

ARTICLES

Erasmus: The 16th Century's Pioneer of Peace Education and a Culture of Peace*

Peter van den Dungen**

More than a century before Grotius wrote his famous work on international law, his countryman Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam laid the foundations for the modern critique of war. In several writings, especially those published in the period 1515-1517, the "prince of humanists" brilliantly and devastatingly condemned war not only on Christian but also on secular/rational grounds. His graphic depiction of the miseries of war, together with his impassionate plea for its avoidance, remains unparalleled. Erasmus argued as a moralist and educator rather than as a political theorist or statesman. If any single individual in the modern world can be credited with "the invention of peace," the honour belongs to Erasmus rather than Kant whose essay on perpetual peace was published nearly three centuries later.

Keywords

Erasmus, Kant, "invention of peace," *Bellum*, *Education of a Christian Prince*, *Complaint of Peace*

I. Introduction

In 1969 festivities celebrating Erasmus took place in various cities around the world on what was then held to be the 500th anniversary of his birth. Since then, the traditionally

* This paper is a revised version of the paper presented at the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) Conference (Peace History Commission) held at the University of Leuven, Belgium, July 2008.

** Honorary Visiting Lecturer at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, UK. A.B.(Antwerp), M.A.(John Hopkins), Ph.D. (King's College, London). The author may be contacted at: P.Vandendungen@bradford.ac.uk/Address: Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, UK.

favourite year of 1467 has again established itself as the most likely year of his birth; more recently a strong case has been made for 1466. The Royal Library in Brussels organised an important exhibition entitled *Erasmus and Belgium* which was the main event of the “National Commemoration of Erasmus.” It consisted largely of early editions of works by Erasmus. For our purposes it is felicitous that the first item on display, and the first entry in the published exhibition catalogue,¹ is his anti-war essay, *Dulce Bellum Inexpertis* (“War is sweet to those who do not know it”) - shown, moreover, in an edition printed in Leuven in 1517. The foregrounding of this work was not because the organisers somehow wanted to emphasise Erasmus as a pacifist. It is merely because this essay was first published in his *Adages*, and because the listing of early editions of Erasmus’s books printed in Belgium, which constituted the first section of the exhibition, was presented in alphabetical order of title. Before its publication as an independent pamphlet, *Bellum* (as the work became popularly known) had first appeared in the *Adages*, the enormously popular work in which Erasmus had collected 100s, and later 1,000s of sayings and proverbs culled from the writings of the ancients. The *Adages* thus became an ideal instrument to popularise, and make more widely available, the treasures of classical wisdom, which up to this time had remained inaccessible to a larger audience.

Erasmus’ *Adages* has been called the first great bestseller of the new age of printing. More than 150 editions published during the 16th century alone testify to its popularity. The book has received universal praise, not only during his lifetime but continuing up to the present. While contemporaries referred to it as “the arsenal of Minerva” (Guillaume Budé) or representing “the Garden of Wisdom” (Richard Taverner), more recently Roland Bainton has called the adages “pearls of wisdom.” Margaret Mann Phillips, a leading English expert on Erasmus, and translator of the *Adages*,² has called it “a key work of the 16th century... the book which formed the European mind.” The great Dutch historian and biographer of Erasmus, Johan Huizinga, wrote that with this book, “Erasmus brought the gold of the classical mind in circulation.” In terms of the history of literary genre, the book represents a lifetime before Montaigne, “the birth of the Essay” by Anton Gail.

However, our interest is not in this most influential and popular of books, but in what was soon to become its most famous, and longest essay. That it featured at the

¹ *Érasme et la Belgique*. Brussels: Bibliothèque Royale Albert Ier, 1969, at. 4-5. The same catalogue was also published in Dutch under the title *Erasmus en België*. Later in the year, the University of Leuven incorporated this exhibition into a larger one entitled *Erasmus en Leuven* which was shown in the city’s municipal museum. It is fully documented in a 500-page catalogue bearing the same title as the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Leuven in 1969.

² MARGARET MANN PHILLIPS, *THE “ADAGES” OF ERASMUS* (1964).