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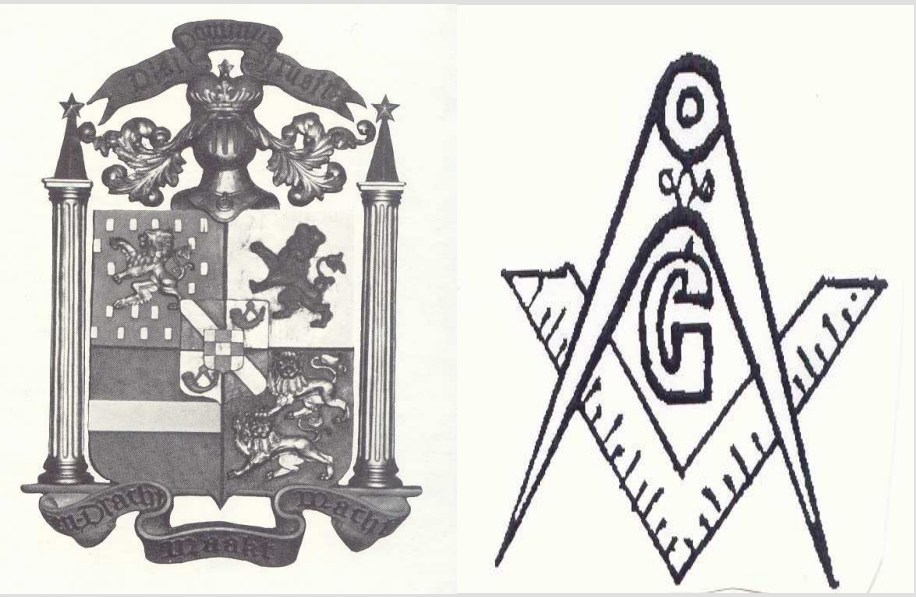
THE DUTCH EQUATION IN THE

RCA FREEMASONRY CONTROVERSY, 1867-1885



Harry Boonstra

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The Dutch Equation

in the

RCA Freemasonry Controversy, 1867-1885

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Dr. Harry Boonstra is a 1951 emigrant from Oldehove, the Netherlands. A graduate of Calvin College, he earned an M.A. in English from Northwestern University, an M.L.S. from the University of Chicago, a Ph.D. in English from Loyola University, Chicago, and an M.Div. from Western Theological Seminary. He began his career as Library Director and English Instructor at Trinity Christian College (1964-71), served for two years with Wycliffe Bible Translators as editor and teacher, was Associate Professor of English at Covenant College (1975-77), Director of Libraries at Hope College (1977-84), and concluded as Theological Librarian at Calvin College and Seminary (1989-99).

Dr. Boonstra served as Associate Editor of *Reformed Worship* for ten years and, since 2002, as Associate Editor of *Origins.* He is the author of *Our School: Calvin College and the Christian Reformed Church* (2001) and co-author of *Pillar Church in the Van Raalte Era* (2003). He has also published articles and reviews on a wide variety of topics in professional journals and religious publications, as well as translating books by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck (2007). He has recently been commissioned by the Reformed Church Historical Series to translate *Vrijheid in het Verschiet: Nederlands Emigratie naar Amerika, 1840-1940,* which is the latest book by the Van Raalte Institute's Inaugural Visiting Research Fellow (2003), Dr. Hans Krabbendam.

Awarded a Visiting Research Fellowship by the Van Raalte Institute, Dr. Boonstra was affiliated with the Institute during the fall semester of the 2007-08 academic year. He presented the material in this monograph in a public address on 18 February 2008.

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My regular research home in retirement has been the Heritage Hall Archives of Calvin College and Seminary. I continue to appreciate the study space, the use of its collections, and the collegiality.

Toward the end of my research, I also was able to visit the Michigan Masonic Library in Grand Rapids, and made grateful use of their particular expertise and collection.

Harry Boonstra

INTRODUCTION

Freemasonry is not what it used to be. One hundred twenty-five years ago the topic about Freemason lodges, secrets, oaths, and religious elements were discussed and debated hotly. Theologians fought tooth and nail to prove it to be a nefarious anti-Christian danger (or the opposite); preachers exhorted their congregations to leave these dens of iniquity, horseback- and train-riding speakers praised its virtues or maligned its members. Denominations and congregations split into pro-and-anti-Masonic assemblies. An anti-Masonic political party exhorted its members to outvote dangerous anti-Whig Masons. Newspapers carried front-page stories in bold print.

In 2007, in the *Grand Rapids Press*, on the day of Gerald Ford's funeral, a letter to the editor mentioned that Ford had been a faithful member of the Grand Rapids Masonic Lodge. That may have been the only Masonic reference in all of the country's newspapers that day or that week.[1]

If Freemasonry seems so unimportant and non-newsworthy today, is it worth revisiting the lodge and its ancient debates? Several considerations have prompted me to do so. The two denominations under discussion here, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), are still very much with us today. They are no longer lobbing verbal bombs at each other, but have joint meetings, projects, and pulpit exchanges, and sing from a jointly-published hymnal. Moreover, a recently-published monograph, *Divided by a Common Heritage*,[2] contains a thorough discussion about an eventual joining of these denominations, as well as the obstacles that still remain for such a joining. Another look at one issue that caused the rift in the nineteenth century seems appropriate. Furthermore, the CRC still holds the same position on Freemasonry as it did in 1880—one cannot be a member of both the CRC and a "secret" lodge.[3]

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[1] One reason for the diminished attention to Freemasonry may be its diminishing membership in the United States. In 1964 there were 4,005,605 members; in 2001 that had dropped to 1,774,200 (<http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonic_membership_statistics.htm>, accessed 16 Jan. 2008).

[2] Corwin Smidt et al., *Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 54 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

[3] See *1977 Acts of Synod* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1979), 575-96.

FREEMASONRY—AN OVERVIEW

A movement that has existed from at least 1717 (some would say since biblical times or earlier) as a world-wide phenomenon, with millions of adherents, with no central authority, is bound to be difficult to characterize. Moreover, the WorldCat database lists some 7,640 books in English, as well as thousands of pamphlets and articles on Freemasonry. A novice could begin reading the standard seven-volume *New and Revised Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* by Albert G. Mackey, and then the one-hundred-plus years of the periodical *Cynosure*,[4] which disagrees with nearly all of Mackey. Even among Masonic writers there is much disagreement about many topics, as well as great variation of practices among the various Masonic branches. After wading through even a modest amount of material, the reader might well want to repeat the words of an old television program, "Will the *real* Freemasonry please stand up?"[5]

Let me highlight a few features of Freemasonry that (nearly) all scholars agree on. Even though there is disagreement on the origins of Freemasonry, most scholars agree that it arose out of the medieval workingmen's guild of masons.[6] In the seventeenth century the guild allowed non-masons to join as "speculative" members. Eventually all Masons were speculative members. Much of the symbolism continued to be borrowed from the masonry trade—triangle, square, apron, and so forth. The first "Grand Lodge" was founded in London in 1717.

For most of its history the membership has consisted exclusively of males (white males in North America). Women have been allowed sporadically, or they have founded their all-female lodges. Membership to a lodge is by invitation and involves a series of rituals as a member advances from Apprentice to Fellow to Master. In some "Rites," a small number continue to rise through the ranks until one achieves the thirty-third degree.

Most of the rituals and ceremonies are based on and adapted from ancient sources, including the Bible. The best-known ritual is an elaborate drama about Hiram Abif, performed as entry to the Master rank. Very loosely based on the Old Testament, the story of Hiram relates his role in the building of King Solomon's temple. Before the completion of the building of the Temple, he was slain by three ruffians because he refused to communicate to them the Master Mason's Word. Hiram was hastily buried in a shallow grave marked by a sprig of acacia or myrtle, which led to its discovery and the subsequent raising of Hiram Abif from death by the power of a Substitute Word, which, it was decreed, should be used until the Lost Word was again found. (The raising of Hiram is a highly contested issue. Opponents consider it to be a quasi-resurrection and a heretical substitute for Jesus' resurrection; proponents say that it is a metaphor for Hiram's spirit of forgiveness.) The swearing-in ceremony to the various ranks has to be on a sacred book, such as the Christian Bible or the Muslim Koran.

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[4] The *Christian Cynosure* began publication in 1868 by the National Christian Association under the leadership of Jonathan Blanchard of anti-slavery and Wheaton College fame. Its principal purpose was "to combat the evils of oath-bound secrecy," mainly as found in Freemasonry. It was supported by various evangelical groups, but by 1950 it had a major constituency in the CRC, especially under the leadership of CRC ministers Benjamin Essenburg and William Masselink. It ceased publication in 1983.

[5] A complete bibliography would also have to include S. Brent Morris, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry* (New York: Alpha Books, 2006). Written by a Mason, the book actually is a fairly good introduction to Freemasonry.

[6] The prefix "free" is variously interpreted. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, after considering various options, chooses the interpretation that masons were free to travel to and work in any city.

A Mason is to believe in God (usually called the Great/Grand Architect of the Universe),[7] to become more enlightened about himself, to serve mankind, and to believe in the immortality of the soul. A Mason is not to discuss his particular religious beliefs, but to hold to the beliefs that all men have in common. He is to be especially loyal to the other brothers in the lodge. The importance of work and creativity is often stressed, as well as the importance of "good works," especially for fellow Masons, but also for humankind generally.

The lodges have always served as a place of companionship and conviviality, usually with lavish meals and (sometimes excessive) drinking of alcohol. For other members it was a place of education, both about masonic lore and about philosophical topics. (There are enough jokes about wives circulating in masonic literature to draw the conclusion that for some members the meetings served as "a night out with the boys.")

There always has been an element of secrecy about the lodge and its activities.[8] However, what constitutes the secrets has been endlessly debated. In recent times the lodges have tended to downplay their secrets. Related to the secrecy is the swearing of sometimes dreadful oaths. The one most frequently quoted by opponents is the following:

> All this I most solemnly, sincerely promise and swear, with a firm and steady resolution to perform the same, without any hesitation, myself, under no less penalty than that of having my body severed in two, my bowels taken from thence and burned to ashes, the ashes scattered before the four winds of heaven, that no more remembrance might be had of so vile and wicked a wretch as I would be, should I ever, knowingly, violate this my Master Mason's obligation. So help me God, and keep me steadfast in the due performance of the same.

Again, the interpretation of the oaths is often debated. Most Masons suggest that the oath is of historical importance and is still valuable to stress the importance and solemnity of the initiation rites, but is not to be interpreted literally. Antagonists insist that the oath is to be taken literally and is never to be uttered by a Christian.

Freemasonry has been shaped by countless sources and influence, but it certainly was strongly influenced by the Enlightenment:

> In the place of traditional pieties, Freemasons throughout Europe placed emphasis on dedication to society and being social men. In place of the word "God" they put the Grand Architect of the Universe, and his task was to be invoked formally, and infrequently. Originally he had been an imported deity, of English and Newtonian

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[7] Some Christian critics have considered the designation of God as the "Architect of the Universe" as a clue to the Enlightenment source of Masonry. This is not necessarily so. In Christian theology and Bible commentaries, God had frequently been designated as such, as it also was by John Calvin. However, the claim by S. Bent Morris that the designation may have been derived from Calvin is pure speculation. (See *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry*, 20, 212.) It is true that if God is designated *only* as the Architect of the Universe, without any acknowledgment of other names and characteristics, or any mention of the Trinity, then Christians do have a legitimate criticism of masonic "theology."

[8] The resistance to Masonry has often been triggered by its secrecy. For example, in the CRC the opposition usually carried a label, such as, "The danger of Secret Societies."

> origin, but his purpose was easily reconciled to that assigned the godhead by continental Spinozism or by deism as popularized in the writings of Voltaire.[9]

This sentiment about the origin and impetus of Freemasonry is echoed by van de Sande: "The golden era of Freemasonry coincided with the high season of the Enlightenment, and there is a clear relationship between the two."[10]

I will provide more information about Freemasonry when discussing lodges in the Netherlands and America. Our main issue will concern questions about the religious content of Freemasonry, especially the question whether it is Christian, quasi-Christian, non-Christian, or anti-Christian.

THE CHURCHES INVOLVED

The Netherlands Reformed Church and Freemasonry

Both the RCA and the CRC had their roots in the Netherlands and its Calvinist, Reformed churches.[11] These Dutch churches were born out of the religious controversy and persecution from the Roman (Catholic) Church in the sixteenth century. At the same time, this struggle was political, as the Seven Provinces of the Netherlands sought to gain independence from subjugation to Spain. Although beginning as a persecuted minority, the Dutch church later grew into a dominant, established church, with many of the attributes of a state church. The "States General"—representatives from the seven provinces that attempted to rule as a national government—were very intertwined in the life of the church. For example, the Synod of Dordrecht was called by the States General, and the government representatives took an active part in the deliberations. So also with the translation of the Bible into Dutch: it was mandated by and paid for by the States General.

It was also a church that underwent numerous theological controversies. The most important among these was the dispute between Calvinists and Remonstrants ("Arminians"), which culminated in the famous Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19 and the publication of the Canons and Church Order of Dort. Officially, the Reformed Church remained faithful to those documents, as well as to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. In time, however, the church suffered from both dead orthodoxy and the spiritual ravages of the Enlightenment. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, as imported from England, Germany, and France, first entered the universities and then the church, creating a spectrum of factions ("modalities") from hyper-Calvinism to liberalism and modernism.

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[9] Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 95. Interestingly, the latest major report by the CRC does not mention the Enlightenment, but finds the origins of Freemasonry in Platonism, Gnosticism, and mystery religions (*1974 Acts of Synod*, 504-67, especially 529-32).

[10] Anton van de Sande, *Vrijmetselarij in de Lage Landen* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1995), 70. This monograph proved very helpful for the history of Freemasonry in the Netherlands. (Throughout this essay, translations from the Dutch are mine.)

[11] A fine recent (although brief) history of the Netherlands Reformed churches in English is Karel Blei, *The Netherlands Reformed Church, 1571-2005*, trans. Allan Janssen, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 51 (Grand Rapids*:* Eerdmans, 2006).

It may be helpful here to cite a description of the Enlightenment by Hendrikus Berkhof because, as we will see later, this description can also be applied word for word to the religious stance of Freemasonry:

> Those in the Enlightenment praise natural religion. This natural religion included, first, belief in a Sovereign Being. This certainly could be proved in countless ways from the wisdom and laws of the arrangement of the universe. From this also flowed the belief in God's providence. Certainly the Sovereign Being made everything of service for the usefulness and happiness of humanity. It is also natural that God commands humanity to exercise virtue and to flee from evil. The human soul must also be immortal. God, virtue, and immortality are the basic concepts of this rational belief. Jesus was greatly esteemed, but as a teacher of natural religion and as an example of true virtue. Only a few understood that with this religion they stood diametrically opposed to the Christian faith.[12]

An additional issue troubling the churches was the frequent interference from the government. This interference became severe again with the return in 1813 of the legitimate "royal" House of Orange, after the French occupation. In 1816 the government published a church order (*Reglement*) that virtually made church government a branch of the civil government. Often the reaction of the faithful believers was to find spiritual nourishment outside the church in various streams of pietism and meeting in conventicles.

Pieter Stokvis provides a helpful summary of the church situation in the early 1800s:

> The Secession from the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, starting in 1834, resulted from a long smoldering conflict between traditional Calvinists and enlightened Protestants. The orthodox Calvinist movement was a complex phenomenon. The majority of Seceders [orthodox] aimed at restoration of a mythical Calvinist church state; a minority tended to favour separation between church and state. . . . Many Calvinists, like the upper class Evangelicals of the "Reveilkring" persisted in their endeavor to reform the church from within, but some Calvinists despaired and seceded or—as they phrased it—returned to ancestral Reformed traditions.[13]

The modernist versus orthodox controversies thus came to a head in 1834. Hendrik De Cock, a pastor in the town of Ulrum in the province of Groningen, had taken the side of those protesting the liberal trends in the church, and he was suspended from his ministerial office. His consistory, however, supported his stance, and the congregation separated itself from the national church on 13 October 1834. This date is usually cited as the beginning of the Secession (*Afscheiding*). A number of other pastors and congregations also seceded soon after this date, forming the "Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands" (hereafter designated as the *Afscheiding* Church). It is this denomination that figures prominently in the RCA Freemasonry controversy. Others sought to reform the church from within; among these was the famous

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[12] H. Berkhof, *Geschiedenis der Kerk* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1967), 233.

[13] Pieter R. D. Stokvis, "The Secession of 1834 and Dutch Emigration to the United States: Religious Aspects of Emigration in Comparative Perspective," in *Breaches and Bridges: Reformed Subcultures in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States*, ed. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2000), 22.

Abraham Kuyper, who in 1886 also became the leader of a separated group (*Doleantie*). These two groups came together in 1892 to form the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*).

How did Freemasonry fare in this Netherlands environment? The initial lodges were closely patterned after English Freemasonry. At various times, however, one also finds French influence. These influences often were determined by whether the Dutch political alliance happened to favor the English or the French. The myths, the rituals, the symbolism, and the purpose were very close to British and American Freemasonry. The French influence and the anti-Christian bias were strong in some Dutch lodges when the French Revolution was brewing in the late 1700s, and these lodges welcomed the French army entering the Netherlands. However, sympathy for all things French soon disappeared after Napoleon conquered the Netherlands and declared Holland a part of the French empire.

The first Dutch Freemasonry lodge was founded in 1735—and was promptly banned by the States General, with the encouragement of church authorities. This disapproval was occasioned partly by complaints from neighbors about rowdy parties and by the general suspicion of unseemly behavior; the ideology of Freemasonry was also suspect. The ban was lifted in 1737.

Several Dutch sources attempt to identify and describe Freemasonry in the Netherlands. Again, the variations among lodges are substantial; van de Sande finds the variation among the Dutch lodges (even though there are relatively few) even greater than elsewhere.[14] The *Christelijke Encyclopedie* summarizes the original purpose of Freemasonry as follows: "Freemasonry is willing to be religious, but it must be a religion in which all people take part, so that each shares the belief of all. There are many faiths, but only one true religion, with two principles—love for God and for all people."[15] Another description comes from a disgruntled correspondent whose letter had been refused by the Reformed magazine *De Bazuin*. He then published a pamphlet, "Tweede Open Brief," in which he sings the praises of Freemasonry and asserts that a Christian could certainly be a Mason, because it makes a person a man of character, gives a person freedom, encourages him to speak out, and promotes the welfare of all people.[16]

Another proponent of Freemasonry asserts, "Every Dutch Freemason will assure you that all ceremonial acts in the Lodge are conducted in the name of or in honor of the Supreme Architect of the Universe." And the charge that Freemasonry wages war on religion is simply not true—although it does "fight against religious hatred, whether it be stirred up by Pius X or [Abraham] Kuyper."[17] In the same pamphlet, Jac. P. van Term takes the *Contra* position and begins with a definition of Freemasonry in the Netherlands that actually describes Freemasonry historically very well. "In general Freemasonry consists of men who mean well in regard to humanity; who themselves do not find satisfaction in revealed religion; who rather imagine a vague, floating concept of God; who therefore construct a religion of general, moral principles."[18]

Membership in the Dutch lodges did and does not differ greatly from English and American membership. Although Freemasonry is officially dedicated to the equality of all men, some, as in Orwell's *Animal Farm,* are more equal than others. Throughout the centuries the

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[14] Van de Sande, 19.
[15] *Christelijke Encyclopedie*, vol. 5 (Kampen: Kok, 1929), 666.
[16] W. D. J. van Brouwer, *Tweede Open Brief, Betreffende de Vrijmetselararij* (Zwolle: Tijl, 1862), 12, 13.
[17] W. Zuidema and Jac. P. van Term, *Vrijmetselarij*. *Pro en Contra* (Baarn: Hollandia Drukkerij, 1910), 3, 10.
[18] Ibid., 15.

largest representation has come from the upper social and economic classes. In the Netherlands wealthy merchants were always strongly represented, as was the lower aristocracy. The Netherlands is probably unique in having a prince be the National Grand Master for sixty-five years. Prince Frederik was the son of King William I who had been welcomed back into the Netherlands in 1813, after the French rule, and Frederik gave prestige to the lodges. In general, the Dutch Masons were "tinted Orange"—that is, they were loyal to the princely and (later) royal House of Orange. Thus, apart from the revolutionary tendencies of some lodges during the late 1700s, the Freemasons were not radical or a great danger to the nation.

In the 1800s the relationship to the churches can be summarized as follows. The Roman Catholic Church forbade all association with Freemasonry, beginning with the papal bull of Pope Clement XII in 1738. The relation to the Reformed Church was more complex. After the initial (brief) banning of Freemasonry by church and government, the national church did not issue a blanket prohibition. In practice, it was those allied with the modernistic (*vrijzinnig*) wing of the church who were drawn to the lodge. At the other end of the theological spectrum, the pietist and orthodox spurned Freemasonry. In 1877 the *Afscheiding* Church declared Freemasonry completely off-limits: "A Freemason, who remains in the lodge, cannot be a member of our church. If he wants to become or remain a member of the congregation, he must break off all contact with the lodge, and prove that to the satisfaction of the consistory."[19] In other orthodox Reformed groups there also was the common understanding that Freemasonry was always non-Christian and often anti-Christian. Preachers frequently warned against the dangers of the lodge, and it was the duty of each church council to bar lodge members. However, discussions about Freemasonry were relatively infrequent—until the 1880s controversy across the ocean. We will now turn to that continent.

The Reformed Church in America and Freemasonry

Here we again have to go back some 250 years to trace the founding and development of the RCA.[20] A small group of Dutch settlers came to North America in 1626 and founded New Amsterdam as a settlement under the control of the mercantile Dutch West Indies Company. They founded a Reformed congregation, which, in effect constituted the beginning of the RCA.

The beginning of this first congregation in 1628 was followed by the founding of more congregations in the eastern states, especially New York and New Jersey, mostly small and struggling congregations. There continued to be small and struggling congregations (until today), but others flourished, both in number and significance. Randall Balmer suggests that "more alarming was the steadily growing alliance between the clergy and the wealthiest members of the Dutch community, coupled with the ever-increasing identification of Dutch religion with affluence."[21] This tendency was especially strong in New York, where the influence of the Anglican Church on the Reformed was also pronounced. The denomination as a whole retained its Dutch and Reformed heritage, but also had to face many complications and difficulties, partly

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[19] Van de Sande, 161.

[20] The standard guide for the early history is Gerald F. De Jong, *The Dutch Reformed Church in the American Colonies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); the various editions of Edward T. Corwin's *Manual of the Reformed Church in America* also remain useful.

[21] Randall H. Balmer, "Dutch Religion in an English World: Political Upheaval and Ethnic Conflict in the Middle Colonies" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1985), 53. One could perhaps posit that the RCA had become too "Americanized."

because it was an immigrant denomination, subject to countless influences and pressures from its American surroundings.[22]

A very significant issue for this study is the long-lasting relationship to the church in the Netherlands. By 1628 the dominant church in the Netherlands was the national Reformed Church, and it therefore seemed natural that the congregation formed in New Amsterdam should be a Reformed congregation and come under the supervision of Classis Amsterdam. The problem was that this natural assumption continued for 163 years! Virtually all the decisions for the RCA were made in Amsterdam, nearly all the ministers were Dutch, and even when they were not, they had to receive their theological training in the Netherlands and be ordained by Classis Amsterdam. In the eighteenth century, many in the RCA questioned this deference, and the denomination was virtually torn apart by opposing reactions to the Dutch control. The formal relationship with Classis Amsterdam was severed in 1792.

Related to the strong connection with the Dutch church was an issue experienced by all immigrants and immigrant churches—acculturation. Acculturation involves every aspect of an immigrant's life, from the minute to the momentous. A major aspect of acculturation is language, which often becomes a burning issue in an immigrant church, sometimes lasting for several generations.[23] The congregations in New York City struggled early with the language issue. They lived in a cosmopolitan environment, eventually using English for all their communication, often including the language of the home. Moreover, there were virtually no new immigrants coming in, and thus no need or pressure to retain the Dutch. *Tercentenary of the City of New York, 1626-1926* mentions somewhat in passing how the Reformed "Middle Church" changed to worshiping in English:

> Here it was that preaching in the English language was first introduced in the Dutch Church. During the Colonial days the services were conducted in the language of the Netherlands, but in April 1764, a change was made in response to the request of a large number of those who worshipped in this church. The first sermon in English was preached by the Rev. Dr. Laidlie, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, who had just been installed as one of the Collegiate Ministers.[24]

This notice does not do justice to the struggle that usually accompanied the language change. In Schenectady, for example, the controversy lasted for several decades, with those wanting to retain Dutch doing so mostly out of a sense of tradition, with the result that the church became virtually the only place where Dutch was used. The initial motive for the change was to

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[22] A rather quaint book for general readers might be called the first "feminist" study of the early Dutch in the East: Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer, *The Goede Vrouw of Mana-ha-ta at Home and in Society, 1609-1760* (New York: Scribner, 1898). The book is especially good for local color and the role of women.

[23] For an overview of the language controversy in the churches, see my "Singing God's Song in a New Land: Congregational Song in the RCA and the CRC," in *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Reverend Dr. Elton J. Bruins at Eighty*, ed. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 56 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1-29. Another helpful study is Robin A. Leaver, "Dutch Secular and Religious Singing in Eighteenth-Century New York," in *Amsterdam-New York: Transatlantic Relations and Urban Identities Since 1653,* ed. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2005), 99-115.

[24] *Tercentenary of the City of New York: A Tribute to the Settlement of Manhatten Island* (New York: Collegiate Reformed Church, 1926), 67.

keep (young) people from transferring to the Episcopal Church, and resulted in a formal resolution:

> To wit . . . that for all coming time so long as there are twenty families in the church, who attend Divine Service in the church of the village, who contribute from time to time with others their just proportion for the maintenance of Divine Service, and who declare that they can be better instructed in the Dutch than in any other tongue, so long, either the forenoon or afternoon sermon in the church of the village shall be delivered in the Dutch and the other in the English tongue."

The percentages for either language changed several times, including a period in which one half of the service was to be in Dutch and one half in English! The chapter closes as follows: "When Domine Romeyn's long and honored ministry terminated in 1804, stated Dutch preaching ended in the church of Schenectady."[25]

Another significant issue was the rise of pietism. The RCA was very much involved in "The Great Awakening"; one of their ministers, Theodorus Frelinghuysen, is often counted among the leaders of the revivalist movement. Several years of revival meetings in many congregations occurred in the late 1720s, and this influence made a lasting impression on the denomination as a whole. As Randall Balmer summarizes: "In the ferment of revival, ethnic distinctiveness and denominational identities began quickly to erode, as evangelicalism provided the common language for their discourse. Contacts with Huguenots, Quakers, Moravians, Lutherans, and especially Presbyterians functioned as an Americanizing force among the Jersey Dutch."[26]

The concerns of language change and revivalism were just two of the issues that were part of the more general and broader matter of acculturation or Americanization.[27] The question of Americanization impinges on the major topic of this essay as well, as we will see when we survey the Freemasonry controversy in the RCA in the 1870s and 1880s.

Another chapter in the history of the RCA began when Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte and his followers came to America in 1847. Many of these immigrants were associated with the *Afscheiding* in the Netherlands, and their views of theology, church government, and worship, as well as Freemasonry, were strongly entrenched. Their settlement in the *kolonie* in and near Holland, Michigan, has often been told. The early years of the settlement were extremely difficult, and the emerging church life precarious. (In some ways the immigrants' difficulties mirrored those experienced by the early RCA in the 1600s.) The RCA in the East, however, helped the fledging community in many ways, both materially and spiritually. In 1849 the RCA invited the immigrants to join their fellowship, and the following year the immigrant congregations joined the RCA as a separate Classis of Holland. Later, the number of immigrants and a wider dispersion gave rise to the adding of the classes of Illinois, Wisconsin, and Grand River. (I will usually refer to this sector of the RCA as the "midwestern church.")

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[25] Jonathan Pearson, *Three Centuries: The History of the First Reformed Church of Schenectady, 1680-1980*, vol. 1 of 2 vols. (Schenectady, N.Y.: First Reformed Church, 1980), 126, 128.
[26] Balmer, 278.
[27] See especially John P. Luidens, "The Americanization of the Dutch Reformed Church" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1969), and Firth Haring Fabend, *Zion on the Hudson: Dutch New York and New Jersey in the Age of Revivals* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), for the denominational treatment; see Elton J. Bruins for a fine "case study" of Third Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, in *The Americanization of a Congregation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

One major controversy resulting from the Dutch immigrants joining the RCA was not foreseen by either the midwestern or the eastern RCA—Freemasonry. We will track this controversy in considerable detail below, but let me introduce one aspect of that controversy here. We need to look briefly at the oft-recurring assertion that in the nineteenth century Freemasonry in America was very different from its European variety. Was it? As noted earlier, because of the amorphous nature of Freemasonry, it is often very difficult to describe it clearly. The variation of descriptions and interpretations is especially true of the religious nature of Freemasonry.[28]

One scholarly monograph that maintains a separate identity for American Freemasonry is Steven C. Bullock's *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, especially in his sixth chapter, "An Appearance of Sanctity: Religion, 1790-1826." His interpretation has been borrowed by others. Let me summarize his argument briefly.

According to Bullock early American Freemasonry tended to be patriotic and deistic, with its religious motif indebted to the Enlightenment. However, after the Revolutionary War, one finds a shift of emphasis. One reason for this shift was the decreasing emphasis on orthodoxy and on dogmatic differences among the churches. Instead, an "ecumenical" spirit often prevailed, which recognized different Christian bodies as fellow believers. "Many believers judged the beliefs and moral standards shared by all Christian groups more important than their disagreements over specific dogmas. . . . Churches began to speak of themselves as 'denominations,' distinguished from each other by name but sharing the essence of Christianity" (167). As more and more Christians from these denominations joined lodges, they encountered others who were neither revolutionary nor deistic, but fellow Christians, and, in distinction from European Freemasonry which forbade the expression of specific religious ideas, American Masons began to carry their faith into the lodge. For many of these Masons, who also shared a post-millennial optimism, and "expected millennial dawn rather than darkness, Masonry could play an important role in hastening the spreading light. Its values and activities encouraged the unity, morality, and benevolence necessary for the advance of Christianity and civilization"(168-69). Lodge meetings were now often opened with specific Christian prayers, even including the closing "for the sake of JESUS CHRIST, our Lord and Saviour" (169). Thus the American lodges left their deistic and Enlightenment basis and became proto-Christian organizations. "Elaborating the most common description of Masonry's religious position, Baltimore brothers in 1825 toasted the fraternity as 'the Handmaid of Religion—like Martha and Mary, both devoted to the service of the Master'" (171). According to Bullock this view became the major view in cosmopolitan circles, although country folk did not always catch on.[29]

Others who did not catch on were "sectarian" Christians—those who still took their dogmas seriously. I suppose Bullock has in mind those Christians who still maintained an orthodox view of the historic Christian faith, but he insists on using the word "sectarian" some fifteen times in nine pages, to distinguish them from more enlightened Christians who eagerly joined the lodges and saw no difference between their faith and Freemasonry. I cannot go into detail here to critique Bullock's interpretation, but it seems to me that he is guilty of rather

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[28] There are hundreds of books, pamphlets, and articles against Freemasonry written by Christian opponents. Many of these are extremely shrill and hostile. A more responsible study is William J. Whalen, *Christianity and American Freemasonry*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998). He writes from a Roman Catholic perspective, but includes other Christian traditions as well. He allots one paragraph to the CRC, and repeats the common error that Freemasonry was one of the chief reasons for the 1857 secession (see pp. 154-55).

[29] Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*: *Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996), 166-71.

selective use of data in proposing a simplistic difference between American and European Freemasonry.

I found more nuanced interpretations in several other scholars, such as Dorothy A. Lipson in her book *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut*. In one telling passage she summarizes Freemasonry as follows: "Their universalism was not limited by Christianity, let alone by particular Connecticut denominations. Their ideas implied that covenanted churches were local idiosyncrasies, while Masonic morality was an attribute of humanity, superior to particular revelation."[30]

For our analysis here, I found *Freemasonry and American Culture* by Lynn Dumenil especially helpful.[31] One citation helps to set the stage for her discussion: "The rituals, then, contained a hodgepodge of religious elements—with some deistic influence and an extensive borrowing from the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Bible. The result was to leave Masonry with an ambiguously defined religious content, open to several interpretations" (37). She then proceeds to delineate three interpretations or viewpoints of Mason religiosity. The first group she calls "universalists." These are the "brothers" and writers who hold to the more traditional view of Freemasonry, which professes a minimalist religious outlook. One has to believe in God, the Architect of the Universe, in the immortality of the soul, and practice charity especially to the "brothers," but also to all mankind. The most important religious beliefs are those that all men from all religions, sects, and denominations hold to, that can be discovered by reason, without regard to specific dogmas. Dumenil quotes the Los Angeles *Freemason* magazine of 1900: "Masonry is the world's religion, in that it contains the foundation of all faith and practice; for Jew and Christian, Mohammedan and Parsee, Roman and Protestant may enjoy the privileges it affords" (49). At the same time, the universalists were not averse to seeing a link to American Protestantism, since most Masons ascribed to that religion, and this tie gave distinction and respectability to the lodge.

Dumenil called a second group a minority of "Christianizers." These Masons played down the notion of universal religion and insisted that Freemasonry was basically Christian. One ministerial Mason argued that "Masonry's main purpose . . . was to help men develop that holy character, which we 'attain through faith in Jesus Christ'" (56). Interestingly, among the chief proponents of this position were the Brownell brothers, editors of *American Tyler*, which was published in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They were equally ardent members of the church of Christ and of Freemasonry, because to them the two were the same. Moreover, some of these brothers argued that only those who believed in the inspiration of Scripture and put their faith in Christ could be members of the lodge.[32]

A third group was at the opposite pole of the religious spectrum: they criticized both Christian dogma and the practice of Christian churches. These "freethinkers" tended "to think of

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[30] Dorothy A. Lipson, *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 120.

[31] Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 37, 49, 54-56.

[32] Albert G. Mackey, probably the most prolific author in American Freemasonry, demurred: Such Christianizing "does not belong to the ancient system. . . . Its religion comes from the ancient priesthood. . . . In its language citizens of every nation may converse; at its altar men of all religions may kneel; to its creed disciples of every faith may subscribe" (*An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences*, vol. 1, rev. ed., Edward L. Hawkins with William J. Hughan [1873; Chicago: Masonic History Co., 1921], 149). See also other editions of Mackey.

Masonry as a religion, not as a mere handmaiden to institutional worship."[33] They found the doctrines of Christianity foolish and the squabbles among various Christian groups absurd and irrational. Moreover, they readily detected hypocrisy in the church, and also considered the charity of Freemasonry at least equal to that of Christian churches and their members.

Albert Pike, one of the most prominent among American Masons, summarized (and agreed with) the freethinkers' position: "Masonry, around whose altar the Christian, the Hebrew, the Moslem, the Brahmin, the followers of Confucius and Zoroaster, can assemble as brethren and unite in prayer to the one God who is above all Baalim, must needs leave to each of its Initiates to look for the foundation of his faith and hope to the written scriptures of his own religion. For itself it finds those truths definite enough, which are written by the finger of God upon the heart of man and the pages of the book of nature."[34]

This brief survey points up the complexity of what constituted Freemasonry in America in the nineteenth century. Certainly, a facile pronouncement that the American version was completely different from European or Dutch Masonry cannot be maintained. In many ways, American Freemasonry matched that of the Netherlands, although the attempt to "Christianize" the lodge was not found as often among the Dutch (recall the quotation from the "Tweede Open Brief," page 9).

This overview is important for at least two reasons. First, those in the RCA who allowed Freemasonry often resorted to the charge that the Reformed immigrants were on the wrong track because they confused American with European lodges. That charge could (and can) not be maintained. Second, what lodge membership meant to RCA members is very difficult to discern. When Rev. Van Cleef wrote to the Synod of the *Afscheiding Church* that "our best and most orthodox ministers and members are Masons," and when Dr. E. S. Porter declared on the floor of the General Synod that he was "a Royal Arch Mason and a disciple of Jesus Christ," what did they exactly mean? What did lodge membership mean to them? Did they completely embrace Masonry, including its deistic origins and rituals? Did they compartmentalize their church profession and their masonic oaths?

In trying to characterize American Freemasonry, I have focused nearly exclusively on its religious dimension. Certainly for RCA lodge members the association meant many other things as well—as they did for the millions of Masons throughout the world. They experienced the initiation rites as either impressive or silly, they enjoyed the conviviality of the lodge, they took part in the charitable events, perhaps they appreciated the absence of women, and for most lodges it was an opportunity to mix with the "better sort" of people from their community.

The Christian Reformed Church and Freemasonry

The CRC story up to the 1880s is much shorter (and not nearly as interesting) than that of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands and of the RCA. The history in some ways begins with the 1834 *Afscheiding* in the Netherlands, since many of the early CRC members came from that separation and continued to identify with it. Moreover, the main church that came out of the *Afscheiding* (the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands) figured prominently in the Freemasonry controversy.

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[33] Dumenil, 62.

[34] Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma* (Charleston, S.C.: Supreme Council of the Thirty-third Degree for the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, 1881), 226.

The CRC originated as a secession from the RCA, as it challenged the 1850 union of the Dutch immigrant church with the RCA.[35] Critics among the new immigrants charged that the RCA was not sufficiently known and that the immigrant congregations had not been adequately consulted about joining the denomination. Moreover, these critics also found practices and teachings in the RCA that could not pass theological muster or Reformed practice. In 1857 the issue came to a head. At the 8 April 1857 meeting, the RCA Classis of Holland received four letters of separation, citing, among other complaints, the use of eight hundred hymns in the RCA and the practice of sharing the Lord's table with those who were not Reformed.[36] Soon a new denomination was formed which became the Christian Reformed Church.[37]

The early years of the new denomination were extremely difficult. Reverend Koene Van Den Bosch was the only ordained minister until 1863. Later, several other ministers also joined but then returned to the RCA; some congregations followed the same pattern. Internal dissension within several congregations, as well as disagreements about doctrine and church polity, further weakened the church. Reading the early "Minutes of the True Dutch Reformed Church" is not an uplifting experience. But there was progress on some fronts. The churches originally were limited to Classis Holland, but expanded to include Classis Illinois in 1868. Theological training was begun with a few students at a minister's home, but an official seminary was begun in 1869, which eventually matured into both Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary. Under the Latin saying *Luctor et Emergo*, historian Henry Beets considers the years 1857-79 as the period of struggle, followed by a period of emergence and stability from 1880-90 (the years during which the Freemasonry controversy took place). After 1900 the church continued to expand, both geographically and numerically. In 1875 the CRC membership was 7,525; in 1900 it was 53,794. These figures include internal growth, members transferring from the RCA, and new immigrants.[38]

Freemasonry was not a very visible issue in the early years of the CRC. Since both pastors and members came from the most conservative end of the Netherlands Reformed spectrum, they had no sympathy for Masons and lodges. Church councils occasionally had to deal with the question, but never as an issue that would threaten their denomination. However, in 1867, Classis Holland took a more-or-less official position, with a brief, rather offhand decision: "Also, in regard to Freemasonry it is decided that after all attempted and fruitless efforts, those who do join [a lodge] will be cast out of the Church."[39] Freemasonry became a major (and endlessly discussed) issue only after it had become a dispute in the RCA. We will now turn to the Freemasonry controversy as it affected the three denominations we have surveyed so far.

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[35] For recent treatments of this separation, see Robert P. Swierenga, "1857—Secession Again: Origins of the Christian Reformed Church," in *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the Nineteenth Century*, by Swierenga and Elton J. Bruins, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 32 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 61-107, and James A. De Jong, *Reassessing 1857: Overlooked Considerations Concerning the Birth of the Christian Reformed Church* (Holland, Mich.: Van Raalte Institute, 2006).

[36] *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 240-43.

[37] A recent essay explores another cause in great detail: Earl Wm. Kennedy, "Richard Baxter: An English Fox in a Dutch Chicken Coop?," in *A Goodly Heritage*, 121-61.

[38] The most informative study of the early history of the CRC is still Henry Beets, *De Chr. Geref. Kerk in N. A.: Zestig Jaren van Strijd en Zegen* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Printing Co., 1918). His English version, *The Christian Reformed Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eastern Avenue Bookstore, 1946), is much inferior.

[39] *1867 Classis Holland Minutes*, Art. 15 (Calvin College and Seminary Archives).

THE FREEMASONRY CONTROVERSY IN THE RCA[40]

Synodical Overtures and Decisions

We will first trace the course of the Freemasonry controversy as it developed between the midwestern RCA and the RCA General Synod. It is often difficult to establish the beginning of a historical event or development, but we can precisely pinpoint the beginning of the Masonic controversy. The *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the RCA*, 1868, records that "a communication was received from the Classis of Holland, in reference to Freemasonry, which was referred to the Committee on Overtures." Another one on the "subject of Freemasonry" was received from the Classis of Wisconsin.[41] It is not really clear why these communications were sent to the Synod in this particular year; perhaps the 1867 CRC decision referred to above prompted the midwestern RCA brethren to demonstrate that their posture was as "Reformed" as that of the CRC. But the underlying reason certainly goes back further; one must remember that the midwestern members came from a tradition in the Netherlands that was repelled by Freemasonry, and they were shocked to discover that the RCA generally did not share that tradition. Worse, many RCA members actually belonged to Freemasonry lodges, and worse yet, these members included elders and ministers.

The overtures requested two actions from General Synod: first, that the Synod express its strong disapproval of Freemasonry, and, second, that Mason membership was not to be permitted in the RCA. The Committee on Overtures responded rather curtly that "the uniform usage of the Church has been to abstain from deliverance upon all abstract questions which are not purely ecclesiastical, or which may involve the exercise of consistorial discipline; they therefore recommend the following resolution: *Resolved*, that this Synod do not consider it proper to express our opinion in the case." The resolution passed by a vote of 89 to19.[42] (It may be worth noting that Synod's response to the first point seems rather disingenuous. It is not clear why the beliefs and practices are considered "abstract questions," and it is ironic that on the very next page of *Acts and Proceedings*, Synod registers an impassioned protest against the "evil and sin of Intemperance." The Michigan and Wisconsin brethren might well have wondered why it was appropriate to condemn one non-ecclesiastical evil, but not another.)

The two classes were not satisfied with this response, and they sent similar overtures to the General Synods of 1869 and 1870. The response of Synod was also similar to that of 1868, as the Committee "feel constrained to present substantially the same views as those contained in last year's report." The Committee (and Synod) were even more insistent that membership in a lodge could not be used to deny church membership, "for this would be to establish a new and unauthorized test of membership in the Christian Church, and would interfere with consistorial prerogatives." The Committee did try to soften its refusal to take action by noting that "our

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[40] Although the RCA Freemasonry controversy created a spate of writing during the 1880s, it did not attract major scholarly attention in the 1900s. A thorough essay was published in 1983 by Elton J. Bruins, "The Masonic Controversy in Holland, Michigan, 1879-1882," in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church,* ed. Peter De Klerk (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 53-72. A somewhat different version of this essay was published as "1882—Secession Yet Again: The Masonic Controversy," in *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the Nineteenth Century*, 108-35. I am indebted to Bruins's study, and readers will find overlap in our essays. One difference is that I have consulted many more sources in the Dutch language, especially church newspapers.

[41] *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America*, 1868, 376-77; hereafter, *Acts and Proceedings*.

[42] Ibid., 461, 463.

brethren are evidently sincere and earnest in their convictions . . . , and they have done well to state their difficulties." Moreover, the Committee agreed "that the path of prudence and safety lies outside of *all* oath-bound secret societies," which may violate the Christian's conscience, and there is no need to join a secret society to carry out benevolence, because the Church has "a far higher capacity for the development of practical benevolence." [43]

After this initial skirmish, the situation in the midwestern RCA remained relatively quiet—at least on the surface.[44] The CRC, however, could not leave the issue alone, and managed to keep the topic alive, especially in the pages of *De Wachter.* For example, in the 8 and 22 April 1870 issues, a correspondent from the Netherlands protested the presence of Freemasons in the RCA, and *De Wachter* was happy to print it. Another article inveighed against Rev. E. C. Oggel who had defended Freemasonry in *De Hope*. In his response H. De Jongh called upon many other Christians who had testified against Freemasonry and then ended by contrasting Masonry with the Gospel: "Truth and lie; Christ and Bile am; light and darkness—these are and will always remain as opposing enemies. Thus says the Lord."[45]

The beginning of the next flare-up can again be pinpointed with precision: it was occasioned by three lectures on Freemasonry. The consistory of the First Reformed Church of Holland (Pillar Church) allowed its sanctuary to be used for a series of lectures against Freemasonry by Edmond Ronayne on 3, 4, and 5 June 1879. Ronayne was an ex-Mason who had written *Handbook of Freemasonry* (by August a Dutch translation was available) and *The Master's Carpet or Masonry and Baal.* The lectures were not "recorded" in any way, but in January 1880 he delivered three lectures in Grand Rapids and one can assume that these were substantially the same. It appears that someone recorded these lectures (in shorthand?) and they appeared in Dutch as a pamphlet.[46] Ronayne focused especially on the religious elements of Freemasonry and made the most of the more lurid aspects of the lodges. To cite just a few sentences: "In their ceremonies Freemasonry is like the idol worship of Baal. . . . This shows that Freemasonry is anti-Christ. One must choose whether to be a believer or a Freemason. A believer cannot be a Freemason. . . . The Bible teaches that the dead in Christ shall rise first. Because Hiram was killed and arose, the Freemason will also arise. It is nothing but pagan idolatry" (11). He also cites the murder of William Morgan as if it were a proven fact: "William Morgan wrote about Freemasonry and revealed the passwords and other secrets. He was thrown into prison and on September 19, 1826, he was murdered by two Englishmen in Canada [presumably Masons] and his body thrown in the river" (14-15).

Reaction in Holland and surroundings was electrifying. The local Dutch newspapers provided extensive summaries of the lectures and published running commentary on the great event. A platform had been built in the Pillar Church to mimic a Masonic temple and in each lecture Ronayne demonstrated part of a Masonic ritual. Attendance at each lecture was gratifying to the organizers, but the third lecture was beyond expectation, "because there was a rumor that

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[43] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1870, 96-97.

[44] During this time, an interesting figure appears in Orange City, Iowa. Dr. A. F. H. De Lespinasse, a medical doctor from the Netherlands and also a committed Mason and freethinker, settled in Orange City. Here he was accepted as a valuable member of the community. See Nella Kennedy, "Dr. A. F. H. De Lespinasse, the Man from Helmus," in *A Century of Midwestern Dutch-American Manners and Mores—and More*, AADAS Conference Lectures (Orange City, Iowa: Northwestern College, 1955), 29-35.

[45] "De Vrijmetselarij in de Kerk," *De Wachter*, 24 February 1871, 3.

[46] Edmond Ronayne, *Over Vrijmetselarij* (Grand Rapids: De Standaard Drukkerij, 1880). My quotations are from this pamphlet.

on the last evening a more horrible spectacle would be shown and ladies would not be permitted (the last part was later denied), on this night a still larger crowd came from hither and yon . . . estimated at fifteen to seventeen hundred." The editor summed up what was supposedly the reaction of most listeners: "Freemasonry is too humiliating, too cowardly, too low, too ridiculous for a person with a reasonably healthy mind to waste any evening in such a manner in a lodge."[47] During the next year hardly any issue of the newspaper went by without an article or letter to the editor on Freemasonry.

But not all agreed with this evaluation of *De Hollander*. The editor of the *Holland City News* harrumphed, "Mr. Ed. Ronayne, of Chicago, was the oath breaker [of his Masonic oaths] who was assisted by local coadjutors, to vent their personal spites, and thus assisted in desecrating a [church] building. . . . The unmitigated twaddle of a renegade Roman Catholic cannot prove edifying to our masses who have for the last thirty years been fed by the most profound theologians."[48] Other magazines and newspapers also dealt with the question and thus it was kept alive in church and town.

As a foil to the Michigan newspapers, it is instructive to read the (eastern RCA) *Christian Intelligencer*. The *Intelligencer* did not comment on the Freemasonry question very frequently. However, one article was rather telling and spoke more frankly than the official synodical pronouncements:

> We know many who are Free Masons. We prize them as friends and as members of the Church of Christ. They are among the best men we know, not because they are Masons, but because they are Christians. They are most earnest, active, and liberal in promoting the interest of the kingdom of Christ. We judge Masonry by Masons, and so judging it we have not a word of condemnation. . . . Our friends and brethren in Holland have been deceived. Without the slightest hesitation we declare our disbelief in the revelations which this Ronayne professed to make. . . . Masonry is an organization for a special purpose, for mutual help and relief. It has nothing to do with a man's religious convictions, any more than an insurance company or a society for ordinary philanthropic ends. . . . It will be useless to bring Freemasonry before the General Synod. That body will give council in the fullness of the sympathy it feels, but it will refuse to pass an act condemning the order, or even to put on record one word for or against it.[49]

We will return to the local effect and consequences of Ronayne's lectures later, but will now resume the deliberation of General Synod. The first mention at the 1880 Synod seems an echo of a decade ago: "Communications on the subject of Freemasonry were received from the Classes of Grand River, Holland, Wisconsin, and Illinois, the last mentioned coming through the Particular Synod of Chicago, to which body it was originally addressed. These papers were all referred to the Committee on Overtures."[50] The committee first summarized the communications with the following citations from the overtures: "Freemasonry is (1) anti-Republican; (2) Anti-Christian; and (3) anti-Reformed"; "a religious institution, which is not only Christless but anti-Christian . . . that involves oaths, obligations, ceremonies and associations which are inconsistent with the principles and fellowship of the Christian Church"; "we ministers and elders do not

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[47] *De Hollander*, 8 July 1879, 2-3
[48] *Holland City News*, 7 June 1879, 5.
[49] "Freemasonry," apparently written by editor John M. Ferris, in the *Christian Intelligencer*, 11 September 1879, 8.
[50] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1880, 462.

knowingly allow Free Masons to membership in our Churches"; "there is danger that we should lose several esteemed members of our Churches." The committee also noted that the overtures were one-sided, and that the sources on which they were based needed to be scrutinized. Moreover, they now acknowledged (in contrast to 1868) that the problem was not "abstract but concrete; that it touches vital points of our faith and order and fellowship as a Church of Christ; and that it must needs be considered with the utmost circumspection and fidelity to all the great interests which it involves."[51]

Synod then passed five resolutions, proclaiming that they "recognize and appreciate . . . the practical difficulties and perplexities" of the midwestern churches. The resolutions included the most severe disapproval of Freemasonry of any synodical pronouncement. Although stopping short of explicit condemnation of Freemasonry, it "declares that no communicant member, and no minister of the Reformed Church in America ought to unite with or to remain in any society or institution, whether secret or open, whose principles and practices are anti-Christian, or contrary to the faith and practice of the church to which he belongs." But at the same time it "advises" consistories (no doubt referring to the midwestern congregations) "to be very kind and forbearing, and strictly constitutional in their dealings with individuals on this subject, and that they be and are hereby affectionately cautioned against setting up any new or unauthorized tests of communion in the Christian Church."[52] This reply certainly took the issue seriously and Synod responded as graciously and fully as they could.

Synod 1880 no doubt considered its language clear and unequivocal and not open to further discussion. They underestimated, however, the fervor and tenacity of the midwestern churches, and the *Acts and Proceedings* of the next year play the by-now-familiar-overture tune: "Your Committee have had placed in their hands memorials [overtures] about the subject of Free Masonry from the Classes of Grand River, Holland and Wisconsin." And this time General Synod was much less conciliatory, and they no longer "recognize and appreciate" the midwestern difficulties. In effect the committee said that this is the same old stuff, and they "do not deem it necessary to review the subject at length. The report of the Committee of 1880 was an exhaustive consideration of the whole matter, and excuses the necessity of again opening this vexed question. . . . The General Synod has no power to declare tenets of doctrine, nor to establish new tests of church membership."

The three synodical resolutions were equally curt: "The Synod does not sympathize with Free Masonry"; it cannot interfere in the "exercise of discipline, except only in the manner prescribed by the Constitution"; and "Synod affectionately requests the memorialists to consider this as an issue *settled*."[53]

Synod 1883 had just one overture (from the Classis of Wisconsin) expressing satisfaction with the previous synodical pronouncements that Synod should not usurp "the rights and privileges of lower judicatories," but asking (one more time) for Synod to make "an inquiry into the nature, ceremonies, etc. of oath-bound secret societies." The Committee of Overtures judged this request "entirely outside of the powers and prerogatives of General Synod and withal so impracticable." Three brief resolutions followed. The second adds a new note (presumably for

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[51] Ibid., 534-35.
[52] Ibid., 533-36.
[53] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1881, 733-34. It is again ironic that the very next topic in *Acts and Proceedings* concerns polygamy, and here Synod calls that moral issue "an iniquity that calls for utter and immediate eradication; it is a foul blot on the national honor, a peril to political and social virtue, and an outrage upon the moral sentiments of all Christendom." Some of the midwestern brethren no doubt judged Freemasonry to be in the same category!

eastern members), "that out of regard to the fact that membership in Masonic and similar orders gives offense to many Christian consciences, and has become a fruitful source of injurious agitation and division in the Church, they, in accordance with the law of Christian love, refrain from connection with such societies." In the third resolution "General Synod would earnestly admonish those who have severed their connection with our Church to return to her communion."[54] This third resolution is obviously urging a return of those who had joined the CRC, and a plea to others *not* to go that route.

This part of the story comes to a close in 1884. There is one more overture from the Classis of Wisconsin. The synodical committee says, "Their unflagging zeal in this direction is a shining example to us all in other departments of christian activity." And the Synod concludes with one sentence: "Having examined the deliverances of General Synod on previous memorials of a like nature [we] feel unable to add anything further, and General Synod has no other or further deliverances to make."[55]

Reactions and Outcomes in the Midwestern RCA

So far we have dealt mostly with the official relationship between the midwestern congregations and General Synod. That relationship was crucial, of course, but we now need to look more carefully at the congregations and the church members. How did they react, what did they say and write, what decisions did they make?

Church Newspapers

We will begin with what was written in the midwestern churches, which was voluminous. To keep the discussion manageable, I will limit myself largely to two sources—*De Wachter* and *De Hope*, two influential Dutch-language church papers. They were very much involved in writing about the Freemasonry controversy, but their influence has perhaps not been sufficiently recognized and used in scholarly discussions.[56]

DE WACHTER

Even though the CRC separated from the RCA in 1857, it was not until 1868 that they published a church paper to defend and perpetuate their cause and to provide more unity for the denomination. *De Wachter* appeared as a four-page paper, to be published every other week,"to Promote the Interests of the True Dutch Reformed Church."

The raison d'être of the CRC was the alleged errors and non-Reformed practices in the RCA, and thus one could expect that they would return to those errors periodically. Because one of the errors was the RCA's toleration of Freemasonry, this subject predictably appeared, especially at times when the division within the RCA was at its greatest. Already in the first volume, one finds a piece that announces the failure of the Wisconsin and Holland classes of the

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[54] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1883, 303-4.
[55] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1884, 502.
[56] Additional sources with much detail were *De Hollander* and *De Grondwet*, two newspapers published in Holland. They often contained articles of classical meetings, with verbatim reproduction of speeches. Both newspapers are available in microfilm at the Joint Archives of Holland. Translations of most of these articles into English are available in the private files of the Van Raalte Institute.

RCA to find satisfaction at their General Synod. The author continued, "From these news items one concludes, not without justification, that the Synod does not dare to confront this issue, and to uproot this sin and evil that has penetrated the church so terribly."[57] Again, in 1870, *De Wachter* published a letter from a person in the Netherlands. This letter had been refused by the editor of an *Afscheiding* periodical, but *De Wachter* was happy to publish it under the title, "Freemasons: May They Be Members of Christ's church?"[58]

In the 1870s one finds articles against Freemasonry appearing at various times, but the volume increased greatly after the Ronayne lectures. The lectures were summarized in detail, with the expected critical comments. Another issue reported on at length was the crisis in the First Reformed Church in Holland (more about this below). By November Ronayne's *Handbook on Freemasonry* had appeared in Dutch and author "v. L." (Wilhelmus van Leeuwen?) summarized it in great detail, both the silly ceremonies and the "atrocious, wicked, God-dishonoring oaths." Then he mentioned again the futile attempts of the Holland and Wisconsin classes to overture General Synod to condemn Freemasonry, and ended with an appeal to the midwestern RCA brothers to level the separating wall and to come to the CRC and "to join together as a Dutch Reformed Church that recognizes Christ as her Head—which we can do very well without the East."[59]

In the next issue of *De Wachter*, we find a translation by Rev. Gerrit E. Boer, professor at the CRC Theological School, of a defense of Freemasonry originally published in English in the *Christian Intelligencer*, apparently written by its editor.[60] The *Christian Intelligencer* was hardly known in the midwestern RCA, and thus Boer's translation was, I suppose, a service to *De Wachter* readers and others. However, the tenor of the article would hardly endear the writer to midwestern readers, be they CRC or RCA. The author claims to know hundreds of Masons and they are among the best Christians he knows, and he finds it sad that the friends and brothers in Holland have been misled by Ronayne. Boer added that he did not need to argue much to persuade *De Wachter* readers of the superficiality and errors of the article, and he was probably right about his audience. But again, the intent was to keep stirring the pot of controversy.[61]

After the meeting of General Synod 1880, there was a long article which, interestingly, gave details of the discussion at Synod from the *New York Times* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel.* This report was one of the few in which the speeches of specific synodical delegates were reported—and the tone was not as measured and civil as the synodical *Acts and Proceedings* suggest. Dr. Taylor, the reporter for the Overtures Committee, read the overture, and then was the first to speak. He considered the overture an insult to all those who were Masons and also upstanding members of the RCA and an attack on freedom of conscience. In response, Rev. Egbert Winter from Illinois delivered a spirited report in which he concluded that one could not be a good Mason and a good Christian. Dr. E. S. Porter replied in "strong language, defending Freemasonry, and that he was a Royal Arch Mason and a disciple of Jesus Christ." Next came Professor Wood, former president of the Board of Education. He made a "capricious, clever speech, including many bitter taunts about the 8 percent of the Reformed Church which meddled in the private judgment of the remaining 92 percent. . . . He hoped that Synod would pound the final nail in the casket of all this foolishness about Freemasonry." Next, Rev. Lepeltak of the

[57] *De Wachter*, 14 August 1868, 2.
[58] Ibid., 8 April 1870, 2.
[59] Ibid., 6 November 1879, 3.
[60] Ibid., 24 February 1871, 3.
[61] Ibid., 20 November 1879.

Classis of Holland declared that Freemasonry made a mockery of God's Word, and then added how a candidate is initiated while he is half-naked. Then Professor Wood jumped up and asked the speaker if he knew this from his own experience or from others who had broken their oath. Before Rev. Lepeltak could answer, Dr. Taylor arose again and declared in great excitement that every word spoken about Freemasonry by brother Lepeltak was false. Amidst all this disorder and shouting of "Order! Order!" someone helped out Rev. Lepeltak by explaining that he had confused the third and the seventh degree. . . . Elder Robert R. Pruyn of Albany declared that "not a single word of truth had been spoken about Freemasonry. Most Christians were Freemasons, and he considered that this institution was, next to the Church, one of the greatest forces of civilization in our country."[62] Again, the decision by editor G. Hemkes to publish the article was a combination of supplying information and inflaming the controversy.

Many authors wrote about Freemasonry in *De Wachter*, but the award for "indefatigable effort" must go to Rev. Lammert J. Hulst, a leading pastor in the CRC. Having served in both RCA and CRC congregations, his final step was to the CRC in 1882, and Freemasonry was the chief reason for his leaving the RCA.[63] One example of his diligence and ardor can be found in the 1884 *De Wachter*. Between 3 March and 21 May he wrote eight articles, mostly directed against Rev. Nicholas H. Dosker's articles in *De Hope*. Hulst's double-barreled approach was aimed at Freemasonry as such and at his being removed from the RCA congregation of Coldbrook. I will not attempt to summarize the articles (which contain a fair amount of repetition) but will call attention to the tone that he often adopted. Although many of his articles are addressed to "My honored/beloved Brother," the tone is often very unbrotherly. In one response to Dosker, he closes with this paragraph: "Truly! Rev. Dosker seeks to cloak the shame [of Freemasonry] that clings to their 'Sodom comforter,' to their strengthening the hands of the godless, to their political rather than faithful activities. However, this cover is too transparent for anyone who is not caught in preconception. May God also deliver this brother from this error."[64] Earlier, when the *Afscheiding* Church was deliberating its relationship to the RCA, Hulst weighed in with this judgment: there is no room to remain with a good conscience in the RCA, because "she has publicly chosen the Barabbas of the world over Jesus. Why don't all Hollanders do as we did? Why don't they also leave a church that has become *unfaithful?* Do not be angry because I speak hard truths; I am not angry, I am not your enemy, but I am an enemy of your works."[65]

DE HOPE

De Hope was the unofficial periodical in Dutch for the midwestern RCA. Its coverage of the Freemasonry controversy was less uniform than that of *De Wachter*. When the early overtures were presented to General Synod (1869, 1870), the midwestern RCA support expressed in *De Hope* was uniformly behind the classes, and so was the disappointment at the Synods' decisions. In the next foray (1879-84), the support for the various anti-Freemasonry declarations was still very strong. For example, in 1881 the classes of Wisconsin, Holland, and Grand River gave no

[62] Ibid., 15 July 1880, 2. Reported by G. D. J. For a complete text of these speeches, see the *Christian Intelligencer*, 17 June 1880: 3-4, 12.
[63] For Hulst's "Statement of Separation" from the RCA, see Beets, 180. Hulst's opponents in the RCA considered him to be a schismatic troublemaker.
[64] *De Wachter*, 23 May 1884, 2.
[65] Ibid., 26 July 1883, 2.

quarter and repeated their recital of the evils of Freemasonry and their request/demand that Synod declare that Masons should not be permitted in the RCA. These overtures, and support for these efforts, were faithfully reported in *De Hope*.

However, one also begins to hear more nuanced voices. For example, when *De Wachter* proposed that since the pronouncement of the RCA Synod 1880 was completely tolerant of Freemasonry, and that the time had come for the midwestern RCA to join the CRC, Rev. Peter Lepeltak of the RCA reacted with a "Not so fast!" Even though Synod had not gone far enough, it had agreed with some of the midwestern overtures, and some of Synod's principles were biblical.[66]

Later that fall a more significant fissure appeared. As noted before, *De Hope* did a great service to the community by reporting on the various classis meetings in the midwestern church. One of the most significant was the report on the 6 October 1880 meeting of the Classis of Holland. The Committee on Order and Discipline presented its report about Freemasonry to the Classis. The report began in an affable tone, as it expressed four areas of agreement and joy at the resolutions of Synod 1880, such as its declaration that one must deal in a friendly and tolerant manner with the Freemasonry issue. It appeared that there was rapprochement between Classis and Synod. But the tone changed in the next paragraph: "However, it grieves us greatly that Synod has added a warning against the adding of new stipulations of membership in the congregation. . . . The warning makes us believe that Synod intended that the exclusions of Freemasons would be the addition of a new test for membership in the Church. . . . This would mean that Freemasons must be tolerated in the Church." (This is indeed what the Synod intended.) The report therefore reiterated some of the evils of Freemasonry and asked the next Synod to rescind the 1880 decision. Moreover, Synod should appoint a committee whose task it would be to prove that Freemasonry militates against the confession and order of the Church.

This report was accepted by Classis. However, one member of the committee, Rev. Nicholas M. Steffens, a highly-respected pastor and professor at Western Seminary, demurred and had written a minority report. His report differed markedly from the majority report. First, he did not believe that Synod had intended to limit the exercise of discipline at the congregational level. Second, Synod's argument that one cannot deny church membership to a whole group of people is purely biblical and Reformed. Third, those (Classis of Holland) who want to be legalistic about barring a whole class of people from the church must remember that they are faced with a historical situation which cannot be suddenly changed. In their diligence they might do more harm than good and in effect destroy the Church. The Classis should therefore not take any action against the decision of Synod 1880 and instead protest against Freemasonry in a less confrontational manner. The churches should also remember that her main calling is the building up of God's kingdom. Steffens's minority report was not discussed but was voted down 17 to 5.[67]

Steffens's report was the first major statement that departed from what had become gospel truth in the midwestern church. It is also significant that among the five votes *for* his report, three other votes besides Steffens's were cast by pastors. In spite of this "opposition," at a subsequent meeting Classis went ahead with its plan to present a broad anti-Freemasonry overture to the Particular Synod of Chicago, which was to present it to the 1881 General Synod.

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[66] *De Hope*, 1 September 1880, 3.
[67] Ibid., 13 October 1880, 3-4.

Steffens predictably voted against that overture with his reason given as, "because it is against all rules of Presbyterian Church Order." [68]

Later Steffens became a major defender of the eastern RCA position, especially as he sparred with Hulst and his articles in *De Wachter*. Steffens had several bones to pick with Hulst. First, of course, was Hulst's ongoing attacks on Freemasonry and the refusal of the RCA to declare Freemasonry membership at odds with church membership. Second, there was Hulst's interpretation of his parting from the Coldbrook congregation. Hulst compared his suspension to that of the ministers of the 1834 *Afscheiding*, who were hounded unjustly from the *Hervormde Kerk*. Steffens disagreed strongly. Hulst was not a faithful pastor who was driven from the RCA. No, he was among those "who destroy congregations and practice anarchy in the church." Third, when Hulst claimed to favor brotherly discussion, without bitterness, Steffens had had enough: "When one hears such words from a man who stands at the head of a group that heaps bitterness upon bitterness and disgrace upon disgrace; at the head of a group of men who admit openly that they do not want to grant freedom of conscience to fellow-Christians; who himself has enriched the church's vocabulary with expressions such as 'friends of the East, playing church, wandering to the area of church politics'—then one truly does not know whether to have pity or to be outraged at such a person."[69]

Another crack in the uniform stance of the midwestern church can be seen in an open letter by Rev. Peter de Pree of Vriesland, Michigan, to one of the strongest opponents to Freemasonry, Rev. John Karsten of the Alto congregation in Wisconsin. De Pree defended the 1880 Synod decision by proposing that this and previous Synods had indeed testified strongly against Freemasonry, and that brother Karsten and his cohorts should cease and desist. Then De Pree added the rather peculiar assertion that the synodical pronouncements had been very effective: "An American minister said to me recently that he knows only one RCA minister who still is in Freemasonry. The general impression among ministers and councils in the East seems to be that Freemasonry is virtually over in the Church, at least among ordained men. They ascribe this development to the actions of Synod."[70]

In another exchange, the editor of *De Hope* took aim at *De Wachter* and implicitly defended the (eastern) RCA. The editor of *De Wachter* had called the RCA the "church of Freemasonry." *De Hope* replied: "We want to assume that that abusive term flowed from your pen in a careless moment, or else we must count you among the lowest of church leaders who do not hesitate to use the nastiest and foulest means to reach your goal." [71]

This selection of summaries and quotations provides a picture of the "journalism" that carried much of the Freemasonry controversy. For most of the church members these Dutch language sources were indispensible for understanding the identity of their churches, what they were trying to achieve, and especially how they related to both the Netherlands *Afgescheiden Kerk* and to the eastern section of the RCA. It is obvious that much was at stake in the controversy, that feelings ran very high, and that (to put it mildly) their speech and writing frequently did not mirror the injunction of Philippians 2:1-5.

Reactions in the Churches

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[68] Ibid., 13 April 1881, 4-6.
[69] Ibid., 17 May 1882, 4.
[70] Ibid., 27 July 1881, 3.
[71] Ibid., 16 November 1881, 1.

Even though the writing and reporting in the church press was very important in keeping the members abreast of developments, even more important were the decisions and events in the congregations. Underlying much of the discussion was the (sometimes indirect, sometimes obvious) question of church membership. If General Synod did not meet the demands of the midwestern overtures, would individuals and congregations jump the ecclesiastical ship and join the CRC?

As a "case study" we will look at the First Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan (Pillar Church), both because we have full information about the discussions and process at First Church, and because it was, in some ways, the most significant and prestigious congregation. The congregation had been founded (rather informally) by Van Raalte soon after the arrival of the first immigrants in 1847, first meeting in a spartan log church and after 1856 in the impressive Pillar Church at the corner of College Avenue and Ninth Street. Van Raalte served the congregation until 1867 and was succeeded by Rev. Roelof Pieters. Van Raalte died in 1876.[72]

Van Raalte shared the opposition to Freemasonry of the midwestern church as expressed in an early meeting of the Classis of Holland. When Freemasonry was discussed, "all look upon it as works of darkness, and thus unlawful for a (church) member."[73] During his ministry, however, the issue did not become problematic and he died before the controversy in the eighties. The next pastor, Rev. Roelof Pieters, died in 1880, and the authority vacuum was filled largely by elder Teunis Keppel.

The Consistory Minutes of First Church are a rich source for tracing the reactions and developments about Freemasonry, especially after the Ronayne lectures (held at First Church).[74] At the first consistory meeting after the Ronayne lectures, the deliberations began: "Several members, about 10 or 12, came to the meeting. Their purpose was to consult with the consistory . . . , what must be done since we now have come to knowledge and conviction about the unrighteous works of Freemasonry, and God's Word teaches us to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them, Ephesians 5, verse 11. . . ." On 24 July there was a congregational meeting of the male members; the attendance was "numerous." A general discussion took place, and a committee was appointed to prepare a document of resolutions for two weeks hence. The next congregational meeting took place on 7 August, and the committee presented a document, with a Preamble, containing five objections against Freemasonry, and six Resolutions. The fourth Resolution read: "Resolved, we consider it to be the calling of our Church to declare itself against Freemasonry, to consider the Order to be in conflict with True Religion, deluding for any person, and that the Church may not admit to her fellowship those who are members of secret societies, and that we use our power and influence unitedly, prayerfully, and in brotherly love to reach this goal." The vote for acceptance of the document was "all votes for, no votes against."

No further minutes deal with the controversy until after the General Synod of June 1880, which had refused to change its earlier stance. The response of the consistory of First Church on 16 August 1880 was curt and shocking: they decided "not to submit to the decisions of Synod."

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[72] The following section draws significantly on my chapter, "Afterward: The Freemasonry Controversy," in *Pillar Church in the Van Raalte Era*, by Michael De Vries and Harry Boonstra (Holland, Mich.: Pillar Christian Reformed Church, 2003), 125-38.

[73] *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858*, 144.

[74] The original minute books are held by Pillar Christian Reformed Church. Copies of the minutes and an English translation by William and Althea Buursma are in the private files of the Van Raalte Institute. (I did my own translation before the Buursma translation was available.)

On 30 August and 30 September they called congregational meetings in which the synodical decisions were dealt with, and for the first time the word *ontbinden* (literally "untie," that is, to separate from the denomination) was mentioned.

At the 27 February 1882 congregational meeting, there still was strong difference of opinion and lengthy debate: "Brother Schrader has a long address and wants to prove that neither in the Old nor the New Testament do we find reasons that would justify secession." The opposition responded in like manner: "Brother Schaddelee cites a large number of texts from the Old as well as the New Testament to prove that the secession was not only proper, but demanded." At this meeting tempers did indeed flare. When Rev. Nicholas Steffens (as representative of Classis over vacant congregations) ruled that some of those present should not vote, president of the consistory Teunis Keppel retorted "that he had no right to speak in this meeting." Steffens snapped, "I order the members to abstain from voting in this business." But vote they did, with the following result: 86 for separation, 18 to remain with the RCA, and 3 undecided. The letter sent to the Classis of Holland set forth the by-now-familiar reasons: "The existence of scandalous sins in the Ref. Church in connection with Freemasonry . . . and the refusal of several General Synods to warn against this evil."

For two years after the decision to leave the RCA, First Church was an independent congregation, even though several other separated congregations had joined the CRC. The first consistory discussion on this independent status appeared in the 22 April 1884 minutes, when eight members came with a statement that presented "several reasons that the church should no longer be independent." The consistory agreed and predictably decided that they must join a denomination that is "Reformed in confession and Presbyterian in church government," and by October they had narrowed that list to the CRC and the United Presbyterian Church. Again predictably, the favored denomination was the CRC. At three successive congregational meetings, the congregation was asked to vote for or against joining the CRC, and the final vote (74 Yes, 19 No, and 8 blank) made the choice official.

The transition was a very smooth one. The CRC had already accepted several congregations because of the Freemasonry controversy and was, no doubt, eager to accept the flagship congregation, First Reformed Church of Holland. Classis Holland of the CRC, after reading the official request of First Church and "asking Rev. Egbert Bos a few questions," promptly accepted First Church and its pastor into the denomination.

This history of First Church was not necessarily typical of other congregations that left the RCA. However, the strong feelings for and against on the part of some, the ambivalence on the part of others, the harsh words, and the long deliberations occurred in all the congregations.

The separating congregations nearly all joined the CRC. Beets records a meeting of representatives of six congregations on 26 October 1882 to discuss joining the CRC, and this acceptance took place on 12 December. Other pastors, congregations, and individual families had already joined or followed later. Exact numbers of those who left are difficult to ascertain. Beets considers Corwin's estimate of one thousand confessing members as too low. However, Beets provides no overall numbers; he admits that it was lower than anticipated and limited to Michigan.[75] There are other numbers to consider as well. Robert Swierenga calculates that "the Masonic lodge controversy . . . cost the Immigrant RCA some 10,000 souls."[76] This number no

[75]Beets, 181-84.

[76] Robert Swierenga, "Walls or Bridges?: Acculturation Processes in the Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches in North America," in *Morsels in the Melting Pot: The Persistence of Dutch Immigrant Communities in North America*, eds. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2006), 37.

doubt includes those immigrants who might have joined the RCA, if it were not for the masonic controversy. Both the decision of the *Afscheiding* Church not to send membership papers to the RCA, and general knowledge among the orthodox Reformed in the Netherlands about the stance of the RCA made thousands of immigrants decide to join the CRC. Thus, although the *Afscheiding* Church did not break formal relations with the RCA, the aggregate cost in numbers was considerable.

Relation to the Netherlands "Afscheiding" Church

In the previous pages we have often touched on the relationship to and influence of the church(es) in the Netherlands. The most long-lasting relationship was the control of Classis Amsterdam over the early RCA (1628-1792). This influence, although often resented and partly undermined by the Americanization of the RCA, kept Reformed doctrinal, liturgical, and judicial principles alive in the American church. That influence decreased substantially in the early part of the nineteenth century, and there is little evidence of much direct contact after that between the RCA and the Dutch church, although some in the RCA were aware of the *Afscheiding* and the suffering of those who left the *Hervormde Kerk.* For example, Dr. Thomas DeWitt reported, "When in Holland I received information of a rising spirit of emigration to America, and especially among the (*afgescheidene*) seceders from the Established Church, and had a short interview with the Rev. Mr. Scholte, of Utrecht, recently arrived in this country. The tide of emigration has commenced, and soon two important colonies from this class will be founded in the West."[77] Moreover, Van Raalte knew about the RCA, and he and Rev. Anthony Brummelkamp had written a letter "To the Believers in the United States of North America," which was translated by Rev. Isaac N. Wyckoff and published in the *Christian Intelligencer* of 15 October 1846.

Renewed awareness and contacts were awakened with the immigration that began mid-century. Van Raalte and his colonists were greatly assisted, both short and long term, by the eastern RCA, and this immigrant connection renewed relationships across the Atlantic. However, the renewed contacts were not with the national *Hervormde* Church, but with the *Afgescheidenen*, the ones who, according to the Americans, had dared to withstand the despotic "anti-Republican" established church and were open to a more evangelical faith. Besides, a settlement in the Midwest would help the faltering Home Mission effort to increase the RCA presence in the "West." In the Netherlands, further knowledge about the RCA would have come through correspondence to the old country by Van Raalte and others. One direct contact was a very significant one: Van Raalte's trip to the Netherlands and his attendance at the Synod of the *Afscheiding* Church in 1866. Although not an official delegate from the RCA, he brought greetings and was very pleased to have the Dutch church suggest a sister church relationship. After this year, delegates from each denomination would visit the other, if funds and travel time made it possible.

In the meantime, the fledgling CRC was generally rebuffed by the *Afscheiding* Church. Nearly every year from 1857 to 1882, the CRC attempted to establish a bona fide sister (daughter?) relationship with the Dutch, but was either rebuffed or given grudging acknowledgment.[78] (The very first issue of *De Wachter* stated wistfully, "It appears that in Holland the eyes are beginning to open about our church.") Writers both in the midwestern RCA

[77] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1847, 134.
[78] Beets, 133-43.

and in the *Afscheiding* Church continued to portray the CRC in the worst possible light. Rev. Bernardus De Beij, for example, had already disparaged the CRC while he was still in the Netherlands (see below) and continued his denigration after he immigrated to Chicago. One unsurpassed sentence will provide the flavor of his critique: "The CRC is the product of schism disease, and offended feelings of honor, Diotrephism, personal animosity, misdirection, Phariseism, that sucks out the fly and swallows the camel, a spirit of temptation, loveless enforcers, and creators of sects."[79]

To return to the *Afscheiding* Church and the RCA. The mutual awareness between the two denominations increased greatly in the early 1880s because of the Freemasonry controversy. Freemasonry had not been a major issue in the *Afscheiding* Church, although in 1877 they had decided that they would not permit Masons to be in their church, and they certainly sympathized with the anti-Freemasonry overtures of the midwestern RCA. When the General Synod rebuffed the midwestern congregations, the Dutch church took notice and began to enter the debate, both by writing in church papers and at their national synods. We will highlight the main voices in this debate.

One long discussion took place between Rev. Bernardus De Beij (Bey), an *Afscheiding* pastor who had come to Chicago in 1868, and Rev. H. Beuker, another pastor in the *Afscheiding* church. Both De Beij and Beuker wrote in the Dutch periodical *Vrije Kerk,* and Beuker was reprinted in *De Wachter*. De Beij had written in December 1881 and Beuker wrote several long responses.[80] In the Freemasonry controversy, De Beij had immediately and wholeheartedly chosen the eastern RCA position, while Beuker defended the position of the midwestern churches and strongly protested the RCA synodical decisions. Beuker especially emphasized that the synod of a denomination is responsible for the spiritual well-being of the whole church, even when dealing with unpopular issues. Beuker also defended his sources. According to De Beij, Beuker had acquired all his information from the CRC "schismatics." Beuker responded (rightly so) that in earlier years the midwestern RCA ministers had objected to the evils of Freemasonry in the pages of *De Hope*, and he had garnered many of his arguments from there.

An even more spirited and significant debate took place between Rev. Steffens and various parties in the Dutch church. Steffens had been a major voice in the debate in the midwestern RCA, where his voice was important. Steffens came from the German branch of the *Afscheiding* Church and had studied at the *Afscheiding* Seminary in Kampen, and was still well known in the Dutch church. He came to America in 1872 and served the Zeeland and the Holland First Church congregations at the height of the Freemasonry controversy. In 1880 Steffens wrote one of his first articles against the *Afscheiding* Church because they supported those who were leaving the RCA. A certain "A. C." in the Netherlands had criticized the RCA Synod, and Steffens protested, "I have always thought that it would be better if our brothers in the Netherlands did not meddle in our affairs, because it is impossible for them to judge our situation correctly." Then he quoted Professor Anthony Brummelkamp, honored nestor at the Kampen Seminary, to bolster his position. Brummelkamp had condemned Freemasonry, but then warned the midwestern RCA, "What now? Do you want to leave your church about this question? Certainly not! Listen to Hosea 2—'Plead/argue with your mother.'"[81]

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[79] *De Hope*, 19 August 1868, 3. The article appeared in *De Hope* a few weeks after De Beij had arrived in America. Readers for whom "Diotrephism" is not a part of their regular vocabulary may want to consult 3 John 9.
[80] Reprinted in *De Wachter* from 13 July to 3 August 1882.
[81] *De Hope,* 22 November 1880, 1, 2.

Two years later, however, Steffens and his old professor were no longer in accord. Brummelkamp had written that just as he had supported the early leaders of the *Afscheiding*, if he were in America now, he would support Rev. Hulst against the persecution he endured from the RCA hierarchy. In his response Steffens first paid homage to Brummelkamp as a great leader, but then continued: "Is it fair to condemn a whole classis, which looked to God when laboring in the Hulst case, as *persecutors*—and that out of partiality for a man [Hulst] who treasures the tradition of the Dutch *Afscheiding* only *apparently* . . . , and really assumes a sectarian stance. 'Please pause for a moment,' we call out to Prof. Brummelkamp, who has been led on the wrong path because of his predisposition toward agitators."[82] But Brummelkamp was not to be dissuaded. In a response to both De Beij and Steffens he wrote that he is "now better informed and retracts his error." He charged his former students to do battle against the evil of the (eastern) RCA, and even cited the words of Mordecai to Esther: "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"[83]

The censure from the Dutch church came from various sources. One writer (A. V.) claimed that the RCA was highhanded and un-Reformed in her actions. Now Steffens answered with a frustrated response that he would voice frequently: "Does A. V. really think that the Netherlands is, as it were, a court of appeal in American Reformed Church questions? When will the people in the Netherlands finally become smart enough to understand that an independent church in America, which assumes a place of honor among Reformed Churches, will not be treated as a child under the authority of guardians—guardians who do not at all understand the questions that trouble us?"[84]

Behind these journalistic skirmishes in *De Wachter* and *De Hope* lay the more important issue of the attitude of the *Afscheiding* Church and its official relationship to the RCA and the CRC. Other authors have noted that the *Afscheiding* Church simply shifted its sympathy and support from the RCA to the CRC, but the situation was more complex. I will summarize the situation in some detail to give the reader a sense of the strong emotional and theological sentiments and of the importance of the posture of the Dutch church.

The two most significant discussions and decisions took place at the 1882 and 1883 Synods of the *Afscheiding* Church. The 1882 Synod had received several communications from those who had recently left the RCA, pleading their cause. The RCA had also sent a communication, in the form of a letter by Rev. Dr. Paul D. Van Cleef, defending the RCA stance.[85]

The Synod itself was divided in its reaction. From the very opening there were those who wanted to break the sister-church relationship with the RCA immediately, while others wanted merely to admonish the denomination. The *Afscheiding* synodical commission mandated to write an advisory report also was split into a majority and minority report. The majority report expressed hesitancy to enter into judgment on a matter in a sister church and assured the RCA that it "was not driven by meddlesomeness or pride, but by Christian love that is concerned about

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[82] *De Hope*, 1 February 1882, 2.

[83] Letters from De Beij and Brummelkamp reprinted in *De Wachter*, 6 April 1882, 3. Brummelkamp was a pivotal figure in this discussion. A prominent leader in the *Afscheiding*, he also taught for many years at the seminary in Kampen. Moreover, he was the brother-in-law of Van Raalte.

[84] *De Hope*, 24 May 1882, 4.

[85] It is not clear if this was a synodically approved document composed before Van Cleef left America or a personal letter. I lean to the latter, because editor Hemkes, in his summary of this Synod, noted that "Van Cleef, because of a misunderstanding about the date of the Synod, already had to return to America with his family, and therefore wrote his report in a letter" (*De Wachter*, 21 September 1882, 3).

others for the promotion of good works." The next sentence, however, continued, "we are convinced that the Lodge is grounded in a Deistic basis, and it grieves us greatly that there are many Masons among you. The letter of Rev. van Cleef especially gives us great pain." The report continued that the *Afgescheidenen* did not want to break fellowship with the RCA, but again, the letter of Van Cleef is mentioned. They want to continue the relationship, but only if the RCA turned from Freemasonry; in the meantime the church would not be able to send or receive attestations (membership papers) without further examination. The minority report concluded more tersely: "We hesitate to do so, but we have to break the relationship."[86]

These reports were followed by a long discussion, in which the "moderates" reminded others that in Corinth St. Paul did not favor separation but warned against it. The question whether the church would terminate its relationship with the RCA was rejected by a vote of 37 to 3. However, the orderly Dutch then performed a parliamentary faux pas and "stopped the voting." They read the letter to be sent to those who had already left the RCA, encouraging them to continue the good fight against Freemasonry, "which is death to the Reformed church," and then apparently repeated the voting, which now rejected the resolution to cut off relations with the RCA by only 23 to 17![87]

For some reason the report on the Dutch Synod of 1882 was resumed in *De Wachter* in 1883 (by the CRC delegate Roelof T. Kuiper). He again mentioned the letter of Rev. Van Cleef. It had been translated into Dutch and read on the floor of Synod.[88] The most significant paragraph was the following:

> We hope that our brothers will realize that Freemasonry in America is very different from Freemasonry in Europe, and that many of our best and most orthodox ministers and members are Masons. Our Synod would not be able to carry out procedures which would lead to expelling brothers from our church who are useful in their office and appear to be honored by God. "What God has cleansed, thou shalt not call common." When Freemasons adorn their confession with a godly life, just as other Christians, we as a Synod cannot deny them entrance into our church.[89]

After the reading of Van Cleef's letter the Synod continued to discuss the issue at great length. Even though there still was some sympathy for the RCA stance, more and more delegates were swayed in the opposite direction. Some again raised the question whether the joining with the RCA by Van Raalte and others had not been too hasty, and they recalled the "proviso" of Dr. Wyckoff that the immigrants "would be most perfectly free, at any time when they found an ecclesiastical connection opposed to their religious prosperity and enjoyment, to bid us a fraternal adieu, and be by themselves again." The Synod also contested the notion that American Freemasonry was completely different from its European counterpart. The gathering then continued to damn the RCA with faint praise by concluding that "they did not want to go so far as branding the RCA as an apostate, false church, and to cut off communion with them at this time, especially since they still regarded them as a church of Christ." Some defended the RCA's

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[86] *De Wachter*, 28 September 1882, 3.
[87] Ibid.
[88] I have not been able to locate a copy of Van Cleef's letter in English; I have translated here a section of the Dutch version back into English.
[89] *De Wachter*, 19 July 1883, 2.

Constitution as a pure and Reformed document, but others held that the denomination elevated their Constitution over the Word of God.[90]

Kuiper's final report consisted of the letter sent by the 1882 *Afscheiding* Synod to the RCA. The letter again began with expressions of brotherly love and protestations that the Dutch church had no interest in meddling in the affairs of another denomination. However, "our heart is not without fear, because according to Rev. Van Cleef's letter and your most recent synodical actions, the evil of Freemasonry is not considered very serious or dangerous." The *Afgescheidenen* would be loath to break relations with the RCA, "but if you do not stop this sin, if you do not demonstrate in word and deed that this sin is detested by you, and is no longer tolerated in your church, then we would soon have to do so." Van Cleef's letter is mentioned one more time: "When Rev. Van Cleef's letter was read to us, a shudder went through our gathering. Moreover, when the words, 'What God has cleansed, thou shalt not call common,' spoken by the Lord to Peter in relation to the heathens' entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, were applied by Rev. Van Cleef to the anti-Christian lodge we were shocked. You must realize that according to our view and our judgment of this sin, that we can hardly entrust our [immigrant] members to your care and guidance. We are responsible for their souls and we tremble at the thought that because of us they would come under the guidance of ministers or elders who belong to the lodge."[91] Even though the Synod used strong language, it did not, as is sometimes asserted, terminate the sister church relationship with the RCA.

The most withering response to the action of the Dutch Synod came from Rev. Steffens. Admitting that the Synod spent much time and energy on the "RCA problem," Steffens continued:

> We cannot give our approval to the treatment of our issues by a Synod in the Netherlands . . . which acts as a sort of Upper-or-Arch Synod. What right would a Synod in another country, and especially the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands, have to meddle in our affairs? . . . Why can their professed love for us not believe that the Reformed Church in America has, not without reason, handled those who left us as schismatics? . . . How must we understand that love toward our Church? They treat us with the rod and give honey to those who disturb us! . . . We consider the action of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands as a novelty of church order, which could not be approved by any Reformed theologian who knows anything about Reformed Church Order. . . . Unless the Lord prevents it, then the road seems open that the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands will become a Christian oracle of Delphi.[92]

Meanwhile, what was the official reaction of the RCA to this barrage of criticism and decisions? Surprisingly nonchalant. The *Acts and Proceedings* of 1883 reported the receipt of the letter from the *Afscheiding* Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands. The Committee on

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[90]Report by R. T. Kuiper, *De Wachter*, 26 July 1883, 1.

[91] Ibid., 16 August 1883, 2.

[92] *De Hope*, 26 September 1882, 3- 4. This is our final quotation from Steffens in the 1882 controversy. However, it is interesting to listen to his reaction four years later: "Recently I have had opportunity to find out things about Freemasonry. I have never before seen so vividly the anti-Christian intent of these people as I do now. Although I regret to the depth of my soul that many of our brothers have broken communion with us because of the Freemasonry issue, I must nevertheless count them correct in their opposition to this evil" (*De Hope*, 26 May 1886, 1).

Correspondence merely noted that the Dutch Synod had requested "a deliverance of Synod on the question of Freemasonry, and second, the continuance of friendly correspondence. In respect to the first, your Committee do not feel called upon to give any expression, since the same subject matter is at present under consideration by another committee. But your Committee earnestly recommend a continuance of correspondence with the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands." The final paragraph of this report shows again the chasm between the two churches. Whereas Van Cleef's letter had shocked the Dutch Synod and may well have been the most damaging item to sway the *Afscheiding* church, the Synod in Albany "commended the course of Rev. Dr. Van Cleef, in the appropriate and judicious words addressed by him to the Synod in the Netherlands on the subject of Freemasonry, the same having been made necessary by his knowledge of facts bearing upon the relations of said Synod with that portion of our church in the West inclining toward secession on this account."[93] (It will not surprise the reader that Rev. Hulst had already provided a journalistic scoop for *De Wachter*. He reported that he had read in several English newspapers that the RCA Synod had received a letter from the Dutch church, and one delegate to the RCA Synod had cried out, "That letter was a slap in the face for our friendly hand reaching out to them.")[94]

The response of the RCA Synod appears to be a casual "brush-off," considering how long and passionately the *Afscheiding* Church had labored over the Freemasonry issue. One would have expected some counter response from the RCA, but no response was sent (although apparently both churches continued to send delegates to the other's Synod meetings). Moreover, in 1885 the Dutch Synod again addressed the question. It was largely a brief reprise of the 1882 discussion, as well as a complaint that the RCA Synod had not responded in any way to the Dutch church.[95] But again, nothing happened—until six years after the initial letter had been received!

The RCA *Acts and Proceedings* of 1889 read: "The [Correspondence] Committee has had referred to it a letter from 'The Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands,' complaining that no notice has been taken of its letters of 1882 and of 1885, sharply criticising our body for the allowing of Church members to join the Free Masons and other oath bound secret societies." The committee drafted a letter approved by Synod, addressing two matters—Freemasonry and "continuance of friendly correspondence." The first issue, Synod said, had been resolved: "Happily the question of Free Masonry is no longer a disturbing element in our churches. The General Synod, by Providential guidance and wise action, has settled this matter, and peace and harmony now reign in our once distracted churches." The letter then continued to summarize the RCA decisions from 1870 to 1881, and concluded with an assurance. "You will see, therefore, that our ministers and elders have not closed their eyes to this matter, nor their ears to complaints, nor their hearts to sympathy and love. There has been no attempt to sacrifice purity to peace, but a disposition to exercise mutual charity and forbearance for the one paramount object—the glory of God in the salvation of men."

Continued relationship, the second issue, was greatly desired by the RCA: "Whatever circumstances may have arisen in the past, we sincerely hope that nothing may break the ties or mar the fraternal feeling between two bodies so closely allied in doctrine and in kinship."[96]

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[93] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1883, 252-53.
[94] *De Wachter*, 21 June1883, 2.
[95] Ibid., 7 November 1885, 4.
[96] *Acts and Proceedings*, 1889, 837-41.

Although CRC folks of that year would consider this missive a highly sanitized version of the previous twenty years, apparently the Dutch church seemed to be generally satisfied.

I have not sought to trace the details of the relationship between the RCA and the *Afgescheiden* Church beyond this year, but it is worth noting the year 1896. In 1892 the *Afscheiding* Church in the Netherlands had joined forces with the 1886 *Doleantie* separation from the *Hervormde Kerk* (led by Abraham Kuyper); the name of the joint churches was *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. The *1896 Acts* of the new church gave notable prominence to the RCA. Visiting delegate Rev. George S. Bishop first brought greetings from the RCA in English. Then Rev. Balster van Ess delivered a four-page speech in Dutch, stressing both the old ties between the Dutch and the American churches and the recent influx of immigrants from the Dutch church. The response was delivered by Abraham Kuyper,[97] who praised the RCA for her faithfulness to the Confessions and urged even stronger ties than before. By contrast, the CRC was represented only by a letter from a committee, complaining that in the past the *Afscheiding* Church had not sufficiently chastised the RCA nor given sufficient support to the CRC. The Dutch Synod did not seem inclined to take these charges seriously.[98] Thus the relationship between the RCA and the Dutch church, although greatly tested, was not completely severed. During the crucial immigration years 1880-1920, however, by far the greater number of Dutch immigrants from (various) Reformed denominations in the Netherlands joined the CRC, and in succeeding decades the bond between the CRC and the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* became very strong, especially from the 1920s to the 1970s.

Conclusion(s)

In 2007 the CRC celebrated its sesquicentennial. Twenty years from now the RCA will celebrate its quatro-centennial. Such landmarks are, appropriately, times of celebration and thanksgiving. They can also be times of more sober assessments, and perhaps of remembering less glorious events. Church disagreements, squabbles, clashes, and schisms are among such less glorious events, and the Freemasonry controversy is no exception—historically interesting, perhaps unavoidable, but not always the church at its best.

Let me make some concluding observations—some already hinted at, others more tangential.

Resolution?

In the letter from the 1889 RCA Synod that was quoted above, the assessment is that all is well in the RCA and all the unrest has given way to glorious peace. One significant item missing from that description is the troubled feeling in much of the midwestern RCA. They had lost their battle

[97] Abraham Kuyper wrote at length and passionately about many subjects; however, his writing on Freemasonry was brief. In *De Heraut* (of which he was the editor) he took a mediating position. He found that Freemasonry in America was less opposed to the Christian faith, but added in the next sentence: "If anyone should ask if a person could at the same time be a confessor of Christ and a conscious adherent of the principle of Freemasonry, then it must be answered without hesitation that this is *impossible*." But then he added immediately, "That to say that everyone who has joined Freemasonry or who does not break with it, denies the Christ and must be excommunicated by the church goes much too far" (*De Heraut*, 30 October 1892, 2). This position was very close to Van Raalte's view. See Henry E.Dosker, *Levensschets van A. C. Van Raalte* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1893), 301, 334-35.

[98] 1896 Acta der Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, Art. 67, 68, 69, 132.

with the East about Freemasonry and they had to acquiesce. However, ministers such as John H. Karsten[99] and many members continued to be deeply troubled by the RCA's stance, and their sense of oneness with the denomination was greatly shaken. In the subsequent history of the RCA, the contrast between East and West did not disappear, and at several critical junctures the differences loomed large. It is outside the purview of this study, but one might well want to examine if the difference and distrust did not partly find its roots in the Freemasonry controversy.

Respectful RCA Synods

It seems to me that the synodical pronouncement about Freemasonry and the replies to the midwestern overtures were generally more generous and respectful than the judgment in the eastern RCA generally. Although I often disagree with the synodical decisions, given their situation it seems that they bent as far as they could. The two expressions of impatience cited above (the 1879 *Christian Intelligencer* article and the shouting match at the 1880 Synod) were probably typical of many members in the East. If I had been a member of a flourishing New York congregation, my attitude probably would have been something like this: "Who do these Dutch immigrant farmers with their broken English and outmoded ideas think they are? What right do they have to dictate to us, who have faithfully carried on the Reformed tradition for 250 years? Besides, we have helped those yokels in so many ways and this is how they show their gratitude!" If I am correct in gauging the attitude of many in the East, then the various synods showed considerable restraint and respect.

American Anti-Masonry

A major fault of the East was the seeming unwillingness to admit that anti-masonry had been and was part of American life. In the 1830s there had been an Anti-Masonic (political) Party, with prominent leaders such as Thaddeus Stevens and William Henry Seward. The most famous American revivalist, Charles Finney, was an ardent opponent of Freemasonry, and churches of many theological stripes militated against the dangers of the lodge. Just because there was a hysterical fringe element in American anti-Mason sentiment, does not negate the fact that there were many reputable Christian voices who warned against the elitism, the false religiosity, and the inimical influence of the Enlightenment. Again, a number of (former) abolitionists turned their attention to Freemasonry and found this to be an institution that also needed to be uprooted from American society.[100]

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[99] John Karsten was representative of many other pastors (and church members) in the midwestern RCA. He had not joined the CRC secession in 1857 and had a long and distinguished ministry in the RCA. He served five congregations (the church in Alto, Wisconsin, twice) and participated in denominational projects, such as serving as editor of *De Hope* and on the Council of Hope College. At the same time, he was deeply troubled and conflicted about Freemasonry in the RCA. He spearheaded the writing of the overtures to Synod from the Classis of Wisconsin. Both the original Dutch and the English versions of the overtures are in his handwriting (see Karsten file, Joint Archives of Holland). He never really had peace over the Freemasonry outcome.

[100] For a lengthy treatment of this widespread phenomenon by a wide spectrum of churches, see Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially 239ff. See also his more recent *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Another historian connects the two states most involved in our study—New York and Michigan. "In Anti-masonry's early stages, a religious dynamic provided most of its drive. The movement originated, after all, in western New York's 'Burned-Over District,' the most preached to, proselytized, revived, and reformed area in all of Yankee Christendom. And as New York emigrants poured into Michigan in the 1820s, Anti-masonry lost little time in spreading there."[101] And there was nothing Dutch or European about these voices. It seems disingenuous of the East to pretend that Freemasonry was an innocuous American institution that only an immigrant could be opposed to.[102]

Fishing in Troubled Waters

The Dutch proverb *vissen in troebel water* always has the connotation of becoming involved in someone else's difficulties to your own advantage. That proverb applies to the CRC's involvement in the Freemasonry controversy. The CRC polemicists often affirmed that the reason for their involvement was brotherly love and concern for the truth. One may grant that from their perspective this may have been true, but to me it is just as clear that they were fishing in RCA troubled waters in order to gain advantage. The immediate advantage would be the gaining of more members. In trying to demonstrate that the eastern RCA was sub-Christian or non-Christian in its toleration of Freemasonry, the CRC troubled the midwestern RCA members with the expectation that many of them would join the CRC. At times that aim was stated forthrightly, as in this citation: "Let us join together as a Dutch Reformed Church that recognizes Christ as her Head—which we can do very well without the East."[103] Just as often the hundreds of articles in *De Wachter* from 1868 to 1885 (including reprints from Dutch church newspapers) could not help but apply this pressure between the lines.

Different Worlds

Elton Bruins has made an excellent case for a major reason for the RCA masonic controversy — Americanization, or rather, the lack thereof. Most of those opposed to Freemasonry, both in the midwestern RCA and in the CRC were first- or second-generation immigrants. Every study on immigrants and immigration acknowledges that the acculturation in a new country is a difficult and usually painful process. In the case of the Dutch immigrants to the American Midwest, this process was made more complex and difficult because of their relative isolation in Dutch communities.

M. Eugene Osterhaven also acknowledged this difficulty and put it even more strongly: "The geographical distance, however, was not as important as the cultural gap between East and West. Here were two groups, the one constituting the oldest church tradition in the country, the other a band of immigrants; the one speaking one language, the other a different one; the one the church of the Van Rensselaers, Livingstones, Roosevelts, and Martin Van Buren, the other living

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[101] Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 62-63.

[102] See *Family Quarrels*, 55-58. Bruins here recognizes the political and religious opposition to American Masonry, and the RCA's ignoring such opposition. He attributes this ignoring to the more advanced Americanization of the eastern RCA. That is true, but I would add that it also betrayed theological insensitivity and failure to admit the dangerous religious ingredients of Freemasonry. Perhaps the RCA had become too "Americanized," and bought into some aspects of the culture of its time without due reflection.

[103] *De Wachter*, 6 November 1879, 3

primitively in log houses struggling to get a start in the new world."[104] Let me expand on Osterhaven's observation.

The history of the two groups was completely different. The eastern church could trace its national and church history back over two hundred years and had been shaped by the Revolutionary War and the glorious quest for independence. They had lived under more than twenty presidents and experienced both the highs and lows of political and economic life. The immigrants in the midwestern church looked back on a complex history of the Protestant Reformation, their own war of independence from Spain, a Golden Age, wars with other European countries, and French occupation. Both East and Midwest had been shaped by national history and myths, which made their inner and outer worlds utterly different.

Difference in language was, in some ways, the most obvious barrier between the East and Midwest. This difference would be in evidence at General Synod, where the midwestern delegates were probably at a disadvantage in discussions and debates. Also, the *Christian Intelligencer* was virtually unknown in the West and *De Hope* was not read in the East, and thus the two sectors lacked genuine communication. Moreover, as all immigrants can testify, not mastering the local language places one in an inferior position.

Place and geography also played a major role. The distance between the eastern and the western regions of the RCA made regular communication and interaction difficult. Moreover, the West was still battling the forests to make room for their farms, the communities were rural, small, and simple, and roads and streets often impassable. New immigrants sometimes still had to live in sod homes. The East also had rural congregations, but the Collegiate churches of New York City inhabited a bustling cosmopolitan city. Another dimension of place included work, economic level, and social standing. Many congregants in the East worked at humble jobs and made a simple living, but others were successful in the professions and still others were millionaires. Two of them became United States presidents. Education also presented an incredibly different picture. Ministers such as Van Raalte had a superb education, although not all ministers did, and church members often had no more than rural elementary schooling. In the East, however, college and university education was often taken for granted in many families.

In surveying the Freemasonry controversy, it is clear that in church and theology the gap was often a wide chasm. Van Raalte and others may have thought that RCA history, theology, and practice were mirror images of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands and, even more, of the *Afscheiding* Church. The dissimilarities, however, were many. The *Afscheiding* represented a very narrow slice of Reformed theology and church practice (even then the *Afscheiding* brethren continued to quarrel about which of their particular interpretations was the *really* Reformed stance). To compare theological issues would take us too far afield, but let me just note two examples of church life—the use of hymns and the relations with other denominations. Hymns were introduced in the RCA in 1789, while the orthodox in the Netherlands (when they were still members of the *Hervormde* Church) despised the 1807 Dutch hymns, and hymn-singing was completely banished in the *Afscheiding* congregations. Second, relations with other Protestant denominations were non-existent in the Netherlands. Since the Reformed Church was the national church, there was in effect no room for other groups. Anabaptists, Lutherans, and Remonstrants were tolerated, but there was no significant contact with those groups. The *Afscheiding* Church would have been even more loath to interact with any other church. The RCA, however, had developed a wide range of "ecumenical" contacts. Their physical proximity

[104] "Saints and Sinners: Secession and the Christian Reformed Church," in *Word and World: Reformed Theology in America*, ed. James W. Van Hoeven (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 66.

to many denominations, involvement in revivals, joint efforts such as the American Bible Society, and common interest in foreign missions had all promoted friendly relations with other Protestants. One only has to glance at any issue of the *Christian Intelligencer* to see this interest and involvement.

Given these and other contrasts and differences between the East and Midwest, it is no wonder that misunderstanding and clashes would develop. In terms of Freemasonry, if the two groups spoke in contemporary parlance, one can imagine each saying about the other, "They just don't get it!"

Membership

When new immigrants from the Netherlands joined the CRC (mostly in Canada) after the Second World War, they posed a question to the "established" CRC in the United States: "You do not allow members to join the Masons, but why can they join the socialist labor unions that are based on the un-Christian principle of the class struggle?" (Being raised in solid Kuyperian principles of separate Christian organizations, the immigrants promptly established Christian labor unions.)

Their question echoed the one by the Freemasonry opponents in the 1880s: how can a Christian be a member of a sub-Christian or anti-Christian organization? The synodical pronouncements always came with the same answer: we may not determine membership in any other terms than that stipulated in the Constitution. In order to understand the significance of that issue for the midwestern church, let me pose it in contemporary terms: could a Christian be a member of an organization such as the Communist Party or the South African *Broederbond* or the Aryan Brotherhood? Assuming that a person does not engage in any violent or illegal activities and is not aware of or ignores the basis or the principles of the organization, should the church forbid such membership? What corporate responsibility does a Christian have when joining such organizations? This question was asked by the midwestern RCA and the synodical answer was not satisfactory for many members. It is still a relevant question today.

The Language of Polemics

One does not have to read much in church history, especially in church controversies, to discover that polemic language was seldom "full of grace" and instead "seasoned with much salt," sometimes with vitriol, ranging from exaggeration to scatology. Saint Paul himself was not devoid of such speech, and for polemicists among the church Fathers, from Roman Catholics to Protestants and from Calvinists to Lutherans, such language has often been the staple of church quarrels and arguments. The language generated by the Freemasonry controversy was no different.

I have quoted some expressions above; here are some other examples. At one point Rev. Henry Dosker characterized those pastors loyal to the RCA: "The loyal churches and pastors, efficiently led by able men, began to rally from the shock and to undo, as far as possible, the work of demoralization."[105] Rev. Gerrit Hemkes responded sarcastically: "The able men were busy handing out sleeping potions, sprinkling sand in the eyes of the people, singing lullabies, and acting in a partisan manner."[106] The "Brochure" about the RCA sent by the CRC to the

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[105] Edwin Tanjore Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America, 1628-1902*, 4th ed. (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1902), 203.
[106] *De Wachter*, 14 July 1881, 3.

Afscheiding Church summarized their evaluation as follows: "Judge for yourselves if in the Constitution the door of the church in the RCA is not wide open, so that Arius, Pelagius, Socinus, and Arminius can freely enter, mount the pulpit, sit in the pew of the elders, and seat themselves at the table of the Lord's supper."[107] When Steffens addressed those in the midwestern RCA who were considering withdrawing from the RCA (and by implication addressing the CRC), he judged that "schism is unnatural, unhuman, unchristian, unbiblical, unreformed."[108]

I am not sure if contemporary church disagreements are less vitriolic because the church is less concerned about the importance of the TRUTH, or because she has learned to be more civil and gracious. In the case of the RCA and the CRC, I am grateful that one of their recent efforts at reconciliation has been the joint production of a song book—*Sing: A New Creation*. That joint effort speaks and sings words full of grace.

[107] *Brochure op Kerkelijk Gebied* (Holland, Mich.: Vorst, 1869), 11.
[108] Quoted in *De Wachter*, 1 September 1881, 3.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: First Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan

The controversy at First Reformed Church in 1882 literally spilled over into the street. The episode below, reprinted from *Pillar Church in the Van Raalte Era*, shows how involved (and polarized) the whole community was in the church issue.[109]

> The next episode comes close to tragi-comedy. The Classis of Holland was to hold a special meeting on 1 March, and intended to meet in First Church, although the consistory had notified classis that they should not schedule their meeting there. Apparently word had gone out that there might be a confrontation at the church and a large number of people turned out. From here on the reports on what happened next differ substantially. The most sensational appeared in (of all places) New York and Chicago newspapers, which referred to fisticuffs and reading of the Riot Act. Bruins quotes a more sober account from the *Banner of Truth* which only mentioned a large crowd and "wordy contention." The most colorful report comes from Teunis Keppel (not a very objective reporter!), who managed to blame not only the minority (those who wished to remain in the RCA) but also the mayor of Holland and "persons outside our Congregation" for whatever trouble there may have been:
>
> > If it had not been for our Mayor, the people would not have gathered outside the fence of the church. On the morning of March 1 it was publicly stated by the mayor, "There will be a Classis meeting today in First Church, even if the bottom stone comes to the top. . . ." [A Dutch expression similar to "even if we have to turn the world upside down."] That expression of the Mayor was spread around. . . . Shortly before one o'clock Mayor Roost came from the West Side with a large book under his arm, a pencil in one hand and a cane in the other, walking in a dignified manner. Three consistory members stood outside the fence and I and Elder Kruidenier inside. The people were quiet, but wondering what the Mayor would do. . . . The Mayor walked up and down the sidewalk and ordered the people, who did nothing nor moved, off the sidewalk. Three ministers stood talking a short distance from the gate. Three ministers came closer to the entrance of the church square. Then the Mayor said to old Father Van den Berge, who stood close to the gate, that he had to get off the sidewalk. The answer was, "I'm not moving." The Mayor called out twice to the Marshall,

[109] Michael De Vries and Harry Boonstra, *Pillar Church in the Van Raalte Era* (Holland, Mich.: Pillar Christian Reformed Church, 2003), 131-32. The material is reprinted here as it appeared in this book, with italics, ellipses, and bracketed sentence also appearing there.

> "Arrest that man," and the Marshall, at the order of the Mayor really did put his hands on the 75-year-old gray Elder, who did not speak a word but stood peacefully by the gate. After that the order came from the Mayor that Wykhuyzen also should be arrested. The ministers . . . said that this was not the desire of Classis . . . , and Classis decided to meet at Third Church. The mayor read the Riot Act, but we say and want to underline it, *nothing happed that deserves the designation riot*.[110]

Describing the same incident but with a different slant is the account of Engbertus Van der Veen (who said earlier, "Keppel was ambitious to perpetuate his own name").

> Time came for the classis to meet, according to the minutes of the latest session—that is, before Keppel's secession. Its session was to be held in our historic church, but Keppel and his followers said the church was theirs. On the morning of the day the Classis was to convene, the consistory locked the double door with a logging chain. The leaders Van den Berg and Derk te Roller, one on each side of the doors, stood like sentinels guarding the entrance. Other members of the consistory, supported by a group of their faithful, stood within calling distance. By their gestures they showed themselves ready to resist any attempt to open the church door. Keppel, dressed in his best, walked inside the church yard from the gate to the church door, up and down, looking excitedly in all directions, his fists clenched as if ready for combat. . . . I went home, leaving the scene with a heavy heart, saddened to see how selfish men could act in the name of Christianity.[111]

APPENDIX B: Different Worlds

Eugene Osterhaven's observation about the East RCA and the West RCA occupying different worlds came to be expressed in an interesting contrast between the contents in the *Christian Intelligencer* and *De Wachter* during the 1880s. The articles and the advertisements demonstrate in a graphic manner that the East and the West did live in separate worlds. (However, both communities had a strong faith in patent medicine!)

HEADLINES AND SUMMARIES FROM THE *CHRISTIAN INTELLIGENCER*

- News item about new professor of Hebrew at Harvard University.

- A reader reporting on a class reunion of an (unnamed) college: "We had Jews and Gentiles, Romanists, Quakers, Scotch Covenanters, infidels, Methodist preachers, and specimen of almost every name that is named to distinguish Christians from one another. It was a marvelous reunion of old friends."

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[110] Teunis Keppel, *De Grondwet*, 14 March 1882, 8.

[111] Engbertus van der Veen, "Life Reminiscences," in *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings* , ed. Henry S. Lucas, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1955; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:505-6.

- In the column “Our Church”: The Reformed Church of Schenectady reported on “Two Centuries of Church Life.” The article described the polished marble of the pulpit, the gothic stone edifice, and the local worthies who attended the celebration.

- The news beyond the RCA included the commencement of Franklin and Marshall College, the statistics of Sunday Schools throughout the world, the gathering of the Pan-Presbyterian Council, and news items from Presbyterian, Methodist, and other Protestant denominations.

- In every issue there was a report on the stock market.

- Most issues summarized other periodicals, such as *Magazine of Art.*

- In 1881 there was a long series on Michelangelo.

- Among the advertisements were the following:
  Tales from the Odyssey for Boys and Girls.
  Electric Corset
  China and porcelain
  Parker’s Ginger Tonic for blood purifier and female complaints
  Cure for opium habit
  Oriental Cream or Magical Purifier (a woman pictured in a rather low-cut gown)
  Marble, bronze, brass Memorial Tablets
  Insurance ads in every issue (many *Afgescheidenen* were on principle opposed to all insurance)
  Advertisement for Auburn Seminary and Mt. Hope Ladies Seminary

HEADLINES AND SUMMARIES FROM *DE WACHTER*

- A reprint from the Dutch church paper *Bazuin*:

  > In the small village of Baflo, Groningen, a quiet ceremony took place: a detailed report of a funeral, with extended summary of the minister’s sermon.

- The news included a long item about the opening of the Theological School in Grand Rapids. Professor G. E. Boer was present with his nine students and four curators, and the audience was privileged to listen to five speakers.

- Received for the Emeritus Ministers, Widows, and Orphans Fund: $6.80 from the Ladies Society “Dorcas” in Grand Rapids.

- Final Agenda item for Synod: Synod should make a decision about the best way to conduct “Holland Christian education.”

- “De Catastrophe in Nieuwkuik, 1880-1881”—in Memory of the Flood in North Brabant.

- "Storm in Pella"—The countryside suffered from a disastrous hail storm. Wheat, rye, oats, and barley were destroyed. Small life-stock was killed, the trees are bare.

- Among the advertisements were the following (all in Dutch):
  Mrs. H. Wijkhuijsen—Physician. Treats Women and Children Illness with the best results; residence across from First Church in Holland, Michigan
  Boeken: *Nieuwe Testament, Psalmen, en Formulieren*; *Scheurkalender voor 1881* van Amsterdam
  Exceptional Opportunity: Farms for Rent. In the western part in Sioux County, Iowa
  J. H. Van Vlissingen: Land Agenten en Notarissen. Agenten van de Amsterdamse Stoomboot
  Hollansche Kolonie in Prinsburg, Minnesota: "Titles to land are guaranteed."
  Stump and Grub Extractor
  Farmer died. Everything for sale at auction, including 18 cows and 12 hogs
  Sloan's Populaire Medicijnen
  Beste Hollandsche Koek

APPENDIX C: Dutch Connection

Why did I use "The Dutch Connection" as part of the title for my essay? There are several reasons. First, I deliberately used a large number of Dutch language sources, both from the Netherlands and from the immigrant community. This decision enabled me to access sources that had not been previously used; for example, I was able to describe the history and composition of Dutch Masonry more precisely than had been done before. Also, it is noteworthy that the crucial discussion between the midwestern RCA and the CRC was conducted largely in Dutch in the church periodicals.

Second, I became aware again of the large role played by the Dutch *Afscheiding* Church. The great amount of attention paid to the Freemasonry controversy by the Dutch synods is really remarkable; page after page of their *Proceedings* is devoted to the evaluation and condemnation of Freemasonry. Equally remarkable is the importance attached to the Dutch sister church relationship on the part of the CRC and RCA.

Third, as I make clear in several sections, the immigrants, both in the midwestern RCA and the CRC, still had a strong umbilical relationship to the *Afscheiding* Church—its history, leaders, teachings, and mutual experiences. This heritage made for strong theological deliberations and principles. At the same time, the heritage also transmitted the frequent tenacity, obstinacy, and theological nitpicking.

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