ERASMUS' attitude toward toleration in general and toward religious toleration in particular has repeatedly been thrown into relief as one of the most significant elements, if not the singularly determinative factor, of his legacy to Western civilization. Especially those interpreters who stress his "liberalism" or "modernism" have tended to make the right to choose one's own religious convictions, together with a benevolent tolerance of differing opinions, the hallmark of an "Eras- mian" ethos which, unfortunately, did not come into its own until a later age. An "undogmatic" stance relying only on a minimum of essential beliefs and expressing a consensus omnium shared by all rational beings of good will was seen as the intellectual side of an ethical life style that called for moderation and kindness, for harmony and concord.

Discovering as they did in Erasmus the prototype of their own liberal ideals, these interpreters found their perspective corroborated by his strenuous, if abortive, literary efforts toward unity in an era torn by confessional strife. His ironic temper and tendency toward pacifism were said to have induced him, again and again, to search for residues of truth on both sides of opposing parties in order to find a common basis for a modicum of agreement. Skeptical with regard to ultimate truth, suspending final judgment, horrified by extremes, avoiding conflict, ever hoping for antagonists to "come to their senses," Erasmus' life was spent in pleading for unity in balance, for conciliation in mutual tolerance.

This view implies also that Erasmus was an "unsystematic" thinker, more concerned with life than with doctrine, more inclined to a free association of like-minded pious intellectuals than to the juridical institution of a hierarchic church, intent on the meeting of minds on simple fundamentals rather than clear-cut definitions and razor-sharp syllogistic conclusions, emphasizing dialogue rather than debate, persuasion instead of confrontation, the spirit more than externals. In short: Erasmus was a well-rounded Renaissance humanist, and, as such, he was the forerunner of an "enlightened" age, not a traditional theologian with a distinct system of thought.1

1 It is impossible to list all the authors who more or less belong to this category. For a survey, see L. W. Spitz, The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 234, n. 121 and 122. With particular reference to toleration, we would add
More recent Erasmus researchers have been led to dispel this image by detailed analyses of several of his theological works. These studies were more or less guided by the search for hermeneutical principles and/or theological topoi which would form the matrix for an overall understanding underlying and informing his work as a whole. Since it seemed mandatory to focus on his theological beginnings in order to identify the embryonic features of his system, his earlier writings have generally received major attention (foremost his *Introductions to the New Testament* and his *Enchiridion*), though his more "secular" writings of the period 1515–1525 were by no means ignored. A genetic-analytical method appeared most promising because it offered the possibility of discovering a hermeneutical matrix which could unify Erasmus' religious thought.2

However, the massive output of theological writings toward the end of Erasmus' life3 has received far less scrutiny. His earlier exegetical work and commentaries on the Scripture, his *Annotations* and *Paraphrases on the New Testament* have been examined,4 while his *Expositions on the Psalms* so far have suffered from neglect. This deficiency is indeed inappropriate, since it was the Psalms that occupied him more continually


