The English in the Netherlands

The relations between the English churches in the Netherlands and the political and ecclesiastical authorities in their home country were radically changed after the accession to the throne of Charles I\textsuperscript{2}. In 1621 his father had granted permission to British ministers who had fled from England or Scotland, to organize a classis after the pattern of the Walloon churches in the Netherlands\textsuperscript{3}. It may be doubted if James was aware that, from the beginning, the Walloon churches in the Netherlands had been organized within the framework of the Dutch Reformed Church and according to the latter's presbyterian church order\textsuperscript{4}. The founder of the classis and the most important spokesman of the group of 11 English and Scottish preachers who took the initiative in its establishment, was John Forbes, minister of the Merchant Adventurers at Delft. In their "Declaration or Act" (1620) they had formulated as their purpose: "the removal of all jealousies of innovation, separation, faction, or schisme". They had declared that they would not "doe any thing in any forme to the least of-fence of the churches in these provinces, or any way to impaire any par-ticular lawfull privelege, which hitherto hath bene enjoyed by any of the Inglish churches in these provinces, being in nature or quality naither offensive nor contrary to the order of the Dutch or French churches among whome they reside...". They were no separatists. They acknowledged the Church of England "as... the true churches of Christ, equally precious in the sight of God (through the same most precious faith) with

\textsuperscript{1} Paper read at the Second Anglo-Dutch Colloquium, on "the Church and Authority", at Oxford, 2-6 September 1980.


\textsuperscript{3} R. Ph. Stearns, \textit{Congregationalism in the Dutch Netherlands. The Rise and Fall of the English Congregational Classis 1621-1635} (Chicago, 1940) 10.

\textsuperscript{4} Rutgers, \textit{Acta}, 245f.
our selves; resolving still to hold communion with them notwithstanding any difference of externall order.” Thus these ministers distinguished themselves from such theologians as the teacher of the Brownists in Amsterdam, Henry Ainsworth, who recognized neither the liturgy of the Church of England nor the validity of its ordination, and his successor John Canne, who disputed Ames’ recognition of the ministry in the English church, and from John Davenport, who rejected the idea of “a particular church being subjected to a classis.”

Nevertheless the classis was somewhat ambivalent in nature. In a resolution of the States General of 10 October 1621 it was decided, that the English classis should keep “the order of the Walloon churches in these countries.” Consequently the Dutch church used to compare the status of the classis with that of the Walloons. The English classis or synod was to supervise church life in the same way as a classis or synod of the Dutch Reformed Church was accustomed to. Thus they ought to verify the legitimacy of the letters of transfer, procured by their pastors and to ascertain whether or not they were qualified for the ministry. As a matter of fact however the English classis was not a classis after the Dutch Reformed pattern. It had only an advisory competence. Classical oversight over the local churches, as was intended by the Dutch authorities, was missing. There was no control over the procedure of the election of ministers in the local churches. Besides the English classis met only sporadically. We may rather consider its organisation as a compromise, a middle course between the Brownist separation and the church structure of the Dutch Reformed. Local member churches might have a presbyterian structure (pastor, elder and deacon), as the English church in The Hague shows. In spite of this indistinctness the ecclesiastical and political authorities in this country did not interfere in the business of the English classis.

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5 Stearns, Congregationalism, 83f.
7 J. Canne, A Necessitie of Separation from the Church of England, proved by nonconformist principles....s.1., 1634.
9 ARA.RSG. Inv. Nr. 3180, fol. 503v.
11 Ibid., 84.
12 Ibid., 137, 171f., 207.
13 A. C. Carter, The English Reformed Church in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century (Amsterdam, 1964) 69.