Markish (1979, Englished 1986) provided a tempered response, claiming that Erasmus's emphasis on a hyper-legalistic ceremonialism of Jewish faith was not in itself

anti-Semitic. Ron however provides a broader, text-based analysis that shows that Jewishness for Erasmus was a kind of infection in relation to Christianity. In religious terms, the Jews are “seditious,” “murderous,” a “shameless race” (Ron 147, citing from Hilmar Pabel’s reading of the Paraphrases in “Erasmus of Rotterdam and Judaism: A Reexamination in Light of New Evidence,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 87 [1996], 9–37). They suffer from a “long, on-going blindness” in relation to Jesus (CWE Ep 1800). Erasmus’s dislike of Pfefferkorn—“once a damned Jew and now a most damnable Christian” (Ep 697); “a half-Jew Christian” (Ep 713)—seems due in part to the impossibility of a Jew to attain full status as a Christian.

In sum, in the light of Ron’s analysis over many pages, there can be no question that there is racial intolerance in Erasmus, mixed into his notions of faith, community, peace, and social tolerance. When we read Ron’s book, we find an Erasmus that is Eurocentric, anti-Judaic, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, impatient with and suspicious of alterity. There is only one thing missing in Ron’s account: the ambivalence towards woman, surely a significant Other in Erasmus’s homosocial world.

Yet, I would argue that our greater clarity—regarding Erasmus’s failures—is attained through the exercise of the intellectual virtues that are found in such abundance in his writing: tolerance (even if only towards Catholics), a desire to see more clearly and to get things right, accuracy, a sense of irony, a rejection of greed, a longing to connect with others, an ability and boldness to critique prevailing social failures, and respect for intellectual work. His political works openly flatter the powerful even as he tries to correct them with his longing for a better world and a rejection of uncontrolled power, baser impulses, and aggression. While Erasmus really is a man of his time, he seems to work against many of the prejudices and expectations held by his contemporaries: a mark of his greatness. And the virtues that he possessed are still part of our intellectual life. One wishes that he had greater self-understanding, that he had understood his own remarkable aggression and distrust, that it wasn’t historical time and the evolution of intellectual life but his own self-knowledge that had revealed his weaknesses. We find this ability of self-criticism in Montaigne.

Erasmus was locked in the old prejudices, in the way that most of us now are locked in ours, no matter how well we think we can transcend them. His virtues, if we can continue to call them such, explain Erasmus’s impact in his own time, but also the longer-term impact he (or the kind of thinking he

exemplified) had on western culture. There has been, on the part of progressive intellectual movements, from Erasmus to the Enlightenment and onward, a continuous opening up of our essential tribalism to marginalized groups, so that today there is a large part of a global intellectual élite that argues for universal tolerance—at the same time that many cling so desperately to the old ways of narrow community. This tolerance, in an extraordinary leap, begins to extend not just to human groups, but to animals and all living creatures, whom we no longer see as Other—or to use Erasmus’s words, as “wild animals and beasts, born to pillage and war” (*Education of the Christian Prince* in *CWE* 27:282)—but as part of a continuum, at the same time that we are unable to escape the most extraordinary suspicion and distrust of the Other in our own human religion, race, and class. Nathan Ron’s book helps us to gain some insight not only into Erasmus but also into our own process of understanding the past and our present condition, as scholars and intellectuals.

WILLIAM BARKER

University of King’s College, Halifax

**Schmidt, Thomas et Christian Thomas Leitmeir, éd.**

***The Production and Reading of Music Sources. Mise-en-page in Manuscripts and Printed Books Containing Polyphonic Music, 1480–1530.***

Collection “Épitome Musical”, Turnhout, Tours : Brepols, Centre d’études supérieures de la Renaissance, 2018. xl + 541 p., 339 illustrations noir et blanc, 58 illustrations couleurs. ISBN 978-2-503-57961-0 (broché) 75 €.

Thomas Schmidt et Christian Thomas Leitmeir ont réuni dans cet ouvrage des études portant sur la mise en page et la production de livres de polyphonie de la fin du XV<sup>e</sup> et du début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, période marquée par les débuts de l’imprimerie musicale et par conséquent par une très grande diversité d’expériences manuscrites et imprimées. Les deux éditeurs ont deux objectifs explicites, le premier étant de montrer que l’étude de la mise en page et de la production de ces manuscrits permet de mieux comprendre les relations de travail entre les producteurs – ateliers et imprimeurs – et les musiciens. Le deuxième objectif est de contribuer à l’avancement de l’étude de la mise en page des manuscrits et des imprimés polyphoniques en proposant une méthode de