

A Calvinist Country?

Look at any Dutch newspaper and you get the distinct impression that the Netherlands is a Calvinist country – or used to be, at any rate. Dutch vices like frugality and moderation are attributed to the country's supposedly Calvinist nature. For many people Calvinism is inextricably bound up with Dutch history and culture, and the commemoration of Calvin's five hundredth birthday in 2009 may well confirm that impression. When she said '*There's a little bit of Calvin in all of us*', the maker of the glossy personality magazine *Calvijn* ('*about the state of Dutch Calvinism today*') articulated the feeling that Calvin has left deep footprints running through the Dutch landscape.

If the Netherlands has gained the reputation of being a Calvinist country, it's perfectly understandable. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the still young Republic presented itself to its neighbours as a Reformed country. After the French period, and after Belgium had separated itself from the Netherlands, Dutch historians (most of them Protestant) began looking for a new national identity. They found it in the struggle for independence from Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Valiant Calvinists, so they said, under the command of William of Orange – the Father of the Country, the new David – had freed themselves from the Spanish yoke. The idea that Calvinism laid the groundwork for Dutch identity was forcefully propagated by the principal founder of neo-Calvinism: Abraham Kuyper. According to Kuyper, the Netherlands had Calvinism to thank for its freedom. In his view, moreover, Calvinism was the best line of defence against tyranny and against the social disruption of the French Revolution.

The historical reality was different. It wasn't Calvinism that was the most significant religious feature of the Low Countries following the Reformation, but religious diversity. During the Reformation period, a variety of new schools of Christian thought took root in the Low Countries. Of all these movements, Calvinism – more properly Reformed Protestantism – ultimately became the most important. The Reformed Church became the church of privilege. The other churches –

the Lutherans and the Anabaptists – were tolerated. But as all these new Protestant denominations gained a foothold in the young Republic, the Catholic Church simply carried on as usual. Although it found itself in an unenviable position, certainly when compared with the Reformed Church, it succeeded in remaining a large and vigorous faith community.

The various church groups influenced each other. And this religious diversity gave rise to an ecclesiastical market. The different churches competed against each other in order to enlist members. The Reformed Church, thanks to its privileged position, clearly had it much easier than the other churches. As the competitive battle went on, the churches marked out their boundaries, adopted powerful features from each other and aroused particular virtues in each other. It is my belief that this competitive struggle had a greater influence both on the churches and on the Dutch religious landscape than the mere presence of Calvinism. So before anything else I'd like to take a look at this competition between the churches.

In the competition that flared up during the Reformation, the various churches tried to outdo each other when it came to virtue, attempted to restrict cross-border traffic and did their very best to arm their flocks with knowledge of the truth of their own faith. In their lively polemics, each of the churches claimed that its believers led exemplary lives. The religious leaders were absolutely convinced that a church's attractive power could be either increased or reduced by its believers' lifestyle. For this reason, pastors enjoined their flocks to live moderate and sober lives and to live together peacefully within the church community.

To prevent their believers from developing sympathetic leanings for a rival church, the church leaders attempted to curb cross-border traffic. Visiting another denomination was 'not done', and all denominations condemned mixed marriages. The church leaders were kept busy marking out well-defined borders so their own group would remain clearly delineated.

The different churches 'armed' their faithful by keeping them well informed. For instance, the Catholic Church in the Republic put a lot of emphasis on knowing the Bible, so their followers would not find them-

selves at a loss for words when conversing with their Reformed neighbours. Reformed believers were taught Reformed doctrine during catechetical sermons on Sunday afternoons and were instructed in the competition's errors and failings. Finally, prospective ministers and priests were taught to debate from both the Catholic and the Reformed side. It was important for them to know the arguments for and against their own church and to learn how to use them.

In short, because of the Republic's religious market, the various churches placed great emphasis on acquiring knowledge, guarding their borders and making sure their parishioners led respectable lives. The one thing they were all agreed on was the value of frugality, knowledge and denominational purity within the family. The competitive battle they were fighting caused them to strengthen these qualities among themselves. This inter-faith competition reinforced the churches' profiles, kindled a desire for frugality and moderation and stimulated appreciation of an intellectual knowledge of the faith.

Although many of the Dutch traits that are now regarded as typically Calvinist seem to me more like a pattern of commonly held norms and values, I would still (with the requisite reservations) like to mention two other elements that have contributed to forming the Dutch culture.

Calvinism was able to take root in the Netherlands because of its view of government. Calvinists expected a great deal from their government, but they did not grant it unlimited authority. This put the Calvinists in a moderate position. Anabaptists in general took a negative view of the government, and because of this they were never able to formulate a positive idea of what they expected from government, nor to take an active part in it. Lutherans were by definition obedient to the government and thereby ruled themselves out: they could not organise themselves under a Catholic authority. Calvinists taught that in principle the government was God's handmaid, so they did all they could to convert it. If the government turned against them, however, and trampled justice underfoot, a citizen had the right to rise up in revolt. This enabled Calvinists to be good citizens as well as rebels, if need

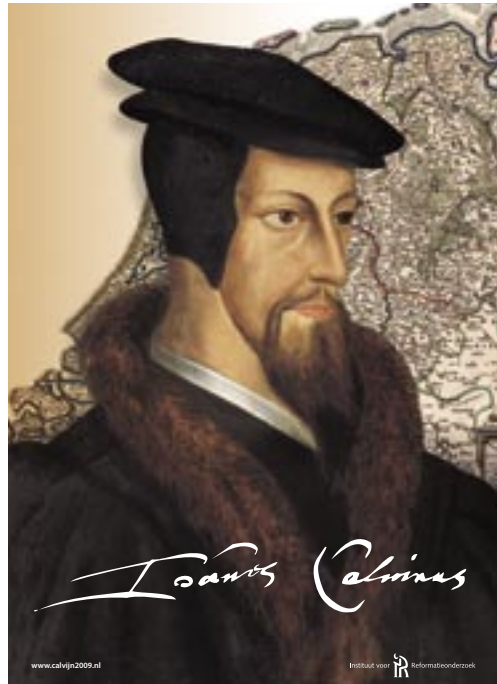


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be. During the Second World War this tense relationship with government authority was the seed that gave rise to discussions on whether the German authority was lawful or not; and once that question had been answered with a 'no', it led to the exceptionally high proportion of Calvinists in the Resistance.

What went for the Calvinist attitude to the government also went for the Calvinist attitude to the world in general. There, too, the relationship was tense. Calvinism gave daily life an even stronger religious colour than the Catholic tradition had done. One pursued one's vocation not in a monastery but in an ordinary job. According to Calvinist theory, a carpenter was no less 'called' than a clergyman. This imparted new value to everyday life. Yet the Calvinist regard for everyday life was not unreservedly positive. For the world was sinful. It had been corrupted by the Fall. So while the

world was the place where the believer had to live his life, it was also a place full of danger. The ideal believer, therefore, was 'in the world but not of it'. This tense relationship had the potential to be an engine of Calvinist idealism. After all, the Calvinist was called to act in and for this corrupted world. The sinful world had to become the Kingdom of Christ. This conviction turned some believers into campaigners for world improvement, particularly in the 1970s and '80s.

To summarise: Calvinism was an important feature in the Dutch landscape, but the same was true of other Christian persuasions. On a number of points, such as the tense relationship towards the government and an activist desire to improve the world, we may perhaps speak of a Calvinist influence. More important than Calvinism in the shaping of Dutch culture, however, was the country's religious diversity.

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