

Introduction

The Role of Reformed Christianity in the Commercial and Colonial Endeavors of the Dutch Golden Age

King Charles X of Sweden thought he knew the culture and character of his European neighbors to the southwest. “Here is your religion,” he once said to a Dutch envoy, exhibiting a large silver coin: “You serve only your Idol, which is Commerce.”¹ Likewise, the English leader Oliver Cromwell purportedly grumbled that the Dutch loved gold more than God after they rejected an English alliance in 1651.² Cromwell’s countryman, Governor Thomas Lynch of Jamaica, revealed his own cranky, pithy version of the Dutch worldview when he said that “Jesus Christ was good, but trade was better.”³ Again and again, frustrated and bemused friends and enemies claimed that Dutch devotion centered on profits rather than God, that wealth and commerce always trumped religion in the Netherlands.

If the Dutch disliked these pompous lectures, they rarely said so, maybe because of some precocious, entrepreneurial sense that the customer is always right. In truth, contemporaries distrusted and disapproved of them for reasons that had little to do with faith. Nor is it likely that their hypocritical critics—in this case a monarch, a member of the English gentry, and the complicit governor of an infamous pirate haven—appreciated their own wealth any less. They just acquired it differently. Their disdain might reflect the simple misgiving and distrust that people often harbor for competitors. Or it might reflect a clumsy effort to identify and explain their differences, to understand a Dutch economy and state whose basic characteristics will feel more familiar

to today's readers than they did to most Europeans at the time. Together the dispersal of power in the Dutch Republic, its merchant rulers, its social mobility and access to office, and the simplicity of Dutch political culture in general offered a sharp contrast and a subtle challenge to the growing pomp and spectacle of monarchical neighbors.⁴

The Republic was the first hegemonic power in the capitalist world economy, "the first modern economy."⁵ Beginning in about 1590 and continuing through the seventeenth century, the Dutch enjoyed high wages and employment rates. Situated at the mouth of major rivers like the Rhine, which carried commerce to and from central Europe, they also traded with nearby England, France, and the Baltic states. Their soil was never the finest quality, but even that worked to Dutch advantage: nobles and ecclesiastical officials in the Middle Ages had taken less interest in the Low Countries, giving generous terms to peasant farmers to colonize the newly drained lands. By the early modern period the peasantry owned much of the land outright and people could buy and sell property with relative ease. Regular imports and a fluid land market, unencumbered by the commons, allowed them to specialize in single commodities, for they could now buy the grain and other needs that farmers elsewhere had to grow or make for themselves.⁶

Agricultural specialization and urbanization mirrored the rise of various industries, including dairy, textiles, soap, beer, pipes, munitions, paper, books, and shipbuilding. Dutch merchants brought gold and ivory from West Africa, silver from Spanish America and Japan, and tobacco, sugar, and other new goods to the Netherlands, then reexported them alongside Dutch manufactures throughout Europe. As the continent's leading trade entrepôt, Amsterdam became a financial center as well, offering marine insurance and other products that diversified risk and lowered costs. At one of the world's first stock exchanges, one could bet on the outcome of almost any event and buy shares in corporations like the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC).⁷ The city's exchange bank facilitated payments and issued the most dependable money in Europe. The Dutch commanded high prices for quality goods, but technological efficiency and cheap credit resulted in low freight rates. When they chose to do so, they could flood a market with reduced merchandise and undercut rivals who simply couldn't compete at the same level.

Given these economic developments and advantages, is it any wonder that even their allies regarded the Dutch with envy and scorn, that contemporaries like Oliver Cromwell and King Charles X questioned the Dutch commitment to everything but the almighty guilder? When former allies became enemies on the battlefield, the rhetoric could reach whole new extremes. Then the

lectures about Dutch greed and false worship became unambiguous expressions of enmity, even more prejudiced and imaginative than before. During the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654), one anonymous Englishman took great delight in describing his theory that the Dutch were “descended from a horse-turd, which was enclosed in a butter-box.” The diarist Samuel Pepys wrote more bluntly during the second war (1665–1667) that “the Devil shits Dutchmen.”⁸

The relationship between faith, worship, and the emerging capitalist economy is no less puzzling today, more than four hundred years after their fellow Europeans first accused Dutch merchants of misplaced devotion.⁹ This book is about Dutch expansion in the seventeenth-century Atlantic world, not capitalism or modernity *per se*. But the projection of Dutch power to Africa and America under the West India Company fostered economic development, and the company is an obvious potential subject in any discussion about religion and affluence, especially because—whatever the Swedes and English believed—many Dutch did in fact promote a cultural, religious mission overseas. They could do so because their joint-stock companies, while certainly “modern,” were not the simple entities that word might imply. They were not just producers or trading mechanisms, nor were they strictly private. Early modern joint-stock companies employed thousands of sailors and soldiers, waged war on competitors and enemies, established colonial settlements, collected taxes, and wrestled with questions of political, legal, and religious authority. Within their spheres of influence, they bore the same powers and responsibilities as the state. To steal a useful term from the British world, the WIC was “a company-state.”¹⁰

Understanding the role of religion in the commercial and colonial endeavors of the Dutch Golden Age begins with an acknowledgment of the manifold goals and powers of these joint-stock companies. Because the WIC was an extension of the state that created it, it necessarily partnered with the Dutch Reformed Church, which enjoyed a monopoly on public worship in the Netherlands and its colonies. But the church-company relationship wasn’t just a thoughtless by-product of corporate organization. Far more than that, the union was strong in this case because of the martial, politically charged times in which the company was born and the Calvinist loyalties of many investors and directors. That context and those influences magnified whatever religious element would have existed in the company anyway, creating religious opportunities and an intense sense of mission for Calvinists in the early Dutch Atlantic. Before expanding on that argument and explaining some of the long-term impacts of the church-company union, I will review a few related theories and alternative points of view.

The historiography on religion and economic development is an old one. Most famously, the sociologist Max Weber argued in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) that Calvinist doctrines produced the mental conditions or frame of mind amenable to the new economic age, that a belief in predestination encouraged people to work hard and save money as they searched for signs of God's favor in their earthly, secular callings.¹¹ Though the Weber theory has had a long, controversial life in the English-speaking world, Dutch scholars have never shown much interest in it. In a smattering of articles and chapters over the years they dismiss it because, for example, Weber confused later Protestant beliefs with early Calvinism. They also maintain that Dutch theologians didn't teach or write much about seeking heavenly signs, which is critical for the psychological component of Weber's argument. Perhaps most damning, the Reformed Church opposed lending, usury, and other practices that drove capitalist growth. And some Calvinist ministers expressed discomfort with wealth. Similar to the English and Swedish critics cited above, they taught that riches were potential spiritual dangers and threats to genuine godliness. According to the current consensus, the Dutch flourished *despite* the public church, not because of it.¹²

In the only book-length treatment of the subject in a Dutch context, the influential *Religious Factors in Early Dutch Capitalism* (1967), Jelle Riemersma went beyond a simple discomfort with trade and identified a gradual separation of religion and business between about 1550 and 1650, as if the Dutch came to see business in neutral terms.¹³ On the topic of global expansion, Riemersma wrote that "commercial enterprise was no longer seen in relation to an ultimately religious purpose." Modernity meant a "divorce between the pursuit of commerce and that of wider political and religious aims." He contrasted state-sponsored Spanish and Portuguese expansion with the independence of joint-stock companies, whose concerns were "strictly commercial."¹⁴ Similarly, one sometimes reads that the WIC "was organized strictly as a trading and commercial endeavor," that the VOC was a "secular" institution "with no ecclesiastical ties or obligations." Freed from so many burdens, the Dutch could make pragmatic, rational choices in the name of profit. Instead of losing money to "ecclesiastical or empirical purposes, as was often the case with the Spanish," the Dutch could reinvest their earnings.¹⁵

The longtime focus on trade tends to foster an essentialist imperial identity that strips Dutch expansion of other elements and leaves the Dutch without any meaningful ideologies, religious or otherwise. After all, they were an "alongshore folk" and theirs was a "commercial empire."¹⁶ The reality behind these statements is that, because the Republic was small and prosperous, Dutch colonies struggled to attract sufficient numbers of people. The WIC's late

arrival in the Atlantic world, its years of privateering, and the hostile, unhealthy climates it encountered in some regions also played a part in reducing the Dutch influence and Dutch presence in the long term. However, as I demonstrate below, at different times and places the Dutch engaged in activities and shared and borrowed ideas that are sloppily labeled English, Spanish, and French in other contexts. No one had a monopoly on any one plan or practice. Expansion was experimental and diverse. The experience itself could either create differences among Europeans or act as an equalizer, depending on the specific conditions in each locale.¹⁷

Related to Riemersma's argument about a "divorce" between religion and business in the Netherlands, the following are five of the most persistent claims about Dutch expansion: First, WIC directors and merchants were indifferent to religious questions and, in the interest of profit, they neglected ecclesiastical needs abroad. Second, Dutch colonies, such as they were, lacked European institutions. Under company government, they were mostly glorified trading posts.¹⁸ Third, to cut costs and find submissive, pliant clergy, both companies hired incompetent men: uneducated, inefficient, and lazy. Fourth, the clergy's main purpose was to serve company employees in *handelskerken* ("trade churches") in Dutch forts and ships.¹⁹ And in the same vein, fifth, the Dutch showed no interest in the souls of indigenous people. Detached from the affairs of church and state in quasi-private institutions, they could ignore other distractions and concentrate on trade. Often compared with pious neighbors like Portuguese Jesuits in Asia and, for so long in the colonial American context, New England Puritans, the "businesslike Dutchmen" begin to seem rather single-minded. They did not allegedly care about dogmatic differences nor spread their religion; they found the union of mission and commerce "entirely strange."²⁰

W. J. van Hoboken created a counternarrative in a widely read essay in the 1960s, arguing that the WIC was a Calvinist institution, a company with significant religious and political aims because so many of its directors were migrants from the southern Netherlands and refugees of war.²¹ But Van Hoboken did not explore the implications of his thesis afterward, and he was ignored or criticized for decades for reasons I have already described. Company directors were only concerned with profit, wrote his first critic, J. G. van Dillen: "Their deeds testify more of greed than of a Calvinist philosophy of life." Van Dillen explained that every director loved silver, but they expended little effort on missionary work and most of them didn't care about religious dogma.²² A related argument (and a sixth major theme in the literature on Dutch expansion) is that the directors, like the Dutch in general, were too tolerant to be strict Calvinists. They purportedly winked or connived at

nonconformity in their colonies whenever it suited their interests. Siding explicitly with Van Dillen, the historian George Smith divided his 1973 book on New Netherland between “The Church’s Point of View” and “The Merchants’ Point of View,” and he claimed that WIC directors tolerated illicit worship because the colony was “first and foremost a commercial enterprise to which the Reformed faith was appended as a godly afterthought.”²³

Despite their positive contributions and strengths, I read historians like Riemersma, Van Dillen, and Smith and feel that they draw the lines a bit too stark, that the church’s concerns about trade and wealth, the fervent pursuit of riches by Dutch merchants, and the independence of joint-stock companies don’t merit an interpretation that always seems to diminish religion as a consequential force in the Dutch world. Themes like indifference, neglect, and tolerance, when the latter is just the fruit of self-interest, suggest an *absence* of religion among the seventeenth-century Dutch.²⁴

Recognizing and studying the West India Company’s social responsibilities and civic agenda became more common in the 1980s and 1990s, in part because of the invaluable Dutch-to-English translations of the New Netherland Project, based at the New York State Library in Albany.²⁵ Yet the best recent scholarship still tends to come from people who utilize original Dutch sources: Jaap Jacobs, Janny Venema, and Willem Frijhoff (to name a few). Jacobs and Venema don’t write strictly about religion, but it occupies a central place in their work because of their interest in colonial society. They deal with Dutch government, politics and social status, the Reformed Church, and related matters, emphasizing the successful plantation and growth of Dutch institutions in New Netherland.²⁶ Frijhoff argues that, too often, “commercial interest” and “religious concern” are portrayed as polar opposites. In his biography of Everardus Bogardus, who worked as a minister for the WIC in West Africa and New Netherland, Frijhoff provides a fine example of the opportunities available to those who are willing to look at Dutch expansion in fresh ways. He takes a former nobody, the “evidence” for the inferiority of Dutch clergy in New Netherland, and writes nine hundred pages on Bogardus’s life and thought, starting with his days as a visionary orphan in Holland.²⁷

Looking beyond New Netherland, the only monograph on a religious topic for any other WIC colony is Frans Schalkwijk’s book on the Reformed Church in Dutch Brazil, which I use extensively in chapter 5.²⁸ I also make use of a growing number of regional, oceanic, and global histories that address social questions in the Dutch world more generally. To take just one notable example, in his book *Innocence Abroad* (2001), Benjamin Schmidt shows how the Dutch exploited the image of the tyrannized Native American to foster a sense of “nation-ness” in the young Republic during the war with Spain. Schmidt

poses a challenge to the pervasive reputation of indifferent Dutch traders. He argues that they took their imagined responsibilities toward Native Americans quite seriously, believing that in places like Peru and Chile, which they tried on different occasions to conquer, oppressed Indians would flock to their banner, convert to Protestantism, and join the invaders in overthrowing the Spanish. In short, “the Dutch Republic showed itself willing to put its money where its rhetorical mouth was . . . by investing substantial funds and effort into forging an ‘alliance’ with its American ‘brethren.’”²⁹

While religion was just one component of the Dutch cultural, imperial mission, in this project I decided to favor the topic because it offers a real contrast and an effective tool for challenging the persistent infatuation with the “commercial character” of Dutch expansion. I chose the framework of Atlantic history in order to set bounds on an otherwise massive undertaking, but more importantly because the western hemisphere is the more neglected of the two in Dutch historiography.³⁰ Atlantic history also discourages the tendency to generalize about a people based on their lives and work in one region. A broad, comparative analysis will have wider appeal and, I hope, rescue the WIC from New Netherland, whose place in the Dutch world doesn’t justify its profound influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century views of the company.³¹

On the question of whether there was an “Atlantic world,” whether that term is an artificial category that works, at most, for the British and Iberians, the Dutch case offers much food for thought.³² Certainly there are potential problems and pitfalls whenever one employs names or borders that didn’t exist at the time of one’s study, and in this book I try to deal candidly with matters of international concern. For instance, I show that the Reformed Church saw the companies as similar institutions and participants in a kind of global mission. Some clergy moved from one hemisphere to another, working intermittently for the WIC and VOC over the course of their careers. And various ministers, company directors, merchants, and other personnel were born in foreign countries and continued to have family and business ties in non-Dutch lands. For these reasons, even the word “Dutch” starts to seem inadequate, never mind the controversial “Dutch Atlantic.”³³

More than anything else, however, the Republic’s division of the globe between a WIC and VOC demonstrates that the Atlantic world didn’t just spring from the minds of modern scholars. The Dutch could have and did briefly consider combining the companies, but they did not.³⁴ They referred to Asia as the East Indies and everything else as the West Indies, often meaning the Caribbean or Brazil, but sometimes using the term even for Africa. Likewise, the Reformed Church in the province of Zeeland had an East Indies committee

and a separate West Indies committee to oversee religious needs in Africa and America. In one regard the Dutch weren't alone: England and France also founded East India Companies. The fact that they didn't do the same for their territory in the western hemisphere, leaving it open to multiple companies, merchants, and proprietors, is a reminder that they also approached the world in two halves. To make the same division today is no artificial, anachronistic imposition; and nowhere is that more clear than in the Dutch case.

Rejecting the spiritual/secular dichotomy and essentialism of some Dutch history writing, I begin with the modest proposition that religion mattered to seventeenth-century peoples, then ask the following questions: How did Reformed Christianity, the public faith of the Netherlands, influence the Dutch experience abroad? How did the Reformed Church and the West India Company interact in each setting? What effect did the major religious issues and divisions of the period have on the WIC and its directors, merchants, employees, settlers, and indigenous allies? Conversely, what effect did expansion have on Dutch Calvinism? If my institutional approach (meaning the attention I give to church and company) seems somewhat conventional, the book is laying a necessary foundation. Based in Dutch-language sources, including letters, diaries, meeting minutes, naval logs, and other manuscripts and printed materials, this is the first comprehensive study of the WIC and Reformed religion during what Wim Klooster calls "the Dutch Moment," or the middle decades of the seventeenth century, when Dutch power and influence in the Atlantic world were at their greatest.³⁵

My argument has a few different layers. Most simply, I want to show the strength and immediacy of the church-company relationship: not Jelle Riemersma's "divorce" or George Smith's religion-as-afterthought, but a clear marriage of religion, trade, and expansion. In that regard this study corresponds with research in the English-speaking world on the compatibility of the Puritan religious order with the market economy and the malleability of Puritan religion when it came to questions of profit and trade.³⁶ In fact, I have found that the Dutch Reformed Church was far more accepting of trade than the anti-Weber literature allows. And by "the church" I don't just mean the clergy. Torn between their international connections and interests and their concerns about wealth, their feelings about expansion were complex. But by focusing only on clerical views of economic developments in a religious community that explicitly rejected authoritarian clergy and required lay participation even in the most powerful ecclesiastical councils, one brings what might be called a Catholic mind-set to a discussion about Protestantism. The clergy's dependence on joint-stock companies and the merchant voice and influence *inside the church* contributed to a remarkably flexible, accommodating

attitude toward trade and secular work in general. Dutch Calvinists, both laymen and clergy, could see God's hand everywhere and interpret any respectable activity and occupation as pious.

Among the religious language and ideas that proved important to the WIC in understanding and explaining its work, three rise above the rest in regularity and ubiquity: anti-Catholicism, reformation, and divine sanctification. The first is problematic because there were still many Catholics in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, and some of them worked for the WIC. However, I will argue that the Calvinist influence was extra strong in the company, which became, as a result, an anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish, anti-Portuguese tool. Calvinists were quite mindful and loud about the WIC extending the wars and social movements of the Protestant Reformation to Africa and America. They wanted to destroy Catholicism, convert and reform preexisting populations, and establish their own institutions and cultural traditions. The word "reformation" could and did contain all of these possibilities. Finally, with "divine sanctification" I'm referring both to the above-mentioned tendency to sacralize secular pursuits and to the idea that the Dutch were, like the ancient Israelites of the Bible, God's chosen people. The combination of WIC warfare with the notions of divine sanctification and the new chosen people made the Old Testament a particularly critical book of scripture for Calvinists in the Dutch Atlantic.

In conclusion I must acknowledge the disagreement and competition in the West India Company over its policies and purpose. I recognize that it had needs and sometimes harbored ideas that competed with the ones outlined here. Company directors from different Dutch cities disagreed about the relationship between migration and trade; they fought over their monopoly rights, the value of individual colonies, and the costs of social planting. A minority of early directors didn't even sympathize with the strict Calvinists in the Netherlands. Whatever else it was, their company was also a business—a profit-seeking corporation—and their religious activities could affect their profits. Perhaps the best way to describe the company's approach to religious matters isn't "neglect," nor was it on the other hand a purely idealistic, blind commitment or consistent religious radicalism. Rather, the WIC had to weigh its many commitments and, in the end, it settled on a supportive yet cost-conscious approach befitting an early modern company-state.

Yet the WIC was still a haven and tool for Calvinists, and those qualities made a difference in the Dutch Atlantic. The *wrath* of the book's title reflects the final argument that, whatever materialistic pragmatism existed among WIC merchants and directors, however much their history, laws, cosmopolitanism, and the church's pan-European, global connections fostered a tolerant

quality among the Dutch, religious fears and a constricting Calvinist dogmatism undermined that tolerant streak and had the greater impact on the company. Calvinists saw the wrath of God in the thunder and lightning; they saw it in disease epidemics, Indian attacks, and lost battles. They feared his anger when colonists didn't live by every moral precept or worshipped the wrong gods. Calvinists became the instruments of divine wrath in warring with the hated Spanish and punishing sinners and nonconformers in colonial courts, all of which imposed costs—monetary and otherwise—that the small Republic and its people-strapped colonies couldn't afford. At the same time, the Reformed churches of the Netherlands inadvertently contributed to problems later blamed on the WIC because they kept an iron grip on colonial hires, publications, and organization. I contend that, as much as any commercial inclination, the expense of the Calvinist-backed war and the church's meticulous, worried management of colonial affairs hampered the mission and reduced the size and import of the Dutch Atlantic world.