"NO ONE BORN OF GOD COMMITS SIN": COORNHERT'S PERFECTIONISM

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"No one born of God commits sin". The Dutchman Dirk Volckertsz Coornhert (1522-90) took this biblical sentence literally and believed that one could attain a state of sinlessness, and that one was capable of leading a perfect life. In numerous treatises and in several disputes with Reformed ministers Coornhert argued for 'perfectionism' and opposed the Reformed doctrine that humans were unable to refrain from sin during their earthly life. Coornhert influenced the Dutch religious landscape profoundly with his perfectionism. Contemporaries were attracted by his thought and took over his ideas. Despite its importance, Coornhert’s perfectionism had not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves. Coornhert scholars largely agree that ‘perfectionism’ was the cornerstone of his thought, but almost nothing has been published on this subject. To this day one is still always referred to a lecture given by Bruno Becker in 1925. In this lecture however Becker does not pretend to say the last word about Coornhert’s perfectionism; he merely raises questions, and hints at directions for further research. In this article I will analyse

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1 John 3, 9. In his book on Coornhert, Voogt makes argues for using the term perfectibility instead of perfectionism. G. Voogt, Religious Constraint on Trial: Dirk Volckertsz Coornhert’s Defense of Freedom of Conscience (Ann Arbor, 1997), pp. 177-78. In this article I will follow the general custom in literature on Anabaptism and use the term ‘perfectionism’.

2 See, for example, D.V. Coornhert, Waarachtige aflaat van zonden, 1580 (WW 1, 252r); D.V. Coornhert, Dat Gods gheboden licht ende leerlijk, 1564 (WW 1, 217r). WW refers to Dieryck Volckertsz Coornherts Wercken. Waer van eynige noyt voor desen gedruckt yn, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1630).


Coornhert’s perfectionism and show how close he was to radicals like Melchior Hoffman and David Joris. Coornhert’s perfectionism thus offers a clear example of the profound influence of the radical Reformation in the Low Countries. After a brief introduction on perfectionism, I will present some biographical data on Coornhert. I will then analyse Coornhert’s belief in human possibilities, followed by a description of his sources. Finally I will draw some conclusions.

1. General context

The view held by Coornhert was far from unique. A radical like Hans Denck stressed that the justification of a believer implied moral improvement and obedience to biblical commands. Melchior Hoffman, who has profoundly influenced Dutch Anabaptism, taught that a reborn believer could not sin any more, since he or she had crucified the flesh. The Reformed doctrine of predestination was incompatible with perfectionism. According to Hoffman God had created humans in order to be saved. He rejected predestination as a pretext for resting in one’s sins. The Reformed authorities sought to curb the influence of perfectionism in various ways. In 1533 a Strasbourg synod, organised by Bucer, rejected Hoffman’s ideas on the human potential to perform good works. Moreover, Bucer used his correspondence to warn against those who denied sin and evil. John Calvin became involved in the polemic against perfectionism as well. In 1545 he used one of his treatises to mock those who dreamed about a state of perfection. Ten years later the Genevan Reformer became embroiled in a heated polemic with Sebastian Castellio on predestination. Castellio’s criticism of Calvin’s doctrine on predestination was, however, largely motivated by his perfectionism. According to Castellio humans could become good because God had created them in his image and likeness. He accused Calvin of ascribing too much force to sin at the expense of Christ’s power to redeem humans.

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