Joep van Gennip

Controversen in context. Een comparatief onderzoek naar de Nederlandstalige controversepublicaties van de jezuïeten in de zeventiende-eeuwse Republiek.

Hilversum: Verloren, 2014. Pp. 800. Hb, 49 Euros.

In this prolix study [Controversies in context. A comparative examination of Dutch-language Jesuit controversial literature in the seventeenth-century Republic], Joep van Gennip examines at length thirty-one anti-Protestant polemical works, written by nine Jesuit authors active in the Low Countries during the seventeenth century. Seven of these nine men served as missionaries in the officially Reformed Dutch Republic during all or part of their careers; the remaining two worked in Antwerp—at the time the hub of Counter-Reformation efforts in the Spanish Netherlands. The *Missio Hollandica Societatis Jesu* first began in the 1590s, and by the middle of the seventeenth century there were dozens of Jesuit missionaries toiling in the vineyard of the republic, alongside a semi-clandestine network of secular priests and members of other religious orders. Their task was to provide pastoral and sacramental comfort to Catholic citizens of the republic, as well as to win over non-Catholic souls.

Controversial literature was a staple of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century—especially in the Spanish Netherlands, living cheek by jowl with the Dutch Republic, had rejected both the Habsburg monarchy and the Catholic Church in the late sixteenth century. The independent northern Netherlands was a prime target on the Catholic confessional map for missionary efforts, intended both to encourage the remaining Catholic faithful and to refute Reformed heresy. The Society of Jesus, with its twin missions of evangelization and education, produced a veritable library of books of controversy and polemic within the Republic's multi-confessional society.

Van Gennip has selected these particular authors and works according to fairly specific criteria: authors who spent most of their careers in the Netherlands (south or north) during the seventeenth century, and polemical works written for the laity in the vernacular. The result is some thirty-one works, ranging from the extremely popular and didactic *Kort onder-wys in het Recht Gelooff* [Short Instruction in the True Faith] of Paulus van den Berghe, which ran to seventeen editions, to the more rarefied polemics penned by Antwerp Jesuits against specific Protestant preachers which, because of their topical nature, rarely enjoyed more than one printing.

The principal question van Gennip asks of these sources is: what rhetorical, theological and literary strategies did Netherlandish Jesuits use in order to

both defend the Catholic Church and potentially win back non-Catholics? The answer, true to Jesuit adaptability, was a flexible variety of approaches. The genres of the selected works range from catechisms to fictive dialogues to historical-apologetical expositions. They used all the traditional arguments common to Catholic polemical practice: the marks of the true church, evidence from scriptural and patristic texts, the association of Protestantism with historical heresies, miracles, the authority of apostolic succession, and so on. In this regard the works studied here are anything but original, relying heavily on the models and formulas of polemic provided by such luminaries as Robert Bellarmine. To be sure, details relevant to the Netherlandish context were sometimes worked in—citing the violent anti-Catholic acts of the anti-Habsburg rebels or Beggars [*geuzen*] to demonstrate the inherently depraved nature of Protestantism—but on the whole these books relied on the tried-and-true tropes and themes of the Catholic polemical tradition.

Van Gennip does an admirably thorough—not to say exhaustive—job of analyzing these works. He concludes that those authors who served as missionaries in the republic drew heavily on their own pastoral experience as a way of bolstering the Catholic faithful, while at the same time specifically targeting Protestant readers (both Reformed and Mennonite) who might have been swayed by vigorous argumentation or appeals to Scripture. The texts themselves were cheaply printed and easy to distribute, taking advantage of the republic's relatively lax censorship laws. It is clear that these polemical works, usually pseudonymously authored and printed, enjoyed a fairly wide circulation in the republic, joining song-books and devotionals as some of the most popular Catholic literature consumed in the region in the seventeenth century.

The thornier problem, of course, is that of audience and reception. Van Gennip's fine-grained analysis of the polemics themselves tells us very little about who read them and why, or how they reacted. On occasion, one of these works would elicit a specific printed response by some Reformed worthy, but we really cannot verify whether these polemics did indeed consolidate the faithful and win converts, as they were intended to do. In this regard, *Controversen in context* suffers from the same lacuna that afflicts most histories of the early modern book: we know so much more about authors than we will ever know about readers.

Controversen in context is a helpful addition to the literature on the Jesuits in the early modern Low Countries, and historians of religion and of literature alike will find this a very useful monograph to consult. Van Gennip's grasp of the historiography is solid, and he presents his analysis lucidly and coherently. That said, this book's chief virtue—its clear and rigorous organization—

comes at the expense of readability. The chapters are organized seriatim by Jesuit author (rather than a thematic arrangement), with sections and sub-sections, making for a certain amount of plodding repetitiveness. By taking this serial approach, the analysis comes off as less comparative than its subtitle promises. The volume, filled with fascinating information and insight, reads more like a dissertation than a book. As such, it is more likely to be consulted than perused, but remains nevertheless an invaluable addition to the historiography.

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DOI 10.1163/22141332-00203005-15