

Nathan Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 196 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-24928-1).

Since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, a common approach to canonical western thinkers has been to analyse how they thought about and positioned themselves in relation to ‘the Other’. Although *Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples* by Nathan Ron, research fellow in the School of History at the University of Haifa, is the first study to systematically analyse Erasmus’s views of all of the ‘others’ he was exposed to – rather than one particular non-European or/and non-Christian religious or ethnic group – it fits into this well-established vein of scholarship. Ron assesses Erasmus’s thought on these various cultural others against the concepts of Eurocentrism and racism. He takes Eurocentrism to be ‘the evaluation of the “other” by a set of values which are foreign to him, namely Christian-European values’ (vi) and racism, following historian Joan-Pau Rubiés, as the belief that biological differences transmitted from generation to generation have an impact on ‘cultural capacities’ (7).

The book is divided into two main sections: in the first section Ron discusses Erasmus and the Turks, with brief forays into Erasmus’s scant remarks on Africans and Amerindians. Erasmus and the Jews are examined in the second half. Ron compares Erasmus to some of his contemporary or near contemporary thinkers, such as Pope Pius II (1405-1464), Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), Michael Servetus (circa 1509-1553), Sebastian Franck (1499-circa 1543), and Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563), though he does not sufficiently explain why he chose these thinkers and not others.

The overall thrust of the book is to demonstrate that Erasmus was not nearly as tolerant and open-minded a thinker as many scholars have maintained or as his reputation in the popular imagination of Western Europe seems to imply. Concerning Erasmus and the Ottoman Empire, Ron argues that the evidence that some scholars have relied upon to argue for Erasmus’s toleration of Islam do not indicate an openness to the religion. He maintains that although Erasmus was opposed to either war or a crusade against the Ottomans, his vision of global peace required the universal triumph of Christianity, admittedly by peaceful means. Moreover, Erasmus’s use of the term ‘semi-Christian’ actually denigrated Islam by dismissing it as a perfidious combination of elements of Judaism and the Arian heresy. Ron argues that Erasmus’s opposition to the persecution of heretics impacted the influential defenders of toleration Servetus, Franck, and Castellio, all of

whom went further than Erasmus in advancing a more radical toleration that defended complete freedom of conscience, and thus the toleration of Islam.

Erasmus wrote so little on Amerindians and Africans that Ron has positioned his few comments on these populations within the part of his book on the Turks, principally in his discussion of De las Casas's defence of the Native Americans. Ron demonstrates that the famous debate between De las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda can fruitfully be seen as a continuation of the debate between Erasmus and Sepúlveda concerning the justice of a war against the Ottomans, in which Sepúlveda called for war and Erasmus opposed it in a series of publications in the 1520's.

Ron's main aim in his analysis of Erasmus's engagement with Judaism and the Jews is to demonstrate that Shimon Markish's influential characterisation of Erasmus's 'a-Semitism' (indifference to the Jews) is misguided. He maintains that Erasmus shared the prejudice against Jews that developed in the late medieval and early modern world, according to which even converted Jews remained Jewish at their 'core', thus arguing that Erasmus's anti-Judaism had a racial element. Erasmus attacked the Jewish convert to Christianity Johannes Pfefferkorn in various letters by arguing that 'if he could be opened up, you would find in his bosom not one Jew but six hundred' (150). While Erasmus's scorn for Pfefferkorn resulted largely from the latter's harsh condemnation of Johann Reuchlin and other humanists, Erasmus also expressed 'racialist' understandings of Judaism with reference to Jewish converts to Christianity whom he appreciated, such as Matthew Adrian, whom he described as 'by race a Jew by religion a Christian' (147). The development of the Iberian *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) doctrine to distinguish between Jewish converts to Christianity and 'old Christians' had clear racist elements and we can find echoes of this doctrine in Erasmus's work. But Ron takes all references to phenotypic traits and their transmission to be racist. The key element in racist thinking is that the reproduction of culture follows the reproduction of the flesh, and Ron obscures this important distinction.

While Ron has a firm grasp of the secondary literature on Erasmus and utilises a wide variety of Erasmus's published and unpublished writings, his analysis is fundamentally undermined by two elements. Firstly, Ron judges Erasmus and other early modern thinkers through the prism of a form of analysis that only achieved theoretical expression with the anthropological vindication of cultural pluralism in the post-Enlightenment world. Even though Ron is correct that Erasmus possessed a Eurocentric bias, he seems to assume that there was a 'view from nowhere' that Erasmus could have had but failed to adopt. A more nuanced understanding of the different forms of Eurocentrism would have enriched Ron's analysis. The egregiousness of his presentism is on full display in his penultimate chapter, 'Muslims are Superior to Jews'. In this chapter, Ron makes a hierarchy of humanity according to Erasmus's ethnology, something Erasmus himself never did. Historians

may be excused the occasional anachronistic thought experiment, but Ron's flimsy evidence does not support Erasmus's supposed hierarchy. Although Ron previously argued that Erasmus's use of the label 'semi-Christians' for Muslims was far from an approbatory term, in this chapter he uses it to argue that Muslim converts to Christianity would be higher on the scale than Jewish converts to Christianity, since Erasmus never referred to Jews as 'semi-Christians'. According to Ron, Erasmus would have placed black Africans below Muslims and Jews, but the only text that Ron uses for Erasmus's views of black Africans is from Erasmus's *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher*: '[t]hose who were previously Ethiopians, black because of their crimes, after discovering Jesus are no longer the person they used to be, and they were wrapped with the white wool of the sheep' (161-162). While this reveals that Erasmus shared the view that blackness resulted from the curse of Ham in Genesis, it does not imply that black African Christians would be ranked below Muslim and Jewish converts. The reading of post-Enlightenment racial hierarchies back into the sixteenth century colours Ron's analysis here, as elsewhere.

The second set of elements that undermines his study is the lack of analytical rigour and diachronic analysis. He does not explain why he has chosen the other thinkers he has chosen to compare and contextualise Erasmus. For example, in the chapter on Nicholas of Cusa, who died before Erasmus was born, it remains completely unclear how the two thinkers were connected, if at all, beyond the similarities in how both of them wrote about Islam. The absence of diachrony is problematic because Ron often refers to Erasmus's 'mind' on a certain subject, without being sufficiently attuned to how his attitudes changed depending on various historical circumstances.

These two elements – presentism and a lack of analytical rigour and diachrony – link to give the impression that Ron is more concerned to judge past thinkers for their proximity to defences of freedom of religion as a human right, and condemn Erasmus for not living up to such a standard, than he is to understand why Erasmus had the views that he held. While a firm commitment to freedom of religion as a human right is certainly a value we should cherish and defend, few historians would agree that the most fruitful approach to the past is to parade past thinkers before a twenty-first-century tribunal.

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