CHAPTER TWO

HONOR, GENDER AND DISCIPLINE IN DUTCH REFORMED CHURCHES

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Summary

Discipline has widely been seen as a deterrent to join Reformed communities. By contrast, this essay argues that the existence of church discipline was a key attraction of the Reformed Churches in the Dutch Republic. This applied especially to women. For unmarried women, who had little opportunity to manifest themselves in the corporate mainstays of urban life, church membership offered a rare chance to engage in a form of sociability that conferred honor to them. The existence of church discipline guaranteed that honor.

On 22 January 1628, the Utrecht consistory discussed a request by a woman called Maria Smeets, who had asked the elders and the ministers for permission to attend the Lord’s Supper in the Reformed Church. About fifteen years earlier, she had deserted that Church, and it must have been obvious to her that she had some explaining to do before she would be allowed to rejoin. Fortunately for us, one of the elders recorded her tale in his journal.

Like so many children in the first generations after the Revolt, Maria had been born into a family that was not confessionally united. She was the child of a Catholic mother and a Reformed father, and had had to make up her own mind whose religious example she would

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1 Parts of this article appeared earlier in Judith Pollmann, ‘Women and Religion in the Dutch Golden Age,’ Dutch Crossing 24 (2000), 162–182. I am grateful to the editors of Dutch Crossing for their permission to rework the material.
follow. Initially, she had chosen to join her father and had become a member of the Reformed Church. And she had been perfectly satisfied there until, sometime during the 1610s, she received a visit from her cousin, a Catholic priest called Pauli, who brought a deeply disturbing message. The ghost of Maria’s deceased mother had appeared to him to complain that her daughter had not fulfilled her wish to have an altar erected in her memory. Struck by guilt, Maria had become an easy prey to her cousin. She agreed to return to the Catholic Church and even became a klop—a lay sister. She had, however, set two conditions. She demanded that she not be asked to worship the Saints or to believe that the Pope was the head of the Church. Her cousin initially agreed to these demands, but eventually began to build up the pressure, and had ultimately “damned” Maria. Hence, according to Maria, her desire to return to the Reformed Church. After some more questioning, the consistory granted her request.

This tale is interesting for a variety of reasons. First, it reminds us that the Reformation process did not necessarily divide the world into clear confessional categories. Well into the seventeenth century, people like Maria, born of mixed marriages, had to negotiate religious division and conflicting loyalties. Yet it is another aspect of Maria’s tale that will concern us here; while Maria seems to have been both willing and capable of defining her own religious priorities, she nevertheless wanted to submit to Reformed church discipline. There was no legal reason why she had to do so. Just as in France, Calvinism in the Dutch Republic was a voluntary religion. However privileged the Reformed Church had become after the Dutch Revolt, no one was forced to attend it. Many only attended sermons but never became communicant members of the Church.

To become a member one had to make a confession of faith before the consistory, which would also examine one’s reputation and one’s knowledge of the faith. Unlike in France, Reformed men and women in the Netherlands only made their confessions of faith when they were eighteen years of age or even very much older. As a consequence, few people were members of the church simply because of parental pres-

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2 Utrecht, University Library, MS 1053, Arnoldus Buchelius, Ecclesiastica Ultraiectina, 1626–1638, fols. 58r, 22 January 1628; 69r–v, 2 April 1628.