CHAPTER 6

Hot Protestants: Predestination, the Freedom of Will and the Making of the Modern European Mind

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“You are cast away, go! You have started with lies, you have ended with lies. Dimittimini, exite.” The end was bitter and dramatic. The chairman of the Synod of Dort, Johannes Bogerman, lost his patience. Roaring, as some reports put it, he ordered Simon Episcopi inus, who had just, in equally outspoken terms, accused Bogerman of committing acts of slavery, to leave. Episcopi inus and his fellow Arminians left.

As usual the two great—indeed massive—seventeenth century accounts of the Synod, those of Johannes Uytenbogaert on the Arminian and of Jacobus Trigland on the orthodox Calvinist side, differ strongly in their account and appreciation of what happened at the Synod of Dort. But they agreed Dort marked a schism; Dutch Reformed Protestantism had split apart. In almost all 57 fateful sessions of the synod which had started on 13 November 1618 the debate had been bitter, though invariably participants asked for moderation, temperance and sobriety. The Synod vacillated between the bitterness of intense theological dispute and a longing for religious peace, between the relentless quest for truth and the thirst for toleration. For over ten years Dutch Reformed Protestants had been arguing, with increasing intensity and rancour. Divisions and issues were manifold, with those such as Simon Episcopi inus and Johannes Uytenbogaert, labelled Remonstrants or Arminians, endorsing the

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views of the theologian Jacobus Arminius, fighting the Contra-Remonstrants or Gomarists, the followers of his erstwhile Leiden colleague, Franciscus Gomarus. In all probability quite a few Dutch Protestants were somewhere in between, often lost in disbelief and anxiety.

Soon after his appointment to a chair in theology at the University of Leiden in 1602, Arminius had started to raise profound questions concerning the proper understanding of the doctrine of freedom and predestination within Calvinist theology. It was hardly a local dispute. From the very beginning the ‘Arminian troubles’ had a strong European dimension. One of Arminius’s earliest works, written as early as 1602 and published in 1612, was the *Modest Examination of Dr Perkins’s Pamphlet*, a response to William Perkins’s study *De Praedestinationis modo et ordine*. The Synod of Dort was the culmination of the ‘Europeanisation’ of the debates on human free will and divine predestination in the evangelical churches. As the official engraving of the Synod shows, indeed emphasises, delegations from England, the Kurpfalz, Hessen, Nassau, Bremen, Geneva and the Calvinist Swiss Cantons participated in the Synod. In other words, the Synod of Dort was of key importance to the development of modern European Calvinism.

This chapter aims to contribute to the study of the relationship between Calvinism and modernity from a particular angle. Whilst modernity is a contested concept, with even those in favour of theories of modernization speaking in terms of multiple modernities, there can be little doubt that freedom has become a crucial value in Western democracies, and has been so for quite a while. This chapter explores the significance of the debate on human freedom.

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