

REMONSTRANTS, CONTRA-REMONSTRANTS AND THE SYNOD OF DORT (1618-1619): THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE EARLY DUTCH REPUBLIC

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The United Provinces in the Early 17th Century

The political events of the Union of Utrecht (1579) and the Act of Abjuration (1581) in part laid the foundations for the seventeenth-century “Golden Age” of the Netherlands. This “Golden Age” of republican independence and Protestant liberty in the northern United Provinces was one of cultural development and national progression. The early Golden Age would be the era of the formation of the prosperous Dutch East and West Indies Companies, with exploration, trade and colonization attempts ranging from the New Netherlands and Suriname to the East Indies and Formosa. Great artists, including Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer, and others, would begin their careers. During this period the increasingly metropolitan and well-connected Republic of the United Provinces, despite its comparatively small size and population, exerted substantial influence globally. While primary conflict with a declining Roman Catholic Spain continued, the influence of the Protestant United Provinces is also attested in episodic tensions with her nearest ally, the ascendant English. English state papers and Privy Council documents evidence this throughout the 1600s, particularly in relation to tensions over trade and colonization in the Americas. King James I of England’s ambassador to The Hague, Sir Dudley Carleton, brought complaints on several occasions before the States-General during the early part of the century, regarding what the English viewed as Dutch incursion into their rightful territory.¹

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In the midst of this era of prosperity and growth the United Provinces were gripped by the Remonstrant controversy – a politically charged theological division and debate over the nature of God, the nature of man, his relationship to, and condition before God, and the nature of salvation, as revealed in the Scriptures. The debate engaged the popular attention of all levels of society within the United Provinces, along with that of both the religiously and politically concerned of surrounding nations. An examination of the controversy, its initial resolution at the Synod of Dort (1618-19), and continuing impact, reveals the deeply religious milieu in United Provinces in the early 17th century. It also suggests that the impacts of this religious life and worldview struggle are perhaps greater than commonly recognized, both domestically and internationally.

The Dutch Reformed Church

Understanding the Remonstrant controversy of the early 17th century must begin with the historical background of the Dutch Reformed church in the United Provinces. Prior to the 16th century Reformation, the Low Countries, like the rest of medieval Europe, were Roman Catholic. To be sure, there were European influences that functioned as proto-Reformation movements: the Lollards, the Brethren of the Common Life, and a strong Augustinian presence not only bore marked similarities to Reformation thought and church developments, but also directly contributed to them. Along with these movements, the Reformation in the Netherlands also gained impetus from the northern humanist efforts of Erasmus in Holland, Reuchlin in Germany, and others.

It was in this late medieval to early modern setting that various Protestant movements took root in the Netherlands. Lutheran influence first arrived in the 1520s, and gained substantial support. Towards the end of the decade, and into the 1530s, a wave of radical Anabaptist thought and turmoil flowed into the Dutch provinces. Initially a strong and popular movement with its “simple ecclesiastical organization which appealed directly to Scripture” and strict moral discipline, the Anabaptist movement fractured over internal divisions.² Anabaptist influence would reach its apex in the region by the time of the Anabaptist Muenster rebellion of 1535 in nearby Germany. Despite

the efforts within the Anabaptist movement to reject violent apocalypticism, as advocated by the pacifist Menno Simons, Anabaptism in the Netherlands would decline in influence, while retaining a legacy as a minor stream of Dutch Protestantism.

The third Reformation era wave of Protestant influence into the Low Countries proved to be more enduring and pervasive. After 1540 Calvinism gained a foothold in the Low Countries. Peter DeJong notes that the “coming [of Calvinism] was... a complex phenomenon” attributable to several of streams of influence, among them not only the positive influence of Calvinist thought, but also “the political and ecclesiastical oppressions of Spain and the disillusionment... with the Anabaptist movement.”³ Robert Godfrey states that “the origin and spread of Dutch Calvinism remains a historiographical problem, for the rigor of the inquisition conducted by Charles and Philip obliterated much of the record.”⁴ What does appear from the historical record is that the southern provinces of the Netherlands (Belgium) were “the cradle of Dutch Calvinism... here its confession was composed, its first congregations were duly organized, and its first synods convened... here it suffered its severest persecutions... [Yet] the changing political scene which within two decades rent the southern provinces from the north compelled Calvinism to seek support and strength almost exclusively in the north.”⁵

The changing political scene which facilitated the birth of the Dutch Reformed Church as the dominant church developed during the period of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563). Pope Paul III called the council in order to address contentious issues in the church, particularly the growing and increasingly independent movements for church reform. During the council leading Catholic figures including Charles V, Cardinal Caraffa, the future Pope Paul IV, and Ignatius Loyola, called for a renewal of the Inquisition to attempt to turn back the growing tide of Reformation Protestantism. This policy was implemented in the Low Countries especially under the rule of Philip II (1556-1581). Philip’s reign was marked by brutal persecution in the attempt to repress religious dissent from Roman Catholicism, and as time progressed, political rebellion against Spain. Imprisonment, torture, and execution by beheading or burning became common-place. Politically, Philip’s brutality gave rise to the campaigns of William of Orange, and his successors, to liberate the Dutch provinces from Spanish

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rule. Religiously, this era of social and political turmoil saw Calvinist thought spread through the Low Countries. Reformed congregations, organized under Spanish repression, soon became the largest Protestant body in the Low Countries despite the potential and often real costs of allegiance.

When the Act of Abjuration (1581) declared the hard-won, and still threatened, independence of the northern United Provinces of the Netherlands,⁶ the leaders of the new Protestant nation decided to recognize the Reformed faith as the country's official religion. In doing so, they made the Dutch Reformed Church the state church of the United Provinces. At the same time, as Peter DeJong notes, the Reformed faith was not the only permitted religion: "Lutherans, Anabaptists, and even Roman Catholics were tolerated in the land... [though] at a decided disadvantage. They could only worship in private dwellings. All church edifices were allotted to the Reformed..."⁷ The relationship of the Dutch Reformed Church to the state would prove a difficult one. In 1568 the gathered leaders of Reformed congregations had adopted a church order which called for a Presbyterian form of church government; Presbyterianism stressed the independence of church government from secular authority. The general desire of the Dutch Reformed Church in the United Provinces during this early period appears to have been for a continued Presbyterianism independent of government interference, while respectful of, and working cooperatively with civil government. The Presbyterian system would generally be followed in the newly established Dutch Reformed state church, but with recurring struggle over state interference in the life of the church, as the election to, and dismissal of persons from church office, and the convening of national synod gatherings became increasingly subject to political approval.⁸

In the officially established Dutch Reformed church all ministers and other church officers were expected to subscribe to the Belgic Confession.⁹ At a synod held in Emden in 1571 church leaders had agreed that Calvin's Genevan catechism of 1545 should be used in French or Walloon congregations, and the Heidelberg catechism in those of the Dutch, the latter practice also carrying on into the national Dutch Reformed church.¹⁰ These confessional and catechetical documents shared a Reformed theological perspective, though they were arguably "moderate statements" of Calvinistic belief, in

terms of their limited reference to predestination.¹¹ As accepted and required by the Dutch Reformed church, these documents recognized and perpetuated a distinctively Reformed theology and practice. The Reformed theology of the church was further promoted by both church and state in the United Provinces through the creation of Reformed divinity faculties at universities such as Utrecht, Leiden, Franeker, and Groningen.

While being official dogma, Reformed theology faced opposition from within the state church. Evidence suggests that the membership of the Dutch Reformed Church coming out of persecution into state legitimacy was a disparate group, though its mainstream was decidedly Calvinist.¹² Minority and dissenting influences within the church included humanist thought, partial acceptance of Roman Catholicism, along with others critical of varied aspects of Reformed thought.¹³ Many of the dissenting minority also tended towards an Erastian rather than a Presbyterian view of church government.¹⁴

Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)

While there was a history of dissent in the Dutch Reformed churches, the Remonstrant controversy was largely rooted in the thought of an individual raised within the Calvinist mainstream – Jacobus Harmenszoon, or Jacobus Arminius. Born in 1560 in Oudewater, Holland, Arminius grew up knowing the harsh realities of life under Spanish rule. Spanish troops massacred his mother; other relatives were massacred in 1575.¹⁵ That same year he began his studies at the University of Marburg, transferring the following year to the University of Leiden where he remained until 1581.¹⁶ The historian Carl Bangs argues that the roots of Arminius' later dissension from the predominant Calvinism of his day may be found during his early Leiden years, where several of the faculty members opposed aspects of Calvinism, and argued for Erastian government,¹⁷ humanism, and broad toleration in the church. These included Jasper Koolhaes, who would later be deposed from his pastorate and teaching position.¹⁸ Whatever the early influences may have been Arminius went on to enter the Genevan Academy as a student in 1581, along with his close friend Johannes Uytenbogaert.¹⁹ Together they studied

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under Theodore Beza,²⁰ a theologian dedicated to the pursuit of consistent Calvinist theology, including the doctrine of predestination. Arminius' only apparent dissent at this time was over Beza's use of Aristotelian logic; both Arminius and Uytenbogaert followed Peter Ramus' philosophical methodology. Despite this difference in scholastic method, there was little indication of theological controversy. In fact Arminius was considered by his Genevan tutors to be a promising student, leaving the academy with a letter of recommendation from Beza himself.²¹

Returning to the Netherlands, Arminius took a pastorate in the Reformed church in Amsterdam in 1587. Here he was regarded as an effective and caring pastor and preacher, though he increasingly fell under suspicion as one who was diverging from certain areas of the Reformed doctrine of the Belgic Confession, particularly as understood and elucidated by the Calvinist mainstream of the Dutch Reformed churches. Michael Williams notes that "between 1591 and 1596 Arminius started developing arguments for human free will, and against predestination, in a series of sermons on Romans 7 and 9" in which he argued "Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau, are not represented as individual persons by Paul... but as typological characters."²² He increasingly argued for a certain freedom of the human will. In doing so Arminius rejected both predestination and the total depravity of man, as understood and stated by Reformed theologians and the confessions of the church. The Calvinist mainstream believed that Scripture taught salvation comes about when God by unilateral, unstoppable, sovereign activity changes the human will, bringing it to repentance and faith, and that he does so only in those he has predestined to salvation. This action of God is necessary because of the impact of Adam's sin, which caused all subsequent human nature to be innately bent in sin and rebellion against God. Unrepented of, and without faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, the innate bent to sin and rebellion, along with the fruit of sin in a human life against the infinite and holy God, bears the just consequence of eternal punishment – perpetual suffering in hell under the wrath of God. So, by God's grace and mercy alone, and by His transforming activity, individuals whom he chooses come to willing repentance and faith in Jesus, are forgiven and saved to eternal blessedness, gaining the inheritance of heaven and earth. In contrast, Arminius came to

argue that God gave all men a general underlying grace, termed 'prevenient' or 'preventing' grace, enabling the human will free choice to repent of sin and have faith. Arminius argued in later written works that predestination, as it was referred to in Scripture, should be understood as "the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing grace, believe, and through his subsequent grace would persevere."²³ This concept of God's foreknowledge was an essential aspect of Arminius thought, necessitated by his stress on the freedom of the human will. His formulation of the idea of foreknowledge was largely rooted in the work of his Roman Catholic contemporary, Luis de Molina (1535-1600) on divine "middle knowledge."²⁴

In 1603, the year in which he defended his doctoral thesis, Arminius was appointed a professor of Theology. He and Franciscus Gomarus, also a former student of Beza, were chosen to take the places of the previous professors of theology who had died in Leiden's plague outbreak in October 1602. There was some controversy over his appointment, but it was settled through the intercession of Johannes Uytenbogaert, now an influential court preacher in the Hague, and the acquiescence of Gomarus after a personal interview with Arminius. Both Gomarus and Arminius had been Beza's students, yet after Arminius' appointment tensions quickly developed over his teaching. Michael Williams states that

...the tensions within the University of Leiden soon overflowed throughout the Reformed church as other teachers, pastors and interested lay people aligned themselves with one or the other of the two feuding professors. From the beginning, Gomarus took the offensive, accusing Arminius of deviation from the confessional standards of the Reformed church – the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.²⁵

Williams goes on to note that the struggle reflected not only differences in the view of God, man and salvation, but also divergence over the concept of the church: "the Calvinists argued that a Reformed church is a confessional church... of particular confessional standards... [However] following in the tradition of Erasmus of Rotterdam... the Arminians championed the idea of the liberty of individual conscience relative to doctrinal standards" within the church.²⁶ Arminius sought to publicly defend

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his views as legitimately within the scope of the language of the confessional standards, publishing and presenting his *Declaration of Sentiments* (1608) to the States-General in the Hague; at the same time he argued that the confessional standards should be re-written.²⁷ In 1609, likely due in part to the pressures of the controversy, Arminius fell ill and died.

The Remonstrants and the Remonstrance of 1610

By the early 1600s the Dutch Reformed church was increasingly pushed in an Erastian direction. Civil magistrates played an influential role in the appointments of both pastors and university professors. Arminius' teachings had gained the sympathy of other pastors, particularly dividing Reformed churches in the Amsterdam region.²⁸ Congregations unhappy with teaching of pastors they saw as departing from the church's confessional statements found they were unable to remove them from office; in other cases pastors faithful to the confessional standards of the church were forbidden to preach.²⁹ Louis Praamsma notes that the liberal movement sympathetic to Arminius developed a "perplexing display of 'liberal intolerance'" with increasing attempts to force an unwilling Presbyterian minded church to submit to Erastian imposition.³⁰ Key figures in encouraging Erastian church-state relations, in what after 1610 became known as the Remonstrant movement, included Johannes Uytenbogaert, the ecclesiastical leader of the Arminian minority movement in the Dutch Reformed church, and Hugo Grotius, "the influential Erasmian humanist." Also included on the Arminian side was the capable political leader Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who served as Grand Pensionary in the States General, a position in which he became the most powerful political leader in the United Provinces.³¹ In 1610 Uytenbogaert published his *Tractaet van't ambt ende Authoriteyt eener hoogher Christelicker Overheyt* (Treatise concerning the Function and Authority of a Higher Christian Government) in which he argued for the supremacy of the States over the church to the extent that "the States had the authority to call and install ministers, elders and deacons, supervise the preaching, to frame an order for the churches, to convene ecclesiastical assemblies as well as to preside over them."³² Initially it appeared

that those sympathetic to the thought of Arminius, and the Remonstrant cause, were ably and forcefully moving the Dutch Reformed churches further away from their initial model of church government and confessional identity.

The advance of the Remonstrant cause was perhaps most apparent at the University of Leiden. After Arminius' death in 1609, Conrad Vorstius, a brilliant young theologian sympathetic to, and moving beyond Arminius' thought towards Socinianism, was chosen to replace him. Gomarus was deeply upset by the support shown for the new theological perspective he had fought with such effort. Resigning his post at Leiden in 1612 in protest, he took up a pastorate in Middelburg, from which he would go on to teach theology at Saumar and later at Groningen where he remained until his death in 1641.³³ Public and international outcry, including that of England's King James I, over Vorstius' appointment, led to his removal from active teaching by the States-General in 1612.³⁴ However, Simon Episcopius, a former student, and also a close friend of Arminius, who was also sympathetic to his thought, was selected to succeed Gomarus as professor of theology in 1612.³⁵

While these shifts were taking place at Leiden, tensions and division continued to increase in the Dutch Reformed churches, particularly in Amsterdam. Congregations opposed to the proponents of Arminian theology and Erastian ecclesiology began to pressure the government for the removal of such pastors from their pulpits. These growing pressures from the churches led the loose group of Arminius' followers to organize after his death in 1609. In 1610, forty six supporters of Arminian thought gathered in Gouda under the leadership of Uytenbogaert and Episcopius, where they worked to gain the official protection of the state against churches seeking their dismissal. At this meeting they formulated *The Remonstrance*, which included a five point statement of doctrinal defense and explanation against the charges of heresy. The five points argued for a modified view of God's predestination and salvation of sinners, including the idea that the atoning work of Christ was "for all men and for every man" though only effectively applied to believers.³⁶ Rather than the monergism of Calvinism, which argued that the salvation and spiritual transformation of the soul of a sinner was entirely the result of God's sovereign, gracious action, while human faith, activity and

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obedience were the fruit or result of God's work, the Remonstrants argued for a synergism of God's grace and man's activity, referring to grace as "this prevenient or assisting, awakening, consequent, and cooperating grace."³⁷ In *The Remonstrance* they charged their Calvinist, Presbyterian opponents in the Dutch Reformed church as falsely accusing them of heresy, and advocated "the authority of the State in ecclesiastical matters."³⁸ While calling for revisions to the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, the liberal minded Remonstrants argued above all "that a binding confession ultimately conflicted both with the authority of Scripture and with the freedom of the individual conscience."³⁹

The publication of *The Remonstrance* in 1610 reflected one facet of the deep and growing division within the Dutch Reformed church, and by implication, within the society and leadership of the early Dutch Republic. The division was exacerbated by the fact that the lines between the politically influential Remonstrant minority and the popular Calvinist majority also carried through into the political realm. The doctrinal controversy continued to develop during the window of military truce with Spain begun in 1609. Politically influential Remonstrants tended to be open to peace talks with Spain, where leading Calvinists viewed Spain as an enemy power which could not be trusted. The political tensions combined with the religious tensions, creating instability in the country. Many among the Calvinist majority believed Remonstrant theology, in seeking a 'middle way' between aspects of Roman Catholic theology and Reformed theology, weakened the political will of the nation. Some feared an eventual recapitulation to Spanish rule, others feared the growing possibility of a civil war due to the deepening divide in Dutch society.

The Contra-Remonstrants and the Counter-Remonstrance of 1611

Immediately after *The Remonstrance* was completed, Uytenbogaert gave it to van Oldenbarnevelt, to present to the States-General in the hope that they would act and determine it as legitimate doctrine for the church. However, the States-General, despite Uytenbogaert's consequent publication of his essay on state supremacy over the church,

decided not to discuss it for a period of several months. Concurrently, they actively prevented any synods from convening to evaluate the document, but rather encouraged, and even enforced, toleration of what now became termed the 'Remonstrant' position. The largely Calvinist, confessional Dutch Reformed churches' response was that "they were prepared at any time to demonstrate to a properly constituted synodical assembly that the five articles of the Remonstrants were contrary to both Scripture and the creeds."⁴⁰ Realizing the need to respond to the general dissatisfaction with the Remonstrant position, the States-General decided to call a limited conference between six of the leading Remonstrants and six of the leading Calvinists, hoping that they would reach a compromise.

The meeting called by the States-General began on March 10, 1611 in The Hague, and lasted over two months, ending May 20. The two parties were granted permission to create and present two documents each – a presentation of their own position and criticism of that of their opponents, and secondly a refutation of charges against their position by their opponents. In preparation for the meeting the Calvinists wrote *The Counter Remonstrance* of 1611, responding to the charges of *The Remonstrance*, and requesting the States-General once again to submit the matter to a "properly constituted synod" or assembly of the Dutch Reformed church, once again clearly arguing for the Presbyterian model of church government. The *Counter-Remonstrance* also included seven doctrinal statements in response to the five doctrinal assertions of *The Remonstrance*. Here the doctrinally Reformed Contra-Remonstrants argued, according to Scripture and the confessions of the church that:

- (1) . . . man in a state of sin was in a state of spiritual inability "dead in trespasses... within them no more power" to turn to God. It is God who chooses to work spiritual transformation in some (the elect) who by this change themselves come to desire salvation and a life of thankful service to God.
- (2) These elect include not only adults who believe in Christ and accordingly walk worthy of the gospel... but also the children of the covenant so long as they do not in their conduct manifest the contrary."
- (3) "That God in his election has not looked to the faith or conversion of his elect... as the grounds of election; but on the contrary in his eternal

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and immutable counsel... purposed and decreed to bestow faith and perseverance in godliness and thus to save those whom He according to his good pleasure has chosen to salvation

(4) Christ's death on the cross "though sufficient unto the atonement of the sins of all men, nevertheless... according to the counsel and decree of God, has its efficacy unto reconciliation and forgiveness of sins only in the elect and true believer."

(5) The Holy Spirit works this salvation through the application of the preaching of the gospel. The Spirit "works so powerfully in the hearts of God's elect, that He illumines their minds, transforms and renews their wills, removing the heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh" so that they are not only converted "but also actually and willingly believe."

(6) As the elect are converted by sovereign grace "without any contribution in themselves", so they are also "continually supported and preserved."

(7) "Nevertheless the true believers find no excuse in this teaching to pursue carelessly the lusts of the flesh, since it is impossible that those who by a true faith are grafted into Christ should not produce the fruits of thankfulness... the more they assure themselves and feel that God works in them... the more they persist in working their own salvation... the same Spirit prepares them for this and thus also powerfully keeps them standing."⁴¹

The results of the conference of the spring of 1611 were inconclusive. Despite elucidated statements and positions, neither party was willing to recant or compromise their position. The States-General, due to the capable political influence of the Remonstrant party, continued to thwart the possibility of a national synod, while the Dutch Reformed churches and Contra-Remonstrant clergy began to demand all the more "the assembling of a National Synod, as a more legitimate and competent tribunal for the examination and decision of such matters."⁴² A second attempt by the States-General at creating doctrinal compromise took place at Delft in 1613. It too failed. Meanwhile pamphlet warfare continued unabated. Historian Robert Godfrey notes that by 1616 "the polarization of Dutch society... had reached a critical point. The Arminians and Calvinists were nearly ready to go to war with one another."⁴³

Politically the division cut deeply through the leadership of the Dutch Republic – Prince Maurice and the statesman Oldenbarnevelt, once close political allies, were already alienated from one another over decisions related to the war, truce, and peace

talks with Spain; this division sharpened as Prince Maurice became allied with the Calvinists. Riots, led by Contra-Remonstrants, broke out in 1617. Prince Maurice refused to use his troops to maintain order. In May of 1617, four provinces called on the States-General to convene a national synod. The province of Holland, along with Oldenbarnevelt, refused the appeals. Maurice's sympathy for the Calvinists was prominently displayed in the summer of 1617 as he now "refused to worship in the Court Church at The Hague where Remonstrant leader, Uytenbogaert, was the preacher... [worshipping] instead with the Contra-Remonstrant congregation in The Hague."⁴⁴ This transition, heightened by the increasingly clear support of King James I of England for Prince Maurice and the increasingly frustrated popular majority of Calvinists led Oldenbarnevelt to realize that his own position, the Remonstrant cause, and the political power of the Dutch merchant oligarchy that underlay his own, were increasingly precarious.

Understanding that the security of his political power now rested in the support of the generally pro-Remonstrant leadership of the province of Holland, Oldenbarnevelt

persuaded the States of Holland to pass the famous *Scherpe Resolutie*... which reasserted Holland's provincial right to prevent the States-General from calling a national synod, declared that cities were empowered to raise additional municipal troops to keep order, and finally directed all civil officials and members of the army to take an oath of allegiance to their municipal authorities and to the States of Holland.⁴⁵

Prince Maurice saw Oldenbarnevelt's political move as a direct challenge and threat to his own political status as Stadtholder and commander of the army, and turned, with the support of the Contra-Remonstrants, to the States-General for support. In November of 1617 the States-General voted to call a national synod, with the support of Zeeland, Friesland, Groningen and Overijssel, but opposed by Holland, Utrecht and Gelderland. Holland's opposition went further than the others, claiming that the Union of Utrecht required unanimous consent of the provinces to pass a legitimate call for a national synod. Maurice in turn, realizing that Holland was the centre of opposition, moved to politically and militarily isolate the province. Travelling with troops to Gelderland he

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installed Contra-Remonstrant regents at Nijmegen, and then moved on to Utrecht by July of 1618. Initially the city refused him entry, but then decided the wiser course of action was to submit to Maurice's authority. The province of Holland now stood alone. Local opposition troops there quickly disbanded, realizing they stood little chance against Maurice's well-trained and seasoned military forces.⁴⁶

Having quelled any possibility of civil war, Prince Maurice now moved to deal with those he viewed as having brought the nation to the brink of civil war through treasonous actions. In late August 1618, Oldenbarnevelt, Grotius, and other prominent leaders of the pro-Remonstrant political faction were arrested and imprisoned. Uytenbogaert fled the country fearing arrest. With the political turmoil now forcibly ended by "the popular centralizing forces headed by Maurice," the way was also opened for a representative assembly of the church to address the religious debate between the Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants by means of a national synod.⁴⁷ Keen international interest followed the unfolding events, both as a result of the deeply religious worldview of the era, and the awareness that the United Provinces were an increasingly prominent European power. Governments clearly recognized that religious thought in a nation was not irrelevant to its politics or its neighbours. Rather, it was and would remain profoundly important to politics and society.

The Synod of Dort 1618-1619⁴⁸

The States-General's decree of 1617 was put into action in 1618, with a national synod called to meet in Dordrecht in November of that year. With the new political settlement, effected by Maurice's coup, the decades-old animosities of the Remonstrant controversy had by no means died down. Where the States-General had called the Hague conference of 1611 to bring together the two parties as equals, the Synod of Dort of 1618-1619 was not intended to be a two-sided theological dialogue or debate. Instead it was to be an examination and evaluation of the teachings of the Remonstrants by the constituted representative assembly of the Dutch Reformed churches, in order to reach an ecclesiastically authoritative settlement on the doctrinal issues dividing the churches.⁴⁹



Van Doodewaard, Fig. 1, Bernard Picart's *Depiction of the Famous Church Council Meeting at Dordrecht 1618 and 1619*, engraving, 1729.

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Provincial synods chose and sent Dutch Reformed church representatives, while the States-General assigned political commissioners to supervise and report on the proceedings.⁵⁰

The call for the Synod of Dort, as authorized by the States-General, required that “foreign Reformed theologians were also to be invited to insure a fair and catholic [or “universal”] decision on the issues in question.”⁵¹ As a result of this, the representation at the Synod would not only have a varied national, but also an international character. Foreign representation included a delegation of the Church of England sent by King James I, functioning under the oversight of both England’s ambassador to The Hague, Sir Dudley Carleton, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot.⁵² Delegations were also invited from the Reformed Churches of France, the Palatinate, the Swiss Reformed cantons, and the republics of Geneva, Emden, and Bremen, all of whom were asked to send their best theologians to give counsel and help bring peace to the Dutch Reformed churches.⁵³ Each international and provincial delegation functioned at the synod as an independent committee, studying and bringing its own assessments and conclusions on each point of issue to the floor of synod, whereupon the synod as a body would discuss, debate, and seek to form concise, coherent statements on the issues at hand.⁵⁴

Initially, the Remonstrants were asked to form a delegation of their own. When it was made clear, however, that their role was simply to state and elucidate their beliefs, and that they would have no place in the actual deliberation and decision-making of the synod, with the exception of those who were stated delegates acting as representatives of their provincial synods, the Remonstrants, led by Simon Episcopius, refused to continue to participate in or cooperate with the synod.⁵⁵ Lacking their verbal testimony, and refused written testimony, the synod, guided by moderator Johannes Bogerman, moved to act, first by establishing the doctrines of the Remonstrants from their writings, and secondly to evaluate the doctrines. The States-General, desiring to maintain the public legitimacy of the proceedings, required that “although the binding character of the creeds was involved, and the Arminians were first opposed in Holland because of their alleged infidelity to the Reformed creeds to which they had voluntarily subscribed... the Synod of Dort would judge the issues solely from Scripture... the Arminians were not to be

judged by any human writings. They were to be judged solely by the criterion of the Word of God..."⁵⁶ While the delegations of Reformed pastors and theologians certainly came to the task of exegesis and evaluation with their own presuppositions in hand, "there is almost no reference to existing creeds or theologians... the *Acta* provide ample evidence that the Synod of Dort engaged in study and debate as to the meaning of the passages to which appeal was made."⁵⁷

Among the national and international Reformed delegates to the Synod of Dort there was a substantial and clearly expressed diversity of opinion. Robert Godfrey argues that there are

three broad divisions into which the various *Judicia* fall. The largest group is composed of those delegations which expressed a simple, strict Calvinist point of view. All the provincial Dutch delegations, as well as the Palatine, the Helvetian, the Genevan, and the Emden delegations belonged to this group. The Theses of Martinius represented the second, moderate group although the sympathies of Davenant and Ward were also with Martinius. The third group, which may also be called the mediating group, placed themselves between the strict Calvinists and the moderates. This aggregation included the Dutch professors, Lubbertus, the English, Crocius and Pareus. The Theses of Isselburg, Hesse, Nassau and DuMoulin may also belong with the mediating group, although they reflect a more rigorous approach than others of this group.⁵⁸

While at times the differing perspectives created fractious debate, the final documents produced by the synod appear to have been agreeable to all present, including the foreign delegations.⁵⁹ The Synod spent much of its time and energy focusing particularly on the *Five Articles of the Remonstrance*, and over the course of its one hundred fifty-three sessions created five articles in response, each containing both a negative refutation of the Remonstrant position, and a positive statement of the Reformed position. The five positive doctrines stated by the Synod can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Unconditional election and faith are a gift of God.
- (2) While the death of Christ is abundantly sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world, its saving efficacy is limited to the elect.
- (3) All are so pervasively corrupted by sin that they cannot effect their own salvation;

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- (4) in sovereign grace God irresistibly calls and regenerates them to newness of life.
- (5) Those thus saved he preserves until the end; hence there is assurance of salvation even while believers are troubled by many infirmities.⁶⁰

The five doctrinal articles came to be known as *The Canons of Dort*, standing as an enduring and definitive position of the Dutch Reformed churches on the controverted points. Along with the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism they were now a third confessional document of the churches, and would bear a lasting influence on the continuing stream of Reformed theology.⁶¹ The result of the doctrinal deliverances of Dort, by implication and synodical decision, was that the Remonstrants who had been cited to appear at the synod were guilty of heresy. Each of the defendants, along with well over a hundred other Remonstrant pastors were deposed and excommunicated; of these eighty would be banished from the United Provinces, some forty would conform their teaching to the decisions of Dort and be restored to ministry in the churches.

Although it was in many respects central to its purpose and activity, responding to the Remonstrant controversy was not the only activity of the Synod of Dort. As the first national synod since the Synod of The Hague (1586) there was much else to be done. Other efforts included “matters pertaining to confessions and the church order... preaching and catechesis for the children of the church... training of ministers and Bible translation and missions were thoroughly discussed and decided.”⁶² Eight sessions of deliberations at the synod were devoted to preparing for a careful new Dutch Bible translation from the Hebrew and Greek texts. Synod appointed six Dutch theologians to the task, asking them to make annotations noting translation difficulties or alternatives with brief explanations, and give summaries of books and chapters. The task, completed in 1637, resulted in the publication of the Staten Bible, which saw long-standing use in the Netherlands and abroad.⁶³

The Aftermath

Upon completion of the synod, each of the defendants, along with well over a hundred other Remonstrant pastors were deposed from their ministerial positions and excommunicated. Of these eighty would be banished from the United Provinces, some forty would conform their teaching to the decisions of Dort and were restored to ministry in the churches.⁶⁴ Politically influential Remonstrants were imprisoned at castle Loevenstein, in part for their rebellion against the States-General.⁶⁵ Oldenbarnevelt, the former elder statesman of the States-General, was tried by a tribunal and received the death penalty by beheading at the Binnenhof, less than a month after the completion of the synod.⁶⁶ It was immediately evident that the Dutch Reformed church would remain confessionally Reformed. During the remainder of the seventeenth century the national church grew in membership and influence, with Calvinism “becoming a more central feature of society.”⁶⁷ Politically the United Provinces would submit to the consolidated leadership of Prince Maurice until his death in 1625.

After 1625, the States-General permitted the Remonstrants to return from exile and establish a separate church in the Netherlands. The Remonstrant church became part of the milieu of the minority streams of religious thought in the Netherlands, alongside Anabaptism, Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and other groups. The return of the Remonstrants also signaled the continuation of popular debate. The dispute entered the realm of historiography when the Remonstrant Johannes Uytenbogaert posthumously published a massive history of the religious troubles, the *Kerckelijke Historie* in 1646, answered by the Reformed historian Jacob Trigland’s equally massive *Kerckelijke Geschiedenissen* in 1650.⁶⁸ The enduring historical disagreement, along with the events and documents of the Remonstrant controversy and Synod of Dort themselves, contributed to lasting streams of Dutch and international theology, both Reformed and Arminian. A formative part of the milieu of the 17th century, the religious debate marked the beginnings of the era of the Dutch Golden Age, indicating that the age of Rembrandt and the Dutch merchant companies was also one of deep concern about God, man, and how Scripture defined their relationship to each other.

*Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic***Notes**

¹ “Correspondence concerning New Netherlands (1616-1622)” and “Representation of Sir Dudley Carleton to the States General of the United Provinces (1622)” in *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America & West Indies (1574-1660) Preserved in the State Paper Department of Her Majesty’s Public Record Office*, ed., W. Noel Sainsbury (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1860), 18, 21, 26-27. The friction and competition over North American trade and settlement would continue beyond the English conquest of New Netherlands. Cf. “‘New York’, Whitehall, 23 October 1667” in *Acts of the Privy Council of England. Colonial Series vol. I. (1613-1680)* eds., W.L. Grant, James Munro, A.W. Fitzroy (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1908), 444-45.

² Peter Y. DeJong, “The Rise of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 8-9.

³ DeJong, 9-10.

⁴ William Robert Godfrey, *Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Stanford University: PhD dissertation, 1974), 25.

⁵ DeJong, 9.

⁶ A state of war continued until the beginning of a twelve year truce with Spain in 1609.

⁷ DeJong, 14.

⁸ DeJong, 14-15.

⁹ DeJong, 13. The Belgic Confession of Faith was written in 1561 by the Flemish Protestant Guido de Bres, and adopted by the synod of Antwerp in 1566. Godfrey notes “the Synod held at Middelburg in 1581 reflected continuing trouble on this subject... order[ing] all church servants to sign the Confession.” Godfrey, 29.

¹⁰ J.A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (New York: Cassell, 1899), ch. 15.

¹¹ Godfrey, 29.

¹² Carl Bangs, “Arminius and the Reformation” in *Church History* 30 (June 1961) 2:155-160. Richard Muller challenges Bang’s argument that the disparate nature of certain streams of thought in the Dutch churches during this period qualifies Arminius as standing within the Reformed mainstream of the Dutch churches. Muller examines Arminius’ scholastic method and thought, dispelling the mistaken though “frequent

characterization of [Arminius'] thought as a biblical and exegetical reaction to the onset of speculative and scholastic style in Reformed theology..." He goes on to note "Indeed, Arminius' opponents were as intent on developing a biblical theology as he was, and their scholasticism was certainly the equal of Arminius' own." Richard Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 25-26, 30. See also Carl Bangs "A Review of Richard Muller's *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy*" in *Church History* 66 (March 1997) 1:118-120.

¹³ Louis Praamsma, "The Background of the Arminian Controversy" in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 24. See also *Acta der provinciale en particuliere synoden, gehouden in de noordelijke Nederlanden gedurende de jaren 1572-1620 VI Friesland 1581-1620 Utrecht 1586-1620* ed. J. Reitsma and S.D. van Veen (Groningen, 1897), 298-307; *Classicale Acta 1573-1620 Particuliere synode Zuid-Holland. I: Classis Dordrecht 1573-1600* ed. J.P. van Dooren (The Hague, 1980) 265-269.

¹⁴ Erastians viewed "the civil government as the highest authority in ecclesiastical matters and sought to maintain their position in the churches by means of the strong support of local and provincial authorities... the secretary of state, Oldenbarnevelt, [an Erastian] wanted a national church which would make room for all shades of religious opinion... [where] the civil authorities would have power to appoint office-bearers as well as to convene and supervise ecclesiastical assemblies." Praamsma, 26.

¹⁵ Robert Godfrey, "Who Was Arminius?" in *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 9 (February 2007) 2: 1-8.

¹⁶ J. Kenneth Grider, "James Arminius" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 81.

¹⁷ The Swiss theologian Erastus wanted to make the church subservient to the state.

¹⁸ Bangs, 160-161.

¹⁹ Grider, 81.

²⁰ Beza was the son-in-law of Calvin, and the leader in Geneva as his successor. He began teaching at Geneva in 1558, and became leading figure of the Genevan Academy from Calvin's death 1564, to his own in 1605. Beza played a key role in the development of Reformed theology in the early post-Reformation era, and was strongly influenced by

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both John Calvin and Martin Bucer. Joseph H. Hall, “Theodore Beza (1519-1605)” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 135-136; Michael D. Williams, “The Five Points of Arminianism” in *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 30 (Spring 2004) 1:11-36.

²¹ Bangs, 161-162; Godfrey, 2; see also Williams, 16.

²² Williams, 16-17. See also Jacobus Arminius, “Dissertation on the True and Genuine Sense of the Seventh Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans” in *The Works of James Arminius* vol. 2, trans. James Nichols (Baker Books, 1999), 471-683.

²³ Jacobus Arminius, “My Own Sentiments on Predestination” in *The Works of James Arminius* vol. 1, trans. James Nichols (Baker Books, 1999), 653.

²⁴ Eef Dekker, “Was Arminius a Molinist?” in *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXVII (1996) 2:337-352. On the basis of his comparison of Luis Molina’s *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providential, praedestinatione, et reprobatione* (Antwerp: I. Trognaesii, 1588, rev. 1595) with Arminius’ *De Natura Dei* later published as *Disputatio Publica* 4, Dekker states “We can say that Arminius somewhere between 1597 and 1603 became convinced of the fruitfulness of the theory of middle knowledge... Arminius not only mentions the theory of middle knowledge, but he has also incorporated it into his theology... Middle knowledge comes to this: God has knowledge of the genuinely free choices that people would make, given certain circumstances, before he decides which circumstances must be factual. By creating circumstances, God has genuine control over what people genuinely free will do. Certainty of divine knowledge is this combined with freedom of the human will. Middle knowledge is vital for Arminius since it is a cornerstone in his attempt to build a theory with the help of which he can show that both God and human beings are free. The freedom of the human will is guaranteed because (1) the relation between circumstance and human volition is not strictly implicative, and (2) God has no control over the realizability of a certain relation between circumstances and human volition. The freedom of the divine will is guaranteed by the fact that God is free in his choice of the circumstances...” Dekker, 351-352.

²⁵ Williams, 17.

²⁶ Williams, 17.

²⁷ Grider, 81.

²⁸ It appears from the records of the Synod of Dort, along with other primary documents, that Utrecht was also an area with a substantial Remonstrant presence, albeit a more moderate or conciliatory variety than that of Amsterdam; early on three Utrecht commissioners to the Synod of Dort were Remonstrants. See “De Vierentwintigste Zitting, Den 8en December, Zaterdag-voormiddag” and “De Vijfentwintigste Zitting,

Den 10en December, Mandag-voormiddag” in *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synode... Gehouden door autoriteit der Hoogmogende Heeren Staten-Generaal der Vereenigde Nederlanden, Te Dordrecht, Ten Jare 1618 en 1619* (s’Gravenhage, 1620; reprint Utrecht: W.M. Den Hertog), 68-87.

²⁹ Williams, 26.

³⁰ Praamsma, 30-31.

³¹ Praamsma, 31. “In 1614 Grotius drafted his ‘Resolution for Peace in the Churches,’ according to which the States of Holland had the right to prohibit preaching on controversial points... Oldenbarnevelt [was] the father of the ‘Sharp Resolution’ of 1617 in which the States of Holland decided that no national synod was to be convened, that the States would retain their authority in ecclesiastical matters, and that the cities were authorized to levy soldiers in defense of the Remonstrants.” Praamsma, 31-32.

³² Praamsma, 31.

³³ Simon Kistemaker, “Leading Figures at the Synod of Dort” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 42-44.

³⁴ Conrad Vorstius, due to the advocacy of Oldenbarnevelt on his behalf, would receive a continued salary by obligation and settled in nearby Gouda. Here he continued a steady stream of polemics against Reformed theology, officially as a professor of theology at Leiden; eventually to the point of becoming a hindrance and embarrassment to the Remonstrant cause. Eventually he completely embraced Socinianism, with its denial of the Trinity – and particularly the divinity and work of Christ in salvation. Godfrey argues that the Vorstius case was integral to King James I’s growing support for Dutch Calvinism and Prince Maurice. Kistemaker, 49-50; Godfrey, 60-61. See also John E. Platt, “The Denial of the Innate Idea of God in Dutch Remonstrant Theology” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), 213-226.

³⁵ Paul A. Mickey, “Simon Episcopius (1583-1643)” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 359.

³⁶ Peter Y. DeJong, Preface to “The Remonstrance of 1610” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 207-209.

³⁷ “The Remonstrance of 1610, Article 4” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 208. See also Williams, 29.

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³⁸ DeJong, 207.

³⁹ Praamsma, 28. See also Wylie, 117.

⁴⁰ DeJong, 210.

⁴¹ My summary, with select quotations of the seven doctrinal points of “The Counter Remonstrance of 1611” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 209-211.

⁴² Wylie, 118.

⁴³ Godfrey, 61.

⁴⁴ Godfrey, 62.

⁴⁵ Godfrey, 62-63.

⁴⁶ Godfrey, 64.

⁴⁷ Godfrey, 64-65.

⁴⁸ See Fig. 1

⁴⁹ Williams, 35.

⁵⁰ For a complete list of delegates from the provincial synods to the Synod of Dort see “De Tweede Zitting. Den 14en November, Woensdag-voormiddag” in *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synode... Te Dordrecht, Ten Jare 1618 en 1619* (s’Gravenhage, 1620; reprint Utrecht: W.M. Den Hertog), 7-9.

⁵¹ Godfrey, 65; see also “Voorrede aan de Gereformeerde Kerken van Christus; In dewelke de oorsprong en voortgang der Nederlandsche verschillen, om welke weg te nemen deze Synode voornamelijk bijeen geroepen is geweest, kortelijck en getrouwelijck verhaald” in *Acta*, v-xxxviii.

⁵² See Anthony Milton’s collection of correspondence documents in *The British Delegation and The Synod of Dort (1618-1619)* (Church of England Record Society, 2005), 1-403.

⁵³ Of all those invited to attend, only the French Huguenot delegation was unable to attend because of the refusal of the king of France to grant permission. As a result a row

of seats was left empty in honour of the French. Despite their absence, some did maintain contact by correspondence, particularly the theologian Pierre du Moulin.

⁵⁴ This is evident throughout the *Acta*. See for example “De Tweeenveertigste Zitting. Den 29en December, Zaterdag-voormiddag” in *Acta* 152-170. See also “Tweede Register van de Oordeelen, zowel der uitheemsche als der inlandsche Theologen, over de Vijf Artikelen der Remonstranten” in *Acta* 957-958.

⁵⁵ *Acta*, 15, 71-86, 88, 101.

⁵⁶ Fred. H. Klooster, “Doctrinal Deliverances of Dort” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 57.

⁵⁷ Klooster, 88-89.

⁵⁸ Godfrey, 225. One of the stated concerns of the “moderate party” was the “importance of the universal offer of the Gospel... the moderates claimed that the sincere offer of the Gospel could only be undergirded by a broad statement on the sufficiency of Christ’s death.” The mediating party, Godfrey argues, enabled the strict and moderate parties to continue to work together, despite occasional tensions. Godfrey, 232.

⁵⁹ Donald Sinnema in his doctoral dissertation *The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort (1618-19) in Light of the History of This Doctrine* (Toronto School of Theology, 1985) argues that within the development of Reformed theology on the doctrine of reprobation the position adopted at the Synod of Dort was more moderate than that of Calvin and Beza.

⁶⁰ M. Eugene Oosterhaven, “The Synod of Dort” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 331-332.

⁶¹ One example is the impact of the Synod of Dort’s doctrinal statements on the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms developed at the Westminster Assembly (1643-1648) in England.

⁶² DeJong, 17.

⁶³ The Staten Bible was translated into English in 1657 by Theodore Haak as *The Dutch Annotations Upon the Whole Bible: Or, all the Holy Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, Together With, and according to their own Translation of all the Text: As both the one and the other were ordered and appointed by the Synod of Dort 1618, and published by Authority, 1637*. (London: Henry Hills, 1657). “Introduction to the

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Facsimilie Edition” *The Dutch Annotations...* (Leerdam: Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting, 2002), 1-7.

⁶⁴ *Declaration of the Decree Made by the Generall States of the United Netherland Provinces, against certaine Arminians, or Remonstrants, for their perpetual banishment. Dated 15 of July 1619.* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1619), 1-7.

⁶⁵ A number, including Hugo Grotius, managed to escape the castle, and find refuge in France.

⁶⁶ Oldenbarnevelt’s two sons sought to avenge his death in a failed attempt to assassinate Prince Maurice; one was arrested, tried and executed, the other managed to escape arrest and fled the United Provinces.

⁶⁷ Charles Parker notes that in the province of Holland “membership levels rose from 20% of the adult population in the early 1600s to about half the adult population by mid-century, and to 68% of the population at the beginning of the nineteenth century.” Charles H. Parker, “Two Generations of Discipline: Moral Reform in Delft Before and After the Synod of Dort” in *Archiv fur Reformationgeschichte* vol. 92 (2001), 215-231.

⁶⁸ Charles H. Parker, “To the Attentive, Nonpartisan Reader: The Appeal to History and National Identity in the Religious Disputes of the Seventeenth Century Netherlands” in *Sixteenth Century Journal* vol. 28 (Spring 1997) 1:57-78.