James M. Estes (ed.) and Charles Fantazzi (transl.)


On August 1, 1530, Philipp Melanchthon wrote to Erasmus from Augsburg, praising the leniency and moderation of the princes gathered there for the imperial Diet, denouncing the ferocity of Johann Eck and his followers, and urging Erasmus to continue his efforts to prevent war. “As for myself,” Melanchthon continued, “I have presented my case simply and without great clamour” (no. 2357). With this veiled reference to the Augsburg Confession, Volume 17 of the _Collected Works of Erasmus_ begins _in media res_, drawing attention to developments at the Diet of Augsburg. The Diet and its consequences would hold an important place in Erasmus’ letters over the next nine months. Other topics that occupied him were his quarrels with both evangelical and Catholic opponents, his own scholarly work, and his efforts to find a suitable long-term home, possibly in his native land. Running through many of these letters is Erasmus’ fear of both the societal and personal consequences of religious war.

Erasmus had several correspondents in Augsburg who reported on developments at the Diet through the summer and fall of 1530. For instance, the Augsburg canon Johann Koller wrote about the meetings between Catholic and Lutheran theologians intended to find theological agreement. Although negotiations concerned the canon of the mass, Koller speculated that the real difficulty was the restitution of ecclesiastical property (no. 2384). Erasmus in turn would pass on the news he received from Augsburg to his other correspondents, such as his financial agent in Antwerp, Erasmus Schets (no. 2403) and the French churchman Antoine d’Albon (no. 2410). He would repeatedly excuse his absence from the Diet, citing both his own recent ill health and the fact that he had not been summoned there by the emperor (nos. 2365, 2411).

Erasmus was irate that Eck had included four unattributed “opinions” drawn from Erasmus’ works in his list of 404 heresies published at the time the Diet opened (no. 2365). Eck himself wrote to Erasmus attesting to his esteem, but he did not retract his criticism of these “opinions” (no. 2387), a point that Erasmus complained about to Koller (2406). Erasmus’ friends in Augsburg were aware of the dispute and did what they could to avoid being tarred by association with Eck. Thus Johannes Henckel, confessor to Mary of Hungary, attested that he had only spoken once with Eck and, if forced to choose sides, preferred Melanchthon to Eck’s “unabashed ferocity” (no. 2392). When the Augsburg cathedral preacher Matthias Kretz seized the opportunity to begin correspondence with Erasmus, he excused a one-time dinner invitation to Eck.
by pointing out that he had also hosted many others who were Erasmus’ loyal friends (no. 2492).

Although Erasmus answered Kretz’ letters (no. 2414, cf. no. 2430), he was suspicious of Kretz’s motives and so asked Koler for a character reference (no. 2415). Upon Koler’s assurance that Kretz was indeed “a good simple man, not without learning” (no. 2437), Erasmus responded to Kretz’s lament over the religious turmoil in Augsburg with his own view that Luther’s theses on indulgences had been blown all out of proportion by the arrogant and overzealous response in Rome and by certain Dominicans in Germany and Carmelites in the Netherlands. Persecution had encouraged rebellion, which had now turned into the threat of war (no. 2445).

In other letters Erasmus made more explicit his view that toleration of heretics was preferable to war, a position that evangelicals welcomed but that garnered criticism from some Catholics. The situation was not helped by the unauthorized publication in Strasbourg, in both the original and in German translation, of Erasmus’ letter to the papal legate at Augsburg, Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggi, urging the emperor to avoid bloodshed (no. 2366). More important for the discussion of toleration was Erasmus’ quarrel with Gerard Geldenhouwer, who in 1529 had published extracts from Erasmus’ writings that urged the toleration of heretics. Geldenhouwer was living in Strasbourg, and the controversy over toleration became linked with Erasmus’ published battle with Martin Bucer over the impact of the Swiss and South German Reformation. Erasmus denounced both Geldenhouwer (whom he called “Vulturius”) and Bucer in his letters to Melanchthon (nos. 2358, 2365), as well as in his Responsio ad fratres inferioris Germaniae, published in September 1530 (CWE 78: 265–368) and in two letters published in a 1531 reprint of his 1529 Epistola contra pseudovangelicos (nos. 2440–2441).

The Diet of Augsburg was the site for the brief revival of yet another quarrel, that with Heinrich Eppendorf. Erasmus had not carried out the terms of an earlier settlement, which prompted Eppendorf to come to Augsburg to present his grievance against Erasmus to Duke Georg of Saxony. Erasmus’ friends in Augsburg reported on Eppendorf’s efforts (no. 2384, 2392). Fortunately for Erasmus, the Duke turned the quarrel over to Julius Pflug, who not only settled the dispute but began his own cordial correspondence with Erasmus (nos. 2395, 2450–2452).

Erasmus had to deal with other opponents as well. One of the longest letters in the volume was written to the Italian Hebraist Agostino Steuco (no. 2465), who had criticized Erasmus, although not by name, in his Recognitio Veteris Testamenti ad Hebraicam veritatem. The letter is a model of Erasmus’ elegant polemical style. Erasmus opened the letter with an anecdote subtly highlight-