In conversations today of social mores, the word ‘tolerance’ is easily thrown around, often understood as an allowance for thought or conduct that may deviate from that which is popularly accepted. Moreover, as a value in western culture, tolerance is largely identified as a hallmark of enlightened thought and a prerequisite for any society that regards itself as progressive or democratic. When considering toleration as practiced in the world of the 17th century Dutch Republic, the temptation may exist to see in that era the foundation of our 21st century notions of tolerance, specifically as it is expressed in the Netherlands today. A closer examination of the Golden Age reminds us that toleration was, more narrowly, about religion, and that it was by no means clearly defined or practiced in ways our post-modern culture might approve. Still, for a nation that is wrestling with new challenges in what it means to be ‘tolerant’ there may be lessons to learn from this period of history. First, however, a review of the principle developments of the idea of toleration in the United Provinces is necessary.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century dismantled a unified Christendom, and in its wake came diversity to a once homogenous – at least outwardly – Church. In the Low Countries, Protestantism evolved from below thanks to the school of Devotio Moderna, cultivated among many of the faithful, and Erasmus’ humanism which, among other things, encouraged the individual Christian’s spiritual maturation freed from fixed religiosity. Such independence of thought and conduct paralleled the restraint that was felt by leading men under the yoke of the Spanish Hapsburgs. In time, Dutch princes and Stadholders of Calvinist persuasion sought to sever their relationship to a Catholic power which meant not only to stifle their spiritual practices but also to inhibit their access wealth and security.

In many ways, the eighty-year war for independence from Spain was a fight by the Dutch for the conscience of religion. But long before a peace was made with this foreign power, an internal fight among Protestants in the Dutch states had to be addressed. The strict
understanding of salvation and
predestination by some Calvinists was opposed by a more lenient interpretation led by Jacobus
Arminius. The disciples of Arminius (known both as Arminians and Remonstrants) were at odds
with the Reformed Church, which, since 1575, served as the formal denomination of the state.
Caught in between the clashes of the Arminians and the Counter-Remonstrants were Catholics,
Lutherans, Mennonites and Jews. Even though they enjoyed official status in the state, the
Reformed Church often complained that the regents did not share their religious zealotry, nor did
they take up the banner of ongoing Reformation within the Netherlands. “For the Calvinists it
was above all a struggle about religion, for the ‘true faith.’ For the regents it was a struggle for
freedom from oppression and tyranny.” (Israel, 369)

This division reveals the fundamental problem that accompanied the debate about
religious toleration: what is the intended goal should such an allowance be given for religious
dissension or freedom to those outside the Reformed Church? As early as the 1580’s there were
those Protestants, like William of Orange, who found it expedient to the war’s cause to indulge
Catholics in areas such as Flanders or the Brabant. Quite simply, such toleration was pragmatic.
By assuaging their fears and assuring their right to Catholic worship, William meant to stave off
fragmentation of the revolt. Within the emergent Dutch Republic, however, the wrestling
between orthodox Calvinists and regents turned in favor of the former. The strength of preachers
and the influx of Calvinist refugees from the south to the Republic turned the tide of public
opinion. It took little time for Dutch regents to alter their attitudes to the direction of the political
wind. Allowance for diversity of religious confessions, it was argued by Counter-Remonstrants
and their like, would lead to confusion among the Christian faithful and an inefficiency of
governance over the people. Singularity of mind and soul, instead, made for a more cohesive
society and a stronger republic. Thus, the toleration for religious traditions outside the formally
established Dutch Reformed Church had to be denounced and confessionalization promoted.
Civic leaders especially were reminded by their pastors of this mission in the decisions they
made and the posture they took when it came to dealing with dissident sects.

Adherents of the old religion, or Roman Catholicism, proved to be a particularly resilient
group in the Netherlands. Large Catholic minorities at the start of the 17th century remained in
Utrecht, Haarlem, Hoorn, Amsterdam and Rotterdam as well as the more traditionally Catholic
areas south of the great rivers. What made Catholics most pernicious to the Republic were their ties to adversaries. Counter-Reformation efforts and the influx of priests were facilitated by Rome’s re-evangelization Missio Hollandica, the neighboring prince-bishop of Münster in Germany, and, of course, the Spanish Hapsburgs. In an age of state making and in a period of war, these elements were at odds with the forging of a cohesive Protestant republic. Even so, the proposition of religious tolerance did not disappear.

Early on in the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, there was an ebb and flow to toleration. Following his coup d’état in 1618, Maurits of Nassau associated himself with the Counter-Remonstrants’ efforts at moral and social reform. His alliance proved successful for it helped consolidate his power over the Republic. Arminians, on the other hand, disapproved of Maurits’ intolerant regime, and when his brother, Frederik Hendrik became Stadholder the pendulum shifted. Calvinist fury was denounced. Arminians attributed the economic slump of the 1620’s to religious persecution and the flight of valuable merchants and craftsmen from the Republic. At the same time, Remonstrant theologians like Simon Episcopius formulated a scripturally-based doctrine for religious toleration, one that almost hinted at a preference for secular prosperity rather than an exclusive concern for the soul’s salvation. “Toleration, in Episcopius’ view, strengthens the state because only that state is secure whose citizens are content, and this can only be where conscience, enquiry, and religious practice are free and untrammeled.” (Israel, 504) This position did not deny the grounds for a public Church, but instead called for an ecclesiastical presence that led by moral persuasion rather than political force. Thus, it was argued, a peaceful coexistence between Christian denominations would flourish in the United Provinces.

By the time Maurits’ son William II ascended to leadership and independence was secured in 1648, orthodox Calvinists regained their political influence. The Prince of Orange acquiesced to their agenda of quieting the Remonstrants and reversing his father’s lenient policies toward Catholics, especially in the newly acquired regions of the south and east. Despite these efforts, however, a sort of religious stability had evolved in the Netherlands by the mid-17th century. The Catholic Counter-Reformation had made the most gains it would achieve, and the formal confessionalization of the country under the Dutch Reformed Church was largely
a paper tiger. Pockets of Arminians as well as Lutherans, Mennonites and even Jews went intentionally overlooked by the authorities so long as they did not disturb public order. Fear of national disunity would again rally the cause of intolerance in 1672 when Louis XIV invaded the Republic and gave his assistance to Catholics in hiding. The Reformed Church preached a kind of patriotism, justifying a returned suppression of the old religion. For their part, Catholics who more strongly identified themselves as Dutch had difficulty proving their allegiance to the Republic. After the French occupation, orthodox Calvinists became dismayed when William III came to power. For him, toleration of Catholics was the key to securing unity in the United Provinces. William believed a coalition of Protestants and Catholics (along with his intended capture of the English throne) would serve well as a bulwark against the Sun King. In the meantime, further theological rifts in the latter half of the 17th century (i.e. the Cocceian-Voetian conflict inside the Reformed Church) only caused more religious unrest and division among academics, thus making the prospect of tolerance less tenable.

If Erasmus’ humanism laid the foundation for the Reformation in the Low Countries, Baruch Spinoza’s rationalism advanced the palatableness of religious toleration in the United Provinces. For this Dutch philosopher of the early Enlightenment, toleration was less about accepting differences in religion and more about prohibiting the political power religion wields over individual conscience. (Israel, 787) Such an idea was shored up by Pierre Bayle, the French Huguenot who took shelter in Rotterdam in 1680. His skepticism argued that faith could not be proved by reason. Voltaire’s Treatise on Tolerance later crowned the Enlightenment’s mounting argument for liberty of conscience in 1763. The toleration proposed by these philosophes carried with it a less than veiled anti-clericalism, for they sought to subordinate the authority of institutional religion’s voice in society (if not to silence it altogether). This trumping of religious dominance by secular power was already being played out in Amsterdam. There the regents forbade the spire of the Nieuwe Kerk to excel the height of city hall’s cupola, thus symbolizing which entity’s interests towered highest over the people.

At the start of the 18th century religious zealotry in the Republic was subsiding and the public Church was beginning to experience a reduction in number because of the growth of immigrant Catholics, Lutherans and Jews. Furthermore, a somewhat respectful interest was
being paid among the denominations
to one another’s theological differences. While this neither eliminated distrust nor ended
prejudices, it did facilitate a more tolerant atmosphere. It took the advent of the Batavian
Republic in 1795 and the imposition of the Napoleonic Code in 1806 to enshrine into law
religious toleration in the Netherlands.

Ultimately, for the leaders of the Dutch Republic during the Golden Age and its aftermath
the practice of toleration was determined by two questions: Is it politically expedient? And can
it be practically enforced? As illustrated by the above survey of its application in the 17th and
18th centuries, there was never a perfect or consistent policy of toleration. The issue, in
contemporary parlance, served as a kind of political football, tossed back and forth depending on
the advantages it gave or took to those in power. In the end, it appears that acceptance and an
almost intentional ‘looking the other way’ proved to be a more effective strategy for co-existence
between Protestants and Catholics (and even Jews). This posture, taken by many regents in
different areas across the Republic, did not deny an official prejudice against sects outside the
Dutch Reformed Church.

Religion remained, nevertheless, an emotionally charged subject. For the believer,
salvation is a serious matter and God’s truth is a heavy weight. So what undermined these grave
issues causing the religiously zealous to accept accepting others? Did something become more
important? Were values shifting? Perhaps it was the comforts of economic prosperity that gave
greater assurance of God’s favor than the attachment to one denomination. Maybe the security
of trade routes took precedent over a singular path to heaven. Could it be that the gains made
through commerce and science yielded greater profits than the expense of routing out dissidents
and chasing away talent? Whatever the case, it is the Dutch who, in the early modern period of
European history, wrestled first with the idea of state-sponsored religious toleration. The legacy
of this is a mythology, which belies a less than serene evolution.

It is a mistake not only for the casual observer of the Netherlands but primarily for the
student of Dutch history to see the nation’s reputation today for the tolerant acceptance of many
social taboos as a descendent of 17th century tolerance of variant religious faiths. For the teacher
of this history, he or she must be diligent in distinguishing the differences. Indeed, there are
those who will look at Amsterdam culture with its legalized prostitution and over-the-counter
marijuana and remark, “Well, that’s
the Dutch. They’re a tolerant society.” But these examples are more about the indulgence of appetites and the social acceptance of what some may consider deviant behavior. The struggle for tolerance in the Golden Age was about a fundamental right and human flourishing and not about a license for certain corporal appetites. In some ways, however, the Enlightenment’s agenda for tolerance may lay claim to a *fait accompli* in that present-day Europe, especially the Netherlands in recent decades, is virtually an altogether secular environment whose nominally Christian citizens largely go unchurched. The ugly heritage of religious wars and the close association of organized religion with politics and education in the last century have contributed to a negative reaction to faith institutions, leaving many churches as relics of a past. This is evident in many Dutch cities where houses of Christian worship now serve other purposes. For instance, I found in Amsterdam that the Zuiderkerk houses the city’s planning information center, in Utrecht St. Martin Church is an apartment complex, in Middelburg the Norbertine Abbey is the Zeeuws Museum, and in Hoorn another prominent church in the city center now houses a grocery store.

The Dutch do take pride in their reputation for tolerance, but the growing presence of Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands today presents new challenges to national consciousness. In the Golden Age, the Dutch welcomed émigrés fleeing hardship in other countries so long as they proved they could be productive to the community. And in the latter half of the 20th century the government actively solicited Moroccans to move to the country to fill a labor gap. I found it noteworthy on our walking tour of Leiden to have the “Gilded Turk” building pointed out – an edifice that reminds citizens that the Dutch Republic’s first foreign power to exchange ambassadors was an Islamic empire. But today openness has come with the expectation by many that these immigrants assimilate with Dutch society. While the public debate may be over conformity and integration, the internal struggle for Dutch citizens more likely centers on the uncomfortable feelings they have for Islamic culture. The presence of Muslims in the Netherlands has literally changed the landscape: in my travels by train, I have spotted newly built mosques raised in the major cities – a contrast to the traditional skyline of church spires and pointed Dutch roofs. And does acceptance of Muslims include an allowance for Islamic legal customs which are sometimes abrasive to western social sentiments?
In dealing with these issues of Islamic immigration, it presses Europeans and the Dutch *per se* to ask, “What is it about these people that threaten us?” Or, “What is it they may take away from us?” It is indeed a moment of soul-searching for the Dutch who must contemplate whether they have learned history’s lessons regarding religious toleration. As in the past, animosity for those who are different can play into the hands of demagogues. On the other hand, a policy of mutual respect between religious groups has led to productive coexistence. In fact, as tolerant regents and princes of the Golden Age demonstrated, it is expedient for the political, economic and social progress of the country to learn to live with one another.

**Work Cited**