Pleading for diversity : the church Caspar Coolhaes wanted

Gottschalk, Linda Stuckrath

Conclusion

A profile of a tolerant, Reformed, Spiritualist

We have looked with great attention at Coolhaes and his life and views. It remains for us to draw out the conclusions which we have reached throughout this study.

Coolhaes has been seen to have been an energetic and eclectic religious figure during a turbulent and exciting period of history in the region of the German Palatinate and the Northern Netherlands, the latter of which was becoming the Dutch Republic, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although leaving no specific church or followers behind, his long life and persistent writing of theology allowed him to inspire others in this "plastic" period of rapid religious and political change. We have seen that he persisted in identifying as Reformed and writing about theology, even after his excommunication and defrocking and then his self-transformation into a distiller and shop-keeper in Leiden and Amsterdam. Despite this persistence, he held his own views loosely, as we have seen, for the sake of his desire for diversity in the visible church. His fiery criticism of the confessional groups and leaders around him remained a constant throughout his life.

An accurate picture of him includes his openness and positivity to underdogs such as the Mennonites, certain Socinians, such as Erasmus Johannes, and Jesuits, whom he painted sympathetically in some of his fictional works. He is sometimes assumed to be confessionally indifferent, but this is too simplisticly stated. He holds clear views on many doctrinal issues. His own views, expressed in his writings throughout his life, are characterized by a reliance on the Bible as generally interpreted by the major Reformers: the Trinity, salvation through Christ's death and resurrection rather than through sacraments, the centrality of grace, and especially the need for personal repentance. He did not deny predestination *per se,* but emphasized that it was more important for the individual to choose the good which was extended to him or her. Because of the personal calling he felt from God to be a preacher, and his concern for individuals to make that decision to choose that good, his main preoccupation was the church, both visible and invisible. All of his writings and actions contribute in one way or another to his effort to make the church what it should be.

We have said that Coolhaes was "eclectic." This is because his views rest on a Spiritualistic foundation, not unlike that of Sebastian Franck, Schwenckfeld, Castellio, and other Spiritualists, which they received originally from mystical medieval Germanic and Dutch thinkers who saw reality as sharply split between the visible and invisible and expressed this in metaphorical language. Luther and the other magisterial Reformers were also influenced by those mystical sources, but for Franck, Schwenckfeld, and Coolhaes, the invisible becomes primary. Coolhaes should be considered to have been an individualistic, critical, and tolerant Spiritualist, a member of Cornelis Augustijn's "fourth stream." His Spiritualistic beliefs are the prism through which his other eclectic ecclesiastical views are reflected and can be analyzed.

It is not his Spiritualism which makes Coolhaes eclectic, however, but the combination of other beliefs which he also holds. Despite Coolhaes believing that in fact the invisible church is the true church, unlike Franck he still believed in and worked for the visible church. He combined and overlaid the Spiritualism with Melanchthonian synergism and the need for repentance, and with an idea of sanctification like that of Coornhert, expressed as a ladder to climb towards virtue. This, in short, means that as a Reformed preacher he was "broader" than many of his colleagues. He held an Erastianism which also reflected a Lutheran-like respect for secular power. However, unlike Luther, he maintained a Zwinglian "single-sphere" idea which brings church and state together as well as the past and future of salvation history and covenant. He holds the importance of a Spiritualist "spiritual eating" in communion, similar to Schwenckfeld and earlier Dutch thinkers. In this his view he also resembles in part the mystical eucharistic view of Calvin, but without Calvinism's need to keep the visible church, as the true church, pure, by keeping impure people out. He seems at times to have baptized infants and then at others not to have insisted on physical baptism. Unlike the magisterial Reformers, both before and after his own excommunication he opposed the punishment or even disciplining of "heresy." This caused him to be regarded as a "libertine." Like Castellio, he held that more than one religion in a state was desirable. Further, he insisted that diversity of opinion be tolerated not just in society but even in each individual confession. All of these ideas we have traced and explained in the preceding chapters. Taken together they show the profile of Coolhaes the Spiritualist as tolerant and eclectic, yet still Reformed.

The ideal church

Coolhaes was inspired by a variety of figures and thoughts. His central concern was the church. Our guiding question throughout this dissertation has been: If Caspar Coolhaes could have designed a church for the young Dutch Republic, what would it have been like? Coolhaes, of course, never found himself in a position to determine the nature of the visible church of his adopted homeland. However, if he had, we have seen that he would have wanted the visible church, which he defines as all of the Christian confessions and groups, to be guarded and guided by benevolent Christian magistrates, to contain sincere and spiritual clergy, and to encompass diversity in theological opinions and allow freedom for the individual. These are the three major areas which we have identified in his writings as most important to him. We took a look at his life to inform our discussion. Then, we focused on his ecclesiology in three areas.

First, his Erastianism. His ideal visible church would be watched over and fostered by the civil government, which, if possible, should be a benevolent and Christian one. Coolhaes sees secular authority on two levels: local city magistrates, and state- or nation-wide higher rulers. He inevitably sides with the more local government over the national, but with both or either over the ecclesiastical. In any event, whether national or local, all civil rulers should lead reasonably and biblically. The higher government should institute church orders for the whole nation or province. On the purely local level, magistrates would oversee the operation of ecclesiastical affairs, including broad guidance about many aspects of church life. This could include attendance at consistorial meetings, selection of preachers and elders, and leadership in the area of schools and in providing for the care of the poor and needy. These civil rulers would also punish offenses, but only those affecting public order and life. Despite Coolhaes' dislike for too many rules, he nevertheless wants a moral and peaceful society. On the other hand, "Christian discipline," as the Reformed understood it, would not be part of the responsibility of the secular rulers. While non-church crimes might be punished by secular rulers, ecclesiastical ones would not be. Whether these rulers were magistrates, members of the States, or even princes and kings, it was to be hoped that they would rule Christianly, regardless of their membership or non-membership in a church confession. In other words, they should rule by their godly examples as much as by their words and decrees.

The second important issue concerns the clergy. We saw that Coolhaes' church would contain good, that is, not hypocritical, preachers. Those he deems hypocritical he criticizes severely, but we prefer to call Coolhaes' anticlericalism "restricted" or perhaps "limited," since despite this criticism, he would not have wanted to abolish the office of preacher, and would have wanted preachers in his ideal church. Elders, on the other hand, would have been optional, as well as the consistories, classes, and synods which together make up the Reformed "Presbyterian" polity structure. Coolhaes' ideal clergy, whether just preachers or preachers and elders, would work together in concert with the civil government, following the directives of those secular authorities as a general rule. They could, however, suggest biblical courses of action when needed, but would then be prepared to accept the decision of the rulers God had placed over them. In dire circumstances, however, they could also occasionally rebuke the rulers. Also, if the civil government was not Christian or was hostile to Christianity, the clergy would have to pick up many of the duties best done by the civil government. Otherwise, they should faithfully preach the Word, endeavor to bring people to Christ and to the "Heavenly Jerusalem" which is the invisible church. A pure and holy life is a given – by this is implied marital/sexual faithfulness, as well as lack of greed, gluttony, pride, etc. Also important is a subjective call of God to ministry, as well as receipt of a legal call by the civil government. Preachers should show a gift for preaching and teaching, and emphasize repentance, mercy, love and gentleness. Like physicians, they should treat and heal the spiritually sick. Christian discipline should be limited to exhortation and occasional rebuke, but never include excommunication or banning. At the same time, they would hold "ceremonies" and the physical sacraments loosely – as optional, not essential. Clergy would occasionally convene for synods, but they should use those occasions to support each other and discuss things as brothers, not to make binding decisions or to judge others like a court. Preaching would be "free": anyone who felt called to preach, could do so. Preachers did not necessarily need university-level theological education, or a knowledge of Hebrew, Greek or Latin, but needed to be perpetual students in the "school" of spiritual growth and sanctification.

The third issue has everything to do with diversity and freedom. The congregation – indeed, all the people in the whole visible church, which is made up of all confessions and groups – would in Coolhaes' ideal church and society embrace diversity. For Coolhaes, this means, primarily, theological diversity. His ideal church would agree on a reductionist

foundation: the Old and New Testaments and the Apostles' Creed. Other than that, various doctrines, on any topic at all, could be freely discussed, believed, or rejected. This would not turn the churches into a messy, libertine "pig pen," because the Spirit and spiritual leaders would guide them wisely. Indeed, the truth about many of those matters cannot be truly known, and so the visible church should have an attitude of acceptance of this theological diversity. All should be welcome at the sacraments, because they help the believer to grow. Struggling individuals should be guided gently, even rebuked if necessary, because this "rule of love" of kindly correction by one believer to another is the true Christian discipline. One should never give up hope for stubborn cases, because even at the eleventh hour a sinner may repent and come back to God. This diverse church, Coolhaes believed, is not marked by covenants of God's promises as much as it is brought back to true worship of God in various ages by continual "reformations." These reformations are led by godly men, but are caused by the Spirit. Thus, the Spirit is working in history, but people can thwart his efforts by their division, as the Reformers did. So, diversity and tolerance should mark the visible church in all its forms. This is good not only for the churches themselves, but also for society as a whole. In fact, Coolhaes would want many different Christian groups to be free to worship in the same cities, in the same geographical areas. Peace should reign among them. Aside from that, each congregant or member of the visible church, in any group, should have the Christian freedom to believe and live as he or she chooses. Coolhaes would not think that all of those choices were equally valid or biblical, but would nevertheless insist on the right of the individual to choose them, until such time as the Lord would make a better way clear to them – in other words, indefinitely.

These pieces of his thought fit together. Links can easily be made from one of these ideas to the others. For example, Coolhaes wanted a diverse church. His Erastianism means for him an increase in tolerance, freedom, and diversity. He was more interested in the individual than in the institution, while he believed that the Reformed preachers in general were the opposite, and so for him the state should protect its citizens' religious rights as well as their political liberty. From another perspective, that tolerance, freedom and diversity fit logically together with Coolhaes' version of Spiritualism. This is because a devaluing of the visible, external and external, in favor of the invisible, internal and unseen, means that visible differences should mean less. Therefore, because visible differences are not essential, there is room for freedom. Christian freedom, and its corollary, confessional diversity, should make

up the visible church and lead to living without fear of censure or persecution, but in brotherly love and tolerance. “Open communion” is also a mark of this. Because the invisible is what is essential, outward conformity is not nearly as important as many of the Calvinist preachers – who were often, in Coolhaes’ experience, using it to gauge a person’s election – were making it. So because no one can be sure who is elect, as Coolhaes believed, all should be able to come to the Lord’s Supper while at the same time continuing to hold their individual views. In Coolhaes’ mind, all of this contributes to religious diversity, which he felt is good for society, and aids the stability of the state. The stability of society brings us back to the centrality of the secular government and their role and rule. So we can see that Coolhaes’ main views, though eclectic, are truly all different sides of the same “prism.”

Relationship between life and thought

Coolhaes’ life events, in a way, foreshadowed and echoed his views, although they cannot be said to have caused or changed them. The themes of anticlericalism, Spiritualism, theological conflicts, free will, Erastianism, religious liberty, and diversity were present from his earliest writing. In our biographical sketch we traced his path, which led through two countries, three confessions, several cities, and a few significant public theological conflicts. He began in Cologne, a place of Spiritualists and theological diversity, as a Roman Catholic. From there he spent time as a silent Carthusian. Through various influences, which may have included Johannes Monheim, he eventually embraced a Protestant view. In his travels between the Palatinate and the Northern Netherlands he seemed to preach in the space between Lutheran and Reformed. In 1571 he said he wanted no confessional name but “Christian.” Already, too, he was being accused of talking about “dark,” Spiritualist ideas, as he traveled thoughout the Dutch-German regions which birthed medieval mystics as well as sixteenth-century Spiritualists. In addition, the Lutheranism he gravitated towards was, as we have said, Melanchthonian synergism, which gave more space for the believer’s cooperation in salvation. So, the views which would perhaps inspire Arminius were already present before he came to Leiden in 1574.

Coolhaes had already been involved in disputes, as well, especially the Essen questions about him and his coworker Von Isselburg, which necessitated the intervention of the theological faculties of Leipzig and Wittenberg. In Leiden, the “Coolhaes affair,” which

ostensibly focused on his Erastian view that the civil government should lead the church, rather than the preachers, consistories and synods, was of course also about all of his "broader" theological views. These combined with his Spiritualism (for example, that the metaphorical fire of hell was worse than any physical fire), his pleading for diversity and freedom (which directly opposed the Calvinist "love of order"), and his persistent out-spokenness, to lead to his excommunication and defrocking. The irony is that he had opposed excommunication as a discipline since his early days in ministry, long before it happened to him. Naturally, this excommunication and defrocking soured his feelings for the Reformed Church and its preachers to a certain extent, but not enough to make him leave it.

It is surprising but true that his views did not change or develop much throughout his life. He continued to associate with and defend people who were of different views than himself, to write about his convictions, and to live on the edge of the Reformed congregation in Amsterdam, as a distiller and, as we put it earlier a "rogue writer of theology." Nevertheless, we can mention a few small ways in which his later views were different from his earlier ones. One is that in a sense he became less critical of the Reformed Church after his excommunication, in that he began to criticize all the other confessions equally - Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Mennonite. Another is that in his early days in Leiden he was largely indifferent to most popular church practices, but in his old age opposed any practice or superstition that seemed too "Catholic." In addition, he wrote theology all his life, but as he got older, he focused in general on more potentially popular projects, such as the texts for emblems (engravings), dialogues, and Reformed almanacs. He wrote fewer weighty, *Toutzsteen*-type tomes. He experimented with various literary styles. Finally, whereas he worked with consistories at the beginning of his Leiden ministry, later he said that consistories should be optional. Still later, he wrote that they were really totally unnecessary. These are all relatively small changes in comparison to his major views, which he held throughout his life after his conversion to Protestantism. His fundamental beliefs are all present in the Essen statement of faith of 1571 and in his first two books, *Apologia* and *Breeder bericht* of 1580; and as far as we can see by his words and actions he kept them till his death in 1615.

In his time and beyond

So we have shown that Coolhaes resembled various figures in his own time, and inspired others beyond it. He held views about predestination and free will which were similar to those of Arminius and the Remonstrants. God gives grace to all to choose to do the good. Coolhaes wants above all to keep from making God the author of evil, and so blames the lack of response of those who do not come to God, on human failure, not God's election.
We have seen that although, nevertheless, a one-to-one parallel between Coolhaes and Arminius cannot be made, Rogge was right in naming Coolhaes as one of the forerunners of the Remonstrants. The Remonstrants were clearly inspired by Coolhaes and others to pursue a broader Reformed faith, and in the desire for toleration and diversity, as well as on the question of the relationship between church and state. Arminius himself, however, while surely retaining some inspiration from Coolhaes and others in the Erasmian tradition of an emphasis on free will, was not merely a "Coolhaesian," but a much more far-reaching, complex theologian.

We have also spoken above and throughout this study about Coolhaes' similarities to Sebastian Franck, to Schwenckfeld, Coornhert, Castellio, and other who have already been recognized as Spiritualists, but also about certain differences from all of them. We have also mentioned that Coolhaes is one of a group of "libertine" preachers in the Netherlands, including Herman Herberts, Tako Sybrants, Cornelis Wiggerts, Cornelis van Braeckel, Pieter Hackius, Herman Duifhuis, Petrus Anastasius Hyperphragmus Gandensis, and Michiel Andrieszoon. He is not exactly like any of them, but he is similar to all of them in certain ways. We can see that libertine, broader ideas related to many, but to label him as the follower of just one other figure, as Kamphuis did in labelling him primarily as a follower of Franck, is far too simplistic.

What, then, is the importance of Coolhaes himself? What is the importance of his ecclesiological vision? Coolhaes was a controversial, consistent voice for a broader Reformed Church and a diverse society in the "plastic" times of post-Spanish occupation, in the new, academically-enhanced and influential Leiden, and on the fringes of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam. He, and others like him, stood at a religious crossroads. The Dutch Republic was in the process of self-definition; secular and ecclesiastical bodies were struggling for supremacy and decision-making power. In the churches, the push for confessionalization was creating new realities. Some, however, were embracing a non- (or less-) confessional,

"libertine" spirituality. Some of these were *liefhebbers* of the Reformed Church; some would identify with Remonstrants or other groups as development continued. A modern society built on religious pluralism was emerging, although it would first go through a period of tightening of Reformed doctrine. Indeed, if libertines and critics had succeeded in creating one broader church earlier, the conflict between Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants might not have happened. However, this was not the case. Many Calvinist preachers were both tireless and relentlessly organized in their efforts to establish a "Reformed polity." The fundamental split of the Dutch Revolt, the question of *religionis causa* versus *libertatis causa*, continued to divide.

Both before and after his excommunication, Coolhaes "disturbed" the narrower Reformed elements, in Leiden, Amsterdam, and beyond. Along with others who spoke for toleration and diversity, he doubtless helped to precipitate the National Synod of Dordt, 1618-1619, and all of the surrounding tumultuous political events of that period. This was important in the process of self-definition of the state and the visible church of the time. He had mobilized no formalized force of protesters. He had only attempted to convince through his writings, by biblical and logical arguments, and by appeals to love and diversity. Some might see him as sadly, perhaps even tragically, out of touch with his own time – preaching de-confessionalization in a confessionalizing era. On the other hand, he persisted in his views, which represented what he believed to be an ecclesiastical constellation true to Scripture, the Apostles' Creed, and the spirit of the Reformation, and which allowed for the freedom and diversity of society and individuals. Despite his critical orientation against much of what was happening, he remained optimistic about the future. This is why his ecclesiological vision is important. It is an example of how a Reformed person could be theologically broader than the strict preachers around him, and still hold both Reformation beliefs about the Bible and Spiritualist and skeptical concerns, the latter set forth in his *Toutzsteen*, as we have discussed, in tension. His vision for the visible church in the Dutch Republic is a glimpse of a tolerant nation in which individuals can both hold strong views and allow variety and diversity.

Coolhaes, we have said, is one small early raindrop in the eventual thunderstorms bringing new movements and ideas. As we have seen, he did not look back, as Coornhert can be said to have done, to a situation in which the unity of one church would bring concord to society. Instead, he wanted the diversity of religious (and non-religious) opinion which has

become a hallmark of modern Western states. He and other Spiritualists, skeptics, libertarians, critics of clericalism and a strict rule of the Reformed Church, and advocates of tolerance and religious diversity, can in this way be interpreted as being forerunners of other broad, modern movements and ideas. We have already mentioned the Remonstrants. The Collegiants and Quakers, with their free preaching and reliance on the Spirit, are indebted in a small way to Coolhaes and to others who taught the same. The Pietists and their emphasis on affective religion and the primacy of the heart can trace their inspiration partly from Schwenckfeld and other Spiritualists, including Coolhaes. At the same time, Coolhaes' skepticism and unwillingness to be dogmatic, while not as extreme as that of Franck, may have even in some small way affected the future development of the religious skepticism of the Enlightenment. Coolhaes may have been out of step with his own time and place, but he is linked to the future.

Of course, the Calvinist Contra-Remonstrants won the battle in the short term, both politically and ecclesiastically. Calvinist-Bezan doctrine was defined and established in a way that would be decisive, for many, for centuries. Coolhaes would have been bitterly disappointed with the theological and political decisions of the National Synod of Dordt of 1618-1619. If he had been alive then, what would he have done? What would have happened to him? It is possible that, despite his long patience with the Reformed Church, he might have chosen to be called by the label Remonstrant and have gone into exile. One just cannot imagine him fitting in to a Contra-Remonstrant Church and nation. It also seems likely, judging from his life history and the affection he expressed for the Netherlands, that he might also have tried to return again from that exile as many did.

Epilogue

Of all of Coolhaes' ideas, tolerance and diversity are the ones most likely to be interesting to present-day society. As in the late sixteenth century, so in today's world religious differences are often a cause of serious tensions. People are asking questions about diversity, pluriformity and tolerance. Is it possible for those of opposing religious views and political convictions to coexist peacefully and productively? Diverse religious environments struggle to find non-violent solutions while keeping some national identity, even as the definition of the latter is anything but clear to the members of and stakeholders in the society. The world as a whole, smaller than it was in the sixteenth century as a result of enhanced communication, travel and

media, resounds with these debates. Sectarian societies exclude others; more open societies attempt to embrace others and include them. Churches often still struggle with questions of exclusion versus inclusion. These are of course all very general and even superficial statements about large, vital issues. Still, concluding the study of Coolhaes and his view of diversity in the church of his time would be incomplete without a brief glance at the present. Mutual tolerance would help peaceful coexistence in the twenty-first century as much as it would have in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Coolhaes' message may perhaps still be useful today. In the divisive ecclesiastical world of his time, his was a voice pleading for tolerance and diversity.