



Marianne Roobol, *Disputation by Decree: The Public Disputations between Reformed Ministers and Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert as Instruments of Religious Policy during the Dutch Revolt (1577-1583)* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 152; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010, 308 pp., ISBN 978 90 0418 661 3).

Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert has been an important symbolic figure for students of sixteenth-century religion. In a long, turbulent career as a controversial writer, his advocacy of the right to express divergent religious opinions made him an important figure in the early history of toleration. In this forensic study of the disputations staged between Coornhert and representatives of the Dutch Reformed Church, Marianne Roobol places these writings firmly back in their contemporary context. What emerges is a very different picture of Coornhert, and of his firm but endlessly patient antagonists. The two debates discussed here took place in rather different circumstances. The first at Leiden in 1577 was hosted by the new university. The second, in The Hague, represented a last ditch attempt to reconcile Coornhert after a series of full frontal attacks on the teaching of the Reformed Church. They were the climax of a long career in which Coornhert had goaded the leaders of the emerging church. Although John Calvin had singled Coornhert out as a significant opponent as early as 1562, it was only fifteen years later that the Dutch ministers felt obliged to respond. Coornhert's writings made much of the contrast between the lone dissident scholar, ranged against the might of the church establishment. But he was not as isolated as he would have one believe. His correspondence reveals an impressive network of sympathisers and advisors, and he continued to reply on powerful protectors even after the debacle of the first Leiden debate.

The Reformed ministers entered into the dispute with reluctance. They were well aware that in such perilous times, with the outcome of the military struggle still undecided, they would not benefit from showing the public a harsh and unyielding face. Even Coornhert recognised initially some need for rhetorical restraint in his criticisms. But ultimately his attack on the Reformed went too much to the heart of their emerging role as the public church of the free state to be ignored. It added to the sensitivity of the issues that the precise nature and function of this public church was the subject of much uneasy reflection among the ministers themselves. One of the difficulties of debating with Coornhert, in print or in person, was that his criticisms were not balanced by a full

articulation of any alternative concept of the church. He reserved his judgement, he said, on the nature of the true visible church until a national ecclesiastical assembly should give judgement. Pressed on the point, he declared that religious plurality should be tolerated until some Esra arose to define the true church. This almost frivolous disregard for the need for some regulation of public religion casts Coornhert in a poor light. Seen in this context, the debates centred not on the principle of toleration, as the Coornhert hagiographers would have it, but on protecting a fragile new polity from religious anarchy. The ministers also had reason to distrust Coornhert's loyalty to the new state. In 1576 he had written to Philip II to assure him that he regarded him as the rightful ruler of the Netherlands. His appearance in Haarlem, a strongly Catholic enclave, was regarded as both dangerous and provocative.

Coornhert began the controversy with a manuscript manifesto provocatively entitled, 'Reasons for my words to the effect that the Roman church is better than the Reformed'. In reconstructing what then transpired Marianne Roobol has to take account of the fact that some of the writings exchanged between Coornhert and his opponents are lost, and that the official protocols of the debates were never published. Historians have to this point made use of versions published by Coornhert, one posthumously. After unsatisfactory written exchanges, the ministers agreed to meet Coornhert in person, but a first debate in Delft was quickly brought to an end by the state authorities. Instead an official meeting was decreed for the following year in Leiden. The setting, in a public space in the new university, was intimidating, and strict rules were established to keep the dispute within clear parameters. The disputation would not be permitted to become a trial of the controversial views of Calvin and Beza on the punishment of heretics, as Coornhert now seemed to wish. After an opening day in which Coornhert chafed at the restraints imposed by the formal structure of university disputations (Roobol is particularly good in explaining why this was important), Coornhert first manoeuvred the discussion to a more discursive attack on the Genevans, and then staged a dramatic departure. The debate did not therefore conclude the Coornhert affair. What it did demonstrate was that far from taking a detached and cautious approach to the Reformed Church, the state authorities were determined to give Coornhert no platform for a wild and discursive assault on Reformed religion.

The second debate in The Hague pitched Coornhert against a very different opponent, the mild and subtle Adrianus Saravia. Later Saravia would win fame for his writings in defence of episcopacy in England, but at this point he was one of the leading spokesmen of the Dutch Reformed Church, having in 1582 accepted appointment to a position in Leiden. Despite an injunction forbidding him to write further on religious matters after the Leiden debate, Coornhert had made several attempts to provoke the ministers into further controversy. He finally achieved his objective with an attack on the Dutch Catechism. The debate in The Hague was, in principle, to be confined to a refutation of these criticisms, in dialogue with the patient Saravia. The adjudicators, who chaired the proceedings, were, significantly, delegates of the temporal power. But once

again Coornhert proved difficult to pin down. By threatening to boycott the proceedings Coornhert succeeded in securing a series of concessions, which ensured that the discussion would once again range widely. If Saravia genuinely hoped to be able to reconcile Coornhert to the church, this was soon revealed to be futile. Henceforth, he applied his mastery of the disputation process to demonstrate the error of Coornhert's views. On and on it went, until the long-suffering commissioners called a halt, ordering that discussions be concluded by correspondence. No resolution had been found at Coornhert's death in 1590.

One ends this book wondering at the endless patience of the Dutch Reformed theologians, and the States, and the lengths to which they were prepared to go to pacify their talented but infuriating critic. Rather than a principled hero of toleration, Coornhert comes over as a dedicated contrarian and tediously self-absorbed. This careful, sober and meticulous study ends up telling us a great deal about the temper of these difficult times. At a time of war, and with the multiple challenges of embedding a new church settlement, the time and care the Dutch Reformed leadership would devote to one egotistic maverick ends up leaving a very different impression of the temper of their religion than that which Coornhert's writings would seek to present. This is a fine, subtle and sensitive study of an important moment in Reformation church-forming. It deserves to be widely read.

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