

Adriaan Koerbagh, a Tragic Hero.

Adriaen Koerbagh (1633-69), stands out as one of the most remarkable, tragic and until recently unfairly underrated figures of the Dutch Golden Age. He and his younger brother, Johannes, were sons of a successful ceramics manufacturer who had died young, in 1644, and left them in sufficiently affluent circumstances for them to devote their lives to study and the pursuit of truth without needing to work at all in the usual sense. Born the year after Spinoza, Adriaan Koerbagh and his younger brother, were lifelong allies in arms as brave enlighteners and intellectual innovators, heretics against the religious ideas of the time, and defenders of basic human freedoms, especially the right of every human to think, believe, say, criticize and write whatever seems right, valuable and reasonable to them.

After starting their university studies at Utrecht in 1653, both transferred to Leiden in the year of Spinoza's expulsion from the synagogue, in 1656. Adriaen concentrated on medicine and Johannes on theology. At Leiden, Adriaan must surely have encountered among his fellow medical students the future dissident fringe - Lodewijk Meijer (or Meyer) (1629-81), Johannes Bouwmeester (1630-80), and Abraham Van Berkel (1639-89) - all studying at Leiden at the time,¹ and probably remained in personal contact with this Leiden and Amsterdam radical Cartesian intellectual fringe, more or less from then on. Bouwmeester Meijer, and Van Berckel, were all studying medicine, and sat in the same classes as Adriaan, and all took a keen interest too in philosophy courses. Midway through his studies, Johannes passed his candidate's examination before the Reformed classis of Amsterdam enrolling as a trainee preacher of the public church, in 1660, signing the required formula of confession of belief in the official Reformed credo.

All we know about the two brothers in the early 1660s is that both brothers were reported, much later, by two later radical writers, Hadrian Beverland and Willem Goeree, to have participated in, and absorbed what were then called atheistic ideas from what by 1660 had become the locally notorious circle of the schoolmaster Franciscus van den Enden (1602-74) and Spinoza in Amsterdam and the circumstantial evidence certainly supports this version of things. Certainly, a little later, the two Brothers had continuing contacts in Amsterdam with Spinoza's Collegiant friend Jarig Jelles who moved house, around 1667, to a house in the center of Amsterdam which he hired from the Brothers. Certainly, by the mid-1660s both brothers were residing mainly in their home city, Amsterdam, where both absorbed basic elements of

Spinoza's clandestine philosophy and developed, we see from what happened in the late 1660s, into particular enthusiasts for the crusade launched by Van den Enden, and Spinoza's physician friends whom they probably had got to know as students in Leiden, that is especially Lodewijk Meijer's and Johannes Bouwmeester's call for what we should term popular enlightenment and spreading Spinoza's basic philosophical stance, as well as spreading among the general public the most up-to-date ideas about medicine, astronomy and science and doing so in ordinary Dutch language accessible to all.²

At the heart of Adriaen Koerbagh's mission in life was the idea of demystifying key areas of life and expertise where traditionally university-trained specialists using Latin terminology kept key areas of expertise locked up and hidden from ordinary people. Adriaen Koerbagh's first book, published in 1664, was a dictionary of legal terms that contains numerous jibes at the expense of lawyers who at that time, with their exorbitant fees and heaps of turgid documents composed in an incomprehensible Latin terminology cultivated a mysterious, quasi-priestly control over the processes of business, property, family and a great many other basic transactions. At this point, there was not yet, in his writing, a single sally against preachers or sacred theological notions. This first text, *'t Nieuw Woorden-Boek der Regten*, was just a vernacular dictionary designed to 'enlighten' the public about the real meaning and implications of legal terms continually used by professionals and academics, often in contentious ways, in a manner wholly obscure to the ordinary reader. This central preoccupation of Adriaen's intellectual efforts in the mid-1660s, was an enthusiasm which in all probability he absorbed directly from his friend Lodewijk Meijer who was an expert in Dutch dictionaries, handbooks and grammar..

As there is no proof of either brother showing radical tendencies in religion and philosophy before 1664, it is possible that their real radicalization only began whilst Adriaen was still working on his legal dictionary, though I myself think it is far more likely to have begun earlier towards the end of the 1650s. In any case, what is certain is that both brothers were fully-fledged members of the Amsterdam radical fringe in both a political and theological sense, active in Leiden as well as Amsterdam, by the mid-1660s when Spinoza, then living in Voorburg, near The Hague, wrote his well-known missive, in the spring of 1665, to an unmentioned friend, usually assumed to be Bouwmeester, complaining that his friend had not visited him lately, or written to him for some time. Some scholars, most notably Meinsma, point out that this letter, obviously to a medical man, could have been written, rather than to Bouwmeester, instead to Adriaen Koerbagh. It would then be the sole surviving fragment of a correspondence that was afterwards, or so Meinsma conjectured, intentionally destroyed by Spinoza and his allies to hide the guilty trail so to speak, for reasons of self-protection.³ Spinoza and the unnamed physician, we see from that letter, were on particularly

friendly terms, and the medical man in question whether Bouwmeester or Koerbagh had been advising Spinoza about his illness of the lungs. He had prescribed “conserve of red roses” as a remedy, a syrup or conserve of pounded sugared roses that was definitely a favourite remedy of Adriaan’s, since he devotes a special and relatively long article to it in his book the *Bloemhof*;⁴ while Spinoza remarks in his letter that that he was keenly awaiting “some of the conserve of red roses which you promised, although I have now for a long time felt better” than when he had last visited this medical man at home (in either case whether Bouwmeester or Koerbagh, presumably, in Amsterdam). This the earliest surviving evidence of the sickness of the lungs that eventually caused Spinoza’s death and shows that it was already impeding his work; Spinoza had suffered several attacks of fever and was accustomed to “open a vein” when seeking relief.⁵

From this letter, which was omitted from the original edition of his correspondence published after Spinoza’s death in the *Opera Posthuma* by the editors as “being of no value”. From it, we learn also that Spinoza had been urging his medical friend “to apply yourself with real energy to serious work, and to prevail on yourself to devote the better part of your life to the cultivation of your intellect and your soul. Now, I say, while there is yet time, and before you complain that time, and indeed you, have slipped by.” Given that Bouwmeester was notorious for intellectual boldness, and that Spinoza suspected that this medical friend suffered from an inferiority complex and was trying to encourage him to write, and that he thought him very talented intellectually but that he “was practically certain that you have rather less confidence in your abilities than is right, and that you are afraid that you may enquire about, or propose something, unworthy of a man of learning,” his advice hardly seems to fit the impetuous Bouwmeester.

On the very same day Spinoza penned this letter possibly to Koerbagh, both Brothers Koerbagh, were cited with disapproval in the minutes of the Amsterdam Reformed consistory of 10 June 1666, Johannes for spreading “godless views,” Adriaan mainly for disorderly life-style and cohabiting out of wedlock with a girl by whom he had had an illegitimate child. The Amsterdam church council was sufficiently troubled by these reports to send a preacher round to their lodgings to investigate: this minister reported that Johannes held “highly unsound and heretical opinions” about matters of faith and was extremely stubborn in defending them. Both brothers eventually complied with the ensuing summons to appear before the consistory where Adriaan was formally rebuked for keeping a girl in “whoredom” and Johannes asked to justify his dissident theological convictions. This he did but with more resolve and at much greater length than the assembly felt able to deal with on the spot, moving them to send one of their number, the preacher Petrus Leupenius, a specialist in combating Socinianism, to interrogate Johannes in greater detail at home. Requiring the younger Koerbagh to explain himself in writing with respect to five

key points, Leupenius received in response a text headed “Jan Keurbach’s Short but Upright Reply to Five Questions put to Him by Petrus Leupenius, minister of the Word of God in this city” which was then considered by the consistory and copied verbatim in its minutes.

By the mid-1660s Johannes who had known some Cartesians and future radicals but shown no particular radical tendencies in 1660 when he became a candidate for a Reformed Church pulpit, had by now been fully converted to Anti-Trinitarianism and radical Cartesianism, had clearly also been converted to something discernably close to a Spinozistic standpoint, though whether it was Johannes or his older brother whom, in 1682, the Remonstrant professor and friend of Locke, Philippus Van Limborch termed “a follower of Spinoza” who took the lead in introducing elements of and definitions from Spinoza’s philosophy into their common project, which to an extent was also that of Meijer and Bouwmeester who may also have been the ones who introduced the Koerbaghs to Spinoza, we shall probably never know. Nor do we know for certain whether the brothers had access, in the way the Jelles, De Vries and others of Spinoza’s Amsterdam circle had, to Spinoza’s early unpublished philosophical manuscripts, though it highly likely, considering what followed, that they did.⁶ In any case, the evidence clearly confirms that both brothers accepted the essentials of Spinoza’s monism, as diffused through the circle (hence not necessarily directly – but probably directly) by 1666 – or over a decade prior to publication of Spinoza’s main work, *The Ethics*.⁷

Asked, what he thought of the doctrine of the Trinity, Johannes answered that he could not find the term *Drieenigheid* [Trinity], or any equivalent to it, in Scripture and therefore concluded that no such doctrine can rightly be inferred from Scripture. Furthermore, the idea that there “should be three distinct divine personae in the single being of God “in het eenvoudige weesen Godts], he added, “cannot be demonstrated through clear and distinct reasoning either.”⁸ Accordingly, veneration of the man Jesus as if he were divine is pure “superstition”. Asked his view of the status of Scripture, he answered that the Biblical books had been composed by God-fearing men at different times to the best of their abilities.” Asked what he meant by that, he refused to expand. Regarding the resurrection of the dead he again answered that he could derive no “clear and distinct idea” about the matter. Asked lastly for his views on Heaven and Hell, he replied that the notion of ‘heaven’ in Scripture means nothing more than the blessed state of the chosen, while ‘Hell’ denotes the miserable condition of those not so blessed, a key doctrine afterwards spelt out in Adriaan’s suppressed last book, *Een Ligt schijnende in duystere Plaatsen*.⁹

Investigation of Johannes Koerbagh’s heresies continued on 27 July at the house of another preacher, Dr Langelius. The council wanted to know what Koerbagh meant by calling God an “eenich weesen” [single being]. Given that God is infinite, replied Johannes, here betraying his familiarity with

Spinoza's unpublished manuscripts, there could not be any being or anything apart from God, so that "all created things are not beings but modifications or modes of being, limited or extended by rest and motion."¹⁰ Asked to explain his view of Creation, Koerbagh responded that "nothing was created out of nothing and cannot be so created", adding that any true concept of God shows that He is identical to his Creation." Johannes' 'Spinozism' was now fully evident and Langelius was appropriately appalled, as were his colleagues on considering these replies. When Langelius severely rebuked him for such blasphemous words and notions, the young man, he afterwards reported, suddenly assumed a contrite and submissive air, acquiescing when the preacher insisted that God is distinct from His Creation and that He did "create the universe from nothing." Finally, he submitted to the pressure admitting that the doctrine of the Reformed Church is the truth and that, as it teaches, "Deus esse trium" [God is a Trinity].¹¹

During August, Johannes was officially reprimanded by the Amsterdam Reformed consistory and warned in particular that he must immediately cease his worst offense which was his illegally propagating anti-Trinitarian views among "ordinary and common folk". If he defied the consistory in this matter, he was warned, he would be brought before the magistrates and severely punished. Although both brothers became somewhat more cautious for a time, basically the experience only hardened their resolve. The following summer it was reported to the consistory that "Johannes Koerbagh was "once again beginning to speak of the Holy Scriptures and catechism in a very blasphemous manner." Two members of the council were dispatched to rebuke him afresh. In December 1667 two young theology students who had been sent to infiltrate a recent Collegiant meeting on the Rokin, in Amsterdam, reporting that Johannes had been present, seated among the principal figures there, and had addressed the gathering praising the Collegiants and reaffirming, in violation of the law, that their gatherings were certainly allowable while others present reiterated that Christ is not the "true God" but "only an eminent teacher or prophet.

At a further interrogation on 1 March 1668, Johannes, now becoming increasingly sullen and resentful, first refused "in rude terms" to discuss his views and then reluctantly stated that the Trinity, three persons in one being, is not to be found in Scripture but only in church teaching, that nothing can be made from nothing and, "finally, affirmed that the concept that there is only one infinite spirit that is one infinite body, divided only into different *modifications*, incorporating within itself both Creator and all created things was by no means so strange." Whether or not anyone else in the room realized it, the thinking of Johannes, like that of his brother, on God, Nature and the subject of Creation was proven, from Johannes' own mouth, to be thoroughly saturated in Spinoza's thinking.

Meanwhile, at Amsterdam, attention switched that February of 1668 to the book *Een Bloemhof van allerley Lieflijkheid zonder verdriet*, today thought to be mainly the work of Adriaan, which in the consistory's view was a detestable book crammed with blasphemous remarks about God, our Saviour Jesus Christ, Son of God, and the divine and perfect Word of the Lord." It was a book, set out in the form of a dictionary, again showing obvious affinities in terms of style and rendering of meanings with Meijer's dictionary, and Johannes' and Meijer's common friend Bouwmeester's views, that not only, along with much else, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity but styled it a "versiering" [adornment], without any basis in Scripture, a meaningless obfuscation deliberately devised by churchmen to help fabricate a big mystifying theology lulling people into false belief so as thereby to boost their own authority in society.¹² Within days the Amsterdam city authorities seized all the copies of the *Bloemhof* on which they could lay hands. It was soon causing waves well beyond Amsterdam.¹³

If Meijer's connection with the work seems likely, there is probably also truth in later rumours that the input of the "devilish Dr Dick", as Bouwmeester was known to some, was decidedly significant too. For at the end of his short life, Adriaan soon to be held as a prisoner in the Amsterdam Rasphuis, felt aggrieved that it was he alone who had to suffer long-term confinement and the ruin of his life, while having scrupulously protected as he had, those of the circle, or the underground movement, most complicit in his own project, the most audacious ideas actually being Bouwmeester's.¹⁴ Whatever the truth of Bouwmeester's reputedly large role, a relatively small number of entries on theology, observes Leibniz in his *New Essays*, provoked an exception degree of indignation.¹⁵ So also did Adriaan Koerbagh's claiming the title 'Reformed Church' is really a misnomer, since the religion of the Calvinists is based on bigotry, force and oppression; a truly restored or purified religion would not divide men, or be based on discipline and coercion, but be based on "wisdom, truth and reason."¹⁶

The *Bloemhof* of Adriaan Koerbagh is undoubtedly 'Spinozistic' since several passages, such as the article "metaphysica," which affirms that there is only one nature and that nothing outside it can exist,¹⁷ the article "essentie" declaring that there is only one entirely self-contained Being, namely God, and that everything else is inherent in and stems from that one and only self-contained being.¹⁸ Also, the *Bloemhof* repeatedly denies that Moses wrote any of the Five Books, adopting a radical position quite unlike that of Hobbes who says Moses "wrote all that which hee is there said to have written," but like Spinoza, otherwise ascribed the authorship of the rest, to Ezra "as the wisest and most learned people hold."¹⁹

Denying the doctrine of the Trinity outright, the book was also blatantly illegal under the terms of the States of Holland's 1653 decree prohibiting Socinian publications. For good measure, the *Bloemhof* also

denies the existence of angels, Satan and everything supernatural, ascribing the general usage of these terms “as a great abuse of the theologians.”²⁰ Magic, sorcery, spells were equally all dismissed as absurdities without any basis in reality.²¹ The Greek term “heresy” so vital to the main churches is explained by Koerbagh as yet another abusive figment since it merely means “follower”. Koerbagh’s objective was the very opposite to that of the preachers- to de-mystify all the foreign words incorporated into the Dutch language, including the term Bible itself which, states the *Bloemhof*, “is a bastard Greek word which means a book in general, no matter what kind of book it may be, whether Renard the Fox or Till Eugenspiegel,”²² What a pity it is, complains Koerbagh, that we do not have more “heretics”, followers of “reason from which the truth stems”, then there would not be so much divisiveness in the world “for the truth is one and simple.” “I lament,” he avers at one point that the “clergy insist that it is a great abuse or sin on the part of those who strive” to render all such Greek, Hebrew and other terms in general usage into plain, clear Dutch, so that they can be generally understood, lest the “common man, as they fear, should become wise.”²³

In fact, it would be impossible to find a more undisguised, direct attack on Christian doctrine even of the most rationally Socinian variety: ‘redemption’ is construed by the Koerbaghs to mean redeeming a person from a condition of this-worldly need, necessity and unfreedom, in particular from ignorance through instructing him or her in knowledge and wisdom and bringing those thus redeemed to the “highest happiness’ and eternal blessedness and well-being “so that this form of redemption is the greatest redemption than can be conceived.” As for Jesus, he was a redeemer among the Jews, “a carpenter, the son of Maria, and the supposed son, or so it was claimed, of Joseph the carpenter, because he taught the people and sought to bring them to wisdom and knowledge by which awareness of the highest good is attained.” That he is also our redeemer and by his suffering and death, with the flowing of his blood, absolved us from all our sins and thereby fully paid for and made them good has no basis in Scripture and is contrary to the truth. Who was this redeemer’s real father is not known and therefore some ignorant people said he was God, God from eternity and the Son of God from eternity, born in worldly time of a virgin without a man coming to her: but these tenets have no basis in Scripture and are contrary to the truth.”²⁴ To say anything like this in 17th century Holland, or anywhere in the Christian world at that time, was flagrantly illegal.

The consistory at once sent delegates to the city hall who had read out selected passages to the burgomasters who, suitably shocked, ordered the entire stock of the book to be seized from the Amsterdam bookshops, as was promptly done, though not very thoroughly it would seem. Copies of the “blasphemous book of Courbag” surfaced also at Utrecht where the book was likewise condemned by church council and city government as “blasphemous” and removed from the bookshops.²⁵

Proceedings against Adriaan Koerbagh were initiated. Generally condemned in the Netherlands as a “scriptum pessimum, blasphemum, atheisticum”, Adriaan, daringly appearing on the title page under his own real name as well as the pseudonym he had used also earlier of ‘Vreederick Waermond [Peaceful Mouth of Truth].’ Confirmed as the author, Adriaan was informed by the magistrates’ chief officer, the city *schout*, that he faced trial, and must on no account leave the city. But he defied the order and fled. Assuming the pseudonym “Pieter Wilte,” he sought refuge in the small town of Culemborg where he found a hiding-place together with his friend and ally, Abraham Van Berkel, the translator of Hobbes, who was already sheltering there. With him, Adriaan took in his baggage the manuscript of his last and most radical work, *Het Ligt schijnende in Duystere Plaatsen om te verligten de voornaamste saaken der God geleertheyd en Gods Dienst*, a book, again purporting to be by “Vrederik Waarmond’ denouncing theological ire, oppression and persecution, that begins by identifying God or Jehovah from the Hebrew wording of the Old Testament as a being “ “niet alleen die is, maar die selfs het wesen en sijn is van alles: want in hem, dat is, in dat wesen,, leeven wy: ook is dit wesen alles in allen. Soo dat al ‘t geen men siet en hoord, en voeld, is maar een wijze van bestaan, afhankelijk van dit wesen.”²⁶

Whilst Adriaan was in hiding, Johannes was again required to appear before the consistory where, on 1 March 1668, casting all caution aside, he flew into another rage denouncing the consistory and the dogma of the Trinity, the latter as a *contradictio in terminis*, a point the brothers restated emphatically in *Een Ligt* here declaring that this doctrine is not so much above, as rather contrary to reason,²⁷ a meaningless mystery nowhere to be found in Scripture. Once again, Johannes reiterated several of what were in fact basic doctrines of *Een Ligt*, points already previously rehearsed before the Amsterdam church authorities, insisting the world could not have been created *ex nihilo* and declaring, using Spinozistic terminology, that there is “only one infinite Spirit and one infinite Body distinguished solely in their respective modifications.” In *Een Ligt* the brothers expound a clearly Spinozistic conception of God, yet were preceding Spinoza by an entire decade in doing so in print, declaring that there was no miraculous element in the process of creation and that “De Schepping had plaats door wetten van beweging en rust” [according to the laws of motion and rest], hence “datter niet meer als een selfsstandigheyd kan zijn” while true salvation or *zaligheid* is simply human happiness in this world, with reason and knowledge the sole path to this “zaligheid,” the goal of all sound human aspiration.”²⁸ Everything in Scripture not in accord with “reason” is thus useless and vain. Certainly men need to be “saved” “ Want seker hy is seer ellendig die in een diepe onweetendheid steekt, en seer ongelukkig die geen verstand heeft om to kunnen oordeelen tusschen een onmogelijkheid of tegenspreking en loogen , en tusschen een mogelijkheid en waarheid. En in die ellende, en in dat ongeluk sijn nu nog by na

alle menschen dat se niet kunnen oordeelen of men ‘er onmogelijke of tegensprekelijke logenagtige en versierde dingen wijs maakt, dan of men ‘er mogelijke en waare dingen leert en voorstelt. En daar uit kan niemand verlost worden, dan die door onderwijning of eigen ondersoeking tot weetenschap komt, en door de rede tot de waarheid gebragt werd soo verre, dat hy op vaste redenen en gronden ...kan oordeelen wat mogelijk, of onmogelijk, wat waar of loogen is.”²⁹

If true redemption is learning to understand, Good and Bad in the brothers’ Koerbagh schema is not a divinely ordained moral system and has no connection with churches or ecclesiastics, but rather a Spinozistic relative measure defined by what is good or bad for the individual and his neighbor.³⁰ “Heaven” in their system, meanwhile, denotes being united with God through knowledge. Here throughout, once again, both the basic principles and the tone are not just intensely but aggressively ‘Spinozistic’: “Vorders de grootste behoudenis (gelijk ik in ‘t lange en breede klaar genoeg getoont heb) bestaat in een of veel (hoe meerder hoe grooter behouder) uyt onweetenheid te brengen tot kennisse, wijseid en verstand, waar door de siel tot het leeven, dat is tot ondstervelijkheid en tot de kennisse Gods, waar in immers (volgens het getuygenis der Schrift) het eeuwig leeven is, komt.”³¹

By manipulating the lamentable ignorance of kings and princes who have historically always neglected the very study most requisite for responsible rule, namely “true” or real theology - that is worldly wisdom (ie. Philosophy) – ecclesiastics have long arrogated to themselves a degree of influence to which they have no right. Christ is indeed “our savior” but only insofar as he taught the people and led them to knowledge, understanding and wisdom; hence, faith as such is completely irrelevant, as is all theology. Belief plays no part in what Christ taught and nor can his suffering and dying expiate anyone’s sins or “bestow any happiness on us.”³² The Koerbaghs' view of Jesus was that not only was he was not God but merely a remarkable individual conceived normally albeit illegitimately 1,167 years ago without our knowing who his father was.³³ The point is then made again in more extended fashion in *Een Ligt*, the Jews were wholly justified in not recognizing Jesus as the “son of God” and in finding that Jesus is not foreseen anywhere in the Old Testament.³⁴ Koerbagh’s books, it has been observed, “are certainly far more outspokenly anti-Christian than anything that Spinoza ever dared to write.”³⁵ This explains why Adriaan Koerbagh was subjected to such exceptionally severe punishment. Indeed, there was no better or bolder early summing up of the core message of Spinozism and the very essence of Radical Enlightenment.

In line with Spinoza’s thought, but not with Hobbes who adopts a distinctly less radical position and whose *Leviathan* influenced them less powerfully than it did Van Berkel, miracles are declared altogether impossible,³⁶ and angels, Satan, devils, exorcism, sorcery, witchcraft and divination are all dismissed as total

fabrications entirely devoid of reality and truth. The one residual quasi-Christian echo that can perhaps be detected is Adriaan's and Johannes' idea that he that seeks to instruct the multitude is all too apt to suffer, and become a martyr, in the face popular ignorance, bigotry and fury.³⁷ Asked later whether he had collaborated with his brother in writing the *Bloemhof*, Johannes admitted "having corrected some passages when it was in the press, adding that he had seen nothing wrong with its contents."

By the middle of April 1668, the authorities and consistory in Amsterdam knew that Adriaan Koerbagh was in Culemborg and "disseminating his filthy opinions there." For Adriaan, disaster struck when the printer, shocked to find the book contained "strange opinions," refused to press on with the printing. or return the manuscript which he assured them was no longer in his possession. He had in fact betrayed them to the authorities without letting on, reporting the affair and passing the manuscript to the local magistracy in Utrecht who passed it on to the Amsterdam burgomasters who lost no time in consulting the city's Reformed consistory over the seized printed sections of *Een Ligt*. Having had several tense confrontations with Johannes over the years, the preachers found little difficulty in detecting striking parallels between the views Johannes had previously expressed to them and what they discovered in *Een Ligt*. Moreover, it was obvious that, the book had been written drawing on a certain familiarity with Biblical Hebrew as a key tool, a language much more familiar to Johannes than Adriaan.

Johannes was arrested in Amsterdam when returning from Utrecht and Culemborg, on 10 May. He was walking across Dam Square in the city center when he ran straight into the redoubtable city *schout*, the art- and book-loving but stern and haughty Cornelis Witsen (1605-69), a prominent figure in the city much involved ten years before with the proceedings surrounding Rembrandt's bankruptcy who detained him on the spot, as the suspected author of the "blasphemous" statements about Christ and Christianity in *Een Ligt*. Johannes was interrogated the next day about his trip to Culemborg and as to the whereabouts of his fugitive brother.

For around ten weeks, Johannes remained behind bars. Meanwhile, everyone in Collegiant circles and among the radical fringe was feverishly discussing the sensational news, as indeed Spinoza, once he too learnt of what was afoot, must have turned it over constantly in his mind and doubtless also felt anxiety, for the group and for himself. The others certainly had ample cause to worry. If the *Bloemhof* was replete with "blasphemies," *Een Ligt* went distinctly further: it was an aggressive veritable declaration of war on organized religion, churches, theologians and clergy everywhere. Word circulated that the Amsterdam burgomasters and magistrates, as well as the consistory, were much greatly aroused by the complicity of the Koerbagh brothers and their circle, in producing the suppressed books, that the magistrates were actively

searching for Adriaan Koerbagh's whereabouts, and that a financial reward for his capture had been announced in The Hague, Leiden, and at Utrecht as well as Amsterdam

With the help of a betrayer lured by the money award offered, Adriaan was eventually arrested, on 18 July, at his new temporary hiding place, a house in Leiden where he was seized along with all the papers found in his room and from where, the next day, he was escorted to Amsterdam under guard back and locked up. The Koerbagh's house in Amsterdam was searched. With everything relevant to the illicit publications and the texts themselves seized by the city magistrates, on 20 July 1668, the now thirty-five year old Adriaan was interrogated by a whole panel of Amsterdam regents, Cornelis Witsen, Hans Bontemantel, and Johannes Hudde among them. Before the magistrates, on their table, alongside a selection of his seized letters, stood copies of the *Bloemhof* and the now suspended, half-printed *Een Ligt*. It was not actually illegal under Dutch law to define God as everything but it indubitably was illegal to deny the Trinity, and especially deny Christ's divinity and sacrifice for men's sins, the claim that the Jews were right to deny it, and claim the illegitimacy of Christ's birth let alone do so with such force and persistence. The magistrates were clearly also interested in placating others, especially, apart from Johannes, also Spinoza, in the illicit aspects, and referred to a passage of the *Bloemhof* where it is stated that who Jesus' father was is something that remains unknown but that the Nazarene is taken to be of illegitimate birth since the story of the divinely immaculate conception is obvious nonsense.³⁸ As the interrogation continued, Adriaan admitted having visited Van den Enden's home two or three times, five or six years before, a significant point given that, years later, Goeree affirmed in print that it was Van den Enden who had converted Koerbagh to the "circle." He had also visited the rationalist Anti-Trinitarian Collegiant Jan Knol's home two or three times.³⁹

What is most remarkable about the denouement is that Adriaan took all the blame and responsibility upon himself. His brother, he admitted, may have corrected a page here and there but not anything "offensive." He pointedly refused to admit that he had discussed his subversive ideas, "spoken about the matter" with his brother or Spinoza. He did admit that he had conferred personally several times with Spinoza but scrupulously shielded Spinoza too from any anti-Trinitarian complicity. Protecting Spinoza and his reputation generally, as well as his brother, Bouwmeester, Van Berckel and Van den Enden, clearly mattered to him but what he did admit is important in that it confirms a direct relationship between Spinoza and Koerbagh that the rest of our evidence merely implies since Adriaan never refers to Spinoza directly in his writings (any more than what survives of Spinoza's correspondence ever mentions Koerbagh.)⁴⁰

The magistrates were eager to uncover Johannes' complicity in the production of the forbidden books, and pointed out that Adriaan knew no Hebrew a knowledge of which is basic to the structure of *Een*

Ligt. But Johannes too stuck doggedly to his denial admitting only that he had corrected one particular uncontroversial section. In shielding himself, he was as careful as his brother, to shield also Spinoza, Van den Enden, Bouwmeester and Van Berckel. Asked point blank whether he considered the *Bloemhof* to be “blasphemous”, he adamantly refused to give a definite answer. After long deliberation, the magistrates fixed Adriaan’s sentence at ten years imprisonment, followed by ten years banishment from the city upon release, with a 4,000 guilder fine plus a further 2,000 guilder penalty to cover the costs of the proceedings and his imprisonment, hence 6,000 guilders in all.

For Johannes, the *schout* originally demanded twelve years behind bars and a hefty fine for him too. The judges were divided over the prosecuting magistrate’s demand that Johannes too be imprisoned albeit for a shorter term, also be made to pay a fine and costs, and be subjected to flogging behind closed walls. Some wanting to imprison Johannes too, others backed De Witt’s ally, Bontemantel, who objected, he records in his notes on the city government’s deliberations, that imprisoning or banishing a prisoner who had already spent ten weeks in prison and who had admitted no complicity or crime would give him personally a bad conscience since in “our country” the law did not investigate or punish opinions concerning religion but only attendance at banned meetings and admitted involvement in forbidden publications. In the end, the regents agreed that Adriaan alone would be made an example of.

The Amsterdam magistrates’ judgments, against Adriaan and Johannes, were not declared publicly but pronounced behind closed doors. Clearly, the magistracy and *vroeschap* wished to avoid drawing attention to the whole affair as well as potential readers’ attention to the suppressed books and learning about the brothers’ ideas. The burgomasters and *vroedschap* preferred that the entire business should remain veiled from the public as far as possible.⁴¹ Adriaan was duly imprisoned in the Amsterdam Rasphuis. In his first months inside he was reportedly in a state of fury, trying to convince everyone of his “ruinous” views, but after a time he grew quiet and contrite. By December 1668, one of the city’s Reformed preachers and assistant to the Rasphuys interviewed Adriaan seeking to retrieve him from “the snares of Satan.” Koerbagh reportedly now showed great contrition and regret for his blasphemous books “wishing that he had never written them.” He became ill and died in his place of confinement in Amsterdam in October 1669, little more than a year after his incarceration and was buried on 16th of that month.

Johannes remained under Amsterdam consistory surveillance and was reported several times over the next few years to be stubbornly adhering to his former heretical views, and attending Collegiant gatherings. On 11 January 1671, occurred a gathering of 400 people at the Collegiant meeting-place on the Rokin at which he figured among the speakers. Once again, recorded the church council, he expressed himself in a

blasphemous fashion regarding Jesus Christ our Saviour, “speaking against his eternal divinity.”⁴² But Johannes took good care never to express his views (again) in writing. The traumatic effect of his brother’s imprisonment and death seems also to have stanchd his old thirst for study and research and intimidate Van Berckel thoroughly. Doubtless this tragic episode had a deeply sobering effect on Spinoza, Meijer, Bouwmeester and Van den Enden too.

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¹¹ Hubert Vandenbossche, ‘Adriaan en Jan Koerbagh’ in H. Dethier and Hubert Vandenbossche (eds.) *Woordenboek van Belgische en Nederlandse Vrijdenkers* (2 vols., Brussels, 1979) i, 167-92, here 167.

² Michiel Wielema, *The March of the Libertines. Spinozists and the Dutch Reformed Church (1660-1750)*, 84-86.

³ K.O. Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle. Étude critique historique sur les hétérodoxes hollandais* (original Dutch edn. 1896; expanded French edn. Paris, 1983) 295-7, 315 n62; Bart Leeuwenburgh, *Het Noodlot van een ketter. Adriaan Koerbagh (1633-69)*(Nijmegen, 2013) , 117-19.

⁴ Adriaan Koerbagh, *Een Bloemhof van allerley lieflijkheid zonder verdriet* (Amsterdam, 1668), 183; Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle*, 315 n62

⁵ B. de Spinoza, *Correspondance* edited by Maxime Rovere (Paris, 2010), 193 n 1.

⁶ Michiel Wielema, ‘The Two Faces of Adriaan Koerbagh’, *Geschiedenis van de wijsbegeerte in Nederland. Documentatieblad van de Werkgroep Sassen* 12 (2001), 57-75, here p.58.

⁷ Wiep Van Bunge, ‘Introduction’ to Adriaan Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places* edited and translated by Michiel Wielema (Leiden, 2011), 1-40, here p. 28; Frank Mertens, ‘Johannes Koerbagh’s lost Album Amicorum seen through the Eyes of Pieter de la Rue,’ *LIAS* 38 (2011), 59-127, here pp. 84-85.

⁸ Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle*, 340-1

⁹ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001), 185-89

¹⁰ Van Bunge, ‘Introduction’, 18; Wim Klever, *Een nieuwe Spinoza in veertig facetten* (Amsterdam, 1995), 54-55.

¹¹ Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle*, 341; Wiep Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza. An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden, 2001), 103.

¹² Koerbagh, *Een Bloemhof*, 499, 632-3; Leeuwenburgh, *Het Noodlot*, 125-6

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- ¹³ Van Bunge, Introduction', 22
- ¹⁴ Leeuwenburgh, *Het Noodlot*, 207
- ¹⁵ G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on human Understanding* (Cambridge, 2012), 277.
- ¹⁶ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 327-8
- ¹⁷ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 444; Wim Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza. Presentatie van een emanciperende generatie* (Hilversum, 1997), 89.
- ¹⁸ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 275
- ¹⁹ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 292, 325-6; Sonja Lavaert, *Vrijheid, gelijkheid, veelheid. Het moderne democratie-denken en zijn kring* (Brussels, 2020), 150.
- ²⁰ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 268, 670
- ²¹ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 303, 670
- ²² Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 95; Eric Jorink, *Het Boeck der Natuere. Nederlandse geleerden en de wonderen van Gods Schepping 1575-1715* (Leiden, 2007), 91
- ²³ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 293
- ²⁴ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 276-7, 664; Cis Van Heertum, 'Reading the Career of Johannes Koerbagh: the Auction Catalogue of His Library,' *LIAS* 38 (2011), 1-57, here pp. 2-3.
- ²⁵ Jonathan Israel, 'The Banning of Spinoza's Works in the Dutch Republic,' in Wiep van Bunge and Wim Klever (eds.) *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700* (Leiden, 1996), 3-14, here p. 9
- ²⁶ Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 56-9
- ²⁷ Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 93-7
- ²⁸ Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 68-9, 82-3, 116-21
- ²⁹ Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 116; Van Bunge, 'Introduction', 23.
- ³⁰ Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 206-11
- ³¹ Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 142-3
- ³² Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 130-5, 142-5
- ³³ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 354, 664; Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle*, 366
- ³⁴ Koerbagh, *Een Ligt*, 192-5
- ³⁵ Michiel Wielema, 'Adriaan Koerbagh' in Wiep van Bunge et al. eds. *The Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers* (2 vols. Bristol, 2003) ii, 571
- ³⁶ Koerbagh, *Bloemhof*, 447; Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza*, 88; Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, 102
- ³⁷ Van Heertum, 'Reading the Career of Johannes Koerbagh', 3-4.

³⁸ Koerbagh, *Een Bloemhof*, 354, 664

³⁹ Leeuwenburgh, *Noodlot*, 199; Van Bunge, 'Introduction' , 11 ;

⁴⁰ Vandenbossche, 'Adriaan en Jan Koerbagh', 172; Wielema, 'Two Faces', 58; Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza*, 90; Leeuwenburg, *Het Noodlot*, 198.

⁴¹ Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle*, 368

⁴² Leeuwenburgh, *Het Noodlot*, 209