



## The Non-Cosmopolitan Erasmus: An Examination of his Turkophobic/Islamophobic Rhetoric

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### Abstract

Erasmus despised the Turks, their achievements, and their religion, at a time when the Ottoman Empire was at its peak under Sultan Suleiman I (the law giver; the Magnificent). However, as a rule Turkophobia/Islamophobia been passed over by scholars and writers. Stephen Zweig, an important biographer, and Johan Huizinga, the prominent historian, both admirers of Erasmus, are by no means the only ones to ignore it. Another important historian, Heiko Oberman, was exceptional in claiming that Erasmus had little patience with the modern ideal of toleration, whether religious or ethnic. However, Oberman focused on Erasmus' anti-Jewish rather than his anti-Turkish/Islamic attitudes. In this study Oberman's arguments are supplemented by analyzing Erasmus' rhetoric concerning the Turks and Islam, concluding that Erasmus was captivated by the intolerant Eurocentric spirit of his time even more than Martin Luther.

**Keywords:** Erasmus, Luther, Islamophobia, Turkophobia

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## Gayri-Kozmopolit Erasmus: Erasmus'un Türkofobik/İslamofobik Retoriğine dair Bir İnceleme

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### Öz

Erasmus, Osmanlı Devleti'nin Sultan Süleyman (Yasa getirici/Kanuni; Muhteşem) döneminde zirvede (en parlak devrinde) olduğu bir zamanda, Türkleri, başarılarını ve dinlerini küçümsemiştir. Bununla birlikte, umumiyetle, Türkofobi/İslamofobi, bilim insanları ve yazarlarca es geçilmiştir. Her ikisi de Erasmus'un hayranı olan, önemli bir biyografi yazarı Stephen Zweig, ve önde gelen bir tarihçi Johan Huizinga, tabiki de bunu görmezden gelen yegane kişiler değildir. Başka bir önemli tarihçi Heiko Oberman, Erasmus'un, ister dini isterse etnik olsun, modern hoşgörü idealine karşı az sabrı olduğunun iddia edilmesinde müstesna olmuştur. Bununla birlikte, Oberman, Erasmus'un Türk/İslam-karşıtı tutumlarından daha ziyade onun Yahudi-karşıtılığına odaklanmıştır. Bu çalışmada, Oberman'ın argümanlarına, Erasmus'un Türkler ve İslam ile ilgili retoriği analiz edilerek, ilave yapılmış ve Erasmus'un hoşgörüsüz Avrosantrik (Avrupa merkezli) ruhla Martin Luther'den bile daha fazla büyülendiği sonucuna varılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Erasmus, Luther, İslamofobi, Türkofobi

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## **Некосмополитичный Эразм: исследование его туркофобской / исламофобской риторики**

### **Резюме**

Эразм презирал турок, их достижения и религию в то время, когда Османская империя находилась на пике своего правления при султани Сулеймане I (законодатель; Великолепный). Однако, как правило, ученые и писатели обходили молчанием туркофобию / исламофобию. Стефан Цвейг, основной биограф, и Йохан Хуизинга, выдающийся историк, оба поклонники Эразма, далеко не единственные, кто игнорирует это явление. Другой важный историк, Хайко Оберман, был исключением и утверждал, что Эразм был недостаточно терпелив в религиозных или этнических аспектах. Тем не менее, Оберман сосредоточился на антиеврейских, а не на антитурецких / антиисламских, настроениях Эразма. В этом исследовании аргументы Обермана дополняются анализом риторики Эразма, касающейся турок и ислама, и сделан вывод о том, что Эразм был заражен нетерпимым евроцентрическим духом своего времени даже больше, чем Мартин Лютер.

**Ключевые слова:** Эразм, Лютер, исламофобия, туркофобия

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## Introduction

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca.1467–1536), the “Prince of the Humanists,” was a prolific writer who left behind more than a hundred original compositions in elegant Latin, as well as numerous translations, from Greek into Latin, of some of the finest works of Greek and Roman classicism.<sup>1</sup> He also gained a reputation as an intellectual who called for the unity of humankind and is considered tolerant toward different peoples and cultures. Proclamations such as “this world, which we share, is the homeland of all human beings,” and “I have always been for the most part a man of stoic mind...considering the whole world to be my homeland,”<sup>2</sup> won Erasmus the name of a devoted cosmopolitan. Pacifism has also been ascribed to him; but elsewhere I have shown that, although he objected to crusades, it was the idea of Christian concord – peace by Christians and for Christians –that Erasmus really cherished.<sup>3</sup> I focus here mainly on the idealized cosmopolitanism or universalism that has been attributed to Erasmus by various scholars.

To start with, Roland Bainton characterized Erasmus as an internationalist and cosmopolitan.<sup>4</sup> Craig Thompson asserted that “Erasmian cosmopolitanism is a state of culture, an intellectual outlook in an individual who by education, experience, and taste is not only familiar with other peoples and cultures but values them.”<sup>5</sup> Stephan Zweig (1881-1942), the famous writer and biographer, viewed Erasmus as a precursor of transnationalism who contributed immensely to the idea of a Europe united by one

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a short list of selected general items: Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of the Reformation*, New York: Harper- Row,1957; repr. Dover Publications Inc., 2001; Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969; John C Olin, *Six Essays on Erasmus*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1979 ; Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence* trans. J. C. Grayson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991; Erika Rummel, *Erasmus*, London and New York: Continuum, 2004; See also Nathan Ron, “Erasmus of Rotterdam,” in M. Sellers, S. Kirste (eds.) *Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy* [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-94-\(201.12.2019\)](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-94-(201.12.2019)).

<sup>2</sup> Respectively: CWE, 27, 315 (*A Complaint of Peace*); CWE, 13, 363 (letter of Erasmus no.1885, of October1527,addressed to Francisco de Vergara (died 1545). [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/\(12.01.2020\)](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/(12.01.2020)).

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Ron, “The Christian Peace of Erasmus,” *The European Legacy* 19 (2014): 27-42.

<sup>4</sup> Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, 114, 118.

<sup>5</sup> Craig R. Thompson, “Erasmus as Internationalist and Cosmopolitan,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 46 (1955): 168.

language, one religion, and one culture, in which conflicts and wars will exist no more.<sup>6</sup> In a similar spirit of idealization, Johan Huizinga, a learned historian indeed, glorified what he defined as “truly Erasmian,” namely, “gentleness, kindness, moderation, a generally diffused moderate erudition.”<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, such an eulogy is made possible if one deducts from the balance Erasmus’ Turkophobic and Islamophobic – as well as anti-Jewish – attitudes, in the same way that Huizinga did.

I argue that the appreciations of Erasmus as a cosmopolitan or universalist resulted from an idealized perception and a tendency, shared by many, to ignore Erasmus’ Eurocentric attitude, i.e., his judging of non-Christians by Christian-European values. The Eurocentric point of view is essentially twisted. It desires and expects the “other” to adapt himself to a cultural conception foreign to him.<sup>8</sup> Erasmus despised the Turks, their achievements, and their religion at a time when the Ottoman Empire was at its peak under Sultan Suleiman I (the law giver; the Magnificent). As already shown by Heiko Oberman, Erasmus was impatient with the modern ideal of toleration,<sup>9</sup> but since many Christians felt,

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<sup>6</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, New York: Viking Books, 1934; repr. Plunkett Lake Press, 2015; originally written in German and published as *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam*.

<sup>7</sup> Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of the Reformation*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> Trevor Roper Eurocentrically stated that black Africa has no history, see H. R. Trevor Roper *The Rise of Christian Europe*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1965, 9: “Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa.” This was responded to by Finn Fuglestad, *The Ambiguities of History: The Problem of Ethnocentrism in Historical Writing*, Oslo: Oslo Academic Press, 2005, 9–22. See also Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 110–111; idem, *The Idea of Latin America*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 15–34; Eurocentrism dominated European attitudes toward native Americans in Latin America. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, trans. Russel Moore, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, 72–73, sharply observed: “From that time on (i.e., the Renaissance-N. R. Europeans become conscious of the idea that the conquest of the world by their civilization is a possible objective. They therefore develop a sense of absolute superiority[...] From this moment on, and not before, Eurocentrism crystallizes.” Amin relies extensively on Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, and on M. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987. Bernal’s thesis regarding the Afro-Asian roots of classical culture is integrated within the Afrocentric approach, which rejects the Eurocentric conceptualization of the West as the sole standard by which to evaluate other cultures, ignoring the significant contributions made by Africans to world civilization and human progress.

<sup>9</sup> Toleration, as used here, indicates the religious freedom or religious pluralism, however limited, which started to evolve, not without a struggle, in sixteenth-century Europe. See Hans R. Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio, 1515–1563: Humanist and Defender of Religious Toleration in a Confessional Age* trans. Bruce Gordon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 6; idem, “The Defense of Religious Toleration and Religious Liberty in

and still feel, respect and esteem for him and his biblical humanism, which he named *philosophia Christi*— intolerance, whether religious or ethnic, was not ascribed to him.<sup>10</sup>

One might profitably read Guy G. Stroumsa, a prominent researcher of the Abrahamic religions, on the bleak vision of Ernest Renan (1823-1892) concerning Islamic monotheism. Stroumsa characterizes Renan's views as reflecting "deeply ingrained ambivalence on the part of many scholars stemming from a Christian background: in their view there had been a steady progression in the refinement of religious ideas from ancient Israel to Christ. From Jesus to Muhammad, however, there could only be regression. For them, the fact that Islamic monotheism seemed so pure actually reflected its inherent poverty and a lack of sophistication."<sup>11</sup> Sure enough, Stroumsa is thinking of scholars more modern than Erasmus; nevertheless, his characterization is also applicable to the case of Erasmus, as I will show here.

A brief comment on the main historical source is required here. The study of Erasmus' attitude toward Turks or Islam is primarily the study of his tract "A Most Useful Discussion Concerning Proposals for War Against the Turks" (*Utilissima consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo*), also known as *De bello Turcico*. It was written against the background of the threat of Turkish invasion of the heart of Europe and the backdrop of the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1529.<sup>12</sup> As Erika Rummel explains, this tract is a comparatively reliable source. *Inter alia*, Rummel compares *De bello Turcico* to Erasmus' well-known *Education of a Christian Prince (Institutio principis Christiani, 1516)*, and points to the fact that *De bello Turcico* contains far more mentions of contemporary personalities and events, while

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Early Modern Europe: Argument, Pressures and Some Consequences," *History of European Ideas* 4 (1983): 36, 38; Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* Trans. James I. Porter, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, 38-39.

<sup>11</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> The tract was published in March 1530, shortly after the Ottomans raised their siege on Vienna. See Michael. J. Heath, Introduction to *A Most Useful Discussion Concerning Proposals for War against the Turks, Including an Exposition of Psalm 28 (Utilissima consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo, et obiter enarratus psalmus 28)*, in *CWE 64 (Expositions of the Psalms)*, 202-209. For the Latin text: ASD V-3, 32-82 (ed. A. G. Weiler).

*Education of a Christian Prince* has many more biblical references and is less attached to contemporary events.<sup>13</sup>

### 1. Obscure Origin

In order to portray the Turks as despicable and uncivilized barbarians, Erasmus emphasized their obscure and unknown origin, i.e., their inferior origin. In *De bello Turcico*, Erasmus rhetorically raises the question: “How often has this race of barbarians, their very origin obscure, inflicted defeat on the Christian people? What cruelty have they not visited upon us?”<sup>14</sup> As he continues, in order to stress this notion, he points to the rare mentions of Turks by the ancient writers.

For at first the name of the Turks was so inglorious that it is scarcely to be found in any ancient writer, except that Pliny, in book 6 chapter 7, mentions, between the Thussagetae and the Arimphaei who dwell near the Rhiphaean mountains, the ‘Turcae’ who at that time lived there, in rocky valleys bordering on the deserts. Pomponius Mela, too, merely mentions their name, such was the obscurity of the tribe from which it is probable that this race sprang, which has now extended the bounds of its encompassing cruelty through so many spacious and opulent regions. Cyprian also mentions their name in his book *On Double Martyrdom*, as if they were already in his time sworn enemies of the imperial name. There are some scholars who think that when Ptolemy refers to the ‘Tusci’ in the Asian part of Sarmatia, we should read ‘Turci’ or ‘Turcae’ what other writer, they ask, ever placed the Tuscans in Asia?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Erika Rummel, “Secular Advice in Sacred Writings,” *The European Legacy* 19 (2014): 16–26. See also Nathan Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2019, 30.

<sup>14</sup> CWE 64, 219; ASD V-3 37: “Gens barbara, obscurae originis, quod cladibus afflixit populum Christianum, quid immanitatis in nos non exerunt.”

<sup>15</sup> CWE 64, 220-221 and notes 62-64; ASD V-3 38: “Primum enim Turcarum nomen adeo fuit ignobile, ut vix apud ullum veterum reperiatur, nisi quod Plinius Libro vi. capite vii. inter Thussagetas et Arimphaeos, qui ad Rhiphaeos pertinent montes, commemorat Turcas, qui tum incoluerint, usque ad solitudines saxo sis vallibus affines. Nec Pomponius Mela illos aliud quam nominat. Tanta erat illius nationis obscuritas, a qua profectos probabile est, qui nunc per tot opulentas ac spatiosas regiones ambitiosae crudelitatis pomeria protulerunt. Nominat illos et Cyprianus in libro De Duplici Martyrio, veluti jam tum Caesariani nominis devotos hostes.



The issue of the Turks' origin was much debated by the Italian humanists who wrote about the Turks, mainly in the 14th and 15th centuries, and attributed to them either a Trojan or a Scythian origin.<sup>16</sup> Erasmus was content with presenting ancient versions, without siding with any of the theories. His caution is indeed commendable, since the Turks came originally from much further east than Scythia.<sup>17</sup> The few Italian humanists who took seriously the Trojan theory, such as Andrea Biglia (c.1395-1435), Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) and Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), were criticized by Edward Gibbon for absurdly believing that the Turks, as descendants of the Trojans, sought to take revenge for the mischief caused to their forefathers. Gibbon ridiculed the pedantic scholars of the Renaissance who, by adapting the name *Teuceri* for them, integrated the Turks within the Greek classical world. Likewise, Robert Schwoebel criticized the Trojan theory as an example of the ridiculous punctiliousness of Renaissance humanists.<sup>18</sup>

After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, the humanists radicalized their literary treatment of the Turks, and the demonization of the Turks increased considerably in their writings. Such expressions are typically found in the writings of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini(1405–1464), who became Pope Pius II, and in texts of Niccolo Tignosi, Lauro Quirini (1420-1479) and many others.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the Scythian origin theory was the more

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Sunt eruditi quidam, qui pro Tuscis, quos Ptolemaeus in Asiatica Sarmatia recenset, existimant legendum Turcos sive Turcas. Quis enim Scriptorum alius Tuscos posuit in Asia?"

<sup>16</sup> See Robert Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent: The Renaissance Image of the Turk 1453-1517*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967; Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists, and the West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2008; Margaret Meserve, "Medieval sources for Renaissance Theories on the Origins of the Ottoman Turks," in B. Guthmüller and W. Kühlmann (eds.) *Europa und die Türken in der Renaissance* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000; repr. De Gruyter, 2012), 409-426; James Hankins, "Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 49, Symposium on Byzantium and the Italians, 13th-15th Centuries (1995): 128-130. Reprinted in idem, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, volume I. Roma: Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 2003, 293-426.

<sup>17</sup> CWE 64, 221 n. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury. 7 vols. London: Methuen, 1909-1914; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1974 vol. 7, 202 n. 87; Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 148-149, 204.

<sup>19</sup> Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 99-116. Gilles Veinstein stresses that the humanists who defined the Turks as Scythians adopted the Byzantine practice of naming as Scythians all the tribes that invaded Europe from the steppes of Russia, such as Mongols, Tatarians and Turkmans (who were named "Eastern Scythians" or



widely accepted. Thus, prominent Italian humanists, including Piccolomini, Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481), Flavio Biondo (1392-1463), Niccolò Sagundino (c.1400-1464?), Theodore Gaza (c.1398-c.1475), Lauro Quirini and Giorgio Merula (c.1430-1494), identified the Turks as Scythians, not only attributing to them a pedigree linked with the ancient world, but no less, portraying them as bloody enemies of ancient Greek-Roman culture.

Piccolomini expressed his opinion against the Trojan origin theory time and again during the years 1454-1459, in letters, in his speeches at the Diets in Frankfurt and Wiener Neustadt, to the Pope in Rome, and in various other writings. In his 1458 edition of *Europa*, he claimed that many authors, even historians, were in great error in calling the Turks *Teuceri*. These writers were presumably influenced by the fact that the Turks had occupied Troy, where the *Teuceri* had lived in the past. These ancient people, Piccolomini believed, had come to Troy from Crete and Italy. Their cultural level was relatively high – the Romans originated from them. This proved that the Turks, who are by origin descendants of barbarian Scythians, had no real linkage to the ancient Trojans. Piccolomini's barbarian Scythians inhabited the northeastern region of Scythia, a place that according to ancient geographers stretched north and east of the Black Sea, and whose inhabitants were various wild peoples, nomadic tribes who specialized in robberies and looting, and even cannibalism.<sup>20</sup> In his speech at the Diet of Frankfurt (September 1454), Piccolomini portrayed the Turks as barbarians, originating from the heart of *Barbaria*, across the Black Sea to the Northern Ocean. They were described as a dirty and repulsive race engaged in all sorts of abominable sexual activity. From the Caucasus they moved to Asia Minor, where they settled down. Piccolomini reports on repulsive foods that the Turks feed on. They are slaves to their desires and worst of all, they despise literature and the arts. Other humanists who referred in their writings to the Turks adopted the Scythian theory and tendentiously portrayed the Turks as enemies of European civilization. Indeed, in the second half of the 15th century, and following the fall of Constantinople, Piccolomini's theory of the Scythian origin of the Turks became the accepted theory.<sup>21</sup>

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“Persian Scythians”). See John Victor Tolan, Gilles Veinstein, and Henry Laurens *Europe and the Islamic World: A History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 22, 68.

<sup>21</sup> Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 68-69, 95, 115.

Italian humanists paved the Turkophobic way for Erasmus. He and the Venetian humanist Giovanni Batista Cipelli (named also Egnazio, 1478-1553), exchanged letters for years and were close friends.<sup>22</sup> Erasmus' references to the obscure origin of the Turks, already quoted,<sup>23</sup> were, to a large extent, based on Egnazio's survey of the subject, which was written as part of a work called *De Caesaribus libri tres* and published by Aldo Manuzio in 1516.<sup>24</sup> Egnazio's work provided Erasmus with what he was looking for: evidence of the Turks' unworthiness.

As mentioned, Erasmus did not expressively side with any theory concerning the origin of the Turks. Nonetheless, it seems that he leaned toward the Scythian origin of the Turks. Firstly, this can be deduced from his perfect acquaintance with the ancient Greek and Roman sources, the Homeric epics included. Since he nowhere mentions Virgil's *Teucrici*, the cornerstone of the Trojan theory, it should be concluded that he was probably skeptical about, if not categorically against, the identification of the Turks, on the basis of Virgil's *Teucrici*, as descendants of the ancient Trojans. Secondly, since the Scythian theory was the more convincing and more accepted among humanists, it is most probable that Erasmus, the prince of Humanists, inclined toward it, even though he did not assert it in his writings. Thirdly, the footprint of Piccolomini – the chief proponent of the Scythian theory – is indicated in the harsh Turkophobic rhetoric that Erasmus used, his blunt denigration and his deep contempt for the Turks. This should lead to the conclusion that, even if the fading issue of the Turks' origin did not occupy his mind, Erasmus leaned toward the Scythian theory concerning the origin of the Turks.

## 2. Rhetoric and thought

*De bello Turcico* contains Erasmus' only written references relating to the essence of Islam:

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<sup>22</sup> Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher (eds.) *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation* Vols. I-III, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985-1987, I, 424.

<sup>23</sup> See notes 14-15.

<sup>24</sup> H. Ehrenfried, *Türke und Osmanenreich in der Vorstellung der Zeitgenossen Luthers. Ein Beitrag zur Untersuchung des deutschen Türkenschrifttums*, unpublished PhD dissertation, The University of Freiburg Br., 1961; A. G. Weiler, "The Turkish Argument and Christian Piety in Desiderius Erasmus' 'Consultatio de Bello Turcis inferendo' (1530)," in J. Weiland Sperna and W. Th. M. Frijoff (eds.), *Erasmus of Rotterdam the Man and the Scholar* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 30-39; J.B. Ross, "Venetian Schools and Teachers Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century: A Survey and a Study of Giovanni Battista Egnazio," *Renaissance Quarterly* 29 (1976): 521-566.

But what shall I say about their system of government? Where is the rule of law among them? Whatever pleases the tyrant, which is the law. Where is the power of a parliament? What room is there for philosophy? For schools of theology? For holy sermons? For true religion? Their sect is a mixture of Judaism, Christianity, paganism, and the Arian Heresy. They recognize Christ just as one of their prophets [...] Do they prefer the sordid and wicked man that Muhammad over Jesus, for which each bow in heaven, on earth and in hell?<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, this Islamophobic conceptualization is far from any moderation or toleration. One further mention of Muhammad is found in this tract: “[...] they rule due to God’s anger, they fight us without God, they have Muhammad as their savior, we have Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Erasmus did not deal much with Islam, focusing rather on the Turks. The aforesaid paragraph is a rare exception that conspicuously demonstrate his Islamophobic attitude.

Viewing Islam as *Mélange*, or *Gemischt*, was not original to Erasmus. His denigrating rhetoric reflects a Christian-Eurocentric *communis opinio* that had existed in Medieval Europe ever since the eighth century, when John of Damascus’ (ca. 675-749) book “On heresies” (*Peri aipseon; De haeresibus*) catalogued Islam and the Qur’an as heresy. According to John of Damascus, Islam stemmed from Christianity as forbidden deviation and therefore was declared and recognized as a form of heresy.<sup>27</sup> The following is a denigrating reference by Pope Pius II to Islam and its

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<sup>25</sup> CWE 64, 258-259; ASD V-3, 76: “Quid autem dicam de politia? Quae legume aequitas apud illos? Quidquid tyranno placuit, lex est. Quae Senatus auctoritas? Quae Philosophia locum illic habet? Quae Theologorum scholae? Quae sacrae conciones? Quae Religionis sinceritas? Sectam habent ex Judaismo, Christianismo, Paganismo et Arianorum haeresis commixtam. Agnoscunt Christum ut unum quempiam ex Prophetis [...] Quid, quod pestilentem ac scelerosum hominem Machumetem Christo, in cujus nomine flectitur omne genu coelestium, terrestrium, et infernorum, praeferunt?” See also Ron, “The Christian Peace of Erasmus,” 32, 34-38.

<sup>26</sup>CWE 64, 231; ASD V-3, 50: “Regnant irato Deo, pugnant adversum nos sine Deo, illi Mahometem habent propugnatorem, nos Christum.”

<sup>27</sup>Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”*, Leiden: Brill, 1972, 51-98; Albert Davids and Pim Valkenberg, “John of Damascus; The Heresy of the Ishmaelites,” in Mona Siddiqui (ed.), *The Routledge Reader in Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013), 18-32; Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1960; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), 209-213; John Victor Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 135-137; Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the*

founder: “[...] Muhammad, an Arab steeped in gentile error and Jewish perfidy, who received instruction in the Nestorian and Arian heresies.”<sup>28</sup> A similar terminology and conception are found, *inter alia*, in Martin Luther’s “On War against the Turks” (*Vom Kriege widder die Tuercken*, 1529), where Luther defines Islam as “a Faith made of the combination of Judaism, Christianity and pagan beliefs.”<sup>29</sup>

Erasmus’ tract was not meant to be a polemic against Islam, but rather a dispute with Martin Luther about the ongoing issue of war against the Turks.<sup>30</sup> Besides, contrary to typical Christian polemics against Islam, the goal of *De bello Turcico* was to warn Christians and the Church of moral deterioration and to exhort them to change their ways.<sup>31</sup> However, although not written as a polemic against Islam, Erasmus was following the method of medieval Christian polemicists in attacking Muhammad *ad hominem* and as a prophet, convinced that they could discredit Islam by discrediting Muhammad.<sup>32</sup>

Above all, *De bello Turcico* does not match classic anti-Islamic polemics in the following sense: It presents Erasmus’ opposition to the institution of crusade in general and to a crusade against the Ottomans in particular. “We have heard so often

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*Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization*, Louisville and London: Westminster John Knoks Press, 2004, 168.

<sup>28</sup>Comment. II, I, 5, (p. 211): “[...] Mahumetem [...] qui fuit Arabs gentili errore et Iudaica imbutus perfidia audivitque Christianos, qui Nestoriana et Ariana labe infecti errant.” See Andrea Moudarres, “Crusade and Conversion: Islam as Schism in Pius II and Nicholas of Cusa,” *MLN* 128 2013, 43.

<sup>29</sup>*Vom Kriege widder die Tuercken - D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1929, 30, II, 122. 26-28: “Also ists ein glaube, zusammen geflickt aus der Juden, Christen und Heiden glauben.” See Silke R. Falkner, “Preserved Spaces: Boundary Negotiations in Early-Modern Turcica,” in James Hodkinson and Jeff Morrison (eds.), *Encounters with Islam in German Literature and Culture*, New York: Camden House, 2009, 61. See also John V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, 105-107.

<sup>30</sup>Erika Rummel (ed.), *The Erasmus Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 315; Heath, Introduction to “A Most Useful Discussion[...],” 205.

<sup>31</sup>On Erasmus’ moral agenda in the context of the war against the Turks: A. G. Weiler, ‘The Turkish Argument and Christian Piety in Desiderius Erasmus’ “Consultatio de Bello Turcis inferendo” (1530)’, in Weiland J. Sperna and W. Th. M. Frijhoff (eds.), *Erasmus of Rotterdam: the Man and the Scholar*, Leiden: Brill, 1988, 30-39.

<sup>32</sup>On this routine: Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 100-130 (ch. III); Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran Cruz, “Popular Attitudes Toward Islam in Medieval Europe,” in David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto (eds.), *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999, 55-82 (66). See also Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 1-18.

of crusading expeditions, of recovering the Holy Land; we have seen so often the red cross emblazoned with the triple crown, and the red chest beside it [...] and the only thing to triumph has been money [...] how can we, who have been misled thirty times over, believe any more promises [...]”<sup>33</sup> This principled objection to crusades, in particular to Leo X’s plans of launching a crusade against the Turks, signifies a principle constantly and devotedly cherished by Erasmus, as opposed to many of his contemporaries.<sup>34</sup> However, it does not necessarily indicate a moderate or tolerant attitude toward Islam. Erasmus’ objection to crusades was by no means an overall opposition to fighting the Turks. Rather, Erasmus harshly condemned embezzlement and corrupt fundraising, and the Church’s involvement in such nefarious activities, and regarded them as inseparable from waging a crusade. His stance was not dictated by a principled opposition to war against the Turks. Under certain conditions he approved war against them. As early as 1516, in his “Education of a Christian Prince” which appeared then – irrespective of the Ottoman siege on Vienna – he called for an attack on the Turks, preconditioned by a Christian *correctio vitae*. This is not an expression of moderation and certainly not of any “pacifism.”<sup>35</sup>

*De bello Turcico* – although not a Christian polemic against Islam – does make use of degrading and harsh anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Admittedly, Erasmus preferred to avoid fantastic and loathsome descriptions, such as those employed by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (based on Aethicus) of the Scythians and the Turks “feeding on disgusting kinds of flesh, such as horses, wolves, vultures, and most horrible of all, human embryos born prematurely.”<sup>36</sup> Still, the “Prince of Humanists” used a rhetoric which was harsh and denigrating enough for us to identify

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<sup>33</sup>CWE 64, 246; ASD V-3, 64.

<sup>34</sup>For Erasmus’ anti-Crusade attitude as allegedly indicating his moderation, see Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 175; Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 225.

<sup>35</sup>See n. 3.

<sup>36</sup>*Opera*, 307: “[...] comedit quae caeteri abominantur, iumentorum, luporum, ac vultorum carnes, et quod magis horreas, hominum abortive [...]” See Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 76 n. 231. A somewhat less gruesome description can be found in Piccolomini’s letter of July 1453 to Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa: Margaret Meserve, “From Samarkand to Scythia: Reinventions of Asia in Renaissance Geography and Political thought,” in Zweder von Martels and Arjo J. Vanderjagt (eds.), *Pius II — ‘El Piu Expeditivo Pontifice’. Selected Studies on Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405-1464)*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003, 26.

it as Turkophobic. By using the term *Immanitas Turcarum* he directed his readers to the alleged inhuman essence of the Turks, inferior to European-Christian human nature. *Immanis* is the lexical opposite of *humanitas*, the word that signifies the cultural ideal of Renaissance Europe. In humanist writings, *immane genus* replaced *infideles* as the preferred denigrating title for the Turks.<sup>37</sup>

Turkish essence, according to Erasmus, is human immorality at its worst. In *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier* he asserts: “He is an adulterer, a sacrilegious person, a Turk; one should abhor the adultery, not the man; show one’s aversion for the sacrilege, not the man; kill the Turk, not the man.”<sup>38</sup> Rather than the physical Turk, it is his essence, condemned as immoral and inhuman, that should be annihilated. Converting the Turks to Christianity will have such an effect.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, it is a Christian inner issue in the sense that it must be uprooted from Christian hearts, by way of a Christian *correctio vitae*.

In *De bello Turcico*, Erasmus defines Turkish essence (*genus Turcarum*) as follows: “If we really want to heave the Turks from our necks, we must first expel from our hearts a more loathsome race of Turks, avarice, ambition, the craving for power, self-satisfaction, impiety, extravagance, the love of pleasure, deceitfulness, anger, hatred, envy.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, Turkish essence is comprised of a definite set of characteristics— solely relating to corruption and immorality. Evidently, any attribution of moderation or toleration to Erasmus, as regards the Turks, and by implication, their culture and religion, should be utterly rejected.

A fundamental motif which Erasmus used in referring to the Turks was their preoccupation with luxury, and as a result of this their effeminacy (*gens effeminata*).<sup>41</sup> By using this denigration Erasmus followed in the footsteps of Italian humanists who

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<sup>37</sup>Hankins, “Renaissance Crusaders,” 122.

<sup>38</sup>CWE 66, 94; ASD V-8: “Adultere est, sacrilegus est, Turca est: exsecretur adulterum, non hominem, sacrilegum adspernetur, non hominem: Turcam occidat, non hominem.”

<sup>39</sup>On Erasmus’ wish to convert the Turks to Christianity, see Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other,”* 37-45.

<sup>40</sup>CWE 64, 242; ASD V-3, 62: “Si nobis succedere cupimus, ut Turcas a nostris cervicibus depellamus, prius teterrimum Turcarum genus ex animis nostris exigamus, avaritiam, ambitionem, dominandi libidinem, nostri fiducia, impietatem luxum, voluptatum amorem, fraudulentiam, iram, odium, invidiam.”

<sup>41</sup>CWE 64, 231; ASD V-3, 50: “Gens est effeminata luxu...”



excelled in denouncing the Turks. Thus, in his first crusade oration, which he delivered in Rome in April 1452, Piccolomini lamented of the Greeks: “Who does not pity this afflicted, oppressed, and ruined people? Once, their empire was mighty and flourishing not only under Alexander the Macedonian and his successors, but also under the Athenians, the Thebans, and the Lacedaemonians: now it is forced to serve the effeminate Turks everywhere.”<sup>42</sup> Piccolomini, in his exhortation of a crusade against the Turks, used the same motif again in an oration he delivered in Frankfurt on October 1454: “Only Mehmed and those fifteen thousand I mentioned before delight in the din of weapons and their warlike spirit makes them fearless in battle. The others, as you will see, are inexperienced, timid, effeminate, and worthless.”<sup>43</sup> And once more in a different oration – with the same purpose as the previous one – delivered in the congress of Mantua on September 1459: “You know what Virgil’s Remus thinks of the Asians. Says he: Phrygian women, indeed! – for Phrygian men you are not.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, the emphasis on the effeminacy of Asian males is linked this time to an ancient Roman literary usage.

Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540), in his treatise “on the wars of Europe and the war against the Turks” (1525), used effeminacy in a similar way, as an insult signifying both the physical and mental weakness of the Turks. Vives made Scipio Africanus assert that all Christian princes should turn against the Turks and invade Asia and seize its resources, since the inhabitants of Asia are weary and not a warlike people, being more effeminate than masculine.<sup>45</sup> Vives’s denigration of the Turks and his warlike attitude toward them would not come as a surprise to Erasmus. Although he objected to wars waged to take over territories and expand borders, Erasmus was in favor of attacking the Turks, as long as it was not a crusade. Rhetorically, these two

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<sup>42</sup>*Opera*, 929-930: “Sed quid Graecia, litterarum mater? Inventrix legum, cultrix morum, et omnium artium bonarum magistra? Quem non miseret gentis illius afflictæ, oppressæ, pessumdatæ? Cujus imperium non sub Alexandro Macedone solum suisque successoribus, sed sub Atheniensibus, Thebanis et Lacedaemoniensibus olim et florentissimum et potentissimum fuit, nunc ubilibet effeminatis Turcis servire coacta est?” The English translation of Piccolomini’s orations is based on Michael von Cotta-Schoenberg’s translations published in the HAL open archives: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01588941/document>.

<sup>43</sup> *Opera*, 685-686.

<sup>44</sup> *Opera*, 909.

<sup>45</sup> Tracy, *Erasmus*, 64, 235 n. 27.



humanists used similar Turkophobic imagery, in particular that of the effeminate and corrupt Turk, stemming from the same conceptualization of the “Other.”<sup>46</sup>

Nor did the presentation of Turkish corruption and immorality come to an end with Erasmus or Vives. For example, in a diary covering the years 1573-1578, Stefan Gerlach, a member of a German delegation to the Ottoman capital city, described Turkish after-dinner delights in Istanbul. As dinner came to its end, two young dancers joined to please the dinner guests and to fulfill their sexual desires, a practice which was customary in Turkey, according to Gerlach’s report.<sup>47</sup> In the many pamphlets regarding the Turks that were published in Germany in the years 1453-1700 (Turcica), discussion of Turkish sexual immorality was very common.<sup>48</sup>

One may wonder how a corrupt and effeminate race, as viewed by the Eurocentric outlook, could form such an eminent empire? Erasmus’ explanation is “that the Turks have not won an immense empire by their own piety or virtue, and that ours has been dashed to pieces as a punishment to us.”<sup>49</sup> And then he poses the rhetorical question: “Can we attribute the Turks’ success to their piety? Of course not! To their valor? They are a race debilitated by debauchery and fearsome only as brigands [...] They owe their victories to our sins.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the Turks won due to Christian moral weakness and the absence of Christian concord. Piccolomini, in his Mantua oration, has a similar explanation: “Alas, the furies! Alas, the ruse of demons! The Christians would rather fight each other than attack the Turks. They prefer civil wars to wars against foreigners, and they often enter bloody battles for insignificant causes.”<sup>51</sup> Conclusively, the main reason for the Ottoman military success, which both humanists point to, was the disunity among Christians.

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<sup>46</sup> Robert P. Adams, *The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, and Vives on Humanism, War and Peace 1496–1535*, Washington, DC: University of Washington Press, 1962, 263-264. See also Tracey, *Erasmus*, 64.

<sup>47</sup>The passage from the diary is cited from Silke R. Falkner, “Preserved Spaces: Boundary Negotiations in Early-Modern Turcica,” 55: “Nach dem Mittag-Essen einen Tanz durch 2 Buben deren die Tuercken zu ihrer Schande missbrauchen, welche verfluchte Unweiss in der Tuercky sehr gemein.”

<sup>48</sup> Falkner, “Preserved Spaces,” 55.

<sup>49</sup> CWE 64, 220; ASD V-3, 38.

<sup>50</sup> CWE, 64, 231; ASD V-3, 52.

<sup>51</sup> *Opera*, 907-908.

The abovementioned rhetorical tropes used by Piccolomini and Erasmus resonate with the medieval Christian polemical literature that frequently ascribed to Islam, as well as to Mohamed himself, a violation of every moral limit in general and sexual corruption in particular.<sup>52</sup> Noticeably, the image of corrupt effeminacy, ascribed to men of the east and then perceived as a threat to the west, was also common in Roman classical literature.<sup>53</sup> In the Middle Ages this abusive rhetoric was turned against Islam, preserving the common theme of a corrupt and immoral East threatening the West.

Another denigrating trope used by Erasmus in relation to the Turks is *latrocinium*, banditry: “They had no single leader, but roved about in scattered bands and laid waste whole provinces by brigandage rather than war.”<sup>54</sup> Further on, Erasmus has the Turks practicing *latrocinium* as their main occupation.<sup>55</sup> Timothy Hampton has pointed out that the word *latro* has a double meaning; as a noun it means *thieve*; as a verb, *bark*. Thus, the derogatory metaphor “Turkish dogs,” which was in use at that time, is implied in this term.<sup>56</sup> Prior to Erasmus, Francesco Filelfo delivered an oration in the congress of Mantua (September 18, 1459) in which banditry as a Turkish way of life was a dominant theme: “Who does not know that the Turks are fugitive slaves and shepherds of the Scythians, who descend from the prisons of the vast and inhospitable Caucasus Mountains into Persia and Media to practice banditry. They made their homes in no set place, except the bogs and the frightening hiding places of woods.”<sup>57</sup> To be identified as having Scythian roots was bad enough, to be thought of as originating from slaves who ran away from their Scythian owners was even worse.

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 306.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Isaac found it in Petronius’ *Satyricon* and in Juvenal’s writing: Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, 231-233.

<sup>54</sup> CWE, 64, 221-222; ASD V-3 40: “[...] nullo certo duce, sed vagi palantesque latrociniiis verius quam bello prouincias depopulabantur.”

<sup>55</sup> CWE 64, 231; ASD V-3 52: “Gens est effeminata luxu, nec alia rem quam latrociniiis formidanda.”

<sup>56</sup> Timothy Hampton, “‘Turkish Dogs’: Rabelais, Erasmus, and the Rhetoric of Alterity,” *Representations* 41 (1993): 67.

<sup>57</sup> [Francesco Filelfo] *Ad Pium Papam Oratio I in Orationes Francisci Philelfi cum quibusdam aliis eiusdem operibus* (Basel, 1498) no pagination: “Quis unus omnium Turcos ignoret fugitivos esse Scytharum servos eosque pastores [...]”; Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 77; Comment. III, 20, 2.

Even in his ludicrous *Praise of Folly* (*Moriae Encomium id est Stultitiae Laus*, 1509), Erasmus did not refrain from pouring harsh scorn on the Turks (and the Jews). He lists certain nations (*nationes*) and cities (*civitates*) which ascribe to themselves high cultural virtues, as if they were endowed with them by nature. Thus, “the British think they have a monopoly, amongst other things, of good looks, musical talents and fine food. The Scots pride themselves on their nobility and the distinction of their royal connexions as much as on their subtlety in dialectic. The French lay claim to polite manners [...]”<sup>58</sup> Erasmus continues with the Parisians, Italians, Romans, Venetians, Greeks, Germans, and the Spaniards. Every peculiar group takes pride in its distinctive virtue or virtues. Two groups are exceptional: the Jews for awaiting their Messiah and not abandoning their Moses, and the Turks who are “the real barbarian riff-raff actually demand recognition for their religion and pour scorn on Christians for their superstition.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, only the Jews and the Turks are not blessed with any virtue or quality and are defined only by their religion, i.e. by their patronizing religious arrogance.

Despite his Turkophobic attitude, as shown here, Erasmus is remembered – as far as historiographical conventions and collective memory are concerned – as a moderate peace seeker who opposed the very institution of crusade. *Inter alia*, this is based on the expression “half-Christians” (*semichristiani*), which Erasmus used occasionally in relation to Muslims, supposedly adopting the optimistic attitude of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464). I have showed elsewhere that Cusanus never used this term in his writings, and the term does not denote Erasmus’ positive impression of Islam. Erasmus’ use of *Semichristiani*, although denoting the religious linkage of Islam to Christianity, does not overshadow his overall Turkophobic attitude.<sup>60</sup> As already quoted, Erasmus attacks Islam for holding Christ as just one of the prophets.

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<sup>58</sup>CWE 27, 117; ASD IV-3, 128: “[...] ut Britanni praeter alia, formam, musicam, et lautas mensas proprie sibi vindicent. Scoti, nobilitate, regiae affinitates titulo, neque non Dialecticis argutiis sibi blandiantur. Galli morum civilitatem sibi fumant ...Turcae totaque illa vere barbarorum colluvies etiam religionis laudem sibi vindicat, Christianos perinde ut superstitiosos irridens. At multo etiam suavius Judaei etiamdum Messaiam suum constanter exspectant, ac Mosen suum, hodie que mordicus tenent [...]”.

<sup>59</sup>CWE 27, 117; ASD IV-3, 128.

<sup>60</sup>Nathan Ron, “Erasmus’ attitude toward Islam in light of Nicholas of Cusa’s *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*,” *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval*, 26 (2019): 133-136.

Besides, Erasmus denounces the Turks and the Jews for their false faith, a mixture of Judaism, Christianity, paganism, and the Arian Heresy. Thus, Erasmus used the term “half-Christian” with a rather typical medieval sense, which matches closely with Piccolomini’s description of Muhammad as an Arab who has been brainwashed by error, perfidy, and the heresies of believers of heretic sects and false religions.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Ron, “Erasmus’ attitude toward Islam in light of Nicholas of Cusa’s *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*,” 133-134, See also notes 26, 29-30 above.

## Conclusion

In a recent study, Noel Malcolm shows that “Eastern despotism” was basically a Western theory created by long-running hostile traditions toward Islam and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>62</sup> Christian theology contributed immensely, in particular by incorporating rumours and unsubstantiated stories, which became accepted truths about Muhammad, his life and the Qur’an. Similarly, ethnographic inventions on Ottoman mores and government were uncritically transferred from one generation to another. This was not a uniform process. Juan de Torquemada (1388-1468), Nicholas of Cusa, Erasmus, Martin Luther, to mention just a few, demonstrated, each in his peculiar way, a somewhat different attitude, whether in essence or in style. Yet, the sense of religious superiority and hostility were persistent. As Malcolm points out, Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), who studied Arabic and Turkish and went to Istanbul, Syria and Egypt, instigated a significant change and new paradigm in terms of unpicking false claims that were attached to Islam. The old paradigm still had a considerable anti-Muslim and anti-Ottoman impact but the notion of *Raison d’État* marked a change in how the Ottoman Empire was conceived. This was to the credit of certain sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers, including Machiavelli in different sections of his works. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment marked a significant change. Voltaire’s *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756) headed a flow of literary and scholarly writing detached from the old patterns of Turkophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric.<sup>63</sup> Thus, for Napoleon, Voltaire and Goethe, and for many other Europeans, Mohamed,

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<sup>62</sup>Noel Malcolm, *Useful enemies: Islam and the Ottoman empire in Western political thought, 1450-1750*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), 409-417 (conclusion). See also the studies mentioned in n. 32.

<sup>63</sup>Malcolm, *Useful enemies*, 397, 404, 407.

the once distant but hated *persona*, became “a figure whose story and whose living legacy are a constant source of curiosity, worry, astonishment, and admiration.”<sup>64</sup>

When studying an issue, whether historical, cultural or other, be it bound up in Erasmus, Beethoven or feudalism, a comparison may sometimes be of help (even if the study itself is not a comparative one). Examining Martin Luther’s attitude toward Islam can sharpen our judgement of Erasmus’ stance. Intriguingly, Luther’s interest in Islam was quite unusual for the time and very different from Erasmus’ attitude.<sup>65</sup> Luther argued that it was important to learn about Muhammad’s faith and to expose Christians to a religious rival who endangered Christendom. This could serve Christians in strengthening their faith and avoiding any interest in converting to Islam. However, Luther emphasized positive aspects of Islam: modesty in regard to clothing, food, housing, as well as worship, prayer, fasting, and religious gatherings. Luther also admired how the Turkish patriarchs kept their women subservient. Furthermore, Luther wrote the introduction to the Latin translation of the Koran published by Theodore Bibliander (1509-1564). It was a translation of an Arabic manuscript, acquired in the 12th century by Peter the Venerable (c. 1092-1156), abbot of Cluny, and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Peter hired the Englishman Robert of Ketton (fl. 1141-1157) to translate the manuscript into Latin. This translation was copied many times, and four hundred years later Luther was in possession of one of these versions. He entrusted it to Bibliander for publication. The outcome of Bibliander’s work was the first printed Latin translation of the Koran (Basel, 1543).<sup>66</sup>

In an interview marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, historian Lyndal Roper expressed her wish for “engagement with Islam, because Islam is perceived as a problem in Germany now, and that is where you can use Luther to say

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<sup>64</sup>Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 1. See also pp. 155-183, Chapter Six: The Enlightenment Prophet - Reformer and Legislator.

<sup>65</sup>My treatment of Luther is based on Lyndal Roper *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, New York: Random House, 2018 , 373-378, and Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 105-109. See also Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007.

<sup>66</sup>Roper, *Martin Luther*, 376-377; Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 105-107.

something very positive. Luther insisted that the Koran should be published.”<sup>67</sup> Luther’s interest was, among other things, ethnographic, as expressed by his introduction to a publication of 1530 entitled *Treatise on the Customs, Habits and Perversity of the Turks* (*Tractatus de moribus, condicionibus et nequicia Turcorum*), composed in 1481 by the Dominican monk Georgius de Hungaria (Georg von Muelbach, 1422-1502). This tract appeared over the years in various editions under the title *A Booklet on the Rituals and Customs of the Turks* (*Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum*). In his introduction to the booklet, Luther asserted that Muslims are superior to Christians in their customs and moral virtues, but since Christianity is more than just customs and virtues, it still transcends Islam.<sup>68</sup>

As shown here, Erasmus would not have given the Turks any credit for their customs and certainly not for their moral virtues – there were none, according to Erasmus. One would expect the prince of humanists to show less arrogance vis-a-vis non-Christian cultures, Islam and the Turks in this case, and to approach them with some degree of intellectual curiosity. Such greatness of mind Erasmus did not display. Stroumsa observes: “In the study of all cultures and religions[...]from those of the native Americans to those of the Jews, from those of the Muslim world, of India, China, and Japan–European Christians could not be devoid of old and engrained prejudices and were often moved by the temptations of imperialism.”<sup>69</sup> Truly, Luther and Erasmus were far from the temptations of imperialism, but they were nevertheless captivated by the Turkophobic and Islamophobic spirit of their time. Erasmus more so than Luther.

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<sup>67</sup>Tamar Herzig and Zur Shalev, “A Conversation with Lyndal Roper,” *Zmanim: A Historical Quarterly* [in Hebrew] 140 (2019), 113-114. See also Roper, *Martin Luther*, 376.

<sup>68</sup> Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 105-106; Malcolm, *Useful enemies*, 38, 64, 141.

<sup>69</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2010, 12.



## References

### Abbreviations

- ASD-** *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969–).
- Comment-** Pius II, *Commentaries* 2 vols., eds. Margaret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta (Harvard, The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2003–2007).
- CWE -** *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–).
- Opera-** *Aeneae Syluij Piccolominei Senensis [...] Opera quæ extant omnia*, (Basel: Henrich Petri, 1551; reprint Frankfurt, 1967). <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01588941/document> (Michael von Cotta-Schoenberg's translations published in the HAL open archives).
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