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The Arminian Controversy: History, Theology, and Art

James W. Ellis¹

¹Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Correspondence: James W. Ellis, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA. E-mail: jellis@yu.edu

Abstract

Arminianism is a Biblical interpretive construct and a theological response to Calvinism. Calvinism is the theology advanced by John Calvin, the leading French theologian of the Protestant Reformation. Arminians and Calvinists disagreed on fundamental Christian doctrine, including the doctrine of predestination and the role human free will plays in the process of Christian redemption and salvation. In the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century and in English theological disputes of the eighteenth century, the Arminian-Calvinist conflict divided societies and Christian fellowships. This essay analyzes these historical Protestant conflicts by analyzing relevant historical, theological, and artistic contexts.

Keywords: Arminianism, Calvinism, Dutch Golden Age, predestination, Protestant theology, Wesleyan theology

1. Introduction

The Dutch Golden Age spanned the last decades of the sixteenth century and the entirety of the seventeenth century. During this time, the Low Countries' Northern Provinces (the Netherlands) revolted against the rule of the devout Catholic Habsburg King Philip II of Spain (1527-1598). The people of the new Dutch Republic adopted the theology and practices of Protestant Calvinism. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a separate group of Protestants, known as the Remonstrants, or Arminians, split from the Calvinists. The Arminians rejected the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and embraced the concept of free will in the process of Christian redemption; the Dutch nation split along theological lines.

The seventeenth century was also a Golden Age for Dutch painting and printmaking, with the emergence of masters such as Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). Rembrandt specialized in portraits and Biblical scenes of the life of Christ. Rembrandt's passionate explorations of Biblical topics, however, were relatively unusual for Dutch art of the Golden Age. Dutch artists tended to depict secular topics and contemporary society in realistic styles. To some extent, the artistic focus on secular subjects reflected a Calvinist cultural ethos. In 1545, the Protestant theologian John Calvin explained his views on art:

I am not ... so superstitious as to think that all visible representations of every kind are unlawful. But as sculpture and painting are gifts of God, what I insist for is, that both shall be used purely and lawfully, that gifts which the Lord has bestowed upon us, for his glory and our good, shall not be preposterously abused, nay, shall not be perverted to our destruction. We think it unlawful to give a visible shape to God, because God himself has forbidden it, and because it cannot be done without, in some degree, tarnishing his glory. ... The only things, therefore, which ought to be painted or sculptured, are things which can be presented to the eye; the majesty of God, which is far beyond the reach of any eye, must not be dishonoured by unbecoming representations (Calvin 1846: 12).

This essay primarily explores the conflicts over Calvinist and Arminian theology that divided the Dutch Reformed Church and Dutch society. Artists visually represented the conflict by creating portraits of the leading figures and popular prints of contemporary events, and, occasionally, by producing allegorical scenes suggesting doctrinal issues. In the eighteenth century, John and Charles Wesley also created literature and musical verses reflecting the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism. These art forms will help contextualize the religious dispute and help explain complex theological topics.

2. John Calvin and TULIP Calvinism

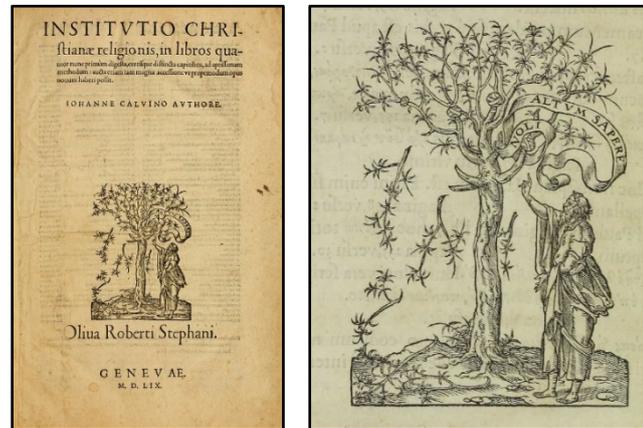
Calvinism is the theology advanced by John Calvin (1509-1564), or Jehan Cauvin, the leading French theologian of the Protestant Reformation (Figure 1). John Calvin elaborated his systematic interpretation of Christianity and the Bible in his 1536 treatise entitled *Institutio Christianae religionis*, or Institutes of the Christian Religion, which is perhaps the single most influential statement of Protestant belief (see Calvin 1846). Calvin completed the first edition of Institutes soon after he arrived in Basel, Switzerland, as he fled Catholic persecution of Protestant Christians in his native France. The treatise, which was reprinted in several revised editions and translated into many languages, has been particularly important to Congregational, Presbyterian, and Reformed (or Calvinist) Christians. In 1559, John Calvin assisted with the production of the fifth and final edition, which scholars and theologians treat as the authoritative text. A Dutch translation of the final edition was published in 1560.



Figure 1. Anonymous French painter. Portrait of John Calvin, ca. 1550.
Public Domain.

Figure 2a shows the title page of the final edition of *Institutio Christianae religionis*, which Robert I. Estienne (1503-1559) printed in Geneva in 1559. Like John Calvin, the printer Robert I. Estienne was a French-born Catholic who became a Protestant. Also like Calvin, Estienne fled from persecution in his home country and eventually settled in Geneva, where he (and his sons) were proprietors of a successful print shop. Figure 2b shows Estienne's device, or symbolic mark, known as *Oliva Stephanorum*. The device depicts the apostle Paul reaching toward an olive tree, perhaps representing the tree of knowledge (Genesis 2:9, The Bible, King James

Version). The words of a banner tangled in the branches read *nol altum sapere*, or “do not be proud.” Protestant reformers, including John Calvin, emphasized salvation through faith alone (*sola fide*) and by grace alone (*sola gratia*), often by citing the apostle Paul’s scriptural declaration to the church in Ephesus: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).



Figures 2a, 2b. Robert I. Estienne. *Institutio Christianae religionis*, 1559; Estienne’s device.
Public Domain.

The precise beliefs of John Calvin and the beliefs of his various historical followers are not identical. When Dutch scholars and theologians began to critique Calvinistic teachings in the early 1600s, Calvin’s supporters convened the Synod (or church council) of Dort (or Dordrecht), of 1618-1619, to settle and formalize the relevant disputed doctrinal issues. The Synod issued the Canons of Dort, which had five primary points that are known today by the acronym TULIP. Tulips have been symbolic of the Netherlands since the seventeenth century, when “Tulipmania” gripped the country (Dash 2001). The acronym TULIP represents: Total depravity (or inability), Unconditional (or absolute) election, Limited atonement, Irresistible (efficacious) grace, and Perseverance of the saints. Neither John Calvin nor the Canons of Dort used the acronym TULIP, but many people understand TULIP concepts collectively as “the five points of Calvinism” or “the doctrines of grace” (see Palmer 2010; Boice & Ryken 2009). Briefly, the five points stand for:

1. Total depravity: all “men are dead in sin ... estranged from God, and helpless ... having no hope ... without God in the world.” “Man, by his fall into a state of sin [has] lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation ... and is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself;”
2. Unconditional election: “an eternal, divine decree [exists] which, antecedently to any difference or desert in men themselves separates the human race into two portions and ordains one to everlasting life and the other to everlasting death;”
3. Limited atonement: “in the intention and secret plan of God, Christ died for the elect only, and that His death had only an incidental reference to others in so far as they are partakers of common grace.”
4. Irresistible (efficacious) grace: “God’s Spirit ... [convinces] us of our sin and misery, [enlightens] our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and [renews] or wills, ... [persuading] and [enabling] us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel;”
5. Perseverance of the saints: “They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved” (see Boettner 2015 edition; Westminster Confession of Faith 1647).

Arminianism is a Biblical interpretive construct and a theological response to Calvinism. Arminianism differs from Calvinism on the role free will faith plays in divine election, on the extent and purpose of Christ's atonement, and on whether a saint may fall away from faith. Arminians and Calvinists differ, however, most fundamentally, on the concept of predestination. The debate over the respective functions of God's grace and human free will extends back to the controversy involving *Church Father* Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and the theologian and free will advocate Pelagius (ca. 354-418). The Council of Carthage, in 418, ultimately declared Pelagianism (that people may chose good without God's intervening assistance) heretical. Pelagius was expelled to Egypt and the First Council of Ephesus declared him a heretic in 431 (Schaff 2013 edition). Arminianism's immediate historical roots though were the theological debates of late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century Dutch Protestantism.

3. Jacobus Arminius and the Remonstrants

Arminianism is named for Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) (Figure 3). Jacobus Arminius is a Latinized form of his original name Jakob Hermanszoon. Arminius was a Dutch theologian and professor at the University of Leiden. Arminius professed views that formed the basis of Arminianism and the Dutch Remonstrant movement. Figure 3 shows Arminius in his office at the University of Leiden. He looks out of the scene and jesters toward an open Bible, seemingly offering his Biblical interpretations to the viewer.



Figure 3. Posthumous Portrait of Jacobus Arminius, ca. 1650, engraving. Public Domain.

Arminius was born in the town of Oudewater, which is between Utrecht and Gouda. He studied at the University of Leiden, and, between 1582 and 1586, he also studied at the universities of Basel and Geneva. The early 1580s were an opportune time for Arminius to be away from his home country. In 1581, the seven Northern Provinces of the Netherlands (which included Arminius' hometown of Oudewater) established the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, and they formally renounced their allegiance to Philip II of Spain. Three years later, Phillip II offered 25,000 crowns for the death of William I, Prince of Orange (1533-1584), stadtholder of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, and Friesland, and a key Protestant leader in the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs at the beginning of the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648). On July 10, 1584, Balthasar Gérard (ca. 1557-1584), a fanatical Roman Catholic from the Franche-Comté region of eastern France, succeeded in assassinating William I in Delft, by shooting him with two pistols. While battles and bloodshed ravaged his homeland, Arminius was far away in Switzerland closely studying the Bible and the writings of John Calvin and his followers.

Arminius returned to the Netherlands in 1587. The following year he was ordained and the authorities in Amsterdam bestowed upon Arminius a license to preach. At the very beginning of his ministry, events led Arminius to question his Calvinist doctrinal views. A professor of the Dutch town of Franeker named Martin Lydius (ca. 1539-1601) forwarded to Arminius a pamphlet written by certain ministers of Delft assailing John Calvin's views on predestination, justification, and other related matters. The ecclesiastical senate of Amsterdam

asked Arminius to publically repudiate the pamphlets' errors. However, during his research the pamphlets' claims and reasoning gradually won over Arminius. According to his biographer, William R. Bagnall, Arminius,

betook himself to the most diligent study of the Scriptures, and carefully compared with them the writings of the early Fathers, and of later divines. The result of this investigation was his adoption of the particular theory of Predestination which bears his name [Arminianism]. At first, for the sake of peace, he was very guarded in his expressions, and avoided special reference to the subject, but soon, becoming satisfied that such a course was inconsistent with his duty as a professed teacher of religion, he began modestly to testify his dissent from the received errors, especially in his occasional discourses on such passages of Scripture as obviously required an interpretation in accordance with his enlarged views of the Divine economy in the salvation of sinners (Bagnall in Arminius 1853, vol. 1: 12-13).

Krzysztof Lubieniecki (1659-1729) was a painter and printmaker who was born in Pommerania (in a town that is now part of Poland). As a child, Lubieniecki moved to Amsterdam and served an apprenticeship with the portrait painter Adriaen Backer (1635-1684). In Lubieniecki's portrait of Arminius (Figure 4), the theologian holds the pamphlet Martin Lydius sent to him. On his desk, is a collection of Arminius' own publications that outline his divergences with Calvinism.



Figure 4. Krzysztof Lubieniecki. Portrait of Jacobus Arminius, ca. 1705.
Public Domain.

Jacobus Arminius' public denunciations of predestination met aggressive resistance, most famously from the Calvinist theologian and professor Franciscus Gomarus, or François Gomar (1563-1641). During the 1580s and 1590s, Gomarus was a Dutch Reformed pastor in Frankfurt am Main, a *Reichsstadt*, or Imperial Free City, in the Holy Roman Empire. He then became a professor of theology at the University of Leiden. When Arminius joined Leiden's faculty, Gomarus became his chief theological adversary. In 1608, Arminius and Gomarus debated Calvinism before a gathering of Holland's regional governmental estates. At the Synod of Dort, Gomarus led the opposition (or Contra-Remonstrants) to the Arminians (or Remonstrants) and to the document published by Arminius' followers, popularly known as The Remonstrance.

The word remonstrance is a Renaissance-era variation of the Medieval Latin term *remonstratus* (to show or demonstrate) and it normally denotes a systematic presentation of points of opposition. In 1610, a group of Dutch Reformed pastors met to draft a publication of their shared concerns regarding Calvinism. Johannes Wtenbogaert (1557-1644) had responsibility for completing the final version. Wtenbogaert studied theology in Geneva, where he fell under the spell of Arminianism, and he eventually became a pastor in The Hague. When Arminius died in 1609, Wtenbogaert took on his mantle. The Remonstrance, or *Remonstrantie*, was completed, signed, and officially presented to the States of Holland and Friesland in July 1610. The Remonstrance contained five articles and assertions, which are summarized thusly:

1. God's election to salvation is conditioned upon faith in Jesus Christ; God elects to save those he has known for eternity will have faith.
2. Jesus Christ died for all men and women, but election and salvation is limited to those who believe in Christ.
3. Men and women are unable to do the will of God in and of themselves, and cannot save themselves apart from God's grace.
4. People have the free will to resist God's prevenient grace.
5. Perseverance of the saints *may be* conditioned upon their continued faith in Christ [this issue was later resolved, with many Arminians believing perseverance of the saints *indeed is* conditioned upon their continued faith] (The Full Original Act 2016).

The Remonstrance's articles challenged Calvinism generally, but also challenged The Belgic Confession (or *Confessio Belgica*) specifically. The Belgic Confession (also known as The Confession of Faith) is a standard doctrinal statement of the Dutch Reformed Church and other international Reformed denominations. The term *Belgica* comes from Gallia Belgica, a province of the ancient Roman Empire that encompassed areas of modern Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, and Germany. Guido de Brès (1522-1567), a Walloon pastor, reformer, and theologian, who had studied under John Calvin in Geneva, compiled and published the Belgic Confession in 1561. The first Latin translation of Brès' revised text was the *Harmonia Confessionum*, of 1581. Festus Hommius (1576-1642), the leading publicist of the Contra-Remonstrants completed a second Latin translation for the Synod of Dort.

4. The Synod of Dort

The Synod of Dort was held between November 13, 1618, and May 29, 1619, in Dort's *Kloveniersdoelen*, a large civic building that usually housed the city's militia and armory. At the close of the proceedings, the Canons of Dort were publically presented at Dort's *Grote Kerk*, or Great Church, a medieval Catholic structure that was converted into a Protestant church building (Selderhuis, Moser, & Sinnema 2014: xxiv).

The Synod convened in a highly charged political environment. Between 1568 and 1648, the largely Protestant United Provinces of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg fought The Eighty Years' War, also known as the Dutch War of Independence, against Spain's ruling Catholic monarchs. At the turn of the seventeenth century, Spain seemed poised for victory, but a credible counteroffensive allowed the United Provinces to turn the struggle into an unproductive war of attrition and to secure the Twelve Year's Truce, of 1609-1621. Throughout the truce, the provinces (known within historiography as the Dutch Republic), strained to maintain public order and cohesion, and often failed, particularly in religious affairs.

The Protestant Reformation came to the Dutch provinces in stages. Lutheranism had little impact. Anabaptism, which placed special emphasis on believers' faith at the time of conversion, as outlined in the Schleithem Confession of 1527, proved popular in the northwestern provinces of Friesland and Holland. Calvinism, which arrived in the mid-sixteenth century, was also strongest in the Dutch western and northern provinces. Calvinist forces liberated the provinces of Holland (where Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague were located) and Zeeland of Spanish Catholic influence in 1572. The majority of residents in these provinces converted to Calvinism, either voluntarily or by compulsion. In the following decade, Arminianism presented its test of Calvinist hegemony. One possible means of soothing tensions caused by a state's religious diversity is seeking after unity or understanding, seeking common ground among traditionalists and reformers. This type of unity proved difficult to achieve in the Dutch federal republic. "Both the character of the [Dutch] Reformed Church as a gathered rather than a national Church, and the decentralized structure of the secular power, made a comprehensive Protestant Church illusory" (Spaans 2002: 78).

Fourteen Remonstrants were called to defend their views at the Synod of Dort, and they were seated at a long central table, surrounded by their opponents (Figure 5). The Contra-Remonstrants, however, not only accused

the Arminians of preaching false, heretical doctrine, they also claimed the Arminians favored compromising with the demands of Spain's despised Catholic monarchs, including Philip III (1578-1621).

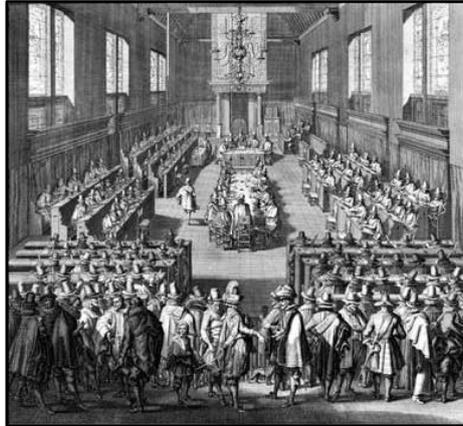


Figure 5. The Synod of Dort, ca. 1608-1609, engraving.
Public Domain.

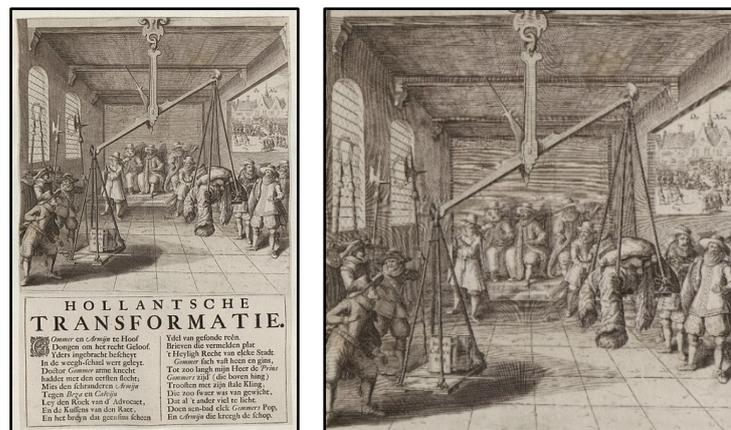
As the Synod opened, Simon Bisschop (1583-1643), whose Latinized name was Simon Episcopus, stood to offer the Remonstrants' defense. Episcopus was a former student of Jacobus Arminius and professor of theology at the University of Leiden. He had already defended the Remonstrants at conferences held in The Hague (1611) and at Delft (1613). At Dort, Episcopus rose from the Arminians' table and asked if he could speak (Figure 6).

[Episcopus] insisted on being permitted to begin with a refutation of the Calvinistic doctrines, especially that of reprobation, hoping that, by placing his objections to this doctrine in front of all the rest, he might excite such prejudice against the other articles of the system, as to secure the popular voice in his favour. The Synod, however, very properly, reminded him that they had not convened for the purpose of trying the Confession of Faith of the Belgic Churches, which had been long established and well known; but that, as the Remonstrants were accused of departing from the Reformed faith, they were bound *first to justify themselves*, by giving Scriptural proof in support of their opinions. To this plan of procedure, they would by no means submit. It disconcerted their whole scheme; but the Synod firmly refused to adopt any other plan. This refusal, of course, shut the Remonstrants out from taking any part in the deliberations of the body [emphasis in original] (Scott 1856: 27-28).



Figure 6. Episcopus addressing the members of the Synod of Dort, 1889, engraving.
Public Domain.

Even though Episcopius and the others were effectively excluded from the proceedings, during the Synod of Dort the Remonstrants' supporters continued to publish statements and produce artwork endorsing their side. The popular Amsterdam engraver Salomon Savery (1594-1683) provided a printed image for a fierce broadside attacking the Contra-Remonstrants entitled *Hollantsche Transformatie*, or "Dutch Transformation." Savery's image is known by the clever title *In the Balance* (Figures 7a and 7b). A huge scale, or balance, stands in an interior that resembles Dort's Kloveniersdoelen. The theology of John Calvin, represented by his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, sits on the balance's left pan. Contra-Romonstrant Franciscus Gomarus stands behind the pan admiring Calvin's treatise. The right pan holds Arminian writings and the heavy fur robes of Holland's numerous town magistrates who supported Remonstrant theology, including Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. Jacobus Arminius (who had died a decade earlier) is shown standing beside the left pan. The *Arminian pan* seems capable of outweighing the *Calvinist pan*, if not for a heavy military sword, which Maurice of Orange, standing to the left, has placed on the Calvinist side. James I (1566-1625), the King of England and a key proponent of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination sits on a throne in the background looking on approvingly (The Balance 2020).



Figures 7a and 7b. Salomon Savery, *Hollantsche Transformatie*, ca. 1617; Detail. Public Domain.

Artists aligned with the strict Calvinist side of the doctrinal debate also published visual and verbal attacks on the Remonstrants' views. "Artistic allegory is when the subject of an artwork, or the various elements that form the composition, is used to symbolize a deeper or more spiritual meaning" (Tate 2020). An allegorical print issued during the closing days of the Synod of Dort casts a dark cloud on the Arminians, their doctrine, and their motivations (Figure 8). An avian humanoid with five heads and four arms, representing Arminianism, symbolically wreaks havoc and spreads evil. In one hand, the creature holds a sword of *bellum* (Latin for war); in the other hand, he holds a heart pierced by the dagger of *invidia* (envy). He stands both on a baby identified as *innocentia* (innocence or integrity) and on a crushed olive branch, representing peace. A broken sword labelled *iusticia* (justice) lies nearby. The figure's grotesque five heads are labelled *avaritia* (greed), *aeothis* (Godlessness or atheism), *seditio* (sedition or inciting rebellion against the state), and *opinio* (perhaps suggesting mere opinion or belief, rather than fact). The Latin inscription at the bottom - warning against the fatal consequences of fervently held, false beliefs - serves as a thinly veiled, foreboding threat.



Figure 8. Polemic allegory depicting Arminianism as a five-headed monster, 1618. Engraving. Public Domain.

5. The fall of Dutch Arminianism

Although the Remonstrants has a significant number of advocates among the Dutch populace, the Synod of Dort was less an impartial debate over the merits of the Remonstrants' theological positions, and more an official denunciation of those positions by a series of testifying Contra-Remonstrants, who supported traditional Calvinist doctrine. The Synod delegates drafted a judicial decision entitled *The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands*, commonly known as *The Canons of Dort*, which expressly rejected the Remonstrance's five articles and enshrined the stricter form of Calvinism reflected in the *Belgic Confession*, represented by the acronym TULIP: [T]otal depravity, [U]nconditional election, [L]imited atonement, [I]rresistible grace, and the [P]erseverance of the saints. Having failed to adequately *justify themselves*, the fourteen Dort Remonstrants were ordered to refrain from ministering, preaching, and exhorting in government-ordained churches and were ordered to sign *The Act of Cessation*, a document that would have made the restrictions legally enforceable. The authorities directed *Episcopius* to cease and desist writing letters and books endorsing Arminianism. The Remonstrants refused to sign *The Act of Cessation*, so the Dutch States-General pronounced its punishment:

[I]n consequence of their contumacy and disobedience, the [denounced Remonstrants] shall be conducted by certain officers appointed by their High Mightinesses out of the United Provinces, without ever being allowed to come or return thither, till the said States shall be fully satisfied that they are willing to subscribe the same act, and leave be given then to return, on pain of being treated as disturbers of the public peace, for an example to others (reprinted in Calder 1835: 390).

The Synod of Dort's condemnation led to religious and political persecution of Dutch Remonstrants for a time. Only in 1630-1631 did the Netherlands' magistrates again tolerate the worship of the nation's Arminian community, which by that time numbered in the thousands. Still, even after the authorities tolerated Dutch Arminians, they were not permitted to build their own church buildings or to ring bells or otherwise publically summon worshipers. Therefore, from their exteriors Arminian churches of the latter seventeenth century appeared to be ordinary houses, but their interiors contained religious furnishings. Dutch Jews, though also officially tolerated, worshipped under similar restrictions (Marshall 2006: 140). According to Dutch theology scholar Jo Spaans, though the seventeenth century Dutch Republic was a religious "haven for those persecuted elsewhere in Europe ... toleration had its limits," and penal laws against Catholics and Arminians, and occasionally even Jews, were enforced (Spaans 2002: 75). Contra-Remonstrant intolerance of Arminians could be defended theologically. The influential letters of the Church Father Augustine asserted the state has "a pastoral duty not only to protect the true Church, but also to take disciplinary measures against dissent. This is a pastoral duty, because forcing dissenters, both the wilfully obstinate and the honestly misled, into the Church is

Claes Janszoon Visscher II (1587–1652) produced the most popular print depicting the decapitation of Van Oldenbarnevelt (Figure 9). Visscher was from a successful family of printers and mapmakers in Amsterdam. The Visscher family created portraits and landscapes for new Protestant Bibles that replaced older Roman Catholic Bibles, such as Jerome's Latin Vulgate, which the Catholic Church affirmed as its official Latin translation at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Traditional Catholic Bibles contained Biblical apocrypha that Calvinists did not want to include in their new translations. Four years after the death of Van Oldenbarnevelt, Claes Janszoon Visscher II produced a new set of prints showing Arminians being executed in the town square of Leiden, the university town where Jacobus Arminius first formulated his critical views of predestination. Such executions were well-attended public spectacles. For those unable to attend the executions, the events were publicized in popular prints and broadsides that were illustrated with remarkably graphic and disturbing scenes. Figure 11 shows an executioner chopping off an Arminian's head with a hatchet, as a crowd watches a few feet away. The Arminian's decapitated head lies on the ground at the bottom of the image.



Figure 10. Claes Janszoon Visscher II. Execution of four Arminians in Leiden, 1623.
Public Domain.



Figure 11. Claes Janszoon Visscher II. Execution of Arminians in The Hague, 1623. Etching.
Public Domain.

6. John Wesley and the spread of Arminianism

After Maurice of Nassau (the Prince of Orange) died in 1625, Remonstrants were again granted a degree of tolerance and were allowed to practice their faith without official condemnation. Simon Episcopius and Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) established and taught at a Remonstrant theological seminary in Amsterdam during the 1630s. Grotius, a polemicist who supported religious tolerance of the Remonstrants, had been tried with Van

Oldenbarnevelt, but had been given a life sentence. He escaped his imprisonment and lived for years as an expatriate theologian, diplomat, and author.

Politico-religious debates over Arminianism also tore apart English society during the seventeenth century. For example, the propagation of Arminianism, or what one author called “Anti-Calvinism,” within the (Anglican) Church of England was a key factor in the English Civil War (1642-1651) (Tyacke 1987). King Charles I (1600-1649) defended Arminianism against the attacks of the Puritans, a diverse group of English Protestants who wished to rid, or purify, the Church of England of Catholic and insufficiently Protestant (or Calvinist) doctrines and practices. In spite of religious differences, the English monarchy granted charters to the Plymouth Company and London Company to establish settlements in North America. English Puritans, now known as the Pilgrims, founded the Plymouth Colony after landing at *Plymouth Rock* (Massachusetts) in December 1620. The Pilgrims practiced strict Calvinist Protestantism, independently from the Church of England. John Winthrop (1588-1649) established the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony approximately a decade later.

In England and Britain’s later North American colonies, further south along the eastern Atlantic seaboard, colonists enjoyed greater religious freedom. In 1649, the Province of Maryland passed the “Act Concerning Religion,” the first law requiring religious tolerance in the English American colonies, though struggles between Anglicans, Catholics, Puritans, and others continued. The Province of Georgia was the last and southernmost of the thirteen original British colonies in North America. Georgia would be particularly important in the history of Arminianism’s introduction to America.

In 1735, James Oglethorpe (1696-1785), the founder of the Georgia colony, invited John Wesley (1703-1791) and his brother Charles Wesley (1707-1788) to come to the newly formed Savannah parish to serve the Anglican community. John Wesley was an English clergyman, evangelist, and co-founder of the Methodist movement, and he was among history’s foremost proponents of Arminianism and Arminian *soteriology*. Soteriology, from the Greek *sōtēria*, meaning salvation, is the systematic study of the doctrine of salvation. During his two years in Georgia, Wesley led small-scale evangelical revivals among the Anglican colonial adherents and ministered to leaders of the local Chickasaw Native American tribe (Figure 12). Wesley wrote that Native Americans “appear the most likely of all the Americans to receive and rejoice in the glorious Gospel of Christ” (Wason 2017: 27).



Figure 12. John Wesley Preaching to a Tribe of Native Americans.
Public Domain.

Although scholarly opinions differ, there is a growing consensus that John Wesley was a faithful representative of Jacobus Arminius (Gunter 2000). In his posthumously published essay entitled *The Question, What is an Arminian? Answered by a Lover of Free Grace*, John Wesley defended Arminian theology against Calvinist accusations (Wesley 2011: 1171-3). According to Wesley, the delegates to the Synod of Dort had levied five charges against the Remonstrants:

1. That they [denied] original sin;
2. That they [denied] justification by faith;
3. That they [denied] absolute predestination;
4. That they [denied] the grace of God to be irresistible; and,
5. That they [affirmed] a believer may fall from grace (Wesley 1798).

With regard to the first two allegations, Wesley wrote the Arminians plead “Not Guilty.” Wesley continued, “No man ever lived, not John Calvin himself, [who] ever asserted either original sin or justification by faith in more strong, more clear and express terms than Arminius has done. ... But there is an undeniable difference between the Calvinists and Arminians with regard to the three other questions.”

Wesley asserted Arminians’ believe in conditional predestination, rather than absolute predestination. He wrote, “the Arminians hold: God has decreed from all eternity touching all who have the written word, ‘One who believes will be saved; one who does not believe will be condemned’ [see John 3:18]. And in order to this: ‘Christ died for all, all who were dead in trespasses and sins’ [Colossians 2:13]; that is, for every child of Adam, since ‘in Adam all died’ [1 Corinthians 15:22].” Wesley further asserted that Arminians hold “that, although there may be some moments in which the grace of God acts irresistibly, yet in general any one may resist, and that to his eternal ruin, the grace whereby it was the will of God he should have been eternally saved.” Finally, Wesley averred that “Arminians hold that a true believer may make ‘shipwreck’ of faith and a good conscience (1 Timothy 1:19), so that he may fall not only foully but finally, so as to perish forever” (Wesley 2011: 1171-3).

John Wesley founded Arminian Magazine in 1778. It became the longest-lasting religious periodical in history, ceasing publication only in 1969. During the years that Wesley oversaw the magazine’s content, it continually featured articles, essays, and poems disputing John Calvin’s theories of predestination and endorsing the idea that “Christ died for all,” or unlimited atonement (see Allen 2016). Arminian Magazine’s subtitle was “Consisting of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption.” The frontispiece of each volume’s new edition featured a printed portrait of a clergyman or theologian who supported the cause of Arminian theology. The first edition showed a bust length portrait of “The Revd. John Wesley” (Figure 13). Often, John Wesley’s brother Charles Wesley contributed poems and hymn verses he had written for Arminian Magazine.

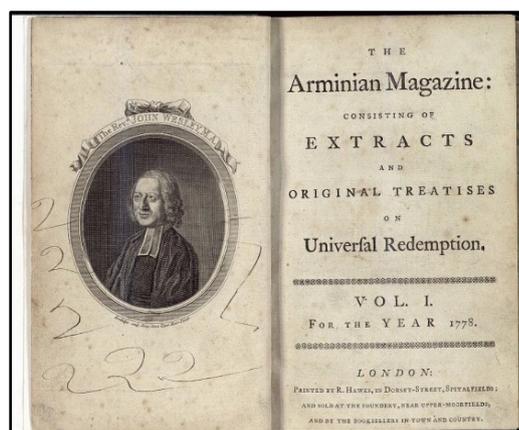


Figure 13. Frontispiece (John Wesley portrait) and first page. Arminian Magazine 1 (1778).
Public Domain.

7. Predestination

Arminian Magazine and John Wesley were outspoken, consistent critics of John Calvin’s views on predestination. In Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin wrote that before God created the world, he foreordained a select group of people, whom Calvin called *the elect*, for eternal life. According to Calvin, the evidence of a person’s membership among the elect includes 1) their *calling* (a subjective internal awareness of

selection) and 2) *justification* (grasping the righteousness of Christ through faith, and being clothed in his righteousness) (see Miller 2013). Calvin maintained that God barred all other people (*the reprobate*) from access to salvation and allotted these unfortunate souls the just punishment for their sins, namely eternal death. Again, according to Calvin, humanity's reprobate are marked by 1) their exclusion from the knowledge of his name, and 2) their exclusion from the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Calvin acknowledged that predestination may seem unfair, but asserted God's ultimate purpose is a mystery to humanity (Theologians & Theology 2019).

Western art history includes many vivid depictions of God's Last Judgment. The Italian Renaissance artist, Michelangelo's (1475-1564) Last Judgment fresco, of 1534-1541, in Vatican City's Sistine Chapel is one notable example (Camara 2020). The doctrine of predestination is esoteric and rarely depicted in the visual arts. Enea Vico (1523-1567), a late-Renaissance engraver from Parma, produced one illustration of predestination (Figure 14). During the early decades of the Reformation, Enea Vico worked for Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574), Grand Duke of Tuscany. Cosimo was a Roman Catholic, a Florentine nobleman, and an important patron of the arts. In the 1540s, Cosimo commissioned Vico to create a series of engravings representing various religious and philosophical concepts.

Vico's engraving *Predestination*, of ca. 1555, shows a divine agent, perhaps an angel, placing a crown of life symbolizing divine election on a farmer's head. The crown is an unconditional gift; the farmer is doing nothing to earn it. In the background, a large bird descends ready to devour another man who is running away with his hands lifted up in terror or desperation. A Latin superscription reads, roughly, "If it is God's desire, suddenly the farmer becomes a king." The background scene may reference Jesus' Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-23). In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus described a sower going forth to scatter seeds. "[W]hen he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls [birds] came and devoured them up." Jesus later explained the meaning of the parable, "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart" (Matthew 13:4, 19).



Figure 14. Enea Vico. *Predestination*, ca. 1555. Engraving. Public Domain.

Arminians, generally, and John Wesley, specifically, taught what theologians call the doctrine of *conditional election*. According to the doctrine of conditional election, throughout eternity God has possessed foreknowledge of how each person will freely respond to the offer of salvation contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God's eternal choice of whom he will elect to eternal salvation has been based upon, or conditioned upon, his foreknowledge of each person's response. A person can choose to resist God's grace and even if a person initially accepts God's grace, he or she can thereafter fall from grace and be lost for eternity.

8. A “horrible decree”

John Wesley devised a fictive conversation entitled *A Dialogue Between a Predestinarian and his Friend* that was posthumously published in 1799 (Wesley 1799; Rack 2011: 259-266). The dialogue consists of a Friend interviewing a strict Calvinist (or Predestinarian) about absolute predestination and unconditional election. Wesley clearly identified with the Friend. During the conversation, the following exchanges occur:

- Friend. - Did God then make Adam on purpose that he might fall?
 Predestinarian. - Undoubtedly. ‘God made Adam and Eve to this very purpose, that they might be tempted and led into sin. And by force of his decree, it could not otherwise be but they must sin.’
 Friend. - But do not you ground God’s decree on God’s foreknowledge rather than his will?
 Pred. - No: ‘God foresees nothing but what he has decreed, and his decree precedes his knowledge.’
 Friend. - Well, this may truly be termed *a horrible decree* [emphasis added].
 Pred. - ‘I confess it is a horrible decree; yet no one can deny but God foreknew Adam’s fall, and therefore foreknew it, because he had ordained it so by his own decree.’
 Friend. - Do you believe, then, that God has by his own positive decree, not only elected some men to life, but also reprobated all the rest?
 Pred. - Most surely, if I believe one, I believe the other. ‘Many indeed (thinking to excuse God) own election, and yet deny reprobation; but this is quite silly and childish. For without reprobation, election itself cannot stand; whom God passes by, those he reprobates.’
 Friend. - Pray explain what you mean by election and reprobation.
 Pred. - With all my heart. ‘All men are not created for the same end; but some are fore-ordained to eternal life; others to eternal damnation. So according as every man was created for the one end or the other, we say he was elected or predestinated to life, or reprobated, that is, predestinated to destruction.’ [...]
 Friend. - How is this? I say, if God has created them for never-ending death, why does he call to them to turn and live?
 Pred. - "He calls to them, that they may be more deaf; he kindles a light, that they may be the more blind; he brings his doctrine to them, that they may be more ignorant; and applies the remedy to them, that they may not be healed."

John Wesley’s brother, Charles Wesley, was a clergyman and co-founder of Methodism; however, Protestant Christians remember Charles Wesley perhaps most of all for the thousands of Christian hymns that he wrote, such as “Love divine, all loves excelling.” Through his hymns, Charles Wesley provided evangelical interpretations of Old Testament psalms and other passages. In this, Wesley emulated his illustrious predecessor, Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Isaac Watts, who came from an English family of zealous Nonconformists, was a Congregationalist minister and a prolific and popular hymn writer. Although Watts identified as a Calvinist, he espoused Arminian beliefs. In his book *Ruin and Recovery*, Watts wrote that there is no reason “the strictest Calvinist should be angry that the all sufficient merit of Christ should overflow so far in its influence, as to provide a conditional salvation for all mankind, since the elect of God have that certain and absolute salvation which they contend for, secured to them by the same merit” (Davis 1943: 108).

John and Charles Wesley founded the Wesleyan or Wesleyan-Arminian theological movement, known as Methodism, which originally aimed to reform the Church of England from within. Although the Wesleys’ personal theology was forthright Arminianism, they never left the Church of England. Many of their immediate followers and associates, however, remained committed Calvinists. Frequently “doctrinal divergences” emerged

between the Wesleys and the Anglican clergyman credited as the third co-founder of Methodism, George Whitefield (1714-1770). Whitefield never strayed from his Calvinist belief in limited atonement, that it was God's intention and plan that Jesus Christ die for the elect only, and that Christ's death had only an incidental reference to others and only to the extent that are partakers of common grace (see Scotland 2019). The Arminian theology of John and Charles Wesley, on the other hand, stressed unlimited atonement, that Christ died for all though his sacrifice is only effectual when a person receives him in faith. Charles Wesley's hymns and John Wesley's prose and sermons conveyed the idea that no one "is predestined to damnation. [All people] can be saved if they follow the light they have. God does not force our wills" (Wesley & Wesley 1981: 37).

Charles Wesley published two volumes of hymns in 1741-1742 entitled *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* (Figure 15). The hymnals contained musical verses and satirical poems many of which seem to be direct attacks on the Calvinist concept of absolute, unconditional election. John Wesley appreciated his brother's work so much he included three selections from *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* in the first volume of his *Arminian Magazine* (Figure 13).

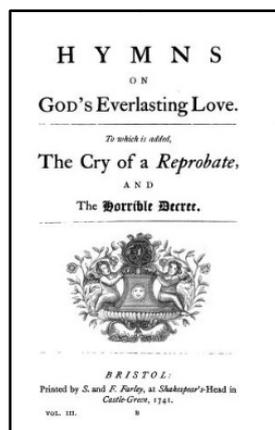


Figure 15. Title page of *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love*, 1741.
Public Domain.

John Wesley particularly appreciated a thirteen-verse song included in the original edition of *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* entitled *The Lord's Controversy*. It is now known by various names, including *The Horrible Decree*. In his *Dialogue Between a Predestinarian and his Friend*, John Wesley suggested that if God had indeed predestined Adam's sin, and the fall of man, without providing for unlimited atonement, this was a "horrible decree." Charles Wesley echoed those sentiments in *The Lord's Controversy*, which is among the Wesleys' most strongly worded polemics against the doctrine of limited atonement.

Jesu, my hope, my help, my power,
On thee I ever call,
O save me from temptation's hour,
Or into hell I fall. [...]

The blackest crime upon record
I freely could commit,
The sins by nature most abhorred
My nature could repeat.

I could the devil's law receive,
Unless restrained by thee;
I could (good God!) I could believe
The HORRIBLE DECREE.

I could believe that God is hate,
 The God of love and grace
 Did damn, pass by, and reprobate
 The most of human race. [...]

My strength will I ascribe to thee,
 My wisdom from above,
 And praise to all eternity
 Thine all-redeeming love (The Loss of Eternal Life 1789).

9. Conclusion

This brief essay has addressed the Calvinism-Arminianism debate in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and a few further developments in the eighteenth-century rise of Wesleyan theology within the Church of England. Several scholars have written helpful books about the broader historical progression of Arminian theology (see, for example, Stanglin, Bilby, & Mann 2014; Van Leeuwen, Stanglin, & Tolsma 2009), and theologians from various denominations and traditions continue to discuss and advocate differing interpretations. Members of modern Presbyterian and Reformed Churches often disagree with members of Methodist, Pentecostal, and Restoration congregations, for instance. Although there may never be a consensus among Protestant Christians concerning the respective merits of classical Calvinism and Arminianism, reflecting on the historical debate, as has been done in this essay, may help individuals reach their own conclusions.

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