Calvinism and the Making of the European Mind

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CHAPTER 4

Calvinists vs. Libertines: A New Look at Religious Exile and the Origins of ‘Dutch’ Tolerance

Mirjam G.K. van Veen and Jesse Spohnholz

Scholars of the Reformation in the Netherlands have long understood the role of persecution and exile in encouraging specific forms of Christianity over others. In the sixteenth century, the Low Countries saw a great diversity of religious adherents, including Lutherans, reform-minded Catholics, Anabaptists, spiritualists, and Calvinists. Though all of these strains persisted, it was the Calvinists who emerged in control of the state-sponsored Dutch Reformed Church once the military success of rebel forces in 1572 allowed the creation of the Dutch Republic. One reason that historians have given for the success of Calvinism has been the key role of the experiences in exile in helping to consolidate this religious movement, theologically, institutionally, liturgically, and even socially. The received story generally goes like this.

In the 1540s, the Catholic Habsburg government stepped up its persecution of religious dissenters. Some Protestants renounced their heresy, while others lived in hiding. Still others accepted martyrdom. The most important people in the consolidation of Calvinism, though, were the exiles. These were people who were willing to leave their homes, families, and friends, and to move to foreign lands, where their prospects were uncertain. Unlike other dissenters, exiles both preserved their commitment to their faith—and lived to tell about it. By the mid 1550s refugee communities of Calvinists from the Low Countries had emerged in southern England and the northwestern Holy Roman Empire. In England, the largest were in London and Norwich, while in the German lands they were in Emden and Wesel.

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The experience of exile, historians have emphasized, helped transform evangelicals into Calvinists. Religious refugees found men and women who shared their beliefs, established networks of mutual support, and built so-called ‘model churches’ that offered pure specimens of the Calvinist faith. Refugees began building church institutions that could bind them together, establishing norms of doctrine and liturgy. In short, the exile experience encouraged Dutch Calvinists to see themselves as independent of state authority, bound together by the Word of God, free to work relatively unhindered to establish doctrines, institutions, and a pattern of ritual life that allowed them to live out their ideology in its most perfected form. The Reformation historian Heiko Oberman even used the term “Exulantentheologie” to describe how Calvinist ideas thrived in conditions of exile. As Oberman suggested, John Calvin’s emphasis on the doctrine of election and predestination served as great consolation for his persecuted followers—it provided a sense of meaning in a world in which hardships on earth stood in contrast with the guiding hand of God. The conditions of harsh persecution and alienation from government, thus, were perfect for the spread of Calvinism.


The next phase of this narrative of exile and the spread of Dutch Calvinism started in 1572, when refugees returned to the Netherlands, ready to begin creating Calvinist churches in the new Dutch Republic. The result could be jarring. This formation of the new Dutch Reformed Church saw a range of local conflicts between Calvinist ministers, who insisted on autonomy in designing and regulating the new public church, and those political authorities who aimed to retain a guiding hand in church matters. These conflicts between ministers and magistrates overlapped considerably with a parallel set of religious struggles between Calvinists and the so-called ‘Libertines,’ those who supported a broad and inclusive, un-dogmatic church and a brand of spiritualism that promoted religious toleration. Calvinists aimed an exclusivist church with narrowly defined standards of orthodoxy, marked by conformity to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. Libertines, in contrast, feared the return of a set of institutions that could compel the consciences of ordinary people, amounting to a new “Spanish Inquisition,” but now one taking its marching orders from Geneva instead of Rome. Erastian magistrates and Libertines often found themselves in alliance against Calvinist ministers. This polemic between ‘Calvinists’ and ‘Libertines’ continued throughout the sixteenth century, becoming intertwined in a set of theological and political


9 Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert for example saw the magistrates as the safeguards against this “Genevan Inquisition.” Mirjam van Veen, “De aert van Spaensche Inquisitie’. Coornherts opvattingen over de verhouding tussen kerk en staat,” Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift 58 (2004), 67.
Calvinists vs. Libertines


disagreements, culminating in a dramatic political showdown in 1617 and ending with a resolution to the church debate at the national Synod of Dordt in 1618/19. Though the Republic would continue to be religiously diverse, this moment marked the triumph of Calvinism, forged in the hardships of persecution and foreign exile, within the Dutch Reformed Church, over and against more inclusive and tolerant versions of Dutch spirituality.

We are currently engaged in a research project that re-conceptualizes this narrative of the Dutch Reformation. For the most part scholars have looked to the winners in the struggles within the Reformed Church, explained their success by turning to their exile experiences to explain their strong sense of righteousness in the face of adversity and their discipline and organization in the face of diaspora. In this paper, we examine a group of religious exiles whose experience abroad was quite different, and who returned to the Netherlands not as committed Calvinists, but as some of the most notorious and influential Libertines. In what follows we will describe the experiences of four men, Hubert Duifhuis, Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert, Caspar Coolhaes and Herman Herberts, who spent time as religious exiles in the German Rhineland. Each had experience there that showed them that broadly-conceived, supraconfessional, inclusive, and tolerant policies were a perfectly legitimate model for a public church. They also found ties to strands of spiritualist thinking with which Libertine attitudes came to be associated. And when they returned, each became a forceful advocate of Libertinism, not simply because he articulated some kind of natural ‘Dutch’ tolerance, but in part as a result of experiences abroad. Further, these men maintained mutual relationships amongst each other that we believe constituted a network of former exiles attempting, without success in the end, to push the Reformed Church in a very different direction than their Calvinist opponents. These four examples suggest that Libertinism may have been just as influenced by the experience of religious exile as was Calvinism.

Scholars have for many years been well aware of the drama of the conflicts between Calvinists and Libertines.10 However, the Libertines have

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largely been treated as representative of an endemic brand of a specifically ‘Dutch’ spiritualism or tolerance that stood against the spread of a Genevan-influenced ‘international Calvinism’. Indeed there were important rhetorical reasons for Libertines, in their own writings, to encourage this view; they often described their struggle as one between the natural Dutch Reformation, inclined to religious liberty, and a foreign imposition of intolerant Calvinism. In this model Calvinism appeared just as unnatural to the Netherlands as was the foreign imposition of Roman Catholicism against which the Reformation was fought. Caspar Coolhaes, for example, wrote that it was Calvinist exiles flooding into the country who posed the greatest threat to his view of a broad and inclusive church. The true Dutch Reformation was, if we are to believe these Libertine ministers, a peaceful and inclusive Reformation, while international Calvinism was a foreign and radical imposition on the country.11

Yet the truth was that many Libertine ministers had been exiles themselves, had fostered their religious vision in foreign lands, and were influenced by foreign religious thinkers just as surely as were the opponents they castigated. While we have found examples of these viewpoints in exile centers across Germany and England, our focus here will be on a series of Libertine leaders who had spent time in the German Rhineland, in places like Wesel, Essen, and Cologne. We believe that, in contrast to much scholarship on the Dutch Reformation, many former exiles emerged as moderates, libertines, and advocates of religious toleration—far too many indeed to uphold the theory that Calvinism’s later success rested primarily on its incubation in exile, whether through independent institutional consolidation or because of its specific ‘Exulantenteologie’12. There are also indications, still tentative at this point, 


12 It is possible that exile communities in the Rhineland were different in this regard from other exile communities, but this is not probable. Believers often moved from one exile community to the other. Moreover London and Emden had many more moderate exiles too. On Adriaen van Haemstede in London, for example, see Andrew Pettegree, Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 164–181.
that networks of Libertines who had once been exiles allowed them to keep in touch with one another, exchange ideas, read each others' writings, and model their actions on one other. If this is true, then this alternative brand of former religious exiles in the Republic may well have constituted a distinct movement within the Dutch religious landscape.

The four men under discussion in this paper not only emerged as among the most famous, or infamous, Libertines of the early Republic, but also spent some of their formative years in the Rhineland. The former priest from Rotterdam, Hubert Duifhuis, had escaped with his new wife from the Netherlands to the Rhineland city of Cologne in 1572. By 1577 he took a position at a minister in Utrecht, where he organized a church based on his spiritualist, Libertine views. The spiritualist Dirck Volkertsz Coornhert lived in the Rhineland for at least five years. During some time he lived at Wesel, so he will have known its supraconfessional church. Caspar Coolhaes was born in the Rhineland city of Cologne. During the outbreak of widespread Protestant preaching in the Netherlands, in 1566, Coolhaes became a preacher in Deventer. After the subsequent crackdown the following year, he again fled to the Rhineland, this time to Essen, in the county of Mark, where he served in the de jure Lutheran, but de facto non-dogmatic and inclusive church there. He was later offered a position in the Dutch city of Leiden in 1574. Finally, Herman Herberts, a former monk from Gelderland, lived in the German Rhineland in the 1560s and 1570s; he served in mixed confessional churches in Bocholt and Wesel before taking posts in the Netherlands, first at Dordrecht and then at Gouda.

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14 While there he raised money to support Orangist rebels. H. Bonger, Leven en werk van Dirk Volkertsz Coornhert (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1978), 62–82.


The religious climate of the German Rhineland during the 1560s and 1570s was remarkably amenable to fostering moderate, accommodating, and religiously tolerant views. Broadly speaking, this was a result of a combination of specific political and religious circumstances. In terms of politics, all the powerful princes in this region were Catholic, though none was generally speaking powerful enough or philosophically inclined to follow the model of harsh persecution adopted by the Habsburg government in the neighboring Netherlands.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, dissenting ideas were able to gain a substantive foothold in many cities and towns, and were sometimes supported by local notables. At a local level, too, there were often strong reasons why broad, inclusive, tolerant, and supraconfessional practices and ideas flourished through the German Rhineland. Local magistrates often emerged as powerful advocates of these kinds of religious compromises. In such a religiously diverse climate, promoting a broadly inclusive and ambiguously defined church under their authority was very much in their interest. In Wesel, magistrates often cited the example of the neighboring Netherlands to show the dangers of coercing individuals’ consciences.\textsuperscript{18} Their goal, then, was to preserve their own position as the head of a united Christian community, even if that meant accepting a measure of diversity within that community. However, many magistrates also feared that an open acknowledgement of religious schism could also encourage ducal interference.\textsuperscript{19} In response, magistrates in many locales oversaw broadly conceived compromise churches that belied confessional definition


\textsuperscript{18} David M. Luebke, “Confessions of the Dead: Interpreting Burial Practice in the Late Reformation,” Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte 101 (2010), 55–79. Christian Schulte, Versuchte konfessionelle Neutralität im Reformationszeitalter: Die Herzogtümer Jülich-Kleve-Berg unter Johann III. und Wilhelm V. und das Fürstbistum Münster unter Wilhelm von Ketteler (Münster: Lit, 1995). In the last years of the sixteenth century this was changing in some places, but the Netherlandish exiles were often returning by this point.

\textsuperscript{19} As they argued to their prince in negotiations held in 1583. Ludwig Keller, ed., Die Gegenreformation in Westfalen und am Niederrhein, vol. 1 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1881), 261.

This is the reason for the peculiar situation in Goch and Gennep (and elsewhere) in which magistrates insisted that they only had one church in the town, but allowed Lutherans and Catholics to alternate leading roles during the service. J.G.J. van Booma, Communio clandestina. Archivalien der Konsistorien der heimlichen niederländischen reformierten Fliehstilngsgemeinden in Goch und Gennep im Herzogtum Kleve 1570-circa 1610, vol.1 (Bonn: Verlag Dr Rudolf Habelt, 2010), 58–60.
and did not conform to the letter of the law at the imperial, territorial, or even civic level. This allowed them to secure urban autonomy under their own oligarchical authority. Princes often overlooked these transgressions so long as they did not challenge their own precarious hold on power.20

A second peculiarity of the religious climate of the Rhineland was a strong tradition of spiritualism, which it shared with the northern Netherlands. Spiritualism fostered the idea of an invisible church to which all true believers belonged. True belief, spiritualists emphasized, was not primarily about any specific doctrine, but about the imitation of Christ. Believers were able to obey God's commands, to refrain from sin and to reach a state of perfection. Spiritualist authors admonished their readers to kill the old Adam and to sanctify their lives. To spiritualists, confessional statements were far less important than the sanctification of one's life. This attitude helped them to cross confessional lines and to tolerate people of various confessions.21 We find spiritualist ideas all across the Rhineland. The famed spiritualist Sebastian Franck's letters to Campanus were circulating here; the Anabaptist spiritualist David Joris had adherents in many cities and towns across this region; the founder of the notorious spiritualist association Hendrick Niclaes lived in Cologne, and the court of Jülich-Cleves was notorious for its hospitality to spiritualist thinkers.22

As a result of these political and religious conditions, in many communities across this region, people of different confessions shared churches and even worshiped in mixed confessional or supraconfessional services together. In Wesel and Dortmund, supraconfessional celebrations of communion were held and Lutherans, Reformed, and Catholics all had the local clergymen baptize their children.23 At Borcken and Vreden, Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic


congregants shared baptism, but not communion. At Goch, Gennep, and Duisburg, Catholics and Lutherans shared the same communion ritual, but maintained moments during the liturgy in which confessionally distinct rituals were practiced; Lutherans simply excused themselves from the building while Catholics celebrated the offertory, while Catholics stepped outside while Lutherans sang vernacular hymns. Elsewhere, as at Hückeswagen (in Berg), at Bocholt (in Münsterland), and at Wesel until 1557, parishes had both a priest and a Lutheran minister who offered different services within the same church building. The models for these compromise were diverse, but in all of these cases, churches were marked by accommodation and inclusiveness and were not, in practice at least if not in law, defined by strict doctrinal or confessional boundaries.

When they arrived in the Rhineland, religious refugees from the Netherlands had every incentive to fit themselves within these churches, rather than forming separate churches. Some balked and left for places that allowed exclusively Reformed worship. Others, however, were willing to compromise if they were treated peaceably. Indeed, through much of the Rhineland, there was good reason for refugees to reduce, not increase, commitment to Calvinism. Calvinism was, after all, banned according to imperial and territorial laws and many local churches were willing to welcome the emigrants if they gave lip service to conformity within these broadly-conceived churches and accepted local

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74–75. For examples of ‘comprehension churches’, that is broad, inclusive churches that could retain medieval ecclesiastical unity without strict doctrinal demands, see Benjamin J. Kaplan, Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice Of Toleration in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 127–143.


25 Van Booma, Communio clandestina.


magisterial authority. Deemphasizing confessional differences, therefore, proved a wise strategy to preserve their own welcome in these foreign lands.\(^{28}\)

Once back in the Dutch Republic, some exiles who had spent time in the Rhineland used these experiences there to encourage more moderate and inclusive attitudes and practices. Hubert Duifhuis and Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert even referred to the Rhineland and its readiness to compromise as an example for the Dutch to follow.\(^{29}\) Though we know of no expressions of such opinions by Casper Coolhaes or Herman Herberts, the model of churches they promoted in the Republic in fact looked remarkably akin to that which they had experienced in the Rhineland. This tendency to soften confessional differences and to aim at a broad, encompassing church was hardly compatible with the strong confessional commitment demanded by strict Calvinists.

The clashes between Calvinists and Libertines that emerged in the early Republic often centered on the introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the eyes of Calvinists, the Heidelberg Catechism, alongside the Belgic Confession, was a critical doctrinal standard for orthodoxy. The Heidelberg Catechism, which had been written by theologians in the Palatinate in 1562, was first translated into Dutch the following year by Petrus Datheen. In 1567 it was published together with his Dutch translation of the Genevan Psalms.\(^{30}\) It was recommended for use in Dutch Reformed churches at the general synod held by Reformed exiles meeting in the East Friesland city of Emden in 1571. After Reformed refugees began returning home and organizing their new public church, orthodox Calvinists began promoting the catechism, making it obligatory at the provincial synod of South Holland held at Dordrecht in 1574.\(^{31}\)


\(^{29}\) Pieter de Bert to the brethren in Utrecht, Rotterdam, 7 August 1578, in Bor, Vervolch vande Neerlandsche Oorloghen, book 21, 107v. D.V. Coornhert, Verscheyden t'samenspraken, not dated, vv 1, 444r/v. WW refers to Dieryck Volckertsz Coornhert's Wercken. Waer van eenige noyt voor desen gedruckt zyn, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Jacob Aertsz Colom, 1630).


Such decisions were confirmed at the national synods held at Dordrecht in 1578, Middelburg in 1581, and The Hague in 1586.32

The introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism was not an immediate success. Many people claimed that they were too busy to attend the preaching of the catechism and church members often refused to participate in catechism services. In some cases the Heidelberg Catechism was so unpopular that, even as late as 1620, the Synod of South Holland urged ministers to preach the catechism even if the only people in attendance were their own family members. Many Calvinist ministers attributed this lack of success to the common people's abhorrence of change or to the specific doctrines taught in the catechism.33 Prominent Libertines took the lead in opposition to the document as a whole. Men like Duifhuis, Coolhaes, and Herberts categorically refused to preach the catechism. They argued that their obligation was to preach the Bible. According to them, the catechism focused so much on human sinfulness that it underestimated the potential of humans to achieve goodness. They argued that humans were indeed able to refrain from sin and achieve a degree of spiritual perfection. Some, like Coolhaes and Herberts, probably learned these ideas from spiritualists in the German Rhineland. Others, like Duifhuis, were influenced by spiritualists before their exile, but surely Duifhuis's experiences with the House of Love in Cologne nourished these ideas during his time in Germany. In what follows, we will characterize the opposition to the Heidelberg Catechism as an expression of the ideas of these former Rhineland exiles—ideas characterized by the same spirit of spiritualism, accommodation, anti-confessionalism, and religious inclusiveness that characterized the religious culture in many communities in the German Rhineland in which they had lived.

Dirck Volckertz Coornhert already stood out as an opponent of Calvinism in the early 1560s. In particular, he railed against John Calvin's polemic against the so-called 'Nicodemites', that is those who were willing to conform outwardly to one church while committed to the Reformed faith. Outward rituals, according to Coornhert, were of secondary importance. Far more important was the command to love one's neighbor. Therefore church attendance or an outward confession was not a thing worth putting one's life at risk for. Indeed, the churches he experienced in the Rhineland were much closer to the distinction between external forms of religion and the more important internal spirituality that Coornhert emphasized. His time in the duchy of Cleves,
including in the supraconfessional church at Wesel that welcomed Christians of various confessions without demanding rigid standards of doctrinal orthodoxy, surely helped him appreciate the distinction between external acts and internal piety. In one of his writings he described a believer in the Rhineland who attended a Catholic Church service, but who didn’t participate at the mass. This believer left the church after he had heard the sermon and before the celebration of the mass.34 In the very same year that Coornhert became the States of Holland’s secretary, he published a treatise against Calvin’s and Beza’s doctrine on predestination, which was printed with a false imprint in the German Rhineland town of Wesel.35 His criticism of the atrocities committed by one of the military leaders of the Revolt (Willem van der Marck or Lumey) made his position troublesome and he fled to the Rhineland once again. He only returned to his country after the Pacification of Gent in 1576.

As soon as his plans to return to Haarlem became known, Calvinist ministers in the new Dutch Reformed Church feared the worst.36 Almost immediately upon his return, Coornhert began openly criticizing the Dutch Reformed Church. If a true church existed—and Coornhert himself was unsure about whether any single true church exists—it was definitely not the one that had emerged as the new public church in the Republic.37 In 1578 political leaders in the States of Holland organized a disputation to resolve the disputes between Coornhert and a group of Reformed ministers. The whole event was a failure: the ministers and Coornhert were not even prepared to agree on the ‘status questionis’. Both sides claimed the right to set the terms of the debate, and neither was ready to give in. Coornhert broke off the disputation and left.38 Afterwards, he continued his attacks on the public church. Haarlem’s burgomaster Nicolaas van der Laan suggested focusing the entire discussion on the Heidelberg Catechism. Coornhert was quick to conclude that this writing contained “considerable errors.”39 He opposed both its doctrine and its obligatory character. His special target was the 8th and 114th questions of the catechism:

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34 D.V. Coornhert, Verscheyden t’samenspraken, ongedateerd, ww 1, 444r/v.
36 Roobol, Disputation by Decree, 75–95.
37 D.V. Coornhert, Verscheyden bedacht schynende met te brengenhen dat die Roomsche Kercke beter zy dan der Ghereformeerden, ww 1, 484v–486v.
38 Roobol, Disputation by Decree, 136–152.
39 D.V. Coornhert, Van de erfzonde. Disputatie tusschen de Predicanten tot Haarlem, ende D.V. Coornhert (Gouda: J. Tournay, 1610). The disputation between Coornhert and Haarlem’s minister Johannes Damius took place in 1579.
Question 8. *But are we so perverted that we are altogether unable to do good and prone to do evil?*
Yes, unless we are born again through the Spirit of God.

Question 114. *But can those who are converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?*
No, for even the holiest of them make only a small beginning in obedience in this life. Nevertheless, they begin with the serious purpose to conform not only to some, but to all the commandments of God.40

According to Coornhert, the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching about the inability of humans to achieve goodness on their own was far too negative. The Calvinist teaching that humans were bound to remain sinners put all morality at risk, he argued, since it undermined the willingness to perfect oneself. To support his argument he quoted Sebastian Castellio, the famed advocate of religious tolerance and spiritualism living in the Swiss city of Basel. Reformed ministers, Castellio had argued, behaved like military captains, urging their soldiers to seize a castle but at the same time warning them that they lacked the capacity to do so.41

Humans, Coornhert believed, were free to choose between good and evil. A believer should always be ready to receive God’s grace. This grace fortified the believer and made him or her strong enough to fulfill the divine law completely. It was on these grounds that Coornhert objected to the doctrine of predestination. Calvin had cited Roman 9 to support this doctrine: “Even before they had been born, or had done anything good or bad…[Rebecca] was told, ‘The elder shall serve the younger’. As it is written, ‘I have loved Jacob, but I hated Esau’.” In opposition to his Calvinist opponents, Coornhert denied that Paul intended this passage to be about predestination at all. Paul did not intend his reader to think that Jacob and Esau were specific people. Rather, the two men represented two different sorts of people, one born from flesh the other born from the spirit. A believer, Coornhert emphasized, should choose whether he wanted to belong among the carnal or the spiritual people.42 He also had a

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42 D.V. Coornhert, *Vande Predestinatie, Verkiesinge, ende verwerpinghe Godes*, WW 3, 199v–200r. In his writing Coornhert used the polemic between Sebastian Castellio and Beza as well as the polemic between Herman Herberts and his Calvinist adversaries.
second problem with the Heidelberg Catechism. A church, he wrote, had no right to impose any specific doctrine on its members. He warned that the Reformed ministers’ insistence on the Heidelberg Catechism constituted a return of what he called a ‘papal yoke’, which the Reformation had been fought against in the first place.

Coornhert’s polemic attracted considerable attention throughout the entire Republic. The involvement of the States of Holland and their attempts to settle to differences between Coornhert and the ministers by organizing disputations is only one sign of this. The ministers regarded Coornhert as part of a larger endeavor to undermine the Reformed Church. Coornhert also saw himself as participating in a wider struggle, in which he was allied with Libertines within the Dutch Reformed Church in Utrecht, Gouda, and Leiden, to resist the Calvinist ministers’ attempts to gain dominion above the secular authorities and the consciences of ordinary Dutchmen.

In Utrecht another former Rhineland exile, Hubert Duifhuis, came into conflict with Calvinists for much the same reason. Duifhuis had apparently spent most his time in the Rhineland in Cologne, where he had contacts (and ultimately disagreements) with the spiritualist leader Hendrik Niclaes. Yet he presumably also travelled elsewhere, since he later cited the example of Wesel's supraconfessional compromise church as he worked in Utrecht to establish an inclusive, non-dogmatic church of the kind that operated in many locales on the Lower Rhine. Also like many Protestant ministers in these Rhineland compromise churches, Duifhuis continued to wear surplices and to follow the medieval liturgical calendar, despite his break from Rome. And again, like the ministers in the German compromise churches, he refused to accept the authority of a consistory. Like ministers in Bocholt, Wesel, Duisburg, and elsewhere, Duifhuis thus defied confessional categories. He had clearly rejected the Roman Church, but refused to accept alternative confessional models in its place. As a result, like Coornhert, Duifhuis objected to the requirement that religious instruction should follow the Heidelberg Catechism, arguing instead that ministers should preach the Bible alone. Orthodox Calvinists, he argued, wanted to establish a ‘new papacy’ by forcing individuals follow to an external form rather than their consciences.

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44 During one of his disputations Coornhert described the Gouda deputes as his allies. Coornhert to a friend, Haarlem, 10 November 1583, WW 3, 449a.
45 Pieter de Bert to the brethren in Utrecht, Rotterdam, 7 August 1578 in Bor, Vervolch vande Neerlandsche Oorlogen, book 21, 107f.
Duifhuis had been influenced in his opposition both to the content of the Heidelberg Catechism and indeed to confessional statements as such by the spiritualist Family of Love, which stressed the importance of the imitation of Christ over religious standards created by humans. Duifhuis had probably met its leader, Hendrik Niclaes, in Duifhuis’s hometown of Rotterdam. When both men faced Habsburg persecution, they continued their friendship as exiles in Cologne. It was during their Rhineland exile that Duifhuis, like other Familists, split from Niclaes, because they refused to accept Niclaes’s claims to being a prophet. Duifhuis never gave up the spiritualist ideas he learned from Niclaes, however. In Utrecht, he later edited *Het boeck der ghetuygenissen vanden verborghen acker-schat*, a spiritualist tract written by Hendrik Jansen van Barrefelt, Niclaes’s successor as leader within the Familist movement.46

After returning to the Netherlands in 1574, Duifhuis posed a serious threat to orthodox Calvinists. Utrecht’s magistrates were initially happy to support him and he was able to establish his Libertine church alongside the town’s Calvinist church. If Duifhuis faced serious opposition from local Calvinist ministers like Werner Helmichius, it was in large part because they feared that his example might spread across the Republic. Indeed Helmichius wrote an extensive letter to Haarlem’s leading Calvinist minister, Johannes Damius, about his experiences with Coornhert. He informed Damius that during a debate on the calling of ministers, on the ecclesiastical discipline and on predestination he had urged Duifhuis to change his mind. Duifhuis responded, he later recalled, by recommending that Helmicius read the works of Sebastian Castellio, especially his writings against the doctrine of predestination. Helmichius now asked Damius to provide him with arguments he had once used against Coornhert. Still, if Calvinists argued against Coonhert’s ideas, they were never able to stop him from publishing his views.47

In Leiden, about the same time, a similar clash arose between another former Rhineland minister advocating inclusivist and moderate religious ideas and his Calvinist colleagues. Like Duifhuis and Coornhert, the Leiden minister Caspar Coolhaes was also influenced by spiritualist ideas. For instance, in a dialogue that he wrote, Coolhaes had one of the interlocutors suggest that Coolhaes’ ideas aligned with those of the Family of Love.48 Coolhaes was also

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48 Coolhaes, *Apologia*, 86r.
probably influenced by Pietro Perna, the Italian printer in Basel who published Castellio’s writings. Coolhaes had also read Castellio’s treatise against John Calvin, had defended the views of Sebastian Franck, and had even translated one of Franck’s writings.49 Like other spiritualists, Coolhaes denied the real existence of the devil. Hell was not a specific place, he argued, nor did it cause any physical pain. Rather, Coolhaes supposed that hell was instead a concept to describe a troubled conscience.50 Having been raised and educated in the German Rhineland, Coolhaes’s first experience of ministry in the Netherlands was in 1566/67 in the city of Deventer, where he helped magistrates organize the first open Protestant church in that city. In his 1580 treatise, Apologia, Coolhaes later described and applauded the situation in Deventer:

In other towns three or four different confessions are preached and they preach against each other. Believers differ and the one adheres to this confession, the other to another confession. One is a Martinist, the other a Calvinist, the third a Mennonite and the fourth I don’t know what. In those towns believers despise each other and they condemn each other. But in Deventer, you magistrates maintain the Word of the Lord with such a peace and unity, that it surprises everybody.51

When the government regained control of the Netherlands and refugees streamed back into exile in Germany and England, Coolhaes took a post in the aconfessional church in Essen, a Rhineland town in the county of Mark. There, after breaking from the Catholic Church in 1563, magistrates had formally adopted a Lutheran church though imposed few doctrinal standards on ministers or parishioners in practice until 1570 (when Coolhaes left for the Upper Rhine city of Mannheim for the subsequent three years).52

Once minister in Leiden, Coolhaes stuck to his moderate course. Whereas other ministers pressed for the abolition of the old ‘papal’ abuses, Coolhaes, like Duifhuis and many ministers in the Rhineland, was inclined to continue

50 Coolhaes, Apologia, 90v.
51 Coolhaes, Apologia, 43r.
52 In 1571 Essen’s magistrates adopted more orthodox Lutheran standards for their ministers and hired Hermann Hammelman. In the coming years, though, Lutherans and Reformed continued to live, and often to worship, alongside one another. The city only firmly adopted Lutheranism in the early seventeenth century. Horstkemper, “Spaltungen—Spannungen—Spielräume,” 184–187.
the practice of celebrating vespers and funerals. If tensions arose about these practices, however, even more discord greeted Coolhaes' willingness to ascribe considerably more power to the magistrates with regard to the church than did his Calvinist colleagues. In 1578 a conflict arose about their respective views about the role of magistrates in appointing ministers and elders and in relative authority of ecclesiastical synods. In that year magistrates in several towns, most vigorously in Leiden, opposed the convening of a synod. They argued that the authority to convene a synod lay with the States of Holland and not with the church officials. Coolhaes was the only minister in the city who supported the magistrates' position.

By 1579, however, Coornhert, that other former Rhineland refugee and spiritualist, involved himself in the conflict as well. That year Leiden's town secretary, Jan van Hout, asked Coornhert to write a treatise to explain and defend the point of view of the city's magistrates on matters of religious policy. This treatise, the Justificatie, offered a clear expression of the views of Coornhert and Leiden's magistrates. According to the Justificatie, the majority of Holland's Reformed ministers had tried to usurp the magistrates' power by calling a synod without consulting governmental officials. On behalf of Leiden's magistrates, Coornhert warned the danger of introducing a new “Ius canonicum.” Coornhert warned that Calvinist ministers had put the inheritance of the Dutch Revolt at risk and endangered the freedom they had only recently obtained. The Justificatie envisioned a broad and inclusive national church that would be overseen by the country's secular authorities.53 In his Apologia, written in 1580, Coolhaes set out a similar model. The provincial States should choose one church and the magistrates should oversee its affairs. A synod able to interfere in the policies of a local church, he argued, came far too close to the old “papal tyranny.”54 Instead, the church Coolhaes aimed at was a broad and encompassing (but still Protestant) one, not unlike that which he had served in Essen in the later 1560s. This model, though independent from Rome, aimed to preserve certain elements of the medieval church which Coolhaes acknowledged as critical. After all, the medieval church, in Coolhaes's idealized image of it at least, had welcomed a variety of viewpoints and institutions without demanding uniformity in practice and belief. The most suitable public church for the Dutch Republic allowed different opinions and convictions, Coolhaes wrote.55 Christ had laid the foundations, he believed, and nobody should deviate from that model or attempt to impose

54 Coolhaes, Apologia, 49f.
55 C. Coolhaes, Een cort warachtich verhael (Leiden: Bouwenszoon, 1610), 63–64.
man-made definitions of orthodoxy. Rather, every believer should be allowed to build his own house on these foundations.

Though clearly quite similar, is not entirely clear whether Coornhert and Coolhaes harbored exactly the same vision of this inclusive church. After having read the *Apologia* Coornhert asked Coolhaes whether they were still embarked in the same ship. In his writing Coolhaes had ascribed a role to the secular authorities in religious affairs: they should wipe out idolatry and protect the true religion. In a letter to Coolhaes in 1580, however, Coornhert insisted that secular authorities should never force people to a specific belief. Coolhaes replied that he didn't disagree with Coornhert and that he accepted the existence of the Catholic Church alongside the Reformed Church. In the end, neither man systematically explained his view, and both men's ideas remained imprecise. It is certain, however, that Coornhert emphasized the difference between inward and outward religion. He was also ready to accept the secular authorities' role in matters of outward religion. The problem with this differentiation was, of course, deciding what belonged to the outward and what to the inward realms. Moreover, the majority of the believers didn't accept this spiritualist distinction. Coolhaes, for his part, never fully explained the limits of his religious tolerance or the boundaries of inclusiveness under his conception of 'concord'. On the one hand, he made a plea for a broad inclusive church, harboring believers with differing opinions; this vision clearly incorporated the ideal of 'concord' that he based on his idealized vision of the medieval church. On the other hand, he advocated the toleration of at least two different Christian churches—Reformed and Catholic; this suggests that he accepted a degree of religious toleration. That is, religious toleration (acceptance of difference) and religious concord (unity based on agreement) stood in tension in Coolhaes's writings in a way that he never fully resolved.

In any case, both men saw themselves as allies, drew on similar intellectual traditions (Castellio, Franck, and Joris) and had similar experiences in exile. Even if Coolhaes was not as radical as Coornhert with his plea for a broad

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encompassing church and religious tolerance, he nonetheless alienated himself from his colleagues just as surely. Leiden’s magistrates continued to support him, but their support turned out to be halfhearted. In face of the ongoing war against the Habsburg government in the south, William of Orange and the States of Holland pressed for a solution to the distracting conflict surrounding Coolhaes. They hoped that internal religious unity would help unite the country in the face of its more substantial external threats. In response, Leiden’s magistrates backed off from their defense of Coolhaes. Meanwhile Calvinist ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church began a process that would culminate in Coolhaes’s excommunication in 1582.

Ultimately that excommunication had only limited effect. It certainly did not stop Coolhaes from publishing treatises in support of his views. Indeed, in each of the treatises that he wrote afterward, he targeted ridicule specifically at the Heidelberg Catechism. In general, these criticisms followed from his overall view of the church: a church should not try, he argued, to impose any specific doctrine on its believers. Coolhaes dedicated one of these treatises to the magistrates of the city of Gouda, the South Holland city that continued to harbor another former Rhineland refugee, Herman Herberts, who supported key elements of Coolhaes’s religious vision. That city, Coolhaes explained, abhorred sects and factionalism, and instead fostered peace and unity. Others accused Gouda of following a libertine policy, but according to Coolhaes Gouda pursued a true Christian course.

Calvinist ministers, of course, had an entirely different attitude about Gouda. To them, Gouda was a rat’s nest, the birthplace of every possible heresy. Since joining the revolt in 1572, Gouda’s magistrates had worked to secure a biconfessional resolution to the conflicts between Reformed and Catholics, even as both sides jockeyed for control of the city’s central parish, St. Jan’s church. Although efforts at a compromise liturgy failed, Gouda’s magistrates’ did not abandon their effort to achieve some solution that would allow religious coexistence in the city. Indeed, their ideas about church-state relations and what the country’s public church should look like were remarkably similar to those of the magistrates in Leiden who had supported Coolhaes. Gouda’s magistrates had supported Leiden’s opposition to an independent church synod and claimed authority for themselves to appoint ministers and elders.

57 Coolhaes, Warachtich verhael, 52.
58 [C. Coolhaes], Toutzsteen, [n.p., 1584], C3v/v.
59 Magistrates tried, and failed, to introduce a liturgical compromise at St. Jan’s at which a Catholic priest would preach but not celebrate the Mass. This compromise failed to satisfy either Calvinists or Catholics. Hibben, Gouda in Revolt, 86.
In this state of affairs, then, it is noticeable that like Coolhaes, another former resident from the German Rhineland, Herman Herberts, became Gouda’s minister in 1582. He fitted extremely well with the magistrates’ endeavor. When he was called to Gouda, he was already known as a “Libertine.” He had served as a formerly Lutheran minister in the biconfessional church in Bocholt in the late 1560s. At that church, he preached according to the Augsburg Confession (which version is unknown) while another clergyman offered Catholic teaching. After the Cathedral dean learned of this situation, Herberts was dismissed, though he managed to escape before being apprehended by the bishop’s men. He quickly landed on his feet, moving from one mixed confessional church in the Rhineland to another. By June of 1571, he applied for a recently vacated pastoral position in nearby Wesel. After submitting a Melanchthonian confession of faith and demonstrating that he was “pure and upright” in doctrine and behavior, magistrates hired him. His time there appeared to have been relatively uneventful, though he ministered to Lutherans, Reformed, and Catholics in his parish. His experiences at Bocholt and Wesel surely convinced him that a broadly conceived, accommodationalist Christian church was a perfectly viable option.

In 1577, Herberts left Wesel to serve the Dutch Reformed Church in the city of Dordrecht, but quite soon got involved in conflict because he opposed the use of the Heidelberg Catechism. Driven from strongly Calvinist Dordrecht, Herberts was hired in Libertine Gouda. Calvinist ministers like Jean Taffin feared that Herberts and his supporters aimed to introduce a Libertine church there, akin to the one that Duifhuis had established in Utrecht. They were not far off the mark.

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60 Brinck, “Herman Herbers te Bocholt.” Bocholt was one of the aconfessional towns in the bishopric of Münster currently being studied by David M. Luebke. Herberts would later deny to Calvinist questioners that he ever preached Lutheran doctrine.

61 See letter of Bishop Johann von Hoya to the Cathedral chapter, April 15, 1570, from the Cathedral dean Gotfried von Raesfelt to the bishop, May 3, 1570, the episcopal mandate of May 12, 1570 and the letter of the bishop to the city of Bocholt May 26, 1570, all of which identify Herberts’s heresy. Keller, ed., Die Gegenreformation, 376–378.

62 Stadtarchiv Wesel A3/56 fol. 88r, 90r. Evangelisches Kirchenarchiv Wesel, Gefach 3,2,5. The formal adoption of the Augsburg Confession offered Wesel’s magistrates cover for their accommodationalist church, though compliance was not enforced rigidly. Spohnholz, Tactics of Toleration.


64 Kort end’ waerachtich verhael, waeromme de particuliere Synodus van Zuyt-Hollant het boeck Hermanni Herberts...genaemt Korte verklaringe over de woorden Pauli, Roman 2 &c. als onsayver end’ schadelick gheoordeelt...heeft (The Hague: Aelbrecht Heyndricxz, 1592), 35.
In Dordrecht magistrates had limited Herberts's influence, but Gouda's magistrates were far more supportive of his inclusivist tendencies and his spiritualist message. Calvinist ministers also fretted about the clear influence of David Joris on Herberts's ideas. Calvinists treated the spiritualist/Anabaptist Joris (who had died in Basel over twenty years before) as an arch-heretic. In contrast, Herberts evidently applauded his spiritualist ideas and seem to have been responsible for a recent publication of David Joris's *Wonderboeck*. Herberts also expressed much appreciation for the spiritualist ideas of Sebastian Franck and Sebastian Castellio, including the latter's writing against predestination and his Bible translation. Once again it is clear that not only Herberts's biography but his intellectual influences are similar to the Libertines discussed earlier.

Very much like Coornhert, Herman Herberts placed great emphasis on perfectibility, which put him too at odds with the Heidelberg Catechism. Christ, the *medicus*, was able to cure people from their sins and there was no reason to question his ability and willingness to do so. Herberts offered the apostle Paul as an example of a believer who had actually reached such a state of perfection. Also like Coornhert, Herberts claimed that in Romans 7 Paul had not been speaking in his own person. Paul was, according to Herberts, a reborn person. Reborn persons were not disturbed by sin anymore. Herberts therefore argued that Paul's sentences on affliction must have referred to someone else. On Romans 9—“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”—Herberts offered an interpretation that differed from Calvinist readings of this text as justifying the doctrine of predestination. According to Herberts, Jacob and Esau were two different sorts of humans: one born from flesh and one born from spirit. One should choose, Herberts wrote, to which sort of humans one wanted to belong. It seems quite likely that Herberts had been reading Coornhert’s refutation of the doctrine of predestination discussed earlier. He also have been introduced to the ideas of Sebastian Castellio through Coornhert. He quoted Coornhert's translation of Castellio, alluded to above, in which Castellio paints Calvinist ministers as military captain urging his soldiers to conquer a castle, while at the same time warning them that they would prove unable to succeed.

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69 Mirjam van Veen, “‘No one born of God commits sin’: Coornhert’s perfectionism,” *Dutch Review of Church History* 84 (2004), 341.
A second reason that Herberts objected to the Heidelberg Catechism was his belief in the invisible church of all believers. There was no need to condemn each other because of opposing opinions on baptism, he argued: the members of Christ’s body were to be found everywhere. Herberts thus de-emphasized the importance of ecclesiastical traditions or of confessions themselves. The adherents of these traditions and confessions all belonged to one and the same body of Christ.\(^{70}\) In one of his treatises he ridiculed the ecclesiastical conflicts: “We, the so-called Evangelicals or Reformed, behave just like the others do. The others pray the Lord to constrain us, to destroy us. In the same way we pray the Lord to constrain and destroy them.”\(^{71}\) The Calvinists’ attempts to suspend Herberts from his post in Gouda failed: he continued to publish his writings against the Heidelberg Catechism and in favor of a broad church.

In the meantime, another unorthodox Reformed minister, Jacobus Arminius, was beginning to attract attention on related issues. In 1588 magistrates in Amsterdam appointed Arminius as a minister. In 1590 he preached a sermon on Romans 7 that followed the same line of argument against the Calvinists’ position on predestination that had used by men like Coornhert and Herberts; Paul had not been speaking about a reborn person. His Calvinist colleague, Petrus Plancius, almost immediately challenged him to prove his orthodoxy. During the quarrel that broke out, it became apparent that whereas Arminius accepted the magistrates’ involvement in this theological debate, Plancius did not.\(^{72}\)

This is not the only occasion on which the conflicts swirling around Arminius touched on the controversies surrounding our former Rhineland refugees. In 1593, Arminius preached on Romans 9. By now an experienced and learned theologian in the Dutch Reformed Church, he must have known that this text was already an important shibboleth in the whole polemic on predestination. In his explanation of Romans 9 Arminius came remarkably close to Herberts’ and Coornhert’s exegesis. He argued that Jacob and Esau were not two persons, the one rejected and the other saved; they were simply two different sorts of people.\(^{73}\)

\(^{70}\) Herberts, *Bekentenisse des gheloofs*, 331v, 343r, 355r.

\(^{71}\) Herman Herberts, *Corte verclaringhe over die Woorden Pauli geschreven tot den Romeynen cap 2.*, 28 (Rotterdam: Dierick Mullem, 1584), 27r.


During the publication of Gouda’s catechism in 1607 Arminius, now professor of theology at the University of Leiden, became even more closely involved in the opposition to the Heidelberg Catechism led by these former Rhineland exiles. Herman Herberts, his son Theodor, and Harboldus Tombergen (Herman Herberts’s colleague in Gouda and later a founder of the Remonstrant Brotherhood) were responsible for writing the so-called Gouda Catechism; after his father’s death, Theodor oversaw the document’s publication. Before doing so, however, he asked Arminius to approve of the work’s content, which the theologian was happy to do. While scholars continue to debate the extent to which Libertinism influenced Arminian ideas, this episode suggests there were at the very least substantial areas of shared interests and cooperation.\(^{74}\)

The publication of the Gouda Catechism, of course, only confirmed Calvinists’ loathing for the Libertines of Gouda. One of the objections against Gouda’s catechism was its pacifist character. They argued that a catechism should serve to highlight errors, and warn against doctrinal mistakes, not welcome different beliefs. The Calvinists Ruard Acronius and Reginald Donteclock, both fierce Calvinists with a long history of battling Libertinism, denigrated the document as “a shoe fitting to everybody’s feet.”\(^ {75}\)

It is quite probable that Herman Herberts and other Libertines would have approved of their opponents’ description of this work—they did indeed promote a broad church in the Republic, not so dissimilar to those that they came to know in the Rhineland. They also firmly believed in an invisible church of all believers. The believers gathered in this church, they argued, should aim at imitating Christ, trying to kill their old Adam and to refrain from sin. This vision of the church was wholly incompatible with the imposition of the Heidelberg Catechism advocated by Calvinists in the early Republic.

It is, we think, conspicuous that the most forceful and famed ‘Libertines’ who advocated these views had spent time in the German Rhineland. We are currently beginning a larger research project that aims to understand exactly what kinds of experience people had in the Rhineland, and to trace the ways that these experiences shaped the religious landscape of the Dutch Republic.

At this point, we can only offer two tentative conclusions, though they do


demand some rethinking about the nature of the Dutch Reformation. First, it may well be that the traditions of Dutch Libertinism, and critical strands associated with Dutch toleration, were not just inherent expressions of a tolerant Dutch culture, but just as much a product of foreign ideas and experiences in exile as was the more exclusivist brand of Dutch Calvinism. If we are right about this, then these former Rhineland exiles moving back to the Netherlands may well have prepared the soil for Arminianism and other alternatives to orthodox Calvinism in the Netherlands, and provided support for policies supporting religious toleration in the Republic. Indeed, while many historians have explained Dutch tolerance by invoking political and economic incentives, this group of former exiles seems to have offered potent intellectual arguments for both religious concord and toleration that received favorable attention from many people, even if those people were not part of the Calvinist consensus at the Synod of Dordt. These ideas, it seems, were bolstered by the shared tradition of spiritualism in northwest Germany and the northern Netherlands, and their experience of churches adopting religious compromises that seemed to be working. Second, these examples also suggest that scholars of the Dutch Reformation—and perhaps of the Reformation in general—need to rethink the relationship between Calvinism and exile, including the argument that the faith promoted a particular “Exulantentheologie” that thrived in the face of persecution. That may have been true for some, but other former exiles—men like Hubert Duifhuis, Dirck Volckersz Coornhert, Casper Coolhaes, and Herman Herberts—emerged as leading Libertines both within and outside the public church.76