Introduction

In 1667, Cosimo de Medici, heir to the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, embarked on a grand tour of Europe, mostly at his father’s urging, in order to escape his unhappy marriage to a cousin of French king Louis XIV.¹ Prince Cosimo’s travels took him to, among other places, the province of Holland in the Dutch Republic, where he famously visited the aging painter Rembrandt van Rijn in Amsterdam.² Religion apparently interested Cosimo at least as much as art, for his secretaries recorded in their travel journals that their lord also visited numerous churches in the metropolis. On Christmas day in 1667, Cosimo first attended mass in a Jesuit oratory, then proceeded to attend a Reformed church service, and concluded the day with subsequent visits to Mennonite, Lutheran, Socinian, and Remonstrant churches.³ To this progress through the city’s ecclesiastical geography was later added an extensive tour of a Jesuit house church. The visitors noted the exterior, which looked like every other house on the street, and marveled at the interior, which, at the top of a long stairwell, included a proper Catholic worship space containing an altar as well as an organ and other musical instruments. The priests present were dressed in secular clothing and explained that all activities within the house took place privately.⁴ That such an arrangement

⁴ *De twee reizen*, p. 206.
was possible in ostensibly Reformed Holland was, to the diarists, clearly noteworthy, as was the sheer variety of confessional options available for their prince to sample. This degree of religious diversity was not something they could encounter at home.

The fact that early modern Holland (and the wider Dutch Republic of which it was the largest province) was religiously fragmented did not make it unique. The splintering of medieval Latin Christendom by the Protestant Reformation led to the spiritual division of virtually all the lands in the northern half of Europe in the 1500s. From a modern perspective it is difficult to imagine how strange and frightening this change must have been to a civilization that had been unified in faith and church for nearly a millennium; in this respect, the Reformation truly ended the Middle Ages once and for all. By the close of the sixteenth century, every land from the Alps northward identified with an official church, yet also harbored religious minorities who were tolerated or persecuted to a greater or lesser degree. In this regard, the officially Reformed Dutch Republic was no different from its neighbors Catholic France, Anglican England, or Lutheran Denmark, to name just a few. How this novel situation—religious disunity—would work itself out was entirely a matter of local circumstances. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a bewildering array of local, multiconfessional convivencias developed in the sundry corners of Europe despite the best efforts of political and ecclesiastical elites to impose conformity. European polities tried, in manifold ways, to accommodate, manage, or even eliminate religious minorities within their populations; nevertheless, complete religious conformity proved to be a political and clerical fantasy rather than a reality throughout the early modern era.

What is interesting about the Dutch case, especially the province of Holland, was not so much the fact of its multiconfessionalism as the peculiar circumstances that attended it. War was endemic to Europe in the sixteenth century, but only in the Low Countries did war lead (unintentionally) to the creation of an entirely new state—the Dutch Republic, or United Provinces. The accidental, improvised nature of this new state’s political and ecclesiastical settlement resulted in a strange hybrid, a polity that was strongly decentralized yet dominated by one province—Holland—and a religious identity that was officially Reformed yet demographically pluralist. The Republic’s decentralized, confederate political structure

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ensured that the management of this religious pluralism was entirely a matter of local jurisdiction. In most communities, particularly in the province of Holland, local political leaders opted to accommodate pluraliformity rather than to impose conformity. It was both the suppleness and the success of this accommodation, which resulted in fairly harmonious confessional coexistence across society, that contemporary observers either praised or denounced as “toleration.”

Religious toleration is a concept with its own historiography, initially of a Whiggish, triumphalist flavor, celebrating its emergence as a key liberal value of the modern West. This earlier literature was mostly concerned with the idea of toleration, as it was perhaps most famously articulated by the English philosopher John Locke, rather than its praxis. More recently, scholars of early modern Europe have turned from intellectual history to examining the actual experience of religious pluralism, reframing the discussion around the phenomenon of coexistence among confessional groups. How, they ask, did people of differing faiths living in the same communities get along or fail to get along with each other? This is what the editors of a recent conference volume on the subject have called the “pragmatics of diversity” – that is, the day-to-day challenges confronting European Christians of various plumage as they learned to live with each other in the wake of the fracturing of Latin Christendom. Their approach, to which this study subscribes, views early modern European religious history not through the teleological lens of the inevitable triumph of toleration, nor through the theoretical lens of intellectual history in which the abstract idea of toleration slowly gained ground among European elites, but instead through the more mundane lens of practical social and political realities. The value-laden abstraction of “toleration” has been laid aside in favor of more neutral descriptors.
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such as “coexistence” or “diversity.” How, in other words, did adherents of different churches have to accommodate and adjust to living in close proximity to each other?

This stress on practical coexistence, of which toleration may be said to be a part, has led scholars to examine various local circumstances of what has been called “interconfessional conviviality.” Keith Luria and Gregory Hanlon, for example, have uncovered the rich complexity of relationships between Catholics and Huguenots in seventeenth-century France, while across the border in Germany, the multiconfessional populations of various imperial cities have been similarly investigated by such historians as Etienne François, Peter Lang, Peter Wallace, and Paul Warmbrunn. In the case of England, Alexandra Walsham has revealed just how complicated and intricate Protestant attitudes toward Catholics were, amounting to something as oxymoronically potent as “charitable hatred.” Howard Louthan has charted the search for religious coexistence in Central Europe. All of these monographs reveal just how complicated and multifaceted the delicate choreography among different confessional groups was within the crowded communities they shared. Whatever the official hostility between confessions, believers developed a host of social and cultural mechanisms – often unofficial, tentative, informal, ad hoc, yet nevertheless effective – that allowed them to live


Much of the literature on different multiconfessional arrangements has recently been surveyed by Benjamin J. Kaplan, Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For the most recent overview, see the essays in A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World, ed. Thomas Max Safley (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

12 Walsham, Charitable Hatred, p. 2.

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and work among each other without undue harm to either community cohesion or confessional integrity. These mechanisms – discourses, languages, boundaries, identities, customs, habits, attitudes, and spaces – permitted interconfessional conviviality of varying degrees to flourish across multiconfessional Europe. This conviviality, however, was not in any way a proto-Enlightenment victory of religious equality; it was fragile, evolving, improvised, unpredictable, and acutely sensitive to larger political, social, and cultural pressures. Conviviality could and did collapse when greater political forces required it. Louis XIV’s Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and its attendant dispersal of much of France’s Huguenot population, is probably the most famous example of the vulnerability of early modern Europe’s multiconfessional arrangements. Toleration was neither inevitable nor permanent, and confessional coexistence retained its discontents.

What follows is a particular case of early modern European confessional coexistence, a series of essays highlighting various aspects of the relationships between Calvinists and Catholics in the Dutch province of Holland from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. The case of Holland is interesting, at least in part, because it was so conspicuous; in few other regions of Europe was the religious heterogeneity of the population so obvious, so seemingly unregulated, and so diverse. More than one perplexed foreign observer remarked with – variously – surprise, admiration, envy, or derision on the bewildering and sometimes cacophonous multiconfessionalism of Holland’s towns.14 In the wealthy, teeming cities and towns of early modern Holland, where only one church was officially recognized, it was nevertheless possible to be a Calvinist, Catholic, Mennonite, Lutheran, Arminian, or a member of one of any number of small sects. It was also permissible not to adhere to any church at all. These were astonishing facts in a time and place that thought corporatively and that valued harmony above all other social virtues, whose conventional wisdom assumed that difference led only to discord.

This study focuses on the province of Holland, specifically drawing on sources from its six biggest cities: Amsterdam, Leiden, Haarlem, Delft, Gouda, and Dordrecht. Holland was the largest of the Dutch Republic’s seven provinces, as well as its economic dynamo. Holland had been the North’s economically dominant province since the later Middle Ages, and

by the early 1600s its maritime location allowed it to become the major entrepôt of world trade throughout most of the seventeenth century. At the same time, the province’s population swelled as immigrants, mostly from the Spanish Netherlands, moved into its towns and financed or labored in its textile industries. The spectacular economic growth and success of the Dutch Republic’s commercial and manufacturing sectors was a phenomenon largely confined to the province of Holland. This economic dominance is reflected in the revenue quotas each province was obliged to pay to finance the national government; Holland’s quota was always at least 55 percent during the seventeenth century. Most of the dazzling economic and cultural ascendancy that is popularly associated with the Dutch Golden Age was in fact confined largely to the province of Holland. In addition, Holland was religiously the most diverse of the seven provinces. With neighboring Utrecht, Holland had the largest Catholic minorities within its town populations, running anywhere from 8 percent to 20 percent. The remaining five provinces, by contrast, had much smaller Catholic populations that were much less conspicuous confessional minorities. The Catholic presence was more palpable in an everyday sense in Holland than it was in much of the rest of the Republic. Because of this, the available historical source material on Catholics is richer in Holland than in any other province except perhaps Utrecht.

The complicated dynamics attending the relationship between Catholics and Calvinists in Holland were therefore not necessarily representative of the Dutch Republic as a whole, because each province had the constitutional right to regulate its own religious affairs. The mercantile regents who controlled Holland established a largely, if not consistently, tolerationist regime. Their laissez-faire approach allowed Catholics to exercise their faith within generally clear parameters. Governments in other provinces were not always as accommodating. Some of the towns in Gelderland and Overijssel, for example, took steps in the seventeenth

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16 Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, p. 286.
18 Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, pp. 380–381.
19 Willem Frijhoff quite rightly refers to this as “connivance.” Frijhoff, “How Plural were the Religious Worlds of Early Modern Europe? Critical Reflections from the Netherlandic Experience,” in *Living with Religious Diversity*, p. 33.
century to limit the access of their Catholic inhabitants to the rights of citizenship, for various political reasons of their own. Precisely because of this local regulation of religious questions and all the variegation attending it, it is extremely difficult to make assertions about the character of multiconfessionalism in the Dutch Republic as a whole without qualifications. More historical spade work on confessional relations in other provinces must be done, and is being done, before we can paint a portrait of interconfessional relationships in the Republic in broad strokes with any degree of confidence. This study will, therefore, confine itself to the province of Holland, where the complexity of the interactions between Catholic and Calvinist was most problematic and most dynamic.

In particular, it focuses its examination on the relationships between Reformed and Catholic denominations, which were, of course, only two of the multiple confessions that could be found in Holland’s society in the seventeenth century. Confessional coexistence in Holland was, to be sure, not limited to two churches. Arguably, a fuller picture of religious coexistence in Holland would emerge if relationships among all of the province’s confessional groups were considered. The various Mennonite congregations, for instance, were an important social presence in most of Holland’s towns, and their members played significant roles in the province’s booming economy. Available quantitative evidence suggests that in some cities, such as Haarlem, Mennonites outnumbered Catholics in the first part of the seventeenth century. The Reformed church, especially in the late 1500s and early 1600s, often viewed the Mennonites as rivals and directed a fair amount of invective and polemic in their direction, much of which was returned in good measure. By the 1610s, however,


Reformed interest in the Mennonites waned considerably, as the public church became preoccupied with more palpable threats in the form of the Arminians and a revived Catholicism. In addition, the self-segregating discipline of the various Mennonite communities, who tended to use up a lot of energy fractiously arguing points of doctrine among themselves, appears to have led them to eschew confessional confrontations as the century wore on. Likewise, the Lutherans – the smallest and statistically least significant of all of Holland’s confessions – received scant attention from the Reformed church after the turn of the seventeenth century, as did the Remonstrants once they were drummed out of the public church.25

The relationship between Holland’s Calvinists and Catholics, however, was heavily charged with conflict because they were at precise theological odds with each other. The central issue of contention was which of the two was the true church. Since at least late antiquity, the Catholic church had claimed through the papal primacy a universal authority over all Christian souls, an authority buttressed by scripture and maintained by tradition. Its sacraments, particularly the mass, provided the means by which God’s grace was offered for the redemption of sinners.26 As far as the Catholic church was concerned, the Reformed church was, of course, one more variant of the malignant heresies that arose out of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformed church, in turn, by embracing the central tenet of sola scriptura, saw no legitimate scriptural basis for the Catholic church’s authority or teachings. Its Belgic Confession insisted that the marks of the true church were the preaching of the Gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the disciplining of sin. The false church, continued the creed, followed its own ordinances rather than God’s, administered sacraments improperly, and persecuted those who lived holy lives. “These two churches,” the confession added, “are easily known and distinguished from each other.”27 The Catholic church saw the Reformed as distorted and heretical; the Reformed saw the Catholic church as corrupted and idolatrous. This contest over which church was the truly valid one lay at the heart of the two confessions’ ongoing relationship with each other throughout the early modern era.

A second reason the relationship between Holland’s Catholics and Calvinists was so fraught with antagonism was the fact that they had, in effect, traded places in the 1570s. In that decade, rebels invaded Holland

and forced the province to defect to the revolt against Spain. With that defection came the disestablishment of the Catholic church in the province, which was the price the rebel regime had to pay to secure the support of Reformed Protestants. Thus, Reformation came to Holland escorted by revolt. Before 1572, the Catholic church had been the only legitimate religion, and the Calvinists were an illegal sect. Within a few years, this situation was precisely reversed: The Reformed gained political ascendancy as the only publicly allowed church, and Catholic worship was outlawed. Therefore, the relationship between Calvinist and Catholic in Holland was politicized in a way that relationships among other confessions were not.

The dislocations and shifts that came with the loss and gain of political legitimacy proved to be integral to the sorting out of the mechanics of Calvinist-Catholic coexistence in Golden-Age Holland. Simply put, the Calvinists had won and the Catholics had lost. The Reformed church believed it had won a significant victory over idolatry and superstition, and the Catholic church found itself usurped and persecuted by heresy. Therefore, at the most formal, public level, the relationship between the two confessions was antagonistic. This hostility was expressed in harsh polemic and vicious invective, by Reformed lobbying for the enforcement of anti-Catholic statutes and by the Catholic mission’s relentless proselytizing. In the polarized, confessionalized atmosphere of post-Reformation Europe, these two churches could seldom be indifferent to each other; arguably, each one’s identity was to a great degree bound up in its rejection of the other.

Paradoxically, however, it was the very same revolt, or at least its political consequences, that forced Calvinist and Catholic in Holland to coexist with one other. The republican, confederate regime that the revolt established in Holland placed political authority very much in the hands of local civic magistracies. These powerful urban regents superintended religious affairs with a firm hand and tried (with a fair amount of success) to control religious pluralism rather than eliminate it. Thus, they allowed for Catholic worship within carefully prescribed parameters, but they also placed checks on the Reformed church’s ability to exercise autonomous authority. This carefully managed accommodation of all churches, including the privileged one, allowed for a basically peaceful coexistence among confessions.

*This confederate regime has been persuasively analyzed by J. L. Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).*
This managed multiconfessionalism provided not only a society where otherwise hostile confessions could live side by side; it also permitted a high degree of interaction between adherents of different faiths. The booming economy and growing towns of Holland during the Golden Age encouraged economic and social traffic of all kinds, and, as we shall see, adherents of all confessions actively participated and cooperated in them without much regard for religious difference. Calvinists and Catholics lived and worked with each other; they befriended each other; they married each other; and they did all this during one of the most religiously polarized eras of European history. Small wonder outside observers found Holland so perplexing.

Examined on its face, the case of early modern Holland’s Calvinists and Catholics indeed appears paradoxical: How were two faiths, one favored and the other displaced, that were so implacably hostile toward each other able to coexist in comparative peace? In the past few years, historians of early modern Europe have begun to explore relations between disparate social groups through the explanatory lens of socially constructed boundaries and boundary making. Keith Luria uses a formulation of “sacred” boundaries between Catholic and Huguenot in seventeenth-century Poitou. Three different types of boundary arrangements, from the blurry to the negotiated to the rigid, characterized and facilitated interconfessional relations there. By creating such arrangements — that is, by establishing where the limits lay — French Catholics and Calvinists could find agreed-on ways to deal with each other. In a suggestive essay, Jesse Spohnholz recently speculated on the ways such boundary models might be applied to the case of the Low Countries, especially the border between the public church and private, tolerated faiths.

This study, however, is less interested in what separated confessions than in interactions between them. Divisions appear to have mattered less to most early modern Hollanders than getting along with each other. It therefore suggests that it might be more useful to conceptualize confessional coexistence in Holland as taking place not across different boundaries but instead at different levels — or more precisely, within different metaphorical spaces. Implicit in the notion of coexistence, after all,


30 Luria, Sacred Boundaries, pp. xxvii–xxx.