DISPUTATION BY DECREES: AN INTRODUCTION

In the turbulent period of the Dutch Revolt the States of Holland regularly appointed ad hoc committees to draft or implement policy decisions. This had been customary even before 1572, but the uncertain years following on the First Free Assembly of the States (held in Dordrecht, July 1572) gave new stimulus to the committee system. Decision-making in the plenary assembly of the States was often difficult. Ad hoc committees could be called into being at short notice, increasing the flexibility and effectiveness of the States. They could improvise, as the terms of reference provided to the Commissioners could easily be adapted to the needs of the moment.\(^1\) Central to the present study are two unusual ad hoc committees that have not previously been recognized as such. They were instituted to manage two remarkable religious disputations between the man of letters Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert (1522–1590) and a number of notable Reformed clergymen: Arent Cornelisz (1547–1605),\(^2\) Reginaldus Doncetlock (ca. 1545–after 1611), and Adrianus Saravia (ca. 1532–1613). These public debates took place in Leiden, on 14 and 15 April 1578, and in The Hague, from 27 October to 3 November and from 28 November to 1 December 1583.

In one important respect, these committees charged with organising religious disputations were unlike other ad hoc committees of the States. They were concerned with religious affairs, while the general run of committees focused on matters of military, fiscal and administrative concern.\(^3\) It was a thing previously unheard of that the States should not only intervene directly in theological controversies but appoint an ad hoc committee to do so. The institution of the public disputations in Leiden and The Hague shows the political significance that theological debate had in this period. Although Coornhert and his

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1 J. W. Koopmans, De Staten van Holland en de Opstand: De ontwikkeling van hun functies en organisatie in de periode 1544–1588 (The Hague, 1990), 91–93, 199.
2 His family name is Storm van 's-Gravenzande. Cornelisz was also known as Crusius.
3 Koopmans, De Staten van Holland, 199–200.
contemporaries firmly distinguished between a ‘political’ and an ‘ecclesial’ sphere, they had no notion of the modern separation of church and state. In concerns for the unity of the country, political and religious affairs were inextricably linked. The government served the common good by advancing the preaching of the true Christian faith.

The religious policy of the States has been little studied. In his overview of the development of this organ of government during the Revolt, J. W. Koopmans gives a number of examples of the work of the States at a religious level. The questions concerned were primarily of a practical nature, such as the division of church buildings and the payment of clergymen. The States were also responsible for “maintaining oversight and functioning as supreme judge in disagreements.”

He makes no mention of the intervention of the States in religious controversies involving critics who were not members of the public church, such as the Coornhert affair.

Because Reformed ministers were critical in their letters of the lack of support they were getting from the authorities, an unrosy picture has developed of the relationship between church and state in the early period of the Revolt. In 1579 the Amsterdam predikant Johannes Kuchlinus (1545–1606) lamented that the government took no action against a monster like Coornhert.5 His fellow minister Thomas Tilius (ca. 1534–1590) wrote in 1582, “So far as church discipline is concerned, the States will draw no advantage from it.”6 Should the general conclusion therefore be that the government gave the public church little support beyond the financial?

The historian Andrew Pettegree has rejected any such interpretation of the clergy’s letters of complaint as superficial. Their dark reflections should not be taken too literally. The mutual ties between church and state deserve more attention.7 These ties were linked to the political

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