

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ANTIQUITY

Edited by Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Christine Shepardson, Peter Gemeinhardt

Gaetano Lettieri / Maria Fallica /
Anders-Christian Jacobsen (eds.)

Progress in Origen and the Origenian Tradition

25



PETER LANG

Progress is a structural and systematic concept in the thought of Origen of Alexandria, which represents one of the most advanced syntheses of the Christian reading of the Old and the New Testaments' legacy and the classical paideia, as well as a rational critique towards every kind of static objectification of the religious. Origen's legacy was capable of radiating its influence through Western theology and philosophy, thus shaping its idea of theological, moral, intellectual, social and political progress. The volume follows the intellectual dynamism generated by the reception of Origen's thought through seventeen articles, which span through the centuries, from the analysis of Origen's thought to its reception history in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Modern Age, up until the 20th century.

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Maria Fallica

Charity and Progress: Erasmus in the Origenian Tradition

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to explore the category of progress in Erasmus' thought, thus highlighting his reception of Origen. The paper investigates Erasmus' understanding of moral progress, exegetical progress, and the progress of the rational mind in key texts of his production. Particular attention is given to the anti-Lutheran aspect of this theology of progress.

Keywords: Luther, Catholic Church, Charity, Justification, Ecclesiology

Erasmus of Rotterdam was a man of moderation: it was his professed ideal, theologically declined and strategically emphasised against his opponents, first of all Luther. This image, carefully cultivated, comes to mind when confronted with his reception of Origen, famously loved *auctor* whose influence on Erasmus has been conclusively proved by André Godin's masterpiece, *Érasme lecteur d'Origène*.¹ Moderation is certainly at work in his complex reappraisal of Origen; Erasmus retains almost nothing of the Alexandrian's most daring speculations on the protological and eschatological level, and the allegorical "excesses" of Origen's hermeneutics are often condemned. However, this explicitly moderate approach should not obscure the *radical* Origenian inheritance in the thought of the Dutch humanist, in terms of a liberal, progressive culture, capable of educating mankind and representing the true, Christian philosophy in the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, this paper looks in the direction of a comprehensive reading of Erasmus' thought² under the category of progress, which will provide a broadened understanding of Origen's influence on Erasmus, given the premise of this volume, namely the crucial nature of the category of progress in Origen.

1 A. Godin, *Érasme lecteur d'Origène*, Geneva 1982.

2 Thus, my reading will refer to the entirety of his production, in the conviction that, although anything but a systematic philosopher, Erasmus held firm some basic theological tenets, which he *adapted* to the cultural, political, and religious circumstances of his age, not without *faux pas* and misunderstandings. On Erasmus' biography and its effects on his thought, see J. D. Tracy, *Erasmus, the Growth of a Mind*, Geneva 1972; R. Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe: Making of a Humanist, 1467–1500*, Edinburgh 1993; M. Barral-Baron, *L'enfer d'Érasme*, Geneva 2014.

1. *Raise Yourself: Progress from the Letter to the Spirit*

It is possible to read a major part of Erasmus' thought in line with the fifth canon³ of his *Enchiridion*, the handbook of the Christian knight, which introduces us to his Platonic (Origenian) reading of the Pauline dualism between the letter and the spirit:

My brother, do not progress slowly by dint of reluctant effort, but by moderate exercise arrive at quick and vigorous adulthood in Christ. Embrace zealously this rule, not to be willing to crawl along the ground with unclean animals, but supported on those wings whose growth Plato thinks are induced in our minds by the heat of love and shoot out anew, raise yourself as on the steps of Jacob's ladder from the body to the spirit, from the visible to the invisible, from the letter to the mystery, from sensible things to intelligible things, from composite things to simple things.⁴

The rule indicates the exegetical movement, which goes from the letter to the spirit, in true Origenian fashion,⁵ as well as the movement of the heart of the true Christian, who, as the title of the *Enchiridion* suggests, is an athlete in Christ: the gymnastic part of the philosophy of Christ is strongly stressed throughout the entire production of Erasmus.⁶ If, as Albert Rabil has said, the concept that learning will make one a better person is the key to Erasmus' program of scholarship and reform,⁷ the heart of this learning is the true understanding of the Scriptures. In reading Scripture, the only goal is to be changed, seduced, moved to tears and then be transformed by the text itself, which is food for the soul, and it will transform the soul day by day, taking away vices and adding piety. Therefore, exegesis is to proceed from the flesh of Scripture to its mystical spirit; according to the Pauline metaphor, very dear to both Origen and Erasmus, the believer must progress from milk to solid food (1 Cor 3:2).

3 For instance, this is the interpretation of A. Auer, *Die vollkommene Frömmigkeit des Christen: nach dem Enchiridion militis Christiani des Erasmus von Rotterdam*, Düsseldorf 1954, 81; see also Godin, 1982, 43 f.

4 Desiderius Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, in id., *Spiritualia (Enchiridion / De contemptu mundi / De vidua)*, CWE 66 tr. C. Fantazzi, Toronto 1988, 84. A very interesting chapter of Jacob Vance's book, J. Vance, *Humanism, Mysticism, and Evangelism in Erasmus of Rotterdam, Bishop Guillaume Briçonnet, and Marguerite De Navarre*, Leiden 2014, 20–49, reads in terms of secrecy the dualism letter/spirit in Erasmus, indicating the Origenian root of this mechanism and pointing out texts from the *Ratio*, the *Enchiridion* and the *Sileni Alcibiadis*.

5 See Godin, 1982, 253 f.

6 The theme of spiritual warfare, commonplace in devotional texts, can nonetheless be traced back to Origen; cf. Godin, 1982, 33 f.

7 A. Rabil, *Desiderius Erasmus*, in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy II Humanism Beyond Italy*, Philadelphia 1988, 222.

This progress is *vehementer velle*,⁸ to will and to meditate, namely, to exercise this will. As the disciples in Acts went into the upper room, the *cenaculum*, after the ascension of Jesus, removing from the lower part of the house, the believer must be far removed from sordid cares and “prepare himself as a dwelling of the Holy Spirit.”⁹ *Stare vero in via Domini, retrogredi est*,¹⁰ admonishes Erasmus in his *De puritate tabernaculi*, the last of Erasmus’ written works, and perseverance is the key to proceeding in the *via pietatis*.

This path to salvation also encompasses the sustainment of the sacraments confessed by the Church, which Erasmus held, even though his sacramental theology was often accused of being dangerously close to “Swiss” leanings.¹¹ Erasmus stresses the importance of the inner, willful participation of the soul, again going from the simple letter to the spirit. Baptism is not enough, if it is not accompanied by the constant exercise of embracing Christ in the depths of the heart and acting in a Christian spirit:

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- 8 D. Erasmus, *Enarratio In Primum Psalmum*, ed. A. Godin, in: C. Béné / S. Dresden / A. Godin (eds.), *Enarrationes In Psalmos Pars Prior*, ASD V-2, Amsterdam 1985, 19–80 (52).
- 9 The editor of the English translation quotes Rabanus and Hugh for this exegesis, but it is worth mentioning Or., Cels. 8, 22 (the perfect Christian, like the apostles of Jesus who “went up to the upper room” [Acts 1:13–14], spends time in supplication and prayer to become worthy of some measure of the tongue of fire from God); cf. Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Acts*, CWE 50, tr. R. D. Sider, Toronto 1995, 10 and 165 n. 77.
- 10 D. Erasmus, *Enarratio Psalmi XIV qui est de puritate tabernaculi sive ecclesiae Christianae*, ed. A. Godin, in C. Béné / S. Dresden / A. Godin (eds.), 1985, 300.
- 11 Not without some good reasons: see Erasmus’ ambiguous judgement of Johannes Oecolampadius’ doctrine of the Eucharist: “learned, well written and thorough”. He added that “I would also judge it pious, if anything could be so described which is at variance with the general opinion of the Church, from which I consider it perilous to dissent” (cf. Desiderius Erasmus, *Ep. 1636*, in *Letters 1535–1657*, CWE 11, tr. A. Dalzell, Toronto 1994, 343–344). Oecolampadius’ theology was heavily dependent on Patristic and Origenian motives; see L. Lies, *Origenes’ Eucharistielehre im Streit der Konfessionen: die Auslegungsgeschichte seit der Reformation*, Innsbruck 1985. In particular, Erasmus’ Latin translation of Origen’s *Fragmentum commentariorum Origenis in evangelium secundum Matthaeum* (Basel 1527) was contested and caused accusations of heterodoxy for Erasmus’ doctrine of the Eucharist; defending his translation, made “in good faith”, from a man that “no one reads today as a dogmatist”, Erasmus even suggested that “perhaps even now the church has not clearly defined how the body is present in the Eucharist beneath the accidents or beneath the actual bread” (cf. *Ep. 2263*, in *Letters 2204–2356*, CWE 16, tr. A. Dalzell, Toronto 2015, 167); cf. Godin, 1982, 574–592.

For obtaining the prize of salvation we do not suppose it is enough to have been admitted through baptism into the household of Christ, to have been delivered by his kindness from the tyranny of sins and restored to freedom – unless we henceforth keep ourselves free from any association with base desires.¹²

The vigorous stance of the athlete, running the course, can stand next to the violence which will conquer the reign, extorting divine mercy: the weapon for conquering is penance, the continuous cry of the soul. The figure of the penitent, so crucial for a Roman Catholic Church which was answering Luther's attack on the indulgences and the entire penitential system, is paradoxically enforced in its powerful weakness, able to "extort" mercy from God's hands.¹³

2. The Economy of Progress and the Preeminence of Charity: The Anti-Lutheran Erasmus

The mention of Luther introduces one of the most eloquent adversaries of an Origenian and liberal theology of progress,¹⁴ with whom the differences exploded in the debate of 1524. The crucial presupposition of Erasmus' proactive and dynamic vision is the full force of human free will, which, as Luther famously recognised, was the most substantial point upon which to attack. As the synergistic model of the Διατριβή says, Adam was created with an intact reason and will, able to persevere in innocence. The original sin obscured the *logos*, and the human capacity to judge, and the human will

12 Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrase on 1 Corinthians*, tr. E.A. Phillips Jr, in *Paraphrases on the Epistles to the Corinthians, The Epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, CWE 43, ed. R.D. Sider, Toronto 2009, 128.

13 Desiderius Erasmus, *De immensa misericordia Dei*, ASD V-7, ed. C.S.M. Rademaker, Leiden 2013, 90; cf. G. Lettieri, *Machiavelli interprete antiluterano di Erasmo. L'Esortazione alla penitenza (1525) epitome del De immensa Dei Misericordia (1524)*, in: *Giornale critico di storia delle idee* 2 (2017), 27–103.

14 On Luther and Origen, see M. Schulze, *Martin Luther and the Church Fathers*, in: I. Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, vol. 2, Leiden 1997, 573–626 (616–620); J. F. Dechow, *Origen's Shadow over the Erasmus/Luther Debate*, in: G. Dorival / A. Le Boulluec (eds.), *Origeniana sexta: Origène et la Bible/Origen and the Bible: Actes du Colloquium Origenianum Sextum Chantilly, 30 août-3 septembre 1993*, Louvain 1995, 739–757; G. Pani, "In toto Origene non est verbum unum de Christo": *Lutero e Origene*, in: *Adamantius* 15 (2009) 135–149; P. Walter, *Inquisitor, non dogmatistes. Die Rolle des Origenes in der Auseinandersetzung des Erasmus von Rotterdam mit Martin Luther*, in: A. Fürst / C. Hengstermann, *Autonomie und Menschenwürde: Origenes in der Philosophie der Neuzeit*, Münster 2012, 169–183.

was made unable to do good, but it was not abolished. This means the permanence of the natural law in human nature, as is testified to by the capacity of the Greek philosophers to discover God's omnipotence and to determine moral precepts coherent with those of the Gospel. Erasmus' texts against Luther reiterate the point again and again: in *On the freedom of the will* the believer is urged to "strive with all our might, have recourse to the remedy of penitence, and entreat by all means the mercy of the Lord, without which no human will or endeavor is effective".¹⁵ The possibility for the ancient philosophers to attain moral goodness, in its anti-Augustinian stance, is a landmark component of this theology of freedom. Thus, in a passage of the *Hyperaspistes*, Erasmus claims that

A person who understands much through human reason and believes certain truths about God, who has drunk in a love of wisdom from the books of philosophers, who has striven for a habit of virtue according to his own small measure, is somewhat more capable than a crude soldier who has lived in a profound state of ignorance and the grossest vice and who never gave a thought to God. And so does a person have what he has not received? Not at all. But it does not follow that since he did not receive it as a gift but as a legacy, therefore he did not receive it.¹⁶

Against what he calls the "Stoic notions"¹⁷ of Luther regarding the totally sinful nature of good actions performed without grace, Erasmus will continue to defend "gradations of faith and of charity which have not yet attained effective faith, which is only given by God",¹⁸ and the existence of "a certain kind of charity towards God through his [the human] natural power",¹⁹ "some will to goodness, however minuscule" which "springs from nature".²⁰ Pagan philosophy is the best example of this, allowing us to dismiss Luther's idea, which, in Erasmus' words, is that "the tolerance of Socrates is no less grievous an offense in the sight of God than the cruelty of Nero".

The striving of the ages towards goodness has a value that can constitute a legacy for all generations: Erasmus' program of reform is based on the possibility of moral gradations,²¹ and, therefore, of progress.

15 M. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, eds. E. G. Rupp / P. Saville Watson, Louisville 1969, 114.

16 D. Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes Book 2*, tr. C.H. Miller, CWE 77, ed. C. Trinkaus, Toronto 2000, 742.

17 Erasmus, 2000, 737.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Erasmus, 2000, 744.

20 Erasmus, 2000, 743.

21 See on this an interesting paragraph in M. Caldwell, *Skepticism and Belief in Early Modern England: The Reformation of Moral Value*, New York 2017, 53–55.

The fuel of this race is described in terms of charity, the cardinal virtue which was the manifesto of the late mediaeval Italian curial and confraternal culture,²² and which was the “Italian way to Paul”. This would be a reading of the Epistles in which the Paul of the Corinthians was prominent, instead of what would be the Romans-oriented Paul of the Reformations: the primacy of charity vs. the primacy of faith.²³

Accordingly, Erasmus’ *philosophia Christiana* can be read in terms of a humanistic version of the Pauline race in the ninth chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians. Erasmus lauds Paul’s commitment to the race, his willingness to subdue his body and make it obedient to the spirit, speeding up towards the prize, as a real boxer fit to fight. But for the humanist what is truly remarkable in Paul is his ability to temper himself and his eager race to the weakness of others.²⁴ Indeed, in dealing with the Corinthians, Erasmus comments admiringly:

He [Paul] is such a squid, such a chameleon [...] with such freedom does he himself twist and turn like a man who threads the windings of a maze and appearing to us in a fresh guise every time. How humble and ingratiating he sometimes is, as he beseeches them by the mercy of Christ [...] elsewhere he abases himself and calls himself an offscouring, misbegotten and unworthy [...] in one place he acts the part of an intelligent and sober man; in another he dons the mask of one who is foolish and beside himself [...] Always Christ’s business is his main concern; always he thinks of the well-being of his flock, like a true physician leaving no remedy untried which may restore his patients to perfect health.²⁵

Charity is the regulative measure of Paul’s race, the carpenter’s rule²⁶ of Christian life. If charity is this regulative force, the mode of its application is accommodation: a distinctive, albeit traditional, theological-rhetorical disposition of Erasmus, which embraces the Greek *συγκατάβασις* (condescension) and *συμπεριφορά* (accommodation), technical terms broadly employed in early Christian interpretations of Paul’s attitude in becoming “all things

22 See A. Prospero, *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari*, Torino 1996, 17; I follow here the interpretation of Erasmus’ anti-Lutheran attitude, especially in the *Concio De immensa Dei misericordia*, and its Roman context, proposed by Lettieri, 2017, 32–44.

23 Prospero, 1996, 21.

24 Erasmus, 2009, 16–17.

25 Erasmus, 1982, 249 (it is the epistle to Erard de La Marck, ep. 916 Allen, 5 February 1519).

26 “If we have Christian charity like a carpenter’s rule, everything will easily be set straight by that”: Erasmus, 1982, 79 (this is the preface to the 1518 edition of the *Enchiridion*, and consist of a letter to Paul Volz, ep. 858 Allen, 14 August 1518).

to all people” (1 Cor 9:19–23),²⁷ used especially by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and John Chrysostom. This attitude is explicitly praised elsewhere to criticise “that kind of downrightness, edgy and harsh and unsmiling, among inexperienced people that require everyone to live solely in their own way, and whatever pleases others they condemn.”²⁸ Harshness and lack of charity are shown by the incapability of accommodating themselves to others; here is another clear example of Erasmus’ gradual morality.

Paul’s attitude, his enacting ability, the willingness to change role as a good actor, but above all his charitable nature are all an imitation of a model, the highest possible. In Erasmus’ *Explanation of Psalm 85*, published in Basel in 1528, there is a beautiful exegesis of David as Christ, “the perfect example of a poor man”,²⁹ who prays in the Psalm to the Father for the salvation of the church and the spreading of the Father’s glory. God answers the cry of God’s people to have mercy in Christ, with different kinds of mercy:

He has mercy when he alleviates suffering and grants relief so that our weakness can endure it [...] He has mercy when he bestows grace, when he strengthens, and when he saves [...] He has mercy when he allows his people to fall into error and commit serious offences [...] Nor is the Lord’s mercy of one kind only, for his mercies are manifold, available to all who cry out to him. One kind of mercy sets free, another anticipates; one accompanies, another follows; one protects, another consoles; one beats in order to correct, another bestows in order to enrich. Need I say more? As his wisdom is beyond measure, so is his mercy.³⁰

It is impossible not to think here about Origen’s concept of the *epinoiai* of Christ,³¹ from which, in Erasmus’ reading, the highest is mercy, the true expression of the Lord’s charity. The connection with Origen on this point is clear in Erasmus’ mind, as we can see in his annotation on Romans 12:1, when he mentions Origen’s preference for the plural for the word mercy: Christ’s love is multifaceted, plural.³² This love can *make a bird out*

27 M. Mitchell, *Pauline Accommodation and “Condescension”* (συγκατάβασις): 1 Cor 9:19–23 and the History of Influence, in: T. Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, Westminster 2001, 197–214.

28 Desiderius Erasmus, *Adages III to IV 100*, CWE 31, tr. M. Mann Phillips, Toronto 1982, 134.

29 Desiderius Erasmus, *An Explanation of Psalm 85*, tr. C. White, in id., *Explanations of the Psalms*, CWE 64, ed. D. Baker-Smith, Toronto 2003, 28.

30 Erasmus, 2003, 48.

31 Cf. Or., princ. 1.2; Or., Joh. 1.125–292 f.

32 Cf. D. Erasmus, *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum. Pars tertia*, ASD VI-7, ed. P.F. Hovingh, Leiden 2012, 286: *per misericordiam*. Διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρῶν, *id est, per miserationes*. *Consentientibus in lectione Chrysostomo ac Theophylacto*. *Annotavit numeri rationem et Origenes, putans in eo esse emphasisim immensae Dei misericordiae*.

of a donkey, Erasmus promises. Christ's love, willing to embrace everyone, puts wings on the soul, accelerating the race.³³ But everyone who desires to fly up to the Lord has to put off the old man from his youth, the start of the spiritual age: "for piety, too, has a period of infancy, of adolescence, of youth, and of manhood, but it has no old age – for old age is the mark of sinners."³⁴ It is interesting to note a parallel passage in the prefatory letter of the *Enchiridion*, which, after having paralleled piety to a human being, with stages of infancy, growth and adult strength, invites "every man according to the measure that is given him [...] to strive upwards towards Christ."³⁵ Ages are paralleled with the four elements, each with its given place: "but fire, which has the highest station, gradually sweeps all things into itself and transforms them so far as it may to its own nature. Water it evaporates and turns into air, and air it rarefies and transforms into itself".³⁶

Erasmus preaches an "obliging and kind" Lord, who by granting charity makes his commandments easy to bear and is fair and humane in his judgment of our deeds. He recognises our inadequacies and forgives our weakness if we have been unable to raise up our hearts to him as far as we should; He gives assistance to our slender resources and pardons us for our indifference, giving support and relief while human beings make progress; He is not only kind and humane but also πολυέλεος, in other words, very merciful.³⁷

"The kindness of divinity accommodating itself to our weakness" is evident in His willingness to "not reveal himself to us entirely at once but lead us gradually and through distinct stages to such a lofty philosophy",³⁸ as Erasmus' *Ecclesiastes* explains the gradualism in revelation, from the law of nature to the gospel. A God *misericors* and *miserator* tolerated the blindness of the Jews for many centuries, and afterwards the more pitiful and odious relapses of Christians, even after baptism, with a patience that cannot be worn down.³⁹

God's tolerance is imitated by the Fathers, in their acceptance of superstitious rituals: an interesting passage from *Modus orandi Deum* suggests to "put up with" contemporary popular customs, until "the opportunity to correct it without causing civil uproar should present itself."⁴⁰

33 Erasmus, 2003, 55.

34 Erasmus, 2003, 56.

35 Erasmus, 1988, 16.

36 Erasmus, 1988, 16.

37 Erasmus, 2003, 57.

38 Desiderius Erasmus, *The Evangelical Preacher*, tr. J.L.P. Butrica, in id., *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, CWE 68, ed. F. McGinness, Toronto 2015, 1084.

39 Erasmus, 2003, 95.

40 Desiderius Erasmus, *On Praying to God*, tr. J.N. Grant, in id., *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, CWE 70, ed. J.W. O'Malley, Toronto 1998, 198.

God's path through history, then, proceeds in a very long line of gradual revelation, but contradictions and errors on the part of His people are plainly visible, as Erasmus states dolefully in the comment on Ps. 85:

No age is without its Herods, who massacre infants, none which does not have its Annas and Caiaphas, its own Scribes and Pharisees; this is the case even during the church's most peaceful periods, not only in this most turbulent century when the nets are so torn by differences of opinion and character that they can hardly be mended even by those who are in the apostolic succession – although we read in the Gospels that the disciples did manage it.⁴¹

The answer is clear in Christ's prayer: He "prays for progress, that the church might stand firm in faith and love and might ever progress towards better things. He has redeemed and cleansed his bride, but without God's protection no one is able to stand firm in what is good, unless God's grace directs and guides those who have been called. He prays, therefore, for Peter, in other words, for the church, to prevent its faith growing weak."⁴²

Erasmus' appeal to the necessity of remaining within the Church became at the same time more urgent, as the years passed and the wound of the divide in Western Christianity became more deep-seated: this is evident in many texts from the years 1527–1529. But this necessity to stay within the embrace of the Church, the spiritual one, but visibly expressed by Peter and the sacraments of baptism and penance, goes far back in time. Indeed, already in the preface of the *Enchiridion* of 1518 as well as in the *Ratio*, Erasmus explained the cooling of the fire of charity and the true role of Christ in rekindling this fire: "let Christ remain what he is, the centre, with several circles running round him. Do not move that central mark from its place".⁴³ Around Christ, the center, there are three circles: the first is the one of those nearest to Christ; priests, bishops, cardinals, popes, who "should embrace the intense purity of the centre and pass on as much as they can to those next to them". The second circle is that of the lay princes who defend the public peace; the third circle is the common people, to whom indulgence must be given, attempting to make them follow the center. From one circle to another, there are various degrees of tolerance; the church permits certain rituals and even superstitions, which allow for the weakness of youth until they acquire sufficient strength.⁴⁴ To live in history is to compromise, preserving long-held religious habits to accommodate with *old suits*, in the attempt to lead to spiritual freedom. Progress is not (only) a line, but also

41 Erasmus, 2003, 90.

42 Erasmus, 2003, 72.

43 Erasmus to Paul Volz, ep. 858 Allen, 14 August 1518.

44 Cf. Erasmus, 1985, 118; id., 1997, 96.

runs in circles, coming near the center. As Georges Chantraine has pointed out, in the ecclesiology of circles presented in the *Ratio*, Erasmus reinterprets the hierarchic system of the Pseudo-Dionysius, dynamised through the centripetal force of Christ and the centrifugal force of the earthly passions.⁴⁵

With the proviso of the maintenance of the theological and anthropological presuppositions crucial to Erasmus' thought (freedom of the will and charity as guidelines), all human structures stand in a circle governed by love for one's fellow man. This means reasoning in terms of *consensus* and perseverance under Peter's guidance. In the meantime, the best praise that can be given to a speculative theologian is his attitude to silence, his reticence to define, his exhortation to unity and love.⁴⁶

3. The Progress of the Mind: The Radical Erasmus

The profile of Erasmus' theology presented so far risks appearing to be the portrait of a very domesticated theologian, spiritual heir to the great philological tradition of Origen and Jerome, fully at ease in the embrace of the Roman Catholic seat. This reading, without the brusqueness of this summary, has been authoritatively proposed in Erasmus scholarship,⁴⁷ in opposition to an important alternative reading of his figure, that of a liberal, *progressive* thinker, who was an important ring in the chain of a process of secularisation of Christianity.⁴⁸ Moreover, the inheritance of his thought in the so-called Radical Reformation, which has been widely studied in the last

45 Cf. G. Chantraine, « *Mystère* » et « *Philosophie du Christ* » selon Érasme: *Étude de la lettre à P. Volz et de la « Ratio verae theologiae »*, Namour 1971, 124. Chantraine sees an evolution from the *Enchiridion* to the *Ratio*, from a vertical ascent of the individual to the collective, dynamic, Christocentric movement of the Church.

46 I allude here to the *Preface* to the edition of Hilary (1523), in which Erasmus spends many words in praising the silences of Hilary, much more than the words devoted to the actual doctrines explained in the *De Trinitate* of the Latin Father.

47 See for instance one of the most fervent defenses of Erasmus' Roman Catholic stance, the recent edition of T.P. Scheck, *Erasmus's Life of Origen: A New Annotated Translation of the Prefaces to Erasmus of Rotterdam's Edition of Origen's Writings 1536*, Washington 2016; Scheck, following Henri de Lubac's judgement, calls Erasmus "a greatly misunderstood figure in the history of Catholic theology" (Scheck, 2016, XV), recalling the very disparaging note on the *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1917 by Joseph Sauer, or the harsh appraisal of Joseph Lortz.

48 In the second volume of his invaluable study on the image of Erasmus' personality and thought through the centuries, Bruce Mansfield traces back the "liberal view" to the period 1750–1920, when liberal optimism itself considered Erasmus a valuable frontrunner: "Its essence was: Erasmus stood for a more open religion, for more critical scholarship, for a more tolerant society" (B. Mansfield, *Man on His Own: Interpretations of Erasmus, c. 1750–1920*, Toronto 1992, 373).

decades, has rightfully questioned the global interpretation of Erasmus himself.⁴⁹ The value of contemporary scholarship in dealing with these conflicting interpretations of Erasmus is, first of all, the full recognition of Erasmus' stature as theologian and, in the second place, the appreciation of the complexity of his personal position.

I think that the category of progress, in the terms that I have sketched here, helps us understand the complex theological, ecclesiological, and political positions of a man who received the offer of a cardinal's hat from Paul III and inspired the anti-Trinitarian thinkers, who was protected and paid by the Popes and attacked by Catholic universities, who could be revered in life and damned shortly after his death.

The progress in circles towards an all-consuming fire span throughout history and human constructions, revealing their nature as human, imperfect compromises. I find very revealing the delineation of an historical, progressive determination of dogmas even from the synoptic Gospels to John,⁵⁰ a text toward which Erasmus does not conceal his distance.⁵¹

I would like to offer an example of this "progressive" theology, choosing a very sensitive question such as Erasmus' position on divorce, as debated in his letter to one of his opponents, the Dominican inquisitor of Cologne, Jacob of Hoogstraten, who had criticised the edition and translation of the New Testament. Erasmus admitted that he had recorded his "pity for people who are loosely held together by an unhappy marriage, and yet would have no hope of refraining from fornication if they were released from it".⁵² The preference for a wide path towards salvation⁵³ means for Erasmus – who

49 See at least C. Gilly, *Erasmus, la reforma radical y los heterodoxos radicales españoles*, Castellò de la Plana 2005; P.G. Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus: Erasmus' Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe*, Toronto 2009; G. Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England*, Toronto 2009.

50 John's Gospel, Erasmus states clearly, for instance in the *Preface* to his *Paraphrase*, was due to the spreading of groups of heretics; if it were not for them, the other Gospels would have been sufficient for Christian life (cf. Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrasis in Euangelium Ioannis Apostoli*, LB 7, Lyon 1706, 490–497).

51 I have specifically dealt with this theme in M. Fallica, *La potenza della parola. Erasmo e l'incipit del prologo di Giovanni*, in: L. Geri (ed.), *Erasmo inquieto*, Rome 2022, forthcoming.

52 *Ep.* 1006 Allen, Erasmus to Jacob of Hoogstraten, 11 August 1519, in D. Erasmus, *Letters 993 to 1121*, tr. R.A.B. Mynors, CWE 7, Toronto 1987, 49.

53 Sometimes there is a cautious but visible sympathy for the Origenian apokatastasis; see the already mentioned *Concio de immensa misericordia Dei*, where Erasmus alludes, without mentioning the name of the author, to the theory of the salvation of all creation: *nec defuere qui tantum tribuerent misericordiae diuinae, ut impios etiam daemones ac damnatos homines crederent aliquando post*

hastens to specify that “I am no innovator; I refer the whole question to the church’s discretion” – the wish of a charitable man who can “pity those who are set for perdition”. Erasmus continues defining a protrusive value of the attitude of charity: “Christian charity often wishes for something that is not possible, and it is often a pious act to wish for something you cannot bring about.” He accuses his adversary of trying to

prolong the discussion to great lengths, adducing every possible argument to prove that after a divorce remarriage is unlawful, as though I were unaware of the opinions of the early Fathers or the decrees of the church on this subject.⁵⁴

However, and here the idea of progress comes into play, Erasmus affirms that “the spirit of Christ may not have revealed the whole truth to the church all at once. And while the church cannot make Christ’s decrees of no effect, she can none the less interpret them as may best tend to the salvation of men, relaxing here and drawing tighter there, as time and circumstance may require.” The evocation of a full disclosure of Christ’s truth is not connected to a free gift of the Spirit but to the *interpretation*, made by the Church, in accordance with the principle of accommodation. The belief in progress in the understanding of what Christ has revealed makes possible the hermeneutical action of the exegete and the Church. “The Gospel is not superseded; it is adapted by those to whom its application is entrusted so as to secure the salvation of all men. Nor is a thing superseded when it is better understood.”⁵⁵ And if Erasmus wishes to leave the right to decide to the Church, the rhetorical question posed to the Inquisitor is very telling:

If you say that it is unlawful to take things which are generally accepted and question them, what are we to make of the saintly Doctors who are not afraid to submit for discussion whether the Eucharist is a sacrament, whether simple fornication is a sin?⁵⁶

It is clear that Erasmus claims the right to do what the saintly Doctors did, thanks to the natural gift of understanding which allows the creature to discern truth and progress in it. Christ speaks now better than before in the text

longas seculorum periodos recipiendos in gratiam (D.Erasmus, *De immensa Dei misericordia Concio*, ASD V-7, ed. C.S.M. Rademaker, Leiden 2013, 54). Erasmus continues asserting that, despite the preeminence of its author, this theory has been deemed heretical, and he is citing it as a witness to what extent the most erudite exegetes lauded God’s mercy. Erasmus’ appreciative tone is very clear; see on this P. Terracciano, *Omnia in figura. L’ombra di Origene tra ‘400 e ‘500*, Rome 2012, 156–157.

54 Erasmus, 1987, 50.

55 Erasmus, 1987, 50.

56 Erasmus, 1987, 52.

of the New Testament, as is said in Erasmus' *Paraclesis* – a very telling word chosen for the preface of the *Novum Instrumentum*. Through this title, which clearly alludes to the outpouring of the Spirit, Erasmus wants to hint, in the words of James Kearney, that “the promise of the Father is fulfilled not in Pentecost but in the written text of Scripture”,⁵⁷ now fully restored by Erasmus himself. In this sense, Erasmus can really be considered a proponent of the immanence of the possibility of love and true understanding in the human being, challenging dogmatic structures and borders. Naturally, the center and goal of human experience remains Christ, the fire, who will “sweep all things into itself and transform them so far as it may to its own nature”,⁵⁸ putting an end to all the human efforts and speculations. The Son, who is the beginning, the progress, the consummation,⁵⁹ will transform the faithful in many Christs. The flesh of the Lord, which at some time became an impediment to the faith of the disciples, will no longer be an obstacle.

This weak God, fully revealing Himself only in the kenosis of love, will make the creature more and more like Himself. It will be the *repuerescencia*, as Erasmus' beautiful coinage suggests: to be like infants, or maybe like spirits. Because, “God tolerates the life of the flesh for a while, if it is gradually dissolved into the spirit, but he does not tolerate it forever.”⁶⁰

This weakness and frailness of the divine voice who will not break the bruised reed, who does not impose his grace but persuades and caresses, who prefers to be read in the page of a book, who stays in the heart of the believer, will provoke scandal and admiration in Erasmus' readers. Some of the most innovative voices in the panorama of the Reformation, such as the Socinians or the Anti-Trinitarians, will follow some of his more daring hints, and his lesson will not be forgotten in the Catholic Reformation: but the careful and complex building of his thought, with all his rebalancing and forward thrusts, will be difficult to imitate.

57 J. Kearney, *The Incarnate Text: Imagining the Book in Reformation England*, Philadelphia 2009, 67.

58 Erasmus, 1988, 16.

59 D. Erasmus, *An Explanation of The Apostles' Creed*, tr. L.A. Perraud, in id., *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, CWE 70, 246.

60 D. Erasmus, *A Commentary on the Second Psalm*, “Why Did the Nations Rage?”, tr. M. Heath, in: D. Baker-Smith (ed.) *Expositions of the Psalms*, CWE 63, Toronto 1997, 96.