

Another Look at James Arminius and the Dutch Reformation¹



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James Arminius was a Dutch Reformed minister (Amsterdam) and theological professor (Leiden) in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. To many he is an enigma on the scene of the Dutch Reformation. All too often historians have done Arminius and history an injustice by over simplifying the complex political, social, economic and religious milieu of his day and age. This oversimplified explanation of the Dutch Reformation appears in three states—“Calvinism came in, Arminius nearly ruined it, the Synod of Dort restored it.”²

However, this dismisses the dynamic interplay of manifold forces in the Dutch Reformation. Another historian furthering the misconceptions concerning the place and significance of Arminius role in the Dutch Reformation says that,

...after an active pastoral and intellectual life as minister in the church, he became Professor of Theology in Leiden University. Little by little tradition tells that he was led into anti-Calvinist error by the writings of the Dutch libertine pietist Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert—Arminius fell away from total acceptance of the Calvinist theology, balking particularly at the ‘horrible decretum’ of election. Against that decree he laid his theological emphasis upon man’s free will and God’s mercy, until he finally denied

¹ This article is based on research while Dr. Sutton was studying with William R. Estep, noted historian of the Reformation and the Anabaptist movement.

² Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), 21.

the doctrine outright and asserted a church polity in conformity with his idea of man's relation to God.³

For many, these analyses constitute the sum total of "the facts" concerning Arminius. The contention of this article is that these two assessments, of the Dutch Reformation in general and Arminius in particular, are both superficial and inadequate.

Our purpose, therefore, is to examine the Dutch Reformation with an eye to clarifying the issues surrounding the polarizations within the Reformed church. What were the issues which brought Arminius into conflict with the "high Calvinists" and eventually led (after his death), to the polarization of the Remonstrant and Contra-Remonstrant factions consummating in the Synod of Dort (1618–1619)? What was the context and background of the conflicts emerging in the Dutch Reformation? How did the political, theological and ecclesiastical issues fit into the socio-economic matrix? This article, while not attempting to be a mini-biography of Arminius, will nonetheless seek to present the different issues in their chronological setting. It will maintain a bifocal approach; first, by presenting a brief overview of the Dutch Reformation and secondly, by concentrating on the issues which separated Arminius and his disciples from the "orthodox" Calvinists in the Dutch Reformed Church.

I. OVERVIEW OF THE DUTCH REFORMATION

The religious reformation in the Netherlands was cradled in the arms of the political fight for freedom. The political revolution was basically a revolt from the oppression of Catholic Spain. The two great antagonists in this struggle were Philip II of Spain and William the Silent. Philip's objective, keeping in mind that the Netherlands comprised part of his domain, was the supremacy of Spain and the extirpation of heresy, especially of the Anabaptist and Reformed varieties. On the other hand, William's twin ideals were love of freedom and hatred of oppression.⁴ "It was not patriotism, but pity, not love of what he was defending, but hatred of what he was attacking that made him a liberator."⁵ As a man of tolerance he allowed liberty of conscience to every man.⁶

³ R. L. Colie, *Light and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 8.

⁴ W. Stevenson, *The Story of the Reformation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), 115.

⁵ J. M. Thompson, *Lectures On Foreign History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), 112.

⁶ Stevenson, 116.

As for the Netherlands, there were three grounds for discontent. First, they bitterly resented the continued presence of Spanish troops on Dutch soil. Second, they were strongly opposed to the suggested formation of new bishoprics—a tactic of Philip's to further entrench Catholicism and hence Spanish rule. Third, they were appalled at the barbarous decrees against heretics and the savage treatment of the victims.

In 1566 a milestone on the way to the war for freedom against Spain occurred. A document written by William's brother, Louis of Nassau, and supported by religious leaders Philip of Marnix and Viscount Brederode (A Roman Catholic), accompanied by two thousand signatures was presented to Philip's representative in Brussels. It requested the withdrawal of the Inquisition and the lifting of placards or decrees against heretics.⁷ At the sight of approximately 200 petitioners, Margaret of Parma, Philip's regent, was apprehensive. In response to the regent's apprehension, Barlaymont, one of her advisors, retorted, "What, Madam! is your Highness afraid of these beggars?" Said Brederode in response to the insult, "They call us beggars, we accept the name."⁸ The beggar's sack appearing all over the country became the symbol of resistance to Spain.

The outbreak of iconoclasm by angry mobs climaxing with the pilaging of Antwerp's cathedral in August of 1566, precipitated Philip's response. He sent the Duke of Alva to crush the rebellion. Alva arrived on August 8, 1567. Thus began the slow but brutal war with Spain which was to last until 1609.

What was the religious side of the Reformation? In 1523 the first martyrs for the cause had been burned at the stake in Brussels, the capital city of the Netherlands at that time. Soon afterwards, several Protestant trends manifested themselves, variously inspired by Luther, Erasmus, and the Anabaptists.⁹ Carl Bangs suggests that the Reformation came in three stages. First, around 1520 the Sacramentarians emerged. Basically, this was a loose designation for a number of people who preached against abuses in the church. One Sacramentarian, Pistorius, taught that the decrees and canons of the church were to be taken seriously so long "as they agreed with the word of God." Arminius was to be in this sturdy tradition.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 118.

⁸ Ibid., 119

⁹ Gerrit J. Hoenderdaal, "The Life and Struggle of Arminius in the Dutch Republic," in *Man's Faith and Freedom* (ed. G. O. McCulloh; New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 11.

¹⁰ Bangs, *Arminius*, 21.

The Sacramentarians gave way to the Anabaptists—probably many of them became Anabaptists in the 1530s.¹¹ This “heresy” had come out of Zurich where Zwingli had expelled these “radicals.” The common people and some of the magistrates heard them gladly. Because the Munster fiasco gave Anabaptists a bad name and due to a number of other organizational problems and oppressive measures, in addition to internal friction, Anabaptism was unable to become a dominant force in Dutch Protestantism.¹²

The third stage sees the rise of the Reformed church. Bangs points out that the earliest Dutch Reformed leaders do not seem to be Calvinists at all; instead, they appear to be indigenous individuals nurtured on biblical piety. They are not seized by dogmatic insights but steadily press toward a purified faith according to Scripture.¹³ This indigenous movement was sustained by such writings as Veluanus’s *Layman’s Guide* and Bullinger’s *Housebook*. History records a continuation of thought from Veluanus to Arminius. Nonetheless, many forerunners of Arminius emerged, such as Caspar Coolhaes in Leiden.

As Calvinist clergy and people fled northward from the attack by Spain and the Catholics the plot thickened. These Calvinists brought with them their talents, energy, money and theology which was precise and intolerant. Then, as the Remonstrant historian Gerard Brandt comments, the term “Reformed” came to have two meanings. It meant one thing to the old Hollanders, yet something quite different to the new preachers.¹⁴

In the later 1500s Calvinism began to make heavy inroads into the Netherlands. Its appearance in organized form can hardly be said to antedate the year 1544. Usually its introduction has been traced to influences which spread from Geneva through France to the southern provinces where the French language was widely spoken. Here the first Calvinist churches were organized. Yet, its coming was more complex.¹⁵

DeJong traces its infiltration along three avenues. First is in the writings of Calvin, Zwingli, Oecolampadius and Bullinger. Second, many leaders from the Netherlands found themselves exiles from time to time. Some went to Geneva, others fled to places where Reformed churches in

¹¹Bangs, *Arminius*, 21. See also C. Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism* (The Hague, Netherlands: M. Nijhoff, 1968), and Wm. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville: Broadman, 1963, repr. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).

¹²Estep, 108-29.

¹³Bangs, *Arminius*, 21.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵Peter DeJong, “The Rise of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* (ed. P. DeJong; Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 9.

exile were organized, i.e. Emden and Heidelberg after 1550. A third avenue was found in the vigorous labors of those who returned to the southern provinces to organize and lead Reformed congregations and then fled North due to Spanish persecution, i.e., Plancius.¹⁶

In the course of time, the Netherlands, while yet at war with Spain, was able to prosper under the political leadership of Jan van Oldenbarnevelt and the military leadership of William and later Maurice of Orange, William's son.¹⁷ With the war, the center of commerce shifted to Amsterdam. The "Alteration," as the official Reformation of Amsterdam was called, occurred in 1578. The Alteration saw the Roman Catholic clergy and monastics leave Amsterdam in early May of 1578, with Reformed Church services beginning on May 11, 1578. This was a victory for the Reformers of 1566 who had endured and survived.¹⁸

With the Alteration a new town government was constructed, or should we say reconstructed, to reflect the new distribution of power.¹⁹ The reconstructed city government centralized power in the City Council, a group of 36 community leaders. The Council, reflecting the new distribution of power consisted of three groups: (1) thirteen were among the "Old Beggars," the militant reformers forced into exile in 1566; (2) thirteen were mild reformers, less revolutionary in their actions; and (3) the final ten consisted of Roman Catholics who were members of the old town government. Needless to say, the balance of power shifted to the returning exiles, four of whom became burgomasters, the highest position in the political structure.²⁰

The immediate result of the Alteration saw several changes. First was a revival of trade. Coupled with this was the beginning of rapid population growth, including many refugees from the south, a key factor in the religious turmoil to come. The Alteration brought new regimes in both city and church.

By 1592, the machinery of radical change was in motion. The war for independence changed the picture with respect to trade; many even managed to trade with the enemy. At this time, the decline of Antwerp due to Parma's invasion,²¹ brought Amsterdam into a position of leadership. Parma offered a two-year period of grace in which inhabitants were al-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ William the Silent had been assassinated in 1584 at Delft.

¹⁸ Bangs, *Arminius*, 104.

¹⁹ For a concise overview of the Amsterdam hierarchy, see John Murray, *Amsterdam in the Age of Rembrandt* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 20-26.

²⁰ Bangs, *Arminius*, 105.

²¹ J. P. Blok, *History of the People of the Netherlands (1559-1621)* (trans. Ruth Putnam; New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), 202-05.

lowed to leave Antwerp. As many as 60,000 left taking with them their skills, their international trade connections, their capital and their theology (which for Reformed was strict Calvinism). Meanwhile in the North two interconnected inventions were significant. The Dutch had improved the style of their ships to develop the *Fluit* or “fly-boat,” a long, narrow craft of great speed and capacity; and they had adapted the windmill, first used to pump water out of the holders to saw lumber. The quick production of lumber in standard sizes made possible a massive production of fly-boats.²² Amsterdam in 1592, was exploding with manpower, capital, technology, and capability of trade. With little vacant land in which to invest and old trade patterns thwarted by war, an interest in new trade routes and expanded commerce was in view. East Indian trade in the form of trading companies would shortly appear. With successful espionage, secret Portugese trade routes were made available to the Dutch with the resultant explosion of foreign trade. With the change and expansion wrought by trade southern personnel and capital were playing a large role in the North—this was to have a profound impact on Amsterdam’s and the Netherlands’ religious life.

In the course of history, a polarity was to develop in the Dutch Reformed Church. The antagonists were to be Arminius and his disciples, and on the other side, the “orthodox” Calvinists. It culminated ten years after Arminius’s death. On April 24, 1619, the “Synod of Dort” (Dordrecht) sat for the 154th, and last time. Ostensibly summoned to resolve differences between Dutch Remonstrants (Arminians) and Contra-Remonstrants within a context of Calvinist theology, in reality it pronounced predetermined decrees on Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Total depravity, Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints.²³ In connection with the proceedings of the Synod of Dort, Jan Oldenbarnevelt, the Arminians’ protector, was found beheaded on trumped-up charges. Remonstrants were denounced as heretics and banished.²⁴ Some two hundred Remonstrant ministers were imprisoned. Hugo Grotius, one of them, managed to escape. As Peter DeJong, a Reformed historian, summarizes, “the Synod of Dort marks the close of the

²² Carl Bangs, “Dutch Theology, Trade, and War: 1590-1610,” *Church History* 39 (December 1970): 470-482.

²³ Robert Peters, “John Hale and the Synod of Dort,” in *Councils and Assemblies* (ed. G. J. Cummings and D. Baker; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 277.

²⁴ H. A. Slaate, *The Arminian Arm of Theology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977), 16.

first period in the history of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.”²⁵

With the overview complete, the next segment of this paper will address the issues involved in creating the polarity within the Dutch Reformed Church. The approach will be twofold, dealing first with Arminius’s pastoral years in Amsterdam (1587–1603) and then second, his professorial years in Leiden (1603–1609). This paper is making this dichotomy because the contexts differ to the extent that the issues are clarified and conflict becomes more intense in the latter episode. In our discussion of each issue the format will be to (1) define the issue, (2) give its background, and (3) delineate the two sides’ views.

II. ARMINIUS IN AMSTERDAM (1587-1603)

In Arminius’s pastoral years he found himself in conflict over a number of issues within the Reformed Church. For brevity’s sake these will be considered under three headings. First, Arminius clashed with the “orthodox” Calvinists over the issue of toleration—he was in favor of it. Secondly, there was the doctrinal-theological conflict in which Arminius did not conform to Calvinist doctrine (and particularly to Beza’s form of Calvinism). A third issue of conflict was over church polity and government. Arminius’s ecclesiology evidently differed from the “high” Calvinists.

The question to raise at this point is this: was Arminius an innovator or was there a precedent for the views which he espoused? The contention of this paper is that Arminius reflects an indigenous Reformed Church²⁶ which is progressively assaulted and infiltrated by Calvinism to the point that it loses its grasp on the reins of power and hence is displaced by an alien religious form, i.e. Calvinism. Therefore, the sociological aspect accounts for a portion of the ensuing conflict. How is this manifested in the conflicts which crystallized into the polarities of Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants?

III. TOLERATION

The basic issues in respect to toleration were whether or not differing religious opinions would be tolerated, and where would the line be drawn with respect to tolerance and intolerance. Needless to say, formal Catholicism was not tolerated by the Reformed Churches. But what was the attitude toward others who dissented and even those Catholics who were not vocal? In respect to toleration or the lack of it, there were two

²⁵ DeJong, 17.

²⁶ Bangs, *Arminius*, 54.

sides. Both wanted to present a united front against the onslaught of the Catholic Counter-reformation. However, the means were different. One side, which would be Arminius's position, advocated tolerance both as a conviction and as the key to unity against Catholicism. The other side, comprised of Calvinists, asserted doctrinal conformity as the means for achieving unity. Two events in Arminius's youth would bring him to stand against Spanish-Catholicism and intolerance. The first was the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. It was here that one of Arminius's intellectual models, Petrus Ramus (Pierre de la Ramée), was murdered.²⁷ This would have been adequate to establish an anti-Catholic bent in Arminius's personality. However a second event was to prove much more tragic. On August 6, 1575, Arminius's mother and siblings were murdered by Spanish troops in the Oudewater massacre. Carl Bangs, summarizing primary sources, says:

It is not a nice story. First the defending soldiers on the walls were shot or stabbed to death. Those who fled into the town were pursued and killed. Then the massacre spread to noncombatants. Mothers were killed in front of their children, children in front of their mothers. Girls and women were raped in view of their fathers and husbands, and then all were killed. No place, no person, was exempt from the pillaging invaders. When the nuns in the cloisters were discovered, they pleaded that they were faithful Roman Catholics. So much the better for your souls, said the soldiers, as they raped and murdered them.²⁸

When news reached Arminius he was crushed. "After two weeks of lamentation, almost without intermission" Arminius left Marburg (one of four locations of study) and returned to Holland, "to look once more upon his native town, though in ruins, or to meet death in the attempt."²⁹ This was one of the tragedies in Arminius life and provides ample justification for his stand against intolerance.

Two other reasons for Arminius belief in toleration may be cited. Bangs points out that while he was in Geneva, besides studying under

²⁷ Hoenderdaal, 11-13.

²⁸ Bangs, *Arminius*, 42. Note that some managed to escape or hide successfully.

²⁹ James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.* (vols. 1 and 2, trans. James Nichols; London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1825-1828); (vol. 3, trans. William Nichols; London: Thomas Baker, 1875), 19-20. For a collection of Anabaptist source material, see *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533)* (ed. Wm. R. Estep, Nieuwkoop: B. DeGraaf, 1976).

Beza, Arminius also studied with Charles Perrot who was more tolerant and liberal than many of his colleagues. In the preface to his book, *De Extremis in Religione Vitandis*, Perrot said, "I desire and approve beyond all things, that every man should enjoy his own opinion freely and entirely."³⁰ Needless to say, the book was suppressed in Geneva, but his views appear to have left a lasting impression on the young Arminius.

A final impression towards toleration was made on Arminius during his trip to Italy in 1586. The pope at the time was the newly chosen Sixtus V, who had begun his reign with a campaign against lawlessness in Rome. It was a reign of terror. Soon after it began, according to one report, there were "more bandits' heads on the Bridge of St. Angelo than there were melons in the market."³¹ This evidently contributed to Arminius's desire for toleration, or at least his distaste for intolerance.

Two men who set precedents for toleration in Arminius's day were Gaspar Coolhaes and Guilielmus Feuguereus. As a student at Leiden, Arminius had first-hand knowledge with the split in the church at Leiden. The rift was over the relation of church and state but the issue of tolerance surfaced as one among many. Coolhaes was the advocate of toleration, a conviction that had its roots in the indigenous North Netherlands Reformation with its distaste for extremism. In a publication, Coolhaes urged toleration of Lutherans and Mennonites, then pointed out that toleration was a two way street, urging toleration of high Calvinists also. His views were condemned and he was deposed from the ministry in 1581.³² Earlier, in 1570, Feuguereus had written a book dedicated to William of Orange, advocating tolerance.³³ But were there any precedents for toleration for the city in which Arminius was to pastor for fifteen years? The answer is yes.

What were Arminius's roots in Amsterdam? How might his relation to this city contribute to his stand for toleration? Arminius was a "Son of Amsterdam" in two distinct ways. First, this is true in terms of his vocation as a minister. The city's Merchants' Guild functioned as his benefactor, paying for his education. At the completion of his education, he returned to Amsterdam where he became a leading minister. A second means of identity with Amsterdam was in his marriage to Lijsbet, the daughter of Laurens Jacobsz Reael, one of the "Old Beggars," and a leading man in the community. Therefore, Arminius was content and

³⁰ Gerardt Brandt, *Historie der Reformatie en andre Kerkelyke Geschiedenissen: in en ontrent de Nederlanden Vol. 2* (Amsterdam: Jan Rieuwertsz. Hendrik en Dirk Boom, 1671-1704), 124.

³¹ Bangs, *Arminius*, 79.

³² *Ibid.*, 54.

³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

even committed to support Amsterdam's standards. One historical standard since the 1520s was the ideal of tolerance.

What was the background of toleration in Amsterdam? The roots of toleration ran deep. Even prior to the Alteration, reform sentiment and the spirit of toleration were evident.

There were numerous instances in which they looked the other way in order not to see Sacramentarian and Anabaptist activities that were forbidden by placards from higher authorities. When the first Anabaptists had been taken away from Amsterdam and condemned and executed in the Hague, the magistrates privately resolved to hinder a repetition of the event.³⁴

Later, in 1566, with the first uprising of the Reformation (which would only last for four months) in Amsterdam, Lutherans and Zwingli-Calvinists were unable to come to agreement concerning the Reformed Church. Would it be comprehensive or established within strict guidelines? When Jan Arendsz espoused an inclusivist policy, the Calvinists of Antwerp sent Caspar van der Heyden to admonish the Amsterdam community for its lax doctrine and scold them for their inclusiveness and toleration.³⁵ This was evidently a foreshadowing of storms to come in which Arminius would find himself a major player.³⁶ When the Alteration occurred in 1598, men of moderate reforming tempers came into the City Council, men who were neither dogmatic nor vindictive, broad in sympathies. Two men who served as burgomasters, Cornelis Pietersz. Hooft and Wilhem Baerdesen were even more tolerant than the moderates, or at least vocalized their espousal of tolerance. Baerdesen, whose wife and sister were Anabaptists, and Hooft, whose wife also was Anabaptist, were strong defenders of liberty of conscience. Hooft later became a strong defender of Arminius and resisted those who attempted to impose narrow doctrinal standards on the Dutch church.³⁷ In the 1580s hard Calvinism was not "palatable" in Amsterdam. However, in time the composition of the city government was to change.³⁸ In the 1590s, Burgomaster Hooft, a "Libertine," sided with Calvinism in its opposition to Spain, but against it in its push for doctrinal rigidity. In 1597 the growing polarity was evident as the "heretic" Vogelsangh was taken into custody,

³⁴ R. D. Evenhuis, *Ook Dat Was Amsterdam Vol. 2* (Amsterdam: W. ten Have, 1965, 1967), 23–25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.66.

³⁶ Bangs, *Arminius*, 96.

³⁷ Evenhuis, 2.274.

³⁸ Bangs, *Arminius*, 124.

leaving his wife and children without support. Hooft was so enraged over the zeal of the Calvinist clergy against heretics that he made a public statement of protest on October 15, 1597, in the presence of the other burgomasters. Hooft opened by reminding his hearers that the war against Spain had been fought to gain “a shelter for liberty, but not an unbounded power of invading others.” He urged freedom of conscience and then pointed his finger toward the church observing that it had allowed itself to become dominated in the consistory by “outsiders who do not understand the nature of Holland...these imported elders bring with them quarrels of other places.” “It is inconsistent,” said Hooft, “to complain of intolerance under popish government and then to practice the same intolerance.”³⁹ Bangs comments on Hooft’s role, saying:

Hooft sees the original religious purpose of the Alteration to be the establishment of a comprehensive church, broadly Protestant. He resents the influx of refugees who subvert the church with a coalition of ministers and workers who together dominate the consistory and enforce an intolerant Calvinism on the City.⁴⁰

In this background and setting, Arminius was the theological spokesman for toleration. History records that as a pastor in Amsterdam, Arminius used discretion in the role of enforcing Reformed polity. It appears that Arminius was not so broadly tolerant as he was slow to make a blanket condemnation on opposing views. Written evidence of his toleration is lacking; however it emerges in his actions and in his associations. While serving as pastor, Arminius was frequently called upon to deal with those who would not comply with the teaching of the Reformed Church. Several examples may be adduced.

One group which threatened the Reformed Church were the Brownists, an independent congregation, which had fled from the persecution of England to the toleration of Holland. What offended the Dutch was the Brownists’ uncompromising and total rejection of the polity and practice of the Dutch churches. Arminius, foremost among defenders of the Dutch position, responded with a measure of toleration. Writing a critique of the Brownists, he stopped short of total condemnation. Orthodox Calvinists were not so tolerant.⁴¹ Arminius, who resisted “trouble makers and unorthodox spirits”⁴² did not pursue all those considered heretics, as seen with the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists had considerable success in drawing off members of the Reformed church. The minutes of

³⁹ G. Brandt, 1.817–24.

⁴⁰ Bangs, *Arminius*, 163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 166.

the consistory show that Arminius remonstrated with individual Anabaptists in their homes, urging them to return to the Reformed Church. Given an assignment by the Synod of North Holland in 1599, Arminius was asked to write a critique of Anabaptism as an apologetic tool. In his work, he referred extensively to the Anabaptists' own publications. No doubt, he read Hubmaier's tract, "Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them."⁴³

Arminius did not actually want to write the refutation.⁴⁴ He was reluctant to make a blanket condemnation of all their teaching. The "orthodox" Calvinists, with their doctrinal rigidity were not nearly as tolerant. In summarizing Arminius's pastoral years, Bangs calls him "the emerging leader of a new articulate theological school built on the foundation of Dutch Protestantism...valiant for the truth but not afraid of tolerance."⁴⁵ At Leiden, Arminius's view of toleration, nurtured in Amsterdam, was to crystallize. Arminius's early views have a twofold source, the nature of the Dutch people and his own reaction against intolerance. However, closely entwined with the issue of toleration at Amsterdam was the doctrinal issues which serve to separate Arminius from his "high Calvinist" antagonists. What were the doctrinal issues?

The doctrinal and theological issues which divided Arminius from the "high Calvinists in Amsterdam began publicly with Plancius's accusation that Arminius preached heresy. This heresy was found in the fact that Arminius was not preaching the "Bezan" interpretation of Scripture, particularly on the subject of predestination found in Romans 7 and 9. What is the background of the doctrinal differences?

The Dutch church as it convened in 1571 had no problem over predestination. At that time the Belgic Confession which it adopted as a model was sufficiently ambiguous. As Bangs comments, "Article 16 of the Belgic Confession put the matter in a form that was both brief and mild."⁴⁶ It did not provide a clear answer to questions which later would be raised about Sub-, Infra-, and Supralapsarianism. At Emden this topic was not even considered. While at Emden, Arminius's future father-in-law, Laurens Jacobsz. Reael, wrote a catechism for the instruction of his children. Some see in the answers of questions 38 and 42 the seed of Arminius's soteriological thought:

The saving deed of Christ is not effective for all men, however, only for those who believe (Q. 38)....

⁴³ See Estep, *Beginnings*, for source material.

⁴⁴ Bangs, *Arminius*, 169.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

whose good works in themselves can only be sinful and unavailing for salvation (Q. 42).⁴⁷

Notably silent from the early doctrinal stands is the theory as to how grace works. It became a vocal issue. What is the background of the theological conflict in Arminius's life? What is his theological background? What evidence exists supporting the popular notion that he was a "Bezan Calvinist" until his radical change of heart and mind in his early Amsterdam pastorate? What evidence exists to the contrary?

Arminius received his earliest training amidst a Reformed Church which was becoming increasingly divided over issues which originated in Switzerland. For a time Arminius lived in Marburg. His university education was at Leiden, where the University and church were both free from clerical control. His six years as a student at Leiden, 1578 to 1581, covered the greater part of the Coolhaes episode. The faculty at Leiden included Coolhaes, Feuguereus and Holman, all of whom opposed Beza's Supralapsarianism. Not until 1581 did a rigid Calvinist teach theology there. This is strong support for the notion that Arminius was directed toward a non-Bezan theology before he even matriculated to Geneva or undertook the ministry.⁴⁸

In 1581, Arminius enrolled in Geneva as a theological student during which time he came into open conflict with Beza not on the issue of predestination but logic. Beza's logic was Aristotelian, but Arminius espoused the Peter Ramus model for logic.

For a short period of time Arminius studied at Basel until the conflict could die down returning to Geneva within a year. At Geneva, Beza became Calvin's heir apparent and then his successor. By the time Arminius came to Geneva in 1581, Beza was the aged and honored patriarch of the Reformed churches. Bangs says:

In Beza, Arminius was face to face with a derivative Calvinism, not that of the master himself, but that of an epigone who tries to be faithful to his teacher by imposing a strict internal coherence on what had been a free and creative theology. Perhaps everything that Beza says can be found in Calvin, but the emphasis is different. Beza lifts the doctrine of predestination to a prominence which it did not have for Calvin. Predestination, made an end in itself, became for Beza an utterly inscrutable mystery of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁸ Carl Bangs, "Arminius and the Dutch Reformation," *Church History* 30 (June 1961): 161.

the divine will. It is a decree preceding the decree of creation (an order of decrees is not to be found explicitly in Calvin).⁴⁹

In studying predestination, Beza posited that God ordered predestination of individuals, decrees of election and damnation to man not yet considered as created. Beza's doctrine of predestination is the fountainhead of what is often labeled "high Calvinism." The precipitation of the so-called Arminianism controversy to a great degree was in the conflict with these who insisted that the details of Beza's system were essential to Reformed orthodoxy. J. C. Godbey points out that by developing a Supralapsarian schema, Beza lifted the doctrine of predestination to a position of theological priority far above that given it by Calvin.⁵⁰

Upon completing his studies at Geneva, Arminius received from Beza a letter of commendation which is often adduced as Beza's acceptance of Arminius's theology. By examining correspondence between Uitenbogaert and Arminius the fact emerges that Beza was rather prone to unexpected tolerance with Dutch students who disagreed with him on predestination.⁵¹

Except for the questionable evidence of Arminius's funeral oration by Bertius, evidence emerges that Arminius was not in agreement with Beza's doctrine of predestination when he undertook his ministry at Amsterdam, indeed he probably never agreed with it.⁵² The issues would not be raised until Plancius challenges him at Amsterdam.

As Arminius began his pastoral duties what theological issues created the polarization between Arminius and the "orthodox" Calvinists? Arminius's antagonist in Amsterdam was Petrus Plancius who was not a mild Calvinist but the first of a new breed of rigid "high Calvinists." Plancius was the first minister to propagate and emphasize the doctrines of predestination. J. Keuning, his biographer, says, "Until Plancius went north, the preaching there was more Bible than dogma, more piety, than theology, with no trace of the doctrine of predestination to be found."⁵³ Needless to say, it was only a matter of time before he and Arminius clashed.

On November 6, 1588, Arminius began preaching from Romans and Malachi, addressing, early, issues of grace and predestination. It was fol-

⁴⁹ Bangs, *Arminius*, 66.

⁵⁰ John Godbey, "Arminius and Predestination," *Journal of Religion* 53 (October 1973): 491.

⁵¹ Bangs, "Dutch Reformation," 61.

⁵² Bangs, *Arminius*, 141.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 119.

lowing his public exposition of Romans 7 that the first round of strife was to raise its ugly head.⁵⁴

The basis of the conflict was over Arminius's interpretation of Romans 7:14, "I am carnal, sold under sin." Does the Apostle, as Arminius puts it, "treat about a man who is still unregenerate or about one who is already regenerate through the spirit of Christ?" The Calvinist interpretation ascribed Paul's words about difficulty of following the law of God to the man to whom Christian salvation had come; this is a difficulty that would always be with the Christian. Arminius, however, felt that this contradicted Romans 6:14, "ye are not under law, but under grace." Arminius concluded that Paul must be speaking of unregenerate man because "the regenerate obtain the forgiveness of sins through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ and the power of his spirit."⁵⁵ Arminius was unwilling to apply the words, "I am carnal, sold under sin," to the life of a believer. In Arminius's words,

He who approves not of that which he does, nor does that which he would is the slave of another, that is, of sin...But the man about whom the apostle is treating approves not of that which he does, nor does what he would, but he does that which he hates. Therefore, the man who is in the place of the subject of discussion is the slave of another, that is, of sin; and therefore the same man is unregenerate and not placed under grace.⁵⁶

This interpretation of Scripture precipitated the first round of theological conflict. Plancius accused Arminius of heresy. The unregenerate man, asserted Plancius, could not have as much godliness as is described in this chapter. Plancius accused Arminius of both Pelagianism and Socinianism. As a result of the accusations, the issue was brought up before the consistory and then the town council. The meeting before the magistrates was held on February 11, 1592. Arminius acknowledged that his exposition of Romans seven differed from some of the Reformed, but he denied that he was outside what was permitted by the Confession and the Catechism.⁵⁷ He had supposed that he could exercise the liberty enjoyed by all Christian teachers of expounding Scripture according to the dictates of conscience. The outcome of the meeting saw Plancius implicitly

⁵⁴ For Arminius's development of Romans 7 see James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius* (3 vols.; trans. James Nichols; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1956), 2:195–243.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:233.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:253.

⁵⁷ Morley Rattenbury, "The Historical Background and Life of Arminius," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 185 (October 1960): 245.

rebuked for only he had made “declamatory statements.” Arminius was to exercise care in the utterance of “new doctrines,” but was not condemned. Why? It affirmed that there might well be doctrinal matters that were not yet settled in the Reformed Church and which should be proper matters for discussion in a town council. Thus the oligarchy stood firm (1) in its support of toleration, (2) of its adopted son Arminius, and (3) of its own role as the guardian of the peace of the church. Bangs observes that before the burgomasters Arminius was surrounded by friends. When the case was taken to the Town Hall, Bre’r Rabbit was in the briar patch.⁵⁸

For the time being there was peace in the church. However, doctrinal controversy revived early in 1593 as Arminius preached on Romans 9. Pieter Dirksen and Burgomaster Claes Oetgens joined Plancius in complaining of Arminius’s exegesis and exposition of Scripture.

By now it was apparent that there were two parties in the city. One was a high Calvinist party with Plancius its theological leader and Oetgens its political leader. The other was gathered around Jan Egbertsz. Bisschop, a prominent Amsterdam merchant, and looked to Arminius for its theological leadership.⁵⁹

The issue over Romans nine was to be the wedge between the warring factions and the primary theological catalyst toward the polarity in the Dutch Reformed Church. Romans 9 dealt with election and concepts of predestination. The high Calvinists, Plancius, et.al. clung to the Bezan interpretation of Romans 9 through 11, i.e., “Supralapsarianism,” which taught Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Unconditional Election of both the saved and the damned.

A precedent for this issue can be found in the case of Snecanus who asserted that “the doctrine of conditional predestination is not only conformable to the word of God but cannot be charged with novelty.” Beza dismissed this view as absurd;⁶⁰ he had built upon Romans 9 a doctrine of double predestination.

In his Introduction to the ninth chapter of Romans Snecanus presents arguments very similar to Arminius.⁶¹ Arminius put his analysis of Romans nine (his sermons are no longer extant) in a letter to Snecanus, writing of their “mutual agreement” upon the interpretation of it.⁶² What were the major emphases of Arminius’s interpretation?

⁵⁸ Bangs, *Arminius*, 145.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 193–94.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.) 3:527. The entire letter is contained in 527–65.

First, Arminius asserts that the interpretation of Beza is wrong because he asks the wrong question and is looking for an answer about which Paul is not dealing. The false question is, "Will the Word of God fail even if most of the Jews are rejected?" The corresponding answer is: "God determined that only some of the Jews were to be partakers."⁶³ Hence, Beza's Supralapsarianism. The problem with this is that the question is inadequate. The correct question, says Arminius, is, "Does not the word of God become of no effect if those Jews who seek righteousness not of faith but of the law are rejected by God?" And the answer is, "God, in his word and in the declaration of his promise, signified that he considered in the relation of children only those Jews who should seek righteousness and salvation by faith, but in relation of foreigners those who should seek the same by the law."⁶⁴ Arminius grounds his interpretation in Romans 4:9–10 and Galatians 3–4.⁶⁵

Next, Arminius examines Paul's use of types and antitypes. Confusion arises over Isaac and Ishmael, and Esau and Jacob when they are taken as examples in themselves of God's purpose rather than as types of the children of the flesh and children of the promise.⁶⁶ The crux of Arminius's argument is found here. He asserts a predestination of classes, those who seek righteousness by works and those who seek it by faith.⁶⁷

Arminius also criticizes Beza in respect to predestination saying "an act which is inevitable, on account of the determination of any decrees does not deserve the name of sin," only those who sin voluntarily and of their own choice can be held blameworthy."⁶⁸

Arminius also takes issue with Beza on the concept of order of decrees with respect to the word translated "lump." Beza in his Supralapsarian interpretation asserts that this is the aggregate of fallen man.⁶⁹

This is a summation of Arminius's arguments for Romans 9. In it is contained the theology which polarizes the Reformed Church. Here, the issue is doctrinal and particularly election. Beza suggests a double-predestination while Arminius teaches a predestination of classes, i.e., for Arminius those in Christ are saved. These treatises on Romans 7 and 9, plus his critique of Perkins and his correspondence with Franciscus Junius (1597), comprise the extant writings of Arminius from the time of his Amsterdam pastorate. Later, his sentiments crystallize.

⁶³ Ibid., 3:529.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 3:530–31.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3:532–33.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3:533–44.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3:540.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 3:548.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 3:558.

In summary, Arminius wrote a poem to Snecanus stating his feelings on the theological issues:

If any man will show to me,
 That I with, Paul do not agree
 With readiness I will abstain.
 From my own sense, and his retain:
 But if, still further, one will show
 That I've dealt faith a deadly blow
 With deepest grief my fault I'll own,
 And try my error to atone.⁷⁰

This is an overview of the theological issues which were to divide the Reformed Church. One more area of conflict which will precipitate the polarity in the Reformed Church is the issue of Ecclesiology. The relation of Church and State, and that of the Creeds to the Church will likewise contribute to the rift.

IV. ECCLESIOLOGY

Besides issues of toleration and doctrine, Arminius came into conflict with high Calvinists over issues of an ecclesiological nature. These issues can be subdivided into two distinct points of conflict. One is the relation of Church and State. The other is the place of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. The two points of contention tie together in the spectrum of authority. Arminius advocated a strong magistracy exercising control of the Church, and wanted to do away with Creeds and catechisms altogether. However, orthodox Calvinists urged strict adherence to the Creeds and lobbied for an autonomous Church with the State having a subservient role. So, at stake in this issue is the nature of the Church: is it confessional or liberal? Was it to be a Church with unity in doctrine or one which allowed freedom for differing views? "Increasingly it became clear that what the Arminians wanted was full doctrinal freedom, while the Calvinists insisted on doctrinal unity and (enforced) stability."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Quoted in Bangs, *Arminius*, 198.

⁷¹ Louis Praama, "The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618)," in *Crisis in the Reformed Church*, (ed. P. DeJong; Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 29.

V. THE RELATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

The first point of contention in relation to ecclesiological issues concerns the relation of Church and State. Historically, the sides divided along two lines: first, the *rekkelijken*, the loose and comprehensive libertines, or broadminded Reformers; the Amsterdam merchants in the 1570s reflected this persuasion. In tension with them were the *preciezen*, precisionists, who wanted a church that ordered its own affairs without interference from the magistrates. Coornhert called the *preciezen* policy, “the papacy of the presbytery.”⁷²

In the Synod of Emden (1571) the *preciezen* won a partial victory with the Belgic Confession being adopted as the formula of doctrinal unity for the Dutch speaking churches; it also adopted a plan of church government, the *Acta*. The *Acta* stated that no church may have authority over any other church (Acta 1). Each church would have a consistory, comprised of ministers, elders and deacons (Acta 6); adjoining churches should send delegates to a “classis” which would meet two to four times per year (Acta 7); it provided for a general meeting for all Dutch churches (Acta 9); and stated that ministers are called by the consistory with consent of the classis (Acta 13).⁷³ Note that no role is ascribed to the magistrate; the calling of ministers is entirely an ecclesiastical matter. It is a mistake to assume that the Synod of Emden was a victory for Calvinism. Its polity was never universally implemented, particularly not in Leiden or Amsterdam. As a matter of fact, the Amsterdam refugees had originally opposed it, but finally acquiesced.⁷⁴ A precedent was set in favor of the *rekketijken* in Leiden in the early 1580s. On March 13, 1581, a young theology professor, Danaeus, came to Leiden to teach:

Danaeus was imbued with the Genevan polity, and in Leiden he came into conflict with another kind of Reformed polity, much less presbyterial. As with many of the early Dutch Reformed churches, the Leiden burgomasters exercised the right of passing on nominations for elder and deacon made by the consistory. In Genevan polity the consistory was a law unto itself. Many early Dutch Reformers had rejected this aspect of Genevan polity, fearing the uncontrolled, literally iconoclastic Calvinist zealots. The Genevans in turn, feared the subjection of the church to the state.⁷⁵

⁷² Bangs, *Arminius*, 100.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 101–102.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

Controversy erupted with the Leiden pastor Coolhaes, siding with the burgomasters against Danaeus and his colleague, Stumis. With the school in an uproar Danaeus resigned and departed in May, 1582. Note that the polarities are beginning to emerge.

Another factor emerged in 1586 as a National Synod met at the Hague, called by Leicester. The effect of the Synod was the elimination of all functions of the magistrates (burgomasters) in the calling of pastors.⁷⁶ This served to further polarize the *rekkelijken* and *preceizen*.

However, in Amsterdam, the burgomasters retained control of the goings on of the Church. In the first Arminian controversy of 1592, the burgomasters saw that dissensions of that kind were nipped in the bud so as to prevent any results disastrous to the church or even the Republic. If the consistory could not settle its differences, they, the burgomasters, “would be obliged to have recourse to other remedies.”⁷⁷ In this period, remarks Bangs, there was outward unity between the Libertine magistrates, who were also the elders and deacons in the consistory, and the more orthodox clergy. The polarity represented still only divergent tendencies and not yet mutually exclusive and openly discernable parties.⁷⁸

After the first two conflicts produced by his sermons the only other notable incident produced by Arminius’s sermons arose out of his exposition of the thirteenth chapter of Romans, when there were complaints that he granted the magistrates too much power in the matters of religion.⁷⁹ By and large, Arminius and the burgomasters stood together in affirming the right and

duty of the magistracy to exercise oversight of the internal affairs of the church.

In the seventeenth century it became customary to label Arminius’s view of the relation of Church and State, “Erastian,” after the views of Thomas Erastus (1555–1584). Erastus had become disturbed over the inordinate use of excommunication after the Genevan polity had been introduced at Heidelberg. He decided after studying the scriptures that excommunication was unwarranted, attributing it to the improper assumption of authority by the church officials. He asserted that all external discipline should be under the general law of the community, administered in Christian lands by magistrates, who oversee the law both as a civil and sacred function. He states the right and authority of rule and

⁷⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁷ Casper Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius D. D.* (trans. John Guthrie; Nashville, TN: E. Stevenson and F. A. Owen, 1867), 81–82.

⁷⁸ Bangs, *Arminius*, 109.

⁷⁹ Brandt, *Life of James Arminius*, 124–25.

jurisdiction has not been committed to ministers or to any others.⁸⁰ Arminius's teaching is similar to Erastus.⁸¹ However, Arminius does not rule out the use of excommunication in the case of external sins.⁸² With respect to the magistrate, Arminius does conform to the precedent of many Dutch towns and the teachings of Erastus. In consultation with spiritual leaders the magistrate is to enforce ecclesiastical laws, "preserve and defend" the ministry, appoint ministers who have been examined by a presbytery, see that they perform their ministry, bestow rewards on those who minister well and remove those who are "pertinaciously negligent."⁸³ Arminius would later assert that "magistrates should call councils and preside over them, or arrange for their presidency, since he alone, if he is performing his duty correctly, is able to bring to a council that impartiality which its presidency requires."⁸⁴ Arminius saw the magisterial function as a matter of divine mandate rooted in the Old Testament practice and in the practice of the early church before it became papal.⁸⁵ Arminius's teaching on the relation of Church and State proved to be a source of conflict between himself and the "orthodox" Calvinists, particularly while in his post as professor at Leiden. While Arminius was yet at Amsterdam, in 1597, the Synods of North and South Holland petitioned the states for a national synod. The states refused fearing that the Synod, moving in the wrong direction, would place undue limits on the role of the magistrate in the calling of pastors and in other functions of oversight in the Church. "The States General feared that a national synod would give occasion for the Calvinists to introduce a Genevan polity whereby the church ruled itself entirely while still calling on the state to protect and maintain it." This in turn could introduce a reign of religious intolerance which would divide the nation.⁸⁶ Bangs summarizes the developing polarity, saying,

The civil and lay interference with church affairs was resented by the Genevan elements. Thus the party lines began to emerge with the lay magistrates and the laity generally on one side and

⁸⁰ Carl Bangs, "All the Best Bishoprics and Deaneries": The Enigma of Arminian Politics," *Church History* 42 (March 1973): 8-9.

⁸¹ An excellent work dealing with the relation of Arminianism and Erastianism is Douglas Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

⁸² Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 2:141.

⁸³ Bangs, "Enigma," 9. Bangs quotes Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 2:508.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Bangs quotes Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 1:183.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Bangs, *Arminius*, 225-26.

the high Calvinist clergy on the other. The magistrates and laymen, supporting Erastianism, toleration, and mild views of predestination, saw in the other party the seeds of a new papacy in which the clergy could come to dominate the church and dictate its doctrine and policies. The clergy saw in the magistrates a threat to the presbyterian polity in which the church preserves its autonomy against the interference of the state.⁸⁷

VI. THE PURPOSE AND PLACE OF THE BELGIC AND HEIDELBERG CONFESSIONS

Inextricably interwoven into the fabric of the Dutch Reformed polarities was the problem of the purpose and place of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. What were their places in the short history of the Reformation? How did the early Dutch Reformers view them? What were their functions? How did the axiological opinions toward the Creeds contribute to the polarities within the Reformed Church?

Originally designed as an apology for the new Reformation faith to King Philip of Spain, the Belgic Confession subsequently gained the position of a touchstone for orthodoxy. It had been written by Guy de Bray and was first printed in 1561. At a Synod held in Antwerp in 1566 the Confession was modified, and from 1580 there had been recurrent demands that it be subscribed to by the Reformed clergy. Yet Calvin himself had warned against putting any creedal statement on the same level as the Scriptures. Later on, however, when Calvinism had reached a certain measure of consolidation many sought to make the Belgic Confession the standard for orthodoxy.⁸⁸ The Heidelberg Catechism, likewise, was promoted as a standard for orthodoxy. It was compiled in 1562 by Ursinus and Olevian, two Heidelberg theologians, at the behest of Elector Frederick III, and accepted the following year as the standard of doctrine in the Palatinate. Its fundamental theology was Calvinism.⁸⁹

In examining the place of creeds in the early Dutch Reformed Church, keep in mind that early Dutch Reformers from Amsterdam had opposed the Belgic Confession's acceptance (1570) as a requirement for orthodoxy. Even prior to Emden, at the inception of "field preaching" in 1566, with the indigenous Dutch Reformation,⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Bangs, "Dutch Reformation," 159.

⁸⁸ Hoenderdaal, 14.

⁸⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. F.L. Cross; London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 629.

⁹⁰ Bangs, *Arminius*, 93.

...the doctrinal basis was a biblical humanism directed against the Roman corruption of the church. The Heidelberg catechism played no official role but was probably regarded as a useful tool of instruction.⁹¹

In essence the Creeds were viewed as useful by the early Dutch Reformers, however, little evidence is forthcoming to assert that they were ever accepted universally as a strict measure of orthodoxy. Even though the Belgic Confession was signed at Emden (1571), as one writer says, "It was sufficiently ambiguous" so as not to be too restrictive in its function.⁹²

At the Alteration, Cuchlinus carried the responsibility of bringing order out of chaos. He was doctrinally loyal to the Heidelberg Catechism as a statement of Calvinism.⁹³ However, in practice the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession were not held as strict measures of orthodoxy. Of the first nine Reformed ministers in Amsterdam, only one signed the Belgic Confession.⁹⁴ This was true even though the Synods of Dordrecht (1578) and Middelburg (1581) required that all ministerial candidates must sign it.⁹⁵ Nor is there any evidence that Arminius signed the Belgic Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism.⁹⁶

By the 1590s it was apparent that no earlier Dutch synods, were truly "national" synods, that is, representative of the whole church.⁹⁷ Among all parties it was agreed that a genuine national synod must be held at the behest of the States General. Until such a synod was held, it was possible to refer all questions about the authority and interpretation of the Confession and Catechism to the "forthcoming national synod."⁹⁸

The polarities on the place of the Creeds were showing. Those who were lukewarm to them could point out that they were not Dutch documents but imports from foreign churches.⁹⁹ The supporters of supralapsarianism wanted the formulas endorsed by a national synod; the opponents wanted them to be "revised in the light of the word of God."¹⁰⁰ The ensuing question which would become even stronger during Arminius's

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 103.

⁹³ Ibid, 107.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 116.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 116.

⁹⁷ Bangs, "Enigma," 10.

⁹⁸ Bangs, *Arminius*, 225.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

professorial years at Leiden was, “Should a national synod meet to enforce the Confession and Catechism, or, to revise them?”¹⁰¹

The issues of toleration, doctrine and ecclesiology served to polarize sides in the Dutch Reformation. Issues which initiated polarization in Arminius’s pastoral years crystallized in his years at Leiden as professor of theology.

VII. CONFLICT AT LEIDEN (1603–1609)

During his years in Amsterdam, Arminius made his views known through both preaching and correspondence. When Franciscus Junius died of the plague in 1602, Arminius was proposed as his successor in the chair of theology at Leiden. However, vigorous opposition came from the supralapsarian clergy. He received the appointment nonetheless, a revealing commentary on the still-fluid theological situation in the Dutch churches in 1603. But now, with the appointment of Arminius, theologico-political forces that had been coexisting somewhat peacefully since the beginnings of the Dutch Reformation came into open conflict. Leiden became a center of contention with Arminius the spokesman for the “toleration” party and Franciscus Gomarus the leader and spokesman for the Supralapsarian faction.

The issues surfacing in open conflict were a continuation of those which Arminius had earlier addressed. They crystallized in controversy over the doctrine of predestination with accompanying debate over grace and free will, and over the nature of the Church. Would it be tolerant and open, and subject to magisterial control, or intolerant reflecting a doctrinally rigid Calvinism? The latter issue would surface in debate over the proposed national synod. Dogmatic theology and the politics of Church and State were intertwined in the six years of Arminius’s life as a professor at Leiden. Consider first the doctrinal issue as it surfaced at Leiden.

A. The Doctrinal Issue

It might be wise at this point to dispel a misconception. Oftentimes Calvin and Arminius are put in tension as having mutually exclusive systems of thought. What was Arminius’s attitude toward Calvin and his writings? The answer is found in a letter he wrote to Sebastion Egbertsz.,

...after the reading of the Scripture...I recommend that the Commentaries of Calvin be read.

¹⁰¹ Hoenderdaal, 114–15.

...For I affirm that in the interpretation of Scripture Calvin is incomparable...so much so that I concede to him a certain spirit of prophecy in which he stands distinguished above others, above most, yea, above all.¹⁰²

However, Arminius is not as enthusiastic over Calvin's *Institutes*:

His *Institutes*...I give out to be read after the Catechism, as a more extended explanation. But here I add—with discrimination, as the writings of all men ought to be read.¹⁰³

Likewise, Arminius verbalizes his loyalty to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. What Arminius quarreled with was a Supralapsarian interpretation of Scripture, not so much with Calvin or even Creeds.

What events contributed to the ever widening polarities? What issues were at stake? The key issue at stake was the issue of predestination as taught by Beza and his followers, Plancius, Gomarus, and the multitude of other high Calvinists. Was their doctrine true to Scripture? Arminius thought not. At Leiden, Arminius immediately set about teaching theology, including the doctrine of Predestination, as he viewed it from his indigenous Dutch Reformed background. In his public disputation given for his doctorate on July 10, 1603, Arminius said,

...though the understanding of God be certain and infallible, it does not impose of necessity in things, nay rather it establishes in them a contingency.¹⁰⁴

Translated, this means that the fall was not decreed, but based upon man's choice, a position contrary to Beza. In another disputation (15), on February 7, 1604, Arminius, speaking on "Divine Predestination," says:

One caution ought to be strictly observed, that nothing be taught concerning [predestination] beyond what the Scriptures say, that it be propounded in the manner which the Scriptures have adopted, and that it be referred to the same end as that which the Scriptures propose when they deliver it.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² This quote contained in a letter to Sebastien Egbertsz, May 3, 1607. It is recorded in Brandt, *Life of James Arminius*, 299–301.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 1:447,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 1:569.

By this, Arminius is implying that those teaching “Supralapsarian Predestination” are going beyond Scripture into speculation. Later, on May 29, 1604, Arminius again pressed hard that the “first sin was contingent and not necessary,”¹⁰⁶ further exposing his polarity with Supralapsarianism. On October 31, 1604, the theological battle at Leiden commenced. Gomarus started it by holding a public disputation, but one that was out of turn and out of step with the established schedule. He excused his speaking out of turn because error was abroad (speaking of Arminius). At the disputation he expounded Beza’s predestination theories.¹⁰⁷

In his public disputations, Arminius challenged many of Gomarus’s and Beza’s theories. Arminius taught that predestination was “the decree of the good pleasure of God in Christ, by which he resolved from all eternity, to justify, adopt and endow with everlasting life...believers on whom he had decreed to bestow faith.”¹⁰⁸ In this definition believers are the elect, and therefore, faith precedes election.

When accused of teaching a Pelagian concept of free will, Arminius responded [speaking of man as a sinner]:

In this state, the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatsoever except such as are excited by Divine grace. For Christ said, “without me ye can do nothing.”¹⁰⁹

Arminius later says “free will is unable to begin or to perfect any true and spiritual good without, grace.”¹¹⁰ [The regenerate] are “made capable in Christ, cooperating now with, God...this cooperation whatever it may be of knowledge, holiness, and power, is all begotten within him by the Holy Spirit.”¹¹¹

Arminius does not deny predestination. However, he does define it differently from Beza, developing his own Biblical Theology. Of fundamental importance is the fact that for Arminius the doctrine of sin and inability, in which he agrees with Calvin, is explicitly presupposed as the problem to which predestination is the answer. This disagrees with Beza

¹⁰⁶ Casper Brandt, *Life of James Arminius*, 195–97.

¹⁰⁷ Bangs, *Arminius*, 263–64.

¹⁰⁸ Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 1:565.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.526

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 2.472

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 2.529

and his followers, who made the decree of election refer to man as yet uncreated. Beza's position makes it necessary that there be sin in order that God may carry out His prior decree—which is to make God the author of sin.¹¹²

As theological tensions increased, complicated by political issues, Arminius was asked to state his theological position before the States of Holland. On October 8, 1608, he delivered his understanding of predestination and other theological points of conflict. After a scathing attack against Supralapsarianism, Arminius delineated his own understanding of predestination. For Arminius,

The first absolute decree of God concerning the salvation of sinful men is that by which he decreed to appoint His Son, Jesus Christ, for a Mediator, Redeemer, Savior, Priest and King, who might destroy sin by his own death, and by his obedience might obtain the salvation which has been lost, and might communicate it by his own virtue.¹¹³

The second decree extends election to those who repent and believe in Christ, i.e., the Church. The third decree is the administration of “sufficient and efficient means” necessary for the repentance and faith by which one is in Christ. The result is that Christ is the elect One, that all are elect who are in Christ, and that no one is in Christ except they come by faith. Election in its primary sense, therefore, refers to Christ. In its legitimate extension it includes believers. The fourth and final decree specifies particular persons, sinful men, whom God elects and saves because of their foreknown repentance and faith.¹¹⁴

Arminius asserted that God's predestination is “in Christ.” By affirming a Christological understanding of predestination, Arminius departed in a number of particulars from high Calvinist Reformed theology.¹¹⁵ Here are a few of the major departures. First, predestination does not determine who shall believe, only that those in Christ, believers, are elect. Second, salvation being in Christ, is not dependent on free will, but free will is active in salvation. Third, the will can resist grace. Fourth, the resistibility of grace leads to the possibility of falling from grace. The possibility that a believer may cease believing is at least an open question. Finally, all this implies a general atonement.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Bangs, “Dutch Reformation,” 166.

¹¹³ Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 1:247.

¹¹⁴ Bangs, “Dutch Reformation,” 167–68.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹¹⁶ Adapted from *Ibid.*, 169–70.

Arminius's view, then, definitely is different from a Supralapsarian understanding of Predestination. The question arises, why is the Predestination issue so important? Why the rage over it? It was not merely a disagreement in the realm of ideas, neither was it just an historical accident. The issue over predestination has its roots in the polarity in Dutch religious and national life going back to the refugee flights of 1566. Polarity existed in Arminius's Amsterdam days. In the seventeenth century the polarity was taking new forms and intensifying.¹¹⁷ With the Catholic Counter-Reformation, Cardinal Bellarmine attacked the Reformed doctrine of predestination. "Here he found the soft underbelly of the Protestant enemy, and his jabs hit home."¹¹⁸ When someone else, especially a Reformed professor of theology, took his own jabs at this soft underbelly, it was reckoned a defection in the direction of Roman Catholicism. Just such a jab was made of Arminius. All of this served to make predestination a touchy issue, for it seemed to strike at the very foundation of both the Reformed religion and the national struggle for independence. In the socio-economic matrix these ideas stood for political realities which further complicated and polarized the two sides.¹¹⁹

B. The Ecclesiological Issue

The various facets in the ecclesiological struggle were manifested in the strife over the proposed national synod. At the heart of the polarity was the definition of the Church's nature. Was it broad, tolerant and free of doctrinal restrictions, or was it exclusive, intolerant and doctrinally elite? The issue on the nature of the church followed Arminius to Leiden and became an increasing point of contention between himself and his high Calvinist antagonists. Dissention existed in the church. Concluding his term as Rector Magnificus at Leiden on February 8, 1606, Arminius delivered his "Rectoral" oration, "On Reconciling Religious Dissention among Christians."¹²⁰ In it Arminius analyzed causes of dissentions and his proposed cures. He called for a national synod and gave some specifications for it. Also, Arminius made one final plea for a degree of toleration and inclusiveness in the Church. He revealed his Erastian sentiments urging that the magistrates exercise control and then urged that the ultimate authority must be the Bible, not decree or dogma. For Arminius, the crucial issue for lack of peace in the Church was the exalted place of the Confession and Catechism.

¹¹⁷ Bangs, *Arminius*, 273.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 1:146–92.

...nothing is more obstructive to the investigation of truth than prior commitments to partial truths.¹²¹

Arminius's sentiments further polarized the sides. His suggestions were not acceptable to Supralapsarians.

On March 15, 1606, at the request of the provincial synods the States General granted approval for a "National Synod." Far from bringing the two parties together, however, it drove them farther apart, for the Supralapsarians were dismayed at the wording of the sanction. The Synod was authorized in terms as those laid down by the States of Holland (1597): that in "the National Synod the Confession and Catechism should be revised."¹²² The Synodical deputies were furious.

In late May of 1607, the Preparatory Council for the National Synod met at the Hague. Their purpose was to establish guidelines for the Synod. Of the eight questions to be settled within the Council the delegates divided on the sixth question—should the delegates be bound only by the Word of God? Thirteen delegates wanted to bind the delegates to the Confession and Catechism as well as to Scripture. Four delegates, Arminius, Uitenbogaert and two Utrecht ministers submitted a minority report with a simple yes. The crux of the matter was one of authority. Was Scripture the supreme authority in terms of which Confession and Catechism could be revised, or were they determined *a priori* to be so conformable to Scripture that not even Scripture could judge them? Arminius and his friends were outvoted.

Professor Hoenderdaal, reflects that the deeper issue involved was the doctrine of the Church.

Arminius and Uitenbogaert wanted a church that would be free from what was already a too-confining confessional authority. They wanted to recognize a plurality of confessions. In this they were not un-Calvinistic, for Calvin himself was willing to recognize more confessions, including the Augsburg.¹²³

The Council also disagreed over question eight: how the Synod may contribute to the well being of the Church. Arminius thought the answer was in revising the creeds, however, the majority vote placed no mode of promoting the Synod's goal of contributing to the churches' well being.

¹²¹ Bangs, *Arminius*, 278.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 280.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 290.

This was a defeat for Arminius and his followers and soon they would learn that the majority would insist on far more restrictive measures than those originally proposed in the Preparatory Convention.¹²⁴

The next year, Arminius, writing to Burgomaster Sebastian Egbertsz., relates how his opponents were pressing to restrict the synod to the “orthodox” party who would rise up against any who wanted to alter the Confession and Catechism. Instead “of being a peaceful synod it would be controlled by the self-appointed accusers of heretics who would suppress and ban anyone they considered” unorthodox.¹²⁵ Arminius’s recommendations in his Rectoral Oration were rejected.

In his “Declaration of Sentiments” Arminius made some strong statements relating to the nature of the Church and the place of the Creeds.¹²⁶ He urged that Scripture be the sole authority in the church and argued that the doctrine of Supralapsarian Predestination was not in accord with Scripture, the Church Fathers, or the greater part of the professors of Christianity.¹²⁷ Arminius stated that,

Of all the difficulties and controversies which have arisen in these our churches since the time of the Reformation, there is not one that has not had its origin in this doctrine, or that has not, at least, been mixed with it.¹²⁸

Arminius cited cases of schism and polarity in the Dutch Church. He listed Coolhaes at Leiden, Herman Herberts of Gouda, Cornelius Wiggerts at Hoorn and Tako Sybrants at Medemblik as examples of orthodox Dutch pastors who had conflict with and suffered by the Confession and Catechism’s high Calvinist Supralapsarian interpretation.¹²⁹ Arminius desired to clarify and reduce the Catechism and Confession because, “there are certain words and phrases which are capable of being understood in different ways and furnishing occasion for disputes.”¹³⁰ His suggestion was, “let it (the Synod) be attempted to make the Confession contain as few articles as possible; and let it propose them in a very brief form, conceived entirely in the expressions of Scripture.”¹³¹ Arminius wanted to remove the ambiguities. When challenged by those who

¹²⁴ Ibid., 291.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Arminius, *Writings* (American Ed.), 1:264–73.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1:239.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1:240.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1:266.

¹³¹ Ibid., 1:272.

would not consider revising the Creeds, he responded, “there is nothing wrong with calling into question that which is not unquestionable.”¹³² Arminius’s “Declaration of Sentiments” only created further polarization within the Dutch Reformed Church. Gomarus continued his attacks accusing Arminius of being Pelagian, Socinian, and a secret supporter of the papacy. It is fortunate that Arminius did not live to see his worst fears materialize at the Synod of Dort. He died of tuberculosis on October 19, 1609.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Carl Bangs, the eminent historian and biographer of Arminius, summarizing the life of Arminius, reflects:

The early controversies at Amsterdam had occurred in the tranquil last days of the old order; the later occurred in the turbulent first days of a new order. The theology of Arminius was the same: the receptivity and the pattern of power were different. In the 1590s, Arminius could scarcely lose; in the 1600s, he could scarcely win. Failure to take into account the economic and political changes surrounding the theological discussion leads to a distorted understanding of that discussion. It was the church and the country which had changed in the two decades, not the theology of Arminius, as some have asserted. Arminius was not an innovator who attempted to undermine the official Dutch Reformed doctrine of Predestination. He was a Dutch Reformed pastor and professor who interpreted the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism in the tradition of many of the earliest indigenous Reformed leaders of the Dutch church.¹³³

Arminius’s life falls in a period of intense nationalistic and religious struggle. The old pattern of Christendom and Empire was breaking up with the rise of the new national states. The rivalry of Catholic and Protestant played a distinct part in the process; questions of patriotism and religious allegiance were inevitably intertwined.¹³⁴

Well chosen were the words of eulogy spoken at James Arminius’s funeral: “There lived in Holland a man, whom they that knew him could not sufficiently esteem; whom they who did not esteem him had never sufficiently known.”¹³⁵

¹³² Bangs, *Arminius*, 314,

¹³³ Bangs, “Theology,” 481–82.

¹³⁴ Rattenbury, “Historical Background,” 243.

¹³⁵ Slaate, *The Arminian Arm of Theology*, 12.

Following Arminius's death Uitenbogaert called a private meeting at Gouda of those who sympathized with the views of Arminius. Held on January 14, 1610, forty-six ministers of the Reformed Church attended the conference. The group drew up a "Remonstrance" of five articles. The first four were against, (1) the Supralapsarian decree, (2) the Sublapsarian decree, (3) the idea that Christ died only for the elect, and (4) the idea that grace was irresistible. Article 5 simply stated that the question whether the saints could fall from grace was still uncertain. The "Remonstrance" though unsigned was sent to Oldenbarnevelt, who circulated it among the different classes. It was met with a storm of opposition, a storm that culminated at the Synod of Dort.