

**THE REFORMATION AND DUTCH
POLITICAL CULTURE**

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This essay shall seek to examine the impact of the Reformation upon the political culture of the Netherlands (Dutch Republic). Prior to the Reformation a sense of unity and nationhood had been rising in the Netherlands; Charles the Bold had begun to hold meetings of the states general in 1465 and his daughter Mary, wife of Maximilian I of Germany, was obliged to grant the 'Great Privilege' of 1477 which reduced the authority of the Prince and affirmed that of the states and their representative council.¹ Hence the Netherlands was composed largely of self-governing regions; this meant that by the time Charles V was Holy Roman Emperor, the Netherlanders' obedience to him was rendered due to the perception that he was their own territorial duke, not because he was Emperor or King of Spain.² And in the 'Augsburg Transaction' (26 June 1548) Charles V persuaded the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire to permit him to make his Netherlands dominions a separate governmental entity from the rest of the Empire.³ A consequence of this increasing sense of Dutch independence was the strengthening of potential resistance to their Habsburg overlords. For example, in 1522 and 1525 Charles V's efforts to finance war with France, through increased taxation in the Netherlands, led to such

¹ McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, p. 256

² Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, p. 300

³ Greengrass, *The European Reformation 1500-1618*, pp 129-130

resentment among the provincial governments that the regent Margaret of Austria feared they would revolt.⁴

Thus, in this essay, we shall seek to demonstrate that although it is too bold to say that the Reformation created either resistance to Spain or Dutch national consciousness, nevertheless, the Reformed or Calvinistic brand of Protestantism which came to dominate the Netherlands (in terms of influence, not necessarily numbers) was conducive to the rise of resistance to Spain and to the unity of the Dutch state. Moreover, we shall also seek to prove that the Genevan Calvinism of the Dutch Reformed Church – as enshrined in the Belgic Confession of Guy de Bray (published in Dutch in 1562) – also shaped the political culture of the Netherlands with respect to conflicts relating to church-state relations and religious toleration.

Although William of Orange was determined not to turn the revolt which he led against Spain into a religious crusade, Calvinism played a crucial role in Dutch resistance to the Habsburgs.⁵ William's desire to create a 'tolerant' environment in the Dutch Republic was somewhat naïve, as the repression of Protestants by the Habsburgs was, in large measure, responsible for creating the conditions for the revolt to occur. Charles V's edict of 1550 sanctioned the death sentence for anyone in

⁴ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, p. 300

⁵ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, p. 307

possession of ‘any book or writing made by Luther, Occlampachius, Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, or other heretics reprobad by the Holy Church.’⁶ And Philip II’s stated desire, during negotiations with Henry II of France in 1559, to destroy ‘heretics’ caused William to resolve ‘to drive the Spanish vermin from the land,’ even though he did not officially become a Calvinist until 1573.⁷ Political opinion was further alienated by the Duke of Alba’s establishment of the Council of Troubles in September 1568, which sentenced twelve thousand people to death (though it was only actually able to execute one thousand, as the rest had fled). And his disregard for the regions time honoured privileges further alienated political opinion, so much so, that when the ‘Sea Beggars’ raided the Holland port of Brill in April 1572 they were, within the course of a few months, able to control virtually all the towns of Zealand and Holland, as their inhabitants were only too happy to open the gates to these liberators from ‘Spanish tyranny’ (only Amsterdam, Middelburg, and Goes did not fall into Beggar hands).⁸

Throughout the revolt the Reformed encouraged resistance to the king by formulating theological justification for such actions. Although the Reformed clergy preached to their congregations about the need for obedience to the lawful authorities, the

⁶ Murdock, *Beyond Calvin: The Intellectual, Political and Cultural World of Europe’s Reformed Churches*, p. 260

⁷ McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, p. 260

⁸ Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*, pp 189-190

crucial question was ‘what constituted lawful authority?’⁹ This is where the theory of contractual government came to the fore; the Reformed believed that when a ruler had broken contract with the people it was the duty of the lesser magistrate to remove them. And so they argued that Philip II’s attempts to repress noble dissent was a breach of contract between the king and the nobility, and that this justified the revolt against him.¹⁰ These theories became especially influential after William’s conversion to Calvinism. Indeed, when Philip II issued an edict banishing William in 1580, Phillippe Duplessis-Mornay composed an *Apology* supporting William’s right as sovereign prince to take up arms against the Spanish king.¹¹ The influence of this type of thinking upon the politicians can be demonstrated by the fact that in July 1581 the States General of the Northern Provinces announced that the King of Spain had forfeited his authority due to his tyrannical rule. The Act of Abjuration claimed that Philip II had violated the conditions of his authority, and thus ‘in his stead another must be elected to be an overlord.’¹² Not only had such theories of resistance been propounded in the writings of Reformed theologians like Calvin and Beza, and in tracts such as *Vindicae Contra Tyrannos*, but they were even enshrined at a confessional level in the Netherlands. The Belgic Confession denied unconditional

⁹ Murdock, *Beyond Calvin: The Intellectual, Political and Cultural World of Europe’s Reformed Churches*, p. 71

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 71-72

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72

¹² *Ibid.*

obedience to civil magistrates when it told subjects ‘to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the word of God.’¹³ Yet, in authorizing such ‘passive resistance,’ the Reformed were not advocating anarchy, as private citizens could not remove tyrants since this was the duty of inferior magistrates.¹⁴

The theological justification which the Calvinists gave to the revolt meant that the civil authorities could not afford to ignore them once independence was achieved. Consequently, despite William’s hopes of accommodating Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in the Netherlands, the Dutch Reformed Church was to emerge as the established, public church in the Dutch Republic, and it desired the suppression of Roman Catholicism by the civil magistrate.¹⁵ The establishment of the Reformed Church is hardly surprising, as the revolution had been given ideological justification by Calvinism, while Pope Gregory XIII had forbidden Roman Catholic involvement in the revolt against Philip II.¹⁶ And so this ensured that the Reformed faith was linked with Dutch national identity after the revolt,¹⁷ as the Dutch Calvinists were lauded as patriots against Spain, while the Roman Catholics called the Dutch political leaders ‘heretics,

¹³ *The Belgic Confession*, Article 36 ‘The Magistrates’

¹⁴ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, pp 226-227

¹⁵ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*, pp 202-203

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 362

¹⁷ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, p. 262

rebels, and unlawful authorities.¹⁸ Yet, as we shall see, the alliance between the Reformed Church and the civil authorities in the Dutch Republic created its own fair share of tensions.

The founding charter of the Dutch Republic is thought to have been formulated by the provinces of the Netherlands signing the Union of Utrecht in January-February 1579.¹⁹ Basically the Union of Utrecht envisaged a league of several sovereign provinces which agreed to give up their sovereign rights in a few limited areas, such as defence, taxation for defence, and foreign policy.²⁰ However, it is questionable whether or not the Union was meant to create a central Dutch State, because in the States General the provinces were supposed to take important decisions unanimously, not as a single state, but as a confederation of states.²¹ Indeed, J.L. Price argues that the Union of Utrecht was only an alliance, and that it took an enormous amount of judicial ingenuity in order to make it appear a more binding and constitutive document.²² Even if this assessment is incorrect, there can be no doubt that the Dutch Republic was originally meant to be federalist and highly decentralised system, as opposed to being a centralised state. But what is important to note, for our present purposes, is that

¹⁸ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*, p. 391

¹⁹ Greengrass, *The European Reformation 1500-1618*, pp 130-131

²⁰ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall 1477-1806*, p. 276

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, p. 269

the governing structure of the Dutch Reformed Church was basically an ecclesiastical equivalent of a federal republic, in which power was divided between consistories, classes, provincial and national synods.²³ Moreover, the theology of Calvinism, with its emphasis upon the depravity of sinful man, supported de-centralization and the separation of powers between various parts of the civil government, as the centralization of power in any one man or institution would inevitably lead to corruption.

Yet one must be careful not to over-emphasize de-centralization, as neither the Dutch Reformed Church nor the politicians were totally opposed to granting the central government power, as the Dutch Republic adopted a common tax and administrative structure, a single military command, while placing William of Orange at the head of affairs, charging him 'to maintain the practice of the Reformed evangelical religion, suppressing and putting an end to, the exercise of the Romish religion.'²⁴

However, the basic commitment of the Reformed to decentralization can be seen in the response to the growing power of Holland. While it is common for moderns to use the terms 'Holland' and 'Netherlands' as if they were synonyms, this is not strictly correct as Holland was only a province in the Dutch Republic. Yet after the revolt it sought to dominate the

²³ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall 1477-1806*, p. 368

²⁴ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*, pp 197-198

other provinces. Consequently, it was denounced by the Calvinist preachers for endangering the security, well-being, and spiritual salvation of the Netherlands.²⁵ However, Holland was largely successful in establishing its dominance, especially as a result of Oldenbarnevelt's success in wresting military and strategic decisions away from the Raad to the States General, which was to all intents and purposes the mouthpiece of Holland.²⁶ This basically turned the Raad into a mere administrative organ of the States General, which meant that the Dutch Republic (by 1590) was a federal state, organized and directed from The Hague, largely controlled by the States of Holland.²⁷

But despite the opposition of the Reformed preachers to the attempts at the centralization of power around Holland, the Reformed Church itself was, in some sense, conducive to Dutch unity. As the public church in the Dutch Republic, it functioned as one of the few unifying symbols which the decentralized Republic had.²⁸ The Reformed Church provided the Dutch State with a unifying sense of purpose; this was vitally important in the Dutch Republic due to the vastly different political and economic interests of the various provinces, as the one aim which they all held in common was the defence of the Reformed

²⁵ Ibid., p. 235

²⁶ Ibid., p. 238

²⁷ Ibid., p. 240

²⁸ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, p.

faith against Roman Catholic and Spanish opposition.²⁹ This, in turn, served as a significant restraint upon the autonomy of Holland, as one province could not decide to change its religious character without putting the entire Union into jeopardy.³⁰ Furthermore, this explains why the Arminian Remonstrant controversy in the early seventeenth century was a severe threat to the unity of the Dutch Republic. The Union of Utrecht had left religious questions to the civil governments of the separate provinces, but this meant that if Holland (where the Remonstrants had great influence) was to redefine the Reformed faith, by turning it into something unacceptable to the other provinces, then the ability of the Reformed Church to bind the provinces together would be weakened, if not completely destroyed.³¹ Hence a strong and united Reformed Church was essential to the preservation of the Union, and, in order to ensure this, a large number of Remonstrant regents in Holland were replaced upon the defeat of the Arminians in 1618-19.³² Calvinism therefore contributed both to the federalism and the unity of the Dutch Republic.

It is important to keep in mind that the Reformed Church in the Dutch Republic did not command the allegiance of most of the populace. Such was the numerical weakness of the Reformed

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 261

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 260

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 270-271

³² *Ibid.*, p. 277

Church that by 1587 only ten percent of the population of Holland were members.³³ Calvinism failed to advance for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the countryside, there was a severe lack of well trained ministers, and so ignorance of Reformed teaching among the people, and adherence to old superstitious practices, was very strong. Furthermore, the Reformed often faced competition from Anabaptist sects and from Lutheran Protestants, both of which claimed many adherents among the mass populace.³⁴ This lack of confessional zeal among the populace was deeply distressing to the devout Calvinists, yet, nevertheless, the Reformed Church prospered as a result of being the public church that enjoyed the backing of the Dutch State.³⁵

However relations between the Reformed Church and the Dutch State were often highly strained. As Grotius once observed, this was partly due to the fact that often where the preachers wholeheartedly followed Calvin, the magistrates often followed Erasmus.³⁶ While the politicians agreed with the Reformed in their abhorrence of the superstitions that Roman Catholicism was perceived to have created, and they agreed that there should be a public church, they continued to revere the memory of Erasmus and his flexible, non-dogmatic interpretation of

³³ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*, p. 365

³⁴ Marnef, 'Chapter Twenty: The Netherlands' in Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World*, p. 360

³⁵ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*, p. 363

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 369

Christianity.³⁷ In practical terms, this meant that politicians such as William of Orange were (at best) only mild Protestants and Calvinists. Although they accepted that there should only be one public church, they believed that its influence over the individual and society should be highly restricted.³⁸ Yet this led to tensions, as the Reformed Church envisaged a much larger social role for itself, as it provided chaplains for the military and, in some localities, it controlled poor relief and vetted all potential school-teachers.³⁹ Moreover, the Reformed clergy often spoke out on civil matters; for example, the provincial synod of Zeeland urged the civil rulers to stop Sabbath profanation, prostitution, and witchcraft in the region.⁴⁰ However, as the magistrates were often unwilling to follow such advice, there was almost a permanent tension over the degree to which the views of the Reformed Church should determine the course of public policy.⁴¹ Often the civil authorities saw themselves as having the right to determine the parameters within which the Reformed Church should operate. Consequently, magistrates and ministers (especially in Holland and Utrecht) were frequently in dispute about the control of poor relief and education, and the toleration of other religious

³⁷ Ibid., p. 392

³⁸ Ibid., p. 369

³⁹ Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*, p. 200

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, p. 184

groups.⁴² One reason the civil authorities sought to keep a strict limit on the role of the Reformed Church and its ministers, was because they believed that the Reformed preachers had such a great influence on the ordinary populace that they were capable of stirring up popular feeling against the authorities.⁴³

Especially in Holland it was perhaps inevitable that a struggle between church and state should have developed, as the civil authorities paid the salaries of the ministers and owned the buildings of the Reformed Church. Since the Reformed Church allowed the magistrate to ‘pay the piper,’ they should not have been too surprised when he demanded to ‘pick the tune.’ Erastianism (the view that the state should control the church) was so strong in Holland that in 1574 the States of Holland drafted instructions for William of Orange insisting that no consistories be established in the Reformed congregations without the approval of the appropriate town council.⁴⁴ However, the Reformed Church’s defence of its right to control church discipline thwarted this. And despite the Erastian aspirations of many of the regents, the magistrate had far less direct control over the public church in the Dutch Republic than in almost any other Protestant, or even Roman Catholic, country

⁴² Marnef, ‘Chapter Twenty: The Netherlands’ in Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World*, p. 361

⁴³ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, pp 75-76

⁴⁴ Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*, p. 194

at this time.⁴⁵ Little wonder then that some regents were attracted to the Remonstrants, whose leaders put forward a specifically Erastian political theory which won the support of Oldenbarnevelt and the States of Holland.⁴⁶ It was the desire for a more inclusive official church, that would be more subservient to the civil authorities, which lay behind much of the regent support for the Arminians.⁴⁷ However, the defeat of the Remonstrants at the synod of Dordrecht (1619) meant that Confessional Calvinism remained the dominant religious influence on Dutch society and culture.⁴⁸

The Calvinistic Reformation in the Netherlands also had an impact upon the political culture in relation to the question of whether the state should suppress heterodox opinions. As far as the Reformed Church was concerned it was, in the words of the Belgic Confession, the duty of the civil government to ‘remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship.’⁴⁹ However, the politicians did not always agree, or at least they did not wish to inflict the same degree of severity against the heterodox that the Reformed ministers did. For example, William of Orange had hoped to accommodate Protestant and Roman Catholic worship

⁴⁵ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, pp 184-185

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86

⁴⁸ Marnef, ‘Chapter Twenty: The Netherlands’ in Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World*, p. 362

⁴⁹ *The Belgic Confession*, Article 36 ‘The Magistrates’

on the basis of the Pacification of Ghent.⁵⁰ The regents were also in favour of toleration at the beginning of the revolt; the States of Holland in July 1572 resolved that ‘freedom of religion’ would be upheld so that no-one would be hindered from the ‘free exercise’ of the Reformed or Roman Catholic religions.⁵¹ Yet as Roman Catholicism came to be closely identified with the Spanish enemy, this commitment to toleration had to be set aside, and by 1573 few among the regents prepared to espouse it.⁵² Consequently, even the previously tolerant States of Holland eventually outlawed the Mass in March 1581.⁵³ However, this should not be overstated, as the regents were not overly zealous in suppressing Roman Catholicism. Basically, once the threat of Spanish re-conquest had receded, the regents of most towns ceased to enforce the prohibitions on Roman Catholic worship that were enacted in the midst of the revolt.⁵⁴ So while the regents paid lip-service to the demands of the Reformed preachers that Popery be suppressed, in reality, they did as little about it as they could get away with.⁵⁵ But even if the politicians had wanted to take a more firm line against Roman Catholic practice, the sheer numbers of Roman Catholics residing in the Netherlands

⁵⁰ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall 1477-1806*, p. 201

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 372

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Duke, ‘The Ambivalent Face of Calvinism in the Netherlands 1561-1618’ in Prestwick (ed.), *International Calvinism 1541-1715*, p. 109

⁵⁴ Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*, p. 195

⁵⁵ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, p.

(thought to have been somewhere in the region of forty to fifty percent of the population) meant that, as they saw it, toleration was a practical necessity, as they believed that widespread repression would have been difficult to enforce.⁵⁶

Nevertheless there were certainly times when force was used against the heterodox. After Maurits's coup in 1618, the execution of Oldenbarnevelt, and the synod of Dordrecht's condemnation of Arminianism, the Remonstrants were purged from town governments and various Remonstrants were either fined or banished from Leiden in an effort to crush Arminian opinion in the city.⁵⁷ Yet even this did not last long, as by the 1630s the Remonstrants were opening their own churches in the towns of Holland, despite the protests of the Reformed Church.⁵⁸ Although the limited repression that existed in the Dutch Republic might appear repulsive to modern observers, it should be remembered that the degree of tolerance shown towards both Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters was most unusual for seventeenth century Europe, as virtually all confessional groupings (apart from the Anabaptists) believed that the state was to suppress false religion. The extent to which this took place in the Dutch Republic was the result of the influence of Calvinism which is, by its very nature, an intolerant

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 76-78

⁵⁷ Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall 1477-1806*, p. 500

⁵⁸ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, pp 196-197

creed due to its emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God over all things, including the state – which is to acknowledge God’s sovereignty by suppressing false religion. What restrained the Dutch State was the Erasmian tradition of a dislike of persecuting people over details of belief and practice.⁵⁹ Therefore, in terms of toleration, Erasmus was probably a greater influence on Dutch political culture than Calvin.

In conclusion, we have seen that Calvinism played a crucial role in the revolt which led to the emergence of the Dutch Republic by providing ideological and theological justification for the lesser magistrate resisting the Spaniards, and for establishing the opinion that the Habsburgs had broken contract with the people who had thus forfeited their right to govern. Furthermore, due to links between Roman Catholicism and the Spanish enemy, the Reformed faith became a badge of Dutch patriotism after the revolt. Calvinism also had a role to play in the formation of the Dutch Republic as a federal and highly de-centralized state, due to both its theology and the structure of its church government. Yet, at the same time, as the Reformed Church helped to unite the Dutch Republic, as its role as the public church meant that it was one of the few things that the various provinces had in common. However, it would be a mistake to think that

⁵⁹ Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism*, p. 85

Calvinism in the Dutch Republic had everything its own way. It only commanded the allegiance of a minority of the population, and relations between church and state were often strained. Moreover, church and state were often in conflict about the role of the Reformed Church in Dutch society, with the magistrates seeking to exercise an Erastian control over the public church's affairs. Furthermore, the Dutch State certainly did not go as far in suppressing heterodoxy as the Calvinist preachers would have desired. So, in summary, we may conclude that although Calvinism had great influence on the political culture of the Dutch Republic, it did not control every aspect of Dutch society and often found itself at odds with powerful political influences.

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