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## REFORM IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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In the sixteenth century the Low Countries sat at the crossroads of important trade-routes. The estuary of Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt contained both the 'mainports' of Antwerp and Amsterdam and a host of lesser sea- and riverports. These handled traffic both on the overland route from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, through Venice and Genoa, over the Alpine passes and via the Rhine Valley on to England, and the searoute connecting the Baltic to the Mediterranean. Proximity to these arteries of wealth had created a favorable climate for the development of a heavily urbanized, highly literate society, in which international trade, manufacture for both export and a dense network of local and regional markets interlocked and flourished. (Spufford, 'Literacy', p. 229-283).

Politically this rich area was firmly in the hands of the House of Habsburg. Charles V had personally built the Low Countries around the Burgundian lands he inherited from his father. Conquests had made him ruler of the 'Seventeen Provinces' by 1543, and in 1548 he forged these possessions into a geographically well-defined unit, separate from the German Empire to which various parts had formerly belonged. In 1549 he made the Estates of all these provinces recognize their government as hereditary in the House of Habsburg. He capped this achievement with the installation of a state of the art, modern set of federal councils: a Supreme Court at Mechelen, which was also court of appeal for the Provincial law courts, the Privy Council and the Councils of State and Finance to advise the ruler. These formed the central government of the whole area, but had to share the power of sovereignty with the provinces and their Estates, which fiercely defended their traditional privileges.

Welding these heterogeneous lands, old possessions and new acquisitions, some densely populated, others only sparsely, in which four languages were spoken and which represented a wide variety in government traditions, tangled jurisdictions and divergent customs, together was a task left to Philip II, who succeeded his father as overlord of the Low Countries in 1559. Within a decade of his rule, these rich, and well-organized lands were in deep trouble. Philip ruled his lands from Spain, and delegated executive power over the Low Countries to a Regent, his half-sister Margaret, Duchess of Parma. She was closely surrounded by advisors, many of foreign extraction, who were in the confidence of the King. At first a perceived preferment of foreign-born men to positions of power and influence, later a new, centrally decreed, system of taxation introducing higher tariffs led strong opposition from the provinces to the central government. These meshed with, and were in time to be almost overshadowed by, a conflict over the religious policies of the Habsburg dynasty. The combination of political and religious discontent was at the root of the

Revolt that would divide the Low Countries into the Catholic Spanish Netherlands and the Reformed Dutch Republic (Parker, *Dutch Revolt*, p. 19-67).

### **Evangelical religion and Anabaptism**

The easy accessibility of the area facilitated not only the trade in commodities, but also the exchange of books, ideas and rumours. Lutheran and Anabaptist religious views found their way from the German Empire to audiences in the Low Countries very rapidly and mixed with local traditions critical of religious life and ecclesiastical organisation, into a diffuse mix of heresies that abhorred their rulers. In the 1520s they perceived widespread ‘Lutheranism’. In actual fact the influence of the German Reformation may have been rather limited, but certainly a considerable change was afoot in both learned and popular views of what it took to be a good Christian.

Central to this change in religious sensibility was a growing interest in the Bible. Humanists, most influential among them Desiderius Erasmus, studied the Bible with a new interest in its literary form and as a guide to moral conduct. The development of the printing industry made the biblical texts and ‘evangelical’ literature available in the vernacular, and no doubt rumours about the ‘Luther affair’ stimulated demand. The literate artisans in towns and cities bought both Bibles and devotional works that formerly were more the preserve of clerics and religious. In a still overwhelmingly oral culture the texts were divulged by word of mouth, in meetings in the houses of laymen where the best reader present read them to the others, and in open-air sermons, where often unnamed preachers expounded the message of the Gospel to willing audiences (Brederode, *Spaanse Brabander*, act III, line 1349-1361, Rooze-Stouthamer, *Zeeland*, 34, Spaans, *Haarlem*, p. 29).

It is unlikely that this popular interest in the Bible was willfully heretical. It did however strengthen criticism against the Church, both among the learned and the unlearned. Priests lost faith in the way they had traditionally preached and ministered, and some of them shared their worries with parishioners who had access to biblical texts and were interested in the new brand of evangelical devotion. Religious began to question their vows, and some of them left their communities, shed their habits and started a new life as laypersons. Among the laity some degree of anticlericalism had never been absent. The privileges of the clerical estate, often obtained by patronage rather than ability, and the cost of its maintenance evoked sentiments ranging from Erasmian irony to bitter resentment. Celibacy was formally required from priests and religious, but not rigidly enforced — and often socially accepted (Woltjer, *Friesland*, p.64-67, 124-126)— but the ambiguity made them the butt of ribald joking and reflected badly on their moral standing. The absence of formal training for the ministry lowered their professional, intellectual status in the esteem of their flocks, who either were literate themselves or saw other laypersons read and explain scripture to them (Bijsterveld, *Pastors*).

On the basis of this new understanding of the scriptures the focus of devotion shifted, away from the sacraments, the saints and their images, pilgrimages and other quests for indulgences, to a more spiritualized and moralistic religion. Funding for traditional devotional practices plummeted in the 1520s (Verhoeven, *Devotie en negotie*, p. 157-184, Mol, ‘Friezen’, Thijs, *Geuzenstad*, p. 20-21). It may well be that at least part of it was deflected towards charity for the poor. All over Europe poor relief was

reorganized, and in its new form, which was propagated as being both more efficient and more Christian, depended almost entirely on regular and frequent contributions from the population. One of the most ardent advocates of the reforms was Juan Louis Vives, secretary to the town council at Bruges (Van Damme, *Armenzorg*, p.102-130). ‘Lutheranism’ quickly became the umbrella-term for all of these religious changes, and it is indeed not difficult to see the similarities between the new devotional preferences and Luther’s message. Antwerp was, however, the only one place in the Low Countries where a fully Lutheran community was formed (Estié, *Vluchtige bestaan*, p. 7-15).

The Emperor reviewed the heresy laws in the Low Countries and gave lay commissioners, provincial Courts and urban justices power of inquisition alongside, and often above, the regular episcopal courts to prevent the spread of the German Reformation, with which as German Emperor he was intimately familiar, into these lands. Under the new laws reading, possessing, printing and sale of forbidden books, attending conventicles to discuss the Bible or books by Protestant authors, breaking or defiling images and disrespect to clergy and the sacraments, were defined as heresy and *lèse majesté*, and as such within the jurisdiction of secular courts (Goosens, *Inquisitions modernes*, 1, p. 47-62). A more active policing of religious orthodoxy resulted of course in a higher visibility of what was actually going on, but still the religious picture remains diffuse. The persecuting authorities found networks of people suspect of heretical opinions, both local, around readers and teachers of the Bible and the new doctrines, and supralocal, where such groups kept in contact through letters and visits. ‘Lutherans’ were burned at the stake, were banned or fled before they could be arrested. In many cases however accusations could not be made to stick. For most the change in devotion did not amount to separation from the Church or a total negation of all it stood for, but rather reinforced pre-existing criticism and anti-clericalism (Decavele, *Dageraad*; Duke, *Reformation and Revolt*, Rooze-Stouthamer, *Zeeland*).

In the 1530s Anabaptism penetrated into the Low Countries from the north-east. Emissaries of Melchior Hoffmann, then based at Emden, took up a wandering ministry in these lands. Anabaptism was from the start both much more radical and more organized than what had gone under the broad umbrella of ‘evangelicalism’ or ‘Lutheranism’ so far. They practiced what they preached. Instead of the rather general criticism of the sacraments found in the adherents of the new evangelicalism, the Anabaptists, from the beginning divided into several branches, following specific ‘prophets’, accepted only those they considered biblical. Their abstention from the Easter celebration of the Eucharist and the baptism of newborns, in favour of their own version of the Lord’s Supper and the baptism of believers, constituted open heresy. Those who were rebaptized formed tight, self-reliant cells, in which teaching was done by those most able, and support of the needy was modelled on the sharing of goods in the primitive Christian communities. A strict discipline kept them separate from the evils of the world and provided a shield of secrecy. Apart from this lay ministry of believers the early Anabaptists had an ordained ministry of elders and missionary bishops, who supervised the local cells, and were authorized to baptize new members. The Anabaptists may have recruited from earlier evangelical groups, but had a radically different character from these (Augustijn, ‘Anabaptisme’, p. 16-23, Knottnerus, ‘Menno als tijdverschijnsel’, p. 105-112).

The Anabaptists were not only heretical, but were also considered a political danger. As the successor to a long line of popular evangelical movements, critical of the Church and its entanglement in secular power and wealth, they believed the end of the world, the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgement were imminent. In preparation for these events they kept themselves separate from society at large, in order to remain unpolluted with worldly interests. They did not attend the services of the Church, kept as much as possible to the company of co-religionists, and refused to swear oaths and bear arms — the usual prerequisites for civil citizenship. They made one decisive exception to their general abstention from armed violence. Anabaptists believed that they could expedite the Second Coming by preparing a New Jerusalem, a town held by the believers, from where Christ and his saints could rule the world. With this object in mind in 1534 Anabaptists took Munster in Westphalia through a political coup. They evicted all those who were not of their persuasion and reorganised the urban community according to their views of Paradise. They invited sympathizers from elsewhere to join them and help defend the city against the bishop of Munster, who intended to retake it by force. Thousands of Anabaptists started out from the Netherlands, but were intercepted by the authorities on their way, in Spaarndam near Haarlem, and in the harbour of Kampen where shiploads from North-Holland landed after crossing the Zuyderzee. A number of them were executed for heresy, but the large mass of them were considered harmless souls misled by religious fervour, and were released with a mere warning. Munster itself was recaptured and the Anabaptist leaders executed. In 1535 and 1536 several attempts were made to take other towns, most notably Amsterdam, but also Leiden, Deventer and Hazerswoude, and in 1535 Anabaptists briefly occupied the convent Bloemkamp near Bolsward. None of these actions were successful. Secular authorities were very alert, and investigated closely into the trade in the kind of prophetic texts that justified the Anabaptist attempts, actively sought out cells in which this literature was read and new plans could be prepared, and brought suspects to trial. In the 1540s this policy slackened, as within Anabaptist groups eschatological expectations faded and a majority decided to abide the time until the Second Coming in patience, abstaining from all use of violence. An important architect of this new peaceful identity was Menno Simons, after whom the Dutch Anabaptists are henceforth called Mennonites (Zijlstra, *Ware gemeente*, p. 11-150, 170-196, 237-247).

Except for the period of the Anabaptist kingdom of Munster and the attempts to take other towns, local magistrates were not very keen on persecution of heresy, Anabaptist or otherwise. The anti-heresy policy emanating from Brussels was seen as one more example of central government infringing upon local jurisdictions. Resentment may not have been the only root of this lack of enthusiasm, interpreted as obstruction by the Emperor. Local magistrates were reluctant to bring their own citizens to trial for harbouring ideas that, although akin to those of Luther, might not quite be an outright breach from the traditional church, or could be viewed as honest misconceptions. They seem to have adhered to an older definition of heresy as ‘willful and obstinate rejection of Christian doctrine and the authority of the Church’, rather than the new one focusing on transgression of the Emperor’s religious policies. The distinction between an interest in biblical precepts or a spiritualized piety, and heresy was, however, often a fine one. The ambiguity of the appeal to a biblical Christianity can be demonstrated from the plays staged by the Chambers of Rhetoric. These plays usually addressed some actual discussion, and quite a few of them contain references

to religious issues of the day. In some instances these were quite outspoken. The texts of the plays staged in Ghendt in the course of a ‘rhetoricians’ contest’ in 1539 were subsequently placed on the Index. Obviously the players and the magistrate of Ghendt did not consider the subject matter or its interpretation as beyond the pale of orthodoxy, as a public display of heresy was unwise in the extreme. The royal inquisitioners in Brussels however thought otherwise. (Decavele, *Dageraad*, p. 193-203). Laxity or sympathy for heretic notions may have played a part, but this does not seem highly likely. There was an extensive gray zone between heresy and an acceptable appeal to the plain Gospel, however critical. The latter could be seen as a call for reforming the Church from the inside. In fact the desire for reform may have been widespread among magistrates and town councils (Spaans, *Haarlem*, 31-32).

### Calvinism

In the 1540s a new brand of religion entered the Low Countries. From France Calvinism spread into the Southern provinces, gradually and diffuse in character at first but more systematically, especially in the French-speaking areas from 1560, under the guidance of the Guy the Bray, who had earlier been active in London and Switzerland. Like Anabaptism the Calvinists formed relatively autonomous cells, with a strong internal organization. They were ministered to by ordained preachers. A consistory made up of lay elders, mostly local notables, organized secret meetings, procured ministers and devotional books like the Bible and the Psalms — translated and set to music for communal singing — and maintained discipline, while deacons cared for the poor (Augustijn, ‘Opmars’). French Calvinism was not only a religion, but also a political movement. Supported from Geneva, which trained and sent out ministers, the Calvinist congregations in France were used by the Huguenot faction to destabilize the Crown that was in the power of the Catholic nobility. This policy would lead to intermittent civil war from 1562 to 1598, each period of warfare concluded by a peace settlement in which the rights and freedoms of both religions were formulated. Likewise, after 1559, in the Southern Netherlands the Calvinist consistories allied themselves with opposition against the centralizing policies of the Catholic King Philip II. His style of government, although building on the institutional structures his father had introduced, was strongly resented by the higher nobility. Noblemen from the Low Countries like William of Orange, Lamoral, count of Egmond and Philip of Montmorency, count of Hornes, who claimed hereditary rights to high office, felt excluded from the real centre of power, which was centred in the small entourage of the Regent. They rode the wave of Calvinism, which would lead Orange to fame as the successful leader of the Revolt and founder of the Dutch Republic, and Egmond and Hornes to public execution (Cameron, *European Reformation*, p. 372-381).

Calvinist provocations of the government in Brussels, in the form of public preaching and the singing of Psalms on the public streets (*chanteries*), preferably under a Catholic clergyman’s windows, started early in the 1560s. The ministers who led these disturbances were theologically often ill informed and functioned more as military leaders than as pastors. They were in contact with the members of the noble faction that saw themselves excluded from the centre of power, and who within years would openly present themselves as leaders of the Dutch Revolt. City magistrates did not suppress the sermons and *chanteries*, or prosecute participants with anything like the vigour the King and his Regent ordered. This led to the impression that the cities

and their magistrates were heavily infected with heresy. Magistrates themselves denied this, pointing to ‘foreign elements’ as the inciters of religious unrest, and maintaining that most participants were there simply out of curiosity or had been unaware of the heretical character of the occasion. And although magistrates had a compelling interest in deflecting the attentions of central government, to protect their own autonomy, they may have had some point there: if the actions were mainly politically inspired, those in it for merely religious motives were unaware and innocent (Steen, *Chronicle of Conflict*, p.23-38)

In 1566 the League of discontent grandees, supported by a larger group of lesser nobles, felt strong enough to apply to the Regent for a suspension of the heresy laws. In a moment of weakness Margaret of Parma promised moderation. All over the South the Calvinist congregations grew in the summer of this Miracle Year 1566, and in the Northern provinces, where so far very little Calvinist activity had been going on, new congregations emerged (Vis, *Arentsz.*, p. 40-91). Existing groups changed character; more than before members of local elites became involved. They reshaped the congregations into recruiting grounds and communications centres for the opposition. The open-air services they organized attracted large crowds. They grew into a show of strength for the opposition to royal policy, a fact underlined by the frequent presence of armed guards. The opposition did however not content itself with services in the open air, the so-called hedge-preaching: in August and September 1566, in a seemingly well-organized operation which started in Steenvoorde in the deep south of Flanders, and swept from south to north through Antwerp into Gelderland, and led to many similar localized incidents as far north as Friesland and Groningen, little groups of iconoclasts, often with the help of local Calvinists or sympathizers, smashed the images in the churches in town after town.

By that time the King had been informed of the softening of his religious policy by his Regent, and had predictably ordered immediate repression of all heretical innovations. In a subsequent Accord the Regent tried to contain the damage by granting limited toleration, but limiting Protestant preaching to those places where they had been held before. Moderation however effectively ended in 1567 with the arrival of the Duke of Alva, who was sent by the King with an army of Spanish tercios to restore order and punish those responsible for the ‘Troubles’ of 1566 (Crew, *Calvinist Preaching*, p. 1-38, Parker, *Dutch Revolt*, p. 74-84).

### **Catholic Reformation, conformity and exile**

Repression was however not the only policy initiated by the King. The issues addressed by the Protestant Reformation — the need for higher standards of learning and morality in the clergy, the soft life lived in many monasteries, the demand among both the learned and literate urban classes for a more spiritualized devotion, closer to the example of the early Church — preoccupied many leading Catholics, including the Papacy. From 1545 the Council of Trent, dedicated to the defense of Catholic doctrine against Protestantism and to Church reform from within, had been in session. In the spirit of this Catholic Reform in 1561 Philip II decreed a reorganization of the bishoprics in the Low Countries, that had been discussed from the reign of Charles V. Three archiepiscopal sees instead of one and fifteen suffragan bishoprics instead of five would henceforth cover all of the territory of the Netherlands, where formerly the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical provinces had ignored state borders to the detriment of

effective governance. The new bishoprics would initiate the Counter-Reformation program of regular synods and visitations, in order to improve pastoral care and combat heresy. As this reorganization infringed upon existing jurisdictions and privileges it met with much resistance, notwithstanding a broader movement for reform (Rogier, *Katholicisme*, I, 201-259, Post, *Kerkelijke verhoudingen*, p. 114-116, 335-336, 452-455, 552).

The actual impact of both political and religious developments on the population at large is hard to calculate. By the 1560s the Low Countries contained one Lutheran congregation in Antwerp (Estié, *Vluchtige bestaan*). In the Dutch-speaking areas both North and South Mennonite groups were widely scattered, with denser concentrations in Frisia, North Holland, and Flanders. Organized Calvinist churches were found mainly in the South, both Flemish and Walloon. Despite humanist criticism of the traditional church and common age-old anticlericalism the majority seems to have unprotestingly conformed to Catholicism. They may have harboured the wish for reform, but the conscious choice for a Protestant congregation, which meant a repudiation of traditional religion, was made only by the informed few. The emphasis here is on informed: hindsight and textbooks allow us to see the doctrinal and ecclesiological implications of the various blends of Christianity formed by such macro-developments of radical Reformation, magisterial Reformation, Counter-reformation, and state formation, but for the average sixteenth-century lay person the finer theological distinctions were less obvious and perhaps quite irrelevant. Traditional religion was closely intertwined with family life and all levels of social organization, and a personal choice for a style of devotion which separated one from this familiar web of relations may have been inconceivable to most.

Those who did join Protestant congregations ran the risk of persecution, which at times could be fierce and deadly. Persecution drove heretics into exile. Most visible are the patterns of exile for the Calvinists. In the 1540s Calvinists from the Southern Low Countries crossed the Channel into England, and formed exile communities in several towns in the South-East, and most of all in London. Several cities in the German Empire also harboured Dutch Protestant exile communities. These exile churches remained separate from the Protestant organization in the receiving countries, but operated with the tacit support of the authorities. They supported the secret congregations that remained on the Continent, training and sending back ministers and printing and smuggling in books, just as Geneva did for French Calvinism. With the accession of the Catholic Queen Mary the Dutch churches had to leave England. They relocated to Emden in East-Frisia, which, also after the succession of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth, remained an important centre of missionary Calvinism, supplying both the Northern and the Southern churches. Many of those involved in the Troubles of 1566 in the Northern provinces, either as iconoclasts or as members of the fledgeling congregations, fled to Emden, and it was in synods held at Emden in 1568 and 1571 that a blue-print was devised for the organization of a Reformed Church once the Revolt had been successful, and these exiles could return (Pettegree, *Emden*).

### **Political reformation**

Armed insurrection would eventually determine the confessional configuration in the Low Countries. However widespread discontent and heresy had been in the preceding

decades, it was the Revolt against the harsh rule of Alva that would make the North officially Protestant and the South officially Catholic. In 1568 Orange, having fled to the safety of his German family-possession, orchestrated a four-pronged attack on Alva's forces, aided by the German Lutheran princes and his relations among the French Huguenot leaders, and by the exile consistories in England. This ambitious campaign failed, and cost Orange both a fortune and the support of the French and Germans (Parker, *Dutch Revolt*, p. 105-111). The first signal victory in the Revolt was gained more or less by accident by the Sea Beggars, a loose association of pirate captains and crews, privateering against the Spanish with letters of marque from Orange. Denied access to English ports by Elizabeth they landed in the small port town of Den Briel, in the estuary of the Meuse river. As it happened the town was practically defenseless, and on the 1st of April 1572 the Beggars took it 'for the Prince of Orange'. Den Briel provided Orange and his Beggars a convenient bridgehead, from which in the early summer of that same year most of Holland was won. The fall of Den Briel would understandably come to be seen in later Protestant historiography, as proof of God's guiding hand in the Reformation of the Netherlands.

One after the other towns and cities declared their allegiance 'to the Prince', partly under the pressure of the Beggar troops before their gates, but also in no small measure aided by members of the local political elites sympathetic to the cause of the Revolt. Although by no means all of these supporters were themselves Protestants, and the urban populations often preferred to remain loyal to the Catholic faith, in each town that joined the Revolt, the Reformed Church was officially recognized. In 1572 and 1573 Catholics retained equal rights to public worship and access to public office under a religious peace arrangement dictated by the Prince of Orange. From 1573 on however allegiance to the Revolt meant also rejection of Catholicism, as among Catholics resistance to the Protestant political takeover was perceived to foment conspiracy with the royal forces. Catholics gradually came to be excluded from political office.

Royal armies proved unable to recapture the areas controlled by the Beggars. The war seriously hampered the economy of Flanders and Brabant, unpaid troops mutinied in Antwerp in 1574 and 1576, and in the latter year thoroughly sacked the city. A stalemate seemed to have been reached, and the seventeen provinces wanted the war to end. In the 1576 Pacification of Ghent the Estates General, overstepping the boundaries of their constitutional power, declared the war over, and accepted the political and religious status quo. Holland and Zeeland would have the Prince of Orange as their governor, and the Reformed Church would be their public Church. The other provinces would remain royalist and Catholic, but the heresy laws were suspended. In the years that followed religious peace settlements were tried out, but these experiments foundered on the growing polarization between North and South. In 1579 the Union of Atrecht and the Union of Utrecht effectively created two different federations of provinces. In the years 1580-1585 in Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels, and Mechelen 'Calvinist Republics' were proclaimed, in defiance of growing royalist and Catholic hegemony. At the same time Groningen in the far north of the territory of the Union of Utrecht declared for the King and Catholicism, and thereby created a backlash of anti-Catholicism throughout the North. In each of these cities upwardly mobile guilds did a grab for political power against the traditional elite. In the South they were given ideological support by the militantly Calvinist ministers — a development not unlike the communal reform movements found in North-German

cities and at the same time heir to the politicized Calvinism of the consistories in France and the Netherlands in the 1550s and 1560s. The republics were overthrown by force of arms in 1585 (Marnef, 'Brussel', Marnef, *Mechelen*, *Israel Dutch Republic*, p. 155-220, Woltjer, *Vrijheidsstrijd*).

The South reconciled itself with Spanish rule, and was in 1599 entrusted by Philip II as a dowry to his daughter Isabella, who ruled it as an independent principality with her husband Albert of Austria. The couple was given the title of Archdukes. They were devoted to the cause of the Counter-Reformation and supported the reform of the Catholic Church in their lands. In 1581 the North renounced its allegiance to Philip II, and became the Dutch Republic. All seven of the United Provinces introduced the Reformed Church as their public Church.

### **New religious regimes**

The military campaigns of Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma, consolidated the Southern Netherlands under Spanish rule. They culminated in the capture of Antwerp in 1585. The sealanes to its harbour were controlled, however, by the Republic, stifling its commerce in favour of Amsterdam. Not only the wealth generated by access to international trade routes shifted to the North, leading it to its Golden Age, but also large numbers of merchants and skilled artisans, many of them Calvinists, Lutherans, Jews and Mennonites. They left the city and its industrial hinterland, partly because of the economical malaise that came in the wake of war, but also for religious reasons. The Spanish Netherlands were a Catholic country, and its rulers demanded loyalty to the Catholic Church from its inhabitants. Protestants were purged from all public functions. The Catholic Church tried to reconcile Protestants, and this policy was moderately successful. Bishops could report large numbers of converts, although it is also clear that many merely outwardly conformed. Those who could not live with that, had to leave, and many did (Marinus, 'Verdwijnen van het protestantisme'; Thijs, *Geuzenstad*, p. 31-59).

Calvinist, Lutheran and Jewish merchant families from Antwerp were given four years in which to sell their real estate in the city and emigrate. Similar arrangements had been made for other cities in the South. Many went to Hamburg or Frankfurt at first, but eventually Amsterdam proved a magnet few could resist. Mennonite linenweavers and Calvinist wool-weavers from Flanders and Brabant settled around Haarlem and Leiden, the main centres of these industries in Holland. Ministers and schoolmasters came from all over the South. Together with emissaries from the exile churches they played an important role in building the public Reformed Church of the Republic and its French-speaking complement, the Walloon Reformed Church, as well as those Protestant churches that enjoyed a limited freedom in the North: the Evangelical-Lutheran churches and the Mennonite communities.

For all churches the last decades of the sixteenth century were a period of building. Politics and war had demonstrated the need for, and determined the choice of, official churches for both the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic. In both the war and the uncertainties of the times had seriously diminished the wealth of the old Church. Church buildings had been damaged, the lands and rents that provided their upkeep and the income of the clergy were diminished through violence and neglect, and title deeds had been lost. The priests needed for pastoral care had been harrassed

by Calvinists in the South, in the North Protestant ministers, officially in demand now for the first time, were equally scarce. Moreover, clergy now had to conform to the higher standards of learning, moral conduct and pastoral ability set by both Protestant and Catholic Reformations. They had to teach their flocks a godly discipline that was stricter than traditional, medieval Catholicism had been.

In the South the appointment of able and active bishops to oversee and lead this construction work proved no easier in the 1580s than it had been in the 1560s. The organization of the new bishoprics, started by Philip II at the very beginning of his reign, was not yet completed, mainly due to problems of funding. The money needed for a well appointed episcopal household, annex court and office, in most cases had to come from the incorporation of wealthy abbeys, who tried each and every possible legal strategy to retain their autonomy. Bishops were obliged under the decrees of the Council of Trent to hold regular diocesan synods and visitations of the churches under their jurisdiction. Synods and visitations had to instill in the diocesan clergy the spirit of the new Catholicism and to correct those who fell short — even parish priests who divided their attentions between farming and their priestly duties because of insufficient income from their benefice. Bishops had to see to it that the religious in cloisters lived according to their vows, and to stimulate the work of active congregations in the care of the sick and the poor, and in elementary teaching. They were responsible for the recruitment and training of priests for their churches. They supported the Latin schools and stimulated promising pupils to continue their studies in their seminaries and eventually take the cloth. They had to see to it that the new teaching device, the catechism, was taught in schools. In their courts they disciplined all, both religious and lay, who in any way overstepped the rights and teachings of the Church (Harline and Put, *Bishops Tale*).

Where bishops and their secular clergy had a relatively hard time overcoming the after-effects of the Revolt and changing into the more demanding Counter-Reformation gear, the regular clergy showed a remarkable resilience. Especially in Antwerp, but also more generally, the traditional orders quickly recovered. The contemplative, cloistered orders, which often demanded a sizeable dowry from new members, appealed especially to the sons and daughters of the wealthy, and having a relative in such an order became a mark of social distinction. This in turn appears to have stimulated vocations to the less strict orders, and the active congregations. The monasteries attracted gifts from the faithful, which allowed them to rebuild, refurbish and embellish their buildings with all the lushness of the then fashionable baroque style. Their chapels consequently became popular. Parishoners preferred them over the shabbier parish churches for their regular devotions and for the receipt of the sacraments. As in the latter donations from the faithful were expected, this fomented resentment between the regular clergy and the seculars. At the same time the ‘marketforces’ implied in this competition for patrons and income may have improved pastoral work, religious education and discipline.

The help of regular clergy and the members of religious communities was also indispensable in inculcating the faithful with the new religious values and attendant practices. The Council of Trent advocated a focus on Christ and the Eucharist, over the traditional cult of the saints. It prescribed a more frequent Communion, and consequently frequent confession, for which the regular priests provided the necessary manpower. There was some measure of specialization in the different orders, which

preached for the educated or for the masses, dedicated themselves to teaching or care of the sick and burying of the poor, but the most versatile order of all were the Jesuits. The religious orders promoted lay devotions, bringing people together in clubs and fraternities for a combination of pious exercises and conviviality. Many of these were socially exclusive, but others catered to the common people. Both regular and secular priests acted as father-confessors to loose groups of devout lay sisters, who combined a life of prayer and meditation with pious work, such as teaching children their catechism, caring for the sick and the poor and engaging people in devout conversation. The arts, from the polemics for the intellectual few, to the processions and religious theater for the population at large, were used to enhance the effect of this process of confessionalization. All this stimulated reverence to the Church, new vocations, and pious donations, and gave society at large a distinctly Catholic stamp. Visitors from the North could not be but impressed by the splendour of the religious services which impacted all the senses, and the many forms of popular devotion (Thijs, *Geuzenstad*, p. 61-96, 161-185, Vroede, *Kwezels*).

In the North the Reformed Church had many of the same problems in building its new organization and finding able clergy. Here too adequate funding for the church was a problem. Secular government claimed a part of the income from the abolished Catholic monasteries, chapters and chantries, for the war effort, for the repair of war damage, and to pay for the new Protestant universities that would have to educate the elites of the Republic who had traditionally patronized Cologne and Louvain — both Catholic by now. The rest had to be used to pay the former monks and nuns a pension for life and for other pious purposes. In time these funds, together with those of the parishes, would guarantee the ministers of the public Church an adequate salary, at least in the larger towns and cities. Rural parishes could be too poor to support a minister, and many had to share one. Even then also protestant ministers were sometimes forced to work for additional income. Ministers were trained in the new universities. They formed supra-local governing bodies in the regional classes and Provincial Synods, which exercised many of the administrative and disciplinary functions handled by bishops in Catholic areas.

In the Dutch Republic the one minister in the village or the handful in larger towns had to do without the rivalry and support the secular clergy of the South experienced in the regulars. The ministers were expected to preach twice on Sundays and usually on one or more weekdays. Four times a year the Lord's Supper was celebrated, exclusively for those who had by a public profession of faith proven they had sufficient knowledge of and wholeheartedly subscribed to the doctrines of the Church. The Reformed version of the sacrament did not require prior confession by the faithful — a sermon of instruction and exhortation to self-examination of one's conscience was held some days in advance. Moreover all full members of the Church were visited personally by the minister and one of the elders, to inquire whether they were worthy of partaking. Those who were not were officially barred. Religious instruction for adults seems to have been given almost exclusively in the form of sermons. In the larger towns 'comforters of the sick' visited the the sick and dying in their houses. Parents were expected to teach the essentials to their children, while a more systematic instruction was provided by schoolmasters, which consisted mainly of memorization of the catechism. The elders, a college of lay notables, often partly made up of members of the magistrate, supervised the religious life of the congregation, and together with the minister handled cases of ecclesiastical discipline.

The poor among the full members were supported by the deacons, who were often amalgamated in a wider board of welfare officers catering to all poor urban residents.

The requirement of some form of instruction, public profession of faith and a godly lifestyle, under the permanent scrutiny of the consistory once one had attained full membership, demanded a measure of commitment that not all were prepared to make. The Reformed Church was, for a public Church, rather exclusive, and it is estimated that by the end of the sixteenth century only ten to twenty percent of the population could be counted as members. This is remarkable. It is an indication that all the humanism, evangelicalism and anti-clericalism of the preceding decades had not made many people into informed and convinced Protestants. It would take a process of confessionalization, of systematic inculcation of religious values, lasting deep into the seventeenth century, to do that (Abels and Wouters, *Nieuw en ongezien*, Spaans, 'Catholicism').

Reformed religious life was focused on the Bible and the truths contained therein. Religious culture was decidedly stark in comparison to the baroque splendour of the Counter-Reformation. The public church buildings were few, without the complement of chapels that gave Catholic faithful a choice of devotional styles and the possibility of social distinctiveness. Only in Utrecht a shortlived experiment was conducted with two rival congregations, offering two different modes of Reformed worship and community-building. One minister in one parish church conducted a relatively undemanding form of worship, without discipline and with access to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for all who wished to partake. This so-called Libertine church was patronized by members of the city's social and political elite, but also by the poor, for whom the thresholds to membership were generally felt to be high, whereas the regular, more Calvinist congregation attracted the economically independent middle groups (Kaplan, *Calvinists and libertines*). Within the Reformed Church at large social differentiation in religious behaviour and display never played a part comparable to what Catholicism could offer. Sometimes it seems that being a member of the Church was itself felt to be a mark of social distinction. Over time within the congregations finer distinctions would develop for the higher strata of Reformed society, in the form of seating arrangements, and membership of conventicles promoting a more intimate knowledge of the faith and pious exercises.

The Reformed church interiors were plain, and, although the arts flowered in the Republic, they depended on a civic, not an ecclesiastical mecenate. Even the splendid and costly organs found in many churches were an expression of civic pride, used for concerts, and not as an accompaniment to the singing of the Psalms in religious worship. Where in the Spanish Netherlands every possible allurements was deployed in order to integrate all subjects of a land that had been heavily infiltrated by both evangelical, Anabaptist and Calvinist ideologies, into a homogeneously Catholic culture, the Reformed Church of the Republic refused so much as to try. Even on the point of baptism and church marriage, in theory a service as the public Church it could perform for all, the Reformed Church was ambiguous, often preferring to reserve these for members only.

### **The problem of diversity**

Despite all the efforts to reconcile all subjects to the Catholic Church, small communities of Protestants and Jews remained in the Spanish Netherlands. They were condemned to obscurity, obliged to conform outwardly to the Catholic mainstream, attending services and even partaking of the sacraments. Their own forms of worship could only be practiced in secrecy. Dissidents living in border areas could and did cross over to places where they could join in the religious services of co-religionists, but such contacts were discouraged. In a city like Antwerp, which depended on the presence of foreign communities in the interest of trade, dissident communities were allowed some latitude, as long as they used it discreetly, without giving offence by attracting any attention to their existence, sometimes at the cost of special taxation. The official policy was that friendly persuasion and force of habit might eventually reconcile them to Catholicism, whereas active persecution would give the authorities in the Dutch Republic an excuse to harrass their Catholic communities (Marinus, 'Verdwijnen van het protestantisme').

The Dutch Republic was confessionally much more diverse. In the Union of Utrecht (1579) freedom of conscience was guaranteed for all the inhabitants of the United Provinces. This in itself did not imply freedom of worship: in fact a succession of penal laws denied Catholics all forms of religious organization and communal worship, whereas Mennonites and Lutherans were never officially granted more freedom than they had had under Habsburg rule, except the freedom from persecution and inquisition into personally held beliefs. Jews were given specific privileges for worship and burial locally in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Freedom from persecution and inquisition and the exclusivity of the public Reformed Church did, however, create some space for religious minorities.

Catholics who were not prepared to live under an officially Protestant regime left the country for the South, or for the exile community in Cologne. Remnants of the indigenous Catholic hierarchy remained in place, however, and from these a new Catholic community was built under the direction of Apostolic Vicars. When the hope the Northern Provinces could be regained for the Spanish King and Catholicism faded, the Republic was declared a mission field by Rome, denying ecclesiastical validity to the structures built in the meantime. This did not immediately affect the community as such. Programs were devised by the remaining clergy to train indigenous priests in seminaries in Cologne and Louvain. To this secular clergy were added regular priests, both Dutch and foreign born, leading here also to resentment on both sides over competition for positions and income. Monasteries had been abolished, but lay sisters, because they officially lacked the status of religious, operated in relative freedom as helpmates of the priests, catechists and fundraisers (Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden*). As long as Catholic organization, worship and pastoral care kept out of public view, and, most important of all, as long as the clergy involved was not suspect of disloyalty to the Dutch Protestant authorities, Catholic devotion, inspired by the Counter-Reformation despite its subdued existence, was allowed to flourish. In the seventeenth century the territories to the south of the great rivers, that had for decades been part of the Spanish Netherlands, and the Achterhoek that had long remained under Munster, but were added by conquest to the Seven Provinces by the stadholders Maurice and Frederick Henry, Catholics were ruled by a small Reformed elite, but the overwhelming majority remained Catholic, and in the exceptional case of Maastricht even enjoyed public status (Rogier, *Geschiedenis*, Ubachs, *Twee heren*, Israel, *Dutch Republic*, p. 387-388, 658-660).

More or less the same applied to the other religions. Lutheran communities were found in most of the the larger towns. All except Woerden and Bodegraven, which had been given as a fief to one of Orange's German Lutheran allies, owed their existence to immigration from the South and subsequently grew on German labour migration. Their ministers were usually also Germans (Visser, *Lutheranen*). The Mennonite presence too was strengthened by exiles from Flanders and Brabant. Flemish, Frisian and 'Waterlander' Mennonites, the latter deriving their name from the marshy area north of Amsterdam, each formed their own communities, with a distinctive brand of piety. The 'ethnic' character faded over time, but the names remained as labels for the larger denominations within the highly fragmented community. Often one town or village boasted more than one Mennonite congregation, and some of the smaller splinter groups were to be found in a limited area. They were led by lay preachers, recruited from their own midst (Zijlstra, *Ware gemeente*). Jews settled in towns which were prepared to allow them freedom of worship and often also a separate burial ground in exchange for the economic activities they generated. At the end of the sixteenth century these were mainly Sephardic Jews, denoting Iberian or more generally Mediterranean extraction, later in the seventeenth century they would be joined by Ashkenazic, or Central European, communities. The largest Jewish presence was concentrated in Amsterdam. Especially the Sephardic Jews, born and raised as New Christians in Spain or Portugal, built a new religious identity, taught them initially by rabbis imported from the German Empire (Fuchs-Mansfeld, *Sefardim*, Bodian, *Hebrews*).

The nature of the religious settlement of the Dutch Republic, usually described as tolerant, was nevertheless a variety of the common European form of the confessional state. The magistrates supported the public Church, both financially and morally, and guaranteed its monopoly on public worship. Political power and public office in general were reserved for members of the Reformed Church, or those who outwardly conformed to its precepts. Especially in the early Republic many exceptions to this rule can be found, as the Reformed Church locally often contained a minority of the population as a whole, and following it to the letter was not always possible or desirable, but a rule it was. Members of dissident religious communities were excluded from positions of power and often socially at a disadvantage, and a distinctly hierarchical socio-religious differentiation would develop later on (Spaans, 'Toleration through discipline').

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**For further research:**

The best place to start further research is the article ‘Niederlande’ in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 24 (1994) p. 474-502. It is written by Cornelis Augustijn, who is easily the most sophisticated author on the early Dutch Reformation, and contains extensive bibliographical notes on primary sources and secondary literature. Post, *Kerkelijke verhoudingen* is still authoritative for pre-Tridentine Catholicism, although Bijsterveld, *Pastors*, nuances his opinion on parish priests. Decavele, *Dageraad* presents a broad and insightful picture of the early Reformation in Flanders, as do several articles in Duke, *Reformation and Revolt*, (mainly) for Holland. Parker. *Revolt* is good on political and military aspects of the Revolt, Woltjer, *Vrijheidsstrijd* on the ambiguous relation between religion and politics, and the importance of ‘middle groups’ between Trent and Geneva. Israel, *Dutch Republic*, offers the longer chronological perspective, Cameron, *European Reformation* the wider European context. There is a general tendency to overrate the impact of Protestant influence on the population at large, and to romanticize dissident groups. Thijs, *Geuzenstad* and Harline & Put, *Bishop’s Tale* give lively impressions of Catholic renewal in the South. Reformation and beginning confessionalization in the North are best described in a number of books on city reformation: Abels & Wouters, *Nieuw en ongezien*, on Delft, is a good example of this wider genre, and, moreover, also draws in the situation in the surrounding countryside. The history of the tolerated Churches in the Republic has not yet been integrated into a broader religious history, a real and painful lacuna. Attempts towards such an integration in Spaans, *Haarlem* and Spaans, ‘Toleration through discipline’, and also in Israel, *Dutch Republic*. The references given in the text are to the most recent general histories of these churches.