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From Arminius (d.1609) to the Synod of Dort (1618 – 1619)

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For the better part of two centuries, it was common to refer to Wesley's theological heirs under the rubric Wesleyan-Arminian theology. Wesley himself was responsible in a sense for this nomenclature, because *The Arminian Magazine* is the periodical he initiated in 1778 to distinguish the Wesleyan wing of the revival movement from his more Calvinist friends (and theological adversaries).¹ In the latter part of the twentieth century, this Wesleyan-Arminian language almost completely disappeared as a descriptor. The reasons for this are many, but I have argued elsewhere that the loss of original distinctives has had significant implications for the evolution of soteriology in the movement.²

The year after Arminius' death in 1609, his widow and children published his *Declaration of Sentiments*. The publication of this *Verclarinche* in 1610 was an attempt to honor him, but it was also a literary step toward vindicating him. No one could have anticipated that the decade of 1610-1620 would endure a barrage of publications that was nothing less than rhetorical, theological warfare. Think of it as a presidential election primary debate that lasted almost ten years, with the decision on election finally coming at the Synod at Dort in 1618-1619 – in this case an eternal election. Precise and carefully-worded truth assertions got lost in the rhetoric needed to score points and win followers.

This decade of pamphleteering resulted in a first phase of losing Arminius from sight so that, by the time the Synod of Dort convened in November 1618, it was in fact a form of altered Arminianism that was on trial, and it was an Arminianism altered in ways that Arminius likely would not have approved. If we have lost a true Arminianism, i.e. an actual reflection of his theological sentiments, then that process of loss began very early on. If one may speak of guilt in this process of loss, then blame

¹ For a comprehensive annotated index, see W. Stephen Gunter, *The Arminian Magazine, 1778-1797* at: Divinity.Duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/research-resources/Methodist-studies-resources.

² W. Stephen Gunter, "The Loss of Arminius in Wesleyan-Arminian Theology," pp. 71-90, in Keith D. Stanglin, Mark G. Bilby, and Mark H. Mann, *Reconsidering Arminius: Beyond the Reformed and Wesleyan Divide* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2014). That essay and this chapter were researched and written in tandem. The opening pages of this essay repeat some of that material, but, in fact, the findings in the pages that follow trace out, in some detail, the reasons I assert (in "The Loss of Arminius") that there are doctrinal divergences between Arminius and later Arminians. For this reason, I assert in this essay that it was an altered form of Arminius' theology that we find on trial at Dort. Already a decade after his death, Arminianism was rapidly becoming something with which Arminius would have been less than comfortable. Please note: Throughout the essay, unless otherwise cited, the Latin translations are courtesy of Ms. Jennifer Benedict, a Duke doctoral student in theology and classicist of considerable expertise.

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may be laid at the feet of both the Arminians known as Remonstrants and the Calvinists known as Contra-Remonstrants. Put simplistically, the Remonstrants protested against a strict doctrine of double predestination and the Contra-Remonstrants to a certain extent (Franciscus Gomarus chief among them) upheld and defended the dogma. Behind the scenes there is an additional doctrinal subtext at play regarding assumptions about sin and the interplay between faith and works. These theological disputes are carried on amid a highly complex set of social, political and religious issues at work in the Netherlands:

- 1) The role of civil officials in ordering the life of the church;
- 2) The nature of the church as an inclusive or exclusive body;
- 3) The relationship of the confessional standards to church life;
- 4) The authority of scripture and the authority of creeds;
- 5) The relationship between human freedom and divine sovereignty.⁴

The Political Situation Leading to Dort

To be sure, the issues are complex, and the Reformed Faith that to an extent held the Republic of the Lowlands together after a successful liberating of the country from Spain was a fragile one. Hakkenberg has noted, “The Dutch Republic . . . did not yet have a strong central government, and it was constantly threatened by particularism and political fragmentation.”⁵ The comprehensive volatility in the Dutch context was not merely a difference over dogma inside the church, it was a complex set of differences that threatened the unity of the nation. Put another way, it was more than the reputation of Arminius that was on the line. He was a casualty on the way to redefining the boundaries of political and religious authority. If one looks only at the formal doctrinally contested points of the warring parties, one misses the volatile republican nature of the rhetorical warfare; and it was this pamphlet warfare – somewhat the equivalent of political action committee advertisements – that drove the agenda in the first decade after Arminius’ death when the distinctive emphases of his soteriology began to be lost from view.

Ever since The Synod at Dort, even well-versed historians and theologians have tended to view the theological scene in the Netherlands through the lens of that great synod and see the country as

⁴ Douglas Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration, A Study of the Disputes in Dutch Calvinism from 1600 – 1650* (Cambridge: University Press, 1938), 25-212.

⁵ Michael Adam Hakkenberg, “The Predestinarian Controversy in the Netherlands, 1600 – 1620,” Ph. D., University of California, Berkeley (1989), 4.

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essentially Calvinian. While this was slowly but increasingly true after 1620, it certainly was not the case in prior decades. The Lowlands were religiously and theologically eclectic, and Arminius' teachings were not far out of step with the perspective of many leading voices, especially at the national leadership level. Even by the time of The Synod of Dort, barely one third of the general Dutch population was Protestant, and not all these were strict Calvinists. The general population moved very slowly away from their traditional Roman Catholic beliefs.⁶ The Anabaptists (especially Mennonites) were present and active, although they never organized in ways that made them politically powerful. Nevertheless, their doctrinal inclinations permeated the theological climate. They were not doctrinaire in any exclusive way, and they certainly were not strict predestinarians.

It is not an exaggeration to say that toleration (officially affirmed at the Union of Utrecht in 1559) and eclecticism were prevailing inclinations. When forty-three ministers gathered in 1610 at the Hague under the supervision of the Court Preacher, Johannes Uytenbogaert, to formulate their theological opinions in a formal petition for recognition known as The Remonstrance, they were not necessarily doing anything subversive or revolutionary. Theirs was a formal petition to the States of Holland for official recognition and, where necessary, protection against the intolerance and attacks of the strict Calvinists. Interesting to note is that these Arminians, although perhaps a minority in the Dutch Reformed Church as a whole, were actually in a majority among the magistrates in many larger cities. So, the magistrates in those cities took care to appoint Arminian ministers.

In the Five Points of the Remonstrance of 1610, Arminius' influence is clear: phrasing of key points were taken directly from the theological affirmations in his *Declaration of Sentiments*.⁷ This formal request for protection stirred the political and ecclesial waters to such an extent that at the end of the year (December, 1610) the States of Holland called for a conference in The Hague. Rather than cooling the temperatures of the opposing parties, the conflict between the Remonstrants and the Contra-Remonstrants intensified. The five points of the Remonstrance were answered with the Five Points of Calvinism, and the controversy was now "on" in the public arena with an open division of parties. From this point on we begin to lose sight of Arminius himself as well as certain important points in his theological affirmations.

⁶ Cf. Alastair Duke, "The Ambivalent Face of Calvinism in the Netherlands, 1561-1618," in *International Calvinism, 1541-1715*, ed. Menna Prestwich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 109.

⁷ Cf. W. Stephen Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments. An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), esp. 135-36, 180, 190-91.

Rather quickly, cities across the Republic came to identify themselves with one party or the other, and some cities or towns were divided internally – part Remonstrant and part Contra-Remonstrant. With astonishing speed, the driving issues became territorial, centering on positions of power and influence in pulpits and in positions of civil governing. In 1614 the States of Holland, *without* the support of Amsterdam and other Contra-Remonstrant inclined cities, adopted the “Resolution for Peace in the Churches.” This Resolution condemned the extreme positions on either side of the issue:

1. That God “created any man unto damnation,” or
2. That man “of his own natural powers or deeds can achieve salvation.”⁸

This further stipulated, in an attempt to protect the Remonstrants, that those who refused to affirm the Five Points of Calvinism were not to be subject to slander and attacks, but were, indeed, to be tolerated in the churches.

The Resolution for Peace was anything but, as it failed to satisfy either side of the squabble. At this point the story gets complicated by scenarios of unintended consequences. The Amsterdam classis (local council of ministers), dominated now by anti-Arminian sentiment, blatantly refused to follow the directives of the Resolution for Peace and began openly to support Contra-Remonstrant “strict Calvinist” groups who wished to hold separate worship services in towns where Remonstrant ministers were appointed. The Resolution for Peace was increasingly interpreted as an instrument in support of the Arminians, and when powerful church leaders openly defied the intent of the Resolution, the government was faced with a difficult decision: to enforce or not to enforce. The Advocate General, Oldenbarnevelt, chose to enforce the State’s authority “to use their supreme power to dismiss, or make the towns dismiss, any ministers infringing the resolution.”⁹ In principle, this meant that action could be taken against both Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants, but it was in practice the Contras who suffered the most. In a majority or at least a significant plurality of towns, the civil magistrates were Arminians, thus it was the Contra-Remonstrant ministers, often against the wishes of the local congregation itself, who were dismissed for violating the Resolution for Peace. The controversy was so heated that, in 1616 in The Hague, Rev. Henricus Rosaeus refused to celebrate communion with his Remonstrant colleague, Uytenbogart, who was chaplain to the Senate. When Rosaeus was dismissed from his ministerial office, he went to the neighboring village of Rijswijk, and every Sunday a large

⁸ Pieter Geyl, *The Netherlands Divided (1609-1648)*. Trans. S. T. Bindoff (London: Williams and Norgate, 1936), 52.

⁹ Jan Den Tex, *Oldenbarnevelt*. Trans. R. B. Powell (Cambridge: University Press, 1973) II: 554.

group of his supporters walked from The Hague to Rijswijk (a distance of several kilometers) to hear him preach. In numerous other towns and villages, Contra-Remonstrant ministers were dismissed and replaced with Remonstrant ministers, almost always against the wishes of their congregations. Even in situations where local sentiment was pro-Arminian, civil magistrates forcing out their minister was not a welcomed act.¹⁰ The Contra-Remonstrants began to separate from the public churches and to establish their own churches, calling their own ministers without the “interference” of civil magistrates.

By 1617 the situation in the Lowlands had devolved into what the poet Jacob Cats describes as “the year of violence.”¹¹ The policy of “mutual toleration” had resulted in almost comprehensive “mutual condemnation and reprisal.” Both sides struggled to turn popular opinion in their favor, but the struggle was increasingly characterized by violence:

In the pulpits and the taverns, on the streets, in high places and low, were heard the violent discussions in which no bitter term was spared. The quarrel threatened the existence of the young nation. The academic discussion of Gomarus and Arminius had become [the] bone of contention that divided Holland into two hostile camps.¹²

We do not need to get bogged down in too much historical detail here, but one cluster of events stands out in its symbolic importance. It was mentioned previously that the Contra-Remonstrants in The Hague were walking to an adjacent village to hear their preacher, who had been forced out of his pulpit in The Hague. Prince Maurits had heretofore remained aloof from the fray in the sense that he supported the official government decision of “mutual” toleration. That changed in 1617. In January, the Contra-Remonstrants of The Hague returned to the city for worship in the home of a layman. The States of Holland formally requested Prince Maurits, as commander of the army, to enforce government policy, but the Prince refused, saying that his actual responsibility was not to enforce policy but to defend true religion, the implication being that the Contra-Remonstrants were the orthodox party in the dispute. Maurits’ support emboldened the Contra-Remonstrants, and on July 19, 1617, they broke into the Cloister Church (Kloosterkerk) in The Hague and began holding worship services there – clearly in violation of the edicts passed by the States of Holland. On July 23, Maurits himself joined them to worship in the Cloister Church.

Led by Advocate General Oldenbarneveltdt, the States of Holland took decisive action, passing on August 4 the ‘Scherpe Resolutie’ (Sharp Resolution). In May, 1617, the province of Holland had

¹⁰ Den Tex, *Oldenbarnevelt*, II; 680.

¹¹ Quoted in Den Tex, II: 566.

¹² Hakkenberg, 48, quoting Petrus Blok, *History of the People of the Netherlands*. Trans. Ruth Putnam (New York: G. Putnam’s Sons, 1900), III: 438. [I could not locate this citation in Blok.]

formally called for a National Synod to resolve the religious dispute, but the States of Holland's "sharp resolution" asserted that no regional provincial government had the power to convene a National Synod. That power resided solely with the national government of the States. Furthermore, the "sharp resolution" provided for the raising of a national guard (*waardgelders*) to maintain order in the municipalities, i.e. enforce national law. In effect this set up a power struggle between the Advocate General Oldenbarnevelt and Prince Maurits. The country was literally on the brink of civil war. The National Guard was being raised in cities led by Remonstrant Councils, so Prince Maurits began a process of dismantling the city councils: he dismissed Remonstrant council members and appointing all Contra-Remonstrant councils. At that point, all support for Advocate General Oldenbarneveldt evaporated. He was arrested on August 29, 1618. After being tried on trumped-up charges of treason, he was condemned as a traitor, and on May 13, 1619 the former Advocate General was beheaded.

Oldenbarneveldt's arrest in late August paved the way for the Synod of Dort to convene in November, 1618. So finally this brings me to the point of this history lesson. In the months leading up to the Dort Synod, a book appeared that was evidently read by most every delegate to the Synod, *Specimen controversarium Beligarum*. The author was Arminius' long-time ecclesial adversary Festus Hommius. The book caricatures Arminius' anthropology as highly optimistic regarding human capacity: human beings are "not slaves of sin, but free to will good and evil." This type of caricature had been playing out for a decade in the pamphlet & civil warfare that we have noted. The actual theology of Arminius is now lost beyond the horizon of struggles for political dominance.

Aza Goudriaan has pointed out that these assertions do not "fit especially well into the text of Articles three and four of the Remonstrance of 1610, which insists that the human being cannot 'think, will or do anything that is good' except by the grace of God."¹³ This anthropology is taken directly from Arminius' 1608 *Declaration of Sentiments*. Excepting their appearance in caricature as scapegoats in the rhetorical warfare, Arminius' actual teachings have already and to a large extent been lost from sight by the time The Synod of Dort convened, especially the seriousness with which Arminius took Augustinian teachings on fallen humanity and humanity's utter inability to make a contribution in any way to God's saving initiative in Christ.

This slow disappearing act was accelerated by Arminius' own student, Simon Episcopius, who was the leading spokesman for the Remonstrants at The Synod of Dort, as well as by Arminius' life-long

¹³ Aza Goudriaan, "The Synod of Dort on Arminian Anthropology," in A. Goudriaan, ed., *Revisiting the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 82.

friend, Peter Bertius. Even their nuanced doctrinal shifts must, however, not be seen as isolated doctrinal difference. Theology and politics are inextricably intertwined, so our familiarity with the political landscape is essential to understanding how the eventual pronouncements at Dort could have had such a pervasive and far-reaching impact. We know that, for example, Arminius and Franciscus Gomarus had sharp disagreements over theological dogma, and these doctrinal differences are often understood to be the fundamental wedge that split the Reformed Church. Without underestimating the importance of the dogmatic conflict, we will also see that this difference is markedly exacerbated by their oppositional perspectives on how issues of church and state were to be resolved.

The States of Holland and Ecclesial Polity

Although the Synod of Dort “officially” settled the dogmatic dispute over predestination by siding with the strict Calvinists over against the Arminians, the complex issues related to governing church and state could not be resolved by dogmatic pronouncement. The charges that led to the execution of Oldenbarneveldt in 1619 had little to do with his apparent sympathy for Arminian theological dogma. The charges against him were designed to rid the public arena of his position on how the national government should function in both church affairs and provincial decision-making. On these points, Oldenbarneveldt was much closer to Arminius than to Gomarus. It should also be pointed out that the vexing issue of church-state relations was not solved at Dort. As Douglas Nobbs has noted, “The Synod of Dort in 1618, the only national synod acknowledged by provinces and states, failed to settle the relationship of church and state upon Calvinist principles.”¹⁴ Nobbs’ phrase “upon Calvinist principles” reflects the fault lines of difference between the respective positions of Arminius and Gomarus.

Serious students of church history know that sorting out theological differences is a messy affair, but the process is even more intractable when it is unclear who has the final authority to separate “right” from “wrong.” In the Netherlands, three alternatives were on the table: (1) A pure Erastianism – the church is dependent on the state, so that its doctrine as well as organization is in the hands of the state’s governing body; (2) The church is independent of the state – the church is a self-sufficient body. The state has neither dependence upon nor formal governing connection to the church. (3) The third alternative was essentially an Anabaptist perspective: politics and true Christianity are incompatible. Any connection between the two must be viewed as heretical.

¹⁴ Douglas Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration*, xii.

To the 21st-century reader, the formal separation of church and state into independent entities is so normal that it is difficult to imagine a society with an entirely different norm; however, a different normative situation is what must be envisioned. The States of Holland, using the authority that resided with them, convened the Synod of Dort – with the explicit proviso that the rights of the local provinces that comprised the Netherlands would not be infringed upon, with the explicit provision that patronage would not be abolished. The States also set the number of delegates to the Synod from within the Netherlands and invited specific international representatives. The States sent “deputies” to assure that doctrinal discussions remained within Scriptural limits. The proviso protecting political patronage was short-lived, but in some ways ministerial appointments became even more circumscribed than before. A person’s “call” to the ministry came to be routed through the municipality. This did not represent a formal change of due process, but in practice the local decision was revised. Previously, the municipal purview was limited to the “civil conduct” of the candidate – whether he was an upstanding citizen. If the legal slate was clean, then the person recommended to them was approved. After Dort, local approval included confessional domains, and the States could commission two “deputies” to attend the municipal approval process in an advisory capacity. The practical results of these changes meant that, for example, when the Remonstrant clergy were relieved of their post after the Synod of Dort, the efficient means to accomplish these removals was in place. Municipal approval was required to call as well as to re-appoint clergy. After 1618 the policy of local governments toward the church was in many cases more oppressive than before.¹⁵

Nobbs’ assertion about Dort’s failure along Calvinist lines requires that we look at how Arminius differs from the strict Calvinists about governance. Arminius was fundamentally an Erastian in his assumptions about church and state, assuming the validity of Erastus’ assumption denying independent ecclesial jurisdiction. Arminius seems to have agreed with his Stadholder (Grand Pensionary), Johannes Uytenbogaert, that this established order was *revealed*.¹⁶ There is an evolution in the “Arminian position” that moves along a path from assertions regarding the divine right of the ruler (Arminius) to a larger framed legal theory of sovereignty (Hugo Grotius), and finally, on the eve of Dort, to a theory of toleration for private churches alongside the state established church.¹⁷ Arminius would have cared

¹⁵ Cf. Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration*, xii-xiv; H. W. Ter Haar, *Jacobus Trigland* (’s Gravengage: Nijhoff, 1891), 63-66; H. C. Rogge, *Johannes Uytenbogaert in zijn gevoelen aangaande de Magt den Overheden in Kerkelijke zaken, tegenover zijne bestrijders* (Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1858-1863), esp. vol. III.

¹⁶ J. Uytenbogaert, *Tractaet van ’t Ampt ende Authoriteyt een hooger Christelijcker Overheyt in Kerckelycke Saecken* (Rotterdam: dedrukt by Joannes Naeranus, 3rd edn., 1647), esp. vols. I & II.

¹⁷ Cf. Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration*, 25-107.

greatly about these issues because, in the final analysis, doctrinal orthodoxy in the Lowlands was decided in this political domain. In his disagreements with Gomarus, differences of opinion on governance were continually in play. In his *Declaration of Sentiments*, when we read Arminius asserting that he is not obliged to answer the requests of certain ecclesial deputies at his door demanding doctrinal clarification, he is doing much more than avoiding interpersonal conflict. He is following his and Uytenbogaert's Erastian assumptions about to whom an answer is actually due. Arminius and Uytenbogaert regarded such a position not only as established by precedent and practice, but also as revealed by God as the right order of things.

The Arminian theory attempted to protect simultaneously both the function of the church and the duty of the ruler. It did so by distinguishing the acts of religion from the organizational polity of the church. One might say that the Arminian ideal was state oversight without operational control – not direct control of the church by the state, but through ecclesial structures a state inspection and supervision of the church's due processes. While the state had a share in overseeing the church's due process, it had neither the power nor the right to usurp the spiritual dimensions, to override the divine mandate that gives the church its identity, or to violate the individual conscience of believers. While it may not have been simple, it is important to point out that (following Uytenbogaert), the Arminian theory was a straightforward attempt to address one side of the two-dimensional issue by answering a single question:

What Authority, Command, Power and Jurisdiction [does] a chief sovereign Magistrate (be it Emperor, King, Prince or State) have according to God's word, in matters concerning religion: with the Lands and Dominions, over which those magistrates are supreme governours."¹⁸

The practical implication of the Arminian position is that the power of the church was a matter of incidental discussion consequent upon an independent settlement of the sovereign's power in religion. Put another way, the power of the church was defined negatively by establishing what a sovereign ruler might and might not command. Uytenbogaert's position, adopted by Arminius, was coherent and organic to the extent that it determined one issue (sovereign right), while indirectly addressing the second issue (ecclesial rights). Nobbs

¹⁸ Here Nobbs, 27, is citing the MS translation (British Museum Reg. 17B. XLIV) of Uytenbogaert's "Tractaet," ms. 18, *Tractaet*, 7.

concludes, “Uytenbogaert preserved asimplicity of design which gave plausibility, consistency and integrity to his particular interpretation of divine right.”¹⁹

For the Calvinian party of Gomarus, this position was untenable, if for no other reason than that it failed to preserve the guarantee of a Christian sovereign that ruled from within biblical and orthodox Christian assumptions. Throughout his theological debates with Arminius, Gomarus was operating with a different theory of church and state, which he set out in published form alongside his theological points in the same year as Arminius death.²⁰ Gomarus’ (and the Contra-Remonstrants’) approach, unlike Uytenbogaert’s, was designed to establish simultaneously two authorial centers – the church and government; but it was the “one true Church.” This true church was to be the only public church, and it would be actively supported by the ruling governor. There was, to be sure, a separation of domains: the ruler was the organ of power to enforce ecclesial decisions. Simply put, the domain of the governor was the domain of enforcing power. The domain of the church resided in the realm of “the spiritual,” the church being led by the grace of God, which alone could move the heart to good. The political ruler had neither the right nor the capacity to move in the spiritual domain, and the church was required to refrain from employing the powers of enforcement granted to the sovereign ruler. Each was supreme in its own sphere.

It is at this dialectical juncture that Gomarus’ logic comes most evidently into play. What he and the opponents of the Arminian theory could not abide was that Uytenbogaert’s political theory did nothing to guarantee that the governing leader would be Christian. This was assumed but left unstated. So Gomarus takes a step proactively to preserve Christian governance: loyalty to the ruler was loyalty to God, so long as the sovereign followed the divine will – as it had been interpreted to be the case spiritually by the church. Gomarus insisted that the ruler’s individual power was ultimately subordinate to God’s law, therefore, neither unlimited nor absolute. Furthermore, the governed subjects were to obey an oppressive governor only so long as that obedience did not entail sinning against God: render unto Caesar.²¹ If the Arminians saw divine order in the providentially established priority of the governing structure, the Contra-Remonstrants vested the power in God’s very self – as interpreted and established by the church. The offices of the church were created by God through divine law. The church’s

¹⁹ Nobbs, 28.

²⁰ Franciscus Gomarus, *Waerschouwinghe over de Vermaninghe aen R. Donteclock . . .* (Leyden: voor Jan Jansz. Orlers, 1609).

²¹ Gomarus, *Waerschouwinghe*, 14.

ministers were divinely led envoys who represented and interpreted to its membership divine insights and commands. Nobbs sums up this interlocking set of assumptions up nicely:

So long as they followed His Will, they were endowed with the authority of God Himself, and directly empowered to undertake their [ministerial] function The true sovereignty was with God Neither the state nor the ruler, neither the church nor its ministers, nor even the Holy Community, held the sovereign power, but God in them.”²²

Such a notion was obviously a complicated dialectic. Gomarus confessed that not all rulers were equal, nor were all ministers similarly gifted. Some rulers have spiritual gifts useful and necessary for spiritual worship, and some ecclesial leaders were fit to serve on the councils of state. But God demands that each serve to the utmost of his capacity. To these church ministers were entrusted the “things of the Lord;” the civil rulers were entrusted with the “things of the world.”²³ In the specific situation we are considering, where Prince Maurits was trying to hold a fragile republic together, Gomarus’ dialectic of two realms suited Maurits’ purposes splendidly. Maurits quite willingly affirmed that ecclesial self-sufficiency was complete and inherent in the church so long as he, the ruler, was treated as the divinely ordained collaborator with the church, albeit with religious obligations. As Nobbs has pointed out, “The **corpus cristianum** was still the objective of Contra-Remonstrant theory, and no Christian society was [deemed] possible whenever church and state were opposed.”²⁴ So, when some were inclined to chastise Prince Maurits for attending the illegally convened congregation led by Rev. Rosaeus at The Kloosterkerk in The Hague (July, 1617), Maurits responded that it was his duty to uphold and defend spiritual truth. Within the theory of governance propagated by the Contra-Remonstrants that was slowly gaining ascendancy, the theory he had also chosen to support, his **not** “defending spiritual truth” would have meant that he was not properly fit to rule. The die was publicly cast the day Maurits walked into The Kloosterkerk. This was the new reality of governance that came to define the political and religious reality of the decade after Arminius death, the reality that voted against the probability that the Arminians could carve out a place for themselves in the Dutch church. Arminius’ (and Grotius’) political theory loses in the battle for civil governing, and, as we shall now see, the distinctiveness of Arminius’ theological lines of thought get blurred as well in the hands of his well-meaning disciples and successors. This emerging loss may be discerned in the thought of his lifelong friend and colleague, Peter Bertius, especially in his teachings on justification by faith. The same loss of distinctiveness may

²² Nobbs, 9.

²³ *Waerschouwinghe*, 19, 21-24.

²⁴ Nobbs, 17.

also be discerned in the formulations of his student and successor at Leiden, Simon Episcopius, especially those on the doctrines of sin, grace, and human freedom.

Bertius on Justification by Faith

The life journey of Peter Bertius is a twisted path. As Carl Bangs has noted: “The last history of Bertius is not pleasant He became a troublemaker within Remonstrant circles . . . drawing the censure of Uytenbogaert. He then went over to the Contra-Remonstrants, who did not receive him warmly. Finally, he went to Paris, returned to the Roman Catholic fold, and died in 1629.”²⁵ An examination of Bertius’ thoughts on faith and justification helps explain why the Contras did not receive him warmly. We discover as well some clues as to why this life-long Protestant ended up back in the Roman fold toward the end of his life.

In their recent systematic theology, G. van den Brink and C. van der Kooi touch a central nerve in the Arminian system when they note that, although more in his disciples than in Arminius himself, “his disciples were so fearful that the doctrine of perseverance [of the saints] did not take the human factor with enough seriousness to avoid the danger of immoral behavior that they increasingly underscored the necessity of human cooperation with God’s grace.”²⁶ The authors are cognizant that both Arminius and the original framers of the *Remonstrantie* of 1610, who borrowed explicitly from Arminius, were less inclined than their successors to overemphasize the factor of human cooperation.²⁷ Arminius and the original Remonstrants hewed closer to the line of sovereign grace than their heirs. At Leiden Arminius was kept mindful of this point by Gomarus, and from the University of Franeker in Friesland the rejoinders came from Sibrandus Lubbertus, who went so far as to spread unfounded theological libel against Arminius on this and other points.²⁸ Beginning in 1608, Lubbertus carried on an exchange with Bertius (Arminius’ only theological friend and ally at Leiden) with regard to whether faith was a gift or a “work.” Lubbertus makes some crucial distinctions about faith that later Arminians were not very careful to keep in view.²⁹

²⁵ Carl Bangs, *Arminius. A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 357.

²⁶ G. van den Brink and C. van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek. Een inleiding* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 628. (My translation of the Dutch).

²⁷ Cf. Gunter, *Arminius and His ‘Declaration of Sentiments,’* 130f.

²⁸ Gunter, *Arminius and His ‘Declaration of Sentiments,’* 84ff.

²⁹ Cf. Aza Goudriaan, “Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy,” 155-178, in Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot and Willemien Otten, eds. *Scholasticism Reformed. Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). I follow Goudriaan in the examination of the primary sources that reflect this exchange. In some cases I have silently ‘improved’ Goudriaan’s translation of the Latin original. For example, recognizing that his translation is the literal rendering of

Lubbertus reminds Bertius, “The specific difference between justification by faith and justification by works is this, as I said before, that in justification by works we do something for God, but in justification by faith we receive something from God.”³⁰ This exchange of letters across several years between Bertius and Lubbertus is of more than passing consequence, as it seems to demonstrate an evolution of Arminianism. In the opening page of his essay, Goudriaan posits, “Arminius’ vacillates between two positions on imputed righteousness,” whereas Bertius makes a “more deliberate attempt to combine two viewpoints” – the two viewpoints being faith as a gift *from* God versus faith as our gift *to* God.³¹ If I may be so bold, rather than interpreting Arminius on this point as vacillating, perhaps Goudriaan should consider that Arminius’ vacillation is not indecision so much as it is his trying to hold both imputation and impartation to be equally gifts from God to – a theological dialectic between equally important poles – with God consistently remaining the sovereign initiator. For Arminius, the issue is not so much human involvement as much as it is the nature of God’s saving initiative. In order to avoid determinism (thereby making God the author of sin), the human response must take place **non necessitas** (in a ‘non-necessitated’ way).³² The important point to be discerned here is that Bertius’ move is actually a move away from Arminius on justifying faith.

Goudriaan, rather than examining Arminius’ writings, takes the methodological approach of reconstructing Arminius’ thought by taking to a large extent at face value what Gomarus represents as Arminius’s teaching. I will pass on the temptation to criticize Goudriaan’s decision to take one’s opponent as a reliable resource, but choose rather to acknowledge where I can agree that Gomarus (and Goudriaan) get Arminius right. The most important place is the one where Bertius himself begins: the Arminian emphasis is on justification in relation to an act of faith on the part of the believer, simultaneously holding firmly to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Indeed, this point constitutes the fundamental debate between Lubbertus and Bertius, reflected in seven letters by Lubbertus and six letters from the hand of Bertius.³³ Bertius maintains that faith is justifying “because it

Lubbertus’ phrasing, I prefer “justification by faith” versus “justification by works” where Goudriaan has “justification of faith” and “justification of works.”

³⁰ Goudriaan, “Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy,” 166, citing S. Lubbertus, *Epistolica disceptatio de fide iustificante deque nostra coram Deo iustificatione . . .* (Delft: I. Andreae, 1612), 136. [Hereafter cited as *Epistolica disceptatio*.]

³¹ Goudriaan, “Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy,” 164.

³² Cf. Arminius’ *Verklaringhe* in Gunter, *Arminius and His ‘Declaration’*, 124, 141, 174, 176. The driving issue for Arminius is the doctrine of God, not human involvement.

³³ Cf. C. van der Woude, *Sibrandus Lubbertus: Leven en werken, in het bijzonder naar zijn correspondentie*. Ph.D., Free University of Amsterdam (Kampen: Kok, 19630, esp. 185-197, and L. J. M. Bosch, *Petrus Bertius, 1565-1629*. Ph.D., Catholic University of Nijmegen (Meppel: Krips, 1979), esp. 180ff., 116ff.

is considered by the gracious acceptance of God in Christ as the whole righteousness of the law that we were held to accomplish. And because only this apprehends the righteousness of Christ that is ours by imputation.”³⁴

Bertius admits that he cannot explain exactly how this duality can be logically reconciled, but he insists that both tenets are scripturally supported.³⁵ He then proceeds to try out different options. (1) Perhaps God considers human faith both as the instrument “apprehending the righteousness of Christ” as well as simultaneously “obedience . . . to the Gospel.”³⁶ I would suggest that this ascription is very close to Arminius’ dialectic of faith, but as Goudriaan points out, this is not Bertius’ favored line of interpretation. Bertius suggests also (2) that to those persons “whose faith has been accepted as the whole fulfillment of the law, He subsequently imputes the righteousness of His Son.”³⁷ In phrasing it this way, Bertius seems to be asserting that the act of faith is a meritorious act. Indeed, it would seem that placing the emphasis on human volition is his preferred alternative.³⁸ When we look at other places in the *Epistolica*, we become increasingly convinced that faith defined fundamentally as a human act has for Bertius, and also for later Arminians who were less careful than Arminius on this point, become the default position. In some assertions, the volitional act of faith has become the condition to be fulfilled, followed “after the fact” by an attribution of Christ’s righteousness.³⁹

To the modern reader these distinctions might seem arcane, but this move is the “inch that becomes a mile” in Arminian soteriology. Bertius makes the formal move that both Gomarus and Lubbertus accused, namely, rendering faith as a work we do to earn favor from God, rather than the gift we receive from God. Arminius would not approve. To make this move, Bertius had to either implicitly or explicitly play down the pervasive nature of sin. Implicitly, he certainly makes this move when he assumes that the capacity for faith is an inherent human quality on which the believer must simply act.⁴⁰

³⁴ Goudriaan, “Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy,” 164; *Epistolica disceptatio*, 6; van der Woude, *Lubbertus*, 186.

³⁵ *Epistolica disceptatio*, 104.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108: “But, in justifying us, God looks at faith not merely as an instrument, apprehending the righteousness of Christ, but also as the obedience which is presented by us to the Gospel. Therefore, I think these things can be reconciled in this way, so that things which seem to be opposed and to fight one another may at the same time be consistent and harmonize smoothly.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 109: “Let us also explore another way: that God imputes the righteousness of His son to those whose faith he has taken and accepted in place of complete fulfillment of the law.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113 “You have two ways of reconciling [these alternatives], the latter of which pleases me more.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 46: “If the righteousness of faith accedes to the place of the righteousness of the law, it follows that the condition of faith and the acceptance of it [faith] has acceded to the place of the full and strict fulfillment of all commandments; but the former is true, therefore the latter is as well.” See also 139 for a similar assertion.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69 “. . . through his word, or, through a quality inhering in him.”

It is clearly a *non sequitur*, but Bertius seems to assert that Biblical admonitions to believe and be saved warranted the conclusion that faith and believing were inherent human capacities. Surely, Augustine and Arminius alike would have queried Bertius whether he had forgotten all the other texts about **all** being sinners and falling short of the glory of God. Indeed, what does become of sin in the Arminian tradition the decade after Arminius's death? In order to answer this question, we look at the most influential Arminian theologian in that decade, Simon Episcopius. What we discern are some subtle but important shifts of emphasis. These are not so much contradictions of Arminius as they are slight changes of emphasis that shift the Arminian trajectory. They are, however, changes that did not go unnoticed, not only among Arminius' theological adversaries, but also among Remonstrant theologians themselves.

Episcopius on Grace, Freedom and Sin

To address these changes, we look at the most influential Remonstrant theologian during the decade after Arminius' death, Simon Episcopius. What we discern are some subtle but important shifts of emphasis. They are not so much contradictions of Arminius as they are, in most cases, slight changes that shift the Arminian trajectory soteriologically – changes that were noted by Arminius' theological adversaries as well as by his Remonstrant heirs. In Goudriaan's discussion of the exchange between Lubbertus and Bertius on justification by faith, it is noteworthy that the doctrines of sin and grace are conspicuously absent. In contrast, Arminius was consistently disinclined to visit the subject of justification without considering the disability of sinfulness and the absolute necessity of a proactive divine gracious enabling of humanity to counter the effects of sin. This is Arminius the pastor-theologian at work, someone who knows that weaving a purely mental vision of doctrine is inadequate to the lived life of faith. We do indeed encounter these important discussions in Episcopius, but they are much altered in key areas when compared to corresponding strains of thought in Arminius.⁴¹

Unlike Arminius, Episcopius is silent about the effects of Adam's sin – the concepts of **reatus** and **privation** – seminal presence in Adam and whether Adam's descendants shared in his punishment for that sin. Arminius had asserted:

The whole of this sin, however is not peculiar to our first parents, but is common to the entire race and to all their posterity, who, at the time when this sin was committed, were in their loins, and who have since descended from them by the natural mode of propagation, according to the primitive benediction: For in Adam "all have sinned." (Rom. 5:12.) Wherefore, whatever punishment was brought down upon our first parents,

⁴¹ Here I am following Mark A. Ellis, *Simon Episcopius' Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), esp. 107-130. [Hereafter cited as Ellis, *Episcopius*.]

has likewise pervaded and yet pursues all their posterity: So that all men “are by nature the children of wrath,” (Eph. 2:3) obnoxious to condemnation, and to temporal as well as to eternal death; they are also devoid of that original righteousness and holiness. (Rom. 5:12,18,19) With these evils they would remain oppressed forever, unless they were liberated by Christ Jesus; to whom be glory forever.⁴²

In sharp contrast to Arminius’ Augustinian notions, the only source Episcopius explicitly mentions as the reason for sinful disobedience is free will:

When we speak of actual sins, we wish that to be taken to mean those that we ourselves perpetrate of our own accord and of our own absolutely free will, against the divine will or the law. I say, “by [our] own will”, not by that of another; “absolutely free”, which excludes not only coercion (although the will cannot be recognized through any potency) but also any sort of necessity or determinism at all.⁴³

Mark Ellis is of the opinion that Episcopius makes no mention of sin as corruption, and this is noteworthy because Episcopius otherwise follows Arminius closely, borrowing heavily from him.⁴⁴ This changes, however, when we get to the treatment of the Mosaic Law, to which Arminius dedicated his entire Public Disputation XII, “On the Law of God.” Taking up the three uses that Calvin identifies (moral, ceremonial, and judicial), Arminius analyzes the degree to which they were abrogated by the new Covenant in Christ.⁴⁵ Episcopius provides no separate treatment of the Law, and Ellis sees this as a consequential omission: “We cannot overemphasize his perception of Law as only a type and shadow of grace.”⁴⁶ In Episcopius we encounter statements abrogating the Law in ways quite alien to Arminius: Finally (so that we might comprehend the entire matter in brief), we should judge whatever was contained by the old covenant to have been clearly a type and to have held ‘a shadow of the things to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.’ [Col. 2:17]⁴⁷

For all practical purposes, in the hands of Episcopius, the entirety of the Law is abrogated with respect to the believer – applicable only to the Jews and not the rest of humanity. The Law is a *paidagogos* to bring us to Christ (Gal3:24), but it seems to have no normative character. Because Arminius takes sin so seriously, he understands that the Law reveals the righteousness of God in stark

⁴² James Arminius, Public Disputation VII, “On the First Sin of the First Man,” in *The Works of Arminius*. London Edition (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986), II:156-57. [Hereafter cited as Arminius, *Works*.]

⁴³ Simon Episcopius, *Disputationes Theologiae Tripartae* (Amsterdam: Ioannem Blaeu, 1644), I:10. [Hereafter cited as Episcopius, *Disputationes*.]

⁴⁴ Mark A. Ellis, *Episcopius*, 107, 108-110.

⁴⁵ Arminius, *Works*, II:196-203.

⁴⁶ Ellis, *Episcopius*, 1.10.

⁴⁷ Episcopius, *Disputationes*, 1.22 and similarly 24. Emphasis added.

contrast to human sinfulness. Episcopius seems only to see that the Law reveals human disobedience, that being conceived purely as a volitional act. Within this volitional frame of reference, he seems to have feared that a strong emphasis on Law could lead to a moralism that would do grave injury to Christ and his grace. It might even risk the loss of a distinctively Christian soteriology.⁴⁸ This trajectory of reasoning leads to Episcopius' most striking deviations from Arminius:

Episcopius did not give separate disputations on predestination, calling, free will or grace. All one needed to understand the Gospel of grace was that, although people are sinners, Christ provided forgiveness for sins, sanctification and eternal life for all who believe.⁴⁹

These omissions did not go unnoticed by Episcopius' contemporaries, and they concluded that he was following a line (initiated by Bertius) that was taking Remonstrant theology in an un-Arminian direction – in the sense that it takes the theology in directions Arminius would not likely have chosen.

In the aftermath of the Synod of Dort, Episcopius played the key role in formulating the Remonstrant “Confession of Faith” in 1621.⁵⁰ Ellis points out that, in contrast to Episcopius' own theological treatises, the Confession of 1621 “provides a clear indication that the other Remonstrants demanded that the *Confessio* be more reflective of Arminius Episcopius' colleagues were not supportive of his departure from Arminius on several of the key issues They demanded a return to Arminius.”⁵¹ Even so, Episcopius still manages in the Confession to shift the theological moorings of Arminianism. Arminius had taught that in Christ universal provision for salvation was made, but he did not teach that humanity was intrinsically capable (without the aid of divine grace) of freely participating in this provision. Arminius was simply too Augustinian to make such a move, and his assumptions about the sovereignty of God prohibited such a move as well. It is clear that not all believe, and the fact that some are condemned has to be accounted for. It is at this specific juncture that Episcopius contravenes his mentor. Arminius taught that God's prevenient grace is reaching out to all of humanity; but because some do not believe, we are left with the mystery of why this is so.⁵² The freedom to decide is due to

⁴⁸ Cf. Ellis, *Episcopius*, 110, referencing *Disputationes*, 1.11.7, 15, 16.

⁴⁹ Ellis, *Episcopius*, 111.

⁵⁰ *CONFESSIO, SIVE DECLARATIO, Sententiae Pastorum, qui in Foederato Belgio REMONSTRANTES vocantur, Super praecipuis articulis Religionis Christianae*. [The Confession or Declaration of the Pastors which in the Belgian Federation are called the Remonstrants, on the principle articles of the Christian Religion]. Mark A. Ellis, translator and editor, *The Arminian Confession of 1621* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2005), Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 51.

⁵¹ Ellis, *Episcopius on Original Sin*, 127.

⁵² Ellis asserts on this point, “Arminius denied that sufficient grace was given to all men.” *Ibid*. I am not aware that Arminius makes this an explicit assertion, although it is logically consistent. To assert that God purposefully withholds sufficient grace

proactive divine enabling; there is no mention in Arminius of human ability to decide **for** God apart from intervening grace. Arminius was content to live in the tension of this soteriological dialectic.

This seems to have been a dialectic that Episcopius felt necessary to resolve. He gives a polite nod to Arminius, but then proceeds to set out a rather different course for subsequent Arminian soteriology. Episcopius takes a step on prevenient grace that I have not been able to discern in Arminius. In the *Confessio*, 17:8, we read:

And even if there truly is the greatest disparity of grace (Rom. 12:6f, 1 Pet. 4:10), clearly according to the most free dispensation of the divine will, still the Holy Spirit confers such grace to all (Matt. 11:21, Tit. 3:4f, 1 Pet 1:23 & 2:9, Ja. 1:18, 2 Cor. 3:6, Heb. 4:12), both in general and in particular, to whom the Word of faith is ordinarily preached, as is sufficient for begetting faith in them, and for gradually carrying on their saving conversion. And therefore sufficient grace for faith and conversion not only comes to those who actually believe and are converted, but also to those who do not believe and are not really converted (I. 62:2, Ez. 18:11, Prov. 1:24f, Matt. 23:37, Lk. 8:12).⁵³

There can be little doubt that this statement reflects what turns out to be Arminian sentiment for subsequent generations, but it is not exactly how Arminius would have expressed the dialectic of grace and human freedom. Episcopius and subsequent Arminians describe this sufficient grace, also known as prevenient grace, as a universal endowment that becomes for all practical purposes a “divine spark” intrinsic to the status of being human. In this way, free will enjoys pride of place in the interplay among sin, grace and freedom. The sovereign God has been replaced with the sovereign human. As Richard Mueller has pointed out:

The fall [of humanity] does not appear as an element either structural or doctrinal in Episcopius [Humanity] has a natural inclination toward God, and the right reason (*ratio recta*) with which he is endowed enables his mind to apprehend the good and the just. . . . This *recta ratio*, moreover, proscribes the love and worship of God.”⁵⁴ The practical implications of this have far-reaching implications for evangelical soteriology.

An entire essay would be required to spell out just how far-reaching and the extent to which this move changed the trajectory of Arminian (and later Wesleyan) soteriology.⁵⁵ My essay in *Reconsidering Arminius* only scratches the surface.

is to assert that God has chosen specifically to damn specified individuals. Arminius entire *Declaration of Sentiments* is a polemic against this logic.

⁵³ Ellis, *Arminian Confession*, 109-110.

⁵⁴ Richard Muller, “The Federal Motif in Seventeenth Century Arminian Theology” in *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* (1988) 68:110.

⁵⁵ This has, indeed, proved to be the case in the evolution of Wesleyan-Arminian theology: (1) As an operating assumption, free will as a natural endowment has replaced “the will graciously set free.” (2) The notion of God as salvific sovereign has

Conclusion

The decade after Arminius' death in 1609 proved to be a telling one. The church he had pastored in Amsterdam became the veritable center of an Anti-Arminian sentiment that eventually drove the Arminians out of all the pulpits in the Netherlands. The Erastian theory of church-state governance espoused by Arminius and Hugo Grotius was undermined to the extent that it was no longer practically viable. At the hands of his closest friends and most famous student, Arminius' soteriology was changed in subtle ways that determined its trajectory in some rather un-Arminian ways. Even though the Arminian theology that was judged and found wanting at the Synod of Dort in 1618-19 did not faithfully reflect Arminius, he was inferentially condemned as heretical at the great synod. If the Contra-Remonstrants at Dort closed the coffin on Arminius, the Remonstrants themselves lowered him into the ground and covered him over with Pelagian sentiment. Even as we contemplate the more recent absence of Arminius in Wesleyan-Arminian theology, history teaches us that Arminius' actual teachings were already much obscured a century prior to Wesleyan-Arminian theology's coming into being. Twentieth-century Wesleyans lost Arminius from view, and we in this new century would be well served to recover the soteriological distinctives that he set out.

been replaced with God as the one who affirms our innate liberty to choose. (3) Sin as a fundamental debilitating factor that can be overcome only by gracious intervention has virtually disappeared from the theological horizon. Lip service is paid to sin's debilitating force, but soteriologically **ratio recta** reigns. (4) In a system where human beings are sovereign, any notion of a sovereign God that "predestines" (conditionally or otherwise) is ludicrous – never mentioned.