

From Toleration to Freedom of Conscience A Case Study of Early Arminianism¹

The roots of any debate about tolerance during the Arminian era of The Lowlands are to be sought and found in the Union of Utrecht (1579), Article 13: “Every particular person shall remain free in his [sic] religion, and no one will be pursued or investigated because of religion.² Even though these assertions applied explicitly to the province of Holland, the economic and political center, and they were not accepted and applied universally across the United Provinces,³ the Treaty of Utrecht consciously followed the principle of tolerance advocated in the Pacification of Ghent (1576), which did have comprehensive application across The Lowlands. For our purposes, it is important to underscore that the Union of Utrecht was fundamentally a document of pacification between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

A case in point to its success for pacification between warring Christian bodies is the tolerance exhibited in a few congregational settings. To understand this, we must be reminded how Church-State relations functioned in the United Netherlands. Rather than any strict separation of Church and State, the principle of Erastianism governed the relations and decision-making process – a form of governance that places ecclesial as well as civil issues under the oversight of public magistrates and officials. So, for example, when Arminius was called in 1587 by the church consistory to be a pastor in Amsterdam, this call had to be ratified by the Amsterdam magistrates. But Arminius and Amsterdam are not my case in point for tolerance. That honor falls to the city of Deventer in the province of Overijssel in the central region of The Netherlands, and the minister is Caspar Janszoon Coolhaes/Koolhaes (1536-1615).

¹ This essay was written for a largely North American audience, and presented at the Wesleyan Theological Society, at the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, MO, March 6-7, 2020.

² Cf. *Unie, Eeuwyich Verbond ende Eendracht* (Utrecht: Coenraet Hendricksz., 1579). Pamphlet, University of Utrecht, RARIORA.br.oct. 75. A modern Dutch edition may be found in Simon Groenveld, *Unie, Bestand, Vrede: Drie Fundamentele Wetten van de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009). Note: In the next few paragraphs, I am borrowing from my discussion of this in *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012): 46-48.

³ Cf. Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, “Dutch Contributions to Religious Tolerance,” *Church History* 9, no. 3 (2010):589-90.

Coolhaes converted to Protestantism in 1558 at the age of 24, after a brief span as a Carthusian monk in Koblenz, Germany. Deventer was Coolhaes' first appointment as a Protestant pastor. It is important to note that Deventer had come under the moderating influence of the Brethren of Common Life. Those moderate assumptions strongly influenced the incipient Protestantism in the central part of the country. Although controversies boiled in the Holland provinces, the heated theological controversies among Lutherans, Mennonites, and Calvinists were not front-and-center in the East central provinces. When riotous anti-Catholic protests began in other places, the magistrates of Deventer took steps to assure the relative tranquility of their parish.⁴ The magistrates exercised their Erastian power to take matters in hand to control conflicts between Catholics and those who had recently declared themselves Protestant. In steps that even today would be incredibly ecumenical, the Deventer magistrates assigned the former Roman Catholic church building, the Lieve-Vrouwekerk (The Church of our Lady) to the Protestants, with a three-fold stipulation: (1) The reformers would not damage the church or its contents (relics) in any way; (2) The Reformed congregation would not call a pastor without the approval of the magistrates; and (3) They would allow the Catholics to continue to celebrate Mass in the church. These measures were designed to prevent the congregation's falling into the hands of over-zealous reformers, and it must be concluded that the Deventer magistrates were largely successful in their design.

Coolhaes was the first minister to pastor under these conditions, and by all accounts he had a lively and thriving ministry in Deventer. It suited him perfectly, until the Spanish invaders forced him to flee to Germany. When he returned to Holland, the Leiden burgomasters exercised their Erastian authority in 1574 to invite him to pastor the Reformed Church there. This is where the story gets interesting for our narrative. At the Synod of Emden in 1571, an anti-Erastian declaration had been passed placing pastoral calls in the hands of local church consistories – following the pattern of Calvin's Geneva. When the Leiden burgomasters issued the call to Coolhaes, they were asserting their authority over against the synodal declaration – an edict that some referred to as a "Genevan

⁴ Cf. Gunter, *Arminius* (2012): 22-25.

Inquisition." When Coolhaes agreed to come to Leiden, it was evidently not clear to him that this implicit conflict might soon play itself out in real life.

Coolhaes' experience with Erastian structures in Deventer, combined with his ecumenical experience in that setting, had resulted in his becoming something of a "mild Protestant" – which is to say, not inclined to engage needlessly in ecclesial and theological controversy. If Coolhaes thought that Leiden could be another Deventer for him, he was severely disappointed. He definitely had the support of the Leiden burgomasters, but there was a strong contingency of more radical reformers in Leiden who reflected a decided proclivity for the Genevan polity that placed control in the hands of the church consistory. Exacerbating the situation considerably was the fact that his fellow minister in Leiden, Pieter Corneliszoon, was neither theologically mild nor Erastian in his inclinations. In Deventer the Roman Catholics had been allowed to celebrate Mass in the church, but in Leiden Corneliszoon asserted that even Protestants' saying evening prayers through the week and preaching funeral sermons and celebrating Christian festivals on days other than Sunday (even Christmas!) was Romish practice. To say the least, Coolhaes found these opinions unnecessarily radical and confrontational. The Magistrates sided with Coolhaes, but the local church consistory sided with Corneliszoon. Carl Bangs is insightful in this connection: "The Coolhaes affair was not a tempest in a teapot. It was an expression of fundamental cleavage in the Dutch Reformed Church"⁵ that would continue to reverberate in the Dutch Church for the next 100 years. The esteemed biographer of Coolhaes, H. C. Rogge described him as "the forerunner of Arminius."⁶

Coolhaes was condemned at the Synod of Middelburg in 1582 for his theological moderation and his advocacy of a broad view of tolerance, at which time Dirck Volckertzoon Coornhert (1522-1590) came to his defense.⁷ Previously, when the controversy broke out between the Leiden magistrates and the church consistory over the appointment of Coolhaes, Coornhert had sided with the

⁵ Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971): 49.

⁶ H. C. Rogge, "Koolhaes" in *Biographisch Woordenboek van Protestantische Godgeleerden in Nederland*. Eds. J.P. die Bie and J. Loosjes. 6 vols. (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1911 ff.) V:172-205.

⁷ Dirck Volckerts Coornhert, *Remonstratie of Vertoogh bij die van Leyden* (n.p., 1582).

magistrates of Leiden in favor of the appointment of Coolhaes.⁸ The fullest statement of Coornhert's beliefs about toleration, an apologetic for freedom of conscience in the full sense of the term, is to be found in a creative piece set out as an imaginary conversation.⁹ In this work, and in many other writings, Coornhert propounded the most powerful plea for a full toleration, insisting that a freedom of conscience necessarily requires a freedom of practice, and a free public expression of views. This is where Coornhert went farther than even the tolerant Dutch magistrates were willing to go. He eloquently presented the case for toleration, but he linked his plea for toleration with a strongly implicit rejection of the claims of the Reformed Church. Jonathan Israel has noted, "His assertion that 'what each Church holds to be the true doctrine is not Scripture itself but its interpretation of Scripture' spelt the inevitable failure of his cause and his continued isolation" from the public discourse and tolerance. The States of Holland were so far from agreeing with him that they condemned him by name as a "disturber of the peace."¹⁰ As we shall see, however, his was not a message that went forgotten. It continued to be alluded to in subsequent decades, and gradually, more and more intellectual figures in the northern Netherlands came to see matters in the same light as he had.

These thumbnail examples set the stage for my analysis of the move from tolerance to freedom of conscience in early Arminianism. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. is quoted as having said, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." That is one of my favorite quotations for people who blurt out things like: "Keep it simple stupid." More often than not, what they are pleading for is the avoidance of the difficult journey through the complexity that can lead to clarity on the other side. In these next few minutes, we are going to wade into the complexities of ecclesial polity during the Dutch Reformation. Along the way, we will encounter some very familiar and some not so familiar personalities.

In general terms, it was the Remonstrants (Arminians) that advocated Erastianism and a plea for toleration. The controversy was carried out in stages

⁸ Ibid., *Justificatie des Magistraets tot Leyden* (Leiden: 1579).

⁹ Ibid., *Synodus of Vander Conscientien Vrijheid* (Leiden: 1582).

¹⁰ Jonathan Israel, "The Intellectual Debate about Toleration in the Dutch Republic", p. 7 in *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden & New York: Brill, 1977).

between the juxtaposed “liberals” (*rekkelijk*) and “conservatives” (*precies*).¹¹ The liberal Arminians held for Erastianism, and the staunch Calvinist conservatives held for church consistory control. It is important for us to keep in view that all of these people were Calvinists in their theological suppositions. The connotation of conservative is also something of a conundrum. A conservative is by dictionary definition a person that conserves. The slogan, “We were here before you” (*Wij waren er eerder dan gij*), was an expression used by the Arminians across the land – a saying that had a two-fold meaning. We were here “first” meant that we, the more open-minded and tolerant, were living in The Lowlands before you arrived with your more closed-minded, less tolerant opinions. They were asserting, “We are actually the conserving party. You are the interlopers.” A more tolerant culture (adhering to the tolerance provided for in the Union of Utrecht) was widely accepted before you came on the scene. This was a not-so-veiled reference to the fact that Swiss immigrants from Calvin’s Geneva, and Dutch students returning after their theological studies there, brought with them a more narrow perspective.¹² So, the Dutch dispute had multiple dimensions: political governance, theology, and the influence of immigrants.

For the entire period of Arminius’s professorship at Leiden (1603-1609), and for the decade beyond, the controversy boiled. In the pulpits each Sunday, it was Arminians versus supralapsarian Calvinists, but the underlying earthquake was about freedom of religion and who would have the last say about how tolerant the Dutch Republic would be. In a late medieval version of a twitter tirade, a pamphlet propaganda war broke out with thousands of leaflets being distributed among the general population. Formal disagreements in the university halls and on the Senate floor in The Hague now broke out in the pubs and in the streets. Broad civil unrest threatened the relative tranquility of a Dutch society already on edge due to the ongoing war for independence against Spain.¹³

¹¹ Cf. T. G. Kootte, ed. *Rekkelijk of Precies. Remonstranten en contraremonstranten ten tijde van Maurits en Oldenbarneveldt*. (Utrecht: Rijksmuseum Het Catharijnenconvent, 1994).

¹² Cf. Kootte, p. 10.

¹³ Cf. Michael Abram Hakkenberg, “The Predestinarian Controversy in The Netherlands, 1600-1610” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1989).

A spirit of intolerance became so intense that in 1610, a representative group of Arminians requested and received permission to present a petition to the States of Holland that set out their opinions, which they wished to have the freedom to espouse without fear of reprisal. This “white paper” was presented to The Senate by 44 Arminian clergymen on January 14, 1610. This event, and the position paper presented, became known as the Remonstrance (*Remonstrantie* being a seventeenth-century word for a formal petition of grievance). Thereafter, the Arminians were known as Remonstrants. While the doctrinal portion of the Remonstrance, the famous “five points” that gave rise to the Calvinist five points, TULIP,¹⁴ dealt with matters of God, man [sic], and salvation, the underlying issue was the politico-ecclesiastical issue, the question of a free church subject only to Scripture, its integrity as such to be preserved by Christian magistrates.¹⁵ The core issue is toleration and freedom of religion. In my book, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments*, I have set out the details of the theological sides of the debate. In brief here, I now try to delineate some of the important dimensions of the political theory that served the conflicted opinions.

Leading personalities in this narrative are Prince Maurice, Simon Episcopius, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, and Hugo Grotius. Maurice was initially the military leader in the Dutch war against Spain, but he grew in public esteem due to military successes and was named Prince of the House of Orange. Maurice’s much better-known father, William of Orange / William the Silent, was a steady supporter of the moderate *rekkelijk* position. Prince Maurice started there but slowly but surely moved toward the *precisionists*. As Maurice moved to the conservative side, the Attorney General (*landsadvocaat*), Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, emerged as the spokesperson for the more tolerant *rekkelijk* Arminians. Throughout North Holland a strong majority of magistrates and a significant contingency of clergy were counted among the *rekkelijken*, and for decades they had shaped the contours of early Dutch Protestantism – political and religious. Tensions ran high about who came first and who got it right. These tensions played themselves out in a political strife between Prince Maurice and Attorney General Oldenbarnevelt. Might proved

¹⁴ Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints.

¹⁵ Bangs, *Arminius*, p. 318.

to be right in the practical sense when in 1618 Oldenbarnevelt was convicted of treason on trumped-up charges and publicly beheaded in the center of parliament (*Binnenhof*).

In 1614 the States of Holland passed a Remonstrant-friendly Act of Toleration that forbid ministers to preach on controversial subjects from their pulpits – a decree aimed squarely at hyper-Calvinists’ preaching on predestination. By 1616-17 the revolt among the predestinarians was so complete that on Sundays people walked out of town to Counter-Remonstrant congregations to worship. The most telling of these was when Prince Maurice joined the march to worship outside The Hague, in Rijswijk, to hear the preachments of the Counter-Remonstrant, Rev. Henricus Rosaeus. Magistrates in The Hague had dismissed Rosaeus from his ministry post when he had refused the sacrament to Remonstrant worshippers in his parish.¹⁶ It was a rather large group of Counter-Remonstrants that walked out of town each Sunday, and with this demonstration by the Prince in defiance of the 1614 declaration and Oldenbarnevelt’s enforcement thereof, the fate of Oldenbarnevelt was effectively sealed. His mistake may not have been treason in the legal sense, but it was a gross political miscalculation that proved to be fatal: He went so far as to make toleration more than a social principle, he made it a legal requirement and necessity. Ministers that refused to abide by the strictures not to preach on predestination were removed from their pulpits. City magistrates levied heavy fines on church consistories that supported their recalcitrant ministers. To enforce the toleration act, Oldenbarnevelt even went so far as to call in the militia to enforce toleration. This supreme irony led to the expression ***tolerantie met de knoet*** – which can be translated, “toleration by force” or “toleration under oppression.”¹⁷

Oldenbarnevelt was seventy-one years old, and he had served as attorney general for thirty-three years. To be sure, there was strife between the prince and

¹⁶ Cf. my essay, “The Absence of Arminius in Wesleyan-Arminian Theology,” in ***Reconsidering Arminius. Beyond the Reformed and Wesleyan Divide*** (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2014), esp. pp. 76-77. Rosaeus was dismissed from his church in The Hague when he refused to share The Lord’s Supper with Remonstrant parishioners.

¹⁷ Cf. Aldus M. Sommer, “Wij staan dichterbij Oldenbarnevelt dan we denken” in ***de Volkskrant*** (April 24, 2019). My gratitude to my former parishioner, Dr. Ria de Vries, for helping me unravel the translation of the enigmatic Dutch expression.

the attorney general, but this was more than personal bickering. Oldenbarnevelt's trial and execution were part and parcel of concerted attempts to remove Arminians and all who supported their moderate opinions on religious tolerance. Maurice determined to remove them from every level of government and position of influence in society. Oldenbarnevelt had become the embodiment of the **rekkelijk** (liberal) spirit, and since he has the power as Secretary of State to "enforce" toleration, he had to be eliminated. The cure for tolerant opinions was radical intolerance and violence.¹⁸ Historical honesty requires that we admit that the **lex talionis** was applied from both sides of the theological and political dispute.

In vitriolic public orations and published pamphlets, the Counter-Remonstrants held that the Remonstrant Arminians were not really a church at all, but rather a "political faction," who had deliberately divided the Church in order to weaken the United Provinces so that they could control the state. In the towns under their governance, the Counter-Remonstrant city councils cracked down with a vengeance. For example, in Leiden the fiercest persecutors in Holland were installed as magistrates – relentlessly fining, imprisoning, and banishing their own citizens in an unholy zeal to crush Arminian sentiments.¹⁹

In the mind of Prince Maurice (deeply concerned about the war with Spain), the public and ecclesial disputes threatened civil war. This fear across the republic provided political cover for the execution of Oldenbarnevelt, but Maurice was mistaken in his assumption that removing the Attorney General would alleviate the fear or end the conflict between the Remonstrants and the Counter-Remonstrants. The differences, political and religious, were too engrained in church life and culture. On both sides of the conflict, powerful spokespersons emerged. Even after the Arminians were declared heretics at the Synod of Dort in 1619, stripped of their pastoral assignments, and driven from The Lowlands to take refuge in Antwerp, Belgium and Friedrichstadt, Germany, the conflict raged on in great intensity. Among the leading Counter-Remonstrant controversialists were Adrien Smout and Jacob Trigland at Amsterdam, Henricus Rosaeus in The Hague, and Henricus Arnoldi

¹⁸ Cf. Gunter, *Arminius*, pp. 47-48.

¹⁹ Paschier de Fijne. *Eenige Tractaatjes*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: 1735-36) II:200-01. See the extended discussion in Jonathan Israel. *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall: 1477-1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 499-505, whose narrative I follow closely.

of Delft.²⁰ Arnoldi wrote the South Holland Synod's remonstrance of July, 1628, in which he petitioned the States of Holland to strictly enforce the 1619 ban on Remonstrant conventicles. He roundly denounced Remonstrantism as politically as well as theologically subversive – the very cause of disturbances in the body politic as reflected in riots in Rotterdam, Gouda, Delft, Warmond, Oestgeest, and Hazerwoude. He further accused Remonstrants of promoting theological heresy in the form of Pelagianism and Socinianism. In conclusion, he argues that toleration in the United Provinces had gone “too far” and should, as a matter of urgency to preserve the peace, be trimmed back.²¹

Here the finer points of the principle of tolerance espoused in Article 13 of the Union of Utrecht come into play. As we noted earlier, the Union of Utrecht had been interpreted in such a way as to provide peace between Protestants and Roman Catholics. It is striking that Arnoldi used Article 13 to expound his arguments for **intolerance**. Refusing the Remonstrants the freedom to gather, practice, publish, and teach, he insisted, conflicted in no way with the religious freedom enshrined in the Union of Utrecht. Prior to the Synod of Dort, Arminius, Grotius and Uytenbogaert had argued for toleration of belief in the assembled churches. The issue of whether the churches had the right to assemble was not in dispute. The right to assembly was simply assumed. Arnoldi contended that, because the political context had radically changed, the Arminian argument had also changed. In this contention, Arnoldi was correct. This was true in part because Simon Episcopius, the successor to Arminius as professor of theology at Leiden and the lead spokesperson for the Arminians at the Synod of Dort, was shifting the emphasis in his political polemic. The new political and ecclesial reality required an altered emphasis in the Arminian argument. All the Remonstrant leaders, save Grotius, participated in the new intellectual approach and openly campaigned in favor of their expanded views on tolerance. In essence, they were redefining tolerance to mean “personal freedom of conscience” in matters pertaining to religion.

²⁰ H. A. Enno van Gelder, *Getemperde Vrijheid* (Groningen: 1972), pp. 238-41.

²¹ W.P.C. Knuttel. *Acta der Particuliere Synoden van Zuid-Holland, 1621-1700*. 6 vols. (The Hague, 1908-16). I:239-45.

The subtle shift had far-reaching implications. Not only would there be toleration of difference among the various Reformed perspectives. The toleration of Roman Catholics, the Lutherans and Mennonites, and even Jews, should be allowed to believe and practice their faith according to the dictates of their conscience. This constitutes a subtle but important shift from Erastian toleration of difference toward the enshrinement of personal religious conscience as the norm. This is not the form of argument the new Arminianism took initially, but it was the direction we can discern in 20-20 hindsight. What the new Arminianism actually argued for was a broad umbrella of tolerance, and not merely a particular tolerance of Remonstrants.

Exiled in Paris, Hugo the Great (Grotius) was the exception to Arminian unanimity on redefining tolerance. Grotius persisted in adhering to the very limited concept which he had proclaimed before 1618, insisting that a public or state church, supreme over the religious life of the bulk of society, was absolutely necessary to the stability of society and the body politic.²² While he had conceded that the regime which he had served had “connived” at Lutheran and Mennonite conventicles, allowing them for practical reasons, he had denied that these Churches were tolerated on any basis of principle or that they should be so tolerated. For Grotius, the unchallengeable ascendancy of the public Church over society was more fundamental to its well-being than freedom for confessional minorities to organize or the individual to dissent openly. His ideal was an internally tolerant state Church, doctrinally soft-centered. Tolerate differences in theological opinion. He was resolutely opposed to the forcing of the individual conscience, but he favored an institutionally powerful state Church that embraced the great majority of society. Thus, Grotius’ toleration was little more than an acceptance of theological disparities, as far as practicable, within the public Church. The challenge of his position came in the discernment of particularities. Who decides what is the “great majority of society,” and who discerns “what is practicable”? For example, Grotius takes the view that it is right for a Christian society to tolerate Jews, but he opposed granting the full freedom of worship to them. He even favored harsh restrictions to ensure that Jews did not publicize their faith, convert Christians, or

²² See the discussion in Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, pp 500f, citing Hugo Grotius, *Oratie van Hugo de Groot . . . ghedaen inde vergaderinghe den 36 raden der stad Amsterdam* (Enkhuizen: 1622). P. 52f.

polemicalize against Christianity.²³ In the end, Grotius' argument proved unconvincing to the Arminians after Dort, especially Episcopius.

During the 1620's – 1630's, Episcopius developed a full-fledged doctrine of human freedom and toleration, breaking with the assumptions of his Arminian predecessors. He argued for unrestricted freedom of practice, as well as conscience, for all Churches and individuals – accepting fully the validity of religious and human belief.²⁴ Episcopius' wider view of freedom and tolerance, even extending to the individual conscience, continued in the work of Philip of Limborch.²⁵ He and John Locke, in exile from England for his teachings, became friends in Amsterdam where Limborch was professor of at the Remonstrant Faculty of Theology. The Remonstrant Seminary had been established there in 1634 and moved to Leiden in 1872.²⁶ Limborch convinced Locke to temporarily set aside his *Essay on Human Understanding* to concentrate on the topic that concerned both of them: toleration.²⁷ This led to Locke's writing *A Letter Concerning Toleration* in 1685-86, first published in 1689. The letter opened with the salutation "Honored Sir," that honored gentleman most certainly being Limborch, who published Locke's letter without his knowledge.

Discussion of this friendship takes us beyond the scope of this essay, but it is clear that Locke and Limborch were in agreement about the urgency of addressing intolerance, as Locke wrote to Limborch: "The care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force: but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing

²³ Hugo Grotius, *Remonstrantie nopen de ordre dije in de landen van Hollandt ende Westvrieslandt dijent gestelt op de joden*. Ed. J. Meier (Amsterdam: 1949), pp. 112-16.

²⁴ D. Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration* (Cambridge: University Press, 1938), pp. 103-05.

²⁵ Episcopius transformed Arminius's concept of freedom to accept salvation as solely and completely by prevenient grace, a will in bondage to sin, set free purely by grace prevenient, into free will as a human endowment granted to all humanity. See my discussion in "From Arminius (D. 1609) to the Synod of Dort (1618-19)," in Robert Webster, ed., *Perfecting Perfection. Essays in Honor of Henry D. Rack* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), esp. pp. 23-27.

²⁶ The Remonstrants moved the seminary to the Vrije Universiteit [Free University of] Amsterdam on January 1, 2013, when the Leiden Faculty of Theology, due to the formation of the Protestant Theological University that chose to be located in Amsterdam and Groningen, no longer facilitated a theological study in preparation for Christian ministry. Leiden University continues with its Department of Religious Studies. A special word of thanks to Elza Kuijk MA at the Vrije Universiteit for verifying the official date in documents at the Free University.

²⁷ Jeremy D. Bangs, "Dutch Contributions to Religious Tolerance," p. 610.

can be acceptable to God.”²⁸ Locke and Limborch agreed (with Simon Episcopius) that Christians largely agree on the essentials of their faith and that most disputes are largely about *non necessaria* – over which consensus is neither needed nor possible. Indeed, a wide variety of views may legitimately be derived from Scripture, which means that diversity of belief is not harmful, but rather contain a certain value and validity: “In God’s eyes, each strand comprises fragments of truth.” Consequently, the views of every individual about Scripture ought to have validity in the eyes of other individuals, Churches, and the State.²⁹ Episcopius thus elevated disparity in interpretation to a positive good. In the final analysis, Episcopius’ toleration had as much to do with freedom of religious conscience for the individual as it does with the strictures against coercion within any given Church. His is more than a rejection of intolerance; it is, in the final analysis, an affirmation of freedom of the individual conscience.

So, we have reviewed a political and ecclesial evolution from intolerance, to mere tolerance to limited tolerance to a broadly defined toleration that includes freedom of conscience. There are many streams of influence that fed into this progression. I have tried to make the case that this should be viewed as progress, and that the early Arminians were leaders in this progression. By 1700, Western Europe was leaning into The Enlightenment, and freedom of religion without fear of coercion or retribution was a major factor. The early Arminians – from Arminius to Limborch – were vital voices. At the risk of oversimplification, I venture to assert that Arminius and his early descendants not only bequeathed to us a soteriology that affirmed gracious freedom, they bequeathed to us as well a political theory that affirmed a freedom of conscience to practice that religion. I am not a constitutional scholar, but I read recently that in an early version of the US Constitution, the words tolerance and toleration of religious practices were scratched out, and in its place were written, “Freedom of Religion.” It was for this very thing that the early Arminians contended.

²⁸ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, (www.thefederalistpapersproject.org): 5

²⁹ Philippus van Limborch, “Voor-reden to John Hales and Walter Balcanquel” in *Korte Historie van het Synode van Dordrecht* (The Hague: 1671), pp. 2-4.