

## Was Erasmus's Christian Politics Too Uncompromising?

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### ABSTRACT

*Political theorists typically laud Machiavelli as the first thinker to decisively cast the restrictions of religion and ethics off of politics and to thereby initiate modernity. Consequently, scholars neglect other political thinkers of the Renaissance, whose works receive short shrift either as problematic fusions of the classical and biblical traditions or as failed ventures in utopianism. But one prominent figure of the sixteenth century, Desiderius Erasmus, understood and took seriously the reconciliation of practical life's demands with the requirements of justice and wisdom. In his Education of a Christian Prince, Erasmus sought to squelch political tyranny by advocating a model of just rule based on that of Jesus Christ; but in so doing, he fended against the charges of naiveté and conceit that would inevitably attend his philosophia Christi by demonstrating a certain moral flexibility embedded in his standard of political rule.*

### Introduction

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) contributed to advances in theology and religious life, defended a pacific politics, and insisted on a practical system of ethics in an age plagued by harsh kingships. His vast corpus of writings displays considerable humor, wit, and erudition. Yet political theorists typically pass over this figure in their survey of the history of political thought, and those who do study Erasmus characterize him as a foil to Machiavelli<sup>1</sup> or define him within a limited historical context that tends to disregard his enduring importance.<sup>2</sup> Only recently have scholars recognized a realist element consistent with modern political thought in Erasmus's writings.<sup>3</sup> Once highly reputed by authors such as François Rabelais and Guillaume Budé, Erasmus's fortunes have waned with the occurrence of several events. As an advocate of sensible, minor reforms within the Catholic Church, Erasmus withdrew from participation in the religious Reformation prompted by Martin Luther and John Calvin. The daring of these twin giants who stood for schism and for a nostalgic return to the origins of Christianity charms today's even more schismatic and nostalgic religious scholars, some of whom have deepened the Reformation critique and now debate the authority of church communities and sacred texts as such.<sup>4</sup> Judged by current tastes, Erasmus looks a docile sheep or, worse, a sycophant. His legacy suffers in the area of political philosophy for similar reasons, as the imbalance of scholarly focus between him and the Florentine philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli suggests.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Machiavelli praises assertiveness and preaches the dominion of the intransigent "effectual truth" over human affairs,<sup>6</sup> Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince* supports a starry-eyed, now

outmoded antiwar policy<sup>7</sup> and holds Christian political rulers to a higher moral standard than that of the non-Christians (See *ECP* 1.24, 1.29, 1.32, 1.40). In fact, Erasmus insists that true rulers should model themselves after no less than Christ himself (*ECP* 1.13, 1.18, 1.29, 1.32, 1.40, 1.46, 2.60). These facets of Erasmus may lead scholars to place him among those “others” from whom Machiavelli “departs” in his novel way of studying politics as discussed in chapter 15 of *The Prince* (15.61); but this would be a premature conclusion about Erasmus, who does not appear such a naïf after a review of his *philosophia Christi* and all it entails. Rulers who abide by Erasmus’s Christian political ethics in fact encounter fewer moral restrictions than frequently supposed precisely because they take Jesus Christ as their model ruler.

### **Advice-to-Princes: Some Problems in the Genre**

Erasmus’s *Education of a Christian Prince* falls within the short-lived and peculiar genre of literature of “advice-to-princes” or “mirrors-of-princes.” The book faces certain issues unique to this type of work. Advice-to-princes writings typically serve the double-function of advertising the competencies of the author as a political advisor and of teaching the ruler the art of governance.<sup>8</sup> Problematically, however, the political knowledge a writer presumes in offering such a book to the ruler may be understood as a competing claim to rule rightfully. By proposing to educate the rulers and showing their need for knowledge, tutors bring into question whether royals are simply a superfluous linkage institution between the governed and those who truly possess the political art. Erasmus confirms his low estimation of the prince relative to that of the tutor when he accepts the opinion of Plutarch, who “has good reason for thinking that *no man* does the state a greater service than he who equips a prince’s mind” (*ECP* DL.2, italics mine). And neither thinks princes equip their own minds.

Yet the tutors’ relatively insecure and undesirable station in life makes them appear less wise, for who would not put wisdom to use? A prince may not see, for instance, Machiavelli’s vulnerability as one who suffers the “malignity of fortune” (*Prince* DL.4) as anything other than a personal failing or short-sightedness. Rulers are likewise prone to consider their own good fortune a product of virtue, not luck. From this vantage, princes approached with a book that promises to endow them with practical knowledge must feel wary of disenfranchised authors who could not help but have an undisclosed agenda.

Recognizing these obstacles, Erasmus writes his book not only as advice to princes, but also and chiefly as advice to other potential tutors (*ECP* 1.9). Because he equates the problem of rule with the problem of education, his intended audience is not princes but those who will groom them.<sup>9</sup> Given the foregoing considerations, that princes will refuse the advice offered from a source thought unreliable in both understanding and motive, Erasmus instructs tutors to win the prince’s confidence and clear their names of foul play through a strictly indirect teaching method. Generally, Erasmus insists that tutors should turn their regal students toward examples of the best rulers whose authority over an aspiring prince can be easily demonstrated. Specifically, he insists that tutors should teach princes to fashion themselves after that King of

Kings, Jesus Christ. Christ's perfections not only deserve imitation but demand it. Tutors will not gain the princes' respect by demonstrating their own competencies; but by appealing to Christ, the tutor points the prince to a figure he must heed and can be made to learn from. Christ is not only the most appropriate example for the prince, but also the most effective.

Erasmus recognizes, however, that most rulers in the history of humanity have been tyrants who vainly "wanted to be called 'God' and 'Lord'" (*ECP* 1.26). In light of the tyrants' ultimate conceit, it is difficult to see why Erasmus would apparently encourage or contribute to their wrongheaded aspiration to the divine by insisting on Christ as the ruler's standard. Yet reflecting on the ruler's occupation as one that imitates godliness is precisely what Erasmus recommends: "Let the teacher therefore depict a sort of celestial creature, more like a divinity than a mortal [...] as the picture of a true prince" (*ECP* 1.26–27). Asserting the divine model of rule simultaneously acknowledges and corrects the tyrants' mistake of identifying themselves as gods. Erasmus does not attempt to extinguish this tyrannical impulse; he instead redirects it by showing the ruler exactly what it means to take the title of Lord. He teaches rulers not to think of the deity as that rapsallion Zeus, whose dangerously capricious use of power they associate with divine rule, but as the perfect image of justice and mercy drawn by the Gospels.

### **The Moral Freedom of Christ as Princely Example**

Without recognizing these major pedagogical functions, interpreters tend to characterize Erasmus as an idealist thinker grounded in the humanist tradition and committed to the moral example set by Christ as a constraint on political action.<sup>10</sup> But in pushing the ruler to think through what godliness actually entails, Erasmus does not intend to hamstring rulers with questions of right and wrong. In the discussion surrounding his assertion that "what Christ teaches applies to no one more than to the prince" (*ECP* 1.13), Erasmus denies that the application of Christ's teachings only constrains rulers. Immediately before examining those teachings, Erasmus warns that "[w]here the material seems rather harsh, the tutor should smooth and soften it with an agreeable style of speech" (*ECP* 1.13). This prefatory remark forebodes that what Erasmus imparts may be unsettling if left unvarnished. The tutor must wonder what could be so sensitive: Erasmus begins his exposition safely enough, by recommending that tutors affirm the importance of virtue "as the most beautiful thing of all." Next, he directs tutors to thwart the prince's regard for wealth and bodily pleasures. Finally, he asks them to arm princes against ignoble fear of death through attachment to a "cause" (*ECP* 1.14). He ends the discussion with a summary statement:

All those things the common people hold fast to as a source of pleasure, or respect as excellent, or adopt as useful are to be evaluated by the single criterion of their moral worth. On the other hand, whatever things the common people shrink from as being disagreeable, or despise as lowly, or avoid as pernicious should not be avoided unless they really do have shameful implications. (*ECP* 1.14)

So far from simply prohibiting, the moral advice of Erasmus brings “whatever things the common people shrink from” into the realm of legitimate political action. To determine whether this statement violates Erasmus’s distinction between mere tyranny and truly divine rule, interpreters must ask whether and how it applies to Christ.

In many ways, after all, the Jesus of the New Testament places something of a moral straitjacket around his disciples and, indeed, himself. Throughout his treatise, Erasmus seems to follow Christ’s lead when he refuses to accept the low standards of decency prescribed by non-Christian culture. Erasmus even brushes aside the provisions of the Mosaic Law as mere “sketches and images of justice,” incomplete without the example of the savior (*ECP* 1.31). For Jesus, the non-Christians’ virtue at its apex functions as little more than the floor of virtue for his holy church. Tax collectors loves those who love them; Christians must therefore love those who hate them (Mt 5:44–46).<sup>11</sup> Jesus radicalizes the Law by redefining and heightening concepts like adultery (Mt 5:27–28) and murder (Mt 5:21–22) so that not only external actions but internal feelings come under intense scrutiny: for him, these sinful crimes are not committed at random, but spring from underlying emotions of lust and anger. If these teachings of Christ “appl[y] to no one more than to the prince,” then the task before the Christian ruler seems nigh impossible: “Love your enemy” dictates an idealistic and likely disastrous foreign policy indeed.

On the other hand, the Jesus who set such lofty moral standards also violates established practices within both Judaic tradition and his contemporary secular community. Jesus communes with the lowliest of sinners (Mt 9:11), touches the dead (Mk 5:39), defends an adulteress (Jn 8:2–11), arouses the Jewish scribes’ indignation by working miracles, as they say, “in the name of demons” (Mt 9:34; Lk 6:2), and dismisses the Jewish dietary laws as he contests the old understanding of “what defiles a man” (Mt 15:10). In what seems even today a stretch of the moral imagination, Jesus redefines family along lines that potentially preclude biological relations (Lk 8:19–21). All the while, Jesus consistently and forthrightly embraces “whatever things the common people shrink from as being disagreeable, or despise as lowly, or avoid as pernicious,” but only because these things lack what Erasmus calls “shameful implications”: Jesus justifies his apparent transgressions by showing that those customs and laws he ignores or reinterprets are merely human precepts wrongfully adorned as sacred doctrines (Mk 7:6).

So too, Erasmus does not simply flout moral considerations. Only, he refuses to equate popular standards of right and wrong with authentically Christian standards. Making his most general observation about humanity, Erasmus notes that “the nature of man inclines toward evil” (*ECP* 1.8). He worries that princes will be “contaminated by popular opinions” (*ECP* 1.10) and hopes that they will disregard “the opinion of the mob” (*ECP* 6.79). Erasmus teaches that the perversion of popular opinion affects not only notions of the right and good, but also, and just as importantly, of the wrong and bad.

Just as the Gospels abound in examples of Jesus contesting popular ideas of lowliness and perniciousness, Erasmus provides cases where the prince might “get into the habit of taking pleasure” of those things that most people find unpleasant (*ECP* 1.47). Because the people’s moral scruples do not differ from the tyrannical rulers’, inverting the popular pleasures means

attending to the well-being of the state. Nevertheless, the Christian ruler's pleasures retain a surprising root in a selfishness that is legitimized by the divine model of rule. Erasmus encourages the prince, for instance, to think of the country as his personal possession so that he realizes damages done to it are indirectly done to him (*ECP* 1.34, 1.44). Considered greedy from a worldly perspective, subsuming the world as one's own and possessively guarding it matches Jesus's insistence that "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it to me" (Mt 25:40) and, conversely, that "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (Mt 25:45). The Christian prince, Erasmus provocatively suggests, "has [his subjects] so devoted and dedicated to himself that they do not shrink from anything, even from laying down their lives" (*ECP* 1.35). This may well be one of those thoughts a common person shrinks from as lowly and pernicious; but once again, it entails precisely what Christ demands of his followers when he praises "whoever will lose his life for my sake" (Lk 9:24).

Erasmus does not shy from teaching the prince to take beneficent possession of his domain in the way a true god would. He also aims to overturn widely held attitudes regarding other aspects of morality, among them industriousness. The ancient philosophers and medieval monastics lived lives of contemplation; Erasmus denigrates these occupations as "idle" (*ECP* 6.83). With that word, he casts aspersions on the two occupations held theretofore in highest esteem. Erasmus teaches that "thrift is a great source of revenue" for the prince (*ECP* 4.76). He thus validates some of those occupations theretofore held in lowest esteem, like farming (*ECP* 10.101). This teaching may sound anything but scandalous to modern ears, but only because those ears are modern. The nobility of old considered leisure indispensable to learning and the cultivation of excellence. Even in early America, this opinion persisted in the ideology of Southern mud-sill theory.<sup>12</sup> By recasting leisure as sheer indolence, Erasmus attacks what was typically thought of as the very seat of virtue. He restores the biblical views of Solomon<sup>13</sup> and Paul the Apostle,<sup>14</sup> both of whom saw idleness as an invitation to sinfulness.

By dismissing "whatever things the common people shrink from," Erasmus carves out of a new sphere of appropriate activity for Christian princes. Tyrants, he suggests, cannot conceive of any task outside of military affairs and foreign policy. By contrast, Erasmus refocuses politics on domestic affairs much as the ancient philosophers had focused it (*ECP* 10.99). According to Erasmus, this sphere had been abandoned in the meantime because it was thought below princely dignity (*ECP* 10.100), but he presents public works projects as exciting enterprises "increasing the prosperity of the realm" (*ECP* 10.101). In his list of feasible projects, Erasmus encourages rulers to "divert rivers whose course is inconvenient." The locution echoes Machiavelli's famous discussion of *Fortuna* in chapter 25 of *The Prince*, where he advises communities to provide for the weather ahead by building dams and dikes (25.98–99). We might believe that Erasmus's eagerness to side with Machiavelli in having his ruler account for and mitigate the vicissitudes of life renders his trust in providence uncertain. But that is because we think of biblical teaching from the perspective of the believer who passively trusts. Erasmus shows that exerting control over the world is not only what the Machiavellian schemer does, but also describes the work of

the Lord who is Providence incarnate. This prospect proves itself but another thing we common people shrink from.

## Endnotes

1. Burke 1984; Gilbert 1938/1968.
2. Gwatkin 1965; Tracy 1978.
3. Drysdall 2010.
4. See Scroggs 1995; Soares 1925; Wood 1996.
5. Scholars still vigorously debate aspects of Machiavelli's thought, as a recent special issue of *The Review of Politics* demonstrated in its roundtable of *The Prince* (vol. 75, no. 04). See Zuckert (2013) for an overview of the issue's articles.
6. See Machiavelli 1532/1998, 61. Hereafter referenced in-text as '*Prince*.' Subsequent citations will be given in parentheses in-text and formatted by chapter number and page number.
7. See Erasmus 1516/1997, 102–110. Hereafter referenced in-text as "*ECP*." Subsequent citations will be given in parentheses in-text and formatted by chapter number and page number.
8. Jardine 1997, xix, xxiv.
9. Burke 1984, 85.
10. See Burke 1984, 90.
11. I consulted the King James Version of the Bible for this study.
12. See Miller 2001, 508.
13. "By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through" (Ecclesiastes 10:18).
14. "For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies" (2 Thessalonians 3:11).

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