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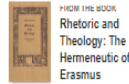


BOOK CHAPTER
ONE Erasmus, Rhetorical Theologian

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ONE

**Erasmus,
Rhetorical Theologian**

1 IMAGES OF ERASMUS

The history of Erasmus interpretation has produced a puzzling variety of readings.¹ Despite repeated attempts at reducing his life and work to common denominators, the humanist has had a way of eluding his interpreters. For all the labels pinned on him, he remained an enigmatic figure. His personality cannot be clearly traced nor his place and role in history definitively fixed. If there is a basic theme running through most modern interpretations, it touches not on something certain but, ironically, stresses the ambiguity of his thinking and the ambivalence of his attitude.

Looking at Erasmus as both an unsystematic thinker and a "man for all seasons"² could result in either positive or negative assessments. Those who came from a nineteenth-century liberal point of view tended to appreciate in him the broad-minded intellectual, impartial and adaptable, open to reason but critical of hypocrisy, fanaticism, and dogmatism. He was seen as a sceptic hiding behind the facade of the humanist. Modern liberalism had found its forerunner: a rationalist who espoused an undogmatic religion so general as to hold the ultimate truth in suspension, and a moralist who advocated so broad an un-churched fellowship of the spirit that he was willing to concede all sorts of personal convictions, if only they led to ethical improvement. Accordingly, he was heralded as a father of religious toleration and an early proponent of religious pluralism. No wonder, then, that his alleged relativizing of the truth and moralizing of religion squared readily with modern notions of histor-