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THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION IN THE NETHERLANDS: THE HISTORICAL, SOCIOCULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF CALVINISM

A REFORMA PROTESTANTE NOS PAÍSES BAIXOS: IMPACTO HISTÓRICO, SOCIOCULTURAL, ECONÔMICO E POLÍTICO DO CALVINISMO

LA REFORMA PROTESTANTE EN LOS PAÍSES BAJOS: IMPACTO HISTÓRICO, SOCIOCULTURAL, ECONÓMICO Y POLÍTICO DEL CALVINISMO

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical, sociocultural, economic, and political impact of the Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands, emphasising the role of Calvinism as a transformative force. The research traces the journey from the origins of the Reformed movement in the sixteenth century — through its precursors in the Devotio Moderna and the influences of Jan Łaski, Guido de Brès, and William of Orange — to the theological consolidation at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) and the social, educational, and economic developments that defined the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth century. The study examines how the principle of Sola Scriptura drove a revolution in literacy, how the Statenvertaling (1637) standardised the language and access to knowledge, and how the Protestant work ethic shaped the capitalist spirit that enabled the rise of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Amsterdam Exchange Bank. The analysis extends to the republican political structuring of the United Provinces, Abraham Kuyper's doctrine of Sphere Sovereignty, and the profound secularisation characterising contemporary Netherlands. It concludes that the Reformation was not merely a religious event, but a first-order civilisational engine.

Keywords: Protestant Reformation. Calvinism. Netherlands. Golden Age. Literacy. Protestant Ethic. Synod of Dort. Dutch Society. Secularisation.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa de forma abrangente o impacto histórico, sociocultural, econômico e político da Reforma Protestante nos Países Baixos, com ênfase no papel do calvinismo como força transformadora. A pesquisa traça o percurso desde as origens do movimento reformado no século XVI — com seus precursores na Devotio Moderna e as influências de Jan Łaski, Guido de Brès e Guilherme de Orange — até a consolidação teológica pelo Sínodo de Dort (1618–1619) e os desdobramentos sociais, educacionais e econômicos que definiram a Era

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de Ouro Holandesa no século XVII. O estudo examina como o princípio da Sola Scriptura impulsionou uma revolução na alfabetização, como a Statenvertaling (1637) padronizou a língua e o acesso ao conhecimento, e como a ética protestante do trabalho moldou o espírito capitalista que possibilitou a ascensão da Companhia das Índias Orientais (VOC) e do Banco de Amsterdã. A análise se estende à estruturação política republicana das Províncias Unidas, à doutrina da Soberania das Esferas de Abraham Kuyper, e à profunda secularização que caracteriza a Holanda contemporânea. Conclui-se que a Reforma não foi apenas um evento religioso, mas um motor civilizacional de primeira ordem.

Palavras-chave: Reforma Protestante. Calvinismo. Países Baixos. Era de Ouro. Alfabetização. Ética Protestante. Sínodo de Dort. Sociedade Holandesa. Secularização.

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza de forma exhaustiva el impacto histórico, sociocultural, económico y político de la Reforma Protestante en los Países Bajos, con énfasis en el papel del calvinismo como fuerza transformadora. La investigación traza el recorrido desde los orígenes del movimiento reformado en el siglo XVI — con sus precursores en la Devotio Moderna y las influencias de Jan Łaski, Guido de Brès y Guillermo de Orange — hasta la consolidación teológica por el Sínodo de Dort (1618–1619) y los desarrollos sociales, educativos y económicos que definieron la Edad de Oro Holandesa en el siglo XVII. El estudio examina cómo el principio de la Sola Scriptura impulsó una revolución en la alfabetización, cómo la Statenvertaling (1637) estandarizó la lengua y el acceso al conocimiento, y cómo la ética protestante del trabajo moldeó el espíritu capitalista que posibilitó el ascenso de la Compañía de las Indias Orientales (VOC) y del Banco de Ámsterdam. El análisis se extiende a la estructuración política republicana de las Provincias Unidas, a la doctrina de la Soberanía de las Esferas de Abraham Kuyper y a la profunda secularización que caracteriza a los Países Bajos contemporáneos. Se concluye que la Reforma no fue solo un evento religioso, sino un motor civilizatorio de primer orden.

Palabras clave: Reforma Protestante. Calvinismo. Países Bajos. Edad de Oro. Alfabetización. Ética Protestante. Sínodo de Dort. Sociedad Holandesa. Secularización.

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of the Netherlands in the period between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represents one of the most fascinating and widely studied cases of civilisational transformation driven by religious ideas. Within a timespan of approximately one century, a peripheral region of the Habsburg Empire — composed of seventeen politically fragmented, economically diverse, and religiously heterogeneous provinces — emerged as the most prosperous, intellectually advanced, and politically innovative nation in Europe. This phenomenon, known as the Dutch Golden Age (*Gouden Eeuw*), was not the result of geopolitical coincidence or simple geographical advantages. Its genesis is deeply rooted in a religious transformation of revolutionary proportions: the adoption of Calvinism as the cultural, ethical, and political matrix of the Dutch nation.

The Protestant Reformation, formally initiated by Martin Luther in 1517 with the publication of his Ninety-Five Theses, triggered a process of reconfiguration of European societies that far transcended the ecclesiastical sphere. In the Netherlands, this process took on peculiar characteristics, shaped by the local context of resistance to Spanish absolutism, by the humanist tradition of the Low Countries, and by the presence of heterodox religious movements that had already prepared the ground for a critical reception of papal authority. The result was a unique synthesis of Reformed faith, civic engagement, and entrepreneurial spirit that bequeathed to the world some of its most enduring institutions: the stock exchange, the central bank, modern capitalism, and the principles of religious tolerance and representative government.

The relevance of this study extends beyond purely historical interest. Understanding how a theological transformation was able to eradicate mass illiteracy, structure a republican and democratic political system, and create the conditions for the economic and cultural flourishing of an entire nation offers invaluable lessons for contemporary debates on the role of religion in the public sphere, on the cultural foundations of economic development, and on the institutional conditions necessary for the creation of open and prosperous societies. Max Weber, in his seminal analysis, identified the Protestant ethic as one of the engines of modern capitalism. However, as we shall argue in this article, the Dutch legacy of the Reformation extends far beyond the economic sphere, encompassing educational, political, social, and cultural dimensions of equal or greater importance.

This article is structured into ten main sections. After this introduction, we examine the arrival of the Reformation in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, identifying the main

historical agents and the currents of thought that prepared the ground for the religious revolution. The third section analyses the process of consolidation of the movement, with emphasis on the Eighty Years' War and the Synod of Dort. The fourth section is devoted to the impact on literacy and education. The fifth examines economic development, with special attention to the Golden Age and the Weberian thesis. The sixth section deals with the political and social structuring of the Republic of the United Provinces. The seventh analyses the trajectory of Dutch Protestantism up to the present day, including the phenomenon of secularisation. Sections eight, nine, and ten present, respectively, the literature review, the benefits of the research, and the conclusion, followed by the references in Vancouver format.

In methodological terms, this article is situated within the tradition of the history of ideas and the historical sociology of religion, articulating primary sources (confessions of faith, synodal acts, state documents) with the secondary academic literature of recent decades. The analysis seeks to overcome both the reductionism that minimises the role of religion in social development and the apologetic interpretations that attribute to the Reformation a mechanical and linear causality. The aim is a nuanced, critical, and comprehensive reading of one of the most significant chapters of modern history.

2 THE INTRODUCTION OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION IN THE NETHERLANDS (SIXTEENTH CENTURY)

To understand the extraordinary receptiveness of the Netherlands to Reformed ideas, it is essential to look beyond the sixteenth century and identify the movements of spiritual renewal that had previously cultivated a mindset prone to questioning established ecclesiastical authority. The most influential of these precursors was the *Devotio Moderna*, a movement of practical spirituality that arose in the fourteenth century in the region of Guelders (present-day eastern Netherlands), founded by Geert Groote (1340–1384). This movement, which was institutionally organised through the Brethren of the Common Life and the monasteries of the Congregation of Windesheim, promoted a personal and inner piety, centred on the imitation of Christ (*Imitatio Christi*) and on the meditative study of the Scriptures.

The importance of the *Devotio Moderna* for the subsequent Reformation lies in several aspects. Firstly, it cultivated a habit of independent devotional reading which, once the Scriptures became more accessible after Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (c. 1440), would naturally evolve into a personal reading of the Bible. Secondly, it developed an

implicit critique of the formalism and corruption of the regular clergy, without, however, reaching an open break with Rome. Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), whose *De Imitatione Christi* would become one of the most widely read books of Christendom, was formed in this tradition. Thirdly, the Brethren of the Common Life ran high-quality schools, forming a generation of literate individuals that included figures such as the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose work of translation and textual criticism of the Bible directly prepared the intellectual ground for the Reformation.

Erasmus (1466–1536), although he never abandoned Catholicism and opposed Luther's positions on free will, exerted a paradoxical and decisive influence in preparing the Netherlands for the Reformation. His critical edition of the New Testament in Greek (1516), with a new Latin translation, demonstrated that the Church's official Vulgate contained significant translation errors, undermining the textual authority on which Rome based its doctrines. His satirical critique of clerical hypocrisy in works such as *In Praise of Folly* (1509) created a climate of scepticism towards ecclesiastical institutions that would be exploited by the reformers. It is no coincidence that the contemporary saying held that “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched”.

The political context also favoured the dissemination of Reformed ideas. The Netherlands was under the rule of the Spanish Habsburgs, but it maintained a tradition of local autonomy and urban governance that resisted the centralisation imposed by Charles V and, later, by Philip II. The merchant cities of the northern provinces — Utrecht, Amsterdam, Leiden, Haarlem — possessed a literate and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie that received Reformed ideas from Germany, France, and Switzerland through established trade routes. This urban bourgeoisie would find in Calvinism not only a theology, but an ideological justification for its aspirations to political autonomy and economic freedom.

The introduction of Reformed ideas in the Netherlands was not the work of a single individual or event, but of a constellation of figures and movements that, in different waves and theological currents, gradually transformed the religious landscape of the region. Identifying these historical agents is fundamental to understanding the complexity and richness of the Dutch reforming process.

The **first wave** arrived with Lutheranism, in the years immediately following 1517. Luther's theses were quickly printed and distributed in the cities of the Netherlands through the flourishing local printing industry. The linguistic and commercial proximity to Germany facilitated the circulation of these texts. However, Lutheran penetration encountered

structural limitations: the Lutheran ecclesiology, with its emphasis on the authority of princes over the territorial church (*cuius regio, eius religio*), was poorly adapted to a region without a Protestant sovereign, where political power remained in the hands of Charles V, an uncompromising defender of Catholic unity.

Hinne Rode deserves special mention as one of the first channels for Reformed theology of a Zwinglian orientation. Rector of the school of the Brethren of the Common Life in Utrecht, Rode travelled to Zurich in 1523, where he maintained direct contact with Ulrich Zwingli. This encounter was especially significant with regard to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper: Rode presented Zwingli with the symbolic interpretation of the Eucharist (the “hoc est” means “hoc significat”), which would become a central point of distinction between the Zwinglian/Reformed and the Lutheran Reformation. Rode brought back to the Netherlands a sacramental understanding that would profoundly shape Dutch Reformed spirituality.

The **second wave**, and the more disturbing one, was **Anabaptism**. **Melchior Hoffman** (c. 1495–1543), a German fur trader who embraced Anabaptism after passing through Lutheranism and Zwinglianism, became a charismatic and influential preacher in the Netherlands from 1530 onwards. With his apocalyptic message — prophesying that Strasbourg would be the “new Jerusalem” and that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent — Hoffman attracted thousands of followers in the northern provinces, especially among the urban popular classes displaced by economic transformation. Hoffmanite Anabaptism, with its rejection of infant baptism and of the hierarchical structures of society, represented a threat not only to the Catholic Church, but to the established social order itself.

The violence of the Münster episode in 1534–35, when radical Anabaptists established a “theocratic kingdom” that was brutally suppressed, tarnished the Anabaptist cause and unleashed relentless persecution in the Netherlands. It was in this context that **Menno Simons** (1496–1561) emerged, a former Frisian priest who, in 1537, published his seminal treatise condemning the use of violence and reorganised the surviving Anabaptists around principles of non-violence, separation of church and state, and rigorous communal discipline. His followers, the Mennonites, survived as a pacifist and economically prosperous minority, contributing in a lasting way to Dutch commercial and financial culture.

The **third and decisive wave** was **Calvinism**. The theology of John Calvin (1509–1564), systematised in his *Institutiones Christianae Religionis* (whose first edition dates from 1536), offered an intellectually rigorous and practically oriented synthesis that overcame the limitations of both Lutheranism and Anabaptist radicalism. Calvinism reached the

Netherlands mainly through two channels: the infiltration of texts and ideas coming from Geneva and Huguenot France, and the organisation of communities of Protestant refugees in German and English centres.

Jan Łaski (John a Lasco, 1499–1560), a Polish nobleman of Erasmian formation who had abandoned Catholicism for Reformed Protestantism, played a fundamental institutional role. As superintendent of the Strangers' Church in London (1550–1553), he developed a model of presbyterian ecclesiastical organisation that would directly influence the Dutch Reformed churches. Forced to leave England after the accession of the Catholic Mary I, Łaski wandered through Europe, eventually returning to Poland, but leaving an organisational legacy that his disciples carried to the Netherlands. His emphasis on the presbyterian structure — government by elected elders, synods for the resolution of theological disputes — became the model for the Dutch Reformed Church.

Guido de Brès (1522–1567) represents another crucial figure in the transmission and systematisation of Dutch Calvinism. Born in Mons (in present-day Belgium), De Brès studied in Frankfurt and was a direct disciple of Calvin in Geneva. In 1561, while working clandestinely as a Reformed preacher in the southern Netherlands, he drafted the *Belgic Confession* (*Confessio Belgica*), a document of 37 articles that systematised Reformed doctrine for the context of the Netherlands. The Confession was deliberately drawn up as an apology addressed to King Philip II, seeking to demonstrate that the Protestants were not subversives or Anabaptists, but Christians who followed the Scriptures. De Brès was captured and executed in 1567, becoming a martyr of the Reformed cause, but his Confession survived as one of the foundational documents of Dutch religious identity.

The formation of the first Protestant communities in the Netherlands took place under conditions of severe clandestinity, forced by the Habsburg policy of repression. Charles V issued a series of increasingly severe edicts against heresy, culminating in the “Edict of Blood” of 1550, which made heresy a capital crime punishable by burning (men) or by the sword or being buried alive (women). It is estimated that between 1523 and 1566, approximately 1,300 people were executed for heresy in the Netherlands, many of them Anabaptists, but also a growing number of Calvinist Reformed.

In response to this persecution, the first Protestants developed creative forms of communal organisation. The *hagenpreken* (hedge sermons) became a striking characteristic of Dutch Protestantism in the 1550s–60s: Reformed preachers held open-air services, in fields and woods on the outskirts of the cities, attracting crowds that could disperse quickly

upon the arrival of the authorities. These events created a sense of communal identity and solidarity that transcended social class divisions, uniting wealthy merchants, artisans, and rural workers around a shared faith and a common resistance.

The first formally organised Reformed churches in the Netherlands were established in the 1540s–1550s, often with the help of pastors trained in Geneva or in other Reformed academies. Emden, a city in north-western Germany close to the Dutch border, became a crucial refuge for the Dutch Reformed in exile and a centre of pastoral training. In 1571, the first Synod of the Dutch Reformed Churches was held precisely in Emden, adopting a presbyterian ecclesiastical order that would become the definitive model of the future Dutch Reformed Church.

3 CONSOLIDATION OF THE REFORMATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

The consolidation of the Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands was a process that involved both religious leaders and political figures of exceptional historical stature. Understanding the specific contributions of these personalities is essential to grasp how Calvinism went from being a movement of a persecuted minority to a constitutive force of Dutch national identity.

William of Orange "the Silent" (1533–1584) occupies a singular place in this narrative on account of his personal trajectory and his role as architect of the Dutch nation. Born a Catholic and raised at the court of Charles V, William was originally a loyal servant of the Habsburgs, a pragmatic statesman whose initial motivations were predominantly political. His gradual conversion to Protestantism — passing through Lutheranism and arriving at Calvinism — reflected not only a personal spiritual transformation, but also a political recognition that Calvinism was the most cohesive and committed social force in the resistance to Spain. William understood, before other political leaders, that the Dutch revolution needed a unifying element that transcended regional and class interests, and that the Reformed faith, with its emphasis on resistance to tyranny and on the sovereignty of God over all kingdoms, could provide this ideological cohesion.

The importance of William for the consolidation of the Reformation lies in two fundamental aspects. First, he conferred upon the Protestant cause an aristocratic and military legitimacy that enabled it to organise effective resistance against the Spanish army. Second, and more surprisingly for a sixteenth-century leader, he consistently advocated a degree of religious tolerance that was extraordinary for the time. The Pacification of Ghent

(1576), which he negotiated, attempted to unite Catholic and Protestant provinces against Spanish domination. Although this attempt at a pan-religious Dutch alliance eventually failed, it revealed an ideal of pluralism that, ironically and paradoxically, would become a defining characteristic of Dutch culture.

Marnix de Sainte-Aldegonde (1540–1598), a direct disciple of Calvin in Geneva and a close friend of William of Orange, played a crucial role as theologian, diplomat, and man of letters of the Reformed cause. It was he who composed the *Wilhelmus*, the Dutch national anthem — one of the oldest in the world still in use — whose lyrics express a Reformed theology of dependence on God and resistance to tyranny. Marnix also drafted the Act of Abjuration of 1581, the document by which the United Provinces declared their independence from Philip II, a document that would later influence the American Declaration of Independence.

Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) and **Jacobus Arminius** (1560–1609) represent the two poles of the great internal theological debate that marked the maturity of the Dutch Reformation. Gomarus, a professor at Leiden, defended the strictest version of Calvinism, including the doctrine of double predestination (according to which God had predestined some for salvation and others for damnation from before the creation of the world). Arminius, also a professor at Leiden, questioned this doctrine, arguing that divine predestination was based on God's foreknowledge of human faith. This debate — apparently esoteric — had profound implications for questions of political sovereignty, human nature, and the structure of society, becoming the catalyst for the great council that would definitively seal the theological identity of Reformed Holland.

The Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), also known as the Dutch Revolt, was the crucible in which Dutch national identity and its particular form of Calvinism were forged. This long and costly conflict — which involved episodes of siege and surrender of cities, naval battles, European diplomacy, and military innovations — cannot be understood simply as a war of political independence. It was equally a religious war, a social revolution, and a philosophical dispute over the nature of legitimate authority.

The immediate trigger of the conflict was the *Beeldenstorm* (Iconoclastic Fury) of August 1566 — an outbreak of iconoclasm that swept across the southern and northern Netherlands within a matter of weeks, resulting in the destruction of images, altars, and decorations in hundreds of Catholic churches. The *Beeldenstorm* was partly spontaneous and partly organised by Calvinist militants who saw in religious icons a concrete expression of

the idolatry that the Reformation condemned. For Philip II, the episode was a declaration of war against his sovereign authority and his mission to defend the Catholic faith. His response was to send the Duke of Alba with an army of approximately 10,000 veteran soldiers from the wars in Italy.

Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba (1507–1582), arrived in the Netherlands in August 1567 and immediately established the “Council of Troubles” — nicknamed by the Dutch the “Council of Blood” — a tribunal that operated outside local laws and legal traditions and that condemned thousands of people to death or exile. Among those executed were the Count of Egmont and the Count of Horn, Catholic nobles who had opposed the extremist policies of Madrid, but who were not Protestants. This indiscriminate brutality proved politically counterproductive: by attacking even moderate Catholics, Alba alienated a large part of the nobility and bourgeoisie who might have remained loyal to Philip II.

The war that followed was marked by phases of advance and retreat. William of Orange financed mercenary armies with his own resources and launched several unsuccessful invasions from exile. The strategic turning point occurred in 1572, when the so-called “Sea Beggars” (*Watergeuzen*) — Protestant privateers operating out of English and German ports — captured the port city of Brill (Den Briel), unleashing a wave of uprisings in the northern provinces that quickly expelled the Spanish garrisons from numerous cities. From this moment, the northern provinces — led by the wealthy province of Holland — became the base of operations of the resistance, with William as their *Stadtholder*.

The Union of Utrecht (1579) formalised the alliance of the northern provinces: Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Guelders, Friesland, Overijssel, and Groningen. This document established a treaty of mutual defence and political coordination that would serve as the constitutional basis for the new republic. The Act of Abjuration of 1581 was the final step: drawing on a natural-law and Reformed logic concerning the limits of sovereign authority, the United Provinces formally declared that Philip II had forfeited his right to rule by violating the privileges and rights of his subjects, thereby becoming a tyrant. With this revolutionary act, the Republic of the Seven United Provinces of the Netherlands was born — the first modern republic in European history.

The war continued for another six decades after the Abjuration, but the de facto independence of the United Provinces was established. The Treaty of Münster (1648), part of the Peace of Westphalia, formally recognised the sovereignty of the Dutch Republic before Spain and the Holy Roman Empire, ending 80 years of conflict. During this long period, the

Reformed faith had consolidated itself as the public religion of the republic — the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk*) was the only publicly recognised church, with its pastors paid by the state and its temples being the medieval churches confiscated from the Catholics. Although the republic did not officially prohibit Catholicism or other confessions, they were obliged to practise their faith in private, while the Reformed Church enjoyed an uncontested public privilege.

If the Eighty Years' War represented the political and national consolidation of the Dutch Reformation, the Synod of Dort (Dordrecht, 1618–1619) was its theological equivalent. This international council — to which delegates of Reformed churches from England, Scotland, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Nassau came, in addition to all the Dutch provinces — was convened to resolve the theological crisis generated by the Arminian Controversy.

The immediate context was explosive. The followers of Arminius, known as Remonstrants, had published in 1610 the *Five Articles of Remonstrance*, questioning the Calvinist doctrines of unconditional predestination, limited atonement, and the perseverance of the saints. The debate had quickly spilled over from the ecclesiastical sphere to become a matter of political life: the Grand Pensionary Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the most powerful civil official of the republic, supported the Remonstrants, partly for theological reasons and partly for political calculations aimed at increasing provincial authority over the church. The *Stadtholder* Maurice of Nassau, son of William of Orange, supported the orthodox Calvinist Gomarists. The conflict culminated in the arrest and execution of Oldenbarnevelt in 1619 — one of the darkest episodes in Dutch republican history — and in the exile of the theologian and jurist Hugo Grotius, who sympathised with the Remonstrants.

Presided over by Johannes Bogerman (1576–1637), the synod met from November 1618 to May 1619, over 180 sessions. After hearing and refuting the Remonstrant positions, the synod formulated the *Canons of Dort*, a doctrinal document that reaffirmed Calvinist orthodoxy in five chapters corresponding to the five Arminian remonstrances: the total depravity of the human being, unconditional election on the part of God, the limited atonement of Christ (whose benefits are applied only to the elect), the irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit, and the perseverance of the saints. These five points would become known in the Anglo-Saxon world by the acronym TULIP.

In addition to the dogmatic decisions, the Synod of Dort took practical decisions of immense social impact. It ordered the translation of the Bible into Dutch from the original

languages (which would result in the *Statenvertaling* of 1637), established guidelines for primary education in all parishes, regulated the catechism as a pedagogical instrument, and determined that pastors should pay special attention to the instruction of children. The Synod was, therefore, much more than a theological council: it was a founding moment of a civilisation, in which the religious and intellectual elite of the Dutch republic outlined the educational, cultural, and spiritual project that would guide the nation for centuries.

The Canons of Dort (1619) — Summary: The document consolidated Dutch Reformed theology around five fundamental affirmations, frequently designated in the Anglophone world as TULIP: (T) Total Depravity — human nature is entirely corrupted by sin; (U) Unconditional Election — God freely elects without consideration of human merit; (L) Limited Atonement — Christ died specifically for the elect; (I) Irresistible Grace — the Holy Spirit effectively transforms the heart of the elect; (P) Perseverance of the Saints — the elect never definitively lose salvation. This theological system would shape the ethics, education, and public life of the Netherlands for more than two centuries.

4 IMPACT ON LITERACY AND EDUCATION

The impact of the Calvinist Reformation on Dutch education constitutes perhaps the most dramatic and empirically documented example of how a theological transformation can produce far-reaching social consequences. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to start from the theological principle that motivated it: *Sola Scriptura* — the doctrine that the Bible is the sole and supreme authority for Christian faith and life. If the Scriptures are God's direct word to the believer, then every believer has not only the right, but the sacred duty to read them personally and within the family. This theological conclusion, apparently simple, had revolutionary consequences: it transformed literacy from a technical skill reserved for clerics, scribes, and merchants into a spiritual necessity of the first order for every member of the Christian community.

The complementary doctrine of the *priesthood of all believers* reinforced this logic. By affirming that there is no intermediary priestly caste between the believer and God, that every Christian is a priest before the Lord, Calvinism eliminated the figure of the priest as the irreplaceable and necessary mediator of access to the sacred. In practice, this meant that each head of household was responsible for the religious instruction of his children and dependants, which made the ability to read a domestic responsibility of a religious character.

The Synod of Dort (1618–1619) transformed these theological convictions into concrete ecclesiastical policy. Article 2 of the School Regulations adopted by the synod determined that in each city and each village a school should be established, funded by the State or by the Church, where children would be instructed to read, write, understand the catechism, and practise the fundamentals of the Reformed Christian religion. This was not an abstract educational programme, but an institutional mandate with implementation mechanisms: the consistories (governing councils of the local churches) were responsible for supervising the schools, the pastors were to inspect the progress of the pupils regularly, and the civil magistrates were compelled to finance the schools and ensure that all children — including the poor — had access to instruction.

In practical terms, the resulting educational system was structured at multiple levels. The *Kleine Scholen* (Little or Elementary Schools) were established in the local parishes to provide basic instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, and catechism. Above these were the *Latijnse Scholen* (Latin Schools), which prepared pupils for university with instruction in Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and philosophy. At the top of this hierarchy were the universities, of which Leiden was the most prominent. This integrated system, financed by a combination of ecclesiastical, municipal, and provincial resources, constituted the first outline of a public education system in the history of modern Europe.

The role of teachers was also radically transformed. In the medieval tradition, teaching was primarily the responsibility of the clergy. In the Dutch republic, the schoolmasters (*schoolmeesters*) became a distinct professional category, frequently examined and approved by the ecclesiastical consistories to verify their doctrinal orthodoxy, but exercising an increasingly civil function. Many schoolmasters in the small communities also accumulated functions as municipal secretary, examiner, and pre-deacon of the local church, becoming central figures of communal life.

The publication of the *Statenvertaling* in 1637 represents one of the most significant moments not only of religious history, but of the cultural and linguistic history of the Netherlands. This translation of the Bible, commissioned by the Synod of Dort in 1618 and financed by the States General (the federal parliament of the republic), was the result of almost two decades of meticulous work by a team of highly qualified scholars.

The translators were chosen carefully from among the greatest specialists in Hebrew and Greek of the republic: Johannes Bogerman and Gijsbert Voetius for the Old Testament, Festus Hommius and Jacobus Revius for the New Testament, among others. The

methodology adopted was explicitly scientific by the standards of the time: the translation was to be made directly from the original texts in Hebrew and Greek, without the mediation of the Latin Vulgate, and was to reproduce the syntactic structure and idiomatic nuances of the originals as much as possible in Dutch, preserving the literary texture of the Scriptures.

The linguistic impact of the *Statenvertaling* was analogous to that which Luther's Bible exerted on German or the King James Bible on English: it became the literary and linguistic standard that shaped modern Dutch. In a country with significant dialectal variations between the provinces — the differences between the Dutch of Utrecht, that of Groningen, and that of Zeeland were considerable — the *Statenvertaling* provided a unified literary Dutch that transcended the regional dialects. By being read and heard in every church in the country, in every family, and in every school, it established a linguistic standard that strengthened the common cultural identity of the United Provinces far more than any political decree could have done.

From the educational point of view, the *Statenvertaling* functioned as the nation's principal textbook. In an era in which printed materials were expensive and books relatively scarce, the presence of the Bible in almost every Dutch home — guaranteed by the subsidies of the state and the Church — ensured that every family that invested in the literacy of its children would have an immediate reference text, rich and of the very highest literary standard. Children learned to read by identifying words they already knew by heart from the oral instruction of the catechism and from the Sunday services. The Bible was not only a sacred book; it was the first book that most Dutch people of the seventeenth century learned to read.

If the parish primary schools represented the base of the educational pyramid built by the Reformation, the universities were its apex and its most eloquent expression of the Reformed vision of a community of faith fully committed to knowledge. The founding of the **University of Leiden** in 1575 is a symbolic event of the first order. William of Orange granted it to the city as a reward for its heroic resistance during the Spanish siege of 1574–1575 — the inhabitants of Leiden withstood the siege for more than a year, suffering severe famine, before being relieved by the “Sea Beggars” who flooded the polders. The university was, therefore, both a prize for bravery and a deliberate investment in the intellectual future of the republic.

Leiden quickly became one of the most important intellectual centres in Europe. Its location in the Netherlands — where the relative freedom of the press and intellectual

tolerance were superior to those of any other European country — attracted scholars who elsewhere would have faced persecution. René Descartes lived in the Netherlands for 20 years (1628–1649), taking advantage of this atmosphere of freedom.

Baruch Spinoza, a Dutch-Jewish philosopher, produced in Amsterdam works that would have been impossible anywhere else in Catholic Europe. Hugo Grotius, founder of modern international law, developed in Leiden his ideas on natural law and the laws of war. This concentration of intellectual talent was not accidental: it was the direct result of a religious and state policy that valued knowledge as an essential dimension of the pious and republican life.

Besides Leiden, other universities were founded during the Golden Age: the University of Franeker in Friesland (1585), the University of Groningen (1614), the University of Utrecht (1636), and the University of Harderwijk (1648). This extraordinary number of universities — five institutions for a population of approximately 2 million people at the beginning of the seventeenth century — reflects both the commitment to higher education and the federal structure of the republic, where each major province wished to have its own institution for the training of pastors and magistrates.

The results of the educational policies driven by the Reformation are empirically measurable and reveal an extraordinary divergence between Holland and the rest of Europe. Historical studies on literacy in the early modern period fundamentally use two types of evidence: the ability to sign one's own name on official documents (such as marriage records, inventories, and contracts) and the number of works published and sold. Although signature is only an approximate indicator of full literacy, it provides quantifiable data that allow robust historical comparisons.

Table 1

Estimated Literacy Rates in Western Europe (Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries)

Country / Region	c. 1650 — Men (%)	c. 1650 — Women (%)	c. 1750 — Men (%)	c. 1750 — Women (%)
Dutch Republic (Holland)	75	50	85	64
England (London)	65	35	70	45

Scotland (cities)	60	30	65	40
France (North)	35	15	50	27
Spain (Castile)	20	8	30	12
Italy (Centre)	22	10	32	14

Source: *Note: Estimated data based on Eskelson (2021), Stone (1969), and Graff (1987). The rates vary significantly between urban and rural areas within each country.*

As the table above shows, the Dutch Republic presented male literacy rates that were double those of France and almost four times those of Spain in the mid-seventeenth century. Even more remarkable is the female literacy rate: with 50% of adult women able to sign their name in the mid-seventeenth century, Holland was generations ahead of any other European country in this respect. This figure is especially significant because it reveals that the Dutch educational revolution was not limited to the male sex — although gender inequality persisted, it was drastically smaller than in the neighbouring countries.

Eskelson (2021), in his study on institutions and literacy in early modern Western Europe, argues that the difference between Protestant and Catholic countries cannot be explained solely by the religious factor; variables such as urbanisation, per capita wealth, and the existence of commercial networks also play a significant role. Nevertheless, he concludes that, controlling for these variables, the specific influence of Protestant institutions — especially Holland and Scotland — on literacy rates remains statistically significant, suggesting a genuine causal effect of Reformed Protestantism on popular education.

Another revealing indicator is the number of books published. In 1630, the Dutch Republic was responsible for approximately half of all the printing output of Europe. Amsterdam had become the largest publishing centre in the world, publishing not only religious texts, but also scientific, philosophical, literary, and political works that were censored in other European countries. This editorial flourishing was both cause and consequence of the high literacy rate: a literate population created demand for books, and the availability of books encouraged literacy.

5 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The connection between Reformed Protestantism and economic development was most influentially analysed by the German sociologist Max Weber in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905). The Weberian thesis, although widely debated, contested, and nuanced by subsequent research, remains an unavoidable starting point for understanding the Dutch phenomenon. For Weber, Calvinism developed a set of attitudes and practices in relation to work, money, and material life that were especially conducive to the development of a rational and methodical capitalist economy.

The first element of this ethic was the doctrine of *vocation* (*Beruf* in German, *roeping* in Dutch). Whereas in the medieval Catholic tradition God's "calling" was primarily understood as a calling to the contemplative religious life (monasticism), Calvinism radically democratised the concept: any legitimate activity — whether craftsmanship, commerce, agriculture, medicine, or the magistracy — was a divine calling that the believer should exercise with the utmost diligence and excellence. This theological dignification of secular work had powerful behavioural consequences: to work with discipline, efficiency, and integrity was not merely an economic virtue, but an act of worship of God.

The second element was *inner-worldly asceticism*, the paradoxical combination of intense activity in the world (and therefore of the production of wealth) with a rigorous restriction in personal consumption. The orthodox Calvinist was not a monk who fled the world, but neither was he an aristocrat who flaunted his wealth in feasts and palaces. He worked intensely, accumulated wealth, but consumed only what was necessary for a pious and orderly life. The mathematical result of this combination was inevitable: the difference between production and consumption, between income and expenditure, was systematically reinvested in the business itself or in the community, generating an accumulation of capital on an unprecedented scale.

The third element was the soteriological anxiety produced by the doctrine of predestination. If salvation was predetermined by God before the creation of the world, and if human beings could not, by their own works, influence this divine decision, how could the believer have any certainty that he was one of the elect? Weber argued that Calvinists sought external signs of election in their success in work and business: material prosperity, the product of a life of discipline and diligence, became psychological evidence of divine grace. Although this relationship between prosperity and election was never affirmed as official

doctrine by the Reformed churches, it functioned as a powerful psychological engine that drove the economic behaviour of believers.

It is important to qualify that the relationship between Calvinism and capitalism is not free of historical complexity. Historians such as Amintore Fanfani (1935) and Hugh Trevor-Roper (1967) questioned different aspects of the Weberian thesis. Fanfani argued that commercial capitalism already existed in Catholic Italy of the fifteenth century, independently of Protestantism. Trevor-Roper observed that many of the most important entrepreneurs of the Dutch Golden Age were refugees from the southern Netherlands — Flemings and Brabanters — whose economic dynamism was not exclusively determined by religion, but also by their displacement from the Catholic centres and by the need to rebuild their fortunes in a new environment.

However, these objections, although pertinent, do not refute the Dutch phenomenon as a whole. As the historian Jonathan Israel argues in his monumental *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (1995), what distinguished the Dutch economy was not merely the individual spirit of its entrepreneurs, but the institutional set that Calvinism helped to create: an educational system that produced a highly literate and numerically competent workforce; an ethic of commercial trust based on the word of honour and on the communal ties of church membership; a theological distrust of state absolutism that favoured the creation of a regulatory environment favourable to commerce; and a network of trans-regional and transnational solidarity among Reformed communities that facilitated credit and commercial information.

The Dutch Golden Age (*Gouden Eeuw*), which spans approximately the seventeenth century, represents one of the most extraordinary periods of cultural, scientific, and economic flourishing in the history of humanity. A nation of approximately two million inhabitants — smaller than many contemporary European cities — controlled the largest maritime trade in the world, possessed the most sophisticated financial institutions on the planet, produced some of the greatest artists (Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals) and scientists (Huygens, van Leeuwenhoek) of its era, and established colonies and trading posts on four continents.

The Dutch economic ascent was initially driven by what the Dutch themselves called the “mother trade” (*moedernegotie*): the grain and timber trade of the Baltic. Already in the fifteenth century, Dutch merchants dominated the routes between the producing ports of the eastern Baltic (Danzig, Riga, Königsberg) and the consuming markets of the Netherlands, France, and the Iberian Peninsula. This dominant position in the trade of essential

commodities provided the initial capital and the commercial networks on which the future global expansion would be built. The *fluiten* — Dutch merchant ships of innovative design, more efficient and cheaper to operate than their English or Portuguese equivalents — gave the Dutch merchant marine a decisive competitive advantage.

The expansion into the Asian spice trade — pepper, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon — which the Portuguese had dominated since the beginning of the sixteenth century, represented the next step in the Dutch economic ascent. The creation of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) in 1602 was the organisational response to this challenge. With an initial capital of 6.5 million guilders raised from more than 1,000 shareholders in six regional chambers, the VOC was not only the first joint-stock company in history, but also the first to possess quasi-sovereign powers: the right to wage war, to negotiate treaties, to mint coinage, and to administer territories. Supported by a permanent fleet of warships and by the accumulated capital of its shareholders — many of whom were prominent members of the Reformed Church — the VOC expelled the Portuguese from their strategic positions in the Indian Ocean and established a commercial empire that extended from Batavia (present-day Jakarta) to Ceylon, from the Malabar Coast to Japan.

Alongside global trade, the domestic Dutch economy diversified and modernised in an impressive manner. Specialised agriculture — especially tulip flowers, whose speculative fever of 1636–37 may be considered the first financial bubble in history — was highly productive. The dairy industry, the herring fishery in the North Sea (with technical innovations such as the curing of the fish on board the boats), the textile industry of Leiden and Haarlem, shipbuilding, and the production of Delft ceramics (inspired by the Chinese porcelain brought by the VOC) constituted a diversified industrial base. This integrated economy was sustained by a financial system of unparalleled sophistication: the Amsterdam Exchange Bank (1609), the Amsterdam Loan Bank (1614), the Amsterdam Stock Exchange (1609), and a developed maritime insurance market created a system of capital mobilisation and allocation that would only be surpassed by the English Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century.

The Dutch commercial expansion of the Golden Age had profound implications for the internal social structure of the republic. Unlike the European feudal monarchies, where wealth and power were fundamentally associated with the possession of land and aristocratic birth, the Dutch commercial economy created a dominant class of mercantile origin — the *regenten* (regents) — whose power was based on commercial and financial capital accumulated through business.

This class of regents controlled not only the great commercial enterprises, but also the municipal and provincial administration. In the assemblies (États) of the provinces and in the municipal councils, it was the representatives of this wealthy bourgeoisie who made the political decisions. Their power was, to a certain extent, counterbalanced by the influence of the Reformed pastors and by the popularism of the artisans and skilled workers organised in the craft guilds. This tension between different social groups, all articulating their demands through a representative political structure, brought the Dutch republic closer to a modern democracy than any other form of European government of the seventeenth century.

The Calvinist ethic of work and saving created, according to some historians, a culture of social mobility based on merit that was remarkably rare for the time. Although the republic was not an egalitarian society — the disparities of wealth were considerable, especially between the great merchants of the VOC and the workers of the shipyards — the dominant cultural narrative valued self-improvement through diligent work, education, and integrity, not the privilege of birth. This mentality favoured upward social mobility for those who demonstrated the Reformed virtues of discipline, frugality, and commercial honesty.

6 POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURING

The Republic of the Seven United Provinces constituted an unprecedented political experiment in the Europe of the seventeenth century. On a continent dominated by absolutist monarchies that asserted the divine right of kings, the Netherlands developed a republican, federalist, and representative system that challenged the dominant political logic of the time. Understanding how Calvinist theology contributed to the formation and legitimation of this political system is essential to evaluating the historical legacy of the Dutch Reformation.

The theological basis of Dutch republicanism lay, in part, in the Calvinist doctrine of *total depravity*. This doctrine, which holds that all dimensions of human nature — including reason and will — are corrupted by sin since the Fall of Adam, had profound political implications: if no human being is intrinsically good enough to exercise unlimited power over his fellows without succumbing to corruption and tyranny, then no political system should concentrate excessive power in a single person or institution. This theological distrust of absolute human power translated into a practical preference for systems of checks and balances, division of power, and institutional accountability.

The political system of the United Provinces reflected this philosophy in its structure. Sovereignty resided formally in the seven provinces (Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Guelders,

Overijssel, Friesland, and Groningen), each with its own provincial assembly (the *Staten*). These assemblies, in turn, sent delegates to the *Staten-Generaal* (States General), the federal body in The Hague that coordinated foreign policy, defence, and other matters of common interest. Crucially, decisions in the States General on fundamental questions required unanimity among the provinces, ensuring that none of them — not even the far wealthier and more populous Holland — could impose its will on the others.

Executive power was divided between two potentially rival centres. The *Stadtholder* — an office that in practice remained in the House of Orange-Nassau during most of republican history — was the military commander and the arbiter of provincial disputes. The Grand Pensionary (*Raadspensionaris*), the highest civil official of the province of Holland, was the principal diplomatic negotiator and the spokesman for the commercial interests of the urban bourgeoisie. The tension between these two sources of authority created a fluid political dynamic which, although it sometimes generated crises (such as the one that culminated in the execution of Oldenbarnevelt in 1619 and the “murder” of Oldenbarnevelt's brother), prevented the crystallisation of power in a single centre.

This political system was justified intellectually through a juridical and philosophical theory that combined classical natural law with Reformed principles. **Hugo Grotius** (1583–1645), the greatest jurist of the period, developed in works such as *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (1625) a theory of international law and just war that was explicitly founded on principles of natural law, but that resonated with the Reformed ethic of responsibility and limitation of state power. The Act of Abjuration of 1581 itself, by justifying the deposition of Philip II on the basis of his violation of the fundamental rights of his subjects, anticipated arguments that would only be fully developed by John Locke at the end of the seventeenth century.

One of the most paradoxical and fascinating aspects of the Dutch republic was its practice of relative religious tolerance, which contrasted vividly with the wars of religion that devastated the rest of Europe during the same period. Although the Reformed Church was the only publicly privileged denomination — with its pastors paid by the state and its temples being the public churches — the other religious confessions were, for the most part, tolerated in practice, provided they contented themselves with the private practice of their worship.

The Catholics, who constituted a significant minority especially in the southern provinces and in the border regions, could practise their faith in “hidden churches” (*schuilkerken*) — residential spaces converted into places of worship that were of general knowledge to the authorities, but that were tacitly tolerated in exchange for the payment of

fees. The Mennonites and other Anabaptist denominations, whose pacifism and industriousness made them economically valuable citizens, were generally tolerated, especially in Amsterdam. The Lutherans maintained their own congregations in the cities. The dissident Calvinists (Remonstrants) found shelter after the Synod of Dort especially in Amsterdam and in other cities.

Even more remarkable was the tolerance extended to the Jews. Amsterdam became, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, one of the main centres of the European Jewish diaspora, receiving both Sephardic Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula (where they had suffered the persecutions of the Inquisition and had been forced to convert to Catholicism as *conversos*) and Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. The Jews could openly practise their religion, maintain synagogues and academies of religious study (*yeshivot*), and participate in the economic life of the republic to degrees of freedom unparalleled in the contemporary Christian world. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), born in the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, although eventually excommunicated by his own community, produced his revolutionary philosophical works in an environment that, despite its tensions, was fundamentally more open than any other in Europe.

This practice of tolerance should not be romanticised or seen as a coherent application of the modern principle of religious freedom. It had fundamentally pragmatic bases: the republic needed to attract and retain human and financial capital, and religious persecution was economically destructive. The Jewish merchants, the Mennonite artisans, the Sephardic financiers, the Flemish artisans who were refugees from the wars of religion of the south — all contributed skills, capital, and commercial networks that the republic needed. Moreover, many of the regents who governed the cities had a political interest in keeping the Calvinist pastors under control, preventing the Reformed Church from becoming a state within the state. Tolerance was, in part, an instrument of governance that kept clerical influence within acceptable limits.

However, regardless of its motivations, the effects of Dutch tolerance on the intellectual culture of the republic were immeasurable. The possibility of publishing works prohibited in other countries, the presence of communities of different religious and intellectual traditions, and the lesser intervention of ecclesiastical censorship in public life created in Amsterdam and in the other cities of the republic an environment of intellectual pluralism that was, for more than a century, the most fertile in Europe.

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) represents the most elaborate and influential synthesis of Dutch Calvinism as a political and social philosophy. Pastor, theologian, journalist, founder of a political party, founder of a university, professor, and Prime Minister of the Netherlands between 1901 and 1905, Kuyper was one of the most extraordinary figures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose influence extended well beyond Dutch borders.

Kuyper's most enduring contribution to political philosophy was the doctrine of *Sphere Sovereignty* (*Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*), elaborated in his celebrated inaugural lecture at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880 and developed over the course of his career. The central thesis of this doctrine is that God created society as a plurality of spheres of authority — family, church, state, science, art, commerce, etc. — each with its own sovereignty derived directly from divine ordination, not from the delegation of the state. The role of the state, according to Kuyper, is threefold: to guarantee harmony between the spheres; to prevent one of them from dominating or invading the others; and to protect individuals within each sphere against abuses of power.

This doctrine had radical implications for practical politics. Firstly, it provided a theological justification for institutional pluralism: in a confessional Christian society such as the Netherlands, different religious groups — Calvinists, Catholics, Lutherans — had the right to their own schools, universities, newspapers, and social organisations, each with its own confessional identity, without the state imposing a secularist uniformity or a dominant religious denomination upon all. Secondly, it structurally limited the power of the state: the government had no authority to intervene in the internal affairs of the family, the church, or other voluntary associations, except to guarantee right and prevent injustices.

In practical politics, Kuyper translated these ideas into the creation of the *Anti-Revolutionary Party* (1879) — the first mass political party of the Netherlands — the *Free University of Amsterdam* (1880) — a university explicitly founded on Calvinist principles, independent of the state and of the established church — and the system of confessional education subsidised by the state (*bijzondere scholen*), whereby private schools of religious inspiration received public funding proportional to the number of pupils enrolled. This last point was the heart of the Dutch “school struggle” that dominated the politics of the country for decades, being finally resolved by the Pacification of 1917, when the Dutch Constitution guaranteed equal funding for public and confessional schools — a system that persists to this day.

7 EVOLUTION UP TO THE PRESENT DAY

The social system that Kuyper helped to build — the so-called *verzuiling* (pillarisation) — became the dominant form of organisation of Dutch society in the twentieth century. The concept of pillarisation describes the division of Dutch society into parallel vertical ideological "pillars" (*zuilen*): an orthodox Protestant (Calvinist) pillar, a Catholic pillar, a socialist pillar, and a liberal pillar, each with its own complete infrastructure of social, cultural, and political organisations. In its full development, around 1920–1960, pillarisation meant that a Dutch citizen could be born in a hospital of their pillar, be educated in schools of their pillar, work in a trade union of their pillar, read the newspaper of their pillar, listen to the radio of their pillar, and be buried by an undertaker of their pillar, without ever having significant contact with members of the other pillars.

The Protestant pillar, direct heir to the Calvinist tradition and to the work of Kuyper, exerted a formidable political and cultural influence during the first decades of the twentieth century. Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party and its coalition partner, the Christian Historical Party, governed the Netherlands in coalition with the Catholic party during much of the interwar period. The Protestant confessional schools educated a significant proportion of Dutch youth. The Free University of Amsterdam, the University of Utrecht (with a strong Reformed influence), and the Free University of Amsterdam formed generations of pastors, lawyers, doctors, and teachers who carried Calvinist values into all professions and instances of public life.

This system of pillarisation was, during its period in force, remarkably effective in managing the religious and ideological diversity of a pluralistic society. By guaranteeing that each major group had its own institutions subsidised by the state, it avoided the acute religious conflicts that had devastated other European countries. The "civil peace" that characterised the Netherlands during much of the twentieth century, in contrast to the religious or ideological civil wars of other countries, may be partly attributed to this system of "consociationalism" — management of pluralism through the guarantee of institutional autonomy for each group.

The most dramatic transformation of the Netherlands in the post-war period was the accelerated process of secularisation that, within a few decades, transformed one of the most deeply religious nations of Europe into one of the most secular in the Western world. This process, known as *ontzuiling* (depillarisation), refers both to the decline of individual religiosity

and to the collapse of the system of pillars that had organised Dutch society during the twentieth century.

Dutch secularisation began slowly in the 1950s and 1960s, but accelerated dramatically after the cultural upheavals of 1968. The post-war generation, raised in unprecedented economic prosperity and educated to ever higher levels, began to question the traditional religious authorities. The concept of “emancipation” — of paradoxically Calvinist and socialist origin — which had been employed to describe the achievement of equality of rights by the subaltern groups within the system of pillars, was redirected towards personal liberation from traditional moral and religious restrictions. Television, the universalisation of higher education, the expansion of the welfare state, and the international counterculture conspired to erode the communal loyalties that sustained the pillars.

The decline was especially marked among the Protestants. The Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*), which had been the most influential institutional expression of Dutch Calvinism for centuries, saw its membership fall dramatically. In an attempt to reverse this decline through consolidation, the Dutch Reformed Church merged in 2004 with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*) and with the Evangelical Lutheran Church to form the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (PKN). Despite the merger, the decline continued: in 2022, the PKN had fewer than 1.6 million active members, compared with the almost 4 million that the founding churches had in the preceding decades.

The statistics of Statistics Netherlands (CBS) for 2022 reveal a radical transformation of the Dutch religious landscape: approximately 58% of the population over 15 years of age did not belong to any religion, a significant increase compared with the 45% recorded in 2010. Catholics represented about 18% of the population (a fall from 27% in 2010), while Protestants totalled only 14% (a fall from 18% in 2010). Muslims, whose presence is largely the result of the immigration of the 1960s–1980s, maintained a stable proportion of about 5%, with rates of religious observance significantly higher than those of Christians. Among young Dutch people aged 18 to 25, fewer than 25% identified with any religion in 2022.

Table 2

Religious Profile of the Netherlands (2010–2022)

Religious Affiliation	2010 (%)	2015 (%)	2022 (%)

No religion	45	52	58
Catholics	27	23	18
Protestants (PKN and others)	18	16	14
Muslims	5	5	5
Others (Hindus, Buddhists, Jews)	5	4	5

Source: *Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS), 2022. Data referring to the population over 15 years of age..*

Notwithstanding the secularisation of formal religious life, the cultural legacy of the Protestant Reformation remains deeply inscribed in the structures and values of contemporary Dutch society. The emphasis on education and literacy, which produced one of the most efficient educational systems in the world (with Dutch students consistently among the best in the international PISA rankings); the culture of tolerance and pluralism, which made the Netherlands a pioneer in the recognition of civil rights for minorities; the ethic of disciplined work and the meticulous management of resources, which is manifested in the efficiency of Dutch agriculture and in the soundness of its public finances; the commitment to international law and multilateral institutions, which has its roots in the Grotian tradition of natural law; all these elements are, to a significant degree, secularised inheritances of the Calvinist culture that the Protestant Reformation implanted in the Netherlands.

8 LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on the Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands and its impacts is vast and multidisciplinary, encompassing works of history, sociology, theology, economics, and political science. This section presents a critical review of the most relevant and influential works, organised by thematic axes.

The work of **Abraham Kuyper**, especially the *Lectures on Calvinism* (lectures delivered at Princeton University in 1898 and published in 1899), remains indispensable for understanding the comprehensive cultural impact of Calvinism. Kuyper argued not only about Reformed theology in the strict sense, but about Calvinism as a *Weltanschauung* — an integral worldview that generated specific implications for art, science, politics, and economics. His analysis of Sphere Sovereignty continues to be a powerful theoretical framework for understanding the institutional plurality of modern democracies. The criticism that can be made of Kuyper is that his vision is essentially apologetic and at times teleological,

tending to present the Dutch developments as the necessary realisation of Calvinist principles, without sufficient attention to the contingent aspects and the non-religious forces that also shaped the Dutch trajectory.

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), a contemporary and collaborator of Kuyper, offers a complementary perspective. In his monumental *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 volumes, 1895–1901), Bavinck articulates Calvinist theology systematically with a historical sensitivity and an openness to dialogue with modernity that prefigure many theological developments of the twentieth century. Bavinck is particularly useful for understanding the relationship between Calvinist orthodoxy and the Erasmian humanist heritage, which Dutch Calvinism never completely abandoned.

The work of **Max Weber**, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905), remains the obligatory point of reference for any discussion of the relations between Protestantism and economic development. Although many of his specific arguments have been contested by subsequent research — especially his dating of the “capitalist spirit” and his characterisation of medieval capitalism — his central intuition concerning the relationship between religious ethic and economic behaviour continues to be fruitful. The most sophisticated response to the Weberian thesis came from R. H. Tawney in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), which offers a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between Protestantism, Catholicism, and capitalism, avoiding Weber's unilateral determinism.

For the Dutch case specifically, the unavoidable reference work is the monumental *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* by **Jonathan Israel** (Oxford University Press, 1995). With more than 1,200 densely documented pages, Israel analyses the rise and fall of the Dutch republic as a multifactorial phenomenon, in which the Protestant Reformation is one among several determining elements, including the geographical structure (the Rhine delta), the naval innovations, the pre-existing urban tradition, and the geopolitical conjunctures. Israel is particularly useful for understanding the internal tensions of the republic and the factors that eventually led to its decline in the eighteenth century.

Geoffrey Parker, in *The Dutch Revolt* (1977), offers the most detailed and balanced analysis of the Eighty Years' War, situating it within the broader context of the European wars of religion and of the crisis of the Habsburg system. Parker examines both the religious and the political, social, and military dimensions of the conflict, demonstrating that the victory of the Dutch revolution was contingent and dependent on a specific combination of factors that would hardly be repeated.

Tyrel C. Eskelson, in “States, Institutions, and Literacy Rates in Early-Modern Western Europe” (2021), published in the *Journal of Education and Learning*, offers the most recent and methodologically sophisticated quantitative analysis of the relationship between Protestantism and literacy. Using data from multiple countries over the period 1500–1800 and controlling for economic and urban variables, Eskelson confirms the existence of a “Protestant effect” on literacy that is statistically robust, especially in the case of the Calvinist nations. The work is essential reading for any researcher who wishes to go beyond generalisations and work with rigorous empirical evidence.

The classic work of **Harvey J. Graff**, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (1987), provides the broader context for understanding the reading revolution in modern Europe. Graff demonstrates that the relationship between literacy and Protestantism, although real, was mediated by a series of other factors — urbanisation, economic development, printing tradition — that made Protestantism a facilitating condition, not a sufficient condition, for mass literacy.

For the analysis of contemporary Dutch secularisation, the works of **Peter Berger** are essential. In *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) and in the later works such as *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), Berger revised his initial thesis on secularisation as an inevitable consequence of modernity, recognising that the Netherlands is an exceptional case within a world that, globally, remains deeply religious. This revision offers a valuable comparative perspective for understanding why Dutch secularisation was deeper and faster than in many other Protestant countries.

The works of the Dutch sociologist **Peter Achterberg** and collaborators on the “Dutch paradox” — how a country with such deep Calvinist roots secularised so completely — represent the most current empirical research on this phenomenon, using data from longitudinal surveys of Statistics Netherlands to trace the religious transformations of Dutch society over the decades.

9 BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH

The investigation into the impact of the Protestant Reformation on Dutch development offers benefits that transcend historical interest in the strict sense, projecting onto fundamental questions of contemporary debates in the sociology of religion, political science, the theory of economic development, and the philosophy of education.

For the Sociology of Religion and the Theory of Secularisation: The Dutch case is a privileged historical laboratory for testing the hypotheses on the relations between religion and modernity. The trajectory that goes from being the most fervent of the Calvinist nations of the seventeenth century to the most secularised society of contemporary Europe challenges the simplistic versions of the secularisation thesis — which predicted a linear relationship between modernisation and the decline of religiosity — at the same time as it illustrates the mechanisms by which a religious tradition can gradually produce the conditions of its own overcoming. The Calvinist emphasis on education and critical reading produced generations of literate citizens capable of questioning religious authority itself; the doctrine of Sphere Sovereignty, by limiting the power of the Church over the state and civil society, created the autonomous spaces from which secularisation could advance.

For the Theory of Economic Development: The Dutch experience demonstrates the importance of institutional and cultural variables in economic development, complementing and sometimes challenging the analyses that privilege geographical, technological, or resource-endowment factors. Investment in education as a factor of economic development — today an axiom of development economics — finds one of its most eloquent historical examples in seventeenth-century Holland, where mass literacy, motivated by religious reasons, created a highly productive workforce and a mercantile class capable of financial and organisational innovation. The creation of the VOC as a joint-stock company, of the Amsterdam Exchange Bank as a precursor of the central bank, and of the Amsterdam Stock Exchange as the first organised capital market are institutional innovations whose cultural roots go back, at least in part, to the Reformed tradition of communal organisation, accountability, and collegial management.

For Political Science and Democratic Theory: The republican system of the United Provinces anticipated many of the characteristics that we consider essential to modern democracies: representation, federalism, checks and balances, tolerance of minorities, independence of the judicial power. The analysis of the theological bases of this system — the Calvinist distrust of unrestricted human power, the doctrine of Sphere Sovereignty, the tradition of collegial ecclesiastical government — contributes to the understanding of the cultural foundations of liberal democracies, a theme of growing relevance in an era of increasing authoritarianism. Kuyper's doctrine of Sphere Sovereignty, in particular, offers a conceptual framework alternative to the liberal social contract of Locke and Rousseau for

grounding political pluralism and the limitation of state power, with direct implications for contemporary debates on the role of religion in democracy.

For Theology and the Church: This study demonstrates, with robust historical evidence, that doctrinal fidelity and social engagement are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Dutch Calvinism was, simultaneously, rigorously orthodox in its doctrinal standards (the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism) and profoundly transformative of the society in which it was inserted. This combination challenges both the pietism that divorces faith from civic engagement and the social activism that sacrifices doctrinal depth in favour of immediate relevance. The Dutch model suggests that a community of faith that takes seriously both its theology and its responsibilities towards God's creation can be a powerful agent of civilisational transformation.

For the Sciences of Education: The Dutch educational revolution of the seventeenth century offers historical evidence for the thesis that the best educational systems are those that are rooted in a coherent and motivating vision of human dignity and destiny. The Dutch school was not merely an institution for the transfer of technical information; it was the space of formation of a civic and spiritual identity, of transmission of values, and of creation of a community of people capable of reading, thinking, and participating actively in public life. This integral vision of education — which rejects both pure instrumentalism (education as preparation for the labour market) and narrow ideologism (education as indoctrination) — has much to offer to contemporary educational debates.

10 CONCLUSION

The historical course analysed in this article confirms and expands the central thesis that motivated the investigation: the Protestant Reformation, in its specific Calvinist form, was a first-order civilisational engine in the development of the Netherlands. Starting from the first Lutheran and Anabaptist infiltrations of the 1520s, passing through the theological and organisational systematisation brought by figures such as Guido de Brès, Jan Łaski, and John Calvin, up to the dramatic consolidation in the forge of the Eighty Years' War and in the intellectual crucible of the Synod of Dort, Dutch Calvinism forged a nation whose influence on the development of Western modernity is inversely proportional to its geographical size.

The impacts identified and analysed throughout the sections of this article may be synthesised into four fundamental dimensions:

Firstly, the **educational dimension**: the principle of *Sola Scriptura* and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers transformed literacy from an elite privilege into a universal spiritual necessity, producing the highest literacy rates in Europe in the seventeenth century and establishing the model of public education that the following centuries would only refine. The *Statenvertaling* of 1637 linguistically unified the nation and provided the textual basis for an unprecedented intellectual revolution.

Secondly, the **economic dimension**: the Protestant ethic of work as a divine vocation, of inner-worldly asceticism, and of the systematic reinvestment of the surplus created the cultural conditions for the accumulation of capital and the institutional innovation that defined the Golden Age. The VOC, the Amsterdam Exchange Bank, the Amsterdam Stock Exchange — all these institutional innovations that shaped modern capitalism emerged from a cultural environment deeply marked by Reformed values.

Thirdly, the **political dimension**: the Calvinist distrust of absolute human power, grounded in the doctrine of total depravity, was the theological substrate of an innovative republicanism that anticipated central elements of modern liberal democracies. The Act of Abjuration of 1581, by grounding the legitimacy of government in respect for the rights of the governed, foreshadowed Locke and, through him, the declarations of independence of the eighteenth century. Kuyper's doctrine of Sphere Sovereignty systematically articulated this Reformed intuition into a political philosophy of high contemporary relevance.

Fourthly, the **cultural and identity dimension**: Dutch Calvinism not only produced institutions and behaviours; it produced a culture — a constellation of values, practices, narratives, and symbols — that shaped the collective character of the nation in a lasting way. The pragmatic tolerance of Amsterdam, the moral seriousness of the Dutch bourgeoisie portrayed in the group portraits of Rembrandt and Hals, the scientific meticulousness of van Leeuwenhoek and Huygens, the juridical sagacity of Grotius — all these expressions of Dutch genius of the Golden Age are unthinkable without the cultural support that Calvinism provided.

The subsequent trajectory of Holland — from the Calvinist fervour of the seventeenth century to the almost complete secularisation of the twenty-first century — does not invalidate this legacy; rather, it transforms it into a fascinating paradox. A religious tradition that valued education, critical reason, the questioning of authorities, and the autonomy of the individual before God prepared the ground, inadvertently, for its own overcoming by secular modernity. The values of tolerance, pluralism, universal education, and limitation of state power, which

the Reformation implanted in Dutch culture, survived and prospered even when the religious faith that had generated them retreated to the margins of public life.

This is, perhaps, the most profound teaching of the Dutch case: ideas have consequences that transcend the intentions of their authors and the currency of the beliefs that generated them. The Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands was a singular historical event, unrepeatable in its specific form, but whose lessons for the present are perennial: education as the commitment of a community to its own future; the limitation of power as a safeguard of human dignity; tolerance as a condition of collective prosperity; and faith — any authentic faith — as a force capable of moving not only mountains, but entire nations.

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