Tolerantia: A Medieval Concept

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The notion of tolerance is generally considered a product of modern times and in particular of the Age of Reason.[1] The enlightened philosophers, who laid the foundations of liberalism and democracy, are often hailed as the men who introduced the notion of tolerance as a means of guaranteeing maximum freedom to the individual members of society. Writings such as the *Epistola de tolerantia* of John Locke and the *Traité sur la tolérance* of Voltaire prove indeed that tolerance was an important topic in enlightened thought. Sometimes it is believed that an earlier notion of tolerance can be found, most notably in the writings of Christian humanists like Erasmus. As a matter of fact, "Erasmian tolerance" is a standing phrase in the Netherlands, where the people are happy to link the one virtue for which they openly praise themselves with the only Dutch author who is universally known.

The Middle Ages, on the other hand, have no reputation for tolerance, the lack of which is usually attributed to the influence of a powerful Church that was able and willing to suppress all major deviations from the exclusive truth it was convinced it possessed. Only the Reformation, it is often argued, forced the Church to change its attitude and to redefine its relation towards dissidents.[2] As a consequence, many historical studies of the idea of tolerance begin only in the sixteenth century.[3]

This representation of the history of tolerance is, however, distorted. In the Middle Ages *tolerantia* was a highly developed political concept, and it was

[2] See, e.g., Joseph Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (2 vols.; Aubier, 1955); Klaus Schreiner, Gerhard Besier, "Toleranz," *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (7 vols.; Stuttgart, 1972-92), VI, 445-605.

[3] See, e.g., Michel Peronnet (ed.), *Naissance et affirmation de l'idée de la tolérance, XVIe et XVIIe siècle* (Montpellier, 1988); Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra (ed.), *Een schijn van verdraagzaamheid. Afwijking en tolerantie in Nederland van de zestiende eeuw tot heden* (Hilversum, 1989).

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widely applied in the ecclesiastical as well as the secular sphere. This observation is not altogether new. In a limited number of studies the medieval concept of tolerance receives due attention. The most important of these studies are those by Joseph Lecler, Mario Condorelli, and Klaus Schreiner, but unfortunately none of these authors treat the subject of medieval tolerance in a satisfactory way.

In his monumental *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (1955) Lecler does not investigate the term or the concept of medieval tolerance systematically, but briefly surveys the attitude adopted by Christian scholarly authors towards heretics and unbelievers. In fact Lecler tacitly equates the notion of "tolerance" with "freedom of religion," a concept which indeed found little support among medieval scholars.[4] Condorelli's study (1960) is much more systematic, but it has a rather limited scope. It concentrates on the development of religious toleration in medieval canon law between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.[5] The canon lawyers in fact coined the medieval concept of *tolerantia* with specific attention to religious toleration, and for this reason Condorelli's work remains important and useful. But Condorelli does not analyze medieval *tolerantia* in its full range, nor does he compare the concept with later uses of the term.

Schreiner's article on tolerance in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1990) contains a detailed discussion of the concept of tolerance and its development in western intellectual history.[6] On the patristic and medieval periods Schreiner offers a wealth of material, and his representations of historical facts and developments are generally correct. His evaluations of the facts, however, strike me as misleading as far as the Middle Ages are concerned. Schreiner refuses to take medieval tolerance seriously. The pretension of Christian religion to embody the absolute truth and its function as the main integrating factor of society would have impeded a full development of tolerance; Schreiner even considers medieval Christianity intolerant in its very essence. As he argues,

> Only when the early modern state proceeded to make natural religion instead of a closed system of belief the consensus-shaping *vinculum societatis*, it set free spaces of action in which individuals and groups could realize their rights of freedom of belief and conscience.... Only

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[4] Cf. Lecler's introduction to the section on the Middle Ages (I, 93): "Il semble donc, de prime abord, que le moyen âge n'apporte aucun témoignage en faveur *de la liberté religieuse*. En réalité la situation médiévale est moins simple qu'on ne l'imagine communément ..." (my italics).

[5] Mario Condorelli, *I fondamenti giuridici della tolleranza religiosa nell'elaborazione canonistica dei secoli XII-XIV* (Milan, 1960).

[6] Schreiner wrote the article together with Besier, but the sections on the developments before 1600 are his. This article is concerned with these sections only.

the dissolution of the historically grown bonds between religion and justice, which restituted freedom to religion and prudence to justice, enabled the free expression of religion in a spirit of mutual patience.[7]

We can reproach Schreiner with several inaccuracies. First, it is questionable whether medieval religion represented a closed system which can be opposed to the allegedly more open religious systems of early modern history. Medieval religion and dogma had, of course, a certain elasticity. The hot religious debates at the universities and the division of the theologians into different schools, especially in the later Middle Ages, prove that theologians could be very critical of each other within the limits of orthodoxy. True enough, flagrant and obstinate heresy was punished by death, but the question of how much room for manoeuver Christians actually had within the medieval Church in comparison to post-medieval believers requires a careful analysis in itself—the fact that religious transgressions were suppressed does not say anything about how far a Christian should go in order to make a transgression. Second, the bonds between Church and state were far from being loosened after the Middle Ages, as Schreiner suggests. The early modern principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* rather indicates the contrary, and post-medieval theocracies like Calvin's Geneva, Cromwell's England, and Endicott's Massachusetts do not strike us as examples of particularly open and tolerant societies. But Schreiner's most serious shortcomings are his preconceived ideas of what tolerance is about. He also equates tolerance with freedom of religion. In his view, tolerance is intrinsically linked to the plurality and the relativity of (religious) truth;[8] wherever such a plurality or relativity does not exist or is not acknowledged, Schreiner denies the existence of "real" tolerance.

In my view the medieval concept of tolerance contradicts Schreiner's assertions. Medieval *tolerantia* is a full-fledged example of what tolerance could be. It is an even more coherent and forceful concept than the rather loose notion of tolerance in modern political discourse, precisely because it has nothing to do with religious freedom or the plurality of truth. As a matter of fact the effort of pluralizing (religious) truth in early modern thought went along with a serious setback of medieval tolerance.

In order to substantiate these statements, I want to elucidate the medieval concept of tolerance by discussing its use in medieval scholarly literature, particularly in canon law and scholasticism, from the twelfth century onward. Next, I want to point to some important differences with the allegedly "tolerant" tendencies in early modern thought, as exemplified by Erasmus. My findings will finally permit me to advance some critical remarks about the notion of "tolerance" in its current use.

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[7] Schreiner, 448, 524.
[8] Schreiner, 457: "Pluralität verlangt Toleranz."

It is possible to distinguish three different meanings of *tolerantia* in medieval and early modern sources, meanings which originated in three different cultural contexts. In Antiquity, especially in stoic writings, *tolerantia* stood for the bearing of anything which was a burden to the human body or, more often, to the human mind. Early Christendom developed a second meaning: *tolerantia* still indicated the bearing of physical or psychological burdens, but with religious connotations. It referred to the virtuous capacity of Christian individuals to endure with calm the many sufferings of earthly existence. In this sense, as a synonym of *patientia*, the term appears once in the New Testament (2 Cor. 1:6) and rather frequently in the writings of the Church Fathers.[9]

In both its classical and its early Christian sense *tolerantia* refers to individual life. It means the bearing of difficulties which strike human beings personally. As a social and political concept, however, *tolerantia* is an invention of the Middle Ages. In medieval scholarly writing *tolerantia* came to denote—analogously to some incidental examples in the works of Augustine—the forbearance of bad people (the immoral, the heterodox, the infidel) by those who had the power to dispose of them. The object of tolerance in this third sense were people and their allegedly bad habits, people who were seen as a burden to society and not, at least not primarily, to individuals. Moreover, the tolerating subject was no longer a powerless individual but a powerful collectivity that could destroy the tolerated people if it wanted to but ought not to do so. Tolerance thus came to imply the self-restraint of political power, the abstinence from correctional or destructive force by the authorities governing society. The common ground between the three meanings of *tolerantia* is the implication of a passive attitude of the good and the just towards evil forces.

The development of *tolerantia* as a political concept was especially furthered by canon law from the twelfth century onward. The two main collections of canon law, the *Decretum Gratiani* of about 1140 (which relied heavily on the Church Fathers, most notably on Augustine) and the *Decretals* of Gregory IX promulgated in 1234,[10] contain several statements on circumstances under which evil practices may be left unpunished. The verb *tolerare* is frequently used in this context. The *Decretum* devotes a complete *quaestio* to the matter, in which Gratian concludes—perhaps realizing that mankind can never be purged completely from bad intentions[11]—that evil which cannot be cor-

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[9] *Ibid.*, 450-55; see also Lecler, I, 65-92.

[10] The *Decretum* is a private compilation of authoritive texts from the Bible, the Church Fathers, and early medieval authors which functioned in practice as a source of law. The *Decretals* of Gregory IX (also called *Liber Extra* and abbreviated as X) are an official collection of papal decrees compiled by Raymond de Peñafort (1175/80-1275). Quotations are from *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. Aemilius Friedberg (2 vols.; Leipzig, 1879-81).

[11] C. 31 q. 1 c. 9 (Chrysostom).

rected without disturbing the peace in the Church, should rather be tolerated.[12] Correspondingly the *Decretals* state that many things which would be suppressed if brought before a court are tolerated with patience.[13] Both law collections point notably to Jewish rites as practices that are rightfully not to be interfered with.[14]

Medieval canonists who commented on these statements introduced and elaborated the concept of *tolerantia* as a judicial notion. This development went hand in hand with the extension of ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the whole of mankind. The *Decretum* had originated as a collection of rules which defined the attitude of the Church towards Christians only. With regard to non-Christians, Gratian had left the judgment of those who are outside of the faith to God (referring to 1 Cor. 5:12-13).[15] Later canonists gradually abandoned this reluctance, stating eventually that the pope could uphold natural law against anybody in the world, regardless of the faith of the person in question.[16] At the same time the notion of tolerance was applied to all nations and religions alike. Pope Innocent IV himself acknowledged, in one breath with his confirmation of universal papal jurisdiction, that the pope sometimes refrained from punishing infractions of natural law not only by lack of actual power but also because punishment seemed undesirable in certain cases.[17] Influential commentators such as Hostiensis (Henry of Segusio, c. 1200-1270) and Joannes Andreae (c. 1270-1348), supporting Innocent's view, stated that tolerating unbelievers could even be a duty, provided they did not present a serious threat to Christianity.[18]

The concept of *tolerantia* did not refer to any act of non-interference whatsoever on the part of the Church. Raymond of Peñafort gave the following explanation in his *Summa de iure canonico* (c. 1222/24):

> Permission is taken in three different ways. First, when something is allowed that is not forbidden by any law.... Second, when something is indulged that runs counter to human rules.... This is properly called the true and absolute permission, and it excuses from sin. The third type of

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[12] C. 23 q. 4 c. 17 d.p.

[13] X 3.5.18 (Innocent III).

[14] See, e.g., D. 45 c. 3; X 5.6.3, 5.6.7, 5.6.9.

[15] C. 23 q. 4 c. 16 d.p.

[16] See Walter J. Pakter, *Medieval Canon Law and the Jews* (Ebelsbach, 1988), 47-83.

[17] *In V libros Decretalium commentaria* (Venice, 1570) X 3.34.6 § 6.

[18] Hostiensis, *In Decretalium libros commentaria* (Venice, 1581; facs. Turin, 1965) X 3.34.8, III f. 128v; Joannes Andreae, *In Decretalium libros nouella commentaria* (Venice, 1581; facs. Turin, 1963) X 3.34.8, III f. 172v. Their views were frequently repeated in the late Middle Ages, see, e.g., Panormitanus (Nicolaus de Tudeschis, 1386-1445), *Super Decretales* (Perugia, 1509) X 3.34.8 § 10, V f. 168v (quoting Hostiensis). The ecclesiastical pretension of universal jurisdiction was therefore not an impediment to religious tolerance, as is suggested by Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca, 1982), 262.

permission occurs when lesser evils are permitted so as to prevent greater ones. This is called the *permissio comparativa*, and it does not excuse from sin. It should, however, be called *tolerantia* rather than permission.[19]

Raymond's explanation brings two essential characteristics of the concept of tolerance into light. First, tolerance is applied to evil. Tolerance does not imply that the evil character of the tolerated act is denied or extenuated; it means simply that certain evil acts remain unpunished. *Ecclesia non approbat, sed permittit*, several commentators explained.[20] Tolerance offered no *licentia peccandi* but only a *liberatio a pena*,[21] and it was conceived of as non-interference with practices that were nevertheless unequivocally considered loathsome.

Second, tolerance was applied in order to prevent a greater evil than the tolerated one. *Minus malum toleratur ut maius tollatur*, it was sometimes said in juridical literature.[22] Tolerance was the result of weighing opportunities. Non-interference with certain evil acts should prevent the occurrence of even worse evil. Raymond was not the only canonist to understand *tolerantia* as *permissio comparativa*.[23] Some canonists aspired to define this *permissio* even closer, such as Joannes Andreae, who distinguished three types of tolerance: *permissio simplex*, the mere abstention from punishing evil acts; *permissio tollens impedimentum*, which, moreover, obliged the Church to restrain other people from proceeding against the evil acts in question; and *permissio praestans iuvamen*, the case in which the Church was required to foster actively the occurrence of some evil act (e.g., the punishment of criminal clerics).[24]

[19] *Summa de iure canonico*, ed. Xaverius Ochoa and Aloisius Diez, Universa bibliotheca iuris I.A (Rome, 1975), I.5.4, 8-9.

[20] Joannes Teutonicus, *Glossa* D. 3 c. 4 ad v. *permittit*: "secundum hanc permissionem [tolerantia] dicit canon quod ea, quae permittimus, non approbamus." The *Glossa ordinaria* (ca. 1216) are the standard commentary on the *Decretum*; quotations are from the *Corpus iuris canonici in tres partes distinctum* (Lyons, 1671). See also Geoffrey of Trani (d. 1245), *Summa super titulis Decretalium* (Lyons, 1519; facs. Aalen, 1968, 1992), f. 206; Hostiensis, *Summa una cum summariis et adnotationibus Nicolai Superantii* (= *Summa aurea*) (Lyons, 1537; facs. Aalen, 1962) V.11 § 4, f. 236. Cf. C. 31 q. 1 c. 9: "aliud est enim precipere, aliud permittere" (Chrysostom); Antonius de Butrio (1338-1408), *Commentarii in libros Decretalium* (Venice, 1578; facs. Turin, 1967), X 4.14.6 § 7, [VI] f. 37: "tolerantia haec generaliter non excusat a peccato." See also Condorelli, 134.

[21] Joannes Teutonicus, *Glossa* D. 45 c. 3 ad v. *licentiam*.

[22] *Rhetorica ecclesiastica* (ca. 1160-80), ed. Ludwig Wahrmund, Quellen zur Geschichte des römisch-kanonischen Prozesses im Mittelalter I, 4 (Innsbruck, 1906), 20: "Tolerantia est de maiori duorum vel plurium malorum declinatio"; *Summa "Elegantius in iure divino" seu Coloniensis* (1169), ed. Gerardus Fransen and Stephanus Kuttner (New York-Vatican City 1969-), I, 26: "tolerantia [est] de malis et mortalibus, cum minus toleratur ut maius tollatur"; Joannes Teutonicus, *Glossa* D. 3 c. 4 ad v. *permittit*: "illicitum permitti, ut magis illicitum vitetur ... appellatur tolerantia." See also Condorelli, 23.

[23] See Joannes Teutonicus, *Glossa* D. 3 c. 4 ad v. *permittit*.

[24] *In titulum de regulis iuris nouella commentaria* (Venice, 1581; facs. Turin, 1963), regula *Peccatum* 5.8 § 4, f. 64.

The main social groups that profited from the *tolerantia* recommended in canon law seem to have been non-Christians, especially Jews, and prostitutes. The concept of *tolerantia* was chiefly developed as an answer to the question of how ecclesiastical authorities should deal with the practices of Jewish religion.[25] Jewish rites were considered an evil that had to be tolerated; the major evil that was thus prevented was the forced conversion of the Jews, for conversion to Christianity had to be a matter of free will. Moreover, the Jews would be more willing to embrace the Christian faith, the canonists argued, when they were treated with benevolence.[26] Accordingly, Joannes Andreae mentioned the Jewish rites as an example of acts that should meet with *permissio tollens impedimentum*: the Church should not only leave the rites unpunished but should also prevent others from disturbing them.[27] The same arguments for tolerance applied to other unbelievers, notably to Muslims. Canon law mostly treated Jews and Muslims under the same headings, although canonists often took a harsher stance against the latter because, as a result of the crusades, Christianity was at war with them. The canonists agreed, however, that Muslims who lived in peace with Christians ought not to be attacked or expelled. Other infidels living on the borders of Christendom (Prussians, Lithuanians) had to be treated analogously.[28] The tolerance of prostitution is less markedly expressed in canon law, yet prostitution was often mentioned as a sin that was rightfully allowed.[29] Major evils that were thus prevented were, according to medieval authorities, adultery (with honorable women, that is), rape, and sodomy.[30]

By the thirteenth century the concept of tolerance that had been elaborated in canon law was introduced into scholasticism, where its scope broadened considerably. The schoolmen considered tolerance an attitude to be adopted not only by the Church but also by the state. Especially when they were defin-

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[25] For a survey of the attitude of the canonists see Pakter, *op. cit.*

[26] See Geoffrey of Trani, *Summa* f. 206; Hostiensis, *In Decretal.* X 5.6.7, V f. 31v; id., *Summa aurea* V.11, f. 235v-236v; Joannes Andreae, *In Decretal.* X 5.6.7, V f. 41v; also, e.g., Antonius de Butrio, *Commentarii* X 5.6.7 § 3, [VII] f. 38A (quoting Hostiensis and Joannes Andreae); Panormitanus, *Super Decretales* X 3.34.8 § 15, V f. 168v; Joannes de Anania (d. 1457), *Super quinto Decretalium* (Lyons, 1553) X 5.6.7 § 8, f. 73v-74 (quoting Joannes Andreae). See also Schreiner, 462-65.

[27] See above n. 24.

[28] See Peter Herde, "Christians and Saracens at the Time of the Crusades: Some Comments of Contemporary Canonists," *Studia Gratiana*, 12 (1967) = *Collectanea Stephan Kuttner*, 11, 359-76; James Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers, and Infidels: The Church and the Non-Christian World 1250-1550* (Philadelphia, 1979); James M. Powell, "The Papacy and the Muslim Frontier," *Muslims under Latin Rule, 1100-1300*, ed. Powell (Princeton, 1990), 175-203.

[29] A survey in James A. Brundage, "Prostitution in Medieval Canon Law," *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and Brundage (Buffalo, 1982), 149-60.

[30] See, e.g., C. 32 q. 7 c. 11 (Augustine); Thomas of Chobham, *Summa confessorum* (c. 1220), cited in Schreiner, 471-72; Alexander de Nevo, *Contra iudeos fenerantes* (1441), ed. una cum *Summa Pisanella* (Venice, 1482), f. A3v-4.

ing the relation of secular power to the Jews, the schoolmen eagerly took re-course to the doctrine of *tolerantia* from canon law. The *Summa theologica* ascribed to Alexander of Hales (c. 1185-1245), for instance, contains an exten-sive defense of the tolerance of Jewish rites, with a large number of references to canonist writings.[31] The work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) also offers good examples. Particularly illuminating is a passage from his *Summa theologiae* on the rites of the infidels. Thomas answered the question whether non-Christian cults should be tolerated by Christian rulers in the affirmative (with a reference to the *Decretum Gratiani*[32]). Those who are in power, Thomas ex-plained, rightly permit certain evils lest some good be brought to nothing or greater evils take their place. Accordingly, prostitution is allowed by human government, because, as Augustine said, society would be devastated by unchec-ked lust if prostitution were forbidden. So, although infidels may sin by their rites, they are to be tolerated if some good can be drawn from them or if some evil is avoided. Thus, the rites of the Jews should be tolerated, because they foreshadow the Christian faith, which is a good; for in this way we obtain testimony to our faith from our enemies. The rites of the other infidels, from which no good proceeds, can be tolerated so as to avoid scandal or hatred towards Christianity which could be the result of their suppression.[33]

Tolerance for the sake of the good that may result from the permitted evil seems to have been Thomas's own idea. This idea did not alter the fact that the tolerated evil remained as evil as it ever was. Thomas alleged that the Jews sin in their rites and he called them "our enemies." His argument shows that one did not have to like the Jews to be tolerant; to the contrary, one had to dislike them to be tolerant, for tolerance only applied to evil. Tolerance was not an imperative of love but a restraint on one's hatred. It is thanks to this restraint, however, that Jews, in the Thomistic concept, were permitted to live their own lives within the bonds of a Christian society.

If we turn to the small treatise on the government of Jews that Thomas wrote for the duchess of Brabant, we see the same line of argument. Thomas began with the statement that the Jews, because of their guilt for the crucifix-ion, are destined to perpetual slavery and therefore could be treated as slaves by Christian rulers.[34] Yet, Thomas argued, it is our duty to walk honestly towards them that are outside, as the apostle says (1 Thess. 4:12). Christian rulers should

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[31] *Summa theologica*, ed. PP Coll. S. Bonaventurae (5 vols.; Quaracchi, 1924-69), III, 728-31.

[32] D. 45 c. 3.

[33] *Summa Theologiae, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita* (hereafter: ed. Leon.) IV-XII (Rome, 1888-1906), II.II.10.11; the quotation from Augustine is from *De ordine* II, 4.

[34] On the theory of the *servitus iudaeorum* see Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (18 vols.; New York-Philadelphia, 1952-83 [2]), IX, 135ff.; XI, 3ff. For its insertion in canon law see X 5.6.13 (Innocent III).

therefore behave correctly to their Jewish subjects and exact nothing more from them than is permitted by custom.[35] Again, Thomas did not say that the ruler must embrace the Jews as if they were good subjects; in his vision, they remain sinful outsiders but precisely because they are outsiders, Christian rulers have to bear themselves honestly to them. Thomas even allowed for some room for the evil practice of usury with which the Jews were connected. Although the rulers would do better to compel the Jews to work, they were, in Thomas's view, entitled to levy taxes on the income their Jewish subjects drew from usury and to spend them for the common good. Thomas knew very well that usury was permitted by human law as a necessary tool to economic prosperity, although he never recommended the tolerance of usury in a direct way.[36] In view of the fact that Christian rulers tolerated Jews and other infidels chiefly because of their *utilitas*,[37] Thomas's qualified allowance for Jewish money-lenders must have worked as a strong encouragement of the toleration of Jews.[38]

Arguments comparable to those of Thomas Aquinas can be found quite often in moralizing political literature of the later Middle Ages. Many authors made an appeal to the idea of *tolerantia* in order to demonstrate how to handle evil elements in a Christian society. They referred especially to the principle of opportunity, as in the case of Ptolemy of Lucca (c. 1236-c. 1327), who wrote a continuation of the *speculum principis* that his teacher Thomas Aquinas had composed for the king of Cyprus. According to Ptolemy, the evil of prostitution had to be tolerated because it prevented the greater evil of sodomy. He falsely ascribed to Augustine the comparison between prostitution and the sewer of a palace: "Do away with the sewer, and you will fill the palace with stench; do away with the prostitutes, and you will fill the world with sodomy."[39] Partly because it was believed that Augustine had really spoken these words and partly because it was believed that Thomas Aquinas himself had quoted Augustine in his *speculum principis*, this passage became an authoritative argument in favor

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[35] *Epistola ad ducissam Brabantiae*, ed. Leon. XLII (Rome, 1979), 375-76, echoing X 5.6.9 (Clement III).

[36] *Ibid.*; cf. *Summa theologiae* II.II.78.1 ad 3, quoted below n. 44.

[37] See Powell, *op. cit.*, 203.

[38] It is therefore unjustified, as Cohen does, to include Thomas without qualification among the mendicant theologians who contributed to the gradual disappearance of the Jewish population from Europe. Cohen does not take into account the passages from the *Summa theologiae* and the *Epistola ad ducissam* discussed here, although these texts were extensively used by late medieval authors who debated Jewish toleration. Moreover, the influence of canon law on scholasticism in matters of tolerance invalidates Cohen's distinction between tolerant popes and canonists on the one hand and intolerant mendicants on the other—a distinction which is little convincing anyway, since the canonist Raymond of Peñafort (who gave an authoritative definition of tolerance, as we have seen above) is depicted by Cohen as the evil genius behind mendicant intolerance.

[39] *De regimine principum*, ed. Raymundus M. Spiazzi, *Divi Thomae Aquinatis ... Opuscula philosophica* (Rome, 1954), IV, 14 (1073).

of the toleration of prostitutes in the later Middle Ages. Not only did other writers refer to it in order to reinforce their own arguments, but so did the rulers of urban communities who had to defend the existence of *maisons de tolérance* within the limits of their towns.[40] Again, tolerance had nothing to do with approval. Prostitution was not allowed because it was considered a good but because its suppression would result in even greater evils.[41]

Apart from Jews and prostitutes, marginalized groups such as lepers, the insane, and beggars seem also to have benefited from the idea of tolerance. In the later Middle Ages *tolerantia* had become an argument to justify the existence of all social deviance, especially in the urban community.[42] This is not to say that medieval society was always tolerant in reality. Pogroms against the Jews and expulsions of marginal people as well as non-Christians did occur. But the theory of *tolerantia* was upheld by the popes, the canonists, and many authors influenced by them,[43] and they served at least on a moral level as an impediment to blind destruction of what we nowadays would call "otherness." To be sure, this theory did not imply that worldly and ecclesiastical rulers had to take all evil for granted. Tolerance, it should be repeated, was extended to minor evils that were thought usefully left without interference. As Thomas Aquinas argued, human government should proceed against *vitia graviora* such as theft and murder but should leave lesser sins unpunished without approving of them, for one could not expect all citizens to be perfect. Minor evils could even be profitable to the state, and leaving room for them could consequently be an act of wise statesmanship.[44]

Whether or not certain phenomena should be considered intolerable *vitia graviora* is of course open to debate. Neither Thomas nor the majority of his

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[40] See Jacques Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, tr. Lydia G. Cochrane (Oxford, 1988), 81 n. 17; Schreiner, 471-72. The expression "maison de tolérance" was used in late medieval France, see Schreiner, 458.

[41] See Peter Schuster, *Das Frauenhaus. Städtische Bordelle in Deutschland, 1350 bis 1600* (Paderborn, 1992), 212. Jews and prostitutes seem to have been treated in much the same way in late medieval towns; see *ibid.* 212-13; Leah L. Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in the Languedoc* (Chicago, 1985), 69-70; Diane Owen Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs: Ear-Rings, Jews, and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City," *Past and Present*, no. 112 (1986), 3-59.

[42] See Frantisek Graus, "Randgruppen der städtischen Gesellschaft im Spätmittelalter," *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 4 (1981), 385-437. Infamous people like street musicians paid "tolerance money" in order to stay in town, see Schreiner, 450, 472.

[43] Powell, "Introduction," *Muslims under Latin Rule*, 5-7 (as for religious toleration); Pakter, 27: "No canonist ever advocated exile of the Jews internally or externally."

[44] *Summa theologiae* I.II.93.3 ad 3; I.II.96.2; I.II.101.3 ad 2: "sapientis legislatoris est minores transgressiones permittere, ut maiores caveantur"; II.II.78.1 ad 3: "leges humanae dimittunt aliqua peccata impunita propter conditiones hominum imperfectorum, in quibus multae utilitates impedirentur si omnia peccata districte prohiberentur poenis adhibitis. Et ideo usuras lex humana concessit, non quasi existimans eas esse secundum iustitiam, sed ne impedirentur utilitates multorum."

contemporaries did allow for heresy. In the very period which gave birth to the idea of tolerance, Christianity became increasingly intolerant of religious dissent in practice as well as in theory. Even scholars who, with Richard Kieckhefer, combat the view of the Inquisition as a monolithic repressive agency directed by Rome, do not question the fact that "medieval churchmen from the twelfth century onward clearly did wish to exercise tighter control over the Church's members and to define more narrowly and precisely the boundaries of permissible belief and conduct."[45]

Another phenomenon that was generally considered intolerable was homosexuality.[46] Heretics and homosexuals were not even in theory allowed to dwell in the margins of society, like Jews and prostitutes. Heresy and homosexuality were not seen as minor evils that society could afford. Heresy endangered the very core of Christian civilization, whereas homosexuality was felt to threaten the distinction between the sexes, the main distinction which Christian civilization maintained within its own ranks. *Tolerantia* was a way of walking honestly towards outsiders; towards insiders, strictness prevailed.

Unfortunately the latter difference is commonly disregarded in modern scholarship, which tends to take the marginalization and the extermination of deviant social groups as two facets of one and the same process of "exclusion."[47] In its medieval context, however, marginalization is, paradoxically enough, a way of incorporating deviant groups in society, albeit in its outer spheres.[48] Only the extermination of deviant groups at the gallows or the stake can be accounted as real exclusion, as a way of getting rid of evil when tolerance was felt to be out of place—as was the case with heretics, homosexuals, and ordinary criminals. For the total and final exclusion of evil, however, medieval Christians had to

[45] Richard Kieckhefer, "The Office of Inquisition and Medieval Heresy: The Transition from Personal to Institutional Jurisdiction," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 46 (1995), 36-61:40. Kieckhefer's article sums up the discussion on the nature of the Inquisition elicited by his *Repression of Heresy in Medieval Germany* (Philadelphia, 1979).

[46] See John E. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980); for Thomas Aquinas, see *Summa theologiae* II.II.154.12. Graus, 399, points to the fact that heretics and homosexuals were the two main "marginal" groups that were not tolerated in late medieval society.

[47] See Robert I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford, 1987); see also Graus, 433: "ihr gemeinsames Kennzeichen [of marginal groups] war nur, dass sie von der Gesellschaft nicht integriert wurden." Schuster, 212, argues rightly that the toleration of prostitutes was a means of integrating them into society, in spite of the fact that they were universally held in contempt.

[48] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1961), 14: "la situation *liminaire* du fou à l'horizon du souci de l'homme médiéval" is expressed "par le privilège qui est donné au fou d'être *enfermé* aux *portes* de la ville; son exclusion doit l'inclore; s'il ne peut et ne doit avoir d'autre *prison* que le *seuil* lui-même, on le retient sur le lieu du passage. Il est mis à l'intérieur de l'extérieur, et inversement."

wait for the Last Judgment. During the *saeculum*, minor evils had to be supported and could even be used for the sake of the common good.

Early modern history offers a different picture in this respect. The process of pluralizing religious truth seems indeed to have been initiated in the sixteenth century. Especially before the beginning of the Reformation, the humanists, especially those who were active north of the Alps, advocated a moderate diversity within the sphere of Christian doctrine and practice, thus introducing a freedom that their medieval predecessors had been unwilling to concede. Authors such as Erasmus abhorred doctrinal disputes and were much more interested in restoring a true Christian piety, that could make itself felt in different ways. It is not certain whether the relative freedom of religious thought and action envisaged in Christian humanism really left more room to the faithful in comparison to medieval practice, in which divergent opinions coexisted (after all, one of the most frequent humanist reproofs to scholastic theologians was precisely that they never agreed with each other). Nevertheless, Erasmus and his fellow humanists defended at least the idea of the flexibility of Christian truth as a matter of principle.

It is the appeasing attitude of Erasmus in an age of growing religious polarization which has inspired the notion of "Erasmian tolerance."[49] This notion, however, is rather out of place. Erasmus never recommended his ideas on the matter in the name of tolerance, as Mario Turchetti has argued.[50] For Erasmus *tolerantia* was a choice for the lesser of two evils. Yet he did not consider the relative freedom of belief that he advocated as a lesser evil which would be better left without interference to prevent worse things, but rather as something normal and acceptable, so that the question of tolerance was irrelevant. Whatever the merits of his views may have been, the term "tolerance" is not right. Reluctance in rejecting the opinions of others is not the same thing as tolerating opinions one actually rejects. In fact Erasmus recognized several forms of orthodoxy, which is quite different from allowing forms of heterodoxy. It is precisely on behalf of the unity and the *concordia* among the Christians that he worked out the idea of a harmless religious diversity.[51]

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[49] See, e.g., Wallace K. Ferguson, "The Attitude of Erasmus towards Toleration," *Persecution and Liberty: Essays in Honor of George Lincoln Burr* (New York, 1931), 171-81; Lecler, I, 133-49; Myron P. Gilmore, "Les limites de la tolérance dans l'oeuvre politique d'Erasme," *Colloquia Erasmiana Turonensia* (2 vols.; Paris-Toronto 1972), 713-36; Karl Heinz Oelrich, "Zum Toleranzbegriff des späten Erasmus von Rotterdam," *Festgabe für Ernst Walter Zeeden* (Münster, 1976), 248-59; Manfred Hoffmann, "Erasmus and Religious Toleration," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook*, 2 (1982), 80-106.

[50] "Une question mal posée: Erasme et la tolérance. L'idée de sygkatabasis," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 53 (1991), 379-95. See also next note.

[51] Schreiner, 473, observes rightly that Erasmus did not use the term "tolerantia" to denote his ideas on religious peace and freedom, but "pax" and "concordia." See also Lecler, I,

Towards real heterodoxy, Erasmus was not usually indulgent. In his view opinions that could not be reconciled with the Christian faith as he conceived it (more amenable though he may have been compared with some contemporaries) had to be suppressed if necessary even by the death penalty. Of course one had to try to cure heretics before inflicting capital punishment on them, but if no other remedies were effective, one had to cut off the heretical limbs from the social body in order to prevent the contamination of the whole community.[52] When heresy went along with insurrections, the evildoers should even be put to death without hesitation,[53] unless a major part of society was afflicted; for a religious war would be a greater evil than the existence of heretics. This last line of thought reminds one of the medieval *tolerantia*, although Erasmus added that the allowance of heresy should only be a provisional solution: with the passage of time, society had to be purged from the monster of heresy as soon as the opportunity presented itself.[54] In dealing with heretics, then, Erasmus was usually no less intransigent than medieval theologians.[55] Only after his death did a generation of Catholic as well as Protestant theologians elaborate the idea that the evil of heresy should in principle be tolerated in case of political need, most notably when tolerance could prevent the *maius malum* of a massacre among the citizens.[56]

There are, however, some important exceptions to Erasmus's lack of indulgence to heresy. In expounding the parable of the wheat and the tares from the gospel of Matthew (13:24-30), Erasmus stated explicitly that, according to Christ, the mixture of the wheat (good Christians) and the tares (bad Christians, in particular heretics) had to be tolerated until the conclusion of history, when

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125: "Aussi bien leur idéal [of the Christian humanists] n'est pas tant la tolérance que la réduction des divergences religieuses par un loyal effort de conciliation." Accordingly, the term "tolerantia" is absent from sixteenth-century treaties on religious pacification like the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which employs the term "concordantia" (Schreiner, 447).

[52] See *Adversus monachos quosdam hispanos, Opera omnia*, ed. Joannes Clericus (10 vols.; Leiden 1703-6; hereafter LB), IX 1054B, 1056B, 1059E.

[53] See, e.g., *Opus epistolarium Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. Percy S. Allen et al. (12 vols.; Oxford, 1906-58; hereafter Allen), Epp. 1526: 155-59, 1690: 104-5; *Supputatio errorum Beddae* LB IX 581B; *Adversus monachos* LB IX 1056B; *Epistola contra pseudevangelicos, Opera omnia* (Amsterdam, 1969- ; hereafter: ASD), IX-1 288/137-41.

[54] See Allen, Epp. 1924: 32-35, 2366: 51-55. Lecler, I, 138, thinks that in Ep. 2366 Erasmus applied the Thomistic tolerance of infidels from *Summa theologiae* II.II.10.11 to Christian heretics.

[55] *Vita Hieronymi*: "in the matter of heresy tolerance is a wrong, not a virtue," *The Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto, 1974- ; herafter CWE), 61 44; *Erasmi Opuscula. A Supplement to the Opera omnia*, ed. W. K. Ferguson (The Hague, 1933), 165: 868-70.

[56] See Lecler, I, 289-95; II, 197-203. Joannes Lensaeus (1541-93) explicitly applied Thomas Aquinas's arguments in favor of the toleration of infidels to heretics.

God would separate the two at the Last Judgment.[57] This view can be qualified as genuinely tolerant, and indeed as a departure from medieval rigidity. Still, when the Lutheran author Gerard Geldenhouwer published in 1529 a selection of Erasmus's statements in favor of the tolerance of heretics, Erasmus was upset. In his reaction to Geldenhouwer, Erasmus claimed never to have said that heretics should not be put to death, but only that one should not immediately draw the sword after any accusation of heresy whatsoever by any monk or theologian whatsoever, because charity demanded that one first try to help the fallen. As for the parable of the wheat and the tares, Erasmus argued that not pulling out the tares only applied to the early Church and to the apostles who had no other sword than the word of God,[58] but that it did not imply any restriction of the power of worldly rulers who used real swords against heretics.[59]

Erasmus's overall position with regard to heresy, then, was rather traditional. But if he did not consistently plead for the extension of tolerance to the field of heresy, what attitude did he adopt toward medieval views of tolerance?

Although the term *tolerantia* occurs in Erasmus's work mostly in its classical and its biblical sense,[60] some echoes of medieval *tolerantia* can be found as well, notably with regard to Jews,[61] toleration for whom Erasmus seems to have taken for granted. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Erasmus never called for the expulsion of Jews or the use of violence against them. Neither did he take a firm stand against the acts of violence to which Jews fell victim in his age. Apparently the toleration of Jews did not interest Erasmus very much; all we can say is that at least he did not oppose himself to it. Nonetheless it is clear from his writings that he did not like the Jews. It would not even be impossible

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[57] *Paraphrasis in Matthaeum* LB VII 80E-F. Cf. *Supputatio* LB IX 580Cff.; *Adversus monachos* LB IX 1054Bff.; *Ad censuras facultatis theologiae Parisiensis* LB IX 904Fff.; *Apologia ad blasphemias Stunicae* LB IX 373C; *Commentarius in Psalmum II* ASD V-2 145/539-40; Allen Epp. 916: 244, 1202: 10ff., but on the other hand 2583: 18-20.

[58] In the same sense: *Divinationes ad notate per Beddam* LB IX 464A-C; *Supputatio* LB IX 582A; *Adversus monachos* LB IX 1056D.

[59] *Contra pseudevangelicos* ASD IX-1 287/107-15, 288/126-31. In his discussion of Erasmus's use of the parable, Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence*, tr. J. C. Grayson (Toronto, 1991), 177-78, ignores Erasmus's recantation (even though *Contra pseudevangelicos* was edited by Augustijn himself!) and praises Erasmus's "plea for toleration." For similar misrepresentations see Oelrich and especially Hoffmann, 106.

[60] Erasmus often mentioned Socrates as an example of "tolerantia": *De conscribendis epistolis* ASD I-2 413/13-414/1, *Colloquia* ASD I-3 644/50-51, *Encomium matrimonii* ASD I-5 398/178-80, *Christiani matrimonii institutio* LB V 660A. For "tolerantia" as a Christian virtue (Erasmus retained the term at 2 Cor. 1:6 in his New Testament translation and added it at 2 Thess. 1:4 and James 5:11) see e.g. *Epistola de philosophia evangelica* LB VI *5; Allen Epp. 710: 85, 1177: 44. With Erasmus the verb "tolerare" seems, in all its meanings, to be synonymous with "ferre," cf. *Apophthegmata* LB IV 314A: "Fert autem qui tolerat."

[61] Cf. e.g., *Declarationes ad censuras Lutetiae vulgatas* LB IX 909B, *Ecclesiastes* ASD V-5 254/232-34, *Interpretatio in Psalmum LXXXV* ASD V-3 406: 90ff., *Paraphrasis in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos* LB VII 808F, Allen, Ep. 2443: 314-16; see Shimon Markish, *Erasmus and the Jews*, tr. Anthony Olcott (Chicago, 1986), 66-111.

to charge Erasmus with antisemitism. But contrary to what some scholars think,[62] this is not an argument against Erasmian tolerance. Tolerance applied only to evil; thus, if Erasmus had not considered the Jews evil in some respect, there would have been nothing for him to tolerate. Erasmus did not like the Jews, but he did not dispute their right of existence in Christian society either, and this is exactly what makes him tolerant (although his statements on the matter are rather weak in comparison to medieval tradition). Erasmus's dislike of the Jews is a prerequisite of his tolerance, not an impediment to it.

Towards marginal people other than Jews who in the medieval tradition met with tolerance in theory and often in practice as well, Erasmus seems to have felt the need for toleration even less, and sometimes he explicitly pleaded against it. He does not seem to have favored the toleration of prostitutes[63] (actually prostitution became forbidden throughout Europe during the course of the sixteenth century), and he expressed himself repeatedly against the toleration of beggars[64] and of other people who, in his view, were useless and harmful to society. As he put it in his *Institutio principis christiani*:

> ... [I]t is far better to ensure that no offences at all are committed than to punish them once they have been perpetrated. This will be achieved if the prince can destroy, if possible, or at least check and reduce anything that he has noted as a likely source of criminal behaviour.... The vigilant prince will therefore ensure that he has as few idlers as possible among his subjects, either making them work or banishing them from the state.[65]

Here Erasmus defends the typical humanist idea that the prince, as an educator of his people, should teach his subjects how to behave as good citizens and to abstain from evil. The statement that the prince should cut all social evil at the roots, rather than to let it grow in order to punish it, was a commonplace in Renaissance political writings. Contrary to medieval opinion, evil was not to be tolerated, neither in the center nor in the margins of Christian society. Illustrating his view with the same medical metaphor he used with regard to heresy,

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[62] See, e.g. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, tr. James I. Porter (Philadelphia, 1984), 38-40.

[63] Cf. e.g. *Institutio matrimonii* LB V 719F-720A.

[64] Cf. *Colloquia* ASD I-3 258/823-26, 437/143-45; Allen, Epp. 964: 50-54, 967: 20-22; and cf. Juan Luís Vives, *De subventione pauperum* (1526).

[65] *Institutio* CWE 27 266-67, ASD IV-1 196/916-198/954. The passage is followed by an enumeration of idlers, to which Erasmus reckons beggars, tax farmers, peddlers, usurers, brokers, panders, estate managers, game wardens, courtiers, soldiers, decayed noblemen, and many monks and university teachers. "If the prince will banish from his realm all such seedbeds of crime," Erasmus concludes, "there will be much less for his laws to punish" (CWE 27 268, ASD IV-1 198/971-72).

Erasmus stated that harmed parts of the social body had to be removed before they contaminated the whole, either by restoring them to health or by cutting them off.[66] On no account could social evil be tolerated in its state of depravity. Not only were the traditional *vitia graviora* envisaged here, but so were all sorts of moral degradation, the effect of which was much harsher, in Erasmus's opinion, than state control of the citizens' conduct.[67] Although it would be unfair to depict Erasmus, or the Christian humanists in general, as purely intolerant—we could point to several passages in Erasmus's work which deal less uncompromisingly with social evil[68]—one cannot overlook the tendencies in Renaissance political thought to strive against all evil elements in society and to exclude them rather than to incorporate them if this seemed to be opportune, as medieval authors had recommended.[69]

A major reason for Erasmus's uncompromising attitude to social evil seems to be his idea that only when one makes efforts to realize the ideal situation can one hope to bring forth an even modestly better state of affairs. In his commentary to the adage "Grasp the summit, and halfway will be yours," Erasmus attacked the scholastics who debated the extent to which it was permissible to give in to evil, since it was better to combat evil in all its forms: only this would eventually lead to improvements of some sort.[70] In his preface to the 1518 edition of the *Enchiridion militis christiani* we find the same argument. After having criticized the scholastics for never giving clear-cut directions for human conduct but indicating instead what was *tolerabilis*, Erasmus explained that the highest goal—Christ and his teaching in all its purity—"must be set before everyone, that at least we may achieve something half way."[71] Thus Erasmus criticized the medieval tradition not for showing a lack of tolerance but for having too much of it. Contenting oneself with the lesser of two evils was no serious option for him. As he put it in *Antibarbari*: "Something that is tolerated can even be pleasing when it is compared with something worse; but it will please a great deal more if it is changed into something better."[72]

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[66] *Ibid.*, ASD IV-1 196/928-197/933.

[67] *Ibid.*, ASD IV-1 198/990-93. An exception is Erasmus's qualified defense of the marriage of clerics as a "minus malum" (*Appendix de scriptis Clichtovei* LB IX 811F) preventing debauchery.

[68] In the *Institutio* Erasmus points twice to the possibility of toleration of evil (ASD IV-1 173/213-16, 187/675-78) and states that it can scarcely be hoped that all men will be good (140/116). Cf. also Allen, Ep. 858: 281-83. For a literal echo of the medieval idea of tolerance see *Erasmus' Annotations to the New Testament*, ed. Anne Reeve and M. A. Screech (3 vols.; London, 1986-93), I, 213 (on Luke 22:36): "Postremo sunt in rebus humanis multa necessaria mala, quae tolerantur eo quod excludant maiora mala, non probantur, ut Evangeliae doctrinae."

[69] For a more detailed discussion see my *Pape Jansland en Utopia. De verbeelding van de beschaving van middeleeuwen en renaissance* (Nijmegen, 1994).

[70] *Adagia* II iii 25, CWE 33 142-43, LB II 492A.

[71] CWE, Ep. 858:346-51 (Allen, 324-29).

[72] CWE 23 79, ASD I-1 101/6-8.

Erasmus's willingness to continue the medieval tradition of tolerance, then, is remarkably low. However, he made extensive use of the concept of *tolerantia* in a field that has commonly been overlooked: his polemics against the Protestants. Opposing himself to the radical break of Lutheranism from the medieval Church—a break which, according to Erasmus, was based on the idea that once a new Church was founded, religion and morality would be safe—he frequently took recourse to the idea of tolerance. He insisted that it was nonsense to think that the new Church would be some holy community protected against decay. Evil, Erasmus argued, was intrinsic to earthly existence and thus had to be tolerated in any human institution. In his invective against the Lutheran Geldenhouwer he affirmed:

> As long as the net of the Church is trailed through the course of earthly history and has not yet reached the shore, one should tolerate the mixture of good and evil; it has always been the case and will always be the case for the human condition that it yields more bitterness than honey.[73]

If human faults were to be corrected at all, Erasmus continued, one should be careful only to remove the wrongs of the institution at stake, not the institution itself. But the Protestants were anything but careful and destroyed everything. Turning the parable from Matthew against Geldenhouwer, Erasmus wrote: "you people pull out the wheat with the tares, or, I should rather say, you pull out the wheat instead of the tares."[74] Tolerating the tares, then, was a better solution. As Erasmus stated in *Hyperaspistes I*, in which he attacked Luther directly:

> I know that in this church, which you call papist, there are many people who displease me: but I see such men in your church as well. However, evil to which one is used is tolerated more easily. I shall therefore tolerate this church until I shall see a better one.... He who holds the middle course between two different evils is not an unhappy navigator.[75]

Here Erasmus adopts a tolerant attitude in the medieval sense of the term, allowing for the lesser evil of degenerated Catholicism to prevent the greater evil of Protestant anarchy. Even a moderate tyranny of superstition seemed

[73] *Contra pseudevangelicos* ASD IX-1 304/615-18. Erasmus made the same point against Martin Bucer, Allen, Ep. 2615: 495-99, and against Luther himself, *Hyperaspistes II* LB X 1483C-D.

[74] *Contra pseudevangelicos* ASD IX-1 292/239-40.

[75] *Hyperaspistes I* LB X 1257F-1258A.

more tolerable to him than a total revolution.[76] Superstitions that did not result in impiety should be tolerated, Erasmus declared, just as inept depictions in churches, failing monasteries and universities, and (as long as there was no alternative) scholastic theology.[77] Once Erasmus even put the toleration of Jews and of medieval Catholicism on one line:

> The Apostles showed toleration to the Jews, who could not be weaned away from their ingrained taste for the Law; and the same, I believe, they would rightly show to these men who for so many centuries have accepted the authority of all those councils and popes and distinguished teachers, and find some difficulty in swallowing the new wine of this modern teaching.[78]

Confronted, then, with the Protestant idea that one can and must create a perfect Christian society by turning away from the traditional Church, Erasmus abandoned his vision that one should always strive for perfection in order to make at least some improvements. He pleaded instead for tolerance of the Catholic tradition, if necessary until the end of history. Thus the most cogent examples of Erasmian tolerance do not announce modernity but spring from a concern to preserve medieval Catholicism. Rather than developing a new idea of tolerance as an instrument against the totalitarian aspirations of the medieval Church, Erasmus used the existing concept of tolerance to oppose the no less totalitarian assumption of Protestantism that it could realize, or that it even represented, the City of God on Earth.

My survey of medieval and humanist attitudes towards tolerance enables me to draw some critical conclusions. Contrary to Klaus Schreiner's statements, the pretension of the medieval Church to represent the absolute truth did not imply a limitation of the meaning of tolerance. It is in order to define its own attitude towards those who did not conform to the absolute truth that the Church developed and adopted the idea of *tolerantia*. Heretics (the enemies from within) were persecuted, but unbelievers, especially Jews (the enemies from without) were granted a right of existence, as were most social elements who offended the moral code which the absolute religious truth legitimized and sanctified. It is also evident that the close bonds between Church and state in the Middle Ages did not weaken the impact of tolerance but reinforced it. Ecclesiastical

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[76] *De esu carnium* ASD IX-1 38/563-64.

[77] *Modus orandi deum* ASD V-1 154/135-36 (superstition), 163-65 (depictions); *De recta pronuntiatione* ASD I-4 24/344-54 (monasteries, universities); Allen, Ep. 1127: 14-16 (scholasticism).

[78] CWE, Ep. 1341A: 1172-77, Allen, I, 30: 28-33. Erasmus does not speak in so many words of "tolerantia" but of "moderatio." "Modern teaching" refers to Lutheranism.

authors themselves advised worldly rulers to adopt a tolerant attitude towards evildoers, by taking recourse to the concept of tolerance in canon law and applying it in the secular sphere.

Schreiner's assumption that tolerance implies freedom of religion and plurality of truth seems to me fundamentally mistaken. In the medieval tradition, tolerance is a precept of non-interference on the part of those who are in power. Once religious freedom is acknowledged, religion becomes politically neutral and hence offers no ground for interference or non-interference any longer. Religious freedom and religious *tolerantia* are therefore logically incompatible. Plurality of truth, on the other hand, is compatible with *tolerantia*, but the two concepts do not require each other. Tolerance does not concern the truth but the untrue. Whether the truth in question is uniform or plural is irrelevant. History actually teaches us that medieval tolerance coexisted with a uniform truth, whereas the effort of pluralizing religious truth in early modern times was accompanied by a decreasing willingness to tolerate social deviance.

If we put it in general terms, we could say that medieval *tolerantia* defines the attitude of Christian civilization to its own counterpart. Within the range of Christian civilization a set of absolute rules prevails (hence the persecution of heretics); *tolerantia*, however, offers the possibility of coming to terms with the outer world. It is a way of getting along with essential cultural differences between Christian society and its outsiders. The allegedly tolerant tendencies in Renaissance thought, on the other hand, define only the relations within Christian civilization. Erasmian *concordia* invites us to consider Christian civilization as composed of relative, pluriform rules. It offers no possibility, however, of coming to terms with the outer world. In fact there is little room for such a world: harmless cultural differences are allowed among the insiders of Christian society, but essential cultural differences should preferably disappear. In contrast with *tolerantia, concordia* means reluctance in rejecting others, but not in suppressing the rejected other. It teaches us to accept some variation within the range of the civilized; *tolerantia*, on the other hand, teaches us to live with real differences.

The modern confusion between the notions of "concord" and of "tolerance" might be a heritage of enlightened philosophy. In the eighteenth century the distinction between *tolerare* and *approbare* from canon law was no longer maintained.[79] When Voltaire pleaded for "tolerance" in religious affairs, what he had in mind was the peaceful coexistence of different systems of belief which, to him, had no real significance anyway. "Tolerance" thus came to mean little more than "indifference." This rather feeble notion of "tolerance" still dominates in modern political discourse. When nowadays people urge the politicians (or politicians urge the people) to be tolerant, what they really have in

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[79] Schreiner, 533.

view is an indifferent attitude. Admitting the relativity of our truths, we should be reluctant to condemn the acts or beliefs of our fellow human beings that differ from our own—that is the basic idea of our so-called tolerance. An idea that makes us morally defenseless if outright evil shows up; an idea, moreover, that should make us pray never to find the absolute truth again, for that would apparently imply the end of tolerance.

From the medieval tradition of tolerance we could learn that these last impressions are wrong. Medieval authors never doubted that they possessed the absolute truth, but they developed the concept of *tolerantia* as a way of getting along with the untrue. Medieval authors were never morally defenseless against outright evil and condemned it wherever they believed to find it, but still they advocated not to interfere with it if this seemed to be opportune. Obviously we do not have the same enemies as medieval people. Still, with regard to the question of how to handle the enemies we do have without going to the extremes of tyranny and inertia, the medieval doctrine of tolerance contains a lesson for our age as well.

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