CHAPTER 1

The Republic of Letters: Authors, Contexts, Networks

Religious Wars, Reconciliation and Coexistence

In making sense of the views expressed in the work of Charron, Lipsius, Sarpi and King James and the positions adopted by them it is essential to consider the complex historical context in which they lived and wrote. These four authors lived through some of the most momentous events of the early modern era. The years between c. 1580–c. 1620 were turbulent and chaotic. They were dominated by five elements: religiously motivated war; the need for reconciliation and necessity of coexistence; the promotion of the reformation of the traditional Church; economic crises following almost a century of warfare, and a huge intellectual crisis. All these themes are deeply embedded in their writings. During the last decades of the sixteenth- and the first decades of the seventeenth centuries the religious wars were still raging with varying intensity both in France and the Low Countries. The wars had brought changes in the nature of religion, in political and ecclesiastical structures and to the fabric of society itself. Severely traumatised by the world having turned ‘upside down’, people were desperate to find solace, clear guidance, to rebuild their confidence in the existing structures and, as it became obvious that no one side would emerge as the clear winner, to seek a tolerable pacification. Religious, national, cultural and social identities were defined and redefined throughout this period, as people tried to make sense of the world around them and their position within it.

Charron and Lipsius experienced the religious conflict which lasted between 1562 and 1598 in France and between 1566 and 1648 in the Low Countries. They also lived through the protracted and not always successful attempts at religious reconciliation such as the Council of Trent (1545–52, 1562–3). Although not exactly outright civil war, James VI and I experienced religious tensions from the moment he was born until his death in London. Sarpi’s encounter with religious warfare was more fragmentary, but perhaps no less dramatic. Fortunate not to have lived through religious warfare of a large scale himself, he was informed about it all his life and he wrote about it in his works. Lipsius and Charron died during the brief, albeit uneasy, respite of the relative peacefulness at the turn of the seventeenth century, while Sarpi and James lived long
enough to see the failures of truce and the outbreak of the war that shattered all the hope that had been born during that same period.

Throughout the age of confessional conflict, scholars, officials, political agents, and members of the clergy went through intensive soul-searching of what had gone wrong and what was to be done for the order to return and religious peace to be established. This consideration found two outlets: a return to classical letters, particularly philosophy, for inspiration and possible alternatives, was coupled with an inquiry into the past. Educated men examined the past with a double aim: to identify how events could have transpired differently as well as in order to build insights regarding possible resolutions to what they were experiencing.¹

The four intellectuals whose work forms the basis of this book, never met each other. Pierre Charron (1541–1604) and Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) were almost exact contemporaries; born with six years difference, they both belonged to the second generation of reform and the responses it had generated. During their lives, lines between camps hardened as conflict became more desperate: from the 1540s onwards, it seemed, the different religious groups were fighting for survival. Charron and Lipsius were in their early twenties when civil conflict finally erupted in France and the Low Countries respectively. The extent to which they were affected by the struggle is clearly manifested both in their works as well as in their personal correspondence: ‘There is not a trouble more miserable, no more shameful, it is a sea of infelicities’, Charron wrote about civil war;

it is not properly war, but a malady of the state, a fiery sickness, and frenzy. And to say the truth, he that is the author thereof, should be put out from the number of men, and banished out of the borders of human nature. ... To conclude, it is nothing but misery.²


² Unless stated differently the references are to Pierre Charron, De la Sagesse, Trois Livres (Paris: David Douceur, 1607): Book ii, 4, 564–6. The translation of the passages is largely based on that by Samson Lennard (London: Edward Blount, 1608).