

Why Did Arminianism “Win”?

by R. Scott Clark

- Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary California, author, and Associate Pastor at Oceanside United Reformed Church (Carlsbad, CA). Disclaimer: The statements, views, and opinions presented on the Heidelberg are those of the author and are not endorsed by and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Westminster Seminary California.

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Sometime back Howard wrote to ask, “How and when did Arminianism become the predominate [sic] view?” That’s a good question. First, we should distinguish between Jacob Arminius (James Hermandoon) and the Arminians (or the Remonstrants). Relative to the conclusions Arminian/Remonstrant theology later reached, Arminius was relatively conservative of Reformed theology. He was investigated by thoroughly orthodox Reformed theologians, who were justly suspicious of his theology and pedagogy, but they were not able to prove conclusively that he was teaching error.

Nevertheless, there was certainly an organic relation between Arminius and the Remonstrants who complained (hence their name) against the Reformed theology of the Belgic Confession. Many of the views that Arminius was alleged to have taught, which he denied teaching, were articulated in the [Five Articles of the Remonstrance](#) (to which the Synod of Dort replied several years later in their [Five Canons](#)) almost immediately after Arminius’ death. It seems reasonably sure that Arminius taught essentially what became the Five Points of the Remonstrants and one is almost forced to think that he dissembled during the interviews with Gomarus and others.

As Remonstrant theology developed, however, its basic nature became clearer and that basic nature was rationalism. Arminius was a rationalist in at least one sense of the word inasmuch as he denied the fundamental Reformed distinction between the intellect of the Creator and the intellect of the creature. For Arminius (as for some rebellious and rationalist Reformed theologians in the 20th century) if we could not know what God knows, the way he knows it, we cannot ultimately know anything. For more on this see “Janus, the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel, and Westminster Theology,” in [The Pattern of Sound Doctrine](#). See also Richard Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy*.

What was at least implicit in Arminius’ theology became explicit in his followers, especially in the work of Simon Episcopius (Bisschop). The Remonstrant movement became increasingly unorthodox as it not only built on Arminius’ rationalism but as it adopted another form of rationalism from certain Renaissance scholars, as evident in the Socinian movement, that became predominant in the modern period, i.e. the notion that human rationality is the measure of all things. The authority of Scripture became displaced by the authority of human reason. As in the case of the Socinians, the doctrine of Trinity was abandoned and the Remonstrants became a seminary for the Enlightenment and for the Unitarian Universalism. For more on the nature of the Remonstrant movement after Arminius see John E. Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism. The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575-1650* vol. 29, Studies in the History of Christian Thought (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982).

How does this answer the question? There have two great modern schools of thought: rationalism and subjectivism. Presently subjectivism seems to be winning but for a long time the West was rationalist and Arminianism was a child of rationalism. Popularized Arminianism was more adaptable to the rugged individualist, frontier religion of the American westward expansion.

Versions of Arminianism became the predominant religion in American evangelicalism during the so-called Second Great Awakening in the 19th century and that movement became a tsunami that swamped orthodox Calvinism. To switch metaphors: between the right cross of the higher critical movement emerging from the Enlightenment and the uppercut from “evangelical” Arminian moralism and

rationalism (they always go hand-in-hand) Reformed orthodoxy was on the canvas by the end of the 19th century and by the early 20th century (warning: tortured metaphor approaching) RO was KO'd.

Because they shared common presuppositions, “evangelical” rationalism was no threat to the Enlightenment but Reformed orthodoxy was a threat so the liberals spent their fury in the early part of the 20th century suing, ridiculing, attacking, and dismantling orthodox Reformed dissent. The “evangelical” rationalists became “fundamentalists” and alternately withdrew from the culture (further reducing their threat to the liberal, mainline establishment) in the first half of the 20th century.

The other wing of the Enlightenment was subjectivism, i.e. the notion that what matters is internal, psychological or emotional, experience. By the early 18th century, a good bit of evangelicalism in the colonies became subjectivist, in reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In Europe, this subjectivism became known as “pietism.” The pietists believed the bible but they marginalized theology in favor of religious experience. The children and grandchildren of the pietists, however, when exposed to the withering critique of orthodoxy by the Enlightenment simply caved and made Christianity a matter of private experience of “the divine” rather than a historical faith grounded in objective reality.

The subjectivist wing of evangelicalism from the 18th century did not fair well either. One wing of Edwards’ followers adopted forms of liberalism and the other, generally orthodox Calvinists, gradually shed the Edwardsean subjectivism and became marginalized by the growing liberal mainstream establishment. The who remained generally orthodox and subjectivist became the backbone of the “evangelical” movement of the 20th century.

By 1950 the confessional Reformed remnant was either sequestered in relatively small ethnic denominations (e.g. RCUS, CRC) or in micro-Presbyterian denominations (e.g. the OPC) with no institutions, no buildings, no bodies, and no budgets.

There were branches of Arminianism, however, that remained “evangelical” in some (modern) sense. The Wesleys identified formally with the Reformation (even though their theology was in considerable tension with it!) and versions of Wesleyan methodism and of Charles Finney’s “new method” revivalism became the theology, piety, and practice of the westward expansion. In the 20th century, Arminianism became the theology of fundamentalism and revivalism and those two movements dwarfed the remnant of Reformed orthodoxy.

In short, by the mid-20th century, some version of Arminianism became the default theology of evangelicalism and fundamentalism because, in my view, they posed relatively little threat to the fundamental assumptions of human autonomy and rationalism (or subjectivism) that shaped the modern mind. Early Arminianism anticipated modernity and over the centuries forms of Arminianism adapted successfully to modernity and modernism. In contrast, orthodox Calvinism was antithetical to modernity and modernism from the beginning and remained so in the succeeding centuries. Reformed orthodoxy was neither rationalist nor subjectivist and was therefore unwilling and unable to compromise with it.