Language and Reconciliation:
Erasmus' Ecumenical Attitude*

by Manfred Hoffmann

The image of Erasmus as a flexible if not vacillating peace-maker, especially in contrast to the steadfast and belligerent Luther, is a well-worn cliché. One also likes to set an irenic Erasmus against those Catholic scholastics who felt that they had to defend their theological opinions without compromise. But Erasmus was certainly not a man of peace just for the sake of peace and quiet. Peace was for him not simply a practical way of avoiding conflict. Rather, his irenic attitude toward reconciliation derived from a more fundamental, theological reflection.

We intend to show that Erasmus' view of peace was founded on his understanding of the harmony of nature as it finds expression in human language. Perfect concord, however, does not arise until humanity knows and puts into action the harmony of Christ's teaching and life (harmonia Christi) as it is revealed in the biblical word of God. Therefore, we can best understand Erasmus' concept of a reconciling language by looking at how he saw language function in general and at how he interpreted the biblical sources, the New Testament in particular. In actual controversial situations, though, when Erasmus found himself wedged between the Catholics and Lutherans, he was unable to put his concept of peace into words that would reconcile the opponents.

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An examination of Erasmus' understanding of language shows that he stressed the metaphorical quality of words. He gave special attention to those

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1Luther: "What you say here seems to mean that it does not matter to you what anyone believes anywhere, so long as the peace of the world is undisturbed." "You thus plainly show that outward peace and quietness are to you far more important than faith, conscience, salvation, the Word of God, the glory of Christ, and God himself," Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Free Press, 1969), 108, 128.

2For section I, see my book Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus, Erasmus Studies 12 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), especially the conclusion, 211–27.
terms that intimate a mediation between two otherwise exclusive sides, such as the visible and invisible world. Small wonder, then, that his interpretation of Scripture focused on the function of allegory. He considered this rhetorical device best suited for comparing similar things without compelling extreme opposites into a contradictory unity. Of course, Erasmus' partiality to the double meaning of words exposed him more often than not to the charge that his speech was ambiguous and his thought ambivalent. Nevertheless, he was always primarily concerned with seeking balance in any kind of unsettling situation. Finding mediating circumstances in divisions, looking for equilibrium in oppositions, advising prudence in differences, urging moderation in controversies: these traits characterize Erasmus' ideal.

This way of speaking, namely, persuading to mutual understanding by metaphorical comparison rather than arguing for distinctions by cogent definitions, also marks true theology for Erasmus. Rhetorically schooled theologians achieve far more with a dialogue aimed at agreement than scholastic dialecticians with the force of their logic-chopping conclusions or, for that matter, confessional reformers with the exacting demand of their affirmations. It is analogy instead of syllogism or assertion that enables the transition from word to truth—a truth that is hidden in the profound recesses of the word, not a truth obviously at hand and readily available at the surface of expressions. True speech creates unity; false speech causes dissension.

According to Erasmus, oratory is both true and good insofar as it corresponds to the order of nature. Speech must imitate the equilibrium and proportion that characterizes nature as such. Beyond this natural order of language, however, God has accommodated God's word to human language in such a way that the harmony of Christ reveals an order of language superior to that of nature. Peace in the church is, therefore, not an end in itself but an expression of that Christian concord which is evoked by the harmony of Christ: *Pax est nostra religio.* Just as grace perfects nature, so the specifically Christian harmony brings the general human peace, oriented as it is in the harmony of nature, to completion.

Erasmus saw a fundamental dualism in the world bridged by an analogical relation between word and reality. For human words have not altogether lost their hermeneutical capacity to mirror supra-sensual meanings. While the truth is hidden in language, language still gives understanding to truth, even

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