

"Erasmus and Christian Cynicism
as Cultural Context for Toleration"

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Religious toleration is widely considered one of the most important provisions of modern constitutional theory. It is justified in a variety of ways, some of which are theological and some of which are secular. It is well known that in the seventeenth century Spinoza, Bayle, Locke, and Arnold, among many others, argued for some form of religious toleration. There were also a good number of thinkers who pleaded for toleration in the sixteenth century, and one of the most prominent was Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536).¹ He was known for irenicism at the time of the rise of the Reformation, preferring to calm matters rather than heat them. He was known for a sort of toleration such that "Erasmian" came to refer to a person with a pacific attitude. He was also one of the most influential writers of Renaissance humanism, forging one of the models of the European man of letters.²

Erasmus also may have been the single most influential figure in the reintroduction to early modern Europe of the sayings and doings of the ancient Cynics, through his widely reprinted collections of *Adages* and *Apophthegmata*, his translations of Lucian, and his sprinkling of references to the Cynics throughout many of his other works. Cynicism is, of course, the ancient movement associated with Antisthenes, Diogenes of Sinope, Crates, Hipparchia, and a few more names. These were a type of ascetic and moralistic wandering philosophers, perhaps best known for the figure of Diogenes, who lived in a barrel, performed his natural functions in public, carried a wallet and a staff, said what he thought, and told Alexander the Great to get out of his sunlight.³ I intend to bring the two strands of religious toleration and Cynicism in

¹See the annotated bibliography in John Christian Laursen, ed., *Religious Toleration: 'The Variety of Rites' from Cyrus to Defoe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), which starts with Erasmus.

²Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man Of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³See J. C. Laursen, "Cynicism Then and Now", *Iris: European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate*, 1, 2009, 469-482.

Erasmus's work together here, to assess their mutual connections.

Since religious toleration is one of the pillars of modern constitutional theory, exploring the elements of Erasmus's intellectual development that helped him justify it will help us uncover its foundation. There were other elements of his intellectual development that helped him justify toleration, but the one we are going to explore here is Christian Cynicism. Christine Christ-Von Wedel has observed that we need further study of the influence of Plato and the Stoics on Erasmus; but no one has supplied a full assessment of the influence of the ancient Cynics, either.⁴ Christian Cynicism is the recovery of the tradition of ancient Cynicism together with its adaptation to the purposes of Christian culture. Erasmus transmitted many of the sayings of and about ancient Cynics such as Diogenes and Crates, adapting them to Christianity and showing how they belonged together with a package of ideas including peace, intellectual freedom, and toleration.

I am making the argument that the larger background cultural formation of Christian Cynicism was a factor in both of Erasmus's irenic theology and his jurisprudence of toleration. To the extent that a Christian Cynicism can be found in Erasmus's works, to the extent that it was one of his arguments for peace and toleration, and to the extent that religious toleration is one of the pillars of modern constitutional theory, we can think of Erasmus's transmission of Christian Cynicism as a part of the theological foundations of modern constitutional theory.

Christian Cynicism

The idea of adapting ancient Cynicism to Christian purposes was not wholly far-fetched. The ancient Cynic movement had spawned wandering ascetic philosophers in a number of places in the ancient world, including the near east. Some contemporaries at the time of Jesus of Nazareth thought of him as something like a Cynic philosopher. The asceticism, moralism, and rejection of wealth of the ancient Cynics paralleled that of the Christians.⁵ In one of his books, John Dominic Crossan drew

⁴Christine Christ-Von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 5.

⁵See, e.g., S. Matton, "Cynicism and Christianity from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance" in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, eds. R. Bracht Branham and M.-O. Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996,

attention to the similarities –and the differences– between wandering cynic philosophers and Jesus, concluding that “maybe Jesus is what peasant Jewish Cynicism looked like”.⁶

As for influence in early Christianity, the parallels between the ascetic practices of Jesus and the early Christians and the ancient Cynics are obvious.⁷ The wandering mendicant monks of the early church looked and sounded like the Cynics.⁸ Peregrinus Proteus of the second century was both a Christian and a Cynic.⁹ In the fourth century, Maximus of Alexandria was described by Gregory of Nazianzus as both a Christian and a Cynic because of his asceticism and moralism.¹⁰ As Michèle Clément put it, “liberty, simplicity, and property in common, these were the three principles that Cynicism and Erasmian Christianity shared”.¹¹ And of course, there were limits to the sharing. Christian writers often praised Cynic poverty but rejected Cynic shamelessness. For example, St. Augustine charged that “the dog-philosophers, that is, the Cynics... put forward a view so contrary to human modesty that it can only be called dog-like: that is, unclean and shameless”.¹² But he, too, added that the behavior “of the Cynics does not matter in the least

240-264; F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992); F. G. Downing, *Cynics, Paul, and the Pauline Churches* (London: Routledge, 1998); William Desmond, *Cynics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 211-216.

⁶John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 122. Naturally, other scholars doubt that Jesus was deeply influenced by the Cynics, and see the Jewish prophetic tradition as of much greater importance: see Craig A. Evans, “Context, family, and formation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12-13; Graham Stanton, “Message and miracles” in Bockmuehl, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, 64-65.

⁷Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 6-18, 154-162.

⁸Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 257-270.

⁹Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 19.

¹⁰Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 269-70.

¹¹Michèle Clément, *Le Cynisme a la Renaissance d'Erasmus à Montaigne* (Geneva: Droz, 2005), 96. Hereafter cited in the text with the letters MC and page number.

¹²Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), bk. 14, ch. 20, 619; Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 223-6.

[as far as being a good Christian is concerned], provided there is nothing indecent or immoderate about it".¹³

It is against this background of overlaps between Christians and Cynics that Erasmus's interest in Cynicism can be understood.

Erasmus's irenicist theology

It has already been mentioned that Erasmus was well known for a peace-loving theology. His publishing career spanned the years 1495-1536 and included editions of and commentaries on Church Fathers, paraphrases of many biblical texts, dialogues, essays about teaching, modern editions of ancient Greek and Latin texts, Latin translations of Greek texts, a translation into Latin of the New Testament, and more.¹⁴ The preface to his *New Testament* of 1516 made the comparison that we are following here: "a part of this doctrine was applied by more than one person, principally Socrates, Diogenes, and Epictetus" (cited in MC 88).¹⁵ I will only survey a handful of his religious works to present an overview of his irenicist theology. It will be observed that the Cynics are mentioned or echoed here and there in many of Erasmus's efforts at Christian theology.

Erasmus's *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (*Handbook of the Militant Christian*) of 1503 was one of the most popular works of the age, translated into six languages and reprinted many times. The word "militant" is taken in an entirely metaphoric and spiritual sense. The "enemy" is vice and the passions and the "armour of the Christian militia" consists of prayer and knowledge (CWE 66 30). But prayer alone is not enough: you must prove you mean it by works of charity (CWE 66 53, 71). As befits what we call a humanist, the ancient Stoics and Platonists are

¹³Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 19, ch. 19, 948.

¹⁴The original collected works was *Opera Omnium* (Xxxxx) of 1540, and individual works as well as wide selections were reprinted, translated, anthologized, etc. hundreds of times. An important early eighteenth-century edition was *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, ed. Jean LeClerc (Leiden: Vander Aa, 1703-6; reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1961-2); the modern critical edition is *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam: , 1969-). I have worked largely from *Desiderius Erasmus, Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969-present). Hereafter cited in the text with the letters "CWE", the volume number, and page number.

¹⁵Also mentioned in Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus' Civil Dispute with Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 7.

our allies in the fight for virtue. Even the Cynics provide a good model: Erasmus goes so far as to say that if you fear that wealth might tempt you to dishonesty, you should "in imitation of Crates the Theban hurl your troublesome burden into the sea" (CWE 66 62). He Christianizes this advice a few pages later when he says that one should honor St. Francis by "ceasing to worship money" (CWE 66 71-72). But it remains a cosmopolitan model: follow the "Brahmans, Cynics, and Stoics" in fixing "the dogmas of your sect deeply within your soul" (CWE 66 93).

Most of Erasmus's advice is about self-control. Fight lust by being temperate. Fight pride by remembering your faults. Fight avarice by following those "pagan philosophers" who had only contempt for wealth, which could include the Cynics (CWE 66 118). But Erasmus is not impressed by those who give everything away so that "they can shamelessly beg what belongs to another", which probably means monks but could also include the Cynics (CWE 66 119). So he is calling for a moderate Christian asceticism focused on helping one's neighbors without becoming a burden on others.

One of Erasmus's most famous works was *Morae encomium* (*The Praise of Folly*) of 1517. It was also widely popular, and belongs to the tradition of Lucianic satire. "Folly" speaks, and shows how almost everyone follows her path. She joins everyone who goes to war, and says that "it's the spongers, pimps, robbers, murderers, peasants, morons, debtors, and that sort of scum of the earth who provide the glories of war, not the philosophers and their midnight oil" (CWE 27 99). A number of Folly's remarks have at least an air of Diogenes: a king without the goods of the soul is a poor man; a person who glories in his ancestors and nobility is nevertheless ignoble if he is not virtuous (CWE 27 103). And Diogenes is listed along with Xenocrates, Cato, Cassius, Brutus, and Charon as people who were wise enough to commit suicide -Erasmus surely is not endorsing suicide, so this is lumping Diogenes with the foolish (CWE 27 105). The theology here is irenic: those who jump to accuse others of heresy are lampooned (CWE 27 126). Pontiffs are called to imitate Christ and bankers, lobbyists, secretaries are encouraged to abandon their jobs (CWE 27 138). They would be "reduced to taking up scrip and staff", an echo of Diogenes and the Cynics (CWE 27 138). Folly does not seem to be engaging in satire when she says that "the whole of Christ's teaching is directed towards instilling gentleness, patience, and contempt of life" (CWE 27 145-6).

Querela pacis (*The Complaint of Peace*) of 1517 also speaks in the voice of an abstraction, in this case "Peace". "Peace" asserts that among Christians "assemblies, lawcourts, secretariats, and churches everywhere resound with strife, more

so than among the heathen" (CWE 27 296). In its ideals, Christianity is based on peace, and thus no man "should hope Christ would ever be present at wars" (CWE 27 303). But in practice, "the Christians are led astray by ambition, swayed by anger (worst of counsellors), and seduced by insatiable greed" to go to wars" (CWE 27 305). Here Erasmus brings out a kind of basic conservatism in his mind: "every innovation in affairs creates disturbance and disturbance creates war" (CWE 27 312). It is not Lutheran innovations he is talking about, but rather the changes brought about by dynastic intermarriages, so his solution is to have royal families intermarry within their own realms so as not to combine and recombine empires (CWE 27 312). And Peace implores theologians "to preach the gospel of peace and to make your message ring unceasingly in the ears of the people" (CWE 27 320).

A few years later, in 1524, Erasmus wrote *De immensa Dei misericordia* [Concerning the Immense Mercy of God]. The main thing you can do to obtain the mercy of God is "showing mercy to your brother" (CWE 70 134). "If we were truly merciful, our beneficence would extend even to the Turks" (CWE 70 135). Erasmus's expressed interest in doctrine and theology is small: his main purpose is to change behavior.

One of the most famous of Erasmus's writings was his polemic with Luther, *De libero arbitro* of 1524. There are no direct allusions to the Cynics, and the tone is deadly serious, not Cynic satire (but see one example at CWE 76 58). Erasmus was concerned to defend freedom of the will in order to justify human responsibility and God's justice. In this he followed in the tradition of the Cynic Oenomaus of Gadara's critique of oracles, which he knew from Tertullian (MC 93, 102-3). Much of the framing of his argument was diffident, insisting on the limits of human knowledge and the value of skepticism, humility, and moderation. It was almost entirely argued in terms of Christian texts. Nevertheless, consistent with his humanism, he did draw attention to the high morals of some "philosophers", which we know could have meant Cynics along with Stoics, Platonists, or others (CWE 76 25, 29, 61). Luther recognized what he was doing and in his answer objected that Erasmus did not think anything matters as long as there is peace, and that Erasmus did not think Christianity was any better than human philosophy.¹⁶ "You ooze Lucian from every pore; you swill Epicurus by the gallon", he charged (BW 74). Lucian, after all,

¹⁶Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, tr. J. Packer and P. Johnston (Westwood: Fleming Revell, 1957), 69-70. Hereafter cited in the text with the letters "BW", the volume number, and page number.

"seeks only to entertain" but what Erasmus is arguing "affects eternal salvation" (BW 136).

The last piece of Erasmus's theological writings that we will review is *De sarcienda ecclesiae Concordia* (On Mending the Peace of the Church) of 1533.¹⁷ The Lutheran movement had now gone too far for Erasmus. He had realized that "men's desires are endless" (SEC 356). He advises us not to "be blown about by the wind of doctrinal change" (SEC 375). He had criticized immoral priests and pontiffs, but now he sees "how stupid it is to despise the immorality of certain pontiffs, priests, and monks to the extent that we ourselves become just as detestable" (SEC 376). He hopes "a spirit of accommodation will prevail so that each party will be willing to make concessions to the other", but "care must be taken that the fundamentals be not removed" (SEC 378). Concerning one of the debates, he suggests that "let us agree that we are justified by faith... provided we admit that the works of charity are necessary for salvation" (SEC 379). This was, of course, precisely what the contending parties would not concede to each other. His call is always for toleration: "we must tolerate the pious simplicity of some, even when there is a certain amount of error involved" (SEC 380). Those who "rage against the image of saints have perhaps done so with reason, but to my way of thinking they have been a bit immoderate" (SEC 380). Erasmus concedes that "the superstitious element should be eliminated" but adds that "whatever is useful should be retained" (SEC 380). There are many times in which it is better to "keep your thoughts to yourself" (SEC 381). Concerning the mass, there is no need to repress it completely (SEC 382): "a great deal could be either tolerated or corrected" (SEC 383). So he concludes that "let no one sit in judgment"; "let God be our judge" (SEC 385). "Let us beseech heaven and earth but in no way force anyone into a religion that repels him"; let us "refrain from attacking the religion of others" (SEC 386). The message throughout is peace, toleration, and irenicism.

Cornelis Augustijn has argued that although earlier scholars did not consider Erasmus a theologian, indeed he was - one who based his theology on careful humanistic scholarship.¹⁸ Augustijn's view has been followed by almost all scholars of the

¹⁷"On Mending the Peace of the Church" in *The Essential Erasmus*, ed. J. Dolan (New York: Mentor, 1964), 226-270. Hereafter cited in the text with the letters SEC and page number.

¹⁸Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991 [orig. 1986]), 190-193. Hereafter cited in the text with the letters CA and page number.

last several decades.¹⁹ So it was with theological foundations that Erasmus could argue that Luther was unnecessarily offensive, and favor tolerance and moderation between the orthodox and the Lutherans (CA 120, 127, 129). Another scholar has described the main point of the Christian philosophy of the sixteenth century as follows: "All that was good and true that the Stoics, Plato, Epicurus, Aristotle, Socrates, Diogenes, and Epictetus taught and wanted, was united and empowered by Jesus through his heavenly authority".²⁰ This seems to describe what Erasmus was doing when he Christianized all of the ancient sources, including Diogenes. I hope that this review of Erasmus's theology has made it clear that he was an irenicist with special interest in calming the waters that were being so stirred up by the Reform. Without being the most important theme in his writings, Cynicism came up from time to time, indicating that it was a background current of which he was always aware. We shall now proceed to examine his knowledge of and reliance on the ancient Cynics in order to demonstrate the affinities between these aspects of his thought.

The Cynics in Erasmus's educational writings

Erasmus's first extant manuscript, titled *Anti-barbarorum liber unus* when it was published in 1520, was a defense of the study of ancient languages and Greek and Roman culture, which came to be known as humanistic letters. The main argument was that study of the classics would encourage virtue and moderation.²¹ The practice and justification of humanistic education remained a constant throughout his life. Presumably his study of the Cynics was part of the package of classical studies. But, of course, some of it had to be handled with care. Hugh Roberts has pointed out that the references to Diogenes the cynic in Erasmus's educational writings naturally had to suppress the more socially unacceptable elements of the Cynic sayings and doings, since these texts were intended for the education of young boys, who should not be encouraged to pee or masturbate in public.²² In one of these works, as Roberts puts it, he presented "an eminently respectable, and utterly

¹⁹ For example, Christ-Von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 155.

²⁰ Paul Wernle, *Die Renaissance des Christentums im 16. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: 1904), 24.

²¹ Christ-Von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 26.

²² Hugh Roberts, *Dogs' Tales: Representations of Ancient Cynicism in French Renaissance Texts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2006). Hereafter cited in the text with the name Roberts followed by the page number.

humourless, version of the Cynic" (Roberts 58). In the *Colloquia*, there is "an explicit comparison between Christianity and Cynic asceticism in 'The Epicurean'. Similarly, one of the speakers in 'The Sober Feast' selects a Christian-style saying of Diogenes as his favorite: 'Among all the famous sayings of Diogenes nothing delights me more than his reply to someone who had asked him how he might best avenge himself on an enemy. "By showing yourself as upright and honourable a man as possible", he said'" (Roberts 58). Roberts also reports that Erasmus issued a "bowdlerized selection of Cynic sayings in his edition of the *Disticha Catonis*" (Roberts 58). But he adds that a "more daring version... emerges in the *Adagia* and the *Apophthegmata*" (Roberts 60).

The *Adagia*

One of Erasmus's most popular publications was the collection of *Adages*, taken mostly from Greek and Latin, which he published first in 1500 and then in expanded versions in 1508, 1515, 1517/8, 1520, 1523, 1528, 1530, 1533, 1636, and in his posthumous *Opera Omnium* of 1540. Roberts argued that Erasmus was concerned "to control Cynic humour by suggesting a serious and wholesome moral to the philosopher's antics, despite the fact that these were of course often devoted to the satisfaction of 'ignoble desires'" (Roberts 65). This was, of course, what any Christian would have to try to do with ancient Cynical materials.

"The most important instance of Erasmus's reception of Cynicism outside of the *Apophthegmata* is found in 'Sileni Alcibiades'... which first appeared in 1515, and which is one of the longest and best-known of the *Adagia*", Roberts tells us (Roberts 61; Antisthenes and Diogenes are mentioned in the Sileni commentary at CWE 34, 263 and Diogenes and Crates at CWE 34 276-7). "The ancient philosophers are explicitly presented as proto-Christians, since Erasmus eventually identifies Jesus as the greatest Silenus of all. By naming Diogenes among the Sileni, Erasmus suggests a logic for moving from the disreputable to the idealized version of the Cynic. Diogenes' laughable and outrageous behaviour which led to him being considered a dog is, Erasmus suggests, nothing but a misleading appearance which masks a divine reality" (Roberts 61). Augustijn comments on the same passage on the Sileni, and quotes Erasmus elsewhere for the idea that "we can find a great deal in the books of the ancients that agrees with [Christ's] doctrine", including examples from Diogenes (CA 76, 84). And Clément stresses that when four philosophers are mentioned at one point (Socrates, Antisthenes, Diogenes, and Epictetus), two of them

are Cynics, and when four are mentioned at another point (Democritus, Heraclitus, Diogenes, and Crates), two of them are also Cynics (MC 86, 87).

But Erasmus is also careful to limit the appeal of Diogenes. His explanation of the saying "Vita doliaris / Life in a tub" undercuts glorification of Diogenes because on the one hand it quotes the life of "Diogenes, the famous Cynic philosopher, sufficiently provided with one cloak, a stick to drive away the dogs, cheerfully using a tub fixed to a stake as a place to live in, raw vegetables and plain water for his diet, accustomed to a piece of bread hollowed out for a platter and the hollow of his hand for a cup..." with a few more details (CWE 32, 160). But he immediately adds examples of living modestly that would not have been prestigious: it can be applied to "those in whose style of living there is too much meanness, too much hardship, too much dirt" (CWE 32, 160). He quotes Eubulus on people with "unwashed feet, sleeping on earth and dwelling in the air", some verse on "hunger and dirt and cold, silence and gloom, Therewith a strict economy of baths", and the Sarmatian caravan-dwellers "whose way of life is harsh and mean" (CWE 32, 160). One suspects that reading this would not encourage most readers to want to imitate Diogenes.

Another reference to Diogenes in the *Adagia* is a comment on the adage "Ut sementem feceris, ita et metes / As you have sown, so also shall you reap". Erasmus quotes "an amusing anecdote about Diogenes. At dinner some of them were throwing him bones as one would to a dog, because he was a Cynic. His method of avenging the insult was to go up close to them, and as he stood by them to lift a leg, treating them as a dog might in return" (CWE 32, 166-7). Erasmus does not intervene to scold Diogenes for this, which suggests that he is prepared to allow a certain amount of Cynic anti-social behavior.

Other references to Diogenes, Antisthenes, Crates, and other Cynics throughout the *Adagia* serve as evidence that Erasmus was very familiar with the tradition, even in one case perhaps inadvertently attributing a saying usually credited to Diogenes to Socrates.²³ Erasmus expresses his opposition to one

²³CWE 31, 29. Other references to Diogenes at CWE 31, 217, 247, 254; CWE 32, 56-7, 82, 103, 158, 160, 162, 253, 263; CWE 33, 55, 70, 73, 225, 227, 245, 329; CWE 34, 110, 220, 253, 262, 302; CWE 35 15, 20, 133, 236, 240, 283, 288, 489; CWE 36, 7, 170, 340, 360, 366, 573. References to Antisthenes at CWE 31, 140; CWE 34, 194, 262. To Alcidas at CWE 32, 39. To Menippus CWE 32, 173. To Demonax CWE 32, 63, 211, 228; CWE 33, 208. To Crates CWE 32 281; CWE 33, 55, 161; CWE 34 119, 221, 305; CWE 35 519. To

saying from Diogenes to the effect that doctoring a dead man was the same as trying to teach an old man. That "is a useless saying, which deters old men from learning things which it is disgraceful not to know" (CWE 31, 199). When he cites Crates on better never to be born, he brings in Metrodorus's refutation of that argument, as any good Christian should (CWE 33, 161). At another point he describes the Cynics as leading "a filthy life" (CWE 33, 208). So there is unquestionably an ambivalence on his part concerning the Cynics.

An important book on Erasmus's jurisprudence starts from the adage "Summum jus, summa injuria [Extreme right is extreme wrong]" (CWE 32 244-5).²⁴ It makes the point that Erasmus is always concerned that equity be considered in addition to the letter of the law. Erasmus endorses the principles that "a well-governed state under a good prince and an honorable administration needs very few laws" and "if it is unjust, if it is not impartial, and if it does not serve the public interest it is not a law" (Kisch 115). His judgments are not simple moralism, but based in letters and knowledge of historical context (Kisch 65-66, 122). And out of this moderated jurisprudence comes flexibility in the name of equity and tolerance.

The *Apophthegmata*

The first edition of Erasmus's *Apophthegmata* came out in 1531, with an enlarged second edition in 1532. Roberts remarks that it is "certainly the fullest and most influential Renaissance collection of Cynic sayings and anecdotes" (Roberts 63). The importance of Cynicism is brought out by the fact that after the sayings of the Spartans, which seem to have inspired the project, Erasmus turns to three philosophers: Socrates, Aristippus, and Diogenes. Erasmus's respect for Diogenes is expressed in some introductory remarks: "Diogenes of Sinope... excelled [Socrates and Aristippus] in the varied charm of his sayings... However different they were, you would say they were equal in merit" (CWE 37 271). Book III of the work contains 225 sayings of Diogenes (CWE 37, 271-334), and Books VII and VIII contain 62 sayings of Antisthenes (CWE 38, 775-790), 20 of Crates (CWE 38, 831-836), 30 of Bion (CWE 38, 813-819, 958), 38 of Demonax (CWE 38, 950-958), 2 from Hipparchia (CWE 38, 838-839) and 3 from Metrocles (CWE 38, 798, 837-8; see also 835). In

"Epictetus, a philosopher of the Cynic school": CWE 34, 10. To Zoilus, CWE 35 498. To "the cynics", CWE 36, 292.

²⁴Guido Kisch, *Erasmus und die Jurisprudenz seiner Zeit*, 1, 55ff. Hereafter cited in the text by "Kisch" and page number

the sixteenth century it was reprinted 90 times and it was translated into four vernaculars (Roberts 63). Most of Erasmus's apophthegms were drawn from Plutarch, but most of the Cynic apophthegms were drawn from Diogenes Laertius.

As Roberts describes it, Erasmus's strategy is "recognition of the 'ridiculous', paradoxical and comic nature of Diogenes' performance followed by a positive, moralizing and didactic presentation" (Roberts 65). Diogenes distanced himself from Plato in a manner that Erasmus describes as follows: "Plato kept apart from public life and grew old with discussions, whereas Diogenes lived in public and preferred to live in a philosophical fashion rather than just discuss" (CWE 37, 272). This parallels Erasmus's rejection of the scholastics and his efforts to write for a broader public.

Erasmus used Diogenes's remark that it would be ridiculous if great men like Agesilaus and Epaminondas were lesser ranked than priests in the next world to castigate "the behavior of priests who for the sake of profit appealed to the superstition of inexperienced men" (CWE 37, 289). "He was right to comment on men's superstition, for believing that stains of the soul could be cured by a physical element" (CWE 37, 292). Erasmus adds a Christian conclusion to many of Diogenes's apophthegms. When Diogenes berates someone for having his shoes put on by a slave, Erasmus adds: I know a Christian, a priest and a theologian, not crippled in any limb, who used to summon servants... to undo his laces" (CWE 37, 294). He comments on Diogenes's famous saying about little thieves vs. big thieves that the same could be said "of some Christian magistrates who sometimes hang a man who has stolen ten pence, but themselves get rich without punishment from great thefts, or rather embezzlement" (CWE 37, 295). He glosses Diogenes's remark about an unworthy person wearing a lionskin as "the same thing can be said of those who by their extraordinary clothing make a show of holiness to which their lives do not correspond" (CWE 37, 295). He draws a specific analogy to the Bible when he glosses Diogenes on the lyre which made agreeable music but was deaf itself: "this comment is not very different from St. Paul's saying about the tinkling cymbal" (CWE 37, 322). A parallel is drawn between Diogenes and Solomon (CWE 37, 302). Cynical support for Erasmus's toleration can be found especially in the apophthegms in praise of liberty and freedom of speech (esp. CWE 37, 312-316, 328).

Of course, Erasmus will not accept everything: "his approach to Cynic humour flounders when it becomes too transgressive for him" (Roberts 66). Some of Diogenes's extremes are not examples to follow: they are only valuable as a contrast to other people's opposite extremes (CWE 37, 283, 285). And there are moralistic limits: when Diogenes tells someone he

would have persuaded him to hang himself if he could have, Erasmus adds that "there is nothing to admire here except Cynic license" (CWE 37, 315). He also makes it clear that "to evacuate or urinate or copulate with one's wife" in public is wrong: "decent men like modesty everywhere" (CWE 37, 328).

So far I have reported Roberts's opinion that Erasmus was trying to civilize Diogenes. But there is an alternative interpretation of Erasmus according to which he was not such a social conservative. Peter Bietenholz has brought out some of the elements of Erasmus's early advocacy of what might be called Christian Epicureanism, which would have been flirting with heresy in his times, thus justifying Bietenholz's use of the term "radical" to describe Erasmus.²⁵ This author also remarks that Erasmus seems to have pulled back from his earlier endorsement of the uses of Epicureanism in Christianity, labeling it a "selective Epicureanism".²⁶ But two things can be noted here: one, Erasmus continued to retail the moral lessons of the ancients, including the Cynics, into the 1530's in the *Apophthegmata*. It should be noted that the bulk of the early part of the *Apophthegmata*, on the Spartans, was not at all Christian or conservative by contemporary standards. And of course even if Erasmus himself limited his commitment to the ancients, later readers of the texts that Erasmus had provided could take them further in the direction of radical politics than Erasmus did. And we can observe parallel developments in Erasmus's treatment of the Cynics. He rejected their excesses, but approved of their moral critiques of the authorities, turning them to his own use against the authorities of his time. A touch of rebellion can be observed when Erasmus quotes Diogenes recommending tyrannicide, but does not disagree (CWE 37, 301). And later readers could find a radical critique of the authorities in Erasmus's many references to the ancient Cynics.

There is another way in which Erasmus's politics can be understood as radical rather than conservative. James D. Tracy has written of Erasmus's politics that it was "radical in his perception of the moral demands made by faith in Christ".²⁷ Like Bietenholz, he recognizes Erasmus's "intellectual roots in the 'Epicurean' tradition of humanism", and like Bietenholz he does not see Erasmus's roots in the Cynic tradition.²⁸ But the Cynic

²⁵ Peter Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 109ff, 208.

²⁶ Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus*, 135, 140.

²⁷ James D. Tracy, *The Politics of Erasmus: A Pacifist Intellectual and His Intellectual Milieu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 30.

²⁸ Tracy, *The Politics of Erasmus*, 63.

traditions that Erasmus retailed also included radical moral demands: "Diogenes reproached men for training to become skilled in wrestling... whereas no one made an effort to become good and honest" (CWE 37 275). When Diogenes appears to "many to carry philosophy to excess", Erasmus comments that "whatever goes beyond the limit, even to a fault, is useful for rousing other men's slackness" (CWE 37 282-3; see also 285). Erasmus drew a parallel between Diogenes's comment about big thieves and little thieves to his contemporaries: "some Christian magistrates... sometimes hang a man who has stolen ten pence, but themselves get rich without punishments from great thefts" (CWE 37 295). He criticized book learning when it came at the expense of the practice of virtue (CWE 37 299). He added his own critique of Diogenes who had remarked that a needy old man was the most wretched that there could be: the most wretched of all is he who "is endowed with no virtue" (CWE 37 303; see also 314). When Diogenes says that what is best in life is "freedom", Erasmus adds that "a man is not truly free who is a slave to vices" (CWE 37 328). These and many more of the adages suggest a kind of radical moralism in critique of the materialism of Diogenes's and Erasmus's times.

Elements of Erasmus's politics can be found in the ancient Cynics. For example, Diogenes opposed war and tyrants. "Princes whose ambition drove them to make troubles in constant warfare were really wretched", Erasmus explains (CWE 37 293). He quotes Diogenes's answer to Alexander that emphasized that "you... expose yourself to so many dangers to increase your rule" (CW 37 287) and he told Philip that "I came here to examine your folly in not resting content with ruling the Macedonians" (CWE 37 293). To a tyrant "he implied that the man should be removed" (CWE 37 302). And several of his remarks were critical of the tyrant Dionysius (CWE 37 302, 332). The overall effect of the *Apophthegmata* would have been in a moralizing and anti-war direction that must be at least loosely associated with religious toleration.

The Lucian translations and the *Colloquys*

One of Erasmus's early projects was translations of the ancient satirist Lucian. His first translations appeared in Paris in 1506 with more in a second volume in 1514.²⁹ This was an

²⁹See Erika Rummel, *Erasmus as a Translator of the Classics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), esp. pp. 15, 52, 57-8. Rummel does not note any sympathy for the Cynics, nor does she even mention the translations from Diogenes Laertius in the *Apophthegmata*.

activity he shared with his friend Thomas More, who translated four of the dialogues in the 1506 volume, compared to Erasmus's five. Here it shall only be mentioned that Erasmus translated six of the nine that have been identified as "the dialogues of Cynic tendency": *Dialogi mortuorum*, *Timon*, *De sacrificiis*, *Gallus*, *Icaromenippus*, and *De luctu*.³⁰ These dialogues transmitted sayings and actions of Diogenes. Just as important, they also practiced Cynic humor: what became known as Lucianic or Menippean satire was closely associated with the Cynics as a tool of moral reproof.³¹ Erasmus himself followed in this school in *The Praise of Folly*. Thus Erasmus and his circle were responsible for yet another introduction into European literate circles of the doctrines and tendencies of the ancient Cynics.

Erasmus's *Colloquys* were some of his most popular publications. One of the last to be written, *The Epicurean* of 1533, situates the Cynics as closer to the Christians than the Epicureans and Stoics (MC 88). One character says that there is no one more Epicurean than a Christian who lives piously, and the other answers that the Christians are closer to the Cynics (CWE 40 1075). As Clément puts it, Erasmus made it clear that "The Cynical life and the Christian are concordant" (MC 90).³²

³⁰ Luciano de Samosata, *Diálogos de tendencia cínica*, tr. Francisco García Yagüe (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1976).

³¹ See Joel Relihan, "Menippus in Antiquity and the Renaissance" in Bracht Branham and Goulet-Cazé, eds., *The Cynics*, 265-293; Walter M. Gordon, *Humanist Play and belief: The seriocomic Art of Desiderius Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); W. Scott Blanchard, *Scholars' Bedlam: Menippean Satire in the Renaissance* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995).

³² Rounding out the picture of Erasmus's understanding of and respect for the ancient Cynics, there are a few indications in his correspondence of an identification with them. In 1511 he wrote to John Colet that his economic situation was such that he needed a position or he would be forced to imitate Diogenes "in a thoroughgoing fashion", by which he might have meant suicide (CWE 2, 171). When Colet answered that he could imitate Diogenes by rejoicing in his poverty and reckoning himself a king of kings (CWE 2 174) he answered that "as for your jokes about Diogenes, I am glad I can give you pleasure, however I do", but then added that "I may learn quite to despise life itself. How otherwise could one act Diogenes, at my age and in my state of health?" (CWE 2 183-5). His friends occasionally understood him as a Cynic: in 1518 Ambrosio Leoni wrote that Erasmus had "turned from theologian to Cynic philosopher [and then changed again]" (CWE 5 57). In 1520 Erasmus himself drew the analogy between a friend's long letter and his short one: "When Lucullus

Erasmus as a Source of Early Modern Religious Toleration

Erasmus has been given wide credit for influencing early modern religious toleration. Many of his principles showed up in later writings. For example, Sebastian Castellio was able to use passages from Erasmus to argue for more toleration of heretics (CA 178). There is also a more diffuse legacy. One scholar has made the valuable point that much of Erasmus's thinking supports religious toleration indirectly, that is, without spelling out what the implications are.³³ He allows a great deal of toleration of differences of opinion concerning nonessentials (Remer 85). His tolerance derives from skepticism about human knowledge concerning those nonessentials (Remer 99). In fact, this author writes, Erasmus anticipates John Stuart Mill on the emergence of truth from discussion (Remer 100). And Diogenes is one of the figures Erasmus includes in his review of pagan classics as precursors of Christian philosophy (Remer 53). This sort of thinking was drawn upon by many later writers.

Most of the book by Guido Kisch mentioned above is not about Erasmus, but about the uptake of his ideas by scholars of jurisprudence Claudius Cantiuncula, Budeaus, Oldendorp, Alciatus, Zasius, and Amerbach (Kisch, *passim*). The upshot of all of these figures was a sort of jurisprudence of toleration: the law should always be subject to flexible interpretation, taking into consideration historical context and moral effects. So one can say that the influence of Erasmus's comments on the adages and his other writings had a wider effect in the legal interpretation of his times.

All of those who knew anything about the Cynics in the eighteenth century probably owed some or all of their knowledge to Erasmus either directly or indirectly, simply because he had provided so much of that information in his translations and his anthologies of adages and apophthegmata. Cynicism was one of the

asks me to dinner he sups with Diogenes in return" (CWE 7 286). In a letter of 1525 to Noel Beda he drew the comparison between his critics and Diogenes's criticism of Plato (CWE 11 147). Plato had very smartly answered to Diogenes when he accused him of pride that Diogenes had his pride as well, and the analogy held to the critics of Erasmus. In sum, the letters indicate occasional reference to the ancient Cynics for comparisons to Erasmus's own life.

³³Gary Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996), 67. Hereafter cited in the text with the name Remer and page number.

intellectual currents behind some theories and practices of freedom of the press, and thus of religious toleration, of the time.³⁴ If it seems unlikely that Erasmus's transmission of the ancient Cynics had much influence on later theories of toleration, I can follow the trail in a few places. A century and a half after Erasmus, Christian Thomasius wrote a "Dialogue between Diogenes and Erasmus", which picked up on the relations between the two.³⁵

Notice that I am not claiming that the Cynical tradition was a major and decisive influence on modern constitutional theory. What I am saying is that it deserves a seat at the table when we are analyzing the sources of our traditions. What I think I have done here is open up a new area for the analysis of influences of the ancient Cynics in early modern Europe. Erasmus of Rotterdam was one of the chief transmitters of knowledge of the ancient Cynics, and he was clearly widely familiar with and selectively sympathetic to them. He was also one of the early proponents of toleration and pacifism, as well as had an influence on the jurisprudence of his time. To the extent that religious toleration was supported by his work on the Cynics, one can say that Christian Cynicism was one of the elements of the theological foundations of modern constitutional theory.

³⁴See, e.g., J. C. Laursen, "Humanism vs. Cynicism: Cosmopolitan Culture and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century Denmark" in K. Haakonssen and H. Horstbøll, eds., *Northern Antiquities and National Identities* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2008), 145-162 and 336-339; "Cynicism as an ideology Behind Freedom of Expression in Denmark-Norway" in E. Powers, ed., *Freedom of Speech: The History of an Idea* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 45-60; "Cynic Kingship in the German Enlightenment" in C. Cuttica and G. Burgess, eds., *Monarchism and Absolutism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), 61-74, 228-232.

³⁵ Christian Thomasius, " ", in *Nöthiger historischer Unterredungen* (: 1720).