

## No Purification Without Hatred / Nathan Ron

Nicholas Terpstra has shown how Christian Europe, metaphorized as *Corpus Christianum*, sought to sanction its purity by spiritually and physically keeping Christianity away from Judaism and Islam. Thus, the Ottoman Turks, the Jews, and heretics “were all infections in one or another part of the body. Left unchecked, these infections would spread like a contagion across the whole Body of Christ. Religious leaders and institutions ought to be the spiritual doctors who could halt this contagion [...]”<sup>1</sup> Terpstra does not point to Erasmus; however, his sharp observation contextualizes some of Erasmus’ expressions that reflect the idea that a Christian Europe should be free of Jews. Erasmus wanted a Europe devoid of Jews. In this regard, he was no exception. Historically, expulsions of Jews were common practice in Medieval and early modern Europe. Erasmus praised France, where “The law flourishes as nowhere else, nowhere has religion so retained its purity without being corrupted by commerce carried on by the Jews, as in Italy, or infected by the proximity of the Turks or Marranos, as in Hungary and Spain.”<sup>2</sup> This expression implies the Erasmian ideal of a Europe devoid of Jews and an acceptance of the deportation of French Jews during the Middle Ages, the most infamous occurring in 1306, the late fifteenth century, and the early sixteenth.

That Erasmus was concerned about the Christian purity of Germany is clear from a letter he wrote in 1532: “And today many are wondering whether it would not have been wiser to leave the Jews in Spain the way they were, than to have them move close to us, after changing their

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World: An Alternative History of the Reformation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> CWE, vol. 27 (*A Complaint of Peace*), 306; Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other,”* 131-132, 141-145.

names, but not their internal essence.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Erasmus may have regretted the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula, but only because it resulted in their arrival in Germany. He was alarmed by the expulsion of these Jews that stuck to their Jewishness because of their removal to Germany. He would not have regretted their deportation from Spain if they had not moved to Germany.<sup>4</sup> The purity of Germany concerned him. It is reflected in a few letters of April 1531. Erasmus is troubled by fear of a war that might break out in Germany and its surroundings. Innocent Germans will face violence and suffering since “Spain nurtures a large number of hidden Jews, many of them are in Germany and are prone to war and trained to carry out robberies. All this filth will first flood Germany and then the rest of the world. After they get weapons, they will not leave it. Twice in the past, in Rome and Vienna, they have already shown what such a species might generate.”<sup>5</sup>

Shortly later, Erasmus added: “Under the pretext of this war all imaginable sorts of human riffraff will flood Germany – Jews who can’t stay in Spain, villains from all over Germany who are accustomed to pillage and rob. And worse, all this herd either takes the side of the schismatics or is free of all religion whatsoever...But their temporary success will be restrained by the authority of the rulers. We have examples here for that, Rome and all of Italy, ravaged

---

<sup>3</sup> LB, IX, 821E: (*Declarationes ad censuras Lutetiae*): “Et hodie multi dubitant, utrum consultius fuerit Iudaeos in Hispaniis ut erant sinere, quam nunc haberet nobis proximos, mutato titulo verius quam animo.” For a lenient but wrong interpretation see Markish, *Erasmus and the Jews*, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Although he geographically restricted the notion of *Germania* to upper Germany and considered himself a Netherlander, Erasmus’ special links to Germany should not be doubted. See: Istvan Bejczy, “Erasmus becomes a Netherlander,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 28 (1997): 387-399.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; Ep 2472: 25-30: “Hispaniae multos alunt occultos Iudaeos, Germaniae plurimos habent et natura propensos et bellis exercitatos ad latrocinium. Tota haec colluies exundabit primum in Germaniam, mox in reliquum orbem. Nesciunt enim arma ponere quibus semel tradita sunt. Iam semel atque iterum dedere sui specimen, Romae ac Viennae.” On Sephardic Jews in Germany in the early-modern era, see: Hermann Kellenbenz, *Sephardim an der unteren Elbe: Ihre wirtschaftliche und politische Bedeutung vom Ende des 16. bis zum Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1958); Michael Studemund-Hale'vi in *Verbindung mit Peter Koj, Die Sefarden in Hamburg: zur Geschichte einer Minderheit* (Hamburg: Helmut Buske, 1994).

without pity. And another example, Vienna, which suffered more from its defenders than from its enemies, the Turks, if the witnesses write the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the above-quoted does not necessarily mean racism. Nonetheless, it is clear that Erasmus’s concern for Germany goes hand in hand with an overflowing dish of toxic hatred of the Jews. As I show elsewhere, some of Erasmus’s expressions on Jews are racist, while others are “just” overflowing with hatred. So what do we make of it? Firstly, it is evident that the standard interpretation that Erasmus conceptualized Judaism as signifying categories of Christian misconduct and misdeeds, such as making ceremonial and external rituals the essence of Christian belief – is not the complete explanation of Erasmus’s anti-Judaism.

In contrast to the standard line of explanations, Erasmus referred to ethnic groups and their religions – Jews and Turks, for that matter – and did not just intend to point to forms of Judaism among Christians. Indeed, Erasmus was preoccupied with the deterioration of Christianity to the degree of a “Jewish mentality” and was terrified lest Christians would mentally become Jews.<sup>7</sup> But was there no ethnic significance? Evidently, Erasmus’s dealings with Girolamo Aleandro (1480–1542), and other of his expressions concerning Jews, are of racist meaning.

Secondly, genuine toxic hatred is no less important than well-defined racism when discussing anti-Judaism hatred. Researchers are thrilled with tracing and discovering conceptions of determined biological inferiority, ethnological hierarchies, or ethnic characterizations in early-

---

<sup>6</sup> Markish, *Erasmus and the Jews*, 91; Ep 2479: 16-25: “... fex hominum sub huius belli praetextu inundabit in Germaniam, Iudaei quibus in Hispania non licet esse tutis, ex tota Germania latrocinii ac praedationibus assueti! Adde totum hoc genus aut esse propensum in sectarum partes, aut esse hoc animo ut nulla religione teneantur ... Sed horum, inquires, temeritas principum autoritate cohercebitur. Scilicet exemplo nobis est Roma, totaque Italia tam misere vexata. Exemplum est Vienna, plus a suis defensoribus perpressa quam a Turcis hostibus, si vera scribunt qui illic agunt.”

<sup>7</sup> Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence*, trans. J.C. Grayson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 48-49, 80-81, 111. Dominic Baker-Smith, Introduction to CWE 63 (*Expositiones of the Psalms: Enarratio in Primum Psalmum, 'Beatus Vir' et al.*), xlix. On this see also the lucid discussion of Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries*, 100-102.

modern Europe. However, it seems that the study of hatred as a historical phenomenon is somewhat neglected. Racism unattached to hatred would not have resulted in the persecutions and executions of Jews throughout early-modern Europe, not to mention later periods.