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978-0-521-17319-3 - Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age
Edited by R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia

Defending himself against criticisms that he was making war on his fellow co-religionists, Colonel Jean-Baptiste Stoupe, the Reformed Swiss commander of Louis XIV's troops in Utrecht during the occupation of 1672–3, retorted that the Dutch were not at all Reformed. 'It is well known . . . that in addition to the Reformed', Stoupe wrote in his tract *On the Religion of the Hollanders* (1673), 'there are Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Brownists, Independents, Arminians, Anabaptists, Socinians, Arians, Enthusiasts, Quakers, Borelists, Muscovites, Libertines, and many more . . . I am not even speaking of the Jews, Turks, and Persians . . . I must also report on an enlightened and learned man, who has a great following . . . His name is Spinoza. He was born a Jew and had not sworn off allegiance to the Jewish religion, nor has he accepted Christianity. He is a wicked and very bad Jew, and not a better Christian either.'¹

His criticisms aside, the Netherlands were indeed a Calvinist country, albeit tolerant of numerous religious communities, a fact celebrated in our visions of a Dutch Golden Age but much decried by contemporaries, even by those who enjoyed toleration. Consider the case of the Anabaptists, the most persecuted religious community during the early decades of the Reformation. In his 1633 preface to the *Martelaers Spiegel* Hans de Ries (1553–1638) lamented the languor of his fellow Mennonites. Contrasting the fervour of their forebears who were hunted down for their faith, De Ries chastised the Mennonites of his day for being 'cold and careless in religious matters'. He saw a community preoccupied with temporal affairs: 'the oxen must first be checked and the field inspected before one can come to the heavenly celebration. Wickedness is changed into pomp and splendor; goods are multiplied, but the soul is impoverished; clothes have become expensive, but interior beauty is gone; love has grown cold and diminished, and quarrels have increased.'² Such was the price for

¹ Cited in Willem Frijhoff, 'Hollands Gouden Eeuw', in *De gouden delta der Lage Landen. Twintig eeuwen beschaving tussen Seine en Rijn* (Antwerp, 1996), p. 192.

² *Martelaers Spiegel der Werelose Christenen . . .*, published in Haarlem, 1631–2; cited in Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake. Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 244.

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religious toleration, as the last Mennonite martyr died in 1574 in the northern Low Countries. In fact, the Mennonites found themselves in a new state and society, where religious toleration enabled a gradual process of economic and cultural assimilation.³

This new state, the United Provinces of the Netherlands, emerged out of the revolt against Spain in an alliance that guaranteed freedom of conscience; in the Union of Utrecht (1579), the rebel provinces agreed in article 13 that ‘nobody shall be persecuted or examined for religious reasons’.⁴ Not everyone concurred. From the beginning of the discussion on religious plurality in the Netherlands, the Calvinist Church vehemently opposed any official status for Catholicism, a position shared by other Protestant leaders during the long war with Spain, when Catholics remained a potential source of rebellion inside the new Dutch Republic. Anti-Catholic legislations remained in force throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but their enforcement, as the contributions by Henk van Nierop and Christine Kooi show in this volume, was sporadic and uneven. The central paradox of the Dutch Republic is this: the existence of a confessionally pluralistic society with an official intolerant Calvinist Church that discriminated against Catholics, but whose pragmatic religious toleration elicited admiration and bewilderment in *ancien régime* Europe and whose longevity surpassed the perhaps more tolerant religious regime of the sixteenth-century Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The Netherlands in the Golden Age were a remarkable society. Not only did the different Christian confessions carve out social and political spaces in the Republic, Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews also transformed Amsterdam into the centre of Jewish life in northern Europe during the seventeenth century. Individuals found porous boundaries. Consider the following examples: a Portuguese Jewish philosopher turned agnostic (Benedict Spinoza, 1632–77); a Mennonite poet converted to Catholicism (Joost van den Vondel, 1587–1679); and a poetess abandoning the Reformed Church for Rome, sending her sons to be educated in Leuven (Anna Roemersdochter Visscher, 1583–1651). That religious pluralism flourished in a polity with an official Calvinist Church made this story of toleration even more remarkable. How does one explain the

³ See Alastair Hamilton, Sjouke Voolstra, and Piet Visser (eds.), *From Martyr to Muppy. A Historical Introduction to Cultural Assimilation Processes of a Religious Minority in the Netherlands: the Mennonites* (Amsterdam, 1994).

⁴ M.E.H.N. Mout, ‘A Comparative View of Dutch Toleration in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries’, in C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, J. Israel, and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (eds.), *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden/New York/Cologne, 1997), p. 41.

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juxtaposition of Calvinist hegemony and religious toleration? The history of the Sephardim in Amsterdam provides an instructive example. Coming initially in the 1590s as Portuguese merchants and Christian converts, the so-called 'New Christians', Sephardic Jews in fact, were welcomed by the Regents of Holland but were strongly opposed by the Reformed clergy. When the *conversos* reverted to the open practice of Judaism, reaction from the Reformed Church was fierce. The *predikant* Abraham Coster attacked the Sephardim as an 'unclean people' who sought to build a public synagogue 'in which they can perform their evil and foolish ceremonies and spew forth their gross blasphemies against Christ and his holy Gospels, as well as their curses against the Christians and Christian authorities'.⁵ Moreover, almost from the beginning of their settlement in Amsterdam, Protestant groups sought out the Jews for debates and conversion. In 1608 Hugh Broughton, the English pastor of the separatist community in Middelburg, wrote a polemic in Hebrew against Judaism. There were many attempts to convert the Jews in the seventeenth century, especially between 1640 and 1660.⁶ Provocations and opposition aside, the Jewish community flourished because of the protection of the regents, who ignored most of the complaints of the Reformed clergy. What mattered to the regents was social peace; the pragmatism guiding magisterial policy stipulated that the Jewish community maintained internal discipline and kept watch over its own boundaries. By providing for their own poor and by strictly prohibiting the circumcision of Christian converts, the Amsterdam Jewish community maintained a stable relationship with the regents of the city that became the model for Jewish toleration in the rest of the Republic.

Social discipline and religious toleration, it would seem, went hand in hand in the Dutch Republic, unlike the case in the Holy Roman Empire, as Peter van Rooden argues in his contribution on attitudes towards Jews.⁷ A linchpin in this arrangement was poor relief. By requiring the different religious communities to take care of their own poor, the regents effectively carved up Dutch society into clearly recognisable 'pillars' (*zuilen*), to use a term from later Dutch sociology, with sharply marked boundaries between the larger civil sphere and the separate religious spheres, as Joke Spaans argues in her essay. This genius in mapping social topography ensured that religious and civil identities were anchored in separate spaces,

⁵ Cited in Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation. Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington, IN, 1997), p. 59.

⁶ R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, *De Sefardim in Amsterdam tot 1795. Aspecten van een joodse minderheid in een Hollandse stad* (Hilversum, 1989), pp. 89–98.

⁷ On social discipline and confessional conformity in Central Europe, see R. Po-Chia Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation. Central Europe 1550–1750* (London, 1989).

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which allowed for a nuanced articulation of the individual, the communal, and the civil in different representations. Expressions of loyalty to the House of Orange, for example, enabled all religious communities, including the Jews and Catholics, to celebrate a common patriotism, in spite of the unequal legal and civil status enjoyed by the different religious groups. Religious plurality was thus predicated upon a rigorous and vigilant patrolling of boundaries, undertaken by individuals, communities, and above all by the civil authorities. Order and discipline, therefore, laid the foundations for religious pluralism. The search for order propelled inner journeys of religious crossings, as was the case with Arnoldus Buchelius (1565–1641), who evolved from Catholic to Libertine and finally to Counter-Remonstrant, as Judith Pollmann shows in her contribution. The private and the public coexisted in the easygoing sociability of Buchelius with those not of the Calvinist Church and in his doctrinal intolerance of other religious communities. The construction of the vast grey zone of freedom between the private and the public, where different religious and immigrant groups must interact in daily life, was the work of civil authorities, who rigorously censored confessional polemic and defamations that could lead to disturbance of social peace.⁸ It was the case in 1613 with Cornelis Buyck, brewer and deacon of the Calvinist Church in Woerden, who insulted his Counter-Remonstrant pastor as ‘a false minister and a liar’, and who was fined the enormous sum of fl. 350 (a worker’s annual wages);⁹ it applied to Hans Joostenzoon and his wife, Mennonites who converted to Judaism, and who in turn converted an elder of the Reformed Church in Grosthuisen, who were all three arrested, sentenced to die, and pardoned to exile in 1614;¹⁰ and it was particularly true for those who confounded all religious boundaries by calling into question the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, as the followers of Spinoza and Descartes in Holland experienced at first hand the limits of toleration, as Jonathan Israel reminds us in his chapter.

Toleration, nevertheless, has served the Netherlands well. Visitors to the Republic in the seventeenth century associated religious pluralism with economic prosperity; and the image of an open society in an age of religious conformity has shaped Dutch self-image down to our day, as Ben Kaplan argues in his essay.

⁸ Willem Frijhoff gives an incisive analysis to this process in his ‘Dimensions de la coexistence confessionnelle’, in C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, J. Israel, and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (eds.), *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden/New York/Cologne, 1997), pp. 213–37.

⁹ Frijhoff, ‘Dimensions de la coexistence’, p. 236.

¹⁰ Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, p. 60.

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Our collection of essays focuses on the making of this toleration in the Dutch Golden Age, on the structure, contingency, agency, mechanism, and limitations of religious pluralism and toleration. Drawing together vastly divergent research interests and perspectives, our volume offers four conclusions and themes in the history of religious toleration: they concern periodisation, local diversity, the techniques of toleration, and comparative history.

Phases in the making of religious toleration

First, the making of religious toleration in the Dutch Republic seems to have evolved over three distinct phases. The first period, c. 1572 to 1620, was characterised by the attainment of Calvinist hegemony within the rebellious provinces. While claiming only about 20 per cent of the population of the north as full members, the Reformed Church achieved the status of official church (*publieke kerk*), while the doctrinal and ecclesiological conflicts between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants ended up in the triumph of the more restrictive wing of Calvinism with the 1618 Synod of Dordrecht. During this first period, the most restrictive anti-Catholic legislations were enacted, although the Twelve Years' Truce in the war with Spain gave Catholics a reprieve in the actual enforcement of the edicts. The formation of the Mennonite community and the arrival of Sephardic Jews also made this initial period one of tremendous social change in the Netherlands, as the new society absorbed not only different Christian and Jewish communities, but immigrants from Iberia, France, the southern Low Countries, England, and Germany.

A second period, c. 1620 to 1700, coincided with the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. A pragmatic and successful model of a pluriconfessional society evolved in the Netherlands, where a strong civil authority, especially in Holland, kept the peace between a hegemonic Reformed Church and the other religious communities. The separation between private and public spheres, the continued repression of Catholics during the span of the war and the beginning of Catholic missions launched from the south, the open toleration of the Jewish community, and the economic and cultural assimilation of the Mennonites characterised the success of religious toleration. Yet the limits of toleration were also clearly manifest in the repression against anti-Trinitarians, deists, agnostics, and atheists.

The third period spanned the eighteenth century until the end of the old Republic. The making of a system of religious pluralism was complete, resulting in a 'pillarized' society of separate communities under the watchful supervision of a strong civil authority. Improvements in the

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rights of Catholics represented the most significant development in a society where they still constituted nearly one-half of the population.

Local diversity

The chapters collected in our volume demonstrate the existence of great differences in religious toleration among towns, regions, and provinces in the Dutch Republic. Historians have long been aware of the predominance of Holland and Amsterdam in the economy, culture, and politics of the Netherlands. This was not the same for the history of religious toleration. The story of the Sephardim in the early modern Republic, for example, largely unfolded in Amsterdam; and the Amsterdam regents have been hailed in particular as exemplary of the liberal and tolerant attitude of the Dutch Republic.¹¹ Yet it was the Amsterdam regents who cracked down on the followers of Spinoza and Descartes in the last decades of the seventeenth century. Like all civil magistrates, the regents in Amsterdam were above all concerned with discipline and stability. If social peace was achieved with toleration in the towns of Holland, a different consideration guided the civil authorities in the eastern provinces of Utrecht and Overijssel. Maarten Prak argues that in towns dominated by guilds, such as Arnhem, Deventer, Nijmegen, Utrecht, and Zwolle, the Reformed Church exercised far greater political pressure and achieved a more repressive hegemony *vis-à-vis* minority religious communities. Catholics, for example, were excluded from guild membership and citizenship until the eighteenth century. By moving away from Holland, we immediately acquire a very different picture of society and religion in the Dutch Republic. We must constantly remember the sovereignty of the individual provinces and the importance of local custom in the new United Provinces.

Techniques of toleration

The most visible technique in favour of religious toleration was writing. During the early modern period, the Netherlands produced the most significant works in religious toleration and liberty; the names of Hugo de Groot, Coornhert, Wtenbogaert, and others come readily to mind. Toleration and plurality provided the theme for the formation of a textual and intellectual community that crossed religious boundaries. In addition to Remonstrant writers, members of other religious communities also defended liberty of worship; the importance of this textual tradition for

¹¹ Johan E. Elias, *Geschiedenis van het Amsterdamsche regentenpatriciaat* (The Hague, 1923).

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one religious community is shown by Samme Zijlstra in his analysis of Mennonite ideals of toleration.

Litigation represented another technique in the struggle for toleration. Protracted lawsuits against anti-Catholic placards in Texel and Hoorn, for example, reflected the strong legal culture in the Netherlands and the availability of institutional recourse for minority groups to contest the application of repressive legislation. In fact, Catholics employed many techniques to counter religious persecutions, resorting to bribery, appealing to noble patrons, and counting on the laxity of local magistrates. The key to this contest was the struggle for equal civil rights by minority religious groups, which were eventually achieved by the end of the eighteenth century. A decentralised country with archaic constitutions and fragmented political authorities was not likely or inclined to impose religious conformity.

The Netherlands in comparative perspective

Finally, we would like to propose, more as a theme than as a conclusion, the importance of comparing religious plurality and toleration in the Dutch Republic with other societies in the early modern period. While the intellectual traditions have been studied in the larger European context,¹² a comparative social and political history of religious pluralism and toleration in early modern Europe has yet to be written. Despite scepticism of the depth of toleration in the Netherlands,¹³ the Dutch Republic compared favourably to her neighbours. English Catholics, French Protestants, and suspect Judaisers in Spain and Portugal all endured far harsher treatments than their Dutch counterparts. Even in the Holy Roman Empire, where religious peace between the Christian confessions was established in 1555 and 1648, and where Jewish communities found protection among princes and magistrates, pathways through religious boundaries bristled with far more dangerous obstacles than in the Netherlands. To investigate the social and political context for religious pluralism is not to deny the achievements of the new Republic. By delineating the structures of toleration and by probing its limits, we can come to appreciate even more the achievements of a pragmatic and unsystematic arrangement that gave lustre to the Dutch Golden Age.

¹² See C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, J. Israel, and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (eds.), *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden/New York/Cologne, 1997).

¹³ See Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra (ed.), *Een schijn van verdraagzaamheid. Afwijking en tolerantie in Nederland van de zestiende eeuw tot heden* (Hilversum, 1989).

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2 ‘Dutch’ religious tolerance: celebration and revision

Benjamin J. Kaplan

When foreigners visit the Netherlands today, certain items seem invariably to stand on their touristic agenda: the Rijksmuseum, Anne Frank’s house, a boat ride through the canals. One of the more remarkable items is a walk through Amsterdam’s red light district, where, on a typical summer evening, in addition to the clientele, thousands of foreigners throng – men, women, couples, even families. Such districts are not usually on the itinerary of respectable tourists, but in Amsterdam a promenade there serves a purpose: foreigners are invited to wonder at the tolerance – or, if you prefer, permissiveness – that prevails in the Netherlands. In the same district but during the daytime, the Amstelkring Museum extends essentially the same invitation. The museum preserves Our Lord in the Attic, one of the roughly twenty Catholic *schuilkerken*, or clandestine churches, that operated in Amsterdam in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Nestled within the top floors of a large but unremarkable house named The Hart, Our Lord does not betray its existence to the casual passer-by – it has no tower, no stained-glass windows, no crosses on the outside – and, but for the museum banner that hangs today on the building’s front façade, one could easily pass by it unawares. In its day, though, its existence was an open secret, like that of the other *schuilkerken*. Its discreet architecture fooled no one, but did help to reconcile the formal illegality of Catholic worship with its actual prevalence. Today, the museum’s guidebook (English version) presents the church as ‘a token of the liberalism of the mercantile Dutch in an age of intolerance’.¹

Around the world, Dutch society is famous for its tolerance, which extends to drug use, alternate lifestyles, and other matters about which most industrial lands feel a deep ambivalence. But whence comes that tolerance, that ‘liberalism’? The guidebook hints at two answers. One is that tolerance promotes commerce and thus is profitable; the other is that the Dutch are simply a ‘liberal’, that is, tolerant, people. Tolerance is represented as smart economics, but also as a national trait – a virtue

¹ *Amstelkring Museum: Our Lord in the Attic* (n.p., 1970), first page.

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by most people's account, a vice by others', but either way as something rooted in the history, customs, and very character of the Dutch people. The Dutch, in other words, do not just practise tolerance: by their own account and others', they *are* tolerant; it is considered one of their defining characteristics.²

This is nothing new: 'Dutch' tolerance was already proverbial in the Golden Age, though the tolerance then under discussion extended only to religions. Indeed, as early as the sixteenth century, in the crucible of their Revolt against Spain, the Dutch – with Hollanders in the vanguard – began to define themselves as an especially, even uniquely tolerant people. That identity was cemented in the Golden Age, when Calvinists, Catholics, Mennonites, and a host of other religious groups lived peacefully alongside one another.³ In our own century, the same notion of Dutchness has expanded beyond the religious, just as the concept of tolerance itself, rooted in the religious dilemmas of early modern Europe, has come to be applied to all forms of 'otherness'.

Logically, the argument that the Dutch practise tolerance because they are tolerant is nothing but a tautology, unless one believes in national character as an autonomous, causal force in history, which few scholars do today.⁴ As a cultural construct, though, the argument continues to function as a powerful expression of national identity. In that capacity it provides a standard of behaviour against which the Dutch judge their society and government – severely sometimes, for example as concerns policy towards the ethnic minorities come in recent decades to live in the Netherlands. It also provides a framework for the interpretation of Dutch history. But here the problems begin, for the essentialising of 'Dutch'

² Hans Bots, 'Tolerantie of gecultiveerde tweedracht. Het beeld van de Nederlandse tolerantie bij buitenlanders in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 107 (1992), 657; W.W. Mijnhardt, 'De geschiedschrijving over de ideeëngeschiedenis van de 17e- en 18-eeuwse Republiek', in W.W. Mijnhardt (ed.), *Kantelend geschiedbeeld. Nederlandse historiografie sinds 1945* (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1983), p. 165; B. van Heerikhuizen, 'What is Typically Dutch? Sociologists in the 1930s and 1940s on the Dutch National Character', *Netherlands Journal of Sociology* 18 (1982), 103–26; R. van Ginkel, 'Typisch Nederlands . . . Ruth Benedict over het "nationaal karakter" van de Nederlanders', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 18 (1991), 43, 52; Ernest Zahn, *Regenten, rebellen en reformatoren. Een visie op Nederland en de Nederlanders* (Amsterdam, 1989), pp. 37–42; Herman Pleij, *Hollands welbehagen* (Amsterdam, 1998), pp. 37–42.

³ On the complex relations between social practice and cultural identity, and problems of terminology, see Willem Frijhoff, 'Identiteit en identiteitsbesef. De historicus en de spanning tussen verbeelding, benoeming en herkenning', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 107 (1992), 614–34.

⁴ See, for the Netherlands, Rob van Ginkel's careful examination of twentieth-century ideas and discussions concerning Dutch national 'identity' and 'character': Rob van Ginkel, *Op zoek naar eigenheid. Denkbeelden en discussies over cultuur en identiteit in Nederland* (The Hague, 1999).

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tolerance has for centuries involved mythologising, encouraged anachronism, and served partisan causes. In this way it has long obscured our understanding of religious life in the Dutch Republic. Today it does the same, but in a twofold manner: not just by propagating but also by provoking reactions, some of them exaggerated, against such mythologising, anachronism, and partisanship.

The mythologising began early. In the sixteenth century, Netherlanders justified their Revolt against Spain most frequently as a conservative action in defence of their historic ‘privileges’, or ‘liberties’. As Juliaan Woltjer has pointed out, only some of those privileges had a firm basis in law or fact, and what they entailed was not always crystal clear. Even the famous *jus de non evocando*, perhaps the most frequently cited privilege of all, was capable of varying constructions: while most people agreed that it guaranteed that a burgher accused of a crime would not be tried by a court outside his province, opinions differed as to whether it assigned to local municipal courts sole and final jurisdiction in such cases. Either way, the privilege conjured up a time when cities and provinces had enjoyed judicial autonomy, and therein lay the true power of the privileges generally: to evoke an idealised past against which the present could be judged.⁵ However vague their positive content, no one mistook the privileges’ negative import as an indictment of, and justification for resistance to, the Habsburg government’s unwelcome initiatives and innovations. Foremost among the latter were the efforts of Philip II to introduce what the Dutch, with great effect if little accuracy, called the ‘Spanish Inquisition’: an institutional structure for suppressing Protestantism, reforming the Catholic Church, and imposing Tridentine orthodoxy on the people of the Netherlands. Such a programme entailed *gewetensdwang*, the forcing of consciences, on a massive scale.

But if *gewetensdwang* was new and contrary to the privileges, was its opposite, freedom of conscience, then part of a hallowed past? That was at least the vague implication, made more plausible by the fact that believers in the old Catholic faith as well as converts to Protestantism resisted the government’s religious policies. Still, given that the variety of religious beliefs spawned by the Reformation was scarcely older than the placards outlawing them, it took some legerdemain to construe the privileges as guarantors of freedom of conscience. Nevertheless, a few writers of the period did so explicitly. Two anonymous pamphlets dating from 1579 appealed to the Joyous Entry of Brabant, the oath taken since 1356 by

⁵ J.J. Woltjer, ‘Dutch Privileges, Real and Imaginary’, in J.S. Bromley and E.H. Kossmann (eds.), *Britain and the Netherlands*, vol. v: *Some Political Mythologies* (The Hague, 1975), pp. 19–35; James D. Tracy, *Holland Under Habsburg Rule 1506–1566. The Formation of a Body Politic* (Berkeley, 1990), pp. 147–75.