

Letter from Oldebarnevelt attempting a reconciliation with Maurice of Nassau during the Remonstrant and Contra-Remonstrant dispute, 1618

Introduction: While the Twelve Year Truce gave the Republic a respite from the war with Spain, it ushered in a period of intense political conflict at home. One of the sources of conflict between 1609 and 1619 was a fundamental religious disagreement among Calvinists. The Armenians, known as the Remonstrants, and the Gomarians, known as the Contra-Remonstrants, not only had different theological views, but also battled politically about whether the state should serve as an enforcer for a Calvinist state religion. The Armenians were followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1690), who studied theology at the University of Leiden and in Germany. After serving as a Calvinist pastor in Amsterdam, he was appointed to the Theological Faculty at Leiden in 1603. Although Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641), a Professor of Theology at Leiden who had approved the appointment of Arminius, soon fell out with Arminius about a number of important Calvinist theological issues, especially those rooted in their different understanding of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Arminius took a more tolerant Erasmian view and Gomarus insisted on a stricter interpretation. Arminius sought to make election for salvation dependent upon faith, whilst Gomarus insisted on absolute predestination as the rule of faith, according to which the whole Scriptures should be interpreted. In 1604 their theological disputes became a public debate within the University and soon expanded to a war of pamphlets and sermons throughout the Republic. The Armenians sought to reduce the prescriptions of doctrinal orthodoxy within the Calvinist Church and turned to the state to defend their rights to express their views within the ecclesiastical government of the Church. They assumed that the state had the right and duty, as both late medieval Catholic and Protestant princes had argued, to oversee the Church. The Gomarians, on the other hand argued that the state had both the right and sacred duty to defend the Calvinist Church, which they saw as having pre-eminence over the state. They viewed the role of the Church as the ultimate authority to teach its doctrine and called upon the state to repress alternative theological doctrines and religions. Although the disagreements between the two sides were complex, it is fair to say that the Armenian views, in the tradition of Erasmus, were rooted in a greater respect for tolerance in religious matters.

In 1610, the Armenians presented a Remonstrance, or petition, to the political assembly of the States of Holland, in which they explained their views on predestination and asked the state to enforce a greater tolerance for their views within the Calvinist Church. The Gomarists, who now called themselves the Contra-Remonstrants, mounted a fierce opposition to the petition. The two groups also fought about who should control the Church buildings, since they technically all belonged to the towns and villages after they had been expropriated from the Catholic Church. Both sides appealed to political factions in support of their cause. The Remonstrants found support from the States of Holland and its political leader, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt as well as his young assistant, Hugo Grotius. The Prince Maurice of Nassau, who had little interest in theology, had become impatient with the political power of Oldenbarnevelt in Holland, and was frustrated over his loss of power during the truce with Spain, supported the Contra-Remonstrants.

On August 29, 1618, Maurice arrested Oldenbarnevelt, Grotius and several other Remonstrant leaders. After a contentious trial, the Remonstrant leaders were found guilty.

Oldenbarnevelt was convicted of high treason and beheaded on May 13, 1619, in The Hague. The others were sentenced to life imprisonment (although Grotius later managed a famous escape in a book chest). Also in May of 1619, the States of Holland authorized the Calvinist Church to hold a Synod at Dordrecht to decide the theological issues in dispute. The Contra-Remonstrants condemned the Remonstrants as heretics. While some Remonstrants left the official Calvinist Church, the Contra-Remonstrants were unable to convince the political authorities to serve as their enforcers and prevent the Remonstrants from forming their own Churches. Tensions between the strict and the more latitudinarian Calvinists, and its political implications, continued to plague the Republic for several generations.

On April 24, 1608, just before his arrest, Johan Oldenbarnevelt attempted a reconciliation with this letter to Maurice of Nassau, A. J. Veenendaal, ed., *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt: Bescheiden*, Vol. III (The Hague, 1967), pp. 381-88, translated from Dutch by Herbert H. Rowen, ed., *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972), pp.116-125.

Most Serene and High-Born Prince, Gracious Lord, Gracious Prince and Lord,
I observe with the most profound vexation that Your Excellency has become totally estranged from me. I fear that the things first said by some churchmen some six months ago and then repeated by several politicians, to the effect that Your Excellency had become angry with me, must be true, although I could not believe It until now. Nevertheless, in all sincerity and honesty, I affirm that I do not know when I gave reason for such a change of heart. I have always been and still am Your Excellency's most faithful servant, and with God's grace I hope to die as such. Ten years ago, when we were negotiating for a peace or a truce, I did indeed remark the beginnings of such a change. May Your Excellency be so kind as to recall, however, that I affirmed to you then that my honest and sincere purpose in these negotiations was to serve and protect the country, Your Excellency, and all its good people, and that nonetheless I offered Your Excellency not only to resign all my offices but even to leave the country rather than to remain in office and in the country with Your Excellency's displeasure. This truce [of 1609-1621], concluded with Your Excellency's approval, won his satisfaction because it enabled the affairs of Your Excellency, your notable house, and you beloved brothers and sisters to be put in order. During the time it has been in force, this truce has brought the country prosperity, increased revenues, and won for it a lofty and admirable reputation among the greatest potentates, republics, and Cities not only throughout Christendom and even among this country's enemies, but also in other parts of the world as well. Your Excellency's most admirable reputation was

enhanced and increased by the truce, as is well known and as has been irrefutably demonstrated by the excellent alliances made after the truce with various potentates and republics. These ties have in their turn brought the friendship, counsel, and assistance of other great potentates and republics to this country at various times. The truce also enabled us to slow and halt the accumulation of debts, which formed a heavy burden upon the country and the provinces; the admiralty boards have paid off debts of about 2,800,000 guilders which they owed in 1609, while before the truce these debts had to be increased every year by borrowing at interest. In addition, this country has paid off its great debts to its neighbors and has repossessed the cities and forts which had been given in pledge. It became very apparent, therefore, that this country would have a lasting, desirable, firm, and assured position. It would bring Your Excellency and every member of his most excellent house great praise, honor, reputation, and advantage, for they are the greatest possessors of high offices, dignities, honorable titles, rights, and property in the country.

Two problems have troubled the country, however. The first was the dispute raised by the States of Zeeland several years before the truce and continued for many years afterwards over paying its share of the national budget. At times it held back for entire years and has persistently raised objections and refused to give its approval until the desired reduction was granted on several occasions by decisions of Your Excellency and the Council of State.

The second problem was the disputes over doctrine and authority in religion. These already existed in the country when the war first began but they became more frequent a few years before the truce, involving Professors Gomarus and Arminius of the University of Leiden and their respective adherents. Before and after the conclusion of the truce, my Lords the States of Holland and West Friesland, and I as their servant, worked to bring these quarrels to an end by all proper means. However, as a result of the rigorous censorship and the suspension of various preachers from their religious duties, with consequent complaints, the difficulties came out into the public more and more. At first we had hoped that we could settle this conflict by means of a compromise to be arranged by a legal and impartial assembly of the province of Holland and West Friesland, but it could not be done because some of the churchmen exerted

such influence upon the government in a few cities that these refused to permit the States of Holland and West Friesland who are the lawful sovereigns of this province, either to convene or direct or approve the activities of such an assembly. Yet this is a right which was used by the first Christian emperors and during the last century has been and is being employed by all the kings, imperial electors and princes, counts, lords and all the governors of great and small republics and free cities who have reformed religion and purged it of the superstitions, heresies, and tyrannies of Popery.

For this reason the States were compelled to issue a provisional order that those who could not in good conscience teach, hold, or believe the doctrine of predestination or its corollaries, except as these were held by the Remonstrants, should no longer be molested, prevented from holding services, or interfered with in their performance, while those who wished to teach or hold a stricter and different position remained free to do so. Both sides were then heard at great length, and the provisional order was repeatedly reaffirmed. His Royal Majesty of Great Britain also repeatedly approved the order, confirming it with good, pertinent, and salutary arguments.

Similarly, many preachers of Contra-Remonstrant feelings also approved this provisional order, for they were well aware from the beginning of the war that this attitude existed; It was publicly tolerated in many teachers and members of the church, not only by the government but also by the churchmen who held other opinions. The States then gave repeated orders to practice mutual Christian tolerance, for these reasons and so that no split resulting from these differences of opinion would be permitted or tolerated. Your Excellency knows that I spoke of this to him many times, exhorting him that it was his duty to support my Lords the States in this matter, and that I had specific instructions and obligations to undertake these offices. Your Excellency, saying that he wished to remain neutral in this affair, thereupon called upon me to avoid having him subjected to public exhortations. I then considered that Your Excellency might have in mind the opinions of the States of other provinces of which he was governor, and also recalled that Your Excellency for many years had always listened, while these questions were in debate, to the sermons of Uytendogaert and La Haye [preachers in the Walloon church in The Hague and to no one else, and had always taken Holy Communion with them, and also that Your Excellency,

many years after he had publicly declared that he held the opinions of the Remonstrants in the five points concerning the doctrine of predestination and its consequences, had of his own initiative employed Uytenbogaert in his armies before Jülich and Rees in the years 1610 and 1614, and in the year 1614 had written letters to the magistrates of the city of Utrecht, who had the right to call him back to their own service, strongly requesting that they permit him to remain here in the service of and to the satisfaction of Your Excellency and the churches. Therefore Your Excellency, unless I am mistaken, cannot find it strange that I could not believe that, in opposition to the resolution of the States, he wished to favor and advance this split, with the manifest detriment to the position of the country which would result from harmful divisions within the church, whose members form the best and most trustworthy party in the country, and from the dissatisfaction of many thousands of the oldest and most tested patriots as well as of most of the rulers in many very good towns.

But when all orders for the prevention of a split were rejected here and disruption took place, even in Your Excellency's presence, as he knows, I worked on measures to achieve orderly practices with the least harm to the country, and I therefore proposed that the church [the Kloosterkerk] be designated as a foreign church, as indeed is done in other countries, that is, in lands where Dutch, French, and Italian churches exist which maintain their special order. But I received no support, so that the assembly of the States of Holland and West Friesland met for more than five months in the hope of achieving a settlement, but every way was rejected, there was no willingness to take steps against seditious preaching, writing, and speech, or against violence employed against the government and council in Oudewater, which caused fears in other towns that they would be treated in the same way. Certain reports came in that Your Excellency had given orders to some captains that they should not trouble him or even approach him with matters arising out of the religious disputes. But, in accordance with all reason of state, it must be agreed that the States, having met and debated repeatedly on this matter and having come to a decision by a majority of votes, and not wishing to remain any longer in session, finally had to decree what it had already repeatedly approved by majority vote. Otherwise, as many deputies of the cities said and protested repeatedly, the assembly would have had to recess

without being able to meet again so long as a few towns could delay or prevent a decision upon the resolutions.

When this resolution [ion August 4, 1617] was adopted and presented to Your Excellency by members from the nobles and the towns, Your Excellency was requested to inform them of any point to which he might have objections, and they would give a good explanation of it to him and every reasonable satisfaction. Your Excellency did display some displeasure, but it was considered to be directed at the stubbornness of the deputies of the towns which for five whole months had refused to concur with the proposal of the majority. I made strong efforts to keep the assembly in session, but the deputies of the towns, fatigued by what had happened, were not to be persuaded. It is true that three days after the assembly recessed, Your Excellency revealed to me what had been done in Den Briel by a committee of the States and the magistrates of the town, but I asked Your Excellency to wait for the return of the committee and to believe their report, for they were representatives of the public authority and very good patriots. At that time I also proposed to Your Excellency that he lend his hand to enforcement of the resolution which had been adopted with the greatest discretion and without any offense to Your Excellency's meritorious reputation praying that we might go ahead in unity and good understanding

I spoke to Your Excellency twice again before my departure, the last time on Saturday before I left for Vianen the next Monday (where I had already told Your Excellency that I was obliged to go): On that same day I suggested a compromise of the whole affair to Your Excellency and offered all my good offices. Your Excellency seemed favorable, asking if a proposal for a compromise would be acceptable. I replied that it was certain that it would be accepted. At the same time I offered, if our Excellency considered that I was hostile to his good intentions, to resign all my offices and take up residence outside of Holland rather than remain here in office with the displeasure of Your Excellency, and asked that in such an event Your Excellency lend me his hand in obtaining an honorable release from My Lords the States. But Your Excellency declared that you could not at all approve it and gave me hope that some means of compromise would be proposed.

I then went to Vianen, being weak and in bad health. I remained there for twelve days, continuing in the same weakness; and therefore I went to Utrecht to consult Dr. Sael, my old

friend. I hoped to recover and to spend my seventieth birthday, which was September 24 according to the new style, in my birthplace, the city of Amersfoort, but my continued illness prevented my departure. I remained therefore in Utrecht for some six weeks in the hands of this doctor without hearing the slightest word about any proposal for compromise, but instead that it had been decided by a majority vote, which had never been done before, and despite the resolutions of the States of Holland and West Friesland, the States of Utrecht and the States of Overijssel, to bring the religious disputes before the assembly of the States General which was a direct infraction of the Union of Utrecht and various other treaties, and also before synod, to which the name of national was given. I also heard that in the meanwhile every effort was being made to discredit and bring into the scorn and hatred of the common people all those who tried to speak on behalf of the rights of the provinces. Among these I especially was put forward; a hundred lies, falsehoods, and calumnies against me were spread by means of squibs, seditious libels, and otherwise. One pretext for them was my absence from The Hague, so that I was compelled to return here from Utrecht.

Since then I have made my greeting to Your Excellency several times to offer my services in promoting the necessary settlement of all the misunderstandings. I also asked Your Excellency and the high-born Count William Louis, count of Nassau, Governor of Friesland, Groningen and Ommelanden, etc., to make your proposals for some effective means to achieve this. I demonstrated that the pressure for holding a national synod was a violation of the rights of the provinces, of the Union of Utrecht, and of other treaties and of precedent, so that it would probably bring no advantage but rather great difficulties. I have not received any proposal whatsoever.

Meanwhile I made various proposals both in the assembly of the States of Holland and West Friesland and to Your Excellency and His Grace for I was always quite certain, as I am now, that the nobles and the regents of the towns of Holland and West Friesland who are unable to accept what the others consider to be the highest and most necessary law of the country, confirmed by all treaties, are friends neither of Spain nor of Popery but sincere, trustworthy, and tried friends of the liberties and the laws of the fatherland as a whole and of the provinces and cities individually, that they hold in sincere affection the most laudable merits of Your

Excellency's father of blessed memory and of Your Excellency himself and are greatly concerned to maintain and enhance his praiseworthy reputation and authority to the advantage of the state and himself; and that they are for the most part sincere adherents of the true and pure religion, reformed according to God's Holy Word, and of lawful regulations .to maintain and protect it. I am quite certain, too, that the province of Holland and West Friesland together with its cities and members, can be quite assured about them for reasons founded in nature, as they are men who were born and have prospered in this country, where their forefathers and they themselves did and suffered so much for the good cause, and where they have proved their unchangeable affection and constancy in all circumstances with words and deeds. Your Excellency himself knows these things best of all, for he has often declared that he began his career without specific promises of support from the States of Holland and West Friesland and yet he received from them wlthout exception good and laudable support, which has resulted in the common advantage of the country as well as in high reputation for them and Your Excellency. I am just as certain that in the future Your Excellency will receive good and laudable support from them in all circumstances, if good confidence, understanding, and mutual accord are re-established and faithfully maintained as they were during the previous thirty-one years. This is the goal I always had in mind and for which I worked and will continue to work, with God's help.

But if Your Excellency wishes to follow the counsels of the authors of the *Necessary Discourse* and *The Spanish Counselor* [two pamphlets directed against Oldenbarnevelt] and similar seditious, slanderous, and lying pamphlets, which God forbid, then I must declare frankly and according to my own opinion, but respectfully and subject to correction, that the result cannot but be the total ruin and downfall of this country, of Your Excellency, of his esteemed House and its members, of all pious patriots, and of the true Christian religion.

The *Spanish Counselor* could dream up no better advice than that given by these fellows, that is, to sow, nourish, and maintain mistrust and misunderstanding between Your Excellency and the nobles and cities and their servants. He has produced high-flown and arrogant fantasies [an apparent reference to suggestions that Maurice be made the sovereign of ruler of the United Provinces] easy to write down but difficult to put into practice, which might be attempted in a

dangerous gamble and might even succeed, but which could not endure in view of the character and constitution of this country and would serve no one's interest but the Spaniard's. I therefore beg Your Excellency not to believe such fellows but to reject their advice.

It is true that there may be among them some good, simple men who are zealous in religious questions, but what has happened in the separated provinces of the Low Countries as well as the events of the years 1586, 1587, and 1588 in these provinces which we held, has taught clear lesson that there are mingled among them malicious hypocrites, ambitious men who seek their own advantage in changes of government, many penniless and callow fellows as well as many flagrant traitors. Furthermore, there are many who came to these provinces from the provinces and towns which are now Spanish and Catholic territory who, it is to be feared, either out of natural affection to their native lands and cities or out of vindictiveness, cannot stand that our provinces and cities should have greater prosperity and freedom than theirs, and in general there are twenty to one among them who would prefer to live at public rather than at private cost.

I request most humbly that Your Excellency graciously give his wisest thoughts to these considerations, while time remains for a settlement of the whole affair to general satisfaction, and to believe firmly that if Your Excellency seeks anything within the government of the country or in other matters which concern our whole country and its interests, then a well reasoned proposal. to those who have authority under the laws and usages of the provinces will prove more laudable, more honorable, and more advantageous both for the country and for Your Excellency than a hundred thousand of these libels which try to make the sickness incurable and to prevent any possibility of a compromise settlement. I have repeatedly said to Your Excellency that the experience of thirty-one years has taught me that these people who cause Your Excellency more troubles, difficulties, and vexations in a single year than he would have in ten years in the management of the affairs of the whole country. To expect from other provinces or the purse of Holland and West Friesland if there is further division, what Your Excellency has obtained for thirty-one years from the, States of Holland and West Friesland, and which he can, with God's help, continue to obtain from them, seems to me to be, subject to correction, the greatest absurdity that can be imagined.

I fear that I have been too long-winded for Your Excellency, but I have been unable to say these things more briefly and still meet my duty and relieve my conscience. I am very sorry that in recompense for my long and manifold services and tasks, I am attacked by so many slanderous, lying, seditious, and fraudulent libels, and that these vicious and absurd falsehoods derive their pretext and nourishment from the ill feeling which Your Excellency is supposed to bear toward me. And although for thirty-one years I have been able to get over such things with silence, good conduct, and truth, now, in my advanced old age and ill health, I find myself compelled to publish a statement in defense of myself and my family [a printed remonstrance to the States of Holland on April, 20, 1618], although most unhappily and against my heart and feeling. I have decided to send Your Excellency a copy: of it, humbly asking that Your Excellency be so kind as to consider it only as something forced upon me in my defense, and that he will believe that I am, and hope with God's help to remain to the end of my life, Your Excellency's most humble servant. Placing my hope in this, I pray God the Almighty Lord, to preserve you, most serene and high-born Prince, in prosperity and health and under his holy protection.

From my chamber, April 24, 1608.