

How North and South in the Low Countries Switched Religions

Catholic and Protestant

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[W I L L E M F R I J H O F F]

'The Protestant South and the Catholic North'. It could have been the title of a book printed 450 years ago, just before the Dutch Revolt. But it would have contradicted currently held views about North and South. The common assumption is that the Protestant North rose up against the anti-Protestant policies of the Spanish king and his representatives and that the villain of the piece was the Duke of Alva with his Council of Blood. In their struggle the Northern rebels, united by the Union of Utrecht in 1579, won independence as a Protestant commonwealth, as opposed to the Southern Union of Arras which remained Roman Catholic and loyal to Spain. It was also at this time that the North laid the foundations of intellectual independence and freedom of religious enquiry, which would lead to an unprecedented flowering of the arts and sciences. The South saw itself subjected to the combined yoke of throne and altar while the North tasted the fruits of political democracy and spiritual independence. It was there that the Reformation became the basis for what recent historians have called the Radical Enlightenment, that process of 'demystification' in which magical thinking and the spiritual power of the church were replaced by modern rationalism.

In the divided Netherlands, religious polarisation became the basis of two opposing self-images. The South remained Catholic. It even felt itself to be uniformly Catholic. The South's Catholicism became one of the factors in the Belgian Revolt of 1830 and for a long time national politics revolved around it. In the North, Protestantism in all its variants, even the most orthodox, still sees itself as a religion of freedom. It opposes the oppressiveness of Catholic dogma, hierarchy and morality under which it believes the South is suffering, even though it no longer describes the Pope as the Anti-Christ. On the other hand, the South enjoys a quality of life that it would never wish to exchange for the sombre, strict and hypocritical Protestant culture of the North. At least, that was how things stood until public life was secularised and the system of social 'pillars' came to an end after the 1960s.



Religion or culture?

The contrast between a Catholic South and Protestant North is probably the best-known and most deeply-rooted distinction between the two halves of the Low Countries, but it is also one of the most surprising. After all, the North is far from being uniformly Protestant. On the contrary, entire districts in North and South Holland as well as the inland provinces have remained predominantly Catholic, and the big cities have always harboured their own solidly Catholic minorities. Merchants and ministers dominate the classic self-image of the North, but while the minister defined morality it was the merchant who governed society and the merchant was not necessarily a Protestant. He was often Catholic or Jewish. According to the most recent religious survey of Europe, published in 2003, at 31% the Roman Catholic community in the Netherlands is 50% larger than the 21% of the combined Protestant communities. The rest of the population is Moslem, Jewish, non-churchgoing or belongs to some other religious group. In strictly numerical terms, the North seems to have become a Catholic country.

Protestant Cemetery,
Sint-Maria-Horebeke,
Flanders. Photo by Jonas
Lampens.

Is the opposite true of the South? There are certainly more Protestant communities now than in the eighteenth century before the French occupation (1792-95), and there have always been a few more or less clandestine communities 'under the cross', but their numbers were nothing like that of the Catholics in the North. Although Protestant missionaries (Van Gogh!) have since rediscovered the South, and Protestant churches there have grown exponentially, it is still universally regarded as a Catholic country. Although liberalism and other ideologies have made inroads into the moral primacy of the Roman Catholic religion, the cultural base remains 'Catholic'.

And yet ... Although numerically the North may have become more Catholic than before, any self-respecting Catholic Northerner will invariably point out the Calvinist bias of his culture. Here, the contrast between Catholic and Protestant cuts across the stereotypes of the sombre, gaunt, plain-spoken and deadly serious Northerner and the refined, Burgundian *bon vivant*, flexible and occasionally hypocritical Southerner. The average Northern Catholic does not associate himself with the baroque South; rather he sees himself as a Catholic with a Protestant tinge. In their struggle since the 1960s to modernise the Catholic Church against the moral conservatism of the Vatican, Dutch Catholics invariably point to their unique history which has brought them into the sphere of Calvinist culture: the work ethic, rejection of hypocrisy, moral purity, individualism, sobriety in the expression of one's faith, with a liturgy close to one's everyday experience. In their contacts with Catholics from other countries, Dutch Catholics often feel decidedly Protestant, and certainly non-Vatican. The fact that they previously lived through a century of militant ultramontanism, as unashamedly loyal to Rome as the South, is now brushed aside as a product of a particular political and social period and no longer relevant. After all, at that time they needed an international protector in order to free themselves from Protestant domination.

A protestant soul?

In the sixteenth century Western European Christendom split in two. On one side were those who, with however many reservations, remained loyal to the established church. Their opponents described them scornfully as Romanists or Romish, as did, for instance, the Protestant mayor of Antwerp, Marnix van Sint-Aldegonde (1540-1598), in his satire *The Beehive of the Holy Roman Church* (De Byencorf der H. Roomsche Kercke, 1569). Those 'Roman' Catholics snapped back by calling the Protestants 'heretics' or, in the North until the 18th century, *geuzen* [beggars]. On the other side were those who *protested* against Rome's pretensions and claims to absolute truth. From Luther and Zwingli to Menno Simons and Calvin they wanted a more or less radical reform of the church. But the Roman Catholic Church also had its reformers. In opposition to the Protestant Reformation they almost immediately set up their own reformation, the Counter-Reformation, or what is now considered a more appropriate term since they ran in parallel, the 'Catholic' Reformation. The call for a better trained ministry with higher moral awareness, and a church organisation which was less obsessed with money found a response in the resolutions of the reforming Council of Trent (1543-1563). Their implementation finally began a process of internal reform.

Already early in the sixteenth century, 'Protestant' became the collective term for all those who wanted church reform without the Pope. Adopted by the reformed churches to mark their opposition to the Catholics, it was a political and public catchword that said more about what people disliked than what they actually wanted. Protestants were the persecuted victims of the Catholics, like the Huguenots in France, the Lutherans in Austria or the Waldensians in Italy. But on days of prayer for protection against disasters or war, the Dutch state was reminded of its Catholic soul. The designation 'Protestant' was what united many communities in this deeply divided land and, when in the nineteenth century the Roman Catholics also demanded their place in Christian society, confessing Protestants started to call themselves – somewhat tautologically – 'Protestant-Christian', a term that is still used among the more traditional or orthodox sections of Dutch Protestantism.

The process of national image formation has tried to project the North as the original Protestant country, the cradle of the Reformation in the Netherlands. It was intended to underline and strengthen the Protestant character of the Dutch nation in the face of the struggle for emancipation by Catholics and other religious groups. Yet in the sixteenth century it was in fact the South which initially and most fiercely embraced Protestantism, first in its Lutheran and later in its Calvinist form. The iconoclastic riots of 1566 began in Steenvoorde, now a commune in French Flanders, and spread through the rest of Flanders before reaching the Northern provinces. Even after the Revolt the North remained Catholic for a considerable time. Calvinism progressed in fits and starts and usually only because of the influence of preachers who had fled from the South and were the real Catholic-hunters. Only in the final decades of the sixteenth century did Calvinism become the dominant and official church in the newly independent North, and also briefly in Flanders and Brabant in the Calvinist urban republics of Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels and Mechelen, until the Duke of Parma restored Catholic order in 1585.

In the North there was no question of a theocracy. Although reformed, the civil government insisted on retaining responsibility for a republic which was religiously divided. They did not tolerate religious coercion, even from the Reformed who thought their claims should be honoured in recognition of their role in the Revolt. It is true that the Reformed church was the only publicly recognised and privileged church, but in the private sphere other faiths were tolerated, including Catholicism. So long as Christendom, the basis of Christian society, was not directly attacked, all churches could continue to profess their faith quietly behind the closed doors of private dwellings. Some places were freer than others, but nobody in the North was persecuted solely for matters of conscience.

And yet the North called itself Protestant. The Reformed communities saw themselves as a new, divinely-appointed second Israel, "Neêrlands Israël". This sense of Protestant nationhood had much to do with the enormous influx of refugees from the Southern Netherlands after 1585. At least 100,000 of these, and probably more, constituted between 5% and 10% of the North's total population, and up to 50% locally in places like Leiden. However, these immigrants were by no means all Calvinists. They could be Lutheran or Baptist, like the parents of the prince of Dutch poets, Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679), or even Catholic, since economic motives were certainly as powerful as religion. The Mechelen shipowner and herring trader Johan van der Veken (1548-1616) was

Catholic Beguinage,
Amsterdam.
Photo by Jonas Lampens.



related to the leading families in Antwerp but moved to the Reformed city of Rotterdam. He was one of the founders of the Rotterdam Stock Exchange, and with a fortune of at least 900,000 guilders he lived in the largest house in the city and was by far its wealthiest resident. In fact he was one of the three richest men in the entire Republic. But throughout his life he remained a practising Catholic who actively supported his co-religionists and in his country house at Capelle built and funded a private chapel with a full-time priest.

A Catholic bulwark?

So we should not fall back too quickly on clichés. In the South, the restoration of Catholicism proceeded faster and more forcefully than in the North. When the Twelve Year Truce was agreed in 1609 and Northerners were again allowed to travel to the South, an edict was issued strictly forbidding the spreading of heresy. But in practice the authorities were slow to prosecute those who transgressed. Just as in the North, harsh words and the occasional conviction could not disguise the fact that in general people disliked persecuting their fellow citizens, neighbours and relations or their fellow guild members. Contrary to what the language of the edicts would lead one to expect, after the gruesome death of Anneke Utenhove, an Anabaptist who was buried alive in 1597 on the express instructions of the Archduke, no more heretics were executed. Antwerp

in particular was concerned that the persecution of heretics would damage the economic interests of the city. And in both North and South, the fight against heresy was tempered by the fear of reprisals against co-religionists over the border.

However, the South did go its own way. The prince-bishopric of Liège naturally remained entirely Catholic. But it was the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, whom Philip II appointed to govern the Southern Netherlands in 1598, who set out to be recognised as Catholic rulers in sharp contrast to the Protestant North. For them Catholicism was not merely a set of values but a means of giving the South a clear identity as a bulwark of Catholicism. They made every effort to achieve a theocratic ideal of a homogeneous Catholic community with renewed discipline, morality and spirituality. This re-Catholicisation became a grand programme that also re-energised numerous sectors of the economy: the building of monumental churches with flamboyantly Catholic decoration (such as the Jesuit church in Antwerp which cost an absolute fortune), the foundation of new monasteries (Jesuit, Capuchin, Augustinian, Carmelite, Oratorian, as well as numerous sister convents), the reform of ancient abbeys, high standards of training for priests in new seminaries, the reorganisation of education (in particular the colleges and the University of Leuven), the deliberate resourcing of saints' cults and the promoting of major centres of pilgrimage such as Halle and the brand new Scherpenheuvel (Montaigu) in 1606. Seminaries were also set up for missionaries to Protestant countries like the Dutch Republic, England, Scotland and Ireland.

The Jesuits in the South, with many recruits from the North and led by razor-sharp polemicists like Charles Scribani and Cornelius Hazart, organised an intellectual, theological and moral offensive designed to revive Catholicism in the South and provide support and encouragement to Catholics in the North. Altarpieces and paintings from the workshop of Peter Paul Rubens and his pupils gave form to a world of Catholic imagery which in its emphasis on the sacred, even heavenly, significance of the body and the merits of virtue distinguished itself from the sober Protestant emphasis on the Word, its rejection of merit, and its fear of God's judgement. In this way, a social and mental framework was created that for centuries made the Southern Netherlands a homogeneous 'Catholic nation'.

So the North's Protestant self-image gradually came to stand in opposition to a South that increasingly felt itself to be Catholic. When they first split in the late sixteenth century, they therefore traded places. It explains why the South for so long displayed the grim-faced traits that we now associate with Calvinism while the Protestant North showed sometimes surprising tendencies towards ecumenism and Catholicity. This brings the religious dimension of the development itself into the debate. Is it not therefore more of a cultural than a religious distinction? After all, cultural anthropology has shown that every country constructs its own North and South. In our hemisphere the North intuitively represents coldness and the South warmth. In the Netherlands there is also a cold North and a warm South. Catholicism, which dominates in the south, represents the smells of home, *laissez-faire*, high spirits and warmth while Protestantism in the North stands for individualism, the work ethic, prudishness and coolness. Carnivals, pilgrimages and festivities are Catholic and belong in the South; strict observance of the Lord's Day, moral agonising and teaching the Bible in school are Protestant and characterise the North.



After 1815

Emile Claus, *Girls at their first Communion*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 82 x 117 cm. Collection Dexia, Brussels.

The rise of the antithesis between Catholic and Protestant is therefore closely tied up with the self-definition of North and South as separate cultures and subsequently as separate states. Religious belief became a hallmark of national identity. Although religious minorities in the North played an active role in the Patriot movement of the 1780s and the Batavian Revolution of 1795, Protestantism did not become an issue. During the eighteenth century a broadly Christian form of religiosity had developed within the Protestant churches, which was moderate and enlightened. This had watered down the Calvinist nature of the official church to a broad-based Protestant culture that gradually turned the original Protestant *state* into a Protestant *nation* with a sense of solidarity in which, in fact, only the Catholics felt uncomfortable. In that sense the Dutch nation in the nineteenth century was more 'Protestant' than the old Reformed republic had ever been. But in the uniformly Catholic South matters were very different. A conservative movement led by popular orators and intellectuals such as Hendrik Van der Noot and F.X. de Feller whipped up the population to regard traditional Catholicism as the hallmark of the nation and to defend it against the Enlightenment and the supporters of political modernisation. Resistance to the French invasion with its anticlerical radicalism revolved around the Catholic clergy who, because of the political circumstances, became increasingly conservative and ultramontane.

The short-lived United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815-1830) again pushed relationships to the limit. The two communities were thrown back on their carefully nurtured individual identities: in the North, religious plurality but with

Protestant dominance, and in the South a Catholic monoculture, though with deep-seated differences between an arch-conservative hierarchy with theocratic tendencies and a liberal political and cultural elite that wanted to subject the Catholic Church to the state. In 1815 the reactionary bishop of Ghent, Maurice de Broglie, began a successful crusade against the new constitution because to him its acknowledgement of the freedom of religion clashed with the legitimate claim of the Catholic Church to absolute truth. So Catholicism became entangled in the politics of identity in the Southern Netherlands and inflamed a reflex reaction of Protestant identity in the North. The clash between Catholic and Protestant became a weapon in the political conflict and ultimately one of the decisive elements in the separation of North and South. The Protestant North and Catholic South could simply no longer co-exist.

The unnatural alliance between the Southern Catholics and Liberals in 1828 meant that unionism became the dominant political formula after the new Belgian state was established in 1830. But after Belgian independence was recognised in 1839 the alliance fell apart and after 1857 it ended definitively as Liberals and Catholics took up sharply opposed positions. Clerical ultramontanism and political conservatism worked hand in hand. Worse still, the Catholic leaders in the South with their baroque legacySS looked down on their humble coreligionists in the North, even though they had absolutely no justification for harking back nostalgically to the *Ancien Régime*. On the contrary, the Northern Catholics, who represented nearly 40% of the population, were trying to build a new position as a modern national movement, equal in status to the Protestants. This did not always run smoothly, as was shown by the Protestant April Movement of 1853 against the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy. But in spite of the 'Protestant character of the nation' they were ultimately, in L.J. Rogier's famous formulation, 'reborn in freedom'. ■

Pieter Brueghel the Elder,
The Preaching of St. John,
1566. Oil on panel, 95 x
160.5 cm. Szépművészeti
Múzeum, Budapest.
Was the painter portraying
a contemporary protestant
preacher?

Translated by Chris Emery

