

"Church and Religion in New Netherland and Early New York"

Remarks made by Ambassador Cynthia P. Schneider at the opening of a symposium held by Study Group New Netherland, Woerden, June 4, 1999

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today. I think any symposium that is called "Church and Religion in New Netherland and Early New York" is a very serious endeavor and, looking at your program, I am sure you are going to accomplish a lot today. I hope I can get you off to a start in the spirit of the cooperation and close relationship both in the past and in the present between our two countries.

I am very grateful that I was asked to do this because it gave me a chance to learn about something that I had not sufficiently understood before: that is the very close relationship between the character of New Amsterdam, and I think you can say New York as well, and the old Amsterdam from which it came. When you say the words New York, you think, of course, of the quintessential American city; vibrant; diverse; up all night; really having the whole world there in microcosm. We tend to think of those qualities as being quintessentially American, but is that really so? In fact, thanks to the work that people such as yourselves have done, we can see that those key characteristics of New York, first of all, come from its origin as New Amsterdam and in turn come from Amsterdam itself.

These very distinctive characteristics in New Amsterdam in particular, of the diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds and a multilingual culture, as well as a society based on tolerance-- all of these qualities come from the model of Amsterdam and the greater model of the Dutch Republic. Within the context of the American colonies in general, this heterogeneous quality was unique and very different from the New England colonies, which tended to be British or French, and therefore, much more homogeneous. You could say that the idea of the melting pot, which is such an important foundation of the American identity, was something that originated in New Amsterdam, based on the model of Amsterdam from which it came.

One aspect of that, society multilingualism, can still be related back to Amsterdam today. In 1643, in New Amsterdam, eighteen languages were spoken. Today, in New York over 180 languages are spoken. The Dutch talent for languages is something we very much appreciate today and it already played a role in the colony. The second vicar in the New Amsterdam church, for example, was able to recommend himself for that position because he spoke Dutch and English and that was a critical factor in his selection. Just last night, I was giving an economic speech in Rotterdam and I can tell you in all of my economic speeches, I talk about what a great place the Netherlands is to do business. I always say you will find this a bilingual population and an easy place for your families to settle and your children to go to school and for you to work in because everyone speaks Dutch and English. That is not very different from the colony of New Amsterdam.

One difference, though, is that while today we celebrate this diversity and see it in America, and I think also in the Netherlands, as a source of strength, that was not nec-

essarily the perception of the authorities in the colonies. While they recognized that a pluralistic society and economy allowed the colony to flourish, they also saw it as a threat to social cohesion. There was an effort from Amsterdam to make New Amsterdam as Calvinist as possible. But I have the impression that was somewhat of an uphill battle and anyone who goes to New York today can see that they lost.

Even though New Amsterdam belonged to the Netherlands for a period of only forty years before ownership was transferred, those forty years, being the critical, seminal, years of the colony, established a foundation and left a permanent stamp of diversity and tolerance that shaped not only the melting pot of New York City, but also the United States. I hope that you will find more interesting things about that origin. I think there are some very, very, promising projects that you all will be undertaking. I want to thank you, both Dutch and American scholars alike, for your work that will help us understand our origins and, therefore, our identity even better. Thank you very much.