IN CONCLUSION:
AUTHORITY AND ORDER

The “foundations of the Reformed religion” had been laid in the Netherlands under difficult circumstances, and the Reformation remained extremely vulnerable. Furthermore, the Catholic foe would continue the battle for as long as the Christian Reformed Church failed to maintain sufficient unity. This was William of Orange’s view of the condition of religion in the Netherlands, as expressed in a letter written to Frederick II of Denmark (1534–1588) on 9 July 1579.¹

In current historiography, Frederick II is considered a ‘Lutheran’ ruler, while William—although little can be said with certainty about his personal convictions—is placed among the ‘Calvinists’.² Such a rigid categorization of the religious relations of the late sixteenth century is, however, anachronistic and goes against the views then current. In his letter to the king of Denmark, the Prince of Orange made a powerful appeal to the importance of Christian unity. In a practical sense, he indicated the need for closed ranks against the common Catholic enemy. More important though, in my view, is the implicit assumption that both men, William and Frederick, served the same religious cause. The Prince saw it as self-evident that the religious troubles of the Low Countries were “well known to all Christendom.”³ It was a struggle of universal significance that transcended any local interest.

It would, of course, be wrong to trivialize the differences between the Protestant reformers. The Prince of Orange complained to Frederick II about the behaviour of German theologians, whose outspoken criticism of their counterparts in the Low Countries did serious damage to the cause of Reformation. The king of Denmark, who also ruled over Schleswig and Holstein, had become closely involved in the dogmatic conflict between ‘Gnesio-Lutherans’ and their ‘Crypto-Calvinist’

¹ KHA, Willem I (WI), inv. no. XIV B/8a-4, fos. 1–2. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. J. Smit for this reference.
² A. Th. van Deursen, Willem van Oranje: Een biografisch portret (Amsterdam, 1995), 60.
³ KHA, WI, inv. no. XIV B/8a-4, fos. 1, 3–4.
opponents.⁴ In the Netherlands, too, this controversy was unsettling, as the Prince indicated in his letter. According to William, the best solution would be to organize a free religious disputation. He asked permission to send a number of theologians to Denmark to carry out preliminary consultations. As yet the time was not ripe for a definitive judgement of theological issues, given that—according to the Prince—neither of the parties held sufficient authority to identify and condemn false churches as such.⁵

Force of circumstances led the Prince of Orange to develop a number of religious truces in this period, but his devotion to the ideal of a universal ecclesial community remained unaltered. This church would naturally have a public character. Unity in religion was generally accepted to be a precondition for lasting peace and unity in the state. Religious truces were only temporary solutions to local problems. In Holland, William maintained a church that he regarded as the guardian of a universal Christianity. As is apparent from his letter to Frederick, the precise identity of this church was still far from fixed. The Prince had no desire to pre-empt developments and saw it as of the utmost importance to create room for debate. As long as Christendom continued to face a crisis of authority, a formal colloquy provided a means towards legitimizing the ruling church’s position of power. Also, a disputation of this kind enabled various forms of conflict management that could also serve the cause of unity. The same considerations had weight in the Prince’s final consent to the religious disputation in The Hague. William’s decision was not guided by a rarified ideal, subsequently to be cruelly thwarted by the recalcitrant realities of religious division. Religious unity may at the time have constituted an ideal, but its pursuit must not therefore be dismissed as unrealistic or utopistic even.

In the late sixteenth century it was far from naive to desire religious unity, and far from utopian to think that a religious disputation would further this cause. The expectation was that a formal debate of this nature would bring theological controversy to an end, strengthen the position of the public church, and thereby serve “towards conserva-

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⁵ KHA, WI, inv. no. XIV B/8a-4, fos. 2, 4.