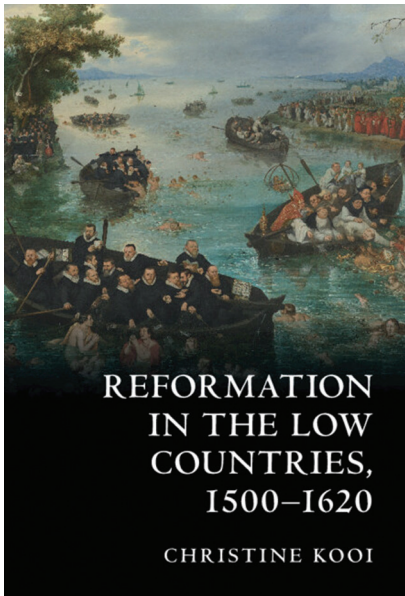


Review

Christine Kooi, *Reformation in the Low Countries, 1500-1620*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 220 pp. ISBN 9781009073950.



In the early seventeenth century, a man by the name of Goswinus Johannis quite literally crossed the confessional and geographical divide between Protestantism and Catholicism on a daily basis: the ex-priest apparently ‘celebrated mass for the Catholics in Brabant in the mornings and then in the afternoons traveled north of the border into Holland to preach in the Reformed manner to village congregations’ (137). This example, discussed by Christine Kooi in *Reformation in the Low Countries*, wonderfully illustrates the chaotic, undefined, and human character of the Netherlandish Reformation. In her book, Kooi convincingly presents the multifaceted history of the Low Countries between 1500 and 1620, paying attention to religious, social, cultural, judicial, political, and economic dynamics, and the ways in which these many aspects intertwine.

In the introduction, Kooi discusses her approach to the Reformation as a multi-confes-

sional phenomenon that took place both in- and outside the modern boundaries of the Netherlands. Kooi brings together a wide array of scholarly insights and examples from roughly the last fifty years and arranges them into a coherent – although by nature, as the author stresses herself, to some degree artificial (11) – narrative. In five main chapters, the reader is led through the Reformation, from lay people’s active involvement in religion in the fifteenth century to the divide of the Low Countries into two separate political and religious states by 1620.

The first chapter sketches out the ‘playing field’ for the many transformations to come: the crowded, actively religious, urbanised, highly literate, and politically complex Low Countries of the early sixteenth century. The second chapter deals with the origins, practices, and beliefs of, as well as the reactions to, the essentially pluriform dissident groups of evangelicals and Anabaptists that arose in the 1520s and 1530s. In the next chapter, Kooi discusses the developments in the mid-sixteenth century, when eclectic theologies

slowly became more coherent and solidified, and confessional borders between Mennonite, Reformed, and Catholic communities started to emerge. In her characterisation of this confessional turn, Kooi pays particular attention to the search for distinct religious identities within these groups. Despite the existence of large in-between 'middle groups' that would not confine themselves to a certain confessional conviction, the religious landscape became increasingly polarised in the late 1560s – and 'with polarization inevitably came conflict' (104). The Dutch Revolt, which arose out of political issues but was fuelled by religious unrest, forms the main theme of the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter concerns the political and religious outcomes of the Revolt: the split of the Low Countries into two distinct states, the Catholic archducal Netherlands in the south, and the nominally Protestant United Provinces or the Dutch Republic in the north. Kooi accurately describes how religious reform took shape in both states and how the authorities dealt with religious minorities. In the conclusion, lastly, the situation of the Low Countries is placed in a wider context, comparing the Dutch Reformation with developments and transformations in other European areas.

The book provides a long-awaited overview that deals with the entangled religious, political, and economic aspects of the tumultuous sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Christine Kooi's synthesis of previous research is balanced and critical, without becoming overly polemical. She fluently incorporates topics that have received special attention in recent scholarship – such as the role of print in the transmission of information and the development of religious identities, or the influence of the Reformation on migration waves – into the ongoing flow of the chronological narrative. Although the book does not discuss the outcomes of new research, it succeeds in enabling its readers 'to step back from the archival trees and survey the whole historical forest' (11). Although, for instance, her acknowledgement of the multi-confessional character of the Reformation, both within and outside the Catholic Church, is not original as such, the consistent and almost self-evident way in which she expresses this awareness within such a comprehensive overview is commendable.

Besides being thorough and accurate, *Reformation in the Low Countries* is also particularly well-written. Kooi has managed to present the often chaotic and conflicting historic transformations in an orderly manner through the chronological composition of the book, clearly structured chapters, and her transparent style of writing. Moreover, she regularly adorns the narrative with captivating anecdotes or illuminating references to the experiences and practices of individuals. In discussing the theological concerns of the early evangelicals, for example, Kooi illustrates the issue of Christ's physical presence in the Eucharist by referring to a woman called Wendelmoet Claesdr, executed for heresy in 1527 because she described the Eucharist as just 'bread and flour', as well as a Middelburg tailor who drunkenly declared that he could consecrate the Sacrament himself (56). Examples like these not only add to the readability of the book but also serve as a valuable reminder of the human character of historical transformations.

In conclusion, Christine Kooi's monograph is an important and attractive addition to the field of Reformation studies. Although a great amount of scholarly research on the Reformation has been carried out and is still ongoing, a comprehensive and nuanced overview was lacking. The clear and organised presentation of the many-sided Netherlandish

Reformation, the colourful writing style, and the detailed but concise discussion of fifty years of scholarship – the book counts roughly two hundred pages – make *Reformation in the Low Countries* highly recommendable for both scholars and students.

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