CHAPTER THREE

THE COORNHERT AFFAIR (I):
FROM CORRESPONDENCE TO DISPUTATION

Thomas Tilius

Thomas Tilius, in Haarlem early in 1577, was exactly the right man in the right place.1 Minister in Delft, former abbot of the Abbey of St Bernard near Antwerp, he had taken the side of the Reformed a decade earlier, and his background seemed to make him just the man to build up the Reformed Church in a bulwark of Catholicism like Haarlem. It was a difficult job and William of Orange had assigned it to a heavy-weight among the Reformed ministers of Holland.

Haarlem had subscribed to the Pacification of Ghent by ratifying the Treaty of Satisfaction between the city and the Prince of Orange on 1 March 1577. Of more immediate significance was the fact that the city was now represented in the States of Holland and had been forced out of years of isolation as a royalist enclave.2 The Treaty of Satisfaction specified that the large Catholic majority in Haarlem retained the right to public worship. By order of Prince of Orange and the States of Holland one church was to be cleared for Reformed worship. The Bakenesserkerk was assigned to Tilius as his base of operations in Haarlem. The people of the city had only reluctantly complied with this development, as part of the process of adjusting to the recent transition to the Pacification and de facto incorporation into the rebel provinces of Holland and Zeeland. The Prince’s will was to be obeyed, but that did not mean that Tilius and his entourage could expect a warm reception.

The tense relations within Haarlem have been described by Joke Spaans as an “armed” religious peace settlement.3 Strictly speaking this is appropriate, as the Catholics and the Reformed in the city were

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1 NNBW II, 1433–1436; Biografisch lexicon V, 502–503.
2 On this “surrender by Satisfaction” see Spaans, Haarlem na de reformatie, 49–52.
3 Ibidem, 49.
given equal rights. Generally speaking, however, religious peace settlements were a way of confirming a *status quo* and maintaining religious divisions. This was not the case in Haarlem, where the numbers of the Reformed were negligible before the transfer of allegiance. The opening of one church for Reformed worship was intended as a counterweight to the overwhelming Catholic power block in the city. J. J. Woltjer and K. W. Swart emphasize that Haarlem was to remain Catholic according to the terms of the Satisfaction, and they avoid the term “religious peace settlement” altogether. This gives a more realistic picture of the situation in the city. In their view, the allocation of one church to the Reformed should be regarded as a political manoeuvre by the Prince; and in this Spaans agrees with them.

Tilius’s hard job was made all the more difficult by the opposition of Coornhert, whose voice was raised in the city from the end of March 1577. The controversy between the two of them developed in a city that had long been loyal to the king and was almost entirely Catholic. As yet, the people of Haarlem clearly showed a clear lack of enthusiasm for the Revolt. Tilius mistrusted the city’s population, though he felt he had little to fear from leading Catholic dignitaries. After a short meeting which included the vicar general of the diocese of Haarlem, Tilius was confident that these men were not penetrating critics. He made a very different assessment of Coornhert, who not only had a reputation for verbal agility, but was also inclined to put his views down on paper. At that time, printed works in which Coornhert expressed criticism of the Reformed Church had been circulating for years.

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4 Examples would be the religious truces that William proposed in, for instance, Brussels (September 1578) and Mechelen (October 1578). The Prince wanted to guarantee freedom of religion to both Catholics and Reformed in these cities. A case for this was made in two requests that the Prince addressed to the governor general and the Council of State in the summer of 1578. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 195; M. E. H. N. Mout, “Het intellectuele milieu van Willem van Oranje”, *BMGN* 99 (1984), 596–625: 612.


7 Tilius to Cornelisz, 24 March 1577, GAD, Hervormde Gem., inv. no. 43: “Vides hos homines nihil sacrarum literarum neque bonorum authorum legisse.”

8 Coornhert’s most extensive theological treatise had until then been his *Vande toelatinghe ende decrete Godes bedenckinghe of de heylighe Schrift ooc in hout sulcx als meesters Iohan Calvijn ende Theodore Besa daer van leeren van 1572*. Coornhert had this