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The Blood of the Martyrs: The Reformation in the Netherlands

The faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honor; and the Son of God will confess their names before God and his elect angels; all tears shall be wiped from their eyes; and their cause, which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious, will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God.

The Belgic confession (1561)

If, as the ancient church believed, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, the Reformation in the Netherlands had an auspicious beginning. It has been said that there were more martyrs for the Reformation faiths in the Netherlands than in any other country (Cochrane, 1966: 185). And in the eyes of contemporaries, pro and con, martyrdom did seed reform. In 1555 Charles V received word that "simple people, seeing the public execution of such heretics with firm constancy and hearing their resolutions and the prayers which they address to God before dying, fall into vacillation and doubt of their faith." An example is the address to the crowd by the Reformed pastor Gilles Verdickt at the moment of his execution: "Do you think Messieurs, that you can expel and extirpate these poor Christians by killing and burning them? . . . you delude yourselves greatly; the ashes of my body will make the Christians multiply" (Crew 1978: 76).

The first martyrs of the Reformation came from the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp. Many of these monks had studied in Wittenberg and returned as enthusiastic supporters of Luther, whose works began appearing in the Netherlands as early as 1518, with more than 80 editions and translations by 1525 (Spruyt, 1991: 730, 747–51). As early as 1519 the prior of the Antwerp Augustinians, Jakob Propst, was defending Luther's teachings. The Netherlands, however, was Charles V's home territory and his reaction was swift. The Augustinian

monastery in Antwerp was leveled and all the monks imprisoned with the choice of recantation or the stake. Three maintained their new faith and were condemned to death. Heinrich Voes and Johann Esch met their death at the stake in July 1523 in the marketplace in Brussels; the third monk, Lambert Thorn, was not executed until 1528.

Their executions occasioned the first Reformation martyrology in the form of Luther's ballad, "A New Song Here Shall Be Begun" (August, 1523; *LW* 53: 211–16), which celebrated the victory of the martyrs' faith and witness. This first hymn of the Reformation appeared initially as a broadsheet and then in hymnals. It later served as the pattern for countless Anabaptist hymns celebrating their martyrs. Luther soon had the unhappy occasion for a second martyrology, "The Burning of Brother Henry" (1525; *LW* 32: 263–86), which recounted the witness of the Augustinian, Henry of Zütphen, who escaped Amsterdam only to be lynched in Ditmarschen (northeast of Hamburg) after a brief, successful ministry in Bremen.

Charles V's determination to root out heresy might be frustrated in Germany, but in his hereditary Netherlands the evangelicals had no powerful patrons to intercede for them. By 1555 the Habsburg Netherlands had the dubious distinction of creating more martyrs for Reformation convictions than any other country in Europe: 63 executed in Mons, Tournai, Lille, and Valenciennes, 100 in Flanders, and 384 in the county of Holland. The Reformation was not a live option in the provinces of Brabant, Flanders, Holland, Zeeland, and the Walloon towns in the face of the religious repression exerted from Brussels, the seat of the Spanish administration for the Netherlands (Duke, 1992: 146). The uneven match of the defenseless evangelical witness against the concentrated powers of the emperor and then Catholic Spain stoked the image of Dutch Protestantism as an early modern David facing Goliath (Spitz, 1971: 510). However stirring such a simple contrast may be, it belies the context and complexity of the Reformations in the Netherlands, which consisted of successive waves of Lutheran, Anabaptist, and Calvinist movements (Williams, 1992: 1177).

The area which came to be known as the Netherlands only in the 1530s included the duchies of Luxemburg and Brabant, the counties of Hainault, Artois, Flanders, Zeeland, and Holland, and other smaller counties and lordships which by 1543 under the political organization of Charles V comprised 17 provinces in all. The southern provinces (roughly modern Belgium), the Walloon area, was mainly French-speaking, whereas the people in the larger area to the north (roughly the modern Netherlands) spoke a Low German dialect. Provincial, not to mention local, differences make generalizations difficult. With that

caveat in mind, the following minimal sketch of the Netherlands will provide a context for the developing Reformation movements. Political unity among the provinces was fragile and rested to a large degree upon the person of Charles V. There was a central bureaucracy but throughout his reign the provincial governments were quite willing to obstruct government policies for the sake of their own customs and privileges. Furthermore, the efforts to finance imperial policy, such as wars with France, through increased taxation on the Low Countries contributed to such discontent that the regent Margaret of Austria feared rebellion in 1522 and 1525.

By the end of Charles V's reign the Netherlanders were near revolt. They complained of exorbitant taxation to finance imperial campaigns in France and Italy, the oppressive presence of Spanish troops to hold down the people, the trampling of rights and liberties by the Inquisition, inflation, the decline of once-successful centers such as Ghent and Leiden, and the loss of local influence in government and the courts. By the time Charles announced his abdication in Brussels, the Habsburg political system in the Netherlands was on the brink of collapse. Within a few more years the nexus of religious, social, and political issues pushed the Netherlands over the brink into 80 years of civil, religious, and national war (Koenigsberger, 1990: 355–8). The independence of the northern provinces as the Republic of the United Provinces was recognized by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

Netherlandish obedience to Charles V was not due primarily to his being emperor and king of Spain but to the perception of him as their own territorial duke. Personal loyalty to Charles and his failure to establish a true monarchy in this small, diverse territory under Spanish suzerainty are significant reasons for the difficulties encountered in the next generation by his Spanish son, Philip II, whom the Netherlanders regarded as a foreigner (he did not speak French or Flemish). In France the Huguenots could be depicted as renders of national unity and fomenters of civil war because their opposition to religious repression often related to the crown. In contrast, the Dutch Calvinists, in opposing religious repression stemming from a foreign occupying power, Spain, could be perceived as patriots because Spain was also politically and economically repressive.

Charles V's sincere desire to root out heresy was never in doubt but it was difficult to realize with thoroughness and consistency. Provincial and local authorities, for the most part devout Catholics, balked at anti-heresy legislation which might override the rights and privileges of their customs. The merchant and maritime cities had commercial relations with German and Baltic areas which had accepted the

Reformation, and hence opposed measures against Protestant merchants from those areas. Access to the freedom of the seas also meant extended contact with Reformation influences in England and France.

"La secte Lutheriane"

The Antwerp Augustinians were referred to as "the Lutheran sect" as early as 1522. Variations of this description thereafter occurred frequently in government documents and thereby suggested, mistakenly, a unified movement. The government's perception of an organized Lutheran movement may have been in the eye of the beholder, but it nevertheless led to repressive activities designed to enforce the edict of Worms. The laity were forbidden to attend unauthorized sermons, and "secret assemblies" were strictly prohibited. As a result the early evangelicals in the Netherlands were forced underground; they met in small groups in "safe houses" and in fields outside the towns. These clandestine meetings were described as "schools," perhaps because outsiders perceived them as places where heresy was taught. The activities at these meetings included Bible study, doctrinal instruction, and at times preaching. In the Flemish countryside interested villagers and sometimes also clerics met after mass at local taverns to discuss biblical texts. It is not surprising that in this context a certain conviviality developed which could prompt ditties mocking the pope, mass, and purgatory. Anna Bijns, a Catholic poet, complained that "Scripture is read in the tavern, the Gospel in one hand and the tankard in the other" (Duke 1992: 152).

The quandary for the early evangelicals was how to maintain their understanding of the public proclamation of the gospel without recourse to separatism. They were well aware of Luther's opposition to sectarianism, but it was clear that it was impossible to install evangelical clergy in the churches and the Inquisition was making evangelical existence itself precarious. The Dutch evangelicals were being driven by persecution toward separatism.

Dissident Movements

Prevented from implementing reform of the established church, there were evangelicals who now found attractive the proclamation of Melchior Hoffmann that true believers should separate from the world and embrace Christ through believer's baptism. In the summer of 1530

Hoffmann returned to East Friesland and was soon baptizing adults in Emden. His followers spread his teachings and apocalyptic expectation (Deppermann, 1987: 74–75) through the Low Countries in the following, year gaining two future leaders in the process: Obbe Philips of Leeuwarden and Jan Mathijs of Haarlem.

Mathijs's role in the Münster disaster has already been discussed (see chapter 8). It is of interest to note that Mathijs's activity in Amsterdam in late 1533 appears to have been stimulated by Rothmann's writing *Confession of the Two Sacraments*. It seems that, rather than the Dutch prophets stimulating Anabaptism in Münster, "it is more precise to say that the radical turn of the Münster Reformation ignited Anabaptism in the Netherlands" (Stayer, 1990: 136). The attempts at mass migration from the Netherlands to Münster occurred in the context of interpreting the social and religious misery of the Netherlands as signs of the world's end and Mathijs's proclamation of Münster as the New Jerusalem. Most of the thousands who set out for Münster were disbanded by the authorities, who confiscated their possessions but did not slaughter them. Münster's militantism was increasingly questioned by Dutch Anabaptists, led in particular by Obbe Philips whose followers embraced non-violence. The Münster legacy lived on, however, in the violent activities of the "Batenburgers" who, under the leadership of Jan van Batenburg (1495–1538), the "new David," plundered and destroyed churches and monasteries in the northeastern Netherlands. At the beginning the Batenburgers believed in the destruction of the godless in preparation for the imminent establishment of God's reign on earth. After Jan's execution this sect degenerated into a robber band which was more criminal than religious.

The disarray of Dutch Anabaptism was addressed by Menno Simons (1496–1561). A parish priest from West Frisia influenced by evangelical ideas about Scripture and the sacraments, Menno was motivated by the tragedy of Münster to abandon his parish in 1536 and devote his energies to leading the Anabaptists. His *Foundation Book* (1540) outlined his communitarian creed for a church under the cross. He worked in Holland (1541–3) and then in East Frisia around Emden. The name "Mennonites" was coined in 1544 for his followers by the Polish Reformer Jan Laski, pastor of the Lutheran church at Emden. Laski thought these quietist Anabaptists should be spared harsh persecution. After Menno's death his followers split over the degree of discipline required for discipleship. By now the emphasis had shifted from eschatological expectation to the holiness of the community exemplified by strict morality. The stress on church discipline which resulted provoked divisive controversies such as that over whether a spouse is

required to shun an excommunicated husband or wife. The discipline designed to preserve the separatist Anabaptist congregations as exemplars of the invisible church of the elect contributed to schism as elders excommunicated each other. In the years following the independence of the northern provinces, the Mennonites adjusted successfully to the commercial culture. "Former gestures of hostility to the broader society, like not carrying arms and not swearing oaths, became the harmless sectarian distinctives of tolerated nonconformists" (Stayer, 1990: 142).

The Rise of Calvinism and the Spanish Reaction

In the 1540s religious repression was stepped up and reinvigorated by Catholic progress in the Counter-Reformation. The Catholic theologians at Louvain issued a brief statement of orthodox faith (1544) and then a detailed list of forbidden books (1546). The central government bolstered the Inquisition and increased the severity of its edicts. A decree of 1550 stated: "No one was to print, transcribe, reproduce, keep, conceal, sell, buy, or give any book or writing of Martin Luther, Johannes Oecolampadius, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Jean Calvin, or any other heretic condemned by Holy Church" (Iserloh et al. 1986: 398). The emperor forbade any gathering which allowed a follower of such heretics to speak and decreed that any man found guilty of doing so be killed by the sword. Guilty women were to be burned at the stake unless they recanted, in which case they were to be buried alive. The majority – at least 1,500 – of those executed between 1540 and 1570 were Anabaptists (Stayer 1990: 141). The intent of the imperial decree was equally to root out Calvinism which was just beginning to spread into the Netherlands in spite of severe persecution.

The incursion of Calvinism into the Netherlands focused in the commercial area of Amsterdam and the Flemish area influenced by French congregations. The southern center of the Reformed movement was Antwerp. The northern center was the East Frisian harbor town of Emden, which became known as the "Geneva of the north" and the "mother church" of Dutch Calvinism (Schilling 1991: 46). Some of these early Calvinists clearly lacked the better part of valor and paid the ultimate price. At the Tournai cathedral on Christmas 1554, Bertrand Le Blas grabbed the eucharistic host from the hands of the priest in protest against "papist idolatry." Before being burned, both his hands were struck off. At Ghent, Georges Kathelyne was executed in 1555 for interrupting a Dominican preacher and calling him a false prophet.

That most people attracted to Calvinism were far more circumspect is indicated by the numerous printings in Dutch of anti-Nicodemite tracts including Calvin's treatises (Marnef 1994: 148). Many of those attracted to Calvinism who eschewed both Nicodemism and martyrdom fled abroad, finding asylum in Geneva, Strasbourg, Frankfurt, and London as well as Wesel and Emden.

The refugee church in London submitted a statement of their faith (*Compendium doctrinae*) to Edward VI in 1551 which was translated into Dutch for use in the Netherlands. This was soon replaced by the Belgic confession of 1561. The main author of the Belgic confession was Guy de Bray (1523–67), known as the "Reformer of the Netherlands." Converted through reading the Bible, he joined the exiles in London in 1548. In 1552 he returned to lead the Calvinist churches. Like the earlier Lutherans in Germany and the Huguenots in France, he and his colleagues hoped to convince the authorities that Calvinism was neither seditious nor fanatical. To this end he composed a confession of faith (1559) which closely followed the French confession of that year. Virtually all of its first printing, done in Rouen in 1561, was destroyed. Another printing at Lille was translated into Dutch and printed in Emden in 1562. The original French version, accompanied by an address to the king, was presented to Philip II in 1562. Affirming loyalty to the govenment, the address also clearly stated that rather than deny Christ they would "offer our backs to be beaten, our tongues to be cut out, our mouths to be bridled, and our whole bodies to be burned, because we know that whoever will follow Christ must take up his cross and deny himself" (Cochrane 1966: 186). Philip was only too pleased to oblige. As he assured the pope in 1566, "rather than suffer the least damage to religion and the service of God, I would lose all my states and a hundred lives, if I had them: for I do not propose nor desire to be ruler of heretics" (Koenigsberger 1994: 180–1). When Valenciennes, where de Bray was preacher, was captured in 1567 he was executed. By then, however, the religious solidarity of the Calvinists had been secured by the Belgic confession, accepted by a synod at Antwerp in 1566.

The Belgic confession facilitated the development of an alliance between the nobles and the Reformed church of the Netherlands against Spanish Catholicism. The nobles desired independence from Spain, and the Reformed desired independence from the papacy. Thus article 36 affirmed the duty of citizens to obey the magistrates "in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God," and the duty of magistrates to "protect the sacred ministry, and . . . prevent all idolatry and false worship" (read Roman Catholicism!). The article ends with a

condemnation of the errors of the Anabaptists and all others "who reject the higher powers and magistrates" (Cochrane 1966: 217–18).

The confession also made an addition to the Calvinist understanding of the church (Kingdon 1994: 21) which later proved troublesome: discipline. Article 29 added church discipline to the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments as a third mark of identification of the true church. Crew (1978: 58) argues that discipline, embodied by the pastors and the people, was not merely a means for the coherent organization of the Reformed churches. Discipline, especially of the pastors, was a witness against both the magical aura of the Catholic priest and the bizarre and charismatic attraction of the sectarian preachers. "The new pastors were to act as educators, administrators and organizers; but most of all they were to be witnesses to the purity of Reformed worship in the face of Catholic paganism and sectarian Protestantism." The new church was to be authenticated by preaching and exemplary morality. The Belgic confession was adopted by the synod of Wesel (1568) and the synod of Emden (1571). Since 1619 it has been the doctrinal standard of the Dutch Reformed churches in Holland, Belgium, and America.

Political resistance to Spanish rule coalesced around William of Nassau and Orange (1533–84), the governor of Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht. In 1565 a league of 300 nobles petitioned Philip's regent, his sister Margaret of Parma, to end the Inquisition and soften the harsh religious edicts. Their disdainful dismissal as "beggars," an epithet quickly embraced by the resistance, prompted widespread iconclastic rebellions and destruction of churches. In response Philip sent in the duke of Alva (1508–82) and 20,000 troops. Alva, the "Iron Duke," entered Brussels on 22 August 1567 convinced that only a reign of terror would subjugate the Netherlanders. In short order Alva's "Council of Troubles," known as the "Council of Blood" to the Netherlanders, arrested hundreds, executed thousands including nobles suspected of heresy, and levied excessive taxation.

The resistance garnered sympathy and some funds but no effective help from the English Queen Elizabeth, nor was their appeal to the German princes successful; potential Huguenot support discussed among the French Protestant princes at La Rochelle (1571) with Louis of Nassau (Kingdon 1988: 185) was rendered moot by the St Bartholomew's Day massacre. William of Orange and his brother Louis thus depended upon his northern provinces where Calvinism was making great gains. From there the famous "Sea Beggars" raided Spanish commerce, seized coastal cities, and even defeated the Spanish fleet in the Zuiderzee. The determination of the northern provinces to

resist the Spanish was indicated by their willingness to open the dikes against Spanish soldiers. It was during this struggle that Dutch patriotism and Calvinism merged.

The military struggle waged back and forth. In 1580 Philip declared William an outlaw and offered a reward for his capture dead or alive. This had the effect of endearing William even more to his people. At the meeting of the Estates-General in Delft in December 1580, William vindicated his honor in the face of Philip's personal attack by publicly renouncing the overlordship of the Spanish king. It was the first practical application of the argument of the Huguenot tract *Vindicae contra tyrannos* (1579) that people have the moral right and obligation to remove a sovereign derelict in his royal duties (Grimm 1973: 363; Garnett 1994: lxx, 137–8). The consequent Union of Utrecht included the seven northern provinces of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Groningen, Friesland, and Overyssel.

William of Orange was assassinated by a supporter of Philip in July 1584. William had been unable to maintain the unity of the southern and northern provinces; his son, Maurice of Nassau, continued to lead the revolt of the northern provinces. The economic strength of the northern provinces, based on their seafaring skills, was supplemented by the personal and financial capital of numerous religious refugees from the south. It is estimated that upwards of 100,000 people fled the southern provinces during the Spanish reconquest and re-Catholization. This was a series of emigrations that had economic as well as religious motivation. But whatever the mix of motivations the experience "can only have served to reinforce the Reformed faith of those who undertook it." The religious refugees understood themselves in terms of the election and exodus imagery of the Hebrew Bible, and viewed their successes as evidence of God's providence and their participation in the New Covenant. The social experience of exodus and diaspora which Reformed merchants and ministers "endured to an even greater extent than most of their coreligionists, was of paramount importance in providing Calvinism with an international character" (Grell 1994: 257–8, 273). It has been suggested that the Calvinist form of the Reformation was more amenable to the endemic sacramentarianism of the pre-Reformation Netherlands than the Lutheran form with its emphasis on the real presence in the Lord's Supper (Williams 1992: 96–9). Probably more important was Calvinism's greater dynamism and versatility rooted in sound organization and an international solidarity that transcended national and regional boundaries (Marnef 1994: 158).

In 1601 the Estates-General chartered the Dutch East India Company, the basis for the development of the United Provinces as a great

colonial power. The Twelve Years' Truce in 1609 enabled the north to further establish its political and economic independence. When Spain resumed the war, it had already suffered the disastrous defeat of its Great Armada (1588) and the Dutch were now well able to hold their own. In 1648 at the Treaty of Westphalia the independence of the Republic of the United Provinces was internationally recognized.

A Godly Society?

Compared to the fate of the Huguenot brethren in France, the Calvinist Reformation in the Dutch Republic was certainly successful. The Reformers had won a providential victory over great odds. In the 1576 treaty uniting the provinces of Holland and Zeeland, William of Orange received the mandate to "maintain and preserve the exercise of the Reformed evangelical religion, causing to cease and desist the exercise of other religions, which are contrary to the Gospel" (Tracy 1993: 487). The former "church under the cross" was now the public church with aspiration to be the new establishment. Success, however, is sometimes more difficult to manage than persecution. If faith is vindicated by suffering (Calvin, *Institutes* III, 8: 7; 1: 707), what is the effect of prosperity?

The answer for the ministers was to form a godly society through church discipline, the third mark of the church. The core of church discipline was denial of access to the sacrament of communion. Here the ministers soon discovered they did not have a free hand. William of Orange had resisted turning the revolt against Spain into a religious crusade, and he strove to create a tolerant environment in the Dutch Republic. As a consequence, Lutherans, Mennonites, various sects, and even Catholics all managed to provide their own religious services. Church discipline is difficult to carry out in a pluralist context.

Even worse in the eyes of the ministers was the fact that a large segment of the population did not become communing members of the Reformed church even though they attended services. These "libertines," as the Calvinists called them, clearly lacked enthusiasm for the newly established religious institutions. Indeed, the "libertines" did not hesitate to use Reformation slogans of "Scripture alone," "faith alone," and "evangelical freedom" against the disciplinary concerns of the Calvinists. The "libertines" associated church discipline with Catholicism and resented this "remnant of the papal yoke." They had not fought to remove the Spanish Inquisition in order to have it replaced by a Genevan one (Kaplan 1994; Pettegree 1994).

Freedom from oppression also allowed various theological controversies within Calvinism to bloom, most notably that between the Gomarists and the Arminians over predestination which raged for years until settled at the synod of Dort (1618–19). All these thorns in the flesh of the Reformed church were nourished by the persistent attachment not only to provincial but even local and urban autonomies. National and religious unity was less a conviction than a necessity when survival demanded it (Rowan and Harline 1994: 78–9; Tracy 1993: 489, 508). The 1591 proposal of a church order was not approved by the provincial states. As a consequence an unusual degree of religious liberty developed in the Dutch Republic, not by design but by the failure of church and state "to agree on new premises for unity, despite the best efforts of both" (Tracy 1993: 490).

Suggestions for Further Reading

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