

More Radical than Spinoza

Adriaan Koerbagh (1633-1669)

The seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was an oasis of tolerance in the Europe of the day, but that did not mean its inhabitants could say or write just anything with impunity. So much is evident from the fate of the doctor and lawyer Adriaan Koerbagh (1633-1669), a passionate Enlightenment thinker who was in many respects more radical than Spinoza himself. Not for nothing was Spinoza's motto "caute" (with caution); and the fact that he wrote in Latin, only published one book under his own name, and kept his major work, *Ethics*, in a drawer (the book was not published until after his death) sheltered him from the storm that Koerbagh chose to brave.

The English translation of Koerbagh's work *Een Ligt Schijnende in Duystere Plaatsen, om te verligten de voornaamste saaken der Godsg-eleerdtheyd en Godsdienst* (A Light Shining in Dark Places, to Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion, edited and translated by Michiel Wielema, Brill, Leiden) makes this major early, radical Enlightenment source available to a wide public once again, and provides me with the opportunity to shed light on the dramatic final months of this so-called heretic.

On Friday 27 July 1668, at 10 o'clock in the morning, a prisoner is brought into the torture room in the Town Hall of the City of Amsterdam, the present-day Royal Palace of Amsterdam. It is the 35-year-old doctor and lawyer Adriaan Koerbagh. He listens to demands for his right thumb to be severed, his tongue to be bored through with an awl, his possessions to be seized, his books to be burned, that he should pay all legal costs, and be sentenced to thirty years' imprisonment in the Rasphuis jail in Amsterdam.

Why? Koerbagh was brought to trial because he had written two blasphemous books: *Bloemhof* (Flower Garden), a dictionary of loanwords, and *Een Ligt Schijnende in Duystere Plaatsen*, a polemical tract. Armed with a razor-sharp pen,

he had openly ridiculed the dogmas of the public Reformed Church. He used *Bloemhof* as a vehicle to cheerfully poke fun at the Bible, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, original sin and predestination. The way in which Koerbagh desecrated the Bible in *Bloemhof* caused huge public outrage. He defined the word 'Bible' as a term derived from the Greek that simply meant 'book', and that could just as well be used for a collection of folk tales about Reynard the Fox or Eulenspiegel. When the controversial loanword dictionary was published in February 1668, the sheriff of Amsterdam moved immediately to seize as many copies as possible. The author was summoned to report for questioning to the Town Hall in Amsterdam. However, rather than appearing in court, Koerbagh sought refuge in 'Cuylenburg' (Culemborg), which in the seventeenth century was a free town with its own legislation and jurisdiction.

Temporarily safe from prosecution by the sheriff of Amsterdam, he began working feverishly and in secret on his second book, *Een Ligt Schijnende in Duystere Plaatsen*. Koerbagh wrote *Ligt* as a philosophical justification of the radical views he had expressed in *Bloemhof*. The light in the title is a symbol of truth, of science, and the 'dark places' are a metaphor for lies, religious belief. Koerbagh argues that the story of creation out of nothing is a fiction that originated at some time or other from a mistaken translation of the original Hebrew text of the book of Genesis. He also refutes the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as a fabrication made up by confused theologians. There is no reference to it in the Bible, he asserts; moreover, as a logical contradiction, it is an absurd concoction. How could a God consist of one and three beings? By denying the existence of the Holy Trinity, Koerbagh also denies the divinity of Jesus. In retrospect, *Ligt* is without a doubt the most radical and merciless written criticism of the public Reformed Church produced during the seventeenth century.

Koerbagh's brother Johannes, who was two years his junior, managed to persuade an Utre-

The Rasphuis jail in Amsterdam,
where Adriaan Koerbagh died



cht printer, Johannes van Eede, to print the book. However, shocked by the radical content of *Ligt*, Van Eede stopped the presses as he read and printed the eleventh sheet of paper, and reported both brothers to the sheriff of Utrecht. The matter was betrayed. In a bid to escape arrest, Koerbagh fled from Culemborg to Leiden, but the authorities were hot on his heels and on 18 July 1668, at 6 o'clock in the morning, he was taken from his bed and arrested, before being transported from Leiden to Amsterdam in a cart *pede ligato* (with the feet bound).

During the legal cross-examination, Koerbagh confessed that he was the author of both *Bloemhof* and *Ligt*. The sheriff and magistrates were chiefly concerned with discovering whether anyone else had helped Koerbagh write the two works, something he firmly denied. Reports of the trial give the impression Koerbagh had decided to take all the blame himself, despite the fact that it is very likely he was helped by his brother and a number of friends. For example, it sounds implausible that his brother Johannes should not have read *Bloemhof* until the proofs were completely ready. Equally suspicious is his flat denial of having discussed his work with Spinoza (himself suspected

of atheism), despite admitting to having been in contact with the Jewish philosopher.

Although the final sentence was more lenient than the original harsh demands, it was still a heavy punishment for the time. His thumb was not severed, nor his tongue pierced, but he was sentenced to ten years in the Rasphuis jail. Just one year later, on approximately 12 October 1669, Koerbagh died in the Rasphuis. On 15 October, he was carried out to burial from his Amsterdam home, Oude Nieuwstraat 6, before a large crowd of onlookers. When a black hen alighted on his coffin as he was being borne away, the rumour quickly went round that the devil in person had come and taken away his soul.

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Translated by Rebekah Wilson

FURTHER READING

Adriaan Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places, to Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion*, edited and translated by Michiel Wielema, Brill, Leiden.

Bart Leeuwenburgh, *Het noodlot van een ketter: Adriaan Koerbagh (1633-1669)*, Vantilt, Nijmegen, 2013.