

New Amsterdam and the Great Dutch Toleration Debates

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NEH Seminar For School Teachers, 2013, London and Leiden
The Dutch Republic and Britain
National Endowment for the Humanities
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On December 27, 1657, several citizens of the Dutch colony of New Netherland presented the West India Company's Director-General, Pieter Stuyvesant, with a remonstrance. It requested an end to the persecution of Quakers within the colony, asking "not to judge least we be judged, neither to condemn least we be condemned, but rather

“took pains to ensure that all were welcome” in the colony, especially in New Amsterdam. Ultimately, he writes, the WIC gave into repeated pressures and in 1663 allowed a man named John Browne to hold Quaker meetings in his home, thus making toleration the law of the land. Looking retrospectively at these events, Jackson sees the Flushing Remonstrance as the birth of American freedom and New York City’s modern diversity. Jackson and others (among them Russell Shorto, author of *Island at the Center of the World*) create a compelling narrative, but like most popular presentations of history committed two sins: they remove the events from their complex context, and they leave out critical information that does not fit their version of history.

This paper seeks to remedy both issues by placing the toleration debates in New Amsterdam and New Netherland within the larger context of the Dutch Revolt and subsequent “Great Toleration Debates” in the Republic in the 16th and 17th centuries. I will begin by tracing the origins of religion in the initial stages of the Dutch revolt. Particular attention will be given to William the Silent and his failure to bring about a “religious peace” in the Low Countries. It will then follow the debates about religion up to 1672 and the end of Johan De Witt’s “true freedom.”³ Next, I will focus on the issue of toleration in New Netherland and its similarities with the larger debates in the mother country. I will argue that we cannot see the Flushing Remonstrance through our modern notions of the Bill of Rights and freedom of religion. Rather, we must understand it as a document unique to the 17th century Dutch experience. Undoubtedly, the Dutch were the most tolerant society in 17th century Europe, but I hope to show that the Republic’s ideas of toleration were far from our modern notions of religious freedom. Given New York City’s world prominence and the issues it faces over race and religion today, it is critical that we have a nuanced, full account of how New Amsterdam and its inhabitants dealt with similar issues in the past.

The Dutch Revolt against Spain was the product of centuries of political, social, and economic history. From the beginning of the revolt, however, two issues stood out amongst the tangled causes: religion and liberty. In 1572 religion meant the ability, especially north of the rivers, to practice Calvinism and other reformed religions, while

³ Since New Netherland was seized by the British in 1664, the fall of the States’ Party seems a logical ending point.

liberty referred to the rights and privileges the localities of the Low Countries accumulated over the years⁴. These political privileges became inextricably linked with religion, especially after Charles V and his son, Phillip II, used Spanish and Hapsburg power to establish the Inquisition throughout the Netherlands. Where before, local privilege entailed control over taxes and other city functions, in the era after the 1550s it increasingly meant the free determination of local religion. A clear example comes from the Compromise,⁵ or oath, sworn by the 200 nobles, that petitioned Margaret of Parma in 1565. These lesser nobles, or *Gueux*—beggars, as they came to be known, swore to “use all our efforts to prevent the reception or introduction of this Inquisition in any way,” which according to them “weaken[ed] the sanction and respect for the ancient laws, customs, and ordinances which have been observed from time immemorial.”⁶ William of Orange, in a letter to his two brothers, the Counts John and Louis of Nassau, espoused nearly identical ideals when he wrote “I have only aspired and claimed to seek the country’s freedom in the matters of religious conscience and government.”⁷ While there were many very local reasons for the rebellion in Holland and the North (and Antwerp, Ghent, and Bruges in the South), the interrelated concepts of religious freedom and privileges came to provide the overall soul of the movement.

If freedom of religion and the exercise of ancient privileges were the overall impetus for revolt, various parties had radically different ideas of what exactly this meant. The discussion of these ideas and how they would look in practice, known as the “great Dutch toleration debates, were a central theme of Dutch internal politics from 1572 until 1672. In the 1570s and 80s William of Orange attempted to settle the religious question before it could divide the body politic by pushing for a “religious peace” in the North and South. Born a Lutheran and raised as a Catholic, William I was committed to the Erasmian ideals of religious sympathy and tolerance.⁸ Even after converting to Calvinism to solidify his standing with Holland’s political base, William refused to give up on religious peace. Politically and morally he hoped for a united Netherlands where

⁴ *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times*, Herbert H. Rowen

⁵ Meaning a league under oath

⁶ *A Band of Beggarly Nobles, The Low Countries in Early Modern times*, Herbert H. Rowen

⁷ *The Goals of the Prince of Orange, The Low Countries in early Modern Times*, Herbert H. Rowen

⁸ *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times*, Herbert H. Rowen

Catholics and Protestants were assured freedom of practice. However, despite Orange's personal prestige, he could not prevent Holland and Zeeland signing a pact of Union in 1575 that charged him as Stadholder with maintaining the Dutch Reformed Church and suppressing Roman Catholicism. Less than a year later, though, William and his supporters scored a victory with the Pacification of Ghent, signed in the town hall of Ghent on November 8, 1576. This pact between the different states of the Netherlands committed them to driving out Spanish soldiers, guaranteed local privileges and self-rule, and forbade the states of Holland and Zeeland from infringing in any way "against the repose and public peace, notably against the Roman Catholic religion, or against its practice."⁹ Regardless of the rhetoric at Ghent, though, by the time of his assassination in 1584, William's religious middle ground had given way to a polarized Calvinist, northern revolt and a mostly Catholic, southern Netherlands.

The failure of Orange's religious peace and subsequent assassination paved the way for the rejection of religious toleration north of the rivers in the 1590s. This era of Dutch history is critical because it highlights the difference between the *de jure* policy of religious freedom laid down in the Union of Utrecht, and its *de facto* application in the early years of the Republic. The Union of Utrecht, a pact between the northern seven provinces of the Netherlands signed in 1579, is generally considered the founding document of the Dutch Republic. While technically not violating the Pacification of Ghent, Utrecht confirmed the reality on the ground—namely that no matter William's attempts at religious peace and a combined north-south state, the revolt had split on religious and geographic lines. Of particular interest for this essay is Article XIII of the Union of Utrecht:

As for the matter of religion, the States of Holland and Zeeland shall act according to their own pleasure, and the other Provinces of this Union shall follow the rules set down in the religious peace drafted by Archduke Matthias, governor and captain-general of these countries, with the advice of the Council of State and the States General, or shall establish such general or special regulations in this matter as they shall find good and most fitting for the repose and welfare of the provinces, cities, and individual Members thereof, and the preservation of the property and rights of each individual, whether churchman or layman, and no other Province

⁹ *Pacification of Ghent, The Low Countries in Early Modern Times*, Herbert H. Rowen

shall be permitted to interfere or make difficulties, provided that each person shall remain free in his religion and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion, as is provided in the Pacification of Ghent.¹⁰

Article XIII's guarantee that "each person shall remain free in his religion, and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion" was remarkable for its time. Written in an era of the Inquisition and Reformation, it predates the Thirty Years War by a wide margin and espouses a freedom virtually unknown anywhere else in Europe at the time. However, in the decades after its creation, the Union's soaring rhetoric gave way to a very different reality on the ground. Foreshadowing the way the American Declaration of Independence rang hollow when signed by slave owners, the Dutch Republic's application of Article XIII failed to match its promise.

This early religious intolerance owed its roots to the challenging political and military reality confronted by the nascent Republic in the 1590s, as well as the mercurial state of confessionalization throughout the provinces. Simply put, the Republic's precarious situation led its regents to emphasize religious uniformity as a way of uniting the provinces against the Spanish. No matter what the Union of Utrecht said, the Regents concluded that freedom of religion was not a viable strategy when the country was so vulnerable. Making matters worse, Holland's leaders believed only ten percent of the province's population belonged to the Reformed Church,¹¹ making them fearful of a Catholic, and therefore Spanish, resurgence if other religions flourished. By 1600, therefore, the Republic had chosen the views of Justus Lipsius and Simon Stevin over the champion of toleration, Dirk Volkertsz. Coornhert. For the sake of society and the state, Lipsius and Stevins urged citizens to conform outwardly to the public Reformed Church, even if they did not believe in its views.¹²

Thus, in the 1590s, the Republic rejected religious freedom. An important caveat, and one which factors into the later toleration debates, is that it never met the levels of intolerance in many other European states. Though the regents declined to extend freedom of practice to Catholics, Lutherans, Mennonites, or Jews, they did not actively

¹⁰ *Union of Utrecht*, <http://www1.umassd.edu/euro/resources/netherlands/20.pdf>

¹¹ Israel, p. 365. See also p. 366 for the uncertain state of confessionalization in the provinces.

¹² Israel, p. 373

suppress those groups' private worship. Further, if the regents were willing to make the Dutch Reformed Church a de facto state church, they gave it no power to compel attendance or coerce the population, and it had no representation in the government.¹³ What existed, then, was a "liberty of conscience," whereby a Catholic or Lutheran could not openly worship or gather in an official congregation, but could practice in the privacy of his home without investigation, prosecution, or penalty. This toleration is a far cry from modern notions of religious freedom and lends skepticism to the claim that New Amsterdam would come to found American religious liberty.

This latent religious toleration of the 1590s spawned generations of debate and discourse in the Republic, ultimately trending towards rising levels of toleration in the 1660s. The great Dutch toleration debate of the 1620s built on the religious quarrel between Jacobus Arminius and Franciscus Gomarus, colleagues at the University of Leiden in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.¹⁴ Arminius harbored serious doubts about Calvinist predestination and advocated for a flexible, accommodating Reformed Church. In his mind, the freedom of the individual in the Church should not be neglected. Conversely, Franciscus Gomarus believed in absolute, hard-line Calvinist predestination. Gomarus' world-view left no room for dissenters to the Dutch Reformed church, or for any individual accommodation within. Given the connection between confessionalization and politics at the beginning of the revolt, the debate between Arminius and Gomarus would set the tone for the next seventy years of political-theological discourse.

Such an open discourse about sensitive topics remains the Republic's greatest intellectual contribution, and during the 1610s and 20s the debate about religious toleration continued. Hugo Grotius carried and extended the banner of Arminian toleration. Grotius, a Dutch jurist, lent his pen in support of Johan van Oldenbarnavelt and the States party. Grotius eventually became a supporter of the 1610 Remonstrance movement, seeking to resolve the religious divisions in the provinces and keep religion out of politics.¹⁵ His views were a middle path for toleration, as he wanted a strong Reformed Church backed by the state to support social and political cohesion. However,

¹³ Israel, p. 368

¹⁴ For a thorough treatment of this topic and the reference for much of the following information, please see Israel p. 393

¹⁵ For a discussion of Grotius, his supporters and opponents, the Remonstrants, and Counter-Remonstrants, see Israel 431, 499-503.

he also desired an internally tolerant state church that was doctrinally “soft-centered,”¹⁶ leaving room for freedom of conscience within the larger reformed community. For Grotius, it was possible to accept minor theological differences in the Reformed Church and keep other religions on the periphery. If Mennonites, Lutherans, Catholics, and Jews practiced inconspicuously and remained a minority of the population, he did not see a reason to suppress them. Pushing Grotius’ views further, Simon Episcopius promoted full-fledged toleration, believing that Christians agreed on the most important theological matters. Throughout the 1620s and 30s, Johannes Uytenbogaert and Paschier de Fijne would support Episcopius and the Remonstrant push for toleration against the Counter-Remonstrant, hard-line views of Henricus Arnoldia.

By the time New Amsterdam came of age in the 1630s, Episcopius and the Arminian tradition emerged as the victors of the “great Dutch toleration debates.” After these debates in the incipient Republic, Dutch society became freer and more flexible regarding religion and thought.¹⁷ In the 1640s, especially, many provinces abandoned the hard-line approach of Gomarus, Arnoldia, and Gisbertus Voetius as most of the population settled into one confessionalized camp or the other. Johan De Witt’s “true freedom” and the revival of the States Party during the first Stadholderless era in the 1650s and 60s would further promote the growth of tolerance. Even the ascendance of William III did nothing to slow down the rise of toleration, and by 1700 the Republic settled into what Jonathan Israel terms “ambivalent semi-tolerance.”¹⁸ Under this system the Reformed Church was still the state’s Church, and any politician looking to become regent had to belong to it, at least nominally. Further, so-called “hidden churches” were still prevalent, and anyone denying the sanctity of the Holy Trinity could be jailed.¹⁹ Regardless of these shortcomings, by the late 17th century the Dutch Republic allowed a remarkable level of diversity, debate, and grudging acceptance of other religions. Years of strife and struggle produced a liberty of conscience, if not outright practice.

¹⁶ Israel, p. 501

¹⁷ Israel, p. 637

¹⁸ Israel, p. 676

¹⁹ Israel, p. 676



The Dutch West India Company House in Amsterdam.

The remainder of this paper will address how the debates over religious toleration impacted New Netherland and its fledgling capitol, New Amsterdam. The Dutch colony of New Netherland began in 1617 at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, a strategic point connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the Oneida Carry²⁰ and the Haudenosaunee fur trade. This initial settlement, named Fort Orange in honor of Prince Maurits and the Princes of Nassau, would later become the city of Albany. The Dutch West India Company (WIC), chartered by the States-General in 1621, operated the colony. Like its sister organization, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), the WIC was privately held by investors from the Seven Provinces and granted a trading monopoly by the States-General. The WIC's charter gave it sole right to the Atlantic trade, including the *Asiento* and the Caribbean, Brazilian, and North American markets. As part of their monopolies, the great trading companies could build fortresses, man armies, make alliances, appoint governors, and do whatever "the increase of trade shall require."²¹ These two companies helped establish a Dutch worldwide trading empire in the early 1600s.

Unlike most other parts of the Dutch trading empire, New Netherland combined the pursuit of trade with agrarian settlements. In 1624 the WIC consolidated its hold on the Hudson River by constructing a fort on the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Called New Amsterdam, the fort would blossom into a settlement and become the capitol of New Netherland. Despite its prominence today, the site was of little value to the overall empire, as it had only 270 residents and a marginally profitable fur trade. After the British captured it in 1664 as a prelude to the Second Dutch-Anglo war, the Republic did not attempt to get it back, preferring in the treaty to keep the Island of Run in Indonesia.

From 1624-1664, therefore, the Dutch West India Company governed New Netherland and New Amsterdam. During these forty years of Dutch rule, how did toleration in the colony compare to toleration in the mother country? Was New

²⁰ Name of the portage between Lake Oneida, which connects to Lake Ontario to the Mohawk River.

²¹ Dutch West India Company Charter, 1621 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/westind.asp

Amsterdam, as Kenneth T. Jackson argued, a “colony with a conscience” and a precursor to our modern American religious liberties? The first problem this argument encounters is that, as we have seen, even if the Republic was the most tolerant society in Europe during the 17th century, its toleration bore little resemblance to our modern notions of religious freedom. At best, Dutch religious dissenters were left alone, so long as they practiced in secret, did not seek political office, and avoided questioning the bedrock belief in the Holy Trinity. Further damaging Jackson’s argument is that the WIC’s charter required it to act “in our [the States-General] name and authority,”²² meaning it too allowed no other official church in its territories but the Dutch Reformed Church. Lutheranism and other faiths were suppressed, prompting Israel to write that “toleration in the Dutch colonial empire was scarcely less limited and grudging (and in New Netherland, and South Africa, more so) than in the Republic itself.”²³ What of the Flushing Remonstrance and its plea to end the persecution of Quakers? Pieter Stuyvesant, Director-General of the colony from 1647-1664, arrested four of the signees and replaced the town’s government with handpicked supporters.²⁴ However, in 1663, John Browne petitioned the States-General to overturn Stuyvesant’s decision, and the WIC agreed to end religious persecution in the colony. Perhaps no better situation summarizes the back and forth state of tolerance in New Amsterdam than the story of the first Jews who arrived from Brazil in 1654. Allowed to stay and trade, they had to worship in their homes and could not own shops or build synagogues.²⁵ Not surprisingly, colonial tolerance lagged slightly behind the trends in the mother country. Religious toleration in the Dutch colonies was not truly a forerunner of modern, American religious liberty. It was a very specific type of ambivalent tolerance, uniquely formed in the crucible of eighty years of revolt and hashed out by competing members of Dutch society throughout the 17th century.

This paper examined New Amsterdam’s religious toleration for two reasons: first, New York City is one of the world’s metropolises and must deal with a diverse society. Second, by examining New Amsterdam’s past (and the way we interpret it), we might

²² West India Company Charter

²³ Israel, p. 952. See also p. 954-55 for a discussion on the WIC’s policy in other parts of the Atlantic empire. To summarize: “nor was the policy of the WIC in the Dutch empire of the Atlantic one of toleration.”

²⁴ New York Public Library, <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2007/12/17/birth-freedom-religion-flushing-remonstrance-december-27-1657>

²⁵ Israel, p. 956

learn about how another diverse Republic addressed similar issues. Certainly, neither the Republic nor the West India Company ever reached the complete toleration advocated by Episcopius, settling instead on a cross between ambivalent toleration and benign repression. This should not diminish the considerable accomplishments of Dutch toleration in the New World, though. I believe the true Dutch legacy is not one of toleration but of discussion. New Amsterdam and the Republic show us that a robust, open public discourse is the surest way to eventual social improvement. Toleration and acceptance are political and moral imperatives, and the Flushing remonstrance and great Dutch toleration debates in Europe and North America teach us that social change takes time, open dialogue, disagreement, and failure before progress is to be made.

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