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RELIGIOUS POLICIES IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH REPUBLIC

(Ronnie Po-chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop (eds.), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, Cambridge 2002, 72-86)

There is a general and long-standing agreement among historians that the Dutch Republic was tolerant on the issue of religion. Still, it is not at all easy to determine how this celebrated toleration actually worked out in practice. It is evident that religious toleration was a hotly debated issue. Jonathan Israel has recently mapped out these discussions and the shifts in their focus.¹ This makes religious toleration an obvious object of study in the history of ideas. The leap from these ideas and discussions to the practicalities that ruled interconfessional relations in the Dutch Republic is seldom attempted, partly because our knowledge of toleration in practice, and why it worked the way it did, is still highly impressionistic.

Toleration as a topic in Dutch historiography

The gap in our understanding of the place of religion in Dutch society, and how this society coped with religious diversity, is mainly a product of historiographical trends in the past. Religious toleration has long been, and still is, an item of national pride, and historians have not really been interested in the particulars of its legal basis and the policies that gave it its characteristic form. Historiographically religious toleration is embedded in the nineteenth-century contest over Dutch national identity that resulted in the famous *verzuiling* or 'pillarization'. Two strands of argument have to be mentioned here. The first puts toleration in the context of an ongoing struggle between intolerant ministers and humanist magistrates, between Calvinists and Libertines. Ministers are portrayed as a party that was set on moulding society after their theocratic ideals, but ran into increasing opposition of tolerant magistrates unwilling to have their own lifestyles censured by the Church. This view, that still has its defenders,² owes much to the rivalries between Liberal and neo-orthodox

¹ Jonathan Israel, 'The Intellectual Debate about Toleration in the Dutch Republic', in: *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic*, ed. C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, J. Israel and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes, Leiden 1997, 3-36.

² The measure in which determined Calvinists attempted to force and succeeded in forcing Reformed Protestantism upon society at large is discussed around the so-called 'protestantiseringstheze' by L.J. Rogier, *Geschiedenis van het katholicisme in Noord-Nederland in de zestiende en zeventiende eeuw*, 3 vols., Amsterdam 1945-7; P. Geyl, 'De protestantisering van Noord-Nederland', in: P. Geyl, *Verzamelde opstellen I*, Utrecht/Antwerpen 1978, 205-218; H.A. Enno van Gelder, 'Nederland geprotestantiseerd?', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 81 (1968) 445-464). Recent use of the opposition calvinists - libertines e.g. Andrew Pettegree, 'The politics of toleration in the Free Netherlands, 1572-1620', in: *Tolerance and intolerance in the European Reformation*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner, Cambridge 1996, 182-198 and, with more justification, in the exceptional case

Protestants in the nineteenth century. The former created a tolerant past, in an Erasmian spirit that closely fitted their ideal of a general national-Protestant Christianity pervading public life. The latter evoked a national history dominated by an almost theocratic Calvinism, favouring their creation of a sectional culture in which neo-orthodox Protestants, now freed from the constraints of Libertine *regenten*, could live their entire lives according to their own confessional norms.³

A second topic relevant to historical views of toleration under the Republic is the position of the Catholics. Here a liberal tradition argues that full citizens' rights were withheld and some financial extortion took place by regrettably corrupt government officials, but on the whole Dutch Catholics enjoyed remarkable freedoms compared with religious minorities elsewhere in early modern Europe. Catholic authors have countered that being systematically treated as second-rate citizens, denied access to the most prestigious areas of public life, and being the occasional victims of extortion as well is nothing to be cavalier about. Here again, Liberals saw the Republic as essentially tolerant — in fact exemplary according to early modern standards — whereas Catholic authors, set on underpinning Catholic emancipation, stressed the structural intolerance of the confessional state towards religious minorities.⁴ Liberal protestants, neo-orthodox Protestants and Catholics each claimed to reflect the true national religious tradition, based on their partisan interpretation of religion in general and of the position of the public Church under the Republic in particular.

Each of these interpretations focuses mainly on Holland, where diversity was most pronounced. All are mainly concerned with the decades from the beginning of the Revolt to around the middle of the seventeenth century. Until recently religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was of little interest to historians. Developments after 1650 remain particularly unclear. This is changing now, but toleration is still hardly a favorite topic for historical research in this later period. It is more or less taken for granted. The emphasis is rather on the various ways Catholics, Lutherans, Mennonites and Jews, once a modicum of acceptance was achieved, managed to build new religious communities and devised markers of communal identity to go with them.⁵ In addition there is growing interest in conviviality within confessionally

of Utrecht Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Calvinists and Libertines. Confession and Community in Utrecht, 1578-1620*, Oxford 1995.

³ A reflection of these discussions in Dutch church history in Peter van Rooden, 'Verbeeld verleden. religieus nationalisme en het ontstaan van de Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis', in: Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1570-1990*, Amsterdam 1996, 147-168.

⁴ The liberal view is presented in W.P.C. Knuttel, *De toestand der Nederlandsche katholieken ten tijde van de Republiek*, 2 vols., 's-Gravenhage 1892-1894, its Catholic opposite first and foremost in Rogier, *Geschiedenis van het katholicisme in Noord-Nederland*.

⁵ For example W. Th. M. Frijhoff, "De paniek van juni 1734", *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Kerk in Nederland* 19 (1977), 170-233; W. Th. M. Frijhoff, "Katholieke toekomstverwachting ten tijde van de Republiek: structuur, en grondlijnen tot een interpretatie", *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 98 (1983), 430-459, Xander van Eck, *Kunst, twist en devotie. Goudse schuilkerken 1572-1795*, Amsterdam 1994, Marc Wingens, *Over de grens. De bedevaart van katholieke Nederlanders in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*, Nijmegen 1994; Marit Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden. Leven tussen klooster en wereld in Noord-Nederland gedurende de zeventiende eeuw*, Hilversum 1996, an exceptional interest in the formal rules

mixed guilds, fraternities and neighbourhoods and the concomitant ideology of civic republicanism.⁶ In this way the question of how the officially Calvinist state treated its minorities and how this may have changed over time, in theory and in practice, is not systematically addressed.

Our understanding of toleration in the Dutch Republic thus remains impressionistic. The general idea is that it was there. The northern provinces of the Low Countries that rebelled against their Spanish overlord had written freedom of conscience into the *Unie van Utrecht* (1579), the document that would come to function as a sort of constitution for the Republic. Persecution for, and inquisition into, religious convictions were officially rejected and interconfessional relations were fairly harmonious. Membership of the public Reformed Church was voluntary, although members of dissenting churches were barred from public office. The Republic became a haven for those persecuted elsewhere in Europe. Toleration had its limits, but even though the penal laws against Catholics, and from the 1620s also against Arminians, were occasionally enforced, and Catholics were vulnerable to extortion, things could have been worse. Moreover, as time progressed, discrimination seems to have abated. Supposedly toleration, such as it was, found a soulmate in the emergent Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, although dissenters remained excluded from public office, they could worship more or less openly and extortion was no longer considered appropriate. Under pietist influence the notion developed among Protestants from various confessional backgrounds that the confessional boundaries might not be absolute.

The Dutch Republic among confessional states

All this adds up to a general impression of a harmonious, almost spontaneous growth of religious toleration in the Dutch Republic. If this impression were true, that would make the country unique in early modern Europe.

Early modern Europe was made up of confessional states. Recent research by Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard, Ronnie Hsia and Jonathan Clarke has considerably deepened our understanding of this phenomenon. The Reformation changed the relationship between Church and state, both in Protestant and in Catholic polities. The new arrangement derives its name ‘confessional state’ from the fact that rulers made extensive use of the possibilities organized religion offered to strengthen their

of tolerance in Theo Clemens, ‘Ijkpunt 1750. Op zoek naar nieuwe grenzen in het politiek-religieuze landschap van de Republiek’, in: *Vervreemding en verzoening. De relatie tussen karholieken en protestanten in Nederland 1550-2000*, ed. C. Augustijn and E. Honée, Nijmegen 1998, 69-101; Alastair Hamilton, Sjoule Voolstra, and Piet Visser, eds., *From martyr to muppy. A historical introduction to cultural assimilation processes of a religious minority in the Netherlands: the Mennonites*, Amsterdam 1994; C.Ch.G. Visser, *De lutheranen in Nederland tussen katholicisme en calvinisme, 1566 tot heden*, Dieren 1983; R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, *De Sefardim in Amsterdam tot 1795. Aspecten van een joodse minderheid in een Hollandse stad*, Hilversum 1989, Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation. Conversos and Community in early modern Amsterdam*, Bloomington, Ind., 1997.

⁶ Willem Frijhoff, ‘La coexistence confessionnelle. Complicités, méfiances et ruptures aux Provinces Unies’, in: *Histoire vécue du peuple chrétien*, ed. Jean Delumeau, 2 vols., Toulouse 1979, II, 229-255, and W. Th. M. Frijhoff, ‘Dimensions de la coexistence confessionnelle’, in: C. Berkvens-Stevelink, J. Israel and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (eds.), *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic*, Leiden/New York/Cologne 1997, 213-237.

powers over their subjects, whether they ruled kingdoms, principalities, or cities. All regimes maintained and protected one official Church. They expected these Churches to help forge a communal identity and strengthen internal cohesion. A shared religion was supposed to weld rulers and subjects together under the Divine Protection that depended on an orderly religious life regulated by true doctrine, a well-ordered church organization, decent public worship and pious public conduct.

It is thus no coincidence that Reformation and the confessional period in religious history overlap state formation and absolutism in political history. There appears to be some difference of opinion on the chronological boundaries of the period of confessional states. For Schilling the period seems to end around 1675, with the appearance of formally accorded toleration. Hsia extends the period to around the middle of the eighteenth century, which suggests that Enlightened policies superseded the old order. For Clarke the confessional state in England lasted until the late 1820's when finally the laws that limited the civil rights of Protestant Dissent and Catholics were repealed.⁷

The confessional state was the answer to the problem of religious diversity. Religious unity among the ruled was the ideal, but in many areas diversity was a fact of life. At best dissidents enjoyed some measure of protection under a religious peace or an official edict of toleration. In the worst case they suffered persecution and expulsion.⁸ Whatever the degree of freedom allowed to tolerated faiths in practice, confessional states were always, by their very nature, intolerant towards religious dissent. Mark Goldie has lucidly and compellingly set forth how religious intolerance could be defended politically, ecclesiologically and theologically. In political theory religious diversity was seen as a danger to political stability, a theory abundantly confirmed by the religious wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The ecclesiological argument ran that uniformity in religion, exercised in a state-backed national Church, guarantees the decency of worship and public piety on which divine favor depends. Theologically it was argued, mainly on the basis of the letters of the church father Augustine, that the state has a pastoral duty not only to protect the true Church, but also to take disciplinary measures against dissent. This is a pastoral duty, because forcing dissenters, both the wilfully obstinate and the honestly misled, into the Church is ultimately for their own good. Instead of tolerating error, the state should use its

⁷ Overview in: Heinz Schilling, 'Confessional Europe', in: *Handbook of European History 1400-1600, Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation*, vol II: Visions, Programs and Outcomes, ed. Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman en James D. Tracy, Leiden 1995, 641-681; R. Po-chia Hsia, *Social discipline in the Reformation. Central Europe 1550-1750*, London/New York 1989; J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832. Ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime*, Cambridge en New York 1985, id., *The Language of Liberty 1660-1832. Political discourse and social dynamics in the Anglo-American world*, Cambridge 1994, Chapter 2, 'The conflict between denominations', 141-217, see also his discussion with Joanna Innes in *Past and Present*, 115 (1987) 165-200) and 117 (1989) 195-207.

⁸ A concise overview in Wiebe Bergsma, 'Church, State and People', in: *A Miracle Mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European Perspective*, ed. Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen, Cambridge 1995, 196-228.

strong arm to make the dissenters listen to the instruction of the official Church.⁹ Goldie's focus is on Restoration England, but this logic of intolerance was practically all-pervading. Confessional states all show a disciplinary approach to religious dissent. There is ample scope for variation here, but essentially the limited toleration of the English Toleration Act and the fierce persecution of Huguenots leading up to and following on the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes stem from the same religio-political worldview.

Coping with diversity

Did the rulers of the Dutch Republic ignore this early modern logic, that they could allow their minorities steadily greater freedoms, or had they found a superior solution to the problem of religious diversity? No, they had not. They too held 'disciplinary' views about religious dissent. Only the location of these diverged from the pattern we know from other European countries.

Let us look at the concrete situation in the Republic and the changes over time. Initially the Revolt showed the characteristics of a religious war. Protagonists of the Revolt strongly identified with Calvinism, its most determined opponents with Catholicism. As soon as the actual warfare shifted from Holland and Zeeland, the heartland of the Revolt, to the borders, the religious situation behind the frontlines was stabilised.¹⁰ From 1572 to 1594 the individual provinces, each of them bearers of sovereignty, all decided on the Reformed Church as the public Church. The option of religious peace, under which Protestants and Catholics would have the right to public worship alongside each other, attempted in Holland in the years 1572 and 1573 and proposed for the other provinces in 1578-1579, proved shortlived. The basis for the religious configuration up to the separation of Church and state in 1796 was to be and to remain the Union of Utrecht with its proclamation of freedom of conscience and its rejection of inquisition into, and persecution for, religious conviction.

It bears pointing out that the first attempt to deal with religious diversity was religious peace. For this the young Republic could find inspiration and models in Switzerland, Germany and France. There, repeated outbreaks of religious war were ended each time with a succession of peace treaties in the course of the century between the Peace of Kappel in 1531 and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Religious peace treaties were meant to end open hostility between factions of opposing religious adherence. They allowed those of both opposing religions more or less equal rights, or, more commonly, an amount of freedom reflecting their actual political strength. In a number of cases this resulted in attempts at geographical separation between faiths. As it turned out that among Dutch Catholics some groups remained steadfastly loyal to the Catholic Habsburg regime which the Northern Provinces were in revolt against, religious peace soon proved not to be a realistic option. Instead, from 1581 penal laws

⁹ Mark Goldie, 'The Theory of Religious Intolerance in Restoration England', in: *From Persecution to Toleration. The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*, ed. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan Israel and Nicholas Tyacke, Oxford 1991, 331-368.

¹⁰ In fact three clearly differentiated areas emerged, each with its own religio-political order, Van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes*, pp. 20-22, 169-172.

excluded Catholics from full citizens' rights and hampered their organization as a religious community.¹¹

The other staple solution to religious diversity was comprehension. Here England led the way. The Anglican church combined a Protestant theology with a highly traditional form of liturgy. The express intention was to keep the country united in one faith that would be acceptable both to reformers and traditionalists.¹² Although initially it did show promise, in the end this attempt would fail spectacularly. In the Dutch Republic, however, comprehension was doomed from the start. Both the character of the Reformed Church as a gathered rather than a national Church, and the decentralized structure of the secular power, made a comprehensive Protestant Church illusory, even though the ideal was strongly present. It became acute in the near-civil war during the Twelve Year's Truce (1609-1621). The party that had advocated comprehension was crushed, and at the Synod of Dordrecht the Reformed Church affirmed its exclusive Calvinist character. The Arminian wing of the Reformed Church that had been closely associated with the losing party in this conflict, seceded from the Reformed Church as the Remonstrant Brotherhood. Penal laws were immediately issued against the Remonstrants, laws that show a marked similarity to those issued earlier against the Catholics. Both were formally denied all forms of religious organization and church services in all but the most private settings because of the potentially political character of their organizations.¹³

So, religious peace and comprehension were both impracticable. Still, that did not condemn the state to Libertarian laxity. Received wisdom has it that the secular authorities in the Republic paid lip-service only to the officially Calvinist confessional identity of the state, and left their subjects largely to their own convictions, conniving at religious organization of nonconformists for purely pragmatic reasons. Tolerance was after all conducive to the trade interests of the merchant elite that ruled the cities and eventually the state itself, and was in accordance with the Erasmian humanism prevalent in this period.

The solution they found was indeed humanistic, but not in the spiritualist tradition that ran from Erasmus to Coornhert, in which the unknowability of true doctrine made toleration of confessional diversity a compelling necessity.¹⁴ Rather, it appears that, in true humanist fashion, they looked for inspiration to Roman civil law. Here they

¹¹ Olivier Christin, *La paix de religion. L'Autonomisation de la raison politique au XVIe siècle*, Paris 1997, Philip Benedict, 'Un roi, une loi, deux fois: parameters for the history of Catholic-Reformed co-existence in France, 1555-1685', in: *Tolerance and intolerance in the European Reformation*, 65-93, Joke Spaans, *Haarlem na de Reformatie. Stedelijke cultuur en kerkelijk leven 1577-1622*, Den Haag 1989, 64-68.

¹² Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations. Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors*, (Oxford 1993), 235-250.

¹³ Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness and Fall 1477-1806*, Oxford 1995, 421-477, cf. Jonathan Israel, 'The Intellectual Debate about Toleration', 9-13.

¹⁴ James D. Tracy, 'Erasmus, Coornhert and the Acceptance of Religious Disunity in the Body Politic: A Low Countries Tradition?', in: *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic*, 49-62 even suggests a close relation between this concept of tolerance and Dutch corporate traditions.

found a set of rules that allowed religions other than the official state Church limited rights. Roman law permitted voluntary societies without corporate identity whose sole aim was religious worship. They remained, however, *collegia illicita*. They were not allowed any organisation beyond regular devotional meetings and were denied communal possessions in order to prevent higher, more specifically political, aspirations. The supposition made here that Dutch policy towards religious diversity was informed by Roman law needs further research, but some evidence can be presented.

Roman laws on religious dissenters were invoked in Hugo de Groot's proposal for an ordinance on the admission of Jews. His argument was that as long as the Jews remained a voluntary society, strictly separated from the Christian public sphere and its avenues of power and patronage, without corporate identity and thus without the means to amass communal property or funds, they could be allowed synagogues for public worship. Jews were attractive immigrants, commanding valuable trade networks that promised profits to the cities that received them. Allowing Jews official toleration under the provisions proposed by De Groot could, however, be construed as a precedent for allowing other dissidents, most importantly the politically suspect Catholics, similar freedom of worship. It is probably for this reason that De Groot's propositions never made it into formal law, although a number of cities admitted Jewish communities under regulations not unlike his.¹⁵ In fact all dissenting communities, as long as they were considered politically dependable, often enjoyed the limited freedoms allowed to the *collegia illicita* under Roman law, while the strict penal laws were enforced only when tolerated communities or their clergy were suspected of political untrustworthiness.

Around the end of the seventeenth century the Roman law code was again referred to in the development of jurisprudence around the position of other dissenting groups. In this period tolerated churches were given responsibility over the relief of their own poor. Originally public welfare had supported the locally settled poor irrespective of religion, except the full members of the Reformed Church, who could apply for welfare to the *diaconie* of their Church. In a number of places the Reformed diaconie was amalgamated with the local public welfare fund, in which case the joint welfare board supported all the locally settled poor, including Reformed church members. In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, urban magistrates urged all Churches to provide for their poor members. This was hardly feasible without allowing these Churches to amass property in the accustomed way of poor-funds, that is by regular collections among Church members for daily expenses and by inviting donations and bequests that could be invested in bonds and real estate. The invested capital rendered long-term dependable revenues, acted as a reserve for incidental large expenses and in times of dearth, and also gave the administrators of poor-funds access to short-term credit. Legal difficulties were immediately presented, bringing up again the stipulations of the Roman law code that permitted religious dissidents, as *collegia illicita*, no freedom of organisation beyond communal worship. Ultimately these were

¹⁵ Hugo de Groot, *Remonstrantie nopen de ordre dije in de landen van Hollandt ende Westvrieslandt dijen gestelt op de Joden*, ed. Jaap Meijer, Amsterdam 1949, especially the legal appendix, p.132.

tacitly ignored, and in the eighteenth century tolerated religious communities were allowed corporate identity in all but name.¹⁶

To all appearances these Roman legal principles provided the basis for the differentiated treatment of religious groups outside the public Church even though were never explicitly codified in Dutch laws or regulations. Their simple existence in the Roman law code that was at the basis of government and administration sufficed. Following their rule of thumb Mennonites and Lutherans were generally allowed to worship in private, as they were considered to have no ulterior, political motives, while this same freedom was denied to Catholics and Arminians, amongst whom these motives were assumed.

These simple basic principles were adapted and embellished over time to fit local circumstances. The local nature of these adaptations needs to be stressed: there was considerable variation in the degree of toleration of dissenting groups from one province or town to another. An obvious example is the permission granted to the Amsterdam Jews and Lutherans to build public places of religious worship in the 1630s. No one who has ever seen the Portuguese Synagogue or the Lutheran Church on the Spui or the somewhat later one on the Singel, can mistake these for examples of *schuilkerken*, the private places of worship to which tolerated groups were restricted. These are very visible buildings, in the most sumptuous of seventeenth-century architectural styles. Permission to build so publicly was limited to the Amsterdam Jews and Lutherans only: elsewhere their co-religionists did not share the privilege. The Amsterdam communities owed their liberties to the fact that they counted among their membership a number of wealthy, well-connected merchant families of foreign origin. These communities could therefore be treated as the 'nations', or foreign merchant communities that had traditionally been accorded special privileges by trade centres, also in the organization of their religious worship.¹⁷

Just as important as legal rules for our understanding of the workings of religious toleration in the Dutch Republic, but even less obvious, were the religious policies of

¹⁶ This development has been reconstructed both for Haarlem and Frisia, Joke Spaans, 'Katholieken onder curatele' and Joke Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland 1500-1800. Publieke zorg en particuliere liefdadigheid in zes Friese steden: Leeuwarden, Bolsward, Franeker, Sneek, Dokkum en Harlingen*, Leeuwarden 1997, 240-258, 272-286. For a specific case see Joke Spaans, 'Gereformeerden en doopsgezinden. Het proces over het Marcelis Goverts Gasthuis te Leeuwarden 1687-1688', in S. Zijlstra et. Al., (eds.), *vroomheid tussen Vlie en Lauwers*, Delft 1996, 141-145. the texts referred to are: *Codex Iustinianus* I, 5: De haereticis et manichaeis et samaritis, par. 4,22 (excluding heretics from financial transactions, including bequeathing and inheritance); *Codex Iustinianus* I, 6: Ne sanctum baptisma iteretur, par 3 (applying these rules to Anabaptists); and *Digesta* XXXIII, 2, par. 16-17 (this text was used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to deflect legacies and bequests illegally made in favour of tolerated Churches, not to the legal successors, but to the local Reformed *diaconie*). In a way this practice was a convergence towards their poor earlier in the seventeenth century, see the article by Peter van Rooden in this same volume.

¹⁷ So in Venice, Bergsma, 'Church, State and People', 209-210, but also, see for example, the Lutheran German merchant community in Amsterdam before it introduced the Reformed Church, Visser, *De Lutheranen in Nederland*, 17-18. The same goes for exile Churches, such as the Dutch in Emden; Andrew Pettegree, *Emden and the Dutch Revolt. Exile and the Development of Reformed Protestantism*, Oxford 1992, 36-37, and the French in Geneva, Jeannine E. Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare. Deacons and the Bourse Française*, Selinsgrove, PA, 1989.

secular governments, both on the provincial and local levels, to incorporate dissident religious communities in the fabric of the body politic. The pervasive historiographical models mentioned in the beginning of this chapter leave little room for the assumption that there was such a thing as a religious policy. Toleration of dissent seems a rather passive attitude, refraining from persecution or too much harrassment, or ignoring the claims of the reformed church to cultural hegemony. I would argue on the contrary that there were several, overlapping religious policies.

A consistent policy among magistrates everywhere was to divide and rule, to suppress the more disaffected elements in dissident groups and to favour those loyal to the existing regime. This assumes of course that the Calvinist magistrates closely monitored dissident communities. We know that they did so from the early years of the Revolt. They kept themselves informed of the comings, goings and doings of dissident clergy. These were expected to preach obedience to lawful authorities, civic morality and the virtues of social harmony. Criticism of the political *status quo*, demanding bizarre devotions or causing schism and unrest within their communities could, and usually did, get dissident clergy banished. When schisms or conflicts occurred within tolerated communities local magistrates often arbitrated to restore the peace.¹⁸

A common preference of magistrates everywhere was for indigenous clergy. Not only were those of foreign birth considered to be less suitable than those originating from the same province, or at least from the Republic itself, but so were those educated abroad. Minimising the amount of foreign missionaries and of regular priests under the authority of superiors residing in Catholic countries is a recurrent theme in the history of the Dutch Catholic community. The repeated bans of the States of Holland against 'foreign' vicars apostolic can be read as an active policy of secular authority to push the *Missio Hollandica* in a more national course. The secession of the Jansenist-influenced Old Episcopal Clergy as a separate, national Catholic Church, legitimate successor to the medieval Church, with indigenous bishops and its seminary in Amersfoort could have been invented by the States themselves. Unfortunately for them it never thrived. In the course of the eighteenth century protocols were devised according to which Catholic priests could be officially admitted, provided they presented an oath of loyalty to the government of the Republic. Discussions over foreign-born and foreign-educated clergy also played a part among the Lutherans. In the second half of the seventeenth century opposition grew against German ministers who clung to the orthodoxies taught at the Wittenberg theological faculty, and a 'Dutch school' of Lutheran ministers gained the ascendancy. As magistrates only allowed dissident clergy to function in their jurisdictions after their explicit approval had been secured, they had considerable leverage in this respect.¹⁹

¹⁸ Examples in Joke Spaans, *Haarlem na de Reformatie, Stedelijke cultuur en kerkelijk leven, 1577-1620*, Den Haag 1989, 75-82, 99, 103, 200-203, cf. also Spaans, 'Unity and diversity as a theme in early modern Dutch religious history: an interpretation', in: *Unity and diversity in the Church*, ed. R.N. Swanson, Oxford 1996, 221-234.

¹⁹ Spaans, 'Katholieken onder curatele', 110-130, 120-122. Visser, *De Lutheranen in Nederland*, 77-86.

The second half of the seventeenth century also shows another, very remarkable course of action, initiated by city magistrates, in redefining religious communities and the role of religion in society. This was achieved by the reorganisation of poor relief along the confessional lines mentioned earlier. This reorganisation made Churches into something like mutual insurance societies. Members lapsing into poverty had henceforth to be supported by their fellow Church members. At the same time this reorganisation strengthened the position of prominent laymen in each Church.

In all different religious groups in the Republic, among Jews, Catholics, and Lutherans, as among Mennonites and Reformed, the clergy wielded spiritual authority only. All Churches had lay boards of elders, procurators or wardens, recruited from the local social elite, who were responsible for the election of clergy, church finance, and keeping the peace within the community. In the tolerated churches they were the ones who were held responsible by local governments for the proper conduct of their religious community as a whole. They were called to account when clergy overstepped the boundaries set by public authority, or when the activities of the Church encroached upon the public sphere. These lay administrators had held positions of power in their communities from the moment these had developed some internal organisation. Now they were made welfare officers as well, which in many cases meant a heavy burden of administration and a constant concern to make ends meet, but at the same time always increased their authority among their co-religionists. From now on they were not only expected to keep their communities in the place allotted to dissenters under a confessional state: they also had to discipline their poorer members. Any disaffection among their poor with established authorities could no longer be deflected to secular magistrates, but had to be met by the lay leadership of the Church.

As the local Churches were themselves responsible for the support of poor co-religionists, the delegation of responsibility for poor relief also gave the Churches a compelling interest in discouraging poor people to join their congregations. Especially Catholic, Lutheran, and Jewish communities in this period seem to have grown mainly from German immigrants, looking for a better life in the Republic. Congregations of co-religionists offered obvious channels of entrance. Making the Churches bear the burden of support for poor newcomers strengthened existing policies to allow only the immigration of skilled or otherwise valuable persons, and to reject the poor.

For the new system to work efficiently, exact criteria had to be devised to determine which of the poor belonged to which welfare office and, consequently, under this new regime, who belonged to which Church. Local magistrates claimed and exercised the authority to lay down the rules to determine, for the practical purpose of support, the exact confessional status of the poor in dubious cases. This was a complicated matter. The burden of support for spouses in mixed marriages could be shared by two *diaconieën*, or *diaconieën* could agree upon relief of families on the basis of the confessional status of the husband or the head of the household in general. But what was to be done with orphans who were too young to be considered members of a Church? Or with orphans living in the households of grandparents who were themselves on welfare from their Church but who professed a different confession than that of their deceased parents? And could a religious community be burdened with the support of people who had been born in that particular confession, but did not participate in its worship or were excommunicated for flouting its religious precepts?

By assuming authority to decide these matters city magistrates in fact set the borders of their local Churches, decided who was and who could not become a member. Congregations could, and did, use these rulings in order to keep their membership within the limits of their financial possibilities.

All this resulted in strictly defined religious communities, the sum of which was nowhere completely co-extensive with the local population. A number of inhabitants would be neither full member of the public Church nor of one of the tolerated Churches. The people without Church affiliation were defined as Reformed, although they could in fact be non-practicing or excommunicated Catholics, Mennonites or Jews. The term 'Reformed' refers only to the fact that they were members of an officially Reformed society. If they did not belong to any other confession, what else could they be but Reformed? But if they happened to be poor, the *diaconie* of the public Church would not be responsible for them. The *diaconie* catered for full members only. The suggestion that the public Church used its welfare funds in order to lure the poor into its fold will not stand close scrutiny. For charity, poor people without a claim on any Church had to rely on the public system of poor relief.

All of these ways in which the magistrates were involved in the tolerated Churches — monitoring clergy, arbitration in case of schisms, defining confessional constituencies — tended in one direction. The arrangement implied a certain recognition of all Churches as legitimate parts of the social and religious order, and accorded them a certain measure of freedom to organise their own religious affairs within given limits. These limits varied, sometimes considerably, from place to place, but these differences were differences of degree. Penal laws became superfluous, since the social elites of tolerated groups were found willing to discipline their co-religionists, and this usually included their clergy.

It can be taken for granted that these policies, taken together, were consciously aimed at stabilising the religious order and the relations between different confessions. Some of them are evident from the very beginning of the Dutch Republic, others developed at a later date. By the beginning of the eighteenth century they had resulted in a social order, made up of several recognized and sharply defined religious communities, each controlled by the civil magistrates through their lay elders. A last, important characteristic of this social order was that, by this time, religious differentiation had also come to mirror social stratification. This socio-religious differentiation has been noted and described earlier by Willem Frijhoff.²⁰ The key to the development of this stratification is, in my opinion, the reform of poor relief along confessional lines described above. Those Churches that made the highest demands in the field of godly conduct tended to shrink in numbers and to move upwards on the social ladder. In a number of cases they appear to have used their moral demands in tandem with the criteria devised by local governments according to which the poorer sort could be kept out. At the end of the eighteenth century the Mennonites, the Old Episcopal Clergy (or Jansenists), and the French-speaking Walloon Reformed were small and highly elitist Churches. Catholic, Lutheran and Jewish communities which, with the exception of Amsterdam, were mostly made up of immigrants, were undemanding

²⁰ Frijhoff, 'Coexistence confessionnelle', 242-245.

and poor. The Reformed held a social position between the elitist and the poor Churches, but they were the only ones eligible for public office.²¹

A tolerant Republic?

The religious policies described here are not very evident even in the existing historical sources. These present a chaotic jumble of arrangements made at the local level and without a clear periodization. While Lutherans in Amsterdam enjoyed their beautiful churches their co-religionists in Leeuwarden had a hard time getting permission to worship in a private house and were never allowed public worship until the end of the *ancien régime*. Holland officially admitted Catholic priests in 1730, Friesland did not do so until 1776.

Two main causes were at the root of this. They are both well-known. First, the Dutch Republic was highly decentralized. Arrangements were concluded at the local, rather than at the central, level. Secondly, as the Reformed church insisted on its exclusive character, the civil magistrate was reluctant to insist on a national, comprehensive Church. Membership of the Dutch Reformed Church probably never encompassed a clear majority of the population. This made the Reformed Church an ambiguous partner of the political power in the construction of a confessional state. Where elsewhere state and public Church jointly devised policies on religious minorities, in the case of the Dutch Republic relations were somewhat more complicated. Local or provincial authorities confronted both the public Church and the other religious communities.

However, there were religious policies. Their overall result was to divide the population into strictly defined religious communities, leaving a surplus category of those who were not members of any community. Each of these religious communities, including their clergy, was under strict discipline of a body of lay elders. The obligation to support poor members and the freedom to exercise religious discipline, and so accommodate or limit membership, allowed the development of a social hierarchy among them. For those outside the organized Churches, a category that probably should be equated with the poor and unsettled, secular mechanisms of control were devised.²² All this made for a society which was very stable and by contemporary European standards harmonious, but at the same time highly authoritarian. The strict discipline that accompanied the much-praised freedom of Dutch society, and perhaps only made it possible, has been noted by Jonathan Israel.²³ In line with his view of a society that was free and ordered, I would argue that it was not Erasmian tolerance or magisterial laxity, but a rather strict disciplinarian regime and a considerable amount of social engineering that produced public recognition and relative freedom for dissident groups.

²¹ Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 305-314.

²² Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 258-262

²³ Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 677-699.