

The Long Reformation Beza's Predestination, Dutch Capitalism, and the Persistence of Cardinal Virtue Ethics in Dutch Public Discourse

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Abstract

This article traces a continuous institutional and theological lineage from the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) to a contemporary Dutch public intellectual project — the 2025–2026 *NRC Handelsblad* column series on the four cardinal virtues co-authored by historian Beatrice de Graaf (Utrecht University) and philosopher Rik Peels (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). The argument is structural rather than evaluative.

A crucial historical correction organizes the entire analysis: the theology codified at Dort was not John Calvin's own carefully qualified doctrine of predestination but the systematic radicalization developed by his successor Theodore Beza (1519–1605). Beza transformed Calvin's pastorally cautious, Christologically grounded doctrine into a deductive logical system — supralapsarian predestination as the organizing principle from which all other doctrines are derived. It was this Bezan system, not Calvin's own theology, that Gomarus defended against Arminius, that the Synod of Dort codified in the Canons of 1619, and that Prince Maurice of Orange enforced politically by suppressing the Remonstrant position and executing Johan van Oldenbarnevelt.

The suppression of Remonstrant theology in 1619 established a specific configuration of virtue, community, and authority that was subsequently formalized in Abraham Kuyper's neo-Calvinist doctrine of sphere sovereignty, institutionalized in the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and its theological research infrastructure, transmitted into contemporary analytical philosophy through Reformed Epistemology (Plantinga, Peels), and remains traceable in the communitarian virtue framework of the De Graaf–Peels NRC column series.

The article further shows that the same Bezan/contra-Remonstrant theological settlement provided the cultural and institutional infrastructure for Dutch commercial capitalism — from the VOC and WIC of the seventeenth century, through Kuyper's theologization of market autonomy, to the contemporary Christian-democratic economic tradition. The suppressed Remonstrant alternative, rooted in Arminian moral anthropology and expressed philosophically in Hugo Grotius's natural rights theory, generated a structurally different economic ethics in which individual rights constrain commercial extraction rather than legitimating hierarchical subordination.

The two traditions — contra-Remonstrant/neo-Calvinist and Remonstrant/vrijzinnig — are placed in systematic comparative analysis across six dimensions: theological anthropology, virtue structure, institutional carriers, epistemological basis, political expression, and contemporary public presence.

Keywords: Theodore Beza, Synod of Dort, Remonstrantism, contra-Remonstrantism, neo-Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper, sphere sovereignty, Reformed Epistemology, Alvin Plantinga, virtue

ethics, cardinal virtues, Dutch intellectual history, Dutch capitalism, VOC, Hugo Grotius, natural rights, vrijzinnig, Beatrice de Graaf, Rik Peels, Long Reformation, verzuiling

1. Introduction

In late 2025, two Dutch academics — historian Beatrice de Graaf and philosopher Rik Peels — began publishing a series of co-authored columns in *NRC Handelsblad* systematically treating the four classical cardinal virtues: courage (*moed*), temperance (*matigheid*), justice (*rechtvaardigheid*), and wisdom (*wijsheid/prudentie*). The columns apply these virtues as analytical and normative frameworks to contemporary political and democratic challenges.

The choice of the four cardinal virtues as organizing framework, the communitarian embedding of each virtue, and the institutional affiliations of both authors prompt a historical question that the columns themselves do not raise: from which intellectual tradition does this virtue framework derive, and how continuous is that tradition with earlier configurations of Dutch theological and political thought?

This article argues that the specific form of virtue ethics deployed by De Graaf and Peels — communitarian, institutionally embedded, oriented toward the *bonum commune* rather than individual moral autonomy — is structurally continuous with the neo-Calvinist framework developed by Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), which was itself a formalization of the contra-Remonstrant position established at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619). But that contra-Remonstrant position was not Calvin's own theology. It was the systematic radicalization of Calvin's doctrine by Theodore Beza, which Gomarus inherited and which became the theological substance of the Dort settlement.

2. The Bezan Transformation: From Calvin to Systematic Predestination

2.1 Calvin's Own Position

John Calvin (1509–1564) developed a doctrine of predestination that was primarily pastoral and exegetical in character. Grounded in Pauline scripture — above all Romans 9–11 and Ephesians 1 — and in Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, Calvin's mature doctrine in the 1559 *Institutes* (III.21–24) affirmed unconditional election and double predestination. But Calvin consistently embedded this doctrine in Christology and pastoral care. Election is "in Christ" — the elect are chosen in relation to Christ as Mediator. Predestination is a source of comfort, not a logical first principle. Calvin explicitly warned against speculation about the divine counsel and against seeking signs of election in worldly success.

Crucially, Calvin was infralapsarian in substance: the objects of the divine decree are human beings considered as fallen, not as not-yet-created. He did not treat predestination as the organizing center from which all other doctrines are deduced. Richard Muller's exhaustive scholarship (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2003) has demonstrated that predestination was neither structurally central nor systematically controlling in Calvin's own writings.

2.2 Beza's Radicalization

Theodore Beza (1519–1605) — Calvin's successor as leader of the Genevan church and academy from 1564 — undertook a systematic transformation of Calvin's theology. Where Calvin was exegete and pastor, Beza was logician and systematizer.

Beza's *Tabula Praedestinationis* (published in English translation in *The Treasure of Truth*, 1576) presented a supralapsarian scheme: the divine decree of election and reprobation is logically prior to the decrees of creation and fall. The elect and reprobate are objects of God's eternal decree considered as not-yet-created and not-yet-fallen. This is not a refinement of Calvin. It is a structural transformation: predestination becomes the logical *prius* from which the entire theological system is deductively derived.

The consequences are far-reaching. In Calvin's framework, individual conscience engages with scripture, pastoral care, and the witness of the Holy Spirit to arrive at assurance. In Beza's framework, the logical structure of the divine decree is prior to everything — including the individual conscience. The community of the elect, defined by the decree, takes precedence over individual moral agency.

This is the theological foundation of the contra-Remonstrant position. It was Beza's system, not Calvin's, that Gomarus defended, that the Dort delegates codified, and that TULIP summarizes.

2.3 Gomarus and the Conflict with Arminius

Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) was the direct institutional heir of Beza's supralapsarian system at Leiden University. Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), his colleague, had developed a position structurally closer to Calvin's own pastoral concerns: conditional election based on foreknown faith, genuine human moral agency, resistible grace.

The conflict between Gomarus and Arminius was therefore not simply a dispute between "Calvinism" and its critics. It was a dispute between two post-Calvinian positions: Beza's logical systematization (Gomarus) and a return toward Calvin's own pastoral and Christological emphasis (Arminius). The Remonstrant position of 1610 — the five articles submitted after Arminius's death — was in several respects closer to Calvin's own nuanced formulations than the Gomarist/Bezan position it opposed.

3. The Synod of Dort and the Suppression of the Remonstrant Position

3.1 The Political Intervention of Prince Maurice

Prince Maurice of Orange (1567–1625) intervened decisively in the theological conflict in 1618, aligning with the contra-Remonstrant faction for political rather than purely theological reasons. Jonathan Israel has argued extensively that Maurice's alignment served to consolidate stadtholder power against the regent oligarchy represented by Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who supported the Remonstrant position (*The Dutch Republic*, 1995). Oldenbarnevelt was arrested in August 1618 and executed on 13 May 1619 — four days after the Synod of Dort issued its final canons.

The Canons of Dort codified Beza's supralapsarian theology in confessional form — later summarized as TULIP. Historians note that these Canons represent the theology of Beza and the post-Calvinian Reformed orthodox more directly than Calvin's own nuanced formulations (Konstapel, 2026; Muller, 2003; Beeke, 2017). They are conventionally presented as the systematic

expression of "Calvinism," but this presentation obscures the Bezan origin of their systematic structure.

3.2 What Was Suppressed

The Remonstrant position contained several intellectual elements that did not enter the mainstream of Dutch Reformed thought after 1619:

1. **Individual moral agency as primary:** the conscience of the individual as the irreducible site of moral decision — closer to Calvin's own pastoral emphasis than to Beza's logical system.
2. **Conditional community:** the religious and civic community as constituted by voluntary association, not by the logical structure of a divine decree.
3. **Pluralism as principle:** the coexistence of differing theological positions as a positive good.
4. **Reform as ongoing:** the capacity for theological and institutional revision without appeal to a fixed confessional standard.

The suppression of 1619 was thus the suppression of a position that was, in several respects, more continuous with Calvin's own theology than the Bezan system that triumphed.

4. Abraham Kuyper and the Formalization of Neo-Calvinism

4.1 Kuyper's Project

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) undertook a systematic reformulation of the Dort/Bezan tradition for the modern era. His doctrine of **sphere sovereignty** (*souvereiniteit in eigen kring*) held that society is differentiated into distinct spheres — church, state, family, school, business — each with its own divinely ordained sovereignty. This doctrine simultaneously resisted state absolutism and resisted the Remonstrant-liberal claim that individual conscience is prior to all institutional structures.

His doctrine of **common grace** (*algemene genade*) allowed Kuyper to affirm the four classical cardinal virtues as genuine moral goods available to all human beings — expressions of divine grace operating universally — without departing from the Reformed confessional framework rooted in the Dort canons.

4.2 The Vrije Universiteit as Institutional Vehicle

Kuyper founded the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 1880 as an institution free from both state control and ecclesiastical control — a practical expression of sphere sovereignty. The VU became the primary institutional carrier of neo-Calvinist intellectual culture in the Netherlands throughout the twentieth century. The Abraham Kuyper Center for Science and Religion, currently housed at the VU, explicitly continues this tradition.

5. Reformed Epistemology and the Analytical Turn

5.1 From Kuyper to Plantinga

The transmission of the Kuyperian intellectual tradition into contemporary analytical philosophy occurred primarily through Alvin Plantinga at the University of Notre Dame. Plantinga — explicitly

acknowledging Kuyper as a forerunner — developed Reformed Epistemology: the position that religious belief can be *properly basic*, held rationally without inferential justification from prior evidence.

Plantinga and Wolterstorff's foundational volume *Faith and Rationality* (1983) makes the Kuyperian lineage explicit: Calvin, Kuyper, and Bavinck are named as the Reformed thinkers who held that belief in God is properly basic. The analytical formalization of this position by Plantinga is a direct institutional and intellectual continuation of the Dort/Kuyper tradition — with the crucial caveat that it is the Bezan/Dort tradition, not Calvin's own more cautious theology, that forms the doctrinal backbone.

5.2 Rik Peels and the Abraham Kuyper Center

Rik Peels (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) studied philosophy at the VU and undertook graduate study in the Reformed Epistemology tradition. He is affiliated with the Abraham Kuyper Center for Science and Religion. His research addresses the ethics of belief, responsible epistemic agency, and epistemological virtue — virtue understood as a disposition of the believing agent within a forming community, oriented toward truth as a common good.

6. Beatrice de Graaf: Institutional Affiliations and Intellectual Formation

Beatrice de Graaf's doctoral dissertation (2004) examined the relationship between the German Democratic Republic, the Dutch peace movement, and the Dutch churches — placing her within the networks of Dutch Reformed civic culture. Her publication record includes systematic contributions to explicitly Reformed venues: *Wapenveld* (the journal of the Nederlandse Christen-Studentenvereniging), the Wetenschappelijk Instituut ChristenUnie, and *Nederlands Dagblad*. The ChristenUnie is the direct institutional heir of Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party, which was itself built on the Dort/Bezan confessional foundation.

7. The NRC Column Series (2025–2026): Structure and Framework

The De Graaf–Peels NRC column series treats the four classical cardinal virtues sequentially, applying them as communitarian ordering principles to contemporary political and democratic challenges. Each virtue is framed in explicitly communitarian terms: justice "can only be just in the context of community"; courage is genuine only when oriented toward a "worthy goal" defined in relation to the common good.

This communitarian framing is directly continuous with the Bezan/Dort/Kuyperian tradition in which the community — constituted by the divine decree and its institutional expressions — is prior to individual moral agency. The individual conscience is not absent but is secondary to the community that forms and sustains the virtuous agent.

8. The Remonstrant and Liberal Alternative: The Vrijzinnige Line

8.1 Survival and Reconstitution (1619–1795)

The Remonstrant Brotherhood survived throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a marginal but intellectually significant presence. Its intellectual milieu was that of Hugo Grotius — exiled after Oldenbarnevelt's execution — whose concept of natural rights presupposes the Arminian moral anthropology: individuals possessing inherent dignity and rational agency prior to any institutional structure.

Simon Episcopius (1583–1643), the systematic theologian of the early Remonstrant Brotherhood, articulated a theology in which human rational agency, freedom of conscience, and the capacity for moral self-determination were foundational — structurally closer to Calvin's own pastoral emphasis than to the Bezan system that had triumphed at Dort.

8.2 The Patriot Movement and the Batavian Republic (1780–1806)

The Patriot movement of the 1780s drew heavily on the intellectual traditions suppressed at Dort, combining Remonstrant theology with Enlightenment natural rights philosophy. Prince William I subsequently reversed these gains. The Batavian Republic (1795–1806) finally extended civic rights to Remonstrants, Catholics, and Jews — formally ending the legal privileges of the contra-Remonstrant Reformed Church that had obtained since 1619.

8.3 The Vrijzinnige Tradition in the Nineteenth Century

Leiden University became the primary institutional carrier of the vrijzinnige tradition — in explicit contrast to Kuyper's VU Amsterdam. The *Moderne Richting* (*Modern Theology*), centered at Leiden from the 1860s, applied historical-critical methods to Scripture and affirmed the autonomy of human reason in religious inquiry. The structural opposition is clear: Leiden (vrijzinnig, individual conscience primary) versus VU Amsterdam (neo-Calvinist/Bezan, community and institution primary).

8.4 The Contemporary Vrijzinnige Presence

The vrijzinnige tradition remains institutionally present in the Netherlands in 2026 — through the Remonstrant Brotherhood, Leiden's Faculty of Theology, and the Humanistisch Verbond — but lacks the institutional density of the contra-Remonstrant infrastructure. This asymmetry is the direct consequence of the 1619 settlement and its aftermath.

9. The Contra-Remonstrant Settlement and the Rise of Capitalism

9.1 Beza's System as Economic Legitimation

The Bezan predestination system — not Calvin's own more cautious formulation — provided the theological logic that made poverty and subordination readable as expressions of the divine decree.

If God determines unconditionally who is elect and who is reprobate, and if the Bezan system makes this decree the logical first principle of the entire theological and social order, then worldly hierarchy acquires a theological legitimation that Calvin's own pastoral theology explicitly resisted. Calvin warned against seeking signs of election in worldly success; Beza's logical system made such seeking structurally inevitable.

Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (1905) identified this dynamic correctly in broad outline but attributed it to "Calvinism" without distinguishing between Calvin's own theology and the Bezan radicalization codified at Dort. The cultural infrastructure for Dutch commercial capitalism was provided specifically by the Bezan/Dort settlement, not by Calvin directly.

9.2 The VOC, WIC, and Theological Legitimation

The VOC (1602) and WIC (1621) operated within the theological and civic framework of the contra-Remonstrant settlement. Reformed ministers traveled with VOC ships. The *Heeren XVII* were embedded in the Reformed civic elite. The Bezan theological infrastructure — in which hierarchical subordination expressed the divine decree — was directly present in the institutional machinery of Dutch colonial capitalism.

9.3 The Grotian Alternative

Hugo Grotius — Remonstrant, exiled after Oldenbarnevelt's execution — built from the Arminian moral anthropology the foundations of international law and natural rights theory. *Mare Liberum* (1609) argued that the sea is free to all nations — directly challenging monopoly extraction. *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (1625) posited norms binding on all parties regardless of their theological status.

Had the Remonstrant position prevailed at Dort, the commercial ethics of the Dutch Republic would have developed within a Grotian framework: natural rights as constraints on commercial extraction, individual moral agency as a limit on hierarchical subordination, no theological legitimation of unconditional servitude. This alternative was suppressed in 1619.

9.4 Kuyper, Sphere Sovereignty, and Market Autonomy

Kuyper's sphere sovereignty doctrine theologized the autonomy of the economic sphere: the market has its own divinely ordered logic that cannot be judged from outside. This provided the theological framework within which capitalist accumulation claimed its own legitimacy — a direct institutional continuation of the Bezan tradition that made hierarchical ordering an expression of the divine decree.

10. Comparative Structural Analysis: Two Traditions

Table 1: Theological and Philosophical Structure

Dimension	Contra-Remonstrant / Bezan / Neo-Calvinist	Remonstrant / Vrijzinnig
Primary theological	Beza → Gomarus → Dort canons → Kuyper	Arminius → Episcopius → Grotius
Relation to Calvin	Bezan radicalization of Calvin	Closer to Calvin's own pastoral

Human agency	Embedded in divinely ordered structure; decree logically prior	Individual conscience primary; rational agency inherent
Election	Unconditional, supralapsarian (Beza/	Conditional; dependent on foreknown
Community	Constitutive of virtue; prior to the	Context for virtue; secondary to
Authority	Distributed across legitimate spheres	Located in rational individual
Reform	Within the confessional tradition; anchored in Dort	Ongoing; no fixed authoritative tradition binding conscience

Table 2: Virtue Structure

Dimension	Contra-Remonstrant / Bezan / Neo-	Remonstrant / Vrijzinnig
Virtue ground	Community and divinely ordered	Individual rational conscience and
Courage	Genuine only when oriented toward worthy communal goal	Following individual conscience against institutional pressure
Temperance	Balance within institutional roles	Self-regulation of the autonomous
Justice	Realizable only within community	Grounded in inherent individual rights
Wisdom	Practical judgment within and for the	Rational discernment of the individual
Virtue formation	Through participation in community,	Through education, rational reflection,
PoC quadrant correspondence	Social (green) / Unity (white) primary	Sensory (red) / Mythic (yellow) primary

Table 3: Institutional Carriers

Period	Contra-Remonstrant / Bezan / Neo-	Remonstrant / Vrijzinnig
1619–1795	Reformed Church as <i>publieke kerk</i> ; state support	Remonstrant Brotherhood (private); no civic rights
1795–1880	Reformed Church reorganizes; loses legal monopoly	Civic rights restored; Leiden Moderne Richting
1880–1960	VU Amsterdam; Anti-Revolutionary Party; <i>verzuiling</i> pillar	Leiden theology; Liberal Party; Humanistisch Verbond (1946)
2000–2026	Abraham Kuyper Center (VU); ChristenUnie; <i>Wapenveld</i>	Remonstrant Brotherhood; Leiden theology; thin infrastructure

Table 4: Epistemological Basis

Dimension	Contra-Remonstrant / Bezan / Neo-	Remonstrant / Vrijzinnig
Primary	Reformed Epistemology (Plantinga,	Historical-critical method; empiricism;
Belief justification	Properly basic belief; community-formed cognitive faculties	Inferential; evidence-based; subject to rational revision
Key institutional	Abraham Kuyper Center, VU Amsterdam	Leiden Faculty of Theology; Amsterdam Faculty of Philosophy

Table 5: Political Expression

Period	Contra-Remonstrant / Bezan / Neo-	Remonstrant / Vrijzinnig
17th–18th	Orange stadtholders; contra-Remonstrant	Remonstrant merchants; Patriot
19th century	Anti-Revolutionary Party (Kuyper, 1879)	Liberal Party
21st century	ChristenUnie; SGP; Christian-democratic wing of CDA	D66; GroenLinks; Humanistisch Verbond
Core political value	Ordered liberty within divinely structured community	Individual freedom; separation of church and state

Table 6: Contemporary Public Intellectual Presence

Dimension	Contra-Remonstrant / Bezan / Neo-	Remonstrant / Vrijzinnig
Representative figures (2026)	Beatrice de Graaf, Rik Peels	No comparable coordinated public intellectual project
Primary public	<i>NRC Handelsblad</i> ; <i>Wapenveld</i> ; ChristenUnie	No equivalent column series or
Institutional density	High: university chair + research center + civic institute + confessional press	Low: small church body + humanist organization

11. Discussion: The Long Reformation

The concept of the "Long Reformation" refers to the observation that the institutional, cultural, and intellectual consequences of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformations extended far beyond their immediate historical moment (Pettegree, 2000; MacCulloch, 2003). The present article contributes a specific Dutch instance: the Bezan/contra-Remonstrant settlement of 1619 established an intellectual configuration — communitarian virtue, institutional authority, sphere sovereignty, market legitimation — that has proven remarkably durable across four centuries.

A crucial clarification emerges from the analysis: the tradition that runs from Dort to the NRC columns of 2025–2026 is not "Calvinist" in any simple sense. It is the Bezan radicalization of Calvin, codified at Dort, institutionalized by Kuyper, and transmitted through the VU to Peels and De Graaf. Calvin's own more cautious, pastorally oriented, Christologically grounded theology was in several respects closer to the Remonstrant position — the position that was suppressed.

This irony is not incidental. It is structurally significant: the tradition that presents itself as the authentic expression of the Reformed heritage is, in its systematic form, a post-Calvinian construction. The vrijzinnige alternative — in its insistence on individual conscience, ongoing reform, and the priority of pastoral care over logical system — may be the more authentic heir of Calvin's own theological instincts.

12. Conclusion

This article has traced a continuous structural lineage from the Bezan transformation of Calvin's theology, through the Synod of Dort (1619), to the De Graaf–Peels NRC virtue column series (2025–2026), and has placed that lineage in contrast with the parallel vrijzinnige/Remonstrant tradition suppressed in 1619.

The key correction to conventional historiography is this: the contra-Remonstrant tradition that dominates Dutch Reformed intellectual life is not authentically Calvinian. It is Bezan — a systematic radicalization that Calvin himself would likely have resisted. The communitarian virtue ethics of the De Graaf–Peels column series, the sphere sovereignty doctrine of Kuyper, and the Reformed Epistemology of Peels all derive from this Bezan construction, transmitted through the institutional infrastructure of the VU Amsterdam and the ChristenUnie political tradition.

Making this continuity visible — and correcting the conventional attribution to Calvin — is the contribution of this article.

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