

New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty

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Evan Haefeli's excellent new book, *New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty*, does nothing less than expand and transform our understanding of religious diversity and toleration in colonial Dutch North America. It will become required reading for anyone seriously interested in the early history of the mid-Atlantic colonies, the genesis of religious pluralism in America, or the history of religious toleration in the Dutch world. It will also be of use to scholars and students interested in seeing how a transatlantic approach to colonial American history can freshly illuminate sources already examined by generations of historians.

New Netherland—the 17th-century colony of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in what is today New York, New Jersey, and the Delaware Valley—occupies a distinctive place in historiography. American historians have long considered the Dutch colonial experience as a template for the emergence of cultures of diversity and competition that would ultimately shape American political and religious development. In the work of the popular writer Russell Shorto, Dutch New Netherland has even been posited as the cradle of modern American liberalism, with its live-and-let-live acceptance of social and cultural difference. The trope lives on in current political culture, with Mayor Michael Bloomberg invoking New York City’s tolerant Dutch origins to defend the building of an Islamic Cultural Center near the World Trade Center site. On the other hand, European historians have largely viewed New Netherland as something of a footnote. Rather than being the ‘island at the center of the world’ celebrated by Shorto, Manhattan and its environs are usually seen as a backwater neglected by Dutch sponsors who were far more interested in investing their resources in the fight with Portugal over Brazil and with Spain over various Caribbean islands.

For Americanists, religious tolerance has been one of the touch points of what allegedly made New Netherland so pivotal for the American future. Yet assessments of the colony’s religious history have had to contend with a central paradox. On one hand, by the 1650s New Amsterdam (now New York City) and its satellite communities were home to a colorful array of European religious refugees and ‘seekers’: Lutherans, Mennonites, Jews, English Baptists, Quakers, and a few Catholics, all of whom existed outside the bounds of the colony’s official Dutch Reformed (Calvinist) church. Surely, most commentators have argued, their ability to find new homes in New Netherland reflected the growing importance of religious toleration in the Dutch Republic, where Amsterdam was becoming the most religiously cosmopolitan city in Western Europe.

On the other hand, the fact that each of these groups had to struggle with the colony’s on-site director, Peter Stuyvesant, his provincial council, and the local Dutch Reformed clergy in order to secure concessions has also been central to the historical narrative. Indeed, the Flushing Remonstrance, a 1657 petition that has been celebrated as one of the earliest arguments for religious freedom in America, was a protest by a group of colonists against Stuyvesant’s anti-Quaker measures, not an endorsement of the colony’s official policies. Were Stuyvesant and his Calvinist allies representative of an outmoded or aberrant tradition that was becoming obsolete in the Netherlands even as they attempted to impose it on colonists? The twin realities of tolerance and intolerance coexist awkwardly in much of the writing on 17th-century Dutch North America, giving rise to a teleological inference: Stuyvesant and company were on the wrong side of American history, destined to be losers as the colony’s religious dissenters planted the roots of American pluralism by taking advantage of a Dutch climate of toleration that prevailed despite Stuyvesant and the local Reformed clergymen.

This is where Haefeli steps in, relying on close readings of Dutch and English primary sources and building on the recent work of Jaap Jacobs, Willem Frijhoff, Benjamin J. Kaplan, Ned C. Landsman, Maarten Prak, and other historians. Inspired by ‘the relatively new fields of Atlantic world history and borderlands history’ (p. x), Haefeli jettisons the purely Americanist focus as myopic and misleading, instead embracing an approach that places New Netherland in the context of contemporaneous European and, indeed, global affairs.

Religious life and policy in Dutch North America, he insists, must be understood as part of the larger Dutch experience, and that experience was evolving during the 17th century not only in the Low Countries but in colonies and outposts as far flung as Dutch Brazil, South Africa, the East Indies, India, Ceylon, and Formosa. Indeed, as Haefeli points out, 'Dutch tolerance, colonies, and nation were created together' (p. 21) during the long revolt against Spain and the struggle over national self-definition that lasted from the mid 16th to the late 17th century. Moreover, the peculiar dynamics of Dutch political and religious culture—especially the primacy of local, provincial, and confessional identities, rather than national uniformity, as the crucial engines of social reality—determined the outcomes of religious confrontations wherever the Dutch settled during their 'Golden Age'. Similarly, the contingencies of timing that brought specific players together in specific places at specific moments explain the variations in Dutch religious policy far better than does a uniform and static policy of toleration that never actually existed.

Central to Haefeli's argument is the question of what defined Dutch toleration in the 17th century. He makes clear what Dutch toleration was not: a clearly enunciated policy in favour of freedom of public worship applicable everywhere at all times. However, the Dutch Reformed Church, though supported by the state, was embraced by only a minority of the Dutch people (other Protestants, Catholics, and small groups of Jews made up the rest of the population); it avoided forcing the heterodox to attend its services or to pay for its upkeep. At the heart of what distinguished Dutch toleration was the idea of liberty of conscience: individuals were free to believe what they wanted without harassment by magistrates, prelates, or inquisitors, a policy that distinguished the Dutch Republic from contemporary Spain, Portugal, England, France, and other European states. Yet the privilege of conducting public worship, services and ceremonies was reserved to the Dutch Reformed Church—a church that was 'national' if not 'established' by 17th-century European standards. Technically, other religious communities—whether Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite, Jewish or, after the Synod of Dort in 1618, the Arminian Protestant congregations known as Remonstrants—were not supposed to manifest themselves publicly in services or processions. Dutch Reformed clerics and laymen often hoped that non-Reformed Christians would eventually convert after exposure to the public church.

What developed in reality was a patchwork of discrete and often transitory policies in different cities, provinces, and regions. In parts of the Netherlands where Counter-Remonstrant (hard-line Calvinist) magistrates and clergy had the upper hand, non-Reformed Protestants and Catholics could find it difficult to sustain any kind of congregational life, and Jews were generally prohibited from settling. At the other extreme stood the great trading port of Amsterdam, which became the capital of 'connivance', defined as tacit acceptance of congregations of Catholics, Lutherans, Mennonites, Remonstrants, and Jews so long as they conducted their religious life in private. (Today, a sense of how this worked can be gained at Amsterdam's Museum Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder, or 'Our Lord in the Attic', a private Catholic church concealed in a house in 1661.) In Amsterdam, connivance eventually slipped into an acceptance of public worship for some groups, with Lutherans permitted to open a public church in 1633 and the first public synagogue opening in 1639. Between latitudinarian Amsterdam and rigorously Calvinist towns like Leyden and Franeker (where a young Peter Stuyvesant studied philosophy) lay a range of often unpredictable possibilities, with some cities 'conniving' and later rescinding connivance for specific groups, or vice versa, as the balance of local political and religious power shifted back and forth. As Haefeli points out, gaining clarity on the specifics of any given locality's policies is complicated by the inclination of Dutch authorities not to commit these policies to writing: 'oral promises could be made and retracted, giving magistrates the room for maneuver they liked' (p. 155).

In some of the book's most fascinating passages, Haefeli shows how this Dutch ambiguity played out in distant colonies. In Batavia (today's Jakarta), Dutch authorities sought to suppress Chinese temples, but then connived at their presence, while refusing to tolerate even private services by Catholics or Muslims. In Brazil, military, political, and commercial considerations led the Dutch to permit public worship by Catholics and Jews; the Western Hemisphere's first synagogue opened in Recife in 1636. Yet non-Reformed Protestants there enjoyed no such privilege. In Formosa (Taiwan), where Dutch colonization (1624–62) almost exactly paralleled that in New Netherland (1624–64), Calvinist missionaries converted some 5,000

native Formosans to the Dutch Reformed Church. Meanwhile their colleagues on the Hudson did little to convert native Lenape and Iroquois, and clergy throughout the Dutch Americas and Caribbean responded in diverse ways to the prospect of converting enslaved Africans. Most analogous to New Netherland was the Cape Colony in what is today South Africa, where, despite the presence of some Lutherans and Catholics, the Reformed Church was the sole recognized religious body.

The core of Haefeli's argument is to show how these vagaries of Dutch religious policy shaped the particular encounters of different religious minorities with New Netherland's authorities. As in Europe, Brazil, and Asia, inconsistency (or flexibility, in the view of Dutch policy makers) was the rule. From the vantage point of the Netherlands, Stuyvesant's relatively intolerant Counter-Remonstrant strain of Calvinism was hardly anomalous or obsolete. As in many parts of the Dutch Republic, Lutherans in New Amsterdam who sought a fully-fledged public church failed to obtain official sanction for their efforts. Meanwhile, their coreligionists on the Delaware won precisely those privileges from Stuyvesant because of the specific terms of the Dutch seizure of their settlement from Sweden in 1655. Although the WIC authorities in Amsterdam overruled Stuyvesant's attempt to discourage Jews from staying in New Amsterdam, the Company never extended full religious privileges to the Jews there, at most telling Stuyvesant to let them worship privately in the wake of requests from Jewish correspondents. Quakers, who insisted on preaching openly without official permission and who violated a 1656 ban on private religious 'conventicles', certainly got Stuyvesant's Calvinist juices flowing, and his treatment of them became a feature of early Quaker martyrology. But Quakers were also involved in a broader conflict between English Calvinist settlers and more radical English Protestants in Dutch-ruled western Long Island, a conflict in which English and Dutch Calvinists made common cause against Quaker nonconformity. In the most radical case of Dutch toleration being extended to North America, the visionaries Franciscus van den Enden and Pieter Cornelisz Plockhoy projected a harmonious colony of open-minded Protestants who would eschew confessional distinctions as they sought spiritual enlightenment on the far side of the Atlantic. In New Amstel on the Delaware River (controlled by the city of Amsterdam, not the WIC), Plockhoy founded his utopia in 1663, only to have it fall apart when the English invaded a year later.

In each instance, Haefeli shows how particular prior experiences in the Netherlands or in the greater Dutch colonial world shaped the expectations of dissenters and the specific responses of officials. He also shows how religious confrontations involved varied stakeholders on both sides of the Atlantic—WIC managers in Amsterdam, first and foremost, but also the consistories and classes of Dutch Reformed clerics in the Netherlands, Reformed ministers on the ground in America, influential nonconformist bodies in Europe, civil officials and merchants mindful of diplomatic and military needs, and colonists themselves—all of whom kept a flurry of letters, petitions, declarations, and complaints flowing back and forth across the ocean. In any given instance, the balance of power and circumstance between these interests would determine outcomes for particular dissenters.

Haefeli also underscores how neither side viewed these confrontations as vindications of some sweeping general principle of toleration or intolerance: 'the issue was not about a uniform practice but rather a series of individually negotiated arrangements' (p. 137). Even the 31 Flushing Remonstrants on Long Island, who warned Stuyvesant in 1657 that religious persecution was an affront to God, were not disinterested bystanders invoking an abstract right but Quaker sympathizers (and in some cases, eventual converts). Neither the dissenting sects nor the Dutch Reformed clergy and magistrates in North America projected their positions much beyond the narrowly circumscribed bounds of group interest and immediate circumstance. Even Stuyvesant, portrayed as an inflexible bigot in much of the secondary literature, affirmed the right of individual conscience, and treated each of the dissenting groups on its own terms. This is one of the book's most useful contributions to a historiography that has often viewed New Netherland through the generalizing filter of the religion clause of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment (1789), an anachronistic approach that has obscured more than it has clarified.

Haefeli also emphasizes the irony of viewing the New Netherland Dutch as prime movers of a culture of toleration that they supposedly bequeathed to the Englishmen who seized the colony from Stuyvesant in 1664. Many scholars have posited the experience of heterodoxy in New Netherland as determinative or at

least influential in the subsequent history of the Middle Colonies, where New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania became the most religiously and ethnically diverse of the 18th-century British North American colonies. But, as Haefeli shows, it was the English conquerors themselves—the first governors of New York, Richard Nicolls and Francis Lovelace—who introduced a form of religious pluralism that displaced the Dutch Reformed Church from primacy and made each Protestant denomination an equivalent player in the colony's devotional and public life. Under the English, Lutherans were finally permitted to found a church, and Quakers were allowed to hold meetings (but not to proselytize). When a Dutch fleet seized New York in 1673 and the region briefly reverted to Dutch rule, the Reformed Church was restored to its dominant public position, to the discomfort of local Lutherans and others who had grown accustomed to English pluralism. Only with the return of English governance in 1674 was a more pluralistic toleration restored. In short, the English conquerors were significantly more tolerant than the Dutch authorities who had preceded them.

Once again, the accidents of timing and the agendas of specific players, in this case the coterie of religiously latitudinarian expansionists around James Stuart, Duke of York, during the English Restoration of the 1660s, accounted for religious policies and social realities. (Regime change would again reshape the religious climate of the Middle Colonies after 1688, when royal governors Benjamin Fletcher and Lord Cornbury established the Church of England as New York's government-supported church, but in the context of the Glorious Revolution's Toleration Act, which countenanced congregations of dissenters on both sides of the Atlantic.) By 1730, the churches of seven different Protestant confessions and a synagogue were open in British New York City, a situation unimaginable in the 17th-century Dutch colony; only Catholics had to await the liberalizing effects of the American Revolution to enjoy religious freedom in New York. Disjuncture, rather than some general 'atmosphere' of toleration bequeathed by the Dutch to the English, shaped devotional life. As Haefeli suggests, 'the greatest Dutch contribution to American religious diversity was to hold the Mid-Atlantic out of the English orbit until this singular period of English history' (p. 19).

This book extends our understanding in many ways, successfully interweaving an impressive range of sources and topics. For Americanists in particular, it provides a grounding in Dutch religious and political history that has usually been missing, to the detriment of both scholarly and popular interpretations of the New Netherland legacy. It joins a body of recent work by Jaap Jacobs, Donna Merwick, Paul Otto, Willem Frijhoff, David William Voorhees, Firth Haring Fabend, Dennis J. Maika, and others, much of it enriched by new translations of 17th-century Dutch documents undertaken by the New Netherland Institute in Albany, New York. This growing literature has challenged received wisdom on Dutch-Indian relations, the connections between commercial and religious imperatives in colonization, and other aspects of New Netherland history.

I have only one significant caveat. According to Haefeli, the peculiarities of Dutch tolerance ‘require us to rethink New Netherland’s reputation in American history as a place where people of many faiths, languages, and nationalities peacefully coexisted’ (p. 91). As provocative as this argument is, it does underplay—while acknowledging in passing—that a case can still be made for a Dutch contribution to colonial tolerance, albeit a more limited one than has traditionally been advanced. After all, even if the experiences of dissenters in New Netherland were more like those of their coreligionists in hard-line Dutch Calvinist towns than in ‘conniving’ Amsterdam, the WIC permitted most heterodox believers to remain in North America, even if reluctantly and in the face of heated opposition from Calvinist clergy on both sides of the Atlantic. Lutherans, Anabaptists, ‘Independents’, Quakers, Catholics, and Jews were generally shut out of 17th-century Puritan New England and Anglican Virginia; where dissenters managed to find refuge, as in nonconformist Rhode Island or Catholic Maryland, they were more or less segregated from neighboring colonies. Not so in New Netherland, where heterodox believers managed to put down roots that positioned them to gain more liberal privileges and rights after 1664. As has long been recognized, this countenancing of ‘erring spirits’ reflected pragmatic calculation on the part of the WIC, desperate for settlers on their American frontier, as well as the peculiarly urban nature of New Amsterdam as a commercial crossroads for refugees. But it also reflected the role of liberty of conscience at the core of Reformed self-understanding, arguably a contribution of lasting importance in America as well as in the Netherlands.

But this is merely a gloss on Haefeli’s impressive and convincing re-envisioning of New Netherland’s religious history in the context of the Dutch Golden Age and its global diaspora. ‘Dutch tolerance was a dynamic, complex, constantly negotiated process’ (p. 9), he tells us. That tolerance looks different when viewed simultaneously from the banks of the Amstel, the Maas, the Paraiba, and the Ciliwung as well as from the shores of the Hudson and the Delaware. We are indebted to Evan Haefeli for opening our eyes.

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