CHAPTER 4

Calvinists vs. Libertines: A New Look at Religious Exile and the Origins of ‘Dutch’ Tolerance

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Scholars of the Reformation in the Netherlands have long understood the role of persecution and exile in encouraging specific forms of Christianity over others. In the sixteenth century, the Low Countries saw a great diversity of religious adherents, including Lutherans, reform-minded Catholics, Anabaptists, spiritualists, and Calvinists. Though all of these strains persisted, it was the Calvinists who emerged in control of the state-sponsored Dutch Reformed Church once the military success of rebel forces in 1572 allowed the creation of the Dutch Republic.¹ One reason that historians have given for the success of Calvinism has been the key role of the experiences in exile in helping to consolidate this religious movement, theologically, institutionally, liturgically, and even socially. The received story generally goes like this.

In the 1540s, the Catholic Habsburg government stepped up its persecution of religious dissenters. Some Protestants renounced their heresy, while others lived in hiding. Still others accepted martyrdom. The most important people in the consolidation of Calvinism, though, were the exiles. These were people who were willing to leave their homes, families, and friends, and to move to foreign lands, where their prospects were uncertain. Unlike other dissenters, exiles both preserved their commitment to their faith—and lived to tell about it. By the mid 1550s refugee communities of Calvinists from the Low Countries had emerged in southern England and the northwestern Holy Roman Empire. In England, the largest were in London and Norwich, while in the German lands they were in Emden and Wesel.²


The experience of exile, historians have emphasized, helped transform evangelicals into Calvinists. Religious refugees found men and women who shared their beliefs, established networks of mutual support, and built so-called ‘model churches’ that offered pure specimens of the Calvinist faith. Refugees began building church institutions that could bind them together, establishing norms of doctrine and liturgy. In short, the exile experience encouraged Dutch Calvinists to see themselves as independent of state authority, bound together by the Word of God, free to work relatively unhindered to establish doctrines, institutions, and a pattern of ritual life that allowed them to live out their ideology in its most perfected form. The Reformation historian Heiko Oberman even used the term “Exulantentheologie” to describe how Calvinist ideas thrived in conditions of exile. As Oberman suggested, John Calvin’s emphasis on the doctrine of election and predestination served as great consolation for his persecuted followers—it provided a sense of meaning in a world in which hardships on earth stood in contrast with the guiding hand of God. The conditions of harsh persecution and alienation from government, thus, were perfect for the spread of Calvinism.

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5 The most important events in this institutional consolidation were the so-called ‘Convent of Wesel’ in 1568 and the Synod of Emden in 1571, which most histories have argued established the basic ecclesiastical framework for the future Dutch Reformed Church. Weseler Konvent 1568–1968: Eine Jubiläumsschrift (Düsseldorf: Presseverband der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland, 1968). Doede Nauta, De Synode van Emden, oktober 1571. Een bundel opstellen ter gelegenheid van de vierhonderdjarige herdenking (Kampen: Kok, 1971). E. Geudeke, “De classis Edam 1572–1650.: Opbouw van een nieuwe kerk in een verdeelde samenleving” (Ph.D. dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2008).