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## **Pleading for diversity : the church Caspar Coolhaes wanted**

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## Summary

This dissertation focuses on the ecclesiology of Caspar Janszoon Coolhaes. Coolhaes (c. 1534-1615) was a Reformed preacher, a writer of theology, a critic of the churches of his day, and an advocate of religious diversity. Originally from the German Palatinate, he came to preach and live in the Northern Netherlands during the Dutch Revolt. He advocated a broader church than many of his Reformed colleagues. Although he died before the National Synod of Dordt in 1618-1619, there is no doubt that he would have opposed its decisions vehemently. His name was linked during that process with the ideas of Arminius, and it is no wonder that H. C. Rogge, his first biographer, took hold of and further established the idea of Coolhaes as the forerunner of Arminius and the Remonstrants.

Coolhaes opposed much of the building up of the organization of the Reformed Church in the Northern Netherlands and Dutch Republic in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – the “Reformed polity” which the Calvinist clergy was pursuing with vigor. He was also critical of all other major confessions. The question we pose, therefore, is this: What sort of church would Coolhaes himself have wanted to design for the new Republic?

Coolhaes’ life and work are closely connected. Because of this, the first part of this dissertation (chapters one through five) gives a biographical sketch. This new treatment of his biography is needed, since new information, sources, and works by Coolhaes himself have been uncovered since Rogge’s nineteenth-century biography.

The first chapter treats Coolhaes’ life before his arrival in Leiden. Coolhaes grew up as a Roman Catholic and became a monk, but then went over to Protestantism. He came to the Netherlands in 1566, to Deventer, as a preacher. Later he fled back to Germany and preached in various cities, notably Essen. Eventually, he returned to the Northern Netherlands to preach in Leiden, arriving on October 3, 1574.

The second chapter is about the so-called “Coolhaes affair,” an important controversy between Coolhaes and the Leiden magistrates on one side, and his fellow-preacher Pieter Cornelisz and the Leiden consistory on the other. As one of the city preachers of Leiden, he argued with his stricter Calvinist colleagues and took the side of the magistrates against them.

In the third chapter, the focus is on the account of Coolhaes’ appearance at the Synod of Middelburg (1581). His insistence on a broader sort of Protestantism, as well as specific disagreements with the Leiden consistory and preachers, eventually led to his defrocking at

the synod of Middelburg (1581), and, soon after, to excommunication from the Reformed Church, the first person to be excommunicated by Dutch Calvinists. His writings from this period lay out his theological ideas, which would change very little throughout his life.

The fourth chapter offers a picture of the life of Coolhaes after the Middelburg Synod. To support his family, he learned the distilling trade, but continued to write in defense of religious diversity and tolerance, first in Leiden, and then in Amsterdam, where he later relocated.

The fifth chapter describes the last years of Coolhaes' life. He dedicated himself during this time to defending the ideas of the well-known Spiritualist Sebastian Franck. He also wrote to defend the rights of the Frisian Mennonites, and to criticize almanacs, popular superstitions, and the disputes about predestination at Leiden University between professors Jacob Arminius and Franciscus Gomarus.

In the second part (chapters six through nine), the ecclesiology of Coolhaes is central. What sort of church would he have wanted? He maintained that his ideal church would be watched over by benevolent, Christian magistrates, rather than clergy and synods. Its preachers should be loving shepherds, rather than power-hungry, quarreling leaders. Above all, such a church should be diverse and tolerant. Each chapter delves further in to the specifics of this ideal ecclesiology of Coolhaes.

The sixth chapter describes Coolhaes as a Spiritualist. Coolhaes was influenced not only by Zwingli and Calvin, but also by Luther and by sixteenth-century Spiritualism. In fact, his Spiritualism was foundational to his ecclesiology. Sebastian Franck was an important Spiritualist who can be linked with Coolhaes; there are also similarities in various degrees with, among others, Coornhert, Schwenckfeld, and Castellio. Spiritualists were a diverse group who were dissatisfied with the progress of the Protestant Reformation and were critical of established churches. Coolhaes can be said to have been a Reformed Spiritualist.

In the seventh chapter, Coolhaes' views on the relationship between church and state are examined. Coolhaes came from an Erastian perspective: the visible church should be guided and guarded by secular magistrates. In this, he showed a strong affinity with Bullinger and Gwalther. Nevertheless, Coolhaes also made space for the church to correct and rebuke the civil government in case of need. Ideally, church and state should cooperate.

In the eighth chapter, Coolhaes' criticism of preachers is laid out. He pleaded for spiritual teachers who would preach biblically on the basis of the Old and New Testaments and the Apostles' Creed, and who would care more about love than about any sort of external ceremonies.

The ninth chapter is about diversity and tolerance in the visible church. Coolhaes judged that visible, external matters were being wrongly emphasized, while the invisible, essential matters which were spiritual and internal were being neglected. He longed intensely for religious diversity within the visible church and within society in general. Every member of the visible church should have the "Christian freedom" to believe and live as he or she deemed right.

If Coolhaes had been able to create the church which he wanted, it would have been a diverse, broad church. It would have been Erastian, and would also contain church servants who were truly called, both by the civil government and by God. In this church, the emphasis would be on the invisible, which was seen by Coolhaes as essential. Finally, diversity, love, and tolerance would mark the church in all its forms.