SONGS OF PRAISE AND LAMENTATIONS
THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH AND ANGLICIZATION IN COLONIAL NEW YORK

Randall H. Balmer
Columbia University

A military historian would find little of interest in the Anglo-Dutch Wars in seventeenth-century New York; the colony changed hands three times with barely an exchange of volleys. In 1664 Richard Nicolls simply sailed through the Narrows, perched on Brooklyn, and demanded New Netherland's surrender. Although Pieter Stuyvesant, governor of the colony, was inclined to resist, the influential members of the Dutch community found neither the means nor the resolve to engage the English. Colonel Nicolls accepted the Dutch surrender and promptly renamed both the city and the colony after his patron, the duke of York. Nine years later John Manning, commander of the fort, discreetly turned his head as the Dutch silently regained control of the fort "without giving or receiving a shot."[1] The English Reconquest a year later was even more peaceable: The Treaty of Westminster, signed at Whitehall in February 1694, ceded the colony finally to the English. New York remained in English hands for a century thereafter--until the American Revolution.

The absence of military engagement between them, however, belies the impact of English rule on the Dutch. A desire to share in the Atlantic trade that the Hollanders had found so profitable shaped English imperial designs in New York, and in time Dutch political institutions gave way to English forms of government.[2]

But nowhere were the effects of English rule felt more keenly than in the Dutch Reformed Church, no longer enjoying the imprimatur of civil authority as it had in New Netherland. The ministers, tossed about by political changes, were quite undecided about what position to take on the new government. Amidst this confusion and uncertainty the Calvinist Dutch religion in New York suffered mightily, losing both its political standing and the allegiance of many of its communicants. All of this, moreover, came after an era of growth and stability among the Dutch churches of New Netherland. Only a couple of months before

the English invasion the Dutch minister on Long Island had reported to the Classis of Amsterdam a "considerable increase of members" in his church and added: "The English are quiet, the savages peaceful; our lamentations have been turned into songs of praise, and the monthly day of fasting into a day of thanksgiving."[3] Ensuing reports would not be quite so sanguine.

I

Trouble within the Dutch community began with the surrender itself. Several Dutch Reformed ministers joined the wealthy merchants in asking Stuyvesant to concede to the English. Dutch commonfolk, their livelihoods threatened by the English takeover, protested this action in the coming years by withholding ministerial salaries and leveling charges of treachery against those merchants and clergy who had urged Stuyvesant to capitulate. Even twelve years after the English Conquest recriminations were still being aimed at the clergy, and so serious had the salary disputes become that the ministers sought relief through the courts. In one case the Court of New York called on twenty-six wealthy Dutch churchmen to supplement the minister's salary because so many who had previously subscribed either refused or were unable to pay. With the English governor's approval the mayor and aldermen commanded "all the inhabitants of this City, who are in arrears to the said salary, promptly to pay their dues on this warning."[4] As these complaints quickly became a fixture of clerical life in New York, one minister feared a "general exodus" of the clergy and himself requested a recall of Holland.[5]

In salary litigations the Dutch clergy enjoyed considerable support from the English, but that success ultimately proved costly because it only served further to alienate them from the popular will while placing an economic burden on those whose incomes were already seriously diminished by the English takeover. The situation was aggravated by the clergy's increasing identification with the wealthier members of the Dutch community. More important, however, in seeking recourse with the English magistrates the clergy established an unsavory precedent in Church-State relations, making themselves dependent on the English for their own ecclesiastical authority.

The Dutch Reconquest in 1673 relieved the internal pressures within the Dutch community somewhat, but the restoration of Dutch

hegemony served only to strengthen the ties between the upper echelons of Hollanders and Calvinist religion. In the brief interim of their rule the new Dutch magistrates openly sought in local leaders "the wealthiest inhabitants and those only who are of the Reformed Christian Religion."[6] Surely the connection between wealth and the Dutch Reformed Church became increasingly evident to the popular mind.

The English regained political control the next year, but their initial guarantees of freedom of conscience and religious autonomy rang hollow several months later with the Van Rensselaer affair. Nicholas Van Rensselaer had found favor in the court of Charles II by cleverly predicting his restoration to the English throne. The monarch rewarded the Hollander by appointing him to preach to the Dutch congregation at Westminster. Soon thereafter Van Rensselaer was ordained a deacon in the Church of England by the Bishop of Salisbury and then later sought placement in New York from the Reformed Classis of Amsterdam, which claimed jurisdiction over the colonial churches.[7] But when Van Rensselaer set foot in the New World he came not by the authority of the Classis of Amsterdam but by the authority of the duke of York who ordered the English governor to install him in one of the colony's Dutch churches. The colonial ministers were surprised indeed when they learned that Nicholas Van Rensselaer henceforth would serve as associate minister to the Dutch congregation at Albany.

Foisting Van Rensselaer onto the Dutch Calvinists certainly represented a violation of their religious liberties, but challenging Van Rensselaer's legality also implied challenging the authority of the recently restored English government. Such insubordination must not be taken lightly or hastily. After several complaints about Van Rensselaer's "disorderly preaching," New York City's minister, Wilhelmus Van Nieuwenhuysen, unsuccessfully challenged Van Rensselaer's appointment and qualifications as a Dutch Reformed minister on the grounds that he lacked ordination and a commission from the Classis of Amsterdam. With Van Nieuwenhuysen's suit frustrated by English magistrates, the case was taken up by two laymen, Jacob Leisler and Jacob Milborne, who met with similar results.

Although Van Rensselaer died a couple of years later, the entire episode pointed up the powerlessness of the Calvinists to counteract English interference in their ecclesiastical affairs.

Surely Van Nieuwenhuysen and others sensed the delicacy of the situation: How could the same ministers who had run to the English to protect their livelihoods turn around later and protest the appointment of an Anglican minister to a Dutch church? The installation of Van Rensselaer may or may not have been a conscious attempt by the duke of York to disrupt the colonial Dutch Reformed Church, but the affair engendered a suspicion of English rule and a distaste for the Catholic heir presumptive.

II

A popular uprising in 1689 provided an outlet for the grievances of Dutch commonfolk against both English rule and wealthy Dutch merchants and clergy. Called Leisler's Rebellion and led by the same Jacob Leisler and Jacob Milborne who had opposed Van Rensselaer, the revolt began when news of England's Glorious Revolution reached New York. The hated papist James II, erstwhile duke of York, had been replaced by William, the Dutch Prince of Orange. In the confusion over who rightfully owned the throne Leisler and his militia seized control of the fort ostensibly to ward off an impending French invasion and to secure the colony for their majesties William and Mary. For the duration of their two-year rule Leisler and Milborne enjoyed overwhelming popular support within the Dutch community, save for the wealthier elements and the Reformed clergy.

With the restoration of English rule in 1691 the anti-Lislerians, with considerable help from the Dutch ministers, insisted that the Leislerians be punished for their insurrection, and as the bodies of Leisler and Milborne dangled from the gallows, Dutch communicants became so enraged that they boycotted the Church almost entirely. In 1698, nine years after the revolt, a letter recounting the Rebellion and its aftermath reported that "the people came to abhor the public services of religion, so that only about one tenth enjoyed the celebration of the Lord's Supper."[8] Because of their opposition to Leisler and their tacit support for James II, moreover, the Dutch clergy were suspected of sympathy to the papists, and both politics and religion in the years after the Rebellion found the Dutch divided into Leislerian and anti-Leislerian factions.[9]

Troubles in the Dutch church were compounded in the 1690s by Governor Benjamin Fletcher's apparent establishment of

Anglicanism in the colony's four southeastern counties. The Ministry Act of 1693 mandated the election of town vestries in six different parishes, and these vestries were empowered to levy taxes on all inhabitants for the support of an Anglican minister.[10] Fletcher also sought legislation granting him authority to license and install the colony's ministers, a power that succeeding governors used as yet another tool to undermine Dutch ecclesiastical autonomy. More important, the legal establishment of the Church of England paved the way for the arrival of missionaries from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

The Anglican Society found fertile soil in New York. The Dutch Reformed Church, crippled by schism within the political impotence without, could not mount an effective defense against the well-financed Society. The Dutch were even more vulnerable because the recurring arguments over salaries in the New World made clerical service less than attractive to ministerial candidates back in the Netherlands, and the shortage of Dutch clergy provided the Anglicans untold opportunities. "In this village there has been no Dutch ministers these five years and there is no probability of any being settled among them," a missionary in Schenectady reported back to London in 1710. "There is a convenient and well built church which they freely gave me the use of. I hope in some time to bring them not only to be contant hearers, but communicants."[11] Books of Common Prayer translated into the dutch language began arriving in New York.[12]

But of all the troubles afflicting the Dutch Reformed Church around the turn of the century, none was more devastating than a schism in the churches on Long Island. With the decease of thir minister, the Long Island churches petitioned the Classis of Amsterdam for a replacement. But when the Reverend Vincentius Antonides disembarked in New York he found that another minister, Bernardus Freeman, had already claimed the churches as his own. Freeman, a charismatic preacher and a tailor by trade in the Old World, had come to New York some years earlier without the approbation of Amsterdam church authorities. Becaue of the drastic shortage of Reformed ministers, the colonial clergy reluctantly placed Freeman in the church at Schenectady and insisted repeatedly that he swear allegiance to the Classis of Amsterdam and the Synod of Dort. Freeman refused, and by 1703, growing tired of his work among the Indians and settlers on the

frontier, he agitated to have himself called to Long Island by certain members of the churches there.

Not taken by this ploy, the elected consistories refused Freeman and proceeded with their call to Antonides, whereupon Freeman took his case to Lord Cornbury, the English governor, who licensed him as the Dutch minister for Long Island. Freeman consolidated his power when he dismissed the existing consistories and replaced them with his own partisaans. When Antonides arrived, therefore, he was denied permission to preach because, Cornbury said, a Dutch minister already served the churches there.

The Long Island schism continued until 1715, when the two parties finally reached a compromise. In the interim Freeman clung tenaciously to his civil license as the grounds for his appointment, forcing Antonides to preach illegally in the face of prosecution threats from Cornbury. The two claims to religious authority could not have been more different. Throughout the ordeal Freeman insisted on the legality of his callby virtue of his license from Cornbury; Antonides, on th basis of his standing with the Classis of Amsterdam. The Classis asked repeatedly that Freeman submit to its authority and end the schism, but Freeman adamantly refused.

The Freeman-Antonides dispute plagued the entire colonial church. Although piqued at Freeman's effrontery, much of the clergy's anger was directed towaard the English and especially at Cornbury, a transvestite who sought to advance Anglicanism in the colony at every opportunity.[13] Cornbury had caused the impasse in the first place with his intervention on Freeman's move to Long Island, and he nettled the ministers further by insisting that they apply to him for civil licensure. The Dutch clergy found English rule increasingly onerous.

III

The resolution of the Long Island dispute brought the Church a brief and welcome respite from controversy, although scarcely three years later a young clergyman named Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen sailed for the New World, took up th churches in New Jersey's Raritan Valley, established his own consistories, and excommunicated those he judged wanting in piety. Once again

the Classis of Amsterdam and the colonial clergy sought to intervene, but they met with little success.

Like the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel some years earlier, young Frelinghuysen could not ask for more fertile soil in which to plant his seeds of revivalism. The popular disaffection with the established Dutch clergy was pervasive. Declining opportunities for social advancement in New York, moreover, combined with the factious and disruptive politics of the post-Leisler years, prompted a migration westward to the Raritan Valley. While the wealthy Dutch traders stayed in New York to pursue their commercial intersts, their less-affluent compatriots began to build their lives away from the confining orbit of the merchants, the treacherous clergy, and the ossified Dutch religion that harbored them both. In this environment Frelinghuysen enjoyed virtually unbounded success, and his activities in the Raritan contributed significantly to the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies.[14]

The years from the English Conquest to the Great Awakening had been perilous indeed. The Dutch Rformed Church, faced with a new paradigm of Church-State relations after the English takeover, plunged into confusion and disarray. The vicissitudes of the period--salary disputes, English interveniton in Dutch ecclesiastical affairs, the Freeman schism, the arrival of Anglican missionaries--all served to weaken ties with the Netherlands despite the clergy's attempts to maintain the conduits of traditional polity. Ordinary Dutch communicants, moreover, alienated from the Reformed Church because of Leisler's Rebellion and most likely unmoved by the finer points of th ecclesiastical-political debate between the Freeman and Antonides parties, grew impatient with the interminable wrangling and sought refuge with the less-contentious Anglicans or were predisposed toward a pietism as defined by clergy somewhat alienated from the Dutch establishment.[15]

Certainly with the passing years in the New World there were fewer and fewer compelling reasons for the Dutch to retain their ethnic identity, especially if that identity was tied to the established Dutch Church. By the turn of the century the wave of immigration had ebbed, the Dutch relinquished their status as the colony's dominant ethnic group, and the possibility that the Netherlands would once again rule New York had faded into

obscurity. Political power, everyone recognized, lay with the English. A decline in the number of native-born Hollanders, English rule, disaffection and internal difficulties in the Dutch church, and revivalism all combined to undermine Dutch ethnic and religious identity.

IV

What do the years from the English Conquest to the Great Awakening tell us about life among the Dutch in eighteenth-century New York? By 1720 we find a people deeply divided economically, politically, and religiously. The pressures of Anglicization had taken their toll, and the differing responses to English rule among the Dutch shaped the divisions within the Dutch community. Finding that their own interests paralleled those of the wealthier Dutch, the ministers had aligned themselves with the English in the early years after the conquest, much to the chagrin of their communicants. As English rule grew hostile to Dutch Calvinism, the clergy fought Anglicization at precisely the time their communicants--now second- and third-generation New Yorkers--began to assimilate into English ways and find their religious identity either with the Anglicans or with New Light clergy who challenged the Dutch religious hierarchy. The constant through these years appears to be a bifurcation with the Dutch community which aligned the wealthy merchants and the clergy against the middle and lower classes and which expressed itself in various ways. The most visible manifestations of the fissure were Leisler's Rebellion, the schism on Long Island, and the Great Awakening itself, all of which pitted the traditional, orthodox clergy and upper classes against Dutch establishment. Leislerianism, religious factionalism, and pietism became, successively, outlets for the disaffected.

The clergy, meanwhile, struggled to guide their ship through the shoals of English rule. The political standing of the Dutch Reformed Church fell precipitiously from establishment status in New Netherland to one of many religions tolerated in New York. The clergy's response to English magisterial fiats in these years required some rather awkward posturing: First they sought recourse with the English for arrears in salary, then they opposed the appointment of Van Rensselaer; they supported English rule during Leisler's Rebellion and then fought the stablishment of Anglicanism and the appointment of Freeman to Long Island. The

relation of Church and State had never been so muddled in New Netherland, and the clergy's lack of a consistent paradigm crippled their ability to deal effectively with Anglicization.

The English Conquest, the succession of meddlesome governors sympathetic to the Church of England, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and internal dissension all spelled trouble for the Dutch Reformed Church in New York. Progressively weakened, the Church became vulnerable to the pietism of Frelinghuysen, which dealt a final blow to the distinctive ethnicity and traditional religious authority embodied in the Dutch Reformed Church. English rule had taken its toll. In the eighteenth century the Dutch Church was unable effectively to deal with the pressures of Anglicization, and the divided churches, unpaid salaries, and the precariousness of their political standing doubtless had the Dutch clergy longing for the halcyon days of New Netherland.

NOTES

1. William Smith, Jr., **The History of the Province of New-York, vol. 1:** From the First Discovery to the Year 1732, **ed. Michael Kammen (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p.39.**
2. **See Robert Brenner, "The Social Basis of English Commercial Expansion, 1550-1650,"** Journal of Economic History **32 (1972), 361-384.**
3. **Edward T. Corwin, ed.,** Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York, **7 vols. (Albany, 1901-16), 1:548, 550.**
4. **Berthold Fernow, ed.,** The Records of New Amsterdam from 1653-1674 Anno Dominie, **7 vols. (Baltimore, 1976), 6:79.**
5. Ecclesiastical Records, **1:587-588.**
6. **E. B. O'Callaghan, ed.,** Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York, **11 vols. (Albany, 1856-61), 2:574.**
7. **Van Rensselaer's motives for going to the New World were at least in part economic, for he sought to lay claim to the massive Rensselaerwyck estate near Albany. For a secondary treatment of the Van Rensselaer affair, see Lawrence H. Leder, "The Unorthodox Dominie: Nicholas Van Rensselaer,"** New York History **35 (1954), 166-176.**
8. Ecclesiastical Records, **2:1258.**
9. **Thomas J. Archdeacon outlines the calamitous political infighting between Leslerian and anti-Leislerian Dutch in the years following the Rebellion. See** New York City, 1664-1710: Conquest and Change **(Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), chap. 6. Patricia U. Bonomi writes that "the political history and party reversals which pitted 'ins' against 'outs' and interest against interest, making factional strife an almost endemic condition of the colony's public life"** (A Factious

People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York [New York, 1971], p. 78). See also Lawrence H. Leder, **Robert Livingston, 1654-1728, and the Politics of Colonial New York** (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961), pp. 57-207.

10. Some of the outlying "parishes" or ecclesiastical jurisdictions were able successfully to resist this interpretation of the Ministry Act and sought to use the appropriations to support dissenting ministers. In New York City, however, after some politicking the town vestry served as one of the tools for the founding of Trinity Church.
11. **Ecclesiastical Records,** 3:1867.
12. Ibid., 3:1880.
13. Nelson R. Burr says that Cornbury "was nearly everything a colonial governor should not have been" ("The Episcopal Church and the Dutch in Colonial New York and New Jersey--1664-1784," **Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church** 19 [1950], 97). Lawrence Leder characterizes Cornbury as "Undeniably the worst governor who ever administered, or maladministered, New York..." **(Robert Livingston,** p.200). A portrait of Cornbury in female attire **is reproduced in Jacob Judd and Irwin H. Polishook, eds.,** Aspects of Early New York Society and Politics **(Tarrytown, N.Y., 1974), p.53.**
14. **On Frelinghuysen's success in New Jersey, see James Tanis,** Dutch Calvinistic Pietism in the Middle Colonies: A Study in the Life and Theology of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (The Hague, 1967), chap. 2.
15. On the origins of pietism in New Jersey, see Randall H. Balmer, "The Social Roots of Dutch Pietism in the Middle Colonies," **Church History** 53 (1984), 187-199. For a survey of Dutch defections to the Church of England, see Burr, "Episcopal Church and the Dutch," esp. pp.100-109. Supporting the theory that Leislerians migrated to New Jersey and became New Lights, Burr notes that the Anglicans were not as successful in New Jersey as in New York (ibid., p.106).