

# VU Research Portal

## Reformed Theology on the Brink of Modernity

van den Belt, Henk

### **published in**

A Landmark in Turbulent Times

2022

### **document version**

Version created as part of publication process; publisher's layout; not normally made publicly available

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

van den Belt, H. (2022). Reformed Theology on the Brink of Modernity: The Predestinated Thief (1619) and the Remonstrant Accusation of Determinism. In H. van den Belt, K-W. de Jong, & W. van Vlastuin (Eds.), *A Landmark in Turbulent Times: The Meaning and Relevance of the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619)* (pp. 345-364). (Refo500 Academic Studies (R5AS); Vol. 84). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

Henk van den Belt, 'Reformed Theology on the Brink of Modernity: The Predestinated Thief (1619) and the Remonstrant Accusation of Determinism', in Henk van den Belt, Klaas-Willem de Jong en Willem van Vlastuin (eds.), *A Landmark in Turbulent Times: The Meaning and Relevance of the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 345-364.

## 22. Reformed Theology on the Brink of Modernity:

### *The Predestinated Thief* (1619) and the Remonstrant Accusation of Determinism

#### Abstract

Immediately after the synod, a Remonstrant minister, Henricus Slatius (1585–1623), published a pamphlet, titled *The Predestinated Thief*. This article uses this pamphlet to assess the issue of determinism, of which the Remonstrants accused the synod. It concludes that, although the accusation is incorrect, the popularity of the pamphlet and the difficulty from the Reformed side to refute it do indicate a major cultural shift towards a modern, monistic – and therefore deterministic – understanding of the relationship between the Creator and his creatures. In the context of modernity, it is difficult to maintain the theological notion of a divine and a human level of causality that operate simultaneously (*concursum*). The unnuanced satire of Slatius demonstrates the growing difficulty with the combination of divine providence and human freedom. The Arminians seemed to defend human liberty, but in fact bound the will of God to the contingent choices of human beings in history, whereas the orthodox Reformed upheld human liberty while maintaining the Augustinian doctrines of sovereign grace.

#### 22.1 Introduction

Several grand narratives reflect on the roots of modernity, such as the discovery of the human subject as starting point of all knowledge, and the desacralization or disenchantment of the world that made modern science possible. This chapter places the discussions at the Synod of Dordt in the broader perspective of a third grand narrative, the rise of monism in modernity. Monism stands opposed to

monotheism, which holds the will of God, the Creator of heaven and earth, to be the cause of creation. On the contrary, monism understands and interprets God and reality as substantially one. It can either take a pantheistic or a naturalistic and materialistic form; the latter is the most popular in secular monism.

According to the theory of Amos Funkenstein (1986, 57–72, cf. Gregory: 2012, 25–73), modern monism is rooted in the concept of the univocity of being. This theory shows that it is at least plausible that pre-modern thought leans towards monism in which God becomes a being among other beings. The result is that divine and human agencies are understood as a zero-sum game; God, as the efficient cause of all things that happen, excludes creaturely liberty and annuls human responsibility. This monism and determinism culminates in the pantheistic identification of God and nature as expressed by Baruch de Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*.

Jonathan I. Israel values the monistic philosophy of Spinoza as the key to understand all the blessings of modernity, including democracy and liberty (Israel: 2006, 866). This is fascinating because pantheistic Spinozism and its materialistic modern counterpart have deterministic tendencies. It can be argued that the real problem with determinism in our modern or postmodern context lies with the strict naturalism or materialism of a secularized worldview rather than with the belief in an omniscient and almighty God. Modern monism puts the first article of the creed – “I believe in God the almighty Father, Creator of heaven and earth” – under pressure by a pantheistic or materialistic identification of creation with the Creator, or in other words by disregarding what Robert Sokolowski calls “the Christian distinction” (Sokolowski: 1982, 32).

No doubt an analysis of the official documents of the Synod of Dordt and the ensuing theological debates also sheds light on this issue, but still shifts in culture can be even more accurately traced through the analysis of popular literature. Whereas the ability to apply specific scholastic distinctions helped the academically trained theologians to explain how God's absolute sovereignty in predestination and human freedom went together, many of the uneducated had more difficulty in understanding these subtle distinctions.

This chapter will focus on a pamphlet, *The Predestinated Thief* (1619), written shortly after the synod.<sup>1</sup> It is a polemical and satirical publication in the context of a controversy, but sharp controversies reveal cultural shifts most clearly (Israel: 2006, 23). The genre of a satire, although it lacks the nuances of official

---

<sup>1</sup> For a very short summary and discussion, see Frijhoff: 1996, 377–379 and the English translation Frijhoff 2002, 97–99.

theological discourse, reveals where the problem really lies.<sup>2</sup> The text, framed in the form of a dialogue between a pastor and a criminal who is sentenced to death, contains many quotations from contra-Remonstrant sources that suggest this position is open to the accusation of determinism (something that the Reformed theologians themselves denied). Moreover, the pamphlet remained popular in later debates between Arminians and Calvinists, and was even translated into Latin as *Fur praedestinatus* ([Slatius]: 1651) and a few years later from Latin into English ([Slatius]: 1658). For this reason the English translation is not used for the quotations, which are rather directly translated from the Dutch original. Below we will summarize the pamphlet, analyzing the passages in which the Remonstrant author accused Reformed theology of being deterministic. We will compare these accusations with the original sources. After some short remarks regarding the reception of the pamphlet, we will close with a few analytic observations.

## 22.2 Henricus Slatius (1585–1623)

The Remonstrant minister Henricus Slatius (or Hendrick Danielsz Slaet), one of the most radical representatives of the Remonstrant party, was most likely the author of *The Predestinated Thief*.<sup>3</sup> As a student, Slatius was supposed to become a missionary under the responsibility of the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C.), who paid for his studies in Leiden (Van Deursen: 1978, 345). He must have been aware of the underlying philosophical and theological distinctions, and could have known very well that the Reformed did not want to make God the author of sin nor deny human freedom. He had studied theology in Leiden and defended theses under the presidency of Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) on justification (Gomarus: 1605). Slatius did not pass the classis exam in Middelburg because he was suspect of being a supporter of James Arminius (1560–1609). After succeeding in Utrecht, and refusing to go abroad, he became a pastor in Bleiswijk where he wrote a pamphlet against the Contra-Remonstrants; in this tract he blamed the latter of being “seceding pastors” who were friends of the doctrine

---

<sup>2</sup> On satire in the Arminian controversy, see Sierhuis (2015, 85–97), who says that Slatius exploits “the possibilities of the genre to a maximum” (90).

<sup>3</sup> The Remonstrant historian Gerard Brandt is the first to mention Slatius explicitly as the probable author (1704, 4:83, 1086, for the English translation, see Brandt: 1723, 4:42). One of the early reactions (Anon: 1649, 15, 17, 57) already alludes to the conspiracy, without mentioning Slatius’s name. It cannot be excluded that these references were the reason to ascribe the work to Slatius; there is therefore no absolute certainty regarding his authorship.

“that God has rejected young children who die in their infancy – even those from believers – from eternity and damns them in the present time” (Slatius: 1617).

Even in the Remonstrant Brotherhood after the Synod of Dordt, Slatius was too controversial to function as a minister. In 1621, he worked briefly in Antwerp but became involved in a conspiracy against Maurice, Prince of Orange (1567–1625); this scheme seriously damaged the cause of the Remonstrants. Slatius fled, but he was caught, imprisoned, and executed. In a farewell letter to his wife he declared that his soul abhorred the Calvinists and that killing a tyrant was permitted. He encouraged her to raise their children as Christians and teach them about the wickedness of the Calvinists (Van Deursen: 1974, 421–422). According to the custom of those days, on the scaffold a Reformed pastor wanted to assist him in preparing for meeting with God, but unlike the thief in the satire, Slatius refused this pastoral help (Visscher: 1623). After his execution his beheaded body was exposed to the public, but his wife took the body away and buried it. Apparently she even had to do this a second time because his secret grave was discovered the first time (Knappert: 1907, 152–154).

### 22.3 *The Predestinated Thief*

The preface to the reader claims that the words of the thief are “the very words of those teachers who are esteemed the best and purest among the Calvin-minded” ([Slatius]: 1619, 3).<sup>4</sup> Their opinion is abominable, overthrowing evangelical piety, and opening a door to all kinds of ungodliness. After the preface, the pamphlet offers a list of names of those who are cited, beginning with John Calvin (1509–1564) and Theodore Beza (1519–1605), including Contra-Remonstrants such as Gomarus and Reginaldus Donteclock (ca. 1545–after 1611), and reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) and Martin Bucer (1491–1551). The list is not complete; for instance, Martin Luther (1483–1546), who is quoted several times in the pamphlet, is not included in this list.

The dialogue can be divided into three parts: the biography of the thief, his argument that he was predestinated to his evil deeds and therefore innocent, and the thief’s reaction to the encouragement of the pastor to believe the gospel. In the thief’s view faith is unnecessary because he trusts he is elected

---

<sup>4</sup> Because the Dutch text is easily accessible via Google Books, or via [www.prldl.org](http://www.prldl.org), the original is not copied in the footnotes. The Short-Title Catalogue, Netherlands (STCN) mentions three printings in 1619. They all have the same page numbers. All the references in the main text are to the 1619 editions. For the later reprints, see the discussion of the reception below.

anyway and therefore will be saved. The story ends with a few remarks by the thief's jailor.

The accusation of determinism is explicit already on the title page. The subtitle accuses the Calvinists of stimulating wickedness and impiety and of hindering sinners to repent. A short poem on the title page is even more explicit: "of what help can Christ, or his Spirit, and the Word we learned, be to us / if God has predestinated the opposite / if Christ is to be our help with his Spirit and teaching us His Word, then God should not predestinate the opposite" (Slatius: 1619, titlepage). In other words, predestination excludes human responsibility to use the means of grace and even the ability of Christ and the Holy Spirit to save sinners.

The opening phrases of the dialogue are also illustrative of the charge of determinism: "*Preacher*: may God grant you a good evening, young man. How are you doing?" The thief, who is sentenced to death, answers: "even as the almighty God, who does everything according to his will, effects in time what He decreed concerning me from eternity" (7). The pastor asks the thief to recount what sins he has committed in order to be able to address him properly concerning the way of salvation; the pastor declares, "because you will be hanged tomorrow and I have been sent to you to see if I can help you to enter paradise, just as the murderer" (7). The reference is to the criminal on the cross next to Jesus who received mercy (Luke 23:42). Then the thief shares his story; his parents did not want to send him to Leiden to study theology, but preferred Franeker even though the students there were famous for drinking and fighting. Their minister advised for the Frisian university "because it was better to become a drunkard and fighter than a heretic" (8). He was sent to Paris because of his mischief, but there he became even worse. Then they sent him to Geneva, supposing that to be a holy city. He describes in detail how he lived in hypocrisy. The text is full of ambiguous and spicy details. He had a servant with whom he slept "and who, out of the trousers, looked more like a girl than a boy" (9). He and his friends danced at night on their socks and behind closed curtains. One time he was caught and had to creep on his hands and knees in the church, begging God and the congregation for forgiveness. In sum, the former theological student travelled throughout Europe as a thief and burglar, leading a pleasant life with prostitutes and robbers.

The second part of the dialogue starts with the pastor's question inquiring how such a horrible sinner, who deserves the gallows and damnation in hell, can face death with a smile on his face:

*Pastor*: well tell me then where do you think you are going when you leave from here?

*Thief:* to heaven, just like you who are not much better than I am.

*Pastor:* my, o my, do you think you are just as good and decent as I am?

*Thief:* yes and that according to your own confession, because your very best works are in themselves dirty, stinking, heinous and horrible, yes only abomination and sin (11–12).

In the margin, next to a full page of quotations that underline the unworthiness of the believer and the uselessness of good works, are references to Calvin's commentaries and *Institutes*, to the prayers in the Reformed book of worship, to the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and to Willem Teelinck (1579–1629) who said that "just like a viper, toad or snake is hated by human beings, not because of committed evil, but because of the venom they contain, so you too are hated by

God because of the natural venom in which you were conceived and born" (13, cf. Teelinck: 1619, 8).<sup>5</sup>

When the pastor replies that this is true, and that God wants his elect to be so sinful so that that they would not be proud but humble, the thief responds that he knew this and therefore did not want to do any good at all. The pastor responds that God wants human beings to be saved by faith, and then the discussion takes a turn. The thief is curious what kind of faith is meant, and the pastor, answering with the words of the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 60) on justification, says this is faith that excludes all merit. The dialogue continues for some time on the uselessness of good works with many quotations of Luther given by the thief to underline the latter.

## 22.4 God's Hidden and Revealed Will

Determinism again comes to the fore when the pastor turns to the will of God as a rule of obedience. The thief responds:

the will of God is twofold: hidden and revealed. So that God wants many things which he has revealed not to want. For example, the Lord commands Pharaoh through Moses: 'Let the people go!' and still it was God's hidden good pleasure and intention that he would not let the people go. That is not so strange, because God has ordained

---

<sup>5</sup> Teelinck's book is a translation of William Perkins, *A Dialogue of the state of a Christian man, betweene Eusebius a perfect Christian, and Timotheus a wise Christian, and the most of it was gathered here and there out of the sweete and saourie writings of Maister Tindall and Maister Bradford* (Perkins: 1591, 55a–87b, there 58b–59a).

that those whom he commands to walk in the right way will go astray by his hidden decree (16).

The thief's response includes four quotations from or references to Reformed authors – these are indicated in the text by italics. In the margin, Slatius links the first two quotations to a work of Hubertus Sturmius (ca. 1547– ca. 1605), a professor of theology at Leiden from 1580–1584. The thief here refers to *On the Eternal and Immutable Predestination of God: Discourse Regarding Election and Reprobation* (1583); in this work, Sturmius (unlike the later synod of Dordt) places election and reprobation on par as the two species of predestination.

Slatius's reference to the distinction between the hidden (*voluntas arcana*) and revealed will (*voluntas revelata*) of God is rather common in Reformed theology (Muller: 1985, 331–332). In Slatius's work it functions to explain why Adam sinned, notwithstanding the fact that his fall was the will of God. We are obliged to obey the revealed will of God, but in a certain sense the impious can be said to do the hidden will of God (Sturmius, 1583, 117). The second reference is to the thesis in which Sturmius states that the efficient cause of reprobation is the eternal most free and most just decision of the will of God (76). In his argument Sturmius refers to Martin Luther's debate with Erasmus on the free will and states that "God wants many things which through his Word he has not revealed to want, so he does not want the death of a sinner, by his word namely, but he does want it by his inscrutable will" (Sturmius, 1583, 81). The Scripture reference is most likely to Ezekiel 33:11 where the Lord declares that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Apparently for Sturmius, as for Luther, the hidden will of God is the will of the *Deus absconditus*, the fundamentally unknowable essence of God as God. For the thief, however, the contradiction of God's inscrutable will with what he commands is irrational.

The third reference is to a work from William Perkins (1558–1602), *A Treatise of Gods Free Grace, and Mans Free Will* (1601); in this work, translated into Dutch, the Puritan states that the Pharaoh should have obeyed the command of God, and "yet the secret pleasure and purpose of God was, that he should not let them go" (Perkins: 1601, 38, cf. Perkins: 1611, 45). The fourth reference is to John Calvin's response to Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563) in which the Genevan Reformer defends the position that sins are not only committed by God's permission, but also according to God's will: "Why however He freely lets those wander, who he commands to hold to the right way, and by a hidden decree gives them over to go astray, it is sober modesty not to know" (Calvin: 1870, 299; for an English translation see Calvin:



1927, 294; Slatius refers to Calvin: 1612, 858; for the original see Calvin: 1558, 64). Thus, whereas Calvin stresses the human inability to understand the tension, Slatius's predestinated thief claims that according to Calvin God has ordained sin by his hidden decree.

These examples illustrate that Slatius combined several harsh sayings from Reformed authors (taken out of their contexts), and twisted them for his own purposes. Of course, this all belongs to the genre of a satirical writing, but the venom lies particularly in the fact that the tract leaves the impression not only that the Reformed position implies determinism, but also that the quotations accurately represent Reformed ideas. Indeed, some of these quotations make the Reformed position vulnerable for a deterministic misinterpretation or at least misrepresentation; this is especially the case when the will of God is immediately connected to evil. Reformed theologians consistently denied that God is the author of sin or the cause of moral evil by making distinctions, such as the one between the hidden and revealed wills of God, or between his commands and his secret purposes. The underlying idea is that the divine and human spheres consist of two separate levels of causation, and that it is beyond human understanding to grasp how they go together. Nevertheless the Reformed maintained genuine human liberty of choice and still confessed that nothing happened or could be done against, or even without, the determining will of God.

Recent research has demonstrated the compatibility of Reformed predestinarian views with human freedom (Van Asselt, Bac, and Te Velde: 2010), showing that the Reformed understanding of the medieval scholastic concept of divine *concursum* provides the ontological framework for upholding human liberty (Muller: 2017, 283–289). Slatius, having been educated in scholastic philosophy and theology, must have been aware of the theological distinctions used to avoid the position that God was the author of evil and to affirm human liberty. In this pamphlet, however, written in the vernacular for the common people, he purposely neglected these distinctions; rather, by highlighting phrases in which God is said to cause sin and in which sin is presented as something that happens necessarily, given the decree of God, he left the impression that Reformed theology is deterministic. These phrases are present, especially in Reformed polemical writings, and they make the Reformed position vulnerable for a deterministic misinterpretation or misrepresentation.

Slatius's thief confesses to the minister that these two wills in God were always grinding in his head as in a mill and that he therefore had not taken too much heed to God's revealed will. In his answer, the pastor refers to Rippertus Sixtus (1583–1651) who says, "It is clear that God sometimes according to his hidden

and omnipotent will and good pleasure does not want to happen what he commands humankind in his revealed will, and I do not deny that all things with regards to God and his decree happen necessarily, but confess that expressly to be my doctrine and opinion” (Slatius: 1619, 18, cf. Sixtus: 1617, 250, 752). If we look at the quotation in the original, it occurs within a debate that Sixtus had with his colleague, the Remonstrant Dominicus Sagma (1586–1635). There Sixtus says that the issue between them is not “whether all things with respect to God and his decree happen necessarily” – with which he indeed agrees – but,

this only is our disagreement, whether all things with respect to God and his decree happen necessarily in such a way that a human being would not freely do the good he does and leave the evil that he leaves and therefore could not leave more evil than he leaves or do more good than he does, because of such a necessary decree of God, by which he would be necessitated to the good and evil that he does (Sixtus: 1617, 752–753).

Sixtus denied ever teaching anything like this. The underlying Aristotelian/scholastic distinction is that between the necessity of the consequent thing and the necessity of the consequence, that depends on something else, in this case of the decree of God (Muller: 2017, 97). According to the Reformed all things were ruled by God’s providence and therefore were merely necessary because of God’s decree (the necessity of the consequence) but not necessary in themselves or in an absolute sense (necessity of the consequent thing, that as such cannot be otherwise), because things could have been otherwise, if God had willed so. Thus sin is not absolutely necessary, Adam and Eve could have not sinned. Because God’s providence does not exclude but rather includes human liberty (the concept of divine *concursum*) God is not the efficient cause of human evil, although it would not have happened if God had not allowed it to happen. Slatius lets the pastor of the predestinated thief twist Sixtus’s meaning by quoting him partially and by neglecting the distinction Sixtus used to explain that God’s decree does not annul human liberty. Thus, Slatius resented the Reformed view of the decree in a deterministic way.

## 22.5 Providence

The discussion between the pastor and the thief then turns to the Reformed doctrine of providence that, in the view of the thief, makes Adam’s fall something that God had predetermined. Human beings can desire nothing unless God

inspires them to do so, and even when they do they act as mad beasts, steered as it were by a hidden bridle. Therefore you can say that God “*wants and causes the godless to live in their lusts, and therefore that there is a necessity to sin with respect to God*” (19).

These rather harsh sayings are quoted from polemical works of Jacobus Trigland (1583–1654), a pastor in Amsterdam, and Cornelius Simonis de Ghesel (ca. 1579–1613), a pastor who was banned from Rotterdam because of his attitude against his Remonstrant colleagues. Placed in their original contexts, however, even these quotes do not have a deterministic meaning. Trigland refers to a quotation from Girolamo Zanchi’s (1516–1590) *Miscellenies* by the Remonstrant Johannes

Wtenbogaert (1557–1644), and then explains that Zanchi distinguished between God as the author of everything that happens as far as the things themselves are concerned, but not as far as they are contrary to the law of God (Trigland: 1616, 171–172.) Ghesel (or Geselius) first states that there is a necessity to sin from the depravity of humankind, which is the cause of sin, and that there is a necessity to sin with respect to God who does not prevent it, but that God is not at all the cause of sin (De Ghesel: 1613, 62). Again, scholastic distinctions serve to explain the difference between the Reformed doctrine of predestination and determinism that turns God into the author of sin or the effectual cause of evil.

The treatise further discusses the question whether God is the author of sin and whether the thief could have known that he sinned. He denies this because his thoughts were also predestinated by God. When he felt the inclination to do something forbidden by God, he thought that it might be the hidden will of God to do it anyway. God might be prompting him to perform what He had from eternity (through an immutable decree) ordained and desired to do through him. The thief states, “I thought, if I resist this, it will appear as if want to oppose God just like Lucifer, therefore I let the sow wallow” (21). The reference here is to the sow that was washed but returned to her wallowing in the mire (2 Peter 2:22). The thief defends this position with references to Reformed expressions that state that God reveals his glory in justly punishing sinners.

## 22.6 The Extent of the Atonement

When the pastor (almost desperately) asks whether the thief has always been without any concern, the thief responds that he trusts he is a chosen child of God, and even if not (if he is a reprobate), all his efforts would be without result anyway. The pastor replies that he should have responded to the call of Word and Spirit, but the thief answers that those who are truly called by the gospel and inwardly called by the Spirit cannot but obey, believe, and repent.

With extensive quotations from the Canons of Dordt, the thief underscores the teaching that only those who are elect can respond to the call of the gospel. In turn, he reproaches the pastor for inconsistently blaming him that he is unconverted. How can someone respond to the outward call if the inward call is not added to it (24)? The remaining part of the discussion covers reprobation, the destiny of little children, the teaching that attendance to the means of grace makes judgement more severe, and the belief that the elect can fall badly and still persevere.

When the pastor reminds his conversation partner that thieves and robbers will not inherit the kingdom of God, the thief replies:

would you be able to recommend a medicine for my poor soul?

*Pastor:* believe in Christ Jesus, repent for your sins and pray God for a blissful moment, in which He grants you forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

*Thief:* what should I believe in order to believe in Christ in the right way?

*Pastor:* you must believe that Jesus Christ has purchased forgiveness of sins and life everlasting for you through his suffering and death. This is what you are commanded in the gospel.

*Thief:* is everything the gospel commands the truth or a lie?

*Pastor:* it is the very truth (31).

Instead of believing the gospel, the thief starts a discussion about the extent of the atonement, insisting that Calvinists teach that Christ is only a Redeemer for the elect (quoting, for instance, Canons of Dordt II.8, which deals with the effectiveness of Christ's death. The thief wants to know if he is elect, otherwise he might believe a lie. It is even worse; the thief argues that if he is a reprobate and God commands him to believe the Gospel, while Christ's atonement is for the elect only, God in that case condemns him for his unbelief and thus for not believing something that is a lie (33).

The pastor offers to pray for the thief, but he refuses. If he is a reprobate, a thousand years of prayer will not help him, and if he is elect, he will be saved anyway. Instead of praying, he rather wants to sing a hymn entitled "Hymn of Praise for the Lord". This hymn, written by Bernardus Busschoff (ca 1595–1639), was very popular among the Contra-Remonstrants, and contained this line: "praised be God who elected me to salvation before I was born...." The most contested lines are printed in the pamphlet in bold: "devil or death, or deadly sins, will never appear so strong or mighty, that they will take away from me this sure pledge" (36).

Finally, it is too much. Not for the pastor, but for the jailor, who exclaims: “is that a hymn of praise? It sounds more like a song of the gallows” (37). The story ends with the jailor drawing the sad conclusion that the Reformed doctrine is unable to bring the prisoner to repentance, but hardens him instead. The jailor concludes, “Is that a Reformed doctrine? If you would call it Deformed, that would be a true name, because in itself it can do nothing else than cause carelessness and give the people occasion to continue and persevere in sin” (38).

The aim of Slatius is to present the Reformed doctrines of grace, as rejected by the Remonstrants and affirmed at the Synod of Dordt, as untenable because of internal contradictions. Slatius is especially concerned as he believes this Reformed teaching turns God into the author of sin and the cause of moral evil, and it gives sinners the excuse to not repent. For Slatius, the hidden decree of God necessitates their sin and if the sinner is reprobate, repentance will be of no help to them anyway. In order to substantiate these claims, he neglects and purposely deletes the Reformed scholastic distinctions, claiming that their understanding of God’s overarching decree annuls human responsibility and even genuine liberty.

## 22.7 Reception

In the Netherlands, Slatius’s pamphlet was republished several times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> One of the reprints (Slatius: 1642) is entitled *The Reckless Thief* (*Den reuckeloosen dief*). This reprint was dedicated to the academic theologians Jacobus Trigland (1583–1654), Gisbetus Voetius (1589–1676), and the local pastors Caspar Streso (1603–1664) and Jacobus Laurentius (ca. 1585–1644), but the dedication is ironic.

Most of the later editions also contain the pamphlet *The Conversion of the Predestinated Thief* published anonymously three years after Slatius’s first printing. It was most probably written by the Remonstrant pastor and jurist Johannes Arnoldi Corvinus, whose Dutch name was Johannes Arnoldsz Ravens (ca. 1581–1650).<sup>7</sup> In this pamphlet a Remonstrant pastor disguised as a mason visits the thief and successfully leads him to conversion. Corvinus here wants to

---

<sup>6</sup> The Short-Title Catalogue Netherlands (STCN), a Dutch bibliography for the period 1540–1800, lists three different issues from 1619, 1642, 1658, 1666, 1670, 1676, 1708, 1718 and 1732, next to six issues without a date. This list is not complete; GoogleBooks also contains scans of the work printed in 1696 and 1725.

<sup>7</sup> Brandt (1704, 818, cf. 1723, 409) mentions him as probable author.

show that the Remonstrant position positively leads to salvation, while the original pamphlet was negative in arguing that the Contra-Remonstrant position leads to ungodliness ([Ravens]: 1622, [2]). The true gospel is not the happy tiding of the Contra-Remonstrants, but a serious message that requires true repentance and conversion; he therefore warns the thief that without conversion and good works his faith is in vain and self-deceptive (23). In Corvinus's view the Reformed doctrine is not an anchor but a cancer for the soul (48). Finally, the thief confesses that he "slept softly upon the pillow of carelessness, that is upon John Calvin's doctrine of predestination" (64) and, according to the disguised pastor, his Contra-Remonstrant colleagues should know "how necessary it is to let a fallen sinner not only doubt about his salvation, but even to hold certainly that he will be damned unless he leads a different life" (69). In this pamphlet, Reformed preachers are surprisingly blamed for stimulating easy-believism and superficiality.

Some of the later editions of the two conversations – Slatius' *Predestinated Thief* and Corvinus' *Conversion* – contain a third discussion, this time from the Reformed side. The pamphlet was first published separately as *The Inquiring Thief* and is dedicated to the members of the Society of the Remonstrants. It was written in reaction to *The Reckless Thief* reprint of 1642, and, without mentioning Slatius's name, it accuses the Remonstrants of the conspiracy against Maurice, Prince of Orange (Anon: 1649, 15, 17, 57). The popularity of the book shows that the issue of predestination and the intriguing genre of satire remained attractive and influential for many generations after the Synod of Dordt.

In England the booklet was published anonymously in Latin ([Slatius]: 1651) during the reign of Oliver Cromwell, and from the Latin translated into English ([Slatius]: 1658). For a long time the booklet was incorrectly ascribed to William Sancroft (1617–1693), Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>8</sup> The Latin edition evoked the publication of an extensive Latin refutation by George Kendall (1610–1663) who copied the whole work and showed from the context that the Reformed authors were falsely accused or erroneously quoted. He, for instance, demonstrated that the quotations from John Calvin were inaccurate. He did not realize however that this was due to the fact that the Latin translation from the Dutch differed from Calvin's original Latin (Kendall: 1657, 145). A preface for this refutation was written by the Puritan John Owen (1616–1683).

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jackson (1822, 250) argued that Sancroft could not be the author of this originally Dutch work (cf. Jackson: s.d.). Later Cornelia W. Roldanus—without referring to Jackson—also argued that the Latin edition was merely a translation of the Dutch pamphlet (1948: 143). According to Collinson (2006, 175–176) there is no reason to think that Sancroft is responsible for the translation. The work, however, was still ascribed to Sancroft in the 1980s (Wallace: 1982, 122).

In light of our general thesis, it is interesting to note that the deterministic misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the doctrine of predestination, coined at the Synod of Dordt, occurred on the brink of modernity. In his *Theodicy* (1710), Gottfried Wilhelm (von) Leibniz (1646–1716) writes:

an ingenious satire was composed against the Gomarists, entitled *Fur praedestinatus* (*De Gepredestineerde Dief*), which tells of a thief condemned to be hanged, who attributes to God all the bad he has done, who believes himself predestined to salvation notwithstanding his wicked actions, who imagines that this belief is sufficient for him, and who attacks with ad hominem arguments a Counter-Remonstrant minister appointed to prepare him for death; but this thief is finally converted by a former pastor who had been deposed for Arminianism, whom the jailer, having pity for the criminal and for the weakness of the minister, had secretly brought to him (Leibniz and Strickland: 2014, 210; Leibniz refers to Bayle: 1706, 938).

According to Leibniz, the author incorrectly presupposed that the Reformed believed God to be the cause of evil, although for some of them, namely the supralapsarians, it was difficult to combine clearly the justice of God with the principles of piety and morals. Leibniz continues:

but all those who acknowledge that God produces the best plan, that he chose it from among all possible ideas of the universe, that in it he finds man led by the original imperfection of creatures to misuse his free will and to plunge himself into misery, that God prevents sin and misery as much as the perfection of the universe, which is an outpouring of his perfection, may permit it: those, I say, show more distinctly that God's intention is the most upright and holy in the world (211).

In other words, had the supralapsarian Calvinists only read Leibniz's work, they would acknowledge that this is the best of all possible worlds. It was this monism, however, that evoked this most satirical response of Voltaire's *Candide*: "if this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others?" (Voltaire: 1949 [1759], 230, 241).

## 22.8 Conclusions

The publication of *The Predestianted Thief*, its popularity, and the reactions to it

(including the later discussion in the context of English Puritanism) all indicate an important shift at the brink of modernity towards a monistic and therefore deterministic understanding of the relationship of God the almighty Creator and humankind as his creature.

The Reformed view of the relationship between God's overarching decree – of which predestination is a part – and human liberty depends on a worldview characterized by two levels of causality, a divine and a human level that operate simultaneously (Muller: 2017, 289). This view generally concurred with the classic Christian view of the relationship between Creator and creature which implied that the omnipotent and omniscient Creator does not annul but guarantees genuine human freedom.

In his satirical resentment of Reformed theology, the author of *The Predestinated Thief*, neglected the distinction between the two levels of causality, combined harsh sayings in an anthology from Reformed writings, lifted quotations out of their original contexts, and twisted them for his own purposes. If the underlying scholastic distinctions remain hidden, and the divine and human spheres or two separate levels of causation are not explained, some of the quotations make the Reformed position vulnerable to a deterministic misinterpretation or at least misrepresentation.

This, however, is exactly what happens in the context of modernity, which interprets reality from naturalistic – though originally pantheistic – monistic presuppositions. These presuppositions leave no room for the medieval scholastic concept of divine *concursum* (cf. Insole: 2016, 120).

Slatius, although familiar with the theological distinctions and aware that Reformed theologians sought to avoid turning God into the author of evil while maintaining human freedom, purposely presented their theology as deterministic. The common people, however, generally did not understand the nuances of these distinctions because of a lack of philosophical training. For the theological experts of Dordt, versed in scholastic distinctions, it was not impossible to combine a predestinarian view of salvation with a belief in true freedom. As the academic delegate from Zeeland, Antonius Walaeus taught the teenagers at the Latin School in Middelburg, "Man freely does what he does because God decreed that he should freely perform these actions rather than those [...]. But these can scarcely be understood. *My reply*: I admit this freely. The ways and modes of action of a power and a wisdom which are infinite cannot be perfectly grasped by a finite intellect" (1643, 2:277, Cf. Monfasani: 1997, 127). The difficulties of human liberty and divine omnipotence were not only countered by scholastic distinctions, but also with the classical appeal to God's incomprehensibility and by warnings against curiosity.



In the context of modernity, however, these appeals and warnings did not seem to be convincing anymore. The unnuanced satire of Henricus Slatius demonstrates the growing difficulty that was felt with this combination of providence and freedom. It is telling that the harshest sayings often come from vernacular literature in which the position of the Contra-Remonstrants was explained for a broader audience, even though in the original contexts of these quotations determinism is often denied. The scholastic solutions did not survive the cultural shift to modernity. The result is a history of pastoral problems of sincere believers that truly struggle with questions and objections to the gospel, similar to those of the sentenced thief.

Later generations tend to look at the two parties through the lenses of liberal Remonstrantism and Puritanized Reformed Orthodoxy. Within a generation or two the Contra-Remonstrant emphasis on free and sovereign grace was no longer experienced as a joyful message that undergirded the full assurance of salvation, but as a problematic source of anxiety regarding the trustworthiness of God's promises. Developments within Reformed spirituality indicate that the common Reformed believer did not understand the subtleties of orthodox scholasticism either. The lay person had difficulties with Reformed doctrine similar to those of the thief in the satire. The cultural shift towards a monistic understanding of the relationship between the Creator and creatures leads to a deterministic misinterpretation of the doctrines of grace in Reformed spirituality. The remarkable concern of the jailor – that this “Deformed” doctrine leads to carelessness – is underlined by the pamphlet *The Conversion of the Predestinated Thief* as it blames Reformed preachers for stimulating easy-believism and superficiality.

The question regarding this problem of determinism is really a theological one. The Arminians, while they intended and pretended to defend true human liberty, bound the eternal will of God to the contingent choices of human beings in history. The Reformed orthodox rejected this position because it determined the will of God. If they had to choose between predestinated sinners – with all of the logical problems it evokes – and a predetermined God, their choice was not very difficult. It is an irony of history that in the later reception the Contra-Remonstrants were blamed of determinism, whereas the Remonstrants were seen as the champions of human liberty.

## Bibliography

Bayle, Pierre (1706), *Réponses aux questions d'un provincial*, vol. 3, Rotterdam, Leers.

- Brandt, Geeraert (1704), *Historie der reformatie en andere kerkelyke geschiedenissen in en omtrent de Nederlanden*, vol. 4, Rotterdam: Barent Bos.
- Brandt, Geeraert (1723), *The history of the Reformation*, trans. John Chamberlayne, 4 vol., London: John Nicks.
- Calvin, Jean (1558), *Calumniae nebulonis cuiusdam, quibus odio & invidia grauari conatus est doctrinam Ioh. Caluini de occulta Dei prouidentia. Iohannis Caluini ad easdem responsio*, [Geneva]: Conradus Badius.
- Calvin, Jean (1612), *Joannis Caluini Tractatus theologici omnes, in unum volumen certis classibus congesti*, Geneva: Jacobus Stoer.
- Calvin, Jean (1870), *Calumniae nebulonis cuiusdam aduersus doctrinam Iohannis Caluini de occulta Dei prouidentia*, in: G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss (ed.), *Ioannis Caluini opera quae supersunt omnia*, vol. IX, Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke, 269–318.
- Calvin, John (1927), *Calvin's Calvinism: 1. the Eternal Predestination of God; 2. The Secret Providence of God*, London: Sovereign Grace Union.
- Collinson, Patrick (2007), *From Cranmer to Sancroft: Essays on English Religion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, London: Continuum.
- De Ghesel, Cornelius Simonis (1613), *Proefken vande schadelijcke verschillen over de christelijcke salichmakende leere*, Amsterdam: Cornelis Fransz.
- Den ondersoekenden dief* (1649); zijnde een t'samen-sprekinge tusschen een arminiaans predicant ende een dief in't gevanggen-huys: Antwoort op de *Gepredestineerde of reuckeloosen dief*, s.l.: s.n.
- Frijhoff, Willem (1996), *De gepredestineerde boer. Leven en geloven in de vroege zeventiende eeuw*, in E. Put (ed.), *Geloven in het verleden: studies over het godsdienstig leven in de vroegmoderne tijd, aangeboden aan Michel Cloet*, Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 375–391.
- Frijhoff, Willem (2002), *Predestination and the farmer. An incident of life and faith in early seventeenth-century Holland*, in: Willem Frijhoff, *Embodied Belief: Ten Essays on Religious Culture in Dutch History*, Hilversum: Verloren, 93–110.
- Funkenstein, Amos (1986), *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Gomarus, Franciscus (1605), *Theses theologicae de iustificatione hominis coram Deo*, respondent Henricus Slatius, Leiden: Johannes Patius.
- Gregory, Brad S. (2012), *The Unintended Reformation*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Insole, Christopher J. (2016), *The Intolerable God: Kant's Theological Journey*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Israel, Jonathan I. (2006), *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Jackson, Thomas (1822), *The Life of John Goodwin, A.M: Some Time Fellow of Queens College, Cambridge, and Vicar of Saint Stephens, Coleman-Street, London. Comprising an Account of His Opinions and Writings, and of the Controversies in Which He Was Engaged in Defence of Religious Liberty and of General Redemption*. London: Longmans.
- Jackson, Thomas (s.d.), *Archbishop Sancroft Not the Author of "the Predestinated Thief" [a Translation of "den Ghepredestineerden Dief," Which Is Generally Ascribed to H. Slatius]*, [for a scan, see [books.google.nl/books?id=mHBaAAAACAAJ&dq](https://books.google.nl/books?id=mHBaAAAACAAJ&dq)].
- Kendall, George (1657), *Fur pro tribunal: Examen dialogismi cui insribitur fur praedestinatus. Accesserunt, oratio de doctrina Neo-Pelagiana habita Oxonii in comitiis Julii IX. M.DC.LIV. Cl.V.G. Tuissii vita, & vindiciae 'a calumniis & sophismatis Francisci Annati Jesuitae. Et dissertatiuncula de novis actibus immanentibus sint ne Deo ascribendi. / Authore Georgio Kendallo S.T.D. Disseratiuncula de novis actibus immanentibus sint ne Deo ascribendi. Dissertatiuncula de novis actibus immanentibus sint ne Deo ascribendi*, Oxford: Henry Hall.
- Knappert, Laurentius (1907), *Slatius en zijn libel "Den gepredestineerden dief"*, in: *Historische avonden: Tweede bundel uitgegeven door het historisch genootschap te Groningen*, Groningen: Wolters, 144–154.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, and Lloyd Strickland (2014), *Leibniz's Monadology : A New Translation and Guide*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Monfasani, John (1997), 'Antonius de Waele', in: J. Krayer (red.), *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts, I, Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 120–129.
- Muller, Richard A. (1985), *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Muller, Richard A. (2017), *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Perkins, William (1591), *A [t]reatise tending vnto a de[cl]aration, whether a man bee in the estate of damnation, or in the estate of grace and if he be in the first, how he may in time come out of it: if in the second, how he may discerne it, and perseuer in the same to the ende*, London: Thomas Orwin, for Iohn Porter and Thomas Gubbin.
- Perkins, William (1601), *A Treatise of Gods Free Grace, and Mans Free Will*, Cambridge: Iohn Legat.
- Perkins, William (1611), *Een tractaet van de vrye genaede Gods, ende vrye wille des menschen*, Leiden: H. van Haestens.
- [Ravens, Johannes Arnoldsz] (1622), *De bekeringe vanden ghepredestineerden dief: of, Tvveede t'samen-sprekinghe ghehouden tusschen een remonstrants-gezinde predicant [...] ende een dieff*, The Hague: [J. Alleman].

- Roldanus, Cornelia W. (1948), *De Gepredestineerde Dief Herrezen*, Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis/Dutch Review of Church History, 36(1), 135–148.
- Sierhuis, Freya (2015), *The Literature of the Arminian Controversy: Religion, Politics and the Stage in the Dutch Republic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sixtus, Rippertus (1617), *Bespreck ofte onderhandelinge ghehouden over eenighe huydendaechsche kerckelijcke verschillen*, Enkhuizen: Meyn.
- Slatius, Henricus (1617), *Henrici Slatii Bewiis, Dat de Schuer-Predicanten zijn Vrienden ende Toe-standers van dese Leere: Dat Godt on-mondighe jonge Kinderkens, die in hare onbejaertheyt sterven, zelfs der Gheloovighen van eeuwigheyt heeft verworpen, ende in tijde verdoemt*, Rotterdam: Matthijs Bastiaenz.
- [Slatius, Henricus] (1619), *Den Gepredestineerden Dief, Ofte Een Samen-Sprekinge, ghehouden Tusschen Een Predicant Der Calvinus-Ghesinde Ende Een Dief, die ghesententieert was om te sterven: Waer in Levendigh werdt voor ooghen ghestelt, niet alleen hoe de Leere der Contraremonstranten ofte Calvinisten, in haer selven den mensche een voet ende oorsake gheeft om godlooselick te leven ende daer in te volherden, maer oock hoe de selve ten hooghsten hinderlicken is, om den sondaer tot de ware boetversdigheyt en berouw sijnder sonden te brengen*, s.l.: s.n.
- [Slatius, Henricus] (1642) *Den reuckeloosen dief. Zijnde eene t'samensprekinge tusschen een gheref. predicant en een dief*, s.l.: s.n.
- [Slatius, Henry] (1651), *Fur praedestinator, sive, Dialogismus inter quendam ordinis praedicantium Calvinistam & furem ad laqueum damnatum habitus in quo ad vivum representatur non tantum quomodo Calvinistarum dogmata ex seipsis ansam praebent scelera & impietates quasvis patrandi, sed insuper quomodo eadem maxime impediunt quò minus peccator ad vitae emendationem & resipiscentiam reduci possit*, London: Impensis F.G., typis G.D.
- [Slatius, Henry] (1658), *The predestinated thief. A dialogue betwixt a rigid Calvinian preacher and a condemned malefactor. In which is not onely represented how the Calvinistical opinion occasions the perpetration of wickedness and impieties; but moreover how it doth impede and hinder, nay almost impossibilitate the reducing of a sinner to emendation and repentance*, London: R. Trott for Daniel Jones.
- Sokolowski, Robert (1982), *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Sturmius, Hubertus (1583), *De aeterna et immutabili praedestinatione dei: electione atque reprobatione diatribe*, Leiden: Johannes Patius.
- Teelinck, Willem (1619), *Een dialogue, oft t'Samensprekinghe vanden staet van een christen mensche*, Amsterdam: Jan Evertsz Cloppenborch.
- Trigland, Jacobus (1616), *Verdediging van de Leere end Eere der Gereformeerde Kercken ende Leeraren, tegen verscheyden lasteringen, insonderheyt Johannis Wtenbogardi in zyn Boeck t'onrecht geintituleert*, Amsterdam: Marten Jansz Brandt.

- Van Asselt, Willem. J./Martijn Bac/Dolf te Velde (ed.) (2010), *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Van Deursen, Arie Theodorus (1974), *Bavianen en slijkgeuzen: Kerk en kerkvolk in de tijd van Maurits en Oldenbarnevelt*, Franeker: Van Wijnen.
- Van Deursen, Arie Theodorus (1978), Slatius, Henricus, in: D. Nauta (ed.), *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands protestantisme*, vol. 1, Kampen: Kok, 345–346.
- Visscher, Claes Jansz. (1623), *Terechtstelling van Henricus Slatius*, Willem Perty en Jan en Abraham Blansaert, in: Frederik Muller, *De Nederlandsche geschiedenis in platen : beredeneerde beschrijving van Nederlandsche historieplaten, zinneprenten en historische kaarten*, 4 vol., Amsterdam: F. Muller, 1:199, number 1498a. For a scan, see the website of the Rijksmuseum: [hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.collect.190853](https://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.collect.190853)
- Voltaire (1949), *The Portable Voltaire*, ed. Ben Ray Redman, New York: Viking Press.
- Walaeus Antonius (1620), *Compendium ethicae Aristotelicae ad normam veritatis Christianae revocatum*, Leiden: Elsevier.
- Walaeus Antonius (1643), *Opera omnia*, Leiden: Franciscus Hackius.

Wallace, Dewey D. (1982), *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology, 1525– 1695*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.