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Grigore, Mihai-Dumitru

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Humanism and Its Humanity. The Transition from the *humanitas Christiana* to
humanitas politica in the political writings of Erasmus

Mihai-D. Grigore

Motto: "What is a human being? What is human nature? [...]"

Making and keeping human life human."¹

In the thicket of the many understandings of humanity and human nature in the modern and post-modern eras, there is a common denominator: humanity is not negotiable and contingent, but an ontological fact of every human being. 'Negotiable' and 'contingent' are only the adjectives and epithets that accompany 'humanity' in the speech of humans on their own humanity. Such appropriations deconstruct humanity in 'multiple humanities' – to paraphrase Shmuel Eisenstadt –, identifying a 'proletarian', 'bourgeois', 'Christian', 'political' humanity and so on.² As Noam Chomsky has argued,

a vision of a future social order [must] be based on a concept of human nature. If, in fact, man is an indefinitely malleable, completely plastic being, with no innate structures of mind and no intrinsic needs of a cultural or social character, then he is a fit subject for the 'shaping of behaviour' by the State authority, the corporate manager, the technocrat, or the central committee. Those with some confidence in the human species will hope that this is not so and will try to determine the intrinsic human characteristics that provide the framework for intellectual development, the growth of moral consciousness, cultural achievement, and participation in a free community.³

This ethical and implicitly political ideal of human individuality as possessing an intrinsic value and being independent of all forms – hidden or not – of determination and contingency, which in fact lead to oppression and injustice, is not new at all. It can already be found in the early modern period, albeit in a preliminary form, at the intersection of moral theology, natural sciences and the secular individualization of man; the modern consequence of this is the transformation of the human being into a specific kind of selfhood as political person, with its own will, desires and rationality.

¹ Macquarrie, John, *In search of Humanity. A Theological and Philosophical Approach* (London 1982), 1.

² On 'proletarian' and 'bourgeois' humanity see Miller, James, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, MA 1993), 202.

³ From Noam Chomsky's *Language and Freedom*, quoted in Wells, Robin Headlam, "Humanism and Human Nature in the Renaissance", in Brian Boyd/Joseph Carroll/Jonathan Gottschall (ed.), *Evolution, Literature & Film. A Reader* (New York 2010), 231–245, p. 231.

This essay is motivated, in part at least, by Jörn Rüsen's apt observation on Christian dogma's ambivalence towards 'humanity':

On the one hand, it contributed to the idea of human dignity through its understanding of man as an image of God, its belief that God became man in Christ, and its transcendence of the ethnic and social barriers of human life by emphasizing the immediacy and equality of human subjectivity in its relationship to God. On the other hand, it emphasized the rankness of human nature in its dogma of Original Sin and put all human approaches to a humane life under the command of the institutionalized dogmatic regulations of the Church.⁴

In anticipation of the following considerations, I should point out that both terms in the title of this essay, *Christiana humanitas* and *humanitas politica*, do not occur in early modern sources. They are my own analytical categories, with which I aim to capture the early modern transition to an understanding of 'humanity' as a quality of human presence in the world.

I argue that there is a turn in the early modern period from a *humanitas* (Humaneness, humanity, *Menschlichkeit*) understood in relation to an external transcendent factor, i.e. a creator God (as an active and determinative agency of humanity) to a new semantic paradigm, which comprehends humanity as the internal, intrinsic and inherent state of every human being, as the *locus* of human nature. I will thus try in this essay to describe this specific early modern turn from a purely theological to an immanent understanding of the 'humanity' of human beings. For this purpose, 'human nature' is understood as human needs, desires and actions in the world. For the first paradigm, I will use the analytic concept of *humanitas Christiana*, while the second will be described as *humanitas politica*.

At the heart of the following analysis are the political writings *Institutio Principis Christiani* ("Education of a Christian Prince" from 1516) and *Querela Pacis* ("The Complaint of Peace" from 1517)⁵ by probably the most important humanist author, 'the prince of the humanists', Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536).⁶ These two works have been quietly ignored by modern scholars, despite their importance for the ethical system of Erasmus. For instance,

⁴ Rüsen, Jörn, "Homo Humanist? Towards a Universal History of Humanism", in: Mihai I. Spărișu/Jörn Rüsen (ed.), *Exploring Humanity – Intercultural Perspectives on Humanism* (Göttingen 2012), 29–44, p. 34.

⁵ I have used the following editions and translations of the texts: Erasmus Roterodamus, "Institutio Principis Christiani", in *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami IV.1*, ed. by Otto Herding (Amsterdam 1974), 95–219; Erasmus Roterodamus, "Querela Pacis", in *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami IV.2*, ed. by Otto Herding (Amsterdam 1977), 1–100; Erasmus von Rotterdam, *Ausgewählte Schriften 5*, ed. by Werner Welzig (Darmstadt 1968); Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince (1516)*, transl. by Lester K. Born (New York 1963); Erasmus, *The Complaint of Peace. Translated from Querela Pacis (A.D. 1521)*, transl. by Thomas Paynell (London/Chicago 1917) (the latter with numerous translation errors).

⁶ Remer, Gary, *Humanism and the Rethoric of Toleration* (Pennsylvania 1996), 45; Rüsen, *Humanity*, 34.

only few extensive studies exist on the fundamental *Institutio Principis Christiani*: the chapter on Erasmus in Eric Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas* from 1948,⁷ the introduction to the *Institutio* by Otto Herding,⁸ and recently the chapter on Erasmus in my own monograph on the discourses surrounding the concept of *Princeps Christianus* in Early Modern political theory.⁹ The following notes are also an attempt to correct certain simplistic interpretations, which see the *Institutio* and *Querela* merely as statements against the Augustinian theory of *bellum iustum*.¹⁰ Such interpretations totally ignore that Erasmus' peace discourse represents only an application, a concretization of the holistic notions of 'humanity' and 'human nature', which for Erasmus represent the basis of human existence and co-existence.

Erasmus is most appropriate subject for the following case study, not only because of his reputation in the intellectual and political landscape of Europe in the 16th century and later¹¹, but also because he was a 'humanist' – a central concept when dealing with *humanitas* –, and because we can identify in the aforementioned works the simultaneous presence of both paradigms: *humanitas Christiana* and *humanitas politica*. Erasmus was one of the first promoters of political humanity in contradistinction to Christian humanity. This makes it all the more disappointing that important recent anthologies on 'Humanism', 'humankind', or 'humanity' should fail to devote at least a chapter to one of the most important thinkers on 'humanity'.¹²

Stating that Erasmus was a 'humanist' raises several problems. Therefore, I will begin by briefly discussing the humanist phenomenon in Early Modern Europe. After that, I will approach his political writings in order to show what made him a 'humanist', and to describe his understanding of *humanitas*. I will finish with some brief, final considerations.

⁷ Voegelin, Eric, *Collected Works*, vol. 22 (Columbia et al. 1998), 88–109; German version: Voegelin, Eric, *Die Ordnung der Vernunft*, Occasional Papers XXIX, ed. by Peter J. Opitz (München 2006).

⁸ Herding, Otto, "Institutio Principis Christiani. Einleitung", in *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami IV.1*. (Amsterdam 1974), 95–130.

⁹ Grigore, Mihai-D., *Neagoe Basarab – Princeps Christianus. Christianitas-Semantik im Vergleich mit Erasmus, Luther und Machiavelli (1513–1523)* (Frankfurt M. 2015), 193–231.

¹⁰ Wedel, Christine Christ-von, *Erasmus of Rotterdam. Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto 2013), 225–235.

¹¹ On the popularity of Erasmus see Augustijn, Cornelis, *Erasmus. His Life, Works, and Influence* (Toronto et al. 1991); Galle, Christoph, *Hodie nullus – cras maximus. Berühmtwerden und Berühmtsein im frühen 16. Jahrhundert am Beispiel des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Münster 2013). For the biography of Erasmus see Halkin, Léon E., *Erasmus von Rotterdam. Eine Biographie* (Zürich 1989); Rummel, Erika, *Erasmus* (New York 2004).

¹² Rösen, Jörn (ed.), *Approaching Humankind. Towards an Intercultural Humanism* (Göttingen 2013); Radasanu, Andrea (ed.), *In Search of Humanity. Essays in Honor of Clifford Orwin* (London 2015).

Humanism and Humanists

What we today call ‘humanism’ is, like every other major historical phenomenon, a difficult concept to define.

There is in fact no essential ‘thing’ that we could call ‘humanism’– in the sense of a definite philosophical, practical and terminological system. At the same time, the concept itself is of late occurrence. It was first used by the theologian Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer (1766–1848) in his educational manifesto *Der Streit des Philanthropinismus und des Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungsunterrichts unsrer Zeit*.¹³ The noun ‘humanism’ also appeared for the first time in English in the 19th century, influenced by German usage.¹⁴ Yet the appropriate approach to humanism would be use the plural form ‘humanisms’, meaning a multitude of forms and intellectual or cultural interests, scientific and scholarly patterns etc. that could be designated as ‘humanist’.¹⁵

However, the use of the singular is surely legitimate in view of the method applied by the ‘humanists’ in their work with the sources of classical and late antiquity as well as early Christianity.¹⁶ They developed a critical-philological approach in order to gain from their texts the information they thought they needed to revive morality and to renew the moral system.¹⁷ The scholarly preoccupation of the humanists had as its practical goal an improved human coexistence that would deliver happiness either on a Christian-theological or a philosophical-ethical basis.¹⁸ In this sense, as a common moral program grounded on education (*educatio*) and knowledge of the past (*eruditio*), and because this program brought

¹³ Niethammer, Friedrich Immanuel, *Der Streit des Philanthropinismus und Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungsunterrichtes unserer Zeit* (Jena 1808). See also Kristeller, Paul O., *Humanismus und Renaissance I. Die antiken und mittelalterlichen Quellen* (München 1974), 16; Keßler, Eckhard, *Der Humanismus und die Entstehung der modernen Wissenschaft* (Pforzheim 1998), 2. On the educational programme of so-called 19th century ‘classical humanism’ see Bommel, Bas van, *Classical Humanism and the Challenge of Modernity. Debates on Classical Education in 19th-Century Germany* (Berlin 2015).

¹⁴ Copson, Andrew, “What is Humanism?”, in: Andrew Copson/A. C. Grayling (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism* (London 2015), 1.

¹⁵ Münkler, Herfried, “Die politischen Ideen des Humanismus”, in: Iring Fetscher/Herfried Münkler (ed.), *Pipers Handbuch der politischen Ideen*, vol. 5 (München 1993), 553–613, p. 553–556; Buck, August, “Der italienische Humanismus”, in Notker Hammerstein/August Buck (ed.), *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte 1* (München 1996), 1–56, p. 1.

¹⁶ Augustijn, *Influence*, 17.

¹⁷ Rummel, Erika, “Scholasticism and Biblical Humanism in Early Modern Europe”, in: Erika Rummel (ed.), *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus* (Leiden 2008), 1–14, p. 1f.

¹⁸ Evans, Robert, “European Humanism: East and West”, in: Mihai I. Spărișu/Jörn Rüsen (ed.), *Exploring Humanity – Intercultural Perspectives on Humanism* (Göttingen 2012), 145–151, p. 145f.

together different intellectual circles all over Europe,¹⁹ we can speak of ‘humanism’ in the singular.

Concerning this point, let us consider the definition of ‘Humanism’ given by *The Willey Blackwell Handbook of Humanism*:

Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more human society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.²⁰

To speak of ‘one Humanism’ as a non-religious, ‘not theistic’ position is a limited approach at best.²¹ Such a definition may seem philosophically quite appealing, but it is false when humanism is considered from a historical perspective. We cannot speak of an international, synchronically and diachronically all-embracing ‘Humanism’. Furthermore, the European Byzantine, late medieval and early modern European ‘humanisms’ were certainly profoundly religious.²² The possibly most influential humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, to whom the *Handbook* does not refer at any point, is the best example of deeply religious humanist views, as I will further try to show.

‘Humanism’ is etymologically linked with the term *humaniora* used by Cicero to define what later in the European Renaissance was known as *artes liberales* or – to use the terms of humanist sources – as *studia humanitatis*.²³ The term ‘humanist’, *humanista*, in 15th-century Italy designated mainly a teacher or preceptor, but it could also refer generally to anyone who had enjoyed an education following the high standards of Greek or Roman antiquity.²⁴ Nevertheless, not only scholarship and education were the goals of the humanist programme of *studia humanitatis*. As already mentioned, the main goal was an ethical and hence a political one. It is no coincidence that Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics* assumed a central place in the teaching canon of the humanist circles in the late Middle Ages

¹⁹ See for instance Furey, Constance M., *Erasmus, Contarini, and the Religious Republic of Letters* (Cambridge 2006), 166.

²⁰ Copson, *Humanism*, 6.

²¹ Copson, *Humanism*, 4.

²² Robbins, Keith (ed.), *Religion and Humanism. Papers Read at the Eighteenth Summer Meeting and the Nineteenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesial History Society* (Oxford 1981).

²³ *Studia humanitatis* consisted, since the 15th century, of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and morals (Kristeller, *Humanismus*, 17f.). See also Robert Black, “Cicero in the Curriculum of Italian Renaissance Grammar Schools”, in *Ciceroniana* 9 (1996), 105–120; Susan Meld Shell, “‘More [Than] Human.’ Kant on Liberal Education and the Public Use of Reason”, in Andrea Radasanu (ed.), *In Search for Humanity. Essays in Honor of Clifford Orwin* (Lanham et al. 2015), 449–464, p. 452.

²⁴ Münkler, *Humanismus*, 554.

and the early modern period. In his recent survey of global ethics, Kenan Malik claims that, the humanists “established a new model of intellectual excellence that emphasized literature, philology, oratory, poetry, ethics, and politics”, but also that they “were enthused less by Aristotle’s dry treatises than by Plato’s stylish dialogues”.²⁵ This is to misstate the facts. Aristotle’s works on poetics, ethics, and politics must in fact be considered a prime source of inspiration – more important than Plato’s works – for the humanist program and in consequence were taught extensively.²⁶ According to the Florentine scholar and statesman Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), the *humanitas* of the humanist program meant both scholarship and education, but also goodness as a political idea of human coexistence, interaction and interdependence: “Because not only the virtue usually called goodness is contained in this concept of *humanitas*, but also experience and scholarship.”²⁷

Erasmus of Rotterdam enjoyed an education not only in the humanities, but also in spiritual and theological subjects, as well as gaining political experience as counsellor to the Bishop of Cambrai and to the *Dauphin* Charles (the future Emperor Charles V). In 1487, Erasmus entered the monastic community of the Augustine Canons in the Dutch town of Steyn, near Gouda. There he came into contact with ‘humanist concerns’ (*humanistische Interessen*):²⁸ the friars enjoyed the intellectual life of the *litterae*, practiced poetry and rhetoric, and cultivated the art of correspondence (*ars epistolandi*). In this exciting intellectual atmosphere, Erasmus wrote an important humanist work, *De contemptu mundi* (before 1493), in which he displays his humanist erudition as well as his theological and moral views on human existence.²⁹ In Erasmus’s understanding of humanism, scholarship and good education are forms of Christian edification. In this view, those practices are ‘humanist’ that form or empower social and rational human nature and help it to evolve – in Aristotelian sense – towards virtue, whereby ‘virtue’ is understood as a quality of human performance and policy.³⁰

²⁵ Kenan Malik, *The Quest for a Moral Compass. A Global History of Ethics*, London 2014, p. 164.

²⁶ Grigore, *Princeps Christianus*, pp. 200f.

²⁷ Apud Eckhard Kessler, *Das Problem des frühen Humanismus. Seine philosophische Bedeutung bei Coluccio Salutati* (München 1968), p. 44.

²⁸ To Humanism in the Low Countries see the new anthology of Jozef Ijsewijn’s older studies, *Humanism in the Low Countries*, selected and edited by Gilbert Tournoy, Leuven 2015.

²⁹ Remer, *Humanism*, pp. 43f; Grigore, *Princeps Christianus*, pp. 201f.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Translation, Introduction, and Commentary by Sarah Broadie, Christopher Rowe (Oxford 2002), Book I, Chapter 13 and Book II, Chapter 2; Aristotle, *Politics*, transl. by Carnes Lord (Chicago 2013), Book I. See Berndt Hamm, “Augustinus-Begeisterung und Augustinismus in der Reformation”, in Kenneth Hagen (ed.), *Augustine, the Harvest and Theology (1300–1650)* (Leiden et al. 1990), 127–135, p. 158f, 195; Ekkehard Mühlenberg, “Das Argument: ‘Die Wahrheit erweist sich in Übereinstimmung mit den Vätern.’ Entstehung und Schlagkraft”, in Leif Grane et al. (ed.), *Auctoritas Patrum II. Neue Beiträge zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (Mainz 1998), 153–169, p. 166–169.

Humanitas and political *concordia*

In the preface of the *Institutio Principis Christiani*, dedicated to Emperor Charles V (1530–1556), Erasmus wrote that he considered himself a *theologus*,³¹ a theologian. Modern scholars invariably refer to him as a ‘humanist’. Both designations are of course legitimate, since they are not mutually exclusive. Regarding Erasmus, one can present two arguments to that effect:

On the one hand, Erasmus develops his whole program with the theological goal of human redemption. He argues that only through an education based on classical philosophers and the Church Fathers, one can edify a plenary, cultivated, re-established humanity as intended by the incarnation of Christ himself.³² As Jacob Vance has argued,

[...] Erasmus steeped himself in the study and translation of numerous Church Fathers, and he had a particular interest in patristic exegesis on Saint Paul. We know that by that time, he had read pseudo-Dionysius, Origen, Cyprien, Ambrose, and Jerome in Italy. Together with humanists such as the earlier Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457) and Jacques Lefevre D’Etaples (c. 1450–1536), Erasmus worked to rehabilitate Saint Paul as an Apostle of central importance during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.³³

The theological message in the writings of Erasmus is clear. In his *De contemptu mundi*, Erasmus has no problem replacing the Christian *felicitas* (‘happiness’) with the pagan, Epicurean term *voluptas* (‘pleasure’) and making it a vehicle for Christian morals, associating for instance the monastic ascetical environment with a *paradisus voluptati* (‘paradise of pleasures’) and with a *hortus deliciarum* (‘garden of delights’).³⁴ Erudition (*eruditio*) was for Erasmus meaningless without its fulfilment in piety (*pietas*). When praising the privileges of education, Erasmus recurs to the well-known homily of Basil the Great (330–379) *Ad adolescentes* and shows how important letters are for an authentic Christian life.³⁵ Such an

³¹ “[E]go theologus inclytum et integerrimum principem [instituit]”, Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institutio*, 134.

³² Fritz Caspari, “Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism”, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 8/1 (1947), 78–106; Grigore, *Princeps Christianus*, 213–227.

³³ Jacob Vance, *Secrets. Humanism, Mysticism, and Evangelism in Erasmus of Rotterdam, Bishop Guillaume Briçonnet, and Marguerite de Navarre*, Leiden/Boston 2014, p. 21. On the humanist preoccupation with the Church Fathers see Charles S. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers. Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance*, Albany 1977.

³⁴ R. Bultot, “Érasme, Épicure et le *De contemptu mundi*”, in Joseph Coppens (ed.), *Scrinium Erasmi* II (Leiden 1947), 205–238, p. 237; Paul Mestwerdt, *Die Anfänge des Erasmus. Humanismus und devotio moderna* (Leipzig 1917), pp. 234f.

³⁵ August Buck, *Humanismus. Seine europäische Entwicklung in Dokumenten und Darstellungen* (Freiburg/München 1987), p. 39.

approach dissociates Erasmus from basic humanism, making him a so-called ‘biblical humanist’.³⁶

On the other hand, we encounter a whole trend of humanist approaches (not only in Erasmus’ writings), which in dealing with the *bonae litterae* or *politiores litterae* (good letters, cultivated letters) of classical philosophy aim in fact at the Christian *pietas*. The *bonae litterae* are seen as the prelude of the *sacrae litterae* (sacred writings, Holy Scriptures), in the same way as erudition is seen to precede piety and heavenly happiness.³⁷ The human ideal of Erasmus is the *homo duplex*, i.e. the ‘two-fold man’, erudite and pious.³⁸ However, Erasmus himself considers that in this way the heavenly Kingdom of God *depends directly* on functional human associations on Earth, capable of offering a viable infrastructure for education: and this means, of course, political, spiritual, literary or even economical education. Uncultivated, illiterate and vulgar people, *vulgus* as Erasmus calls them, cannot make good inhabitants of *patria celesta* (heavenly Fatherland). Only citizens of an earthly, well-organized political body, a *populus* – seen as partner of the ruler in the social contract – can do that.³⁹

This distinction between *vulgus* and *populus* is one of the most characteristic features of the political humanity intended by Erasmus. The *populus* represents the ground, the foundation of the political body and the place where lordship (*principatus*) can evolve and develop into a good, proper, Christian lordship (*principatus Christianus*), avoiding degeneration into abusive tyranny. The *populus* – understood as the community of free decision-makers within the state – is the most important political factor in establishing a *corpus rei publicae*.⁴⁰ However, the people have to be educated in order to do this. Education provides both citizens (subjects) and political elites, so it is indispensable for any polity. In his argument, Erasmus repeatedly refers to Aristotle:

In his *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes between a prince and a tyrant on the basis that the one is concerned with the state and the other pursues his own ends. No matter what the prince is deliberating, he always keeps this one thing in mind: “Is this to the advantage of

³⁶ Cornelis Augustijn, “Erasmus”, in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 10 (1993), 1–18, pp. 2–4. On the whole situation of ‘biblical humanism’ in 16th-century Europe see Timothy J. Wengert, *Philip Melancthon’s Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam*, Oxford 1998; Erika Rummel (ed.), *Biblical Humanism and Scolasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, Leiden/Boston 2008.

³⁷ Robert W. Scribner, “The Social Thought of Erasmus”, in *Journal of Religious History* 6 (1970), 3–26, p. 7. Augustijn, *Influence*, 25, 75.

³⁸ Constant Matheeußen, “*Religio und Litterae* im Menschenideal des Erasmus”, in Joseph Coppens (ed.), *Scrinium Erasmianum I* (Leiden 1969), 143–163, pp. 353, 363.

³⁹ Grigore, *Princeps Christianus*, 216f.

⁴⁰ Herding, *Institutio*, 126.

all my subjects?” A tyrant only considers whether a thing will contribute to his cause. A prince is vitally concerned with the needs of his subjects [...]. On the other hand, if a tyrant ever chances to do something good for his subjects, he turns it to his own personal gain. Those who look out for their people only in so far as it redounds to their personal advantage hold their subjects in the same status as the uneducated common man (*vulgus hominum*) does his horse or ass. For these men take care of their animals, but all the care they give them is judged from the advantage to themselves, not to the animals. But anyone who despoils the people with his rapacity, or wracks them with his cruelty, or subjects them to all sorts of perils to satisfy his ambition, considers free citizens even cheaper than the uneducated common folk (*vulgus*) value their draft animals or the fencing master his gladiators.⁴¹

Therefore, the main characteristic of the *populus* as a body of political subjects or citizens is, according to Erasmus, the fact that the *populus* is the partner of the good ruler in a well-functioning political organism. Rulers who neglect the virtues of generosity, considerate benevolence and good will toward their subjects, *dehumanise* them and abuse them in an unworthy, *in-humane* manner, in the same way that vulgar people (*vulgus hominum*) abuse and misuse their animals. Erasmus thus argues that humanity is a performative, conscious act on the part of humans for the benefit of other humans, in an all-embracing dimension of shared humanity.

On the other hand, in his writings Erasmus makes negative references to the *vulgus*,⁴² in order to contrast it to the positively connoted *populus*, with all its aspects related to political life. Education is thus the criterion of distinction between the two Erasmian categories. When Erasmus speaks of *vulgus* or *plebs*, he does not necessarily mean social categories such as common people, poor, peasants, artisans or vagrants. He means all those – elites included –, who act without education and virtue, like an animal mob, animated by instinctive desires (*voluptates plebejae*)⁴³ and poisoned by dubious, questionable views (*venena vulgarium opinionum*).⁴⁴

⁴¹ “Id vt compendio dicam, hac nota principem a tyranno distinguit in politicis Aristoteles, quod his suis studet commodis, ille reipublicae. Princeps quacunq; de re deliberans illud semper in animo spectat, num expediat vniuersis ciuibus. Tyrannus illud consyderat, an sibi conducatur. Princeps etiam suum agens negocium tamen potissimum suorum spectat vtilitatem. Contra tyrannus si quando benemeretur de ciuibus, tamen hoc ipsum ad priuatam suam refert vtilitatem. Qui suos eatenus curant, quatenus expedit propriis commoditatibus, ii non alio loco ciues suos habent quam vulgus hominum equos et asinos. Nam hos quoque curant illi, sed omnem curationem suis, non illorum vsibus metiuntur. Caeterum qui rapacitate deglubunt populum aut crudelitate laniant aut ob ambitionem suam periculis omnibus obiiciunt, ii peiore loco ciues habent liberos quam vulgus empta iumenta aut lanistae sua mancipia”, Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institvtio*, 154; compare with translation Desiderius Erasmus, *Education*, 161f.

⁴² Voegelin, *Ordnung der Vernunft*, p. 20.

⁴³ Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institvtio*, 144.

⁴⁴ Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institvtio*, 140.

Erasmus considers it is important to decouple that which makes up a human being, its humanity – *humanitas* –, from its transcendent and external points of reference. Humanity is to him something that everybody *potentially* or *virtually* possesses. Christian humanity is what educated, pious Christians possess: “Education exerts an extremely powerful influence, as Plato says, so that a man who has been trained in the right (*homo recte instructus*) develops into a sort of divine creature, while on the other hand, a person who has received a perverted training degenerates into a monstrous sort of savage beast”,⁴⁵ Erasmus states in *Institutio Principis Christiani*. Finally, it is education that leads to the rise of humanity: by birth, every human being possesses humanity *in nuce*, potentially, but this humanity has to be educated and cultivated in order to develop to its full extent. This association of humanity with biological existence given by natural birth as a member of the human species transforms Erasmian ‘humanity’ into an immanent category.

The main argument found in both *Institutio Principis Christiani* and *Querela Pacis* is that no political association, indeed no human coexistence, can succeed in the absence of concord or harmony (*concordia*) between humans, taken as individuals of the same ‘species’. People have to be educated in order to be able to comprehend their common humanity, leading to equality, good will and social solidarity. According to Erasmus, as well as to Aristotle, there is no functional political body without peace and harmony. There is also no international community without universal peace, a thought that would later be developed by Immanuel Kant in his pamphlet *Zum ewigen Frieden (Perpetual Peace)*.⁴⁶

Erasmus attempts not only to show how important concord is for all forms of human forms, but also that concord is deeply rooted in human nature. Therefore, he draws on observations made in the study of nature.

Animals destitute of reason live with their own kind in a state of social amity. Elephants herd together; sheep and swine feed in flocks; cranes and crows take their flight in troops; storks, masters of dutifulness, have their public meetings; dolphins defend each other by

⁴⁵ “Tantum vim habet educatio, ut Plato scripserit hominem recte institutum in diuinum quoddam animal euadere; contra perperam educatum in immanissimam quandam degenerare beluam”, Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institutio*, 188.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf. Texte zur Rezeption 1796–1900*, ed. by Manfred Buhr, Steffen Dietzsch, Leipzig 1984; English translation Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace. A Philosophic Essay*, transl. by W. Hastie, on <https://librivox.org/perpetual-peace-by-immanuel-kant/> (accessed on 4 January 2016). See about Erasmus’ part in the Kantian thought on peace Volker Gerhardt, *Immanuel Kants Entwurf ‘Zum ewigen Frieden’. Eine Theorie der Politik*, Darmstadt 1995, p. 24.

mutual assistance; and everybody knows that both ants and bees have respectively established by general agreement a little friendly community.⁴⁷

The same argument occurs in the *Institutio*, where Erasmus stated that

dragons, panthers, lions, and all the other beasts that are condemned on the charge of savageness do not rage one against the other, but beasts of like characteristics (*suo generis*) are safe together. But the tyrant, who is a human among his conspecific humans (*homo in homines*), turns his bestial cruelty against his fellow humans and fellow citizens.⁴⁸

Erasmus continues with observations regarding human beings:

[...] Yet to man, whom, of all created beings, concord would most become, and who stands most in need of it, neither nature, so powerful and irresistible in every thing else, can reconcile; neither human compacts unite; neither the great advantages which would evidently arise from unanimity combine, nor the actual feeling and experience of the dreadful evils of discord cordially endear. To all men the human form is the same, the sound made by the organs of utterance similar; and while other species of animals differ from each other chiefly in the shape of their bodies, to men alone is given a reasoning power, which is indeed common to all men, yet in a manner so exclusive, that it is not at the same time common to any other living creature. To this distinguished being is also given the power of speech, the most conciliating instrument of social connection and cordial love. Throughout the whole race of men are sown by nature the seeds of virtue, and of knowledge. From nature, man receives a mild and gentle disposition, so prone to reciprocal benevolence that he delights to be loved for the pleasure of being loved, without any view to interest; and feels a satisfaction in doing good, without a wish or prospect of remuneration. This disposition to do disinterested good is natural to man [...]. Hence even the common people, in the ordinary language of daily conversation, denominate whatever is connected with mutual good will (*benevolentia*), humane (*humanum*); so that the word humanity (*humanitas*) no longer describes man's nature, merely in a physical sense; but signifies humane manners, or a conduct, worthy the nature of man.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Animantia rationis expertia in suo quaeque genere ciuilliter concorditerque degunt. Armentatim viuunt elephanti, gregatim pascuntur sues et oues, turmatim volant grues et graculi, habent sua comitia ciconiae, pietatis etiam magistrae, mutuis officiis sese tuentur deplhini. Nota est formicarum et apum inter ipsas concursus politia", Erasmus Roterodamus, *Querela*, 62; compare with transl. Desiderius Erasmus, *Complaint*, 4.

⁴⁸ "Dracones pardi leones caeteraque immanitatis damnata crimine animantia a suo genere temperant et tuta est inter feras similitudo morum. At tyrannus homo in homines, cuius in ciues potissimum feritatem suam exercet", Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institutio*, 157; compare transl. Desiderius Erasmus, *Education*, 166.

⁴⁹ "Solos homines, quos omnium maxime decebat unanimitas quibusque cum primis opus est ea, neque natura tam aliis in rebus potens et efficax conciliat, nec institutio coniungit, nec tot ex consensu profecturae

In consequence, human nature is dignified by the conduct of every human individual and *not* by external instances like God and Church. Nature, Erasmus states in the *Querela*, offers everything that is needed to create concord: “Thus it appears, in the various ways nature has taught man her first great lesson of love and union.”⁵⁰ Only later in the *Querela Pacis* do arguments occur pertaining to Christian theology, which grounds human communities on the sacrifice of Christ and on Eucharistic community, not on the biological/natural order. It is striking for an author who considers himself a *theologus* that reasons based on the observation of nature prevail in the order of argumentation over those that are purely theological. Of course, the natural order is to any theologian in the 16th century – and thus to Erasmus – an image of the divine creative power of God: but Erasmus’s line of argument, which begins with issues from the observation of nature and only later links them with the theological discourse, is still quite unusual and deserves mention.

It is no coincidence that, in the first of the above quotations, Erasmus cites bees as an example of animals forming associations; in the second quotation, he insists that only men have the gift of rationality and speech or language, in order to separate them from animals and insects. This is Aristotle’s argument in his *Politics*. As Aristotle affirmed, even though bees were able to build communities, this fact did not necessarily made them into state-building political beings (*zoa politika*). As Aristotle made clear, this was because the medium of politics was speech, and this was given only to men by their nature:

And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another, but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of

commoditates conglutinant, nec tantorum denique malorum sensus et experientia in mutuum amorem redigit. Figura communis omnium, vox eadem; et cum caetera animantium genera corporum formis potissimum inter se different, vni homini indita vis rationis, quae ita sit illis inter ipsos communis, vt cum nullo sit reliquorum animantium communis, vni huic animanti sermo datus, praecipuus necessitudinum conciliator. Insita sunt communiter disciplinarum ac virtutum semina, ingenium mite placidumque et ad mutuam benevolentiam propensum, vt per se iuuer amari et iucundum sit de aliis benemereri [...]. Hinc est videlicet, quod vulgus quicquid ad mutuam benevolentiam pertinet humanum appellat (vt humanitatis vocabulum non iam naturam nobis declaret, sed mores hominis natura dignos”, Erasmus Roterodamus, *Querela*, 63f; compare to transl. Desiderius Erasmus, *Complaint*, 5f.

⁵⁰ “Tot argumentis natura docuit pacem concordiamque”, Erasmus Roterodamus, *Querela*, 64. This is not new, it is only an argument, Erasmus already formulated in his other work on the peace’s benefits, *Dulce bellum inexpertis* from 1515, Peter G. Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus. Erasmus’ Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe*, Toronto et al. 2009, pp. 73f, 77f.

man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.⁵¹

In this way, Aristotle laid out an educational *desideratum* that culminated in the construction of the perfect political organism. Education is required because speech – as a medium of political virtue and ethics, as well as a communicational interface of human coexistence⁵² – is a complex instrument in which someone has to be instructed in order to display maximal efficiency. Many beings are able to articulate sounds to reveal instinctive desires, but only political subjects, citizens, are capable of communication through speech. Speech distinguishes men as citizens, state-building beings, from barbarians and slaves, who are not capable of establishing a political body. Barbarians do not have education, so they do not have a (political) language.⁵³ Speech/language is for Aristotle a dimension of *human* reflection, discernment, learning, sharing and action.

Erasmus takes up the educational program laid out by Aristotle and adapts it in his own political and pedagogical thought. He no longer speaks of barbarians and slaves. In contrast to Aristotle, Erasmus works with a more inclusive definition of humanity, according to which *all* humans are able to learn to communicate and associate themselves in political organisms. Therefore, their human potential profits from their capacity to be educated. Erasmus's main distinction is not that between citizens and barbarians or slaves, as it was for Aristotle, but that between educated and uneducated people. On the other hand, for Erasmus, speech constitutes the main argument in favour of the divinity and privilege of the human being: the human being is the crown of the entire creation because it shares with God, the Creator, the skill of speech, of communication, of *logos*. Therefore, the nature of all humans – because all humans are capable of speech – is divine. In this way, Erasmus never forsakes his theological concerns in his anthropology, but he does make a decisive step towards strengthening the idea of human nature *per se* as a quality of all humans independent of their religious beliefs or social status.

The natural potential in human ontology, speech as the levelling medium of socio-political balance, and the quality of mutual good will are for Erasmus not only intensified by

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, on Perseus.org, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg035.perseus-eng1:1.1253a> (accessed on 26.10.2015).

⁵² Mihai-D. GRIGORE, Die ethische Handlungsgemeinschaft als Voraussetzung der Hermeneutik. Zur Dialektik des Handelns und Verstehens, in: Christoph Ernst, Walter Sparr, Hedwig Wagner (eds.), *Kulturhermeneutik. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zum Umgang mit kultureller Differenz* (München 2008), 455–472.

⁵³ Mihai-D. Grigore, “Der Mensch zwischen Gott und Staat. Überlegungen zu politischen Formen im Christentum”, in *Studii Teologice* 6/1 (2010), new series, 105–175, p. 110f.

education, but also embodied in the laws of the state. This is why Erasmus expressly links the natural disposition of good will in conspecific beings to the practice of law. Both good will and law are signs and vehicles of *humanitas*. Erasmus writes in this sense in *Institutio Principis Christianis* about the ‘humanity of law’ (*humanitas legum*).⁵⁴ The law and its humanity, as a sign of human policy and politics, attenuates the unnatural quality of the state, because state and political hierarchy between humans are actually results of inequality and are *against* the natural law (*jus naturale*). Natural law made all men free, equal and solidary with each other. Authority, servitude, power and lordship are typical human phenomena, and that is why they count as the law of nations (*jus gentium*): “Nature created all men equal, and slavery was superimposed on nature, which even the laws of pagans recognized”,⁵⁵ affirms Erasmus in the first book of *Institutio Principis Christiani* with regard to the Roman jurists Ulpianus and Florentinus.⁵⁶ In this case, all humans can do is to organize themselves according to their humanity, i.e. good will, solidarity, human laws and of course moral Christian conduct.

In this context, it would be interesting to ask what impact such ideal and theoretical considerations had on the real political life of Europe in Erasmus’s times.

Let us take the case of the *Institutio Principis Christiani*, because it is older and more fundamental than *Querela*, which in many regards only repeated and deepened ideas of the first.

According to a letter that he himself wrote, Erasmus began work on the *Institutio* in 1515 and finished it in March 1516.⁵⁷ The book was published that same year by Froben in Basel and

⁵⁴ Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institutio*, 199. See also Otto Schottenloher, “Zur *humanitas legum* bei Erasmus”, in *Festschrift Hermann Heimpel I* (Göttingen 1971), 667–683, p. 671.

⁵⁵ “Cum natura genuerit omnes homines liberos et praeter naturam inducta sit servitus, quod ethnicorum etiam leges fetentur...”, Erasmus Roterodamus, *Institutio*, 165; transl. Desiderius Erasmus, *Education*, 177.

⁵⁶ Grigore, *Der Mensch*, 112f. Ulpianus was the first to systemize the theory of natural law and the law of nations, stating that natural law was specific and common to all beings and postulated by nature itself, while the law of nations was a human product and characteristic exclusively for human beings: “Ius naturale est, quod natura omnia animalia docuit: nam jus istud non humani generis proprium, sed omnium animalium [...]. Ius gentium est, quo gentes humanae utuntur. Quod a naturali recedere facere intellegere licet, quia illud omnibus animalibus, hoc solis hominibus inter se commune sit” (*Corpus iuris civilis*, vol. I, Institutiones / Digesta, ed. by Theodor Mommsen, Paul Krueger, Hildesheim, 25 1993, chapter 1, p. 29). Natural law consisted of the laws of nature, for instance freedom and equality. The law of nations consisted on the contrary of lack of freedom, inequality, and servitude. Lordship and political power were, according to the Roman jurist Florentinus, against nature and its laws: “Servitus est constitutio iuris gentium, qua quis dominio alieno contra natura subicitur” (*Corpus Iuris Civilis I*, chapter 4, p. 35). On Roman Law in Renaissance humanism see Quirinus Breen, “Renaissance Humanism and the Roman Law”, in: Quirinus Breen, *Christianity and Humanism. Studies in the History of Ideas*, collected and published in his honor by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Heiko A. Oberman, Nelson Peter Ross, Grand Rapids Michigan 1968, 183–199.

⁵⁷ Ludwig Enthoven, “Über die *Institutio Principis Christiani* des Erasmus. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie des Fürstenerziehung”, in *Neue Jahrbücher für klassisches Altertum, Geschichte und Literatur und für Pädagogik* 24 (1909), 313–329, p. 312; Herding, Einleitung, p. 107.

was an instant bestseller.⁵⁸ In the same year, the book was reprinted without license in Leuven by Dirk Martens, which angered Erasmus extremely (“libellum de Principe, quemfurtim excudit interim cum ego abesse in Anglia”).⁵⁹ Further editions followed: the third was published by Badius Ascensius in Paris (1517), and Froben in Basel published a fourth revised edition in 1518. Altogether 33 Latin editions of the *Institutio* are known, accompanied by 21 translations into different European languages.⁶⁰ The first Froben edition was dedicated by Erasmus – in his quality of preceptor, *consiliarius*, of the young prince – to the future Charles V.⁶¹ The resonance of the *Institutio* at the European Courts was quite impressive. It was used for the education of the young princes, the future rulers of their countries: Charles V, Ferdinand I, Henry VIII and Edward VI read it.⁶² Of course, that so many rulers read the book does not necessarily imply that they also put its ideas into practice.

There were also many critics of the work. The French humanist Guillaume Budé (Budaeus) (1468–1540) described the *Institutio* as a thin, insubstantial book, full of superfluous speculations (“tenuis loqui, nimirum anxias ac nimirum subtiles argutias”).⁶³ Other critics accused Erasmus of pacifism, because of his emphasis on concord and solidarity in the policy of states. The theologians at the University of Paris warned the European political class not to be ‘infested’ by Erasmian pacifism, which was endangering the political and social order (“enervat omnem politiam”). The Parisians considered Erasmus’s ideas on peace an abstruse heresy. This virulent critique moved Erasmus to publish in 1531 an apology of the *Institutio*, in which he softened many of his controversial and contested assertions.⁶⁴ We can see from both criticism and popularity, that the *Institutio Principis Christiani* garnered a wide interest in the European political and intellectual circles of the 16th century and thereafter.

Conclusions

What I have been trying to point out is that, in the two most important political works of Erasmus, we can witness a transition from the classical Christian political anthropology,

⁵⁸ Augustijn, *Influence*, 40; Augustijn, *Erasmus*, 2.

⁵⁹ *Opus Epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, 12 vol., ed. by Preserved Smith Allen (Oxford 1906–1958), Letter 332 to Pieter Gillis from 7 Mai, 1515.

⁶⁰ Herding, *Institutio*, pp. 101–104, 114f.

⁶¹ Münkler, *Humanismus*, 592.

⁶² Herding, *Institutio*, p. 103; Ludwig Schrader, “Der Herrscher nach Erasmus von Rotterdam”, in Hans Hecker, *Der Herrscher. Leitbild und Abbild in Mittelalter und Renaissance* (Düsseldorf 1990), 179–201, p. 184f.

⁶³ Apud Herding, *Institutio*, 99. For Erasmus’ controversial relation to Budaeus see David O. McNeil, *Guillaume Budé and Humanism in the Reign of Francis I*, Genève 1975, pp.61–76.

⁶⁴ Herding, *Institutio*, 108–110.

focused on humanity as a Christian form, to a mundane (a precursory world-centred form of secularism) anthropology focusing on humanity as a sort of biological given.⁶⁵

Erasmus remains a theologian and considers mere humanity as only a preliminary, undeveloped form of Christian humanity. He gives priority to the latter, regarding it as an improved, educated and cultivated form of the former. In other words, all people possess humanity, but not all of them possess Christian humanity. This performative aspect – i.e. somebody has to perform something in order to gain a reward – in the deconstruction of the human being – i.e. the humanity of men is dependent on their (moral) performance – is typical of the pre-modern political theory centred on Christian theology. According to this pattern, humanity is related to external factors like God, who creates humans and humanity, like Christ, who intervenes to redeem humankind, or like the Church, with its intercessory power to administer good and evil on Earth in the name of God.

In Erasmus' political writings, we can discern a turn from an externally determined humanity toward an internally given one. In both the *Institutio* and *Querela*, for instance, the Church does not play any important part. Moreover, the arguments from the observation of nature take precedence over those of theological speculation. Two interdependent kinds of *humanitas* are in evidence here. On one hand, there is *humanitas politica*, based on the similarity, solidarity and common interest of all humans in order to create an earthly basis of coexistence, communication and harmony. The realization of political humanity on earth is the first step toward Christian humanity (*Christiana humanitas*). Stipulating a political humanity is the modern *momentum* in Erasmus's anthropology. He inverts the priorities and relates the superior idea of Christian humanity to the basic and indispensable general humanity of all people. According to him, Christ addressed this general political humanity, which makes people capable of association, organization and political life, in order to improve it, but not to replace it. Erasmus is discreetly alluding to the fact that all human association forms are capable of creating order and of giving a functional infrastructure for people to organize their earthly life using their natural disposition to solidarity, communication and rules. Christian humanity is indispensable for redemption, which needs a Christian state on Earth in order to prepare the future inhabitants of God's Kingdom in Heaven. Nevertheless, a political humanity is needed in order to ensure the survival of the human race. Of course, Erasmus is still a partisan of the lofty goal of citizenship in the heavenly Kingdom of God – he is and remains a Christian theologian – but, in his political writings, he opens the door for a

⁶⁵ Voegelin, *Ordnung der Vernunft*, pp. 11–17.

broader understanding of the essence of human beings, and this is their naturally given humanity.

Erasmus's and in fact the entire whole humanist programme's main contributions to the conceptual development of *humanitas* may not be that innovative, but had a major impact on the history of 'humanity'. Taking over many arguments from Aristotle, reinforcing, extending, and concretising them, Erasmus links them to an educational and political agenda. Moreover, in this way he shows that 'humanity' is only less a *perfectus* (something closed, completed, done, self-contained) than a *perficiendum* (something still to achieve, to complete, to bring to an end). Humanity is itself a process of becoming aware, edification, and education of natural potential. By stating that 'humanity' is a form of 'humaneness' centred on mutual benevolence, solidarity, and good will – in a single word 'concord' (*concordia*) – Erasmus only opens an intrinsically indissoluble link: "No humanism without humanity, no 'education' without 'compassion', without *humanitarian practice*."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Hubert Cancik, "Europe – Antiquity – Humanism", in: Jörg Rüsen (ed.), *Approaching Humankind. Towards an Intercultural Humanism*, Göttingen/Taipei 2013, 95–118, p. 116. See also Sem Dresden, *Humanismus und Renaissance*, München 1968, p. 237.