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THEOCRACY AND TOLERATION

A STUDY OF THE
DISPUTES IN DUTCH CALVINISM
FROM 1600 TO 1650

BY

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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH the relation of church and state was debated throughout the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, the two controversies in the first half were the most significant, because both began as disputes in the Calvinist church itself. By the turn of the century, Calvinist theory had been clearly elaborated in favour of a church independent of political interference, while its critics adopted a more secular argument. These early controversies fell naturally into two groups in which there was a close relationship between the writings.

The first of these controversies arose out of the Arminian challenge in the Calvinist church, and lasted from 1609 to 1618, when the Synod of Dort expelled the Arminians from the church and Maurice the Stadholder drove the leaders out of the Netherlands. The first major writing was the *Waerschouwinghe* of Franciscus Gomarus, professor at Leiden and the enemy of Arminius. In 1610 there followed the *Tractaet* of Uytenbogaert, a work of great bitterness to the orthodox party, who replied to it through the works of Junius, Acronius and Walaeus. The Arminians were strongly supported by Grotius, but their attitude was considerably modified by Episcopius.

The second controversy began in 1637 when Vedelius, a foreigner but a zealous defender of the orthodox party against the Arminians, taught at Deventer a theory of the Christian magistracy which was alien to the Calvinist tradition since 1618. Therefore, he was answered by Triglandius and Apollonius. Voetius had already taught a doctrine of the church which was hostile to the position of Vedelius, though not directed against Vedelius himself, and this was collected in his greatest work published much later. Against Apollonius, there appeared a book by Salmasius, which ushered in a separate and worthless controversy fought out in many pamphlets of no originality.

Voetius was attacked by Du Moulin who, though not directly connected with the Netherlands, was strongly influenced by the

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Dutch controversy and was a self-constituted champion of Erastian theories against Dutch, Scottish and French Calvinism.

The relations of church and state had been an acute problem in the Netherlands from the beginning of the Calvinist church,¹ partly because the Calvinists were a minority and many of the ruling classes were not Calvinists, partly because the church was organised before the States were free to control it, and partly because of doctrinal disputes which the States attempted to moderate. The very meaning of the Reformation was at issue; to the Calvinists it meant a rigid conformity to creeds, to others it meant hostility to sacramentalism and dogmatism. Calvinism had to combat a native and strongly humanistic movement, critical of Roman sacramentalism, hostile to dogmatic confessionalism, distrustful of any binding authority in the church save that of the Bible, evangelical and tolerant. The composition and character of the church was in doubt.

The rapid growth of the Calvinist church, identified with the national struggle against Spain, led to a development of its organisation and a consciousness of its unity and strength, marked by an increasing insistence upon the necessity of subscribing to a confession and submitting to the Presbyterian polity. Even before 1600, there were isolated rebels, and a conflict of church and state. It was, however, Arminius² who provoked the great struggle in the church against Calvinist confessionalism, and in consequence the greatest conflict between church and state in the Netherlands. There was a direct connection between the confessional dispute and the hostility of church and state, and it was that connection which made the Calvinist church defy the state. The claim of the church to impose a confession was a claim to independence at a time when national unity was most desirable.

The Arminians appealed to the States of Holland to protect them from this confessional demand. They claimed to recognise no authority but the Bible; they denied that the problem of predestination had been clearly answered in the Bible, and,

¹ See Knappert, *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk*; Reitsma, *Geschiedenis van de Hervorming*, etc.; Sepp, *Het Godgeleerd Onderwijs*, etc.; Visser, *Kerk en Staat*; and Rogge, *Johannes Wtenbogaert en zijn Tijd* (cited as *Joh. Uyt.*).

² See especially Harrison, *The Beginnings of Arminianism*, *passim*.

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moreover, argued that it was not fundamental to salvation. The Calvinists rejected both contentions, and demanded a synod to decide the dispute. When the states insisted upon certain conditions for holding a synod, the Calvinists rejected them as incompatible with the power of the church to determine its own faith. The issue had become a question of freedom or authority in the church, and of freedom or authority in the relations of church and state.

The States attempted the part of mediation, and for that purpose forbade the church in 1611 to censure Arminians or to reject Arminian ordinands solely because of their adherence to Arminian principles. In 1614 the States decreed that the Arminian doctrine of predestination was sufficient for salvation, and that academic speculations were not to be pursued in the pulpits. It was this political oppression which was the strength of the orthodox party, particularly as a new generation had grown up during the war with Spain. Nevertheless, the orthodox themselves had adopted an extreme position, and from 1615 organised illegal churches. The threatened civil war was averted only by the unconstitutional action of the Stadholder, who dispossessed Arminian rulers in favour of the orthodox. He summoned and controlled the Synod of Dort which condemned the Arminians, and it was not until his death in 1625 that the Arminians were able to return, because his successor, Frederick Henry, refused to use the military to support orthodox aims, and because the constitution of the Netherlands enabled a few cities to thwart the will of the majority.

Although after 1625 the Arminians were allowed to establish a church upon principles of fraternity and toleration instead of authority and rigid creeds,¹ the Calvinist church became the nationally recognised, though not established, church of the Netherlands. It was reorganised upon the basis of doctrinal discipline;² the Bible was translated; social habits were reformed; and education stimulated and regulated. The church after 1618 had achieved much in its ideal of regulating society by Calvinist

¹ Cf. Tideman, *De Stichting der Remonstrantsche Broederschap*.

² Cf. Honders, *Andreas Rivetus*, chs. II–V; Ter Haar, *Jacobus Trigland*, 97–121; Wijngaarden, *Antonius Walaëus*, 58–94.

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principles, but by the middle of the century the supremacy of orthodoxy was challenged by Cartesian methods of thought and Coccejus' comparative study of the Bible. The church took to the defensive but failed to turn the secular stream.

The conflict between church and state was not limited to the orthodox church and too liberal governors, for even before 1618 there were disputes between the church and strongly Calvinist rulers, as in Zeeland, Friesland and Groningen.¹ The political control of the church in Zeeland reduced it to a more servile condition than in any other province. The constitution of the church was given to it by the ruler, few synods were sanctioned and political deputies had to be admitted. Moreover, ministers were appointed by a mixed commission representing the ecclesiastical council and the magistracy. In Groningen, the appointment of ministers had to be approved by the state. In Friesland, the political activities of the church were severely censured and its activity strictly controlled. The tendency to theocracy was resisted by even orthodox rulers. The Thirty-Sixth Article of the Confession gave to the ruler a duty to serve the church, and this was developed in the Groningen ordinance of 1601, intended to exclude all but Calvinists from the state and to disinherit all but Calvinist children as illegitimate.² A synod at Sneek in 1587 declared that only one religion was to be allowed and all heretics were to be expelled, since it was better to reduce the state to a desert than to suffer corruption with prosperity. But it may be admitted that these were exceptional and that in general the church showed a prudent respect for the limits of its own authority, and the independent sphere of the state.³

The Synod of Dort in 1618, the only national synod acknowledged by provinces and States, failed to settle the relationship of church and state upon Calvinist principles. Previous provincial and so-called national synods had formulated constitutions of the church which were not accepted by the ruling classes, which, in their turn, especially after Leicester's disastrous intrigue with the church in 1586 and the extreme ecclesiastical constitution formu-

¹ Rogge, *Joh. Uyt.* 1, 194–197; Reitsma, 400, 406–410; Knappert, 1, 69–70, 74–76.

² Visser, II, 132–139; Knappert, 1, 56–57; Rogge, *Joh. Uyt.* 1, 177, 180.

³ Visser, II, 128.

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lated by the synod at the Hague in that year, sought to impose upon the church a constitution framed to give an ultimate political power to the rulers. This attempt broke down in 1618, and the church tried to revive the constitution of 1586, which had modified the earlier independence by certain concessions to a “godly” ruler like Leicester, but which also vindicated the principle that the church was completely independent in deciding matters of doctrine.¹

In 1618, the States allowed the synod to discuss the church-order only on condition that the rights of the different provinces were not attacked, and that patronage was not abolished. The States fixed the number of delegates to the synod, and sent deputies to keep doctrinal discussion within Scriptural limits. A compromise saved the communities from an abuse of patronage, but other appointments to the ministry were subject even more to the States. There was added to the Hague order the provision that all calls to the ministry were to be made after correspondence with the government of the locality, and omitted the limitation of the civil approbation to the civil conduct of the candidate. The civil power was acknowledged still further by the provision that the government might send two deputies to any church meeting so long as they were members of the church and sat only in an advisory capacity.

The answer of the Synod of Dort to the question whether the church was sovereign in its own sphere or whether the magistrates had a voice in the internal matters of the church was only an apparent solution. Utrecht, Gelderland and Overijssel accepted the Dort church-order after some modification; three of the quarters in Friesland rejected it and the church-order was abandoned, the Stadholder threatening to treat the frequent synods as disturbers of the peace. The attempt of Holland to revise the church-order in the interests of the government only led to the continuance of the customary usages, which left all but the direction of worship under the authority of the States. Zeeland adhered to its former order, seeing no need of a common order

¹ See, especially, Hooijer, *Oude Kerkordeningen*; Rogge, *Joh. Uyt.* I, 54–65, 111–125; Knappert, I, 59–70; Reitsma, 395–410; and Visser, II, ch. X.

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when the churches were united in faith. The bid for a general constitution of the church had failed.

The policy of the governments toward the church after 1618 was in some ways even more oppressive than that of Oldenbarneveldt.¹ They often acted arbitrarily to censure or dismiss hostile preachers, while their deputies in the classis threatened to turn it into a political bishopric. Events at Amsterdam, Gouda and in Holland showed quite clearly that the church was no more independent after 1618 than before, and that provided doctrine was not corrupted and that ecclesiastical forms were observed, the church accepted the inevitable. Political commissioners controlled church polity; the States of Holland interfered in doctrine, forbidding the South Holland synod to determine the Sabbath controversy, and determining the prayers and preaching upon the fast days which it commanded. Many consistories were so dependent that they did not allow sermons upon certain Biblical Books without political consent. While the doctrinal settlement of 1618 was not impugned, the church began to rely upon its own means to preserve the purity of its doctrine.

¹ Visser, II, ch. XI; cf. Ter Haar, 63–66, and Rogge, *Joh. Uyt.* III.