War, Piracy and Religion: Godfried Udemans’ Spiritual Helm (1638)

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Abstract
The Calvinist minister Godfried Udemans (1581/2–1649) is generally considered to be one of the more important seventeenth-century theologians from the province of Zeeland. He specialized in writings for a broader public, including, in particular, publications on ethical and religious codes in trade and seafaring. Of his various writings on moral theology, ’t Geestelyck roer van ’t coopmans schip, first published in 1638, is the most important. The Spiritual helm appeared in print some thirty years after Grotius occupied himself with De jure praedae (the manuscript dates from 1604), but Udemans had already begun articulating his thoughts in 1608. It is instructive to examine the ethical writings of a contemporary of Grotius. It has been claimed that in the early modern period, Calvinism, especially in its English Puritan variety, did much to propagate the medieval traditions of holy war that to all appearances had been laid to rest by Spanish theoreticians during the sixteenth-century Renaissance. In this article, I examine the extent to which Udemans draws upon religion as a means of legitimizing violence on behalf of secular political authorities such as the prince (or, as in the case of the Dutch Republic, the States General), and, more in particular, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and West India Company (WIC). If Udemans is representative of the religious tradition to which he reckoned himself, holy war thought did not figure prominently in Dutch Calvinism.

Keywords
Godfridus Udemans; holy war; moral theology; piracy; ethics; Dutch Republic

Introduction: Godfried Udemans

Having read theology at the university of Leiden, Godfried or Godefridus Udemans (1581/2–1649) followed a career as a clergyman in the province of Zeeland. He worked as a minister in Haamstede for several years and then in 1604 became a pastor in Zierikzee, where he remained until his death. Udemans is generally considered to be one of the more important seventeenth-century theologians from Zeeland. He specialized in writings for a broader
public, including, in particular, publications on ethical and religious codes in trade and seafaring. He published a *Spiritual compass* in 1617 and a *Merchant’s yacht* in 1637.\(^1\) Of his various writings on moral theology, ‘t Geesteelyck roer van ‘t coopmans schip, first published in 1638, is the most important.\(^2\) The book covers aspects of morality and ethics on which Udemans had been writing since 1608. It was dedicated to the directors of the East and West India Companies.

The title, ‘t Geesteelyck roer van ‘t coopmans schip, is best translated as *The spiritual helm of the merchant’s vessel*. The book’s subtitle explains Udemans’ choice of metaphor:

> that is: a faithful account of how a merchant and seafaring trader should conduct himself in his actions, in times of peace and war, with respect to both God and people, on water and on land, and especially among the heathens in the East and West Indies: for the glory of God, the foundation of His congregations, and the salvation of His souls: and also for the temporal well-being of the fatherland and his family.

A motto on the title page further clarifies his preference for the *gubernaculum spiritualis* as metaphor. It is a passage from the New Testament: ‘Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth’ (Jas 3.4).\(^3\)

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3. All quotations are from the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible, which most resembles the Dutch translations available at the time.