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Philippus van Limborch

Barnouw, Pieter Jacobus

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Summary

Philippus van Limborch was born in Amsterdam, on 19 June 1633. His father Frans was a lawyer and merchant, his mother Geertruidt Bisschop was a niece of the well-known theologian Simon Episcopius, successor to Arminius as professor at Leyden and leader of the Remonstrant minority in the Dutch Republic. Both families had their origins in the southern part of the country, but being Protestants they had to fly to the free north.

Van Limborch studied at the Seminary of the Remonstrants in Amsterdam. As his teachers he had among others Stephanus Curcellaeus for philosophy and theology and Gerardus Vossius for history. In 1653 and 1654 he lived in Utrecht, to hear the Calvinistic professors, especially Gisbertus Voetius, at the university there. In 1657 he accepted a call from the Remonstrant congregation at Gouda and on 21 October he started his ministry there; ten years later, on 5 July 1667, he left Gouda to become one of the ministers of the important congregation in his native town. But in September of the same year he was appointed temporary Professor of Divinity at the Seminary, and in April 1668 his appointment became permanent. In this function he remained until his death on 30 April 1712.

During these forty-four years he had not only to take care of the education of the divinity-students, but he also officiated as the semi-official source of information in the Brotherhood of the Remonstrants. Questions of practical theology and of the organization debated in the congregations in the Republic and abroad were put before him and had to be answered. There were several Mennonite congregations which wanted to amalgamate with Remonstrant congregations or which tried to get Remonstrant ministers in their service; there were even some towns where ministers of the Reformed Church—the state-church of that time, which had ejected the Remonstrants in 1618—made overtures to a rapprochement. All these problems had to be dealt with and we can find Van Limborch's answers and solutions in the autographic copies of his letters.

But an even more important part of his correspondence did not deal with internal affairs of his church: he exchanged letters with many scholars in Europe. He wrote to ministers and professors in Germany and France, but the correspondents who were nearest to him were Englishmen, especially the Cambridge Platonists and his personal friend John Locke. In a letter to a Dutch friend he wrote that the correspondence with English-

men was very important, for in that way the small Remonstrant group could find a powerful ally, viz. the Church of England, abroad—but a more probable explanation is that he fitted in the latitudinarian way of thinking of people like Ralph Cudworth and Henry More and that he and they felt attracted by their congeniality. They wrote about ecclesiastical affairs and theological and philosophical problems and exchanged first editions of their books. They even dedicated some of their writings to each other and communicated news of mutual friends and of their families. The whole correspondence was carried on in Latin, because Van Limborch never succeeded in learning English. Most of the correspondents never met; only Gilbert Burnet and John Locke had been to Holland and had made the acquaintance of the Remonstrant Professor at the Amsterdam Seminary.

The first independent publication of Van Limborch was a written defence against an attack by one of the Calvinistic ministers of Gouda. In 1661 this clergyman, Jacobus Sceperus, had published a book „Chrysopolerotus” (the inquirer of Gouda), in which he suggested that the Remonstrants should return to the Reformed Church—but only docile people who could keep quiet and most emphatically not their ministers were welcome! Van Limborch answered in the same year with a “Short refutation of the book called Chrysopolerotus”. The magistrates of Gouda called him before their court of justice, but he was not punished.

In 1686 he published his magnum opus: “Theologia Christiana. Ad praxin pietatis ac promotionem pacis Christianae unice directa”. This was the first complete system of dogmatics written by a Remonstrant and it was so much appreciated that it was reissued five times in the Netherlands and that a seventh edition was published in Basle in 1735. A Dutch translation appeared in 1701 and an English one in 1713: “A Compleat System or Body of Divinity”, edited by W. Jones.

The next work of Van Limborch was “De Veritate Religionis Christianae Amica collatio cum erudito Judaeo”, the result of conversations with Isaac Orobio de Castro, a Jewish doctor in Amsterdam who had been a victim of the inquisition in Spain. Some experiences of De Castro are also related in “Historia Inquisitionis”, dedicated to archbishop Tilotson of Canterbury, a historical study Van Limborch published in 1692 as an introduction to his edition of the “Liber Sententiarum Inquisitionis Tholosanae”, a manuscript of the fourteenth century. This book was translated as “The History of the Inquisition” by Sam. Chandler in 1731.

The last original works were “Wels-stervens leer voor Ziekken”, an ars moriendi in Dutch, and commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters to the Romans and Hebrews.

Van Limborch edited many works by other people. Foremost are the sermons and lesser writings of his grand-uncle Episcopius—with a biography in 1693—and a large collection of letters referring to the disputes between Calvinists and Remonstrants: “Praestantium ac Eruditorum

virorum Epistolae Ecclesiasticae et Theologiae varii argumenti. Inter quas eminent eae, quae a Iac. Arminia, Conr. Vorstio, Sim. Episcopio, Hug. Grotio, Caspar Barlaeo conscriptae sunt". The first edition, of 1660, was followed by a second in 1684 and a third in 1704, both enlarged.

In 1671 he supervised a Dutch translation of the history of the Synod of Dordrecht, based on the letters of John Hales and Walter Balcanquhall and he superintended a complete edition of the works of his teacher Gerardus Vossius, published in 1701, just as he had edited the theological works of his other teacher Stephanus Curcellaeus in 1675.

As a historian he tried to prove that the Remonstrants were neither innovators nor schismatics, and that their opposition to the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination was quite justified. He pleaded for mutual tolerance between Protestants—with respect to Roman-Catholics he thought it impossible—and used the inquisition as an example of unchristian intolerance. In his "History of the Inquisition" he proved for the first time that Albigenses and Waldenses were different groups, only bracketed together by the brutal persecution that was their common lot. He wrote, but did not publish, a "Reformatorem de Poena Haereticorum Sententiae", a study of inter-protestant attempts at a new inquisition.

In his work as an exegete Van Limborch had two aims: to refute the Calvinistic views concerning predestination and to reconstruct the way in which the Apostles converted the Jews, in order to repeat this conversion.

In his "Theologia Christiana" he developed a system of dogmatics and of ethics. His christology is sub-ordinationist, in his ecclesiological views there is room for an episcopal as well as for a presbyterial government of the church and in his anthropology and discussions of original sin etc. every care is taken to prevent that God should be the author of sin. There are many tenets in all the different churches, but most are unnecessary: only very few are indispensable tenets, for instance the Apostles' Creed and the acknowledging of Christ as Lord. Philosophically speaking Van Limborch was a moderate adherent of Cartesius, although he did not accept the complete doctrine of the French philosopher; like his friend Locke, for instance, he rejected the "ideae innatae" and defended the "tabula rasa" theory. Like most of his contemporaries he was a fervent adversary of Spinoza and of his adherents.

In the Republic hardly any attacks were made on Van Limborch and his publications, maybe because the divines of the Reformed Church were involved in a bitter quarrel about the systems of Voetius and Coccejus. The only controversial book against his "Theology" was published in Germany. There Chr. Franck, a Lutheran Professor of Divinity at Kiel university, wrote in 1694 "Exercitationes Anti-Limborchianae, De Praecipuis inter Lutheranos et Remonstrantes sive Arminianos Controversiis, Dn. Philippi a Limborch, Theologiae inter Remonstrantes Professoris, Theologiae Christianae Oppositae", but his book was scarcely noted in

Holland and Van Limborch did not pay much attention to it in his correspondence. Even though he belonged to a small minority he was able to do his work of teaching and writing for the Brotherhood of the Remonstrants in all tranquillity and safety. He looked up to Erasmus, Grotius and Episcopius as his shining examples and he tried to follow them on the right way to the ideal church, in which Bible and reason would be the base of real Christianity.

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