

Tolerance as Value-Neutrality  
In the Seventeenth Century Dutch Republic

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I. Introduction: Traditional-Contemporary Notions of Tolerance.

The idea of tolerance is deeply rooted in the culture of the Netherlands, informing a worldview construed as open and welcoming. The Dutch imagine their Golden Age as not only one of economic prosperity and intellectual-scientific innovation but also one in which their nation achieved an almost impossible civility between people of disparate faiths and ideologies. The Dutch Republic is imagined in Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazurus-style terms, the bastion of enlightenment, holding out its hand to the tired, the poor and dispossessed. The victims of religious persecution came here. Intellectual dissidents thrived here. Here was the shining star of hope, the society that didn't ask questions, that looked into your soul and asked, simply, "do you need a home?"

Tolerance is a complicated sensibility from any perspective, historical or contemporary. From a positive light, it construes these very same Dutch notions of friendliness and acceptance. The Netherlands today is seen as one of the most liberal societies on earth, one ready to accept a broad spectrum of human interaction, of virtue and vice. Dutch people take considerable pride in their historical legacy of tolerance and see it as evidence of a noble and progressive civilization. In contrast, that other Protestant civilization, the United States, seems hostile and Puritan, far too ready to pass judgment, far too ready to sacrifice good sense for some moral high ground. The Dutch see people and let them be. Americans see people and want to regulate them.

Tolerance can also be approached from a negative perspective as a grudging or abrupt willingness to accept people of contrarian or unorthodox beliefs because of a larger practical rationale. This rendering of tolerance is far more complex. How can a society every truly accept those who do not accept the coda or maxims of that society? Does tolerance extend itself as far as violent, even revolutionary dissent?

A tolerant society's greatest challenge is how it approaches those who remain intolerant of that society's tolerance. The shaky and incomplete assimilation of many Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands today calls into question many of these issues, explaining why the naturalization literature and paperwork is so forthcoming about the nature of Dutch society. The recent murder of Theo Van Gogh has inspired a national soul-searching, making many Dutch reassess what exactly their tolerant heritage really means.

The purpose of this essay is to sketch the realities of tolerance in the seventeenth century Dutch republic. Where did tolerance come from? Did it have its roots in religion or politics or economics? Why, at some particular moment in the seventeenth century, did the Dutch attempt to invent a totally new value system? What did the Dutch mean by tolerance?

## II. From Religious Intolerance to Religious Semi-Tolerance.

Religious tolerance or freedom of religion, while not necessarily the same thing, was imagined by some as the ultimate meaning of the Dutch Revolt. The attempts of King Philip II to interfere with Dutch religion fanned the flames of revolt, leading to the creation of a modern and better society, one in which the practice of religion was left free. From the horrors of the Inquisition and the terror of the Duke of Alva, the glorious, industrious and resourceful Dutch built their civilization on the wellspring of freedom of worship and freedom of conscience. This narrative informed popular mythmaking and rooted itself deeply in some collective Dutch consciousness. It remains as fantastical as America's *Manifest Destiny*.

The mythology of seventeenth century Dutch tolerance falls apart when considering the treatment of Catholics. From the outset, Catholics were imagined as the natural enemy of all that was good and proper about Dutch society, and they could never be afforded equal or even benign treatment. Catholics were never granted the slightest degree of official tolerance, despite wavering state efforts to the contrary, and found themselves at the hands of vengeful local authorities. "The mood of the militias and populace was strongly anti-Catholic and official efforts to protect Catholic worship, clergy, and images had little chance of succeeding. Just two weeks after Leiden went over to the Revolt, the several hundred clergy in the city were

expelled and Catholic services suppressed.”<sup>1</sup> Despite latter efforts at allowing the practice of the Catholic faith in surreptitious form, a sort of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, a majority of the Dutch remained strongly anti-Catholic throughout the seventeenth century. For all practical purposes, despite whatever revivals would The Dutch Revolt was a victory for the Dutch Reformed Church which became, for all intensive purposes, the state church. This occurred despite the fact that only ten percent of Holland’s populace were active members of the Reformed Church at the time of the revolt.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the vast majority of Dutch did not hold a strongly articulated confessional identity when the republic was formed “In the late sixteenth century, the majority of the Dutch population , like most of the population of the neighboring Westphalia and the Northern Rhineland, cannot unequivocally be described as Protestant or Catholic. For the majority constituted a non-confessionalized or barely confessionalized bloc.”<sup>3</sup> This might have informed the need for more stringent Calvinist efforts to bring the masses over, to counter the potential powers of conversion of Lutherans, Mennonites or Catholics. But it also begs the question of why the Dutch Reformed Church would ever support anything approaching tolerance, when such a policy would surely undermine its power.

From a purely doctrinal perspective, there is nothing in Calvinism that suggests religious tolerance. Unlike a faith like Islam which respects prior monotheisms and imagines them as failed or incomplete revelation, Calvinism does not lend itself to the acceptance of other faiths. The emphasis on predestination and election necessarily renders all those outside the faith (and even many within it,) as beyond salvation. In no way, therefore, could Calvinism, which sought to make its own members better people through the strictest of moral regimes, ever truly accept those beyond its pale. And thus non-Calvinists were necessarily damned, not welcomed into the community of the righteous, not worthy of God’s grace. If the seventeenth century Dutch Republic was officially Calvinist, then how could it be tolerant at the same time? Practically speaking, Dutch society should have remained fairly intolerant. So what happened?

The official proclamation of religious tolerance, promulgated by the States of Holland at Dordrecht in July 1572, had little popular support. Many Dutch would

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Israel, The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477-1806, USA: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 361

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 365

never accept a policy of tolerance, especially for Catholics. From a political perspective, many of the regents feared fragmentation and understood that efforts to impose a state-mandated universal tolerance would be met with considerable resistance. So much of the history of the Netherlands in the early modern period reveals broad geographical disparity, the existence of many distinct loci of practical power. Religious tolerance was therefore never truly exercised across the Netherlands in any uniform or universal manner and was always subject to local conditions. It had no religious basis in Calvinism, as suggested, and the state did little more than pay it lip service in the early decades of the republic. At times, this meant that rival Protestant blocs, such as the Lutherans, had to be manhandled. Anabaptists were persecuted. Despite its reputation as a haven for Jewish exiles, the Dutch Republic never officially tolerated Judaism, and conditions varied according to time and place.

The Dutch Republic therefore attempted to *articulate* the nature of a tolerant society but, in the absence of mandatory *compliance* on the local level, intolerance remained the norm. And this made many observers give pause. Religious intolerance might have opened up the rhetorical or intellectual space necessary for active debate and discussion on the issue. As we know, the republic was probably one of the most intellectually rich and fertile societies on earth in the early modern period, where Descartes and Spinoza sketched their respective visions of the modern world. What is particularly striking about Dutch intolerance is how it might have tacitly acknowledged dissenters, unintentionally, through the attention paid to them. Tolerance could not have developed in a country like Spain which was entirely Catholic and thus had no reason to debate the idea of tolerance. Though persecution or other forms of intolerance were fairly troubling forms of acknowledgement, they bred an odd degree of familiarity that might have paved the way to a less hostile approach to difference. And intolerance might have inspired a whole host of other intellectual questions as well.

The issue of tolerance remained pressing, on the minds of many, throughout the republic's first decades. The Remonstrant vs. Counter-Remonstrant struggle inspired some of the first intellectual, rather than political or religious, approaches on the topic. The violence of this struggle inspired Remonstrants to advocate tolerance for all, perhaps taking note of how the struggle had weakened the republic. Others,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

most notably Grotius, looked pragmatically to the need for a uniform state church with the maintenance of religious space for individual conscience, without necessarily endorsing dissident blocs. (In my own mind, Grotius's approach resembles Elizabeth I's refusal to "make windows into men's souls.") In whatever rendering, tolerance was imagined in both intellectual and practical terms, as a way to diminish confessional animosity. Tolerance was seen by many as the only way to truly get along and end the debilitating effects of religious war.

By the late seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic approached some sort of shaky equilibrium on the issue of tolerance, one informed by geographical diversity but, at the same time, an amorphous sense of consensus among the powers that be. On the ground, tolerance was not an accepted *policy* by the vast majority of the people, but this did not necessarily mean that those who rejected it endorsed violent persecution either. Among elites, there seemed to have been a general sense that tolerance, in some very loose form, without any determined effort towards universal enforcement, had to diffuse outward and, over time, become more deeply rooted in a Dutch general will.

Regents, university curators, professors and preachers were, in the main, more tolerant than their counterparts in the rest of Europe. But their principles were, at most, those of a semi-toleration of practical necessity, tempering somewhat intolerant inclinations and views. Up to a point one was allowed to discuss and propagate dissident religious views.<sup>4</sup>

The key term here is "up to a point." The republic would not become the free and open society that it is today. But it wouldn't become Spain either. What the Dutch were attempting was truly remarkable, a sort of tightrope balancing act between the state's need for a modicum of religious uniformity and individuals' freedom to choose their own church. The powers that be needed to keep this space open and regulate it with the utmost caution imaginable, like a master gardener delicately pruning a bonsai tree. "It was this ambivalent semi-tolerance which was the real hallmark of the Dutch Republic at the end of the Golden Age, a partial toleration seething with tension, theological and political, both within, and between, the principle church blocs and between those of its dissident offshoots."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 675.

### III. Dutch Tolerance on Closer Inspection.

Sometime in the seventeenth century, therefore, the issue of tolerance had to have become less one informed by religious discord and more one informed by more pragmatic considerations. Religious discord and the outright bullying of dissidents lost favor and, for all intensive purposes, was seen as a waste of time. What, therefore, was the real origin of tolerance? Clearly, the Calvinist Dutch Republic never *accepted* the damned among them. How might we therefore describe what their supposed tolerance really meant for them?

Calvinism implies social order, imagining the state as structuring and governing the broad spectrum of society's activities in order to best promote the needs and spiritual nourishing of the people. Religious tolerance as some form of policy or sensibility might be understood as one aspect of the republic's quest to compartmentalize religion for the purposes of order. (In this instance, we can cite a religious, though not doctrinal, source for tolerance.) "Dutch freedom was thus rooted in the preponderance of cities and a high level of social discipline and control. Evidence of this discipline was to be seen everywhere, in the home, schools, churches, universities, merchant ships, and harbors, as well as the navy and army."<sup>6</sup> The Dutch were therefore framing religion in the public sphere: tolerance would become the far limit, the outer boundary of this frame.

What exactly did this far limit or outer boundary entail? More than likely, tolerance for the Dutch did not mean *acceptance* of rival or dissenting religions. Catholics and Jews could never properly be accepted into the community of the elect. But this didn't necessarily mean that they had to be *persecuted* either. Religious dissent was usually met with shows of swift and uncompromising violence on the part of the established powers and the church they represented. The Dutch jettisoned this component of religious strife. Their tolerance was a tentative, even cunning juxtaposition of *non-acceptance* and *non-persecution*. This very unusual method of confronting difference and dissent was a remarkable invention. The Dutch were fabricating an entirely new method of interaction among diverse people. Religious difference had to be subsumed into the private sphere, away from the street and marketplace and into the home.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 676.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 678.

Dutch tolerance was a revolutionary concept. The frame of reference for public interactions between people had always been confessional. On the Dam, here is a Jew, here is a Lutheran, here is a Calvinist like me, here is a Mennonite. The Dutch understood this was an inherently retrograde and divisive behavior and one completely incongruous with economic developments in the republic. As the Dutch economy prospered, it demanded new modes of interaction. Quite simply, identifying people through their religious denomination alone and then dismissing or in some way injuring them was not only impractical but also stupid. Dutch tolerance therefore presumed a new set of values about how people should relate to one another.

#### IV. Practicality or Value-Neutrality?

If the seventeenth century Dutch Republic was only marginally, slightly or sporadically tolerant, then why would so many people, most notably religious and political exiles or refugees, seek a home there? Clearly, those who sought a new life in the Dutch Republic had to have heard that it was at least a freer or safer society than the one they were fleeing. Among these immigrants, there must have been some preconceived notion, like European fantasies of American streets paved with gold, that there would be less or perhaps even no persecution there. How could immigrants with potentially suspect religious backgrounds be allowed to settle so freely in the republic?

The first waves of immigrants were also Dutch, properly speaking, from the south and probably Calvinist, or at least some form of Protestant. But even more importantly, they had skills. “The degree of success achieved depends, partly, on the absorptive capacity of the host society and, partly, on the adaptability of the skills of the immigrants. What is most remarkable about the exodus to the north after 1585 is the speed and comparative ease with which the newcomers were integrated into Dutch society and economic life.”<sup>7</sup> These immigrants could make significant contributions to the economy. The same might be said of Jewish communities who fled to the Netherlands, even before the advent of the republic. As the Dutch economy skyrocketed, Jews were valued for their financial acumen. From a religious perspective, they remained suspect. But in the new “non-acceptance, non-persecution”

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

framework, the Jews were allowed to work and pray and thrive. The proper Dutch burgher could frequent Jewish shops, sell to Jewish consumers, borrow money from Jewish creditors. In the public sphere, the Judaism of the Jews was of no concern.

From our perspective, Dutch tolerance was practicality and intelligence incarnate. This seems far too obvious, reductionist, even a little dismissive. Framing tolerance in terms of pragmatism fails to appreciate the sophisticated nature of this cultural innovation. The Dutch were probably the first people in history to become conscious of the market as operating according to discernible forces. Sometime in the seventeenth century, the Dutch came to the conclusion that the values of the market were incompatible with the values of a society where religious identity framed social interactions in the public sphere. Intolerance, discrimination, prejudice and persecution inhibited the market, operating as barriers to free exchange. What is somewhat derisively referred to as practicality might better be referred to as a form of readjustment. Consciously or not, the Dutch sought to reconfigure the values of society so that they might better synchronize with those of the economy. The market required openness, what we might today call transparency, and religious intolerance was, to again use contemporary parlance, bad for business.

This non-acceptance, non-persecution model of social interaction nullified the entire sensibility of passing judgment. In the marketplace, individuals were imagined in terms of their relationship to exchange or production. Instead of Protestants, Catholics and Jews, the Dutch saw traders and suppliers, warehousemen and insurers, creditors and debtors, producers and consumers. What can I sell to this person who comes into my shop? How can I best profit from my relationship with this supplier? How much money will I make by going into business with this person? Despite the enormous pressure of Calvinism toward austerity, the marketplace had to be framed without the traditional reliance on virtue and vice as normative poles. Economic activities were intrinsically amoral, acting according to their own natural forces. If the forces of the market paid no heed to Calvinism, then neither should its human participants. Production and exchange were not good or bad; they existed in a value-neutral universe.

From one perspective, this value-neutrality was a clever way for the Dutch to assuage their uncertain consciences. Calvinism shook its finger at greed and acquisitiveness. Value-neutrality allowed the Dutch to outmaneuver Calvinism, as economic growth and the creation of wealth was now construed not as vice but simply

“as is.” The Dutch might have been embarrassed by their riches but not enough to part from them. Though it remains doubtful that any wealthy Dutch burgher might publicly extol Gordon Gekko’s famed maxim from the movie Wall Street that “Greed is good,” perhaps that is what some of them were quietly thinking. Many of them might argue to the contrary that material acquisitiveness is an end in itself, undeserving of judgment. “Greed is not good”, a Dutch burgher might argue, “my enterprise has nothing to do with greed, I am simply prospering.”

Consider the expression “it’s just business.” Some behaviors in the marketplace might appear cruel, manipulative and corrupt. We might see them that way but the market does not. The market just sees behaviors. The market might seem cold and heartless. But if the market is an organism, it remains human folly to imagine that it operates according to our own moral frames of reference. Consider the most puzzling situation of all. The seventeenth century Dutch Republic was the most open and tolerant civilization of its time, so says the narrative paradigm. But what about the slave trade? What does Dutch participation in the slave trade do to our traditional warm-and-fuzzy notions of Dutch open-mindedness?

The slave-trade is not the smoking gun, and it’s not the skeleton in the closet either. Value-neutrality might appear a treacherous, even an abominable concept, if and when it has the power to not only sidestep but also completely disregard any and all moral considerations. Here is an apparent *Catch-22*. The slave trade was conducted without any moral restraint by those who participated in it. Just as the modern advertising industry seeks to reduce all of us to demographic niches, just as the modern insurance industry relies on actuarial tables to plot our life expectancies and monthly premiums therein, so too did the Dutch value-neutral approach reduce slaves to marketable commodities, not people with souls, not savages in need of salvation, but simply tokens of supply and demand. The Dutch neither accepted nor persecuted Africans. They simply sold them.

## V. Two Tightropes, Intertwined.

We imagine the Dutch merchant shrugging his shoulders when doing business with Jews. We imagine a polite Dutch housewife hurrying along with her groceries as she passed Oudezijds Voorburgwal 40, knowing full well that there were Catholics secretly praying in the attic. We imagine value-neutrality tolerance as a form of

indifference. To use our own teenagers' vernacular, the Dutch threw up their hands and said "whatever." Is this an accurate assessment?

In the absence of either acceptance or persecution, people of different faiths or backgrounds could actually be appreciated for what they could bring to the market. Rather than indifference, the Dutch value-neutral approach presumed the notion of the individual later articulated by the philosophes of the Enlightenment. When faith became a matter of the private realm of the home, now individuals could be freed to cultivate their own unique talents or skills. In an unfettered public sphere, individuals could truly thrive and become better people. All these striving individuals would also make society better. The Dutch seemed to be asking: "what can you bring to the table?"

Dutch value-neutrality also had a potential dark side. Taken to some far extreme, a person could be objectified in starkly impersonal terms, as a thing necessary to complete an economic transaction or as a thing that existed solely to suit some other person's end. While religious intolerance might have acknowledged the humanity of the dissident, extreme value-neutrality just saw the object, stripped of anything uniquely personal. If the supposed religious tolerance of the Dutch was always properly economic, then it also had the power to deny people of their inherent worth. The Dutch could not have conducted the slave trade otherwise.

The value-neutral approach to individual endeavor, in a market setting which presumed competition, also presumed endeavor at the expense of others. It did not necessarily presume cordial relations. It might even suggest animosity and disdain. In late nineteenth century America, this phenomenon would be referred to as "cutthroat capitalism." In contemporary America, we might refer to it as "Walmartization," the end of "mom-and-pop" commerce, of personal relations between merchants and their consumers. It might also explain how the upper echelons at Enron could remain so untouched by the evaporation of their employees' life savings.

Marx took sympathy. Value-neutrality enabled the development of a space for religious freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of conscience. But it also entailed a very unusual tolerance for more extreme behaviors. In the factories, the profit-hungry bourgeoisie ruthlessly exploited their proletarian workers. And society tolerated it, Dutch-style. To Marx, this was unacceptable. Extreme value-neutrality

prompted the alienation of an entire class of people. Someone had to be able to say “this was wrong” rather than “this is.”

Here again a balancing act. Against the traditional vision of the happy and prosperous Dutch, we have a far more conflicted, far more nuanced and far more interesting portrait of a people. We have a people struggling to negotiate the relationship between the worth of the individual and the demands of the market. The republic walked precariously on a tightrope between religious uniformity and freedom of religion. It also walked on another tightrope, between the total denial of moral frames of reference for economic interactions and the need to acknowledge, at the very least, that people aren't entirely soulless automatons either, motivated solely by economic choice. These two tightropes were intertwined in the tolerance debate of the seventeenth century. Unraveling them was precisely what the Dutch sought to do.