

# Ideas that persist for centuries – by Erasmus of Rotterdam, the prince of humanists

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## Abstract

The paper highlights the personality of the founder of European student exchange program ERASMUS (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) Erasmus of Rotterdam. He was one of the leading European humanists and has left a literary legacy of large dimensions. His thoughts, ideas, opinions, and mainly the works have a great benefit for society even today. From 16th century to the present time they are the subject of unchanged interest.

## INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance period a significant stage in human history, favoured and highlighted human abilities to think and to consider, before theories of idealism and religious philosophy. Numerous significant discoveries (Nicolaus Copernicus), and artworks (Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, Albrecht Durer, Holbain) have taken the origin in this period. Many philosophers have appeared on the scene (Thomas More, Machiavelli, Descartes, Volter) as well as the founder of modern human anatomy, Andreas Vesalius. Important place in this period has taken also versatile scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam.

## ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

Dutch theologian, philosopher, thinker and representative of the European Renaissance and Humanism, **Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam** (own name **Gerrit**



Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam with Renaissance Pilaster 1523, painted by his friend Hans Holbein the Younger.

**Gerritsoon**) was born on October 27, 1467 in Rotterdam. (Recent literature reports that he could be born in Goude as **Geert Geertsen**). The date of birth is mentioned in the years 1466/1467.

Details of his birth and childhood are often referred vaguely, especially because he was a child of illegal bundle of priest with middle class woman. His parents died quite early; therefore he gained the school education in monasteries and church schools. In this period – as a monk of Augustinian Order – he recognized his ancient patterns; he got acquainted with the study of ancient literature, philosophy and theology. Thanks to bishop of Cambrai he studied in Paris and in 1502 he became the professor of Louvain. Early school upbringing left a deep internal conviction in his body which was later evident in his views on life. He has never been active priest, although he finished the study of theology completed by the oath of allegiance at the age of 25 years.

## LITERARY WORK

Erasmus of Rotterdam has left a heritage of large dimensions. He has written textbooks and manuals of Latin language, treatises about education and many philosophical and philological works. He has also worked as a translator. The sources of humanist works were not only classic Latin and Greek texts but also the study of art, rhetoric, poetry and ethics. These attributes represented from him a centre of scholarship and education of the nation.

An important moment in his life was a meeting with Thomas More (1478–1535) who became his long-standing friend. They met each other in Paris during their university studies. Erasmus studied diligently to develop his intellect and he acted as an independent scholar.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century his first literary attempts were published. In his works he tried to respect traditions, he did not recognize the formalism of that time and he also offered the **principle of freedom of expression** in every moment. These basic principles of honesty, but also of honour and justice, the ability of foresight and efforts of the public good, Erasmus applies also to the role of Prince, who is considered to be a servant of people (Institutio Principis Christiani, 1516). Erasmus states that the monarch should be an example of moral life, especially in management of the country. He describes an ideal monarch, responsible for his country.

Erasmus was also interested in question about the **education of children**, mainly in children's morals, the role and position of the family in marriage. His famous work Confidential interviews is based on the belief that people are not born educated, but the most strongest facility against the social evil is to obtain training and education not only at a school, but mainly in the family.

*...Education should begin in small children, because they have a good memory, their soul is not loaded with worries, they have an adaptable and formable nature. At an early age they should study the basic of reading, foreign languages and morality, because everything they can use later in their future studies...*

In his most famous work Praise of Folly (Encomium moriae, 1509) he **critically expresses his opinion** on the address of the ruling royal dynasties, nobility and church. Using satirical manners, “mouth of madness”, he expresses the seriousness and mockery to ingrained expressions of that time. This work was dedicated to his friend Thomas More, an English politician and philosopher, one of the founders of utopian socialism and at the same time the author of the famous work Utopia. Moro's name in Latin version, Morus, led Erasmus to make a pun “moros”, which means stupid, foolish and crazy. This satire is also a kind of hidden confession of Erasmus, but all the time vigilantly controlled by “cold” mind.

*...Among the sciences with the highest value are those which are closest to healthy mind. Prominent places belong to lawyers, because of their seriousness. On the other side there are philosophers, who in unison call the profession of lawyers as a donkey occupation and are scoffing at them. And yet, based on these testimonials of these donkeys, all problems are governed by them, whether trivial or serious, but their possessions are still growing...*

*How are thus most profitable science and art, which have the similarities most affinity with madness, then the happiest people are those who have protected themselves to contact with sciences and in all things they have been governed only by the voice of nature...*

The work, which is the result of cognition and knowledge of the author, has overcome boundaries of Middle Ages. Also in other written Latin works he draws attention to his life attitudes and he criticizes illiterates. Erasmus considers the **scholarship as the priority of every nation**.

Edition of the book of the twelve volumes of personal correspondence points on stylistically masterfully written letters in which he represents his views.

His translation work is notable as well. In 1516 he compiled and published a Latin translation of the New Testament with its own comments. Erasmus gained the copyright for this work from Pope in 1521. In this file he introduced today used term **Novum Testamentum** instead *Novum Instrumentum*. This rather critical text was re-published in the years 1522, 1527 and in 1535. Language skills and abilities have rank Erasmus among the **writers of modern philology**.

## TRAVELING THROUGH EUROPE

During his traveling through European countries he recognized a lot of new friends, met with many humanist scholars and philosophers and most influential intellectuals of former Europe. He visited Italy, Holland, England and graduated in Switzerland. The stay in Basel was very important in his life. He acquainted with Johann Froben, with whom he cooperated and who became the courteous publisher of his books.

He met and became a friend with the excellent painter Hans Holbein (1497–1543). Erasmus helped him to entrance to the English gallant circles. Holbein has gained support of the king Henry VII. and became his court painter, painting portraits of the English aristocracy, and particularly women, who were picked for the king as his wives.

## COMMENTS TO REFORMATION

Dutch humanist was considered to be the forerunner of the reformation of the Church. He tried to enforce by versatile sophisticated way based on the study of philosophy, history and rational thinking, **the idea of religious tolerance**. He did not agree with extremist views of reformers and radical procedures, which were presented in the mainstream of the Martin Luther's Reformation.

His humanistic approach (later he became one of the European leaders) was manifested in critical expressing on many religious issues between the Catholic and Protestant Church. In this period of religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants he wrote "An Essay about Free Will".

His attitude and unwillingness to join openly to one of against standing parties led him to weakening of his influence and standing among scholars. He lost many friends, and his influence in society has decreased significantly. He retreated into seclusion and devoted to translating and writing new files.

## LAST YEARS OF LIFE

Last years of life of Erasmus of Rotterdam were bitter, friends with whom he was tied for many years through common views were missing, and also his health was gradually deteriorating. Erasmus of Rotterdam died in 1536 as a 68-year-old in Basel, in the house of his friend Johann Froben. The place of his final rest, despite the fact that till the last moment he was a Catholic, is in the protestant cathedral of Basel. Legacy that he has left by his last wish was used for the edition of his works, and for the support to poor people and students.

## CONCLUSION

Erasmus of Rotterdam – the prince of humanists – as known at that time – was one of the most important European humanists. His thoughts, ideas, opinions, and mainly the works have had and still having a great benefit for the society. From 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present time they are the subject of unchanged interest.

*...It is no coincidence that ideas of continuing education, international communication and tolerance are included in the European student exchange program ERASMUS (EuROpean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students). This important decision by the European Union (1987) allows students to find mobility, to gain knowledge, forms contacts for cooperation and in particular gives the rise to the idea of European solidarity also for the future...*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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