

Compassionate Calvinism

In a world before the separation of church and state, New Amsterdam's courts of law had the delicate task of balancing the secular and the sacred.

THERE ARE TWO POPULAR—AND SEEMINGLY CONTRADICTORY—VIEWS OF THE NEW NETHERLAND colony: One that the colony was built on greed, and religion was only an afterthought; the other that it was a society in which zealous Calvinists attempted to impose their religion on an unruly citizenry.

Like all stereotypes, these are oversimplifications that each contain some truth. In fact, church and state supported each other's shared ambition to develop an orderly society based on biblical precepts. The printed records of New Netherland make this relationship between church and state very clear. From its opening prayer in 1653, for instance, to the oath of its officials, to its daily dealings with the people, the records of the Court of Burgomasters and Schepens (an inferior court of justice administered by a schout [sheriff], two burgomasters [mayors], and five schepens [magistrates], with appeal to the superior court, the Director-General of the colony and his council) reveal that religion was no afterthought in this community. It was an integral part of the very warp and woof of everyday life.

BY FIRTH HARING FABEND



Upon taking office, the civil officials of the Court of Burgomasters and Schepens took an oath to protect the “pure and true Christian Religion as taught in the Netherland Churches conformably to the Word of God and the order of the Synod of Dordrecht” of 1619.

The prayer with which the court opened its first session is a succinct distillation of Reformed theology as found in the ubiquitous Heidelberg Catechism, one of the six doctrinal standards of the Reformed Dutch Church (the others being the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort).

The prayer begins by invoking an Almighty and Triune God: God of Gods, Lord of Lords, Host of Hosts, and it goes on to acknowledge God as the merciful father in heaven to whom the officials owe thanks for creating them, receiving them in Christ as allies, and making them the rulers in New Netherland — even though they are mere miserable and undeserving mortals unfit to carry out their charge unless He assists them.

An important scholar has described the Heidelberg Catechism as “intensely Calvinistic.” To the modern mind, this phrase evokes images of zealotry, the controversial ideas of predestination and limited atonement, fire and brimstone, and an insistence on moral perfection. But Calvinism has another side to it. We have heard of compassionate conservatism; New Netherland had what might be called compassionate Calvinism, based on a belief that a moral society centered around a core of biblical wisdom was the best society. As expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism, it has a charitable, forgiving, even lenient side, qualities that explain why this little work, composed in 1563, was so popular for so long among Reformed clergy and laity alike.

The “Irenic” or conciliatory tone of the Heidelberg Catechism has often been commented upon. The same tone also often underlies the actions of the New Amsterdam Court of Burgomasters and Schepens as it sought to bring unity and order out of an often seemingly chaotic community. Both church and state, in this

trading community on a wild frontier, were hard put to impose standards of order and propriety on the inhabitants, and the records of the court reveal the government’s endless attempts to deal with its Sabbath-breaking, hard-drinking, brawling, cheating, adulterous, and thieving citizens. This is the side of New Amsterdam that has often been played up by historians, as has the image of a harsh Calvinism intent on spoiling the people’s fun and forcing them into rigid molds of good behavior (see “The Sabbath Keeper,” page 20). It is true that for the worst offenders sentencing was Draconian, although this was so mainly of sentences handed down under Director-Generals Willem Kieft and Peter Stuyvesant, not of the Court of Burgomasters and Schepens. Even council sentences were often softened or retracted at the last minute.

The Court of Burgomasters and Schepens bent over backward to be patient, lenient, just, and fair. It was ever hopeful of reconciliation, ever putting its faith in arbitration over confrontation, always helpful to the helpless, and sometimes willing to discount or even overlook the deficiencies of those who came before it. The forbearing behavior of the magistrates suggests that these government officials were attempting to practice the gentler side of Dutch Calvinist doctrine as found in the little catechism with which they were so familiar.

The greatest number of cases coming before the Court of Burgomasters and Schepens fell into three categories: those involving matters of credit and debt, misunderstandings over contract terms, and cases of slander and insult. The Burgomasters and Schepens decided many cases on the merits, once they had examined the facts, but if the facts were obscure they almost invariably appointed two arbitrators to determine the outcome, or a pair of experts to go out and view a disputed boundary or complaints of shoddy work-

manship or spoiled produce. Many litigants came to agreement on their own, declaring in public that “having become reconciled, they will remain good friends henceforth.” Or they “will no longer remember their foregoing dispute, and they settle with each other equitably and make payment.” If a plaintiff’s property was restored, she was “willing to forgive the defendant, and never to trouble her again” — outcomes that echo the tone of conciliation and concord valued by the court.

The court was often patient, allowing weeks and even months for a debtor to pay what he owed, giving parties “time to think the matter over,” urging litigants to “agree together as friends” until the defendant could scrape his funds together. And it was lenient. One defendant, though guilty, was “allowed to pursue his business as before, inasmuch as he is burthened with a houseful of children.” They “agree to wink at” an old man’s inability to pay his fees, to wait for another man’s payment, to reduce the amount another must pay for his fire-bucket dues, and to excuse another who finds it difficult to pay his rattle-watch dues, “as he has not so much.” A woman who could not pay her rattle-watch dues was promised “that she should not be spoken to about it very soon.” One guilty party “shall, for this time,” be excused from banishment, provided he asked the court’s pardon and promised to behave himself.

It is clear that, although they did not spell it out as such, underlying the decisions of the Court of Burgomasters and Schepens was a foundation of Christian precepts: love your neighbor, be peaceable, turn the other cheek, forgive and forget, show mercy. And just as they understood that church and state worked hand in hand to achieve these goals, so they also believed that that “justice [which] is the foundation of the republic” was based on

The Court of Burgomasters and Schepens bent over backward to be patient, lenient, and fair.

"divine and human law," and that the "law of God was the general basis of the law."

The society they hoped to create in New Netherland in the image of the fatherland was doomed. A letter of February 1664 from the burgomasters and schepens to the Director-General and Council puts the society they had served since the court's inception eleven years earlier in poignant perspective. Begging for help in fortifying New Amsterdam against the English, they wrote: "This capital, where your Honours' good and faithful inhabitants, mostly Dutchmen, have at their own expense built so many fine houses ... should be properly fortified ... [so] that it might cause malevolent neighbours to fear it." If it were properly fortified, they go on, the city could be a place where its 10,000 inhabitants might grow into a great people, and a place that in time and with God's blessing "might even become a place of refuge, if our Netherlands should be visited by cruel wars." It might even become the "granary for our Fatherland in case of failure of the Eastern crops or a prohibition of trade by the Northern kings and princes," and the "staple of commerce for our Fatherland." A few months later, fortifications unbuilt, the little colony fell to the English without a shot being fired.

The vision of New Netherland as a refuge in time of war or economic crisis at home, a breadbasket, an Edenic land capable of supplying the fatherland with manna in its time of need, was in line with the other religious metaphors its leaders used to paint it as a just society based on God's word. Religion was no afterthought in New Netherland. It was woven into the civic fabric and inseparable from it.

Firth Haring Fabend is an independent historian with a Ph.D. from New York University. She is the author of Zion on the Hudson: Dutch New York and New Jersey in the Age of Revivals (Rutgers University Press, 2000).



The Quarreling Domine

The second domine (pastor) to officiate in the province of New Netherlands, Reverend Everardus Bogardus arrived at New Amsterdam in April 1633 on the same ship with the new Director-General Wouter van Twiller. Before the Reformed Church inside the fort was built, he preached to the citizens of the town in a large, barnlike building on t'Water (Pearl) Street. In 1638 Bogardus married Anneke Jans, a widow with four children and a 162-acre farm on the Hudson or North River.

Bogardus had many quarrels with the leaders of New Amsterdam, and often denounced them from his pulpit. In return, the magistrates charged him with drunkenness, meddling in the affairs of others, and using bad language. In September 1647, leaving his wife and children behind, Bogardus sailed on the *Princess* to return to Holland and defend himself against the charges that had been brought against him. He never made it. The *Princess* was wrecked in a storm, and Bogardus was drowned.