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The Zurich theologian Theodor Bibliander is portrayed in the *Historiae ecclesiasticae Novi Testamenti* by Johann Heinrich Hottinger as a ‘fully Erasmian’ man. However, his role as Erasmus’s heir, as well as his own achievements, has until recently remained unacknowledged. Such oblivion is fully unjustified in view of both Bibliander’s personal activities and his importance in the reception of Erasmus’s thought. Bibliander espoused several central ideas of Erasmus — from free will to the limitless mercy of God — and also included a fundamentally ethical and a-deistic notion of Christianity as well as the tolerant, pacifist, and universalistic vision deriving from it. On these bases, however, he created an original and bold conception, showing himself to be a worthy follower of his master’s anti- dogmatism.

Bibliander’s thought and cultural activities led him to widespread fame and to an avant-garde position in relation to his times. As Zwingli’s successor to the Chair of Holy Scripture at Zurich, Theodor Buchmann, called Bibliander (1507–1564), consecrated himself to theology and exegesis, giving them sound foundations through the critical philological method and the study of classical and oriental languages. He became the major European Hebrew scholar and the ‘father’ of modern exegesis. His activity was framed within a cultural vision forged by Erasmus and by Neo-Platonism, which aimed to examine knowledge of the divine in its different historical manifestations as well as the recomposition of fragments of truth within a unitary and universalistic framework. Christianity, conceived of in its ethical essence, was the unifying factor: linguistic knowledge and theological
knowledge were the tools; the reconciliation of the whole of humanity in the religious and political sphere was the ultimate goal. The realization of this event was projected by Bibliander onto the apocalyptic scenario of the coming of the future kingdom of Christ, an eternal kingdom destined to welcome all men. Bibliander's conception was Christian-centric and Eurocentric – the problem of the "indians" was foreign to him, and he principally devoted his attention to the three monotheistic religions, of which he considered Christianity the superior one. However, he formulated the theoretical basis for a reappraisal of religions and cultures of all types and from all time periods, and for their ultimate acceptance into the "regnun Dei". The idea of tolerance emerging from his conception was boundless, and the attitude toward the 'other', because of its incipient comparative perspective, was innovative. Pierre Bayle therefore rightly defined Bibliander 'un homme fort universel' and considered him a protagonist of sixteenth-century universalism.

Bibliander produced an extremely vast scholarly output, most of which is still unpublished. Among his most important publications were a Hebrew grammar (1535, the best at that time); the first Latin edition of the Koran accompanied by a monumental corpus of writings on Islamic civilization (1545); De suture communi omnium linguarum et literarum commentaria (1546), a revolutionary project on linguistic and religious unification by means of the identification of laws common to different faiths and idioms; De fatis monarchiae Romanae sornnium vaticinum Esdræ prophητiae (1553), an interpretation of Esdras's prophecy in view of a vast work of evangelization and pacification of all of the peoples of the world anticipated by the Holy Roman Empire. Also worth mentioning are his attempts to translate the Bible into Arabic and his study of other civilizations, starting with the Islamic one.

Bibliander dedicated his whole life to the project of religious concord, and he sacrificed his old age for it, since he was forced to leave his university position because of the opposition of Pietro Martire Vermigli, a champion of the predominant doctrine. His youthful education under the guidance of the theologians Johannes Oecolampadus and Oswald Myconius, as well as of the great Greek and Hebrew scholar Conrad Pelikan (all of whom had shared with Erasmus intellectual pursuits as well as cultural and religious ideals), was decisive. The stimulus received from them were further expanded upon in Zurich, where Bibliander became a pupil of Leo Jud and Ulrich Zwingli.

Under the influence of its leaders, Zwingli and Bullinger, the Reformation in Zurich was characterized by a profound connection to the humanistic movement, particularly to Erasmus. The Dutch humanist was considered a leading figure of biblical exegesis – of which he always remained the authority – but also an essential point of reference in a religious and pedagogical ambit. Erasmus never visited Zurich, but his works enjoyed considerable success there even after his falling-out with Luther. Their penetration was helped by the translations and publications started by Jud in 1539, Zurich printing presses were responsible for the appearance of the Enchiridion, the Quaestio passio, the Institutio principi Christiani, the Novum instrumentum, and the Paraphrases (accompanied by an exposition of the Apocalypse by Pelikan). The education of the young elite in Zurich was based on Erasmus's texts, from the didactic book on Latin to the editions of the classics and of the Fathers of the Church, while the fully glossed Novum instrumentum and the Paraphrases were the basis for the exegetical and pastoral activities of the Reformers. It is perhaps superfluous to remind ourselves of the importance that the writings of Erasmus had in the elaboration of Zwingli's theory of the Eucharist, and in his critique of the Roman church. As a last sign of homage, the image of Erasmus was included among the portraits of scholars and Reformers frescoed in the house of Christoph Froschauer the Younger.

In Bibliander's case, too, the reception of Erasmus is highly visible, even without the systematic textual comparisons carried out in this article. In Basel and Zurich Bibliander not only assimilated the Erasmian philological method – which he then applied in his exegetical work – but learnt to

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use it as a critical tool against theologians and as the pillar of a new religion: for Bibladder, as for Erasmus before him, 'grammatica', conceived of as a means of restoring the original truth of the sacred texts, was firmly set against doctrinal interpretations that were distant from the evangelical message and a source of continuous and lacerating controversies. Dogmatic thoughts were replaced with the Erasmian philosophy Christiani, centered on the imitation of Christ and on his message of love and charity. Indifferent to dogmatism and external rituals and institutions, this religion is freely chosen through uncorrupted reason, which is illuminated by God, and is confident in the universal extension of salvation thanks to the immensity of divine grace.

If the religious conception of Erasmus was the basis of Bibladder's theological reflection, the radical universalistic outcomes at which he arrived were fully original. His starting point was the postulate of universal election to salvation, an act freely willed by an immensely charitable God and manifested in the law of nature inscribed in human reason, ideas that Erasmus had defended in *De libero arbitrio divino, sive collatio* and in *De immersuo Dei misericordia concilio* (1524). However, Bibladder later foresaw a *Respublica Christiana* open to all potential receivers of the evangelical message of love and charity, each valued as an expression of the potential divine revelation. Bibladder developed Erasmian's origination not only into a powerful weapon against reformed predestination theories.

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10 The concept of the philosophia Christiani was, as is known, presented in the *Eucharistia et Christi*, developed in the *De libero arbitrio Thesis*, and celebrated in the *Pacifism*. From the enormous bibliography on Erasmus I only refer to some fundamental contributions: Balme C., *Erasmus of Christianisme* (New York: 1942); Auguglia G., *Erasmus. Nuove vita, lavori, e influssi* (Torino 1960); Hadam L., *Erasmus. A critical biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1951); Buning U., *Erasmus (London-New York: 1954).*


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but also into a principle capable of undermining the fundamentals of ecclesiastical institutions, theological doctrines, and consolidated mental habits toward orthodoxy.

The centrality of this conception for Bibladder is confirmed in his work *With the Grace and with the Virtue* (Zurich 1523). The text already contains a defined cultural and religious program. The main subject was the problem of prophecy, but the analysis branched out to include the fundamentals and modality of revelation, in order to then enucleate the principles of the universalistic conception. The reflection on prophecy would prove fundamental for Bibladder's future exegetic activity, particularly in terms of the elaboration of his apocalyptic and, broadly speaking, religious vision; it therefore deserves particular attention. Moreover, although charisma was not particularly important in Erasmus's thought, his ideas contributed to Bibladder’s discourse, motivating its development and outcomes.

Bibladder identified prophecy with theology. This coincidence between direct revelation and speculation on God was in itself unconventional and fell of consequences for dogmatism and ecclesiastical institutions, since it negated the very possibility of a monopoly on the sacred by all churches, while simultaneously opening an extremely wide horizon regarding the relationship between man and God. To Bibladder’s reflection, Erasmus’s positive emphasis on the immediacy and spirituality of this relationship – to the detriment of its institutional and ritual manifestations – and his search for principles on which to base it and the idea of a global ecosphere, as well as his methodological and exegetic habits, were potent stimuli.

Bibladder supported his thesis with recourse to the Bible and to a rigorous etymological analysis. Charismatic activity could be defined in terms of *prophétia*, *vivio*, or *theologia*, since in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew the prophet was he who by divine inspiration foresaw the future and penetrated into divine things; in Greek prophets were also called theologos because, following the etymology of the word (θεολόγος), they knew ‘the path, the way, the reason to hear and talk righteousness to God’. True theologians, however, were first priests and then wise (not only διδάκτοι)
but above all these shows”), given that their comprehension of truth was a
mark of spiritual enlightenment; for Bibliander the spirit represented the
guide to religious and exegetic activity, the source of the norms of life.15
The sphere of action of prophetic-theologians was extended by Bibliander
(in this manner following Zwingle) to the res gestae, that is, to symbolic or
real acts anticipating those of Christ and the apostles.16
For Bibliander, the truth of prophecy was absolute.17 The heavenly
provenance of the prophetic message made it 'most fall and absolute' and
'eternal', even if it was spoken by unworthy persons—among emis-
saries of Satan18 or expressed in an obscure and indeterminate man-
ner. The obscurity and indeterminacy of revelations were led back to the
attempt at translating the divine message into a language consonant with
the times, while all ecstatic content 'in the customs of the fanatics'19
was excluded. This attempt to historicize the manifestations of proph-
cy perhaps anticipated Spinoza's critique of the supernastum20 and kept
within the framework of the Erasmian critical method. For Bibliander,
the prophet represented 'the salt of the earth, the light of the world' and
was invested by God with the high responsibility of showing the path of
truth to the faithful, surpassing the often fallacies and limited human
interpreters.21
The role assigned by Bibliander to prophetic charisma was therefore
crucial in his religious discourse; prophecy, or direct revelation from God,
was the true work of God, the main means of communication with and in-
terpretation of divine truth, a beacon orienting the path of humanity
and the fullest expression of the science of the divine. Such centrality of
direct and universal communication from God led, obviously, to a major sub-
version of traditional conceptions and hierarchies. It is true that Bibliander
felt the need to legitimize the existence of ecclesiastical functions (his
aim, he said, was to 'seek truth, not fawn novelty'),22 but he forcefully
demonstrated the limitlessness of divine revelation and the multiplicity of
its manifestations outside of religious institutions.
Bibliander's rigorous analysis of Holy Scripture also bore proof that
prophecy had brought life to the whole history of the Christian church.23
He did not limit the title of prophet to ecclesiastics, but extended it to
those who operated for the promotion of divine truth ('spiritual doctors,
sacred orators, teachers of life', etc.).24 Moreover, neither God's revelation
nor his salvation design was restricted to the Christian citadel, since 'in
all times and in all peoples' there have been men who, because of their
distinction in ethical and religious principles, became guides in the sacred
and the profane, revealing themselves to be active elements in God's prov-
idential plan.25 The similarities among prophetic lives from 'the most dif-
frent times and places' were presented as proof of the unity of God's design
of salvation.26
Numerous examples were discussed by Bibliander to demonstrate the
existence of the divine plan: the vast world of ancient and oriental ci-

cilizations, from Persia to India, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, as well as the
barbaric territories with their own expressive, poetic, and oracular forms,
offered a vast array of 'seekers of truth' who are to be considered 'in-
struments' of God.27 By uttering 'many things [...] on God consonant with
sacred doctrine', these figures had revealed their nature as messengers
of eternal truth, and on these grounds they could not be excluded from
salvation; on the contrary, 'How could I say that God wanted to exclude
them? He most ardently desired to teach His word, to swiftly bring to
all men the knowledge of truth and to make them participant in eternal
salvation?'28 Bibliander conceded that their language and behaviour had
not always been exempt from ambiguity and error. On the other hand,
the word of God had constantly been susceptible to corruption by false
interpreters. However, he held the firm conviction that God spread his
gifts everywhere, like 'gems among basilisks and scorpions, gold in dung,
silver amid vile metals', and that a Christian had the most daunting duty
of individuating celestial truth in this 'mure magnum' of errors, and then
announcing it.29
The idea of the universal extension of divine revelation rests on a potent assumption – the notion of God as a 'commonwealth' of creation, as the giver of the universal law of nature and salvation. The image of an extraordinarily merciful and eternal Godhead which did not exclude anybody from eternal life was so described by Bibliander: 'He leaves nothing outside of His goodness and providence, He provides for and regulates, governs all and nothing can exist outside of Him.' The oneness of the principle, of course, did not eliminate the variety of its manifestations, which reached greater or lesser degrees of clarity according to circumstances. The echo of Eramus's Cœnus is here most clear: 'In the prophetic books God in frequency called 'merciful' and 'the merciful one', because of the surpassing magnitude of His mercy.

The universal reality of salvation appeared to Bibliander to be indisputable in view of the laws of nature inscribed by God in mankind: 'Hence God is the commonwealth of truth, the worser of which He conceded to ethnic peoples also, and He impressed the laws in their heart. And such laws we call the laws of nature.' Laws of nature imprinted religious, normative, and ethical principles in accordance with divine will, and were present in the whole of mankind. The position that Bibliander assigned therein within the human body made his perspective even more audacious: behind the classic formula 'in the heart of man' hid human reason, the foremost instrument of investigation into creation because of its divine nature. Human reason, Bibliander declared, echoing an important theme of the Scholasticism, was comparable to divine reason because of the 'divine spark' it harboured: 'this spark placed by the mind of God, creator of all, in the mortal breast, is similar, since it is the divine face reflected in the human mind.' In conclusion, in Bibliander's thought, religion—that is, Christianity—appears to find its nucleus in ethics and its instrument in reason, leading dogmatic and confessional truths in order to become a universal rule of life.

Such a concept was reaffirmed by Bibliander in a later work, significantly titled Christianissimus sempiternus, versus certas et immutabiles, in quo...
A FOLLOWER OF ERASMUS FROM ZURICH: THEODOR BILLIANDER

from determinism. Conversely, the idea that God could predetermine his creatures to a fate of damnation appeared to him to be antithetical to Christianity, the basic tenets of which is that 'the promise of grace is universal and immutable'.

For Billiander the relationship between man and God was not founded on the 'horrible decree' of predestination, but on the hopeful abandonment to the 'most gentle and holy goodness and justice' of the creator and to the awareness of divine omnipresence in creation. Erasmus had similarly expressed himself in the Confusio, individualizing in the sinking into the abyss of divine mercy the only means to heal the corruption derived from original sin.

Neither Erasmus nor Billiander, however, believed that original sin had totally perverted human nature. This theme was addressed in De summa bonta, et homini felicitate summarique perfectione sine de perfecta resitutiu genera hancam per des filiwm incertam, a voluminous unpublished work (unknown date of composition). Herein, free will was considered an element 'naturally' present in human nature, since it was God's will that mankind reach 'goodness and salvation'. The existence of free will is certified through a scrupulous doctrinal and philological discussion of theological texts (primarily Augustine) and biblical passages. In the Christian discipline liber primer, also written at an unknown date and never published, Billiander embossed on a lofty panegyric of man and his divine nature, grounded in the free will accorded to man by God.

Billiander wrote to Myconius that sinning was a free act through which man chose to deviate from the 'righteous will' given to him by the Father, and therefore its consequences fell on him alone. Possibly to give more weight to his arguments (bearing in mind, however, that the composition

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52. Billiander, Theodoer, De summa bonta, et homini felicitate summarique perfectione sine de perfecta resitutiu genera hancam per des filiwm incertam, a voluminous unpublished work (unknown date of composition).
53. The text is at Zurich Zentralbibliothek, Ms. Greg. 396. The manuscript pages are not numbered. The thesis was demonstrated herein with recourse to biblical, philosophic, and wisdom texts.
55. From a section mentioning famous homilies and voluminous partisan books, partisan odds [...], in loco citato Dei optimi, spectabilissimi, accepit, etc., based on subsequent, in multis varii [...] Non causae statuis merito vel setissimorum virtutis, non beneficia Dei rruit ut oeso, non egri noncem in argentum, gloriam, luctiam, etc.
spiritual and sacramental fruition' of the body of Christ through the Gospel. That said, his conception of Christianity as a religion accessible in its basic principles to all peoples of the earth considerably widened the horizons of the reign of God.

In mapping the divine kingdom on earth, Biblansdor's theology because he saw the 'highest and maximum good' to man, the only 'saviour and dispenser of salvation to all humanity', the culmination of God's design of salvation by way of the purity and immortality he had given man. Faith in the Messiah represented for Biblansdor the only means to the path of election, regeneration, and salvation: 'divine election rests with the Lord Jesus Christ, our God and Saviour, and not without Christ, or outside of Christ, or before or after Christ'. Faith, born out of grace, pushed man to imitate Him, thus becoming 'new creature' in the image of God.

Biblansdor saw faith as boundless. He believed that the benefits of the cross extended to the whole of humanity, without spatial or temporal limitation, and that the Gospel offered to each man the grace of God, the remission of sins, justice, salvation, and eternal life. Similarly to other sixteenth-century universalists (with the sole exception of Jean Bodin), Biblansdor never crossed the borders of the Respublica Christiana. Even in De.summa.bono, which sketched through a rich array of testimonies (from the Sibyls to the Bible, Church Fathers, and Reformation theologians) the vision of a 'holy and catholic church of God', including men of all faiths, places, times, the requisite for participation was individuated in the

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56 Ielona. Schola.Vigilans. Vir. 48:74. The work is in Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, Ms. 1, fol. 94v. 471v.
57 Already present in the Ecclesiasticus Rhetor. Christiani, this concept is also developed in the Contra and in the last part of De. ferao. orbis.
58 Biblansdor, De. summa. bono.
59 Biblansdor, De. summa. bono.
60 Biblansdor, De. summa. bono. "Vidit ertem (ils) appellat et ubert Fustum omnem: igni. colit, ut certa solum, nos nosse esse solum esse [...] iniquas in filio in angustias et paupertas Christiani Jesus nobis praebat exempla. ut vestigio ipsis instamin, et quidem Spiritus et gratia Dei adiutum renovamento etiam perfectionem Dei portum imaginem, ut aliquando super nos tummos renovare bonum et novas creaturas.

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60 Segovia V., L'Islam et la Réforme 175.
where the 'seed of religion and wisdom' — that is, love toward God and the moral principles present in each man — could flourish.  

Bibliander's perspective also encompassed the Jews and the great multitude of oriental peoples. With the intent of including them in the ecclesia Dei and of healing confessional fractures detrimental to both society and the conscience of Christians, Bibliander devoted himself to seeking a common religious and cultural base. Particularly important in this connection was the extraordinary work De ratione communis omnium gentium et literarum commentariorum, the complete title of which significantly reads: Cum abhinc est compropinuatio explicativa doctrinae rectoris beatissimae, eius religionis omnium gentium atque populi, quam argumentum hoc postulare videbatur. The connection between the quest for linguistic unification and universal concord is, in this text, apparent.  

Considering the intrinsically connected between language and religion — Christ is, after all, God's logos — Bibliander identified, through a comparative analysis of classical languages and Arabic and an analysis of the common principles of the three monotheistic faiths, a common original language. Such shared elements were numbered around ten and concerned mainly the immortality of the soul, the spiritual essence of man and religion, and the existence of a single, omniscient, omnipotent, eternal godhead that created, governed, and judged the universe, guided human society through his inspired intermediaries, and acted as an object of spiritual cult and as a normative principle in public and private life. These philosophical and spiritual ideas were not exclusive to one people but belonged to all humanity, even if they were differently expressed. Their reception and practice gave access to the universal 'community of saints' regardless of faith, culture, or social or professional condition. The work also delineates the political contours of such a community, advancing the idea of a supreme sovereign, emissary of God, endowed with the fullness of temporal and spiritual powers. Bibliander further expounded upon the features of this monarchy in a series of writings dating back to 1533, in particular De falsis monarchiis.

42 The Consultatio was published in Basel by Nicolaus Bryldingen in 1541, see fol. 193. The subtitle of the work reads: Reportis huius quaecumque facultate, de ratione communis omnium gentium et literarum commentariorum concordia et pace in ecclesia et republicita Christi consensuit, de eis artis et instrumentis invento. The text is limited to the work of the theologian. The idea of a supreme sovereign defined as follows: Auctoritas, potestas, in Christo, in Ecclesiam, in Principium, in Populum, in Discipulos.  

cities all over the globe; the motivation of his choice is familiar, and it
revolves around the universality of grace and the basic religious unity
of the human race in light of the shared laws of nature.64 Here, too, the
refusal of predestination doctrine is categorical.65 However, this work is
also notable for a new civic and political tension and a heightened aware-
ness of the problem of religious conflict within Christianity and with the
Ottoman Empire, as well as for an ardent desire to find a solution to this
situation (most likely a result of Bibliander’s experiences as a theologian
and as a “faithful citizen” of the Holy Roman Empire).66 Bibliander urged
his audience to exert maximum efforts to heal the religious fracture, thus
obliterating its tragic spiritual, political, and social consequences, and to
operate through peaceful means in view of the “great concern[s]” among
religious on the fundamental principles of salvation.67 He tried to dem-
strate in a concordance among the three faiths concerning the essential
attributes of Christ, who therefore appeared as the legitimate common
‘monarch’.68 The coming of the Messiah was seen as imminent with the
realization of the apocalyptic prophecy, the return of Gog and Magog,
the defeat of the Antichrist, the conversion of all humanity to Christ, and
the beginning of Christ’s reign as foretold by Isaiah.69 In De Monarchia
it was seen as the union of large and elegant states predicted by Babylonian,
Egyptian, Persian and Roman oracles.70
In 1559 two more works helped spread Bibliander’s beliefs, the De fatis
and the De legitima viactivatione Christianismi veri et sempiterni, in both,
the work of evangelization was entrusted to the Holy Roman Emperor and
to the English King Edward VI. Another work composed ten years later,
titled De conversione Judaeorum ad Christum, remained in manuscript
form.71 The project of a translation of the Bible into Arabic was also left
at a preliminary stage; after the Latin edition of the Koran, it embodied
Bibliander’s belief in a dialogue between the Christian West and other
world civilizations with a view toward world peace. Bibliander pursued
this goal until his last work, a historically founded exposition of Christian
truth based on an analysis of two sermons of Luka on evangelical his-
tory from antiquity to its most recent representatives.72 After illustrating
his key ideas in terms of loci – the universality of both free will and the
evangelical promise etc. – Bibliander sketched a project of reform of the
church, significantly supplied with an appendix on the rites of Christians
in Asia and Africa. Only in this chorus, in this plurality of voices, could
Erasmus’s ideas on the renewal of Christian society and on a peaceful
spread of the evangelical message come to full realization.

63 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1r–2v: God did not have ‘temporum prorsum, sed
in aeternum aequum; quoque temporis nostra illi et aequum eundo’, God had created ‘omnes homines [...] ad optimam et aequum perseverationem ipsius op-
lis de et parentiam naturae’. All mankind was destined ‘ad immens tamem bonorum’ [...] ex ‘actis sua benevolentiae cernunt ut suis parentum et universitatis guber
norum supremae, beneficios, illi, consilium providentiam’ by an extraordinarily generous
God, who offered ‘ex immenso thesaurum beneficiorum’, ‘adversus et singulis efficit aequo
pulchrum et quem scirem ipsum viactivam etc.’
64 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1r–2v: He claimed that supporters of predestination were
‘barbari et bernerari’, full of utmost impudence and wickedness because of their will
to substantiate themselves for divine judgment.
65 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1r–2v: 151.
66 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1r–2v: 150.
67 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1v–2r: 151.
68 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1r–2v: 150.
69 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1r–2v: 151.
70 Bibliander, De monarchia fol. 1r–2v: 151.
71 The De legitima viactivatione was published in Basel. On these works, see Egh, Theodor
Bibliander ett. The manuscript of De conversione is in Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, Ms.
Cgr. I 89 (folios not numbered).