

Title: America's Dutch Identity

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Abstract:

This paper explores the history of New Netherland (eventually colonial New York and New Jersey) in light of the Dutch struggle for identity during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Dutch originally belonged to the Holy Roman Empire as a Spanish territory, and were staunchly Catholic. However, with the coming of the Protestant Reformation, things began to change. With the Reformation came a revolution against their rulers, and also a religious diversity previously unheard of in Europe. This struggle carried over into the borders of America with the Dutch establishment of New Netherland. New Netherland was the experiment of religious freedom in practice for the Dutch. The colony became home to a wide variety of religious dissenters that found no resting place in Europe. The Dutch Reformed Church struggled for its autonomy against the increasing religious pluralism, and the latter eventually won out before the British took over New Netherland and divided it. The pluralism present in New Netherland helped set the tone for religious freedom in America today. The author does not discount the contributions of other schools of religious and political thought, but argues that the Dutch's role must not escape the notice of potential research.

Christian Worldview Integration:

My Christian worldview has informed my research on church history, particularly my desire to give an honest portrayal of factual data in as unbiased a fashion as possible. In the case of New Netherland, plenty of people know the history of colonial New York and New Jersey, but

not many take into consideration the role that it played as an extension of an identity crisis among the Dutch that began in Europe with the coming of the Protestant Reformation and ended with a religiously pluralistic colony in North America that continued to thrive even after the Dutch lost it to England, one of their rival colonial powers. As a Christian living in America, I appreciate the religious freedom Christians have here in comparison with the medieval and early Reformation periods in European history, where Christians and other religious minorities such as Jews who did not adhere to a state church were relentlessly persecuted by the state churches. It motivated me to research the colonies where religious freedom was very much appreciated, including New Netherland. In the community at large, this paper will help to answer a series of questions involving what a primitive version of religious freedom looked like in America. Many historians either of the Religious Right or the Liberal Left tend to approach the facts in an overly biased fashion, and tend to focus on only that which fits their agenda. This paper will present an unbiased view of the Dutch vision for religious freedom, and show not only how this shaped the American concept, but give readers some idea where we as Americans can go from here.