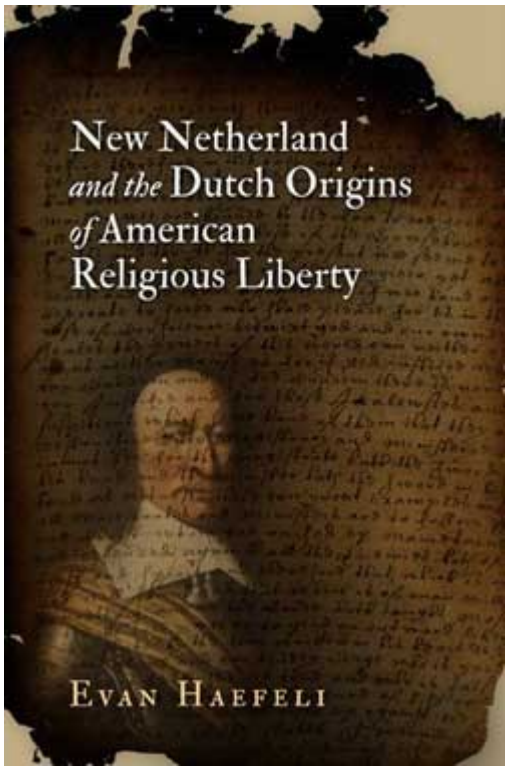
The Distinctive Nature of Dutch Tolerance



Over the last three decades, a dedicated corps of historians has been endeavoring to increase the attention devoted to the Dutch colony of New Netherland in the telling of American history. Aided by the ongoing translation of the trove of seventeenth-century Dutch records at the New York State Library and spurred by heightened public interest in the Dutch following the celebratory events of the quadricentennial of Henry Hudson's voyage of exploration in 2009, these researchers have measurably increased knowledge of the Dutch colony during its forty-year existence and, in the process, kindled interest in the legacy of Dutch colonization in the mid-Atlantic region. The accumulating weight of this body of scholarship, coupled with the adoption of an Atlantic World perspective by students of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America, has ensured that pleas for the integration of the Dutch into the national narrative no longer go unheeded. Bernard Bailyn's recently published *The Barbarous Years. The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675* is only the latest chronicle of early America to incorporate an extended treatment of seventeenth-century Dutch colonists.

Even as American historians have been busy situating New Netherland in the stream of the nation's history, scholars in the Netherlands, critical of the long-standing emphasis on East India Company possessions in accounts of the seventeenth-century Dutch empire, have been paying greater attention to the

colonies under the dominion of the West India Company, among them New Netherland. In the course of deliberating on how New Netherland fits into the broader picture of Dutch colonial enterprise, they have crossed paths with Americans assessing New Netherland's impact on the development of American institutions. Evan Haefeli's long-awaited study of religious toleration in New Netherland lies at the intersection of these two historiographical trends and thus speaks to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, it is Haefeli's decision to frame the history of New Netherland's encounter with religious diversity in the context of the seventeenth-century Dutch world instead of the usual trajectory leading to the American revolutionary period that distinguishes his work.

Evan Haefeli, New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 384 pp., $45.

Dutch tolerance, in Haefeli's view, was not an overarching system resting on a coherent set of principles, but rather a range of possibilities from which emerged a variety of religious arrangements, each one assuming its form at a specific time and in a specific place. Never codified in law during the seventeenth century and lacking an ideological foundation beyond the fundamental notion of "liberty of conscience" for the individual that emerged during the sixteenth-century revolt against Spain, Dutch tolerance is best understood as an elastic system whose properties must be inferred from the historical record of the homeland as well as that of each colony. As Haefeli points out, Dutch authorities, fearful of setting a precedent, perpetually shied away from writing down anything that might be construed as a definitive policy.

In light of the distinctive nature of Dutch tolerance, it is not difficult to see why contingency is at the heart of Haefeli's formulation of the problem and why he continually reminds the reader that variations in Dutch religious arrangements in Europe, Asia, and the Americas reflected particular demographic and cultural conditions or, as he puts it, were "site-specific." Nevertheless, interlacing these variations was a constant thread: the government's endorsement of the Reformed Church as the empire's official church and its encouragement of efforts to recruit members for this church. Despite the mandate to enlist others in the Reformed faith, Dutch authorities, given their unwavering commitment to "liberty of conscience," were prepared to countenance coexistence with Christians of different persuasions, as well as non-Christians, as long as they did not gather to worship in public. Those in positions of power drew the line at legitimizing competitors to the Reformed church. In Amsterdam, where residents held a multiplicity of beliefs, latitude for practicing faiths other than the Reformed was institutionalized in the form of a system called connivance, which allowed ostensibly private religious gatherings to proceed without incurring official sanctions. For certain groups, the Jews and the Lutherans being the most prominent examples, public worship

came to be permitted. The government's commitment to the strict form of Calvinism articulated by the Classis of Amsterdam thus was tempered by a broad-scale consensus that it was prudent to look the other way when faced with the reality of religious diversity. Even so, this did not mean that the long-term goal of winning people over to the public church was abandoned.

Haefeli's rendering of the religious situation in New Netherland pivots on the fact that New Amsterdam, though it contained a sizable number of non-Reformed Protestants by the 1650s, was not Amsterdam. The system of connivance so visible in the Dutch metropolis never took root on Manhattan mainly due to the determination of Director-General Petrus Stuyvesant and his allies, the Reformed clergy, to preserve the Reformed church as the sole church in the community and to suppress dissidents. Stuyvesant's hostility toward Jews, Lutherans, and Quakers as well as his strict oversight of the line between private devotions and public worship have been well documented. However, Haefeli emphasizes his affinity with an earlier generation of counter-remonstrants who favored the strict Calvinism promulgated at the Synod of Dort. Haefeli's richly detailed reconstruction of the interactions between Petrus Stuyvesant and the Dutch West India Company directors illuminates not only the points on which Amsterdam's elite and New Netherland's strict Calvinists disagreed, but also reveals the common ground they shared. It turns out that the directors modified policies in order to enhance the appeal of the public church to outsiders, not to pave the way for formal recognition of toleration, as some have contended.

The Amsterdam directors may not have been comfortable with the extreme form of Calvinism that Stuyvesant embodied and likely would have preferred seeing a version of connivance emerge in New Netherland, but, as Haefeli demonstrates, they went only so far in curbing Stuyvesant's excesses. They forced him and his ministerial allies to accede to specific changes in rules concerning the Jews and the Lutherans, but, crucially, did not oust him. This was because they concurred in Stuyvesant's goals of maintaining the privileged status of the Reformed church and absorbing non-Reformed Protestants into it. In an era when Amsterdam was increasingly open to radical ideas and was polishing its reputation for religious toleration, New Netherland was headed in the opposite direction, with authorities there actively engaged in forestalling the creation of alternative religious communities, and even resorting, on occasion, to tactics that bordered on persecution.

It is this evidence that leads Haefeli to minimize the Dutch role in the evolution of religious pluralism in America. New Netherland's part in the saga of religious tolerance is reduced to the fact that its existence prevented English colonizers with cramped visions of religious toleration such as the Puritans from moving into the territory early in the seventeenth century, in essence holding the mid-Atlantic region for the more enlightened English rulers of the Restoration period, who boldly crafted a model of a truly tolerant society after taking over the colony in 1664. Haefeli buttresses his case by showing that the empowering of Calvinist rulers once again in the brief period

of the Dutch reconquest (1673-1674) inaugurated a reversal of the tolerant policies already put in place by appointees of the Duke of York. Yet if Haefeli's argument that a particular set of Englishmen operating in a narrow window of time in the late seventeenth century set the course for the expansion of religious freedom in what became the United States is to prevail, he owes it to his readers to provide more insight into the background and motives of these Englishmen than he does in his concluding chapter.

Ultimately, *New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty* is noteworthy less because Haefeli anoints proprietary New York's English rulers as the champions of toleration than for his thorough and balanced analysis of the ways the Dutch in New Netherland and around the globe grappled with religious diversity in the lands under their control. Those accustomed to extol the Dutch of the Golden Age for their manifold accomplishments may recoil at learning that the Dutch were not the authors of American religious liberty, but scholars familiar with the complicity of the seventeenth-century Dutch in slavery and their less than admirable treatment of Native Americans will surely be able to digest Haefeli's findings. Reconfiguring the narrative of early American history to include New Netherland does not require casting the Dutch as heroes.

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