



**Guido Marnef.** *Antwerp in the Age of Reformation: Underground Protestantism in a Commercial Metropolis 1550-1577.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. x + 304 S. \$48.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5169-8.

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## G. Marnef: Antwerp in the Age of Reformation

In a letter of 29 February 1568 the duke of Alva described Antwerp as “a Babylon, confusion and receptacle of all sects indifferently and as the town most frequented by pernicious people”. This hostile judgment shows that non-Catholic religious movements as Calvinism, Lutheranism and Anabaptism were thriving in Antwerp at that time. The rise and oppression of Protestantism in Antwerp in the later sixteenth century is the subject of Guido Marnef’s book. His starting point is 1550 when the Protestant movement formed fully independent counterchurches. His book concludes in 1577 when persecution provisionally came to an end. Religious persecution gave this period its unity. In his next book Marnef hopes to examine the period of the Antwerp Calvinist republic, which succeeded the period of persecution.

In his book Marnef combines religious and social history. He is not so much interested in theological details as in the socio-economic background of the Protestants. Great emphasis is placed on the influence of the metropolitan environment on the growth of Antwerp Protestantism. He examines the channels of civic sociability and the organisation of the underground churches in order to explain the popularity of Calvinism.

Marnef’s sources are mostly indirect. The underground Calvinist and Anabaptist churches left very few traces in the archives, so he had to base his research on the archive material of its enemies, the persecuting authorities, and the exile churches. He used archives from many countries: Belgium, The Netherlands, England, Germany, France, Switzerland, Spain and Italy.

Based on his findings he compiled a prosopographical database that includes 1,101 persons: Calvinists, Anabaptists, Lutherans, other unspecified Protestants and offenders against the edicts on heresy who were persecuted in the period 1550-1577. The fact that the database is not included is one of the few shortcomings of this book.<sup>(1)</sup> This and other material was left out when Marnef’s original Ph.D. dissertation, defended in Leuven in 1991, was cut to serve as a basis for ‘Antwerp in the Age of Reformation’.

The book consists of three parts. In the first part the urban context is sketched. The urban environment had a decisive influence on the development of Protestantism. In the commercial metropolis Antwerp the population was relatively mobile, which stimulated the spread of new ideas. Many immigrants arrived every day, who were not integrated in traditional structures and were therefore more open to Protestant religion. Furthermore, the relatively autonomous position of the city administration in relation to the central government stimulated the growth of Protestantism: the city officials were against a too fierce persecution of the heretics for they believed it would harm their commercial interests. Marnef proceeds to describe the channels of civic sociability which affected the spread of Reformed ideas such as the chambers of rhetoric, the education system and the printing press. Finally the Catholic church is examined. There were too few parishes in Antwerp and the priests were badly educated. The Catholic church increasingly failed to appeal to the Antwerp believers.

The second part of the book describes the establish-

ment and growth of the Protestant churches, culminating in the wonderyear 1566-1567. A Dutch and a French underground Calvinist congregation were formed around 1550. They became part of an international network of Calvinist churches comprising London, Emden, Geneva and cities in the German empire. Antwerp was also very important for the regional dissemination of Calvinism in Flanders, Brabant and the Walloon districts. Next to the Calvinist churches, an Anabaptist underground congregation was established. The struggle for dominance within the Protestant movement between Calvinism and Anabaptism was very acute in Antwerp, for both religious tendencies were well represented in the city. The Lutherans, finally, did not establish their own congregation but conformed to Catholic church in externals.

In 1566 the persecution of Protestants provisionally came to an end. Calvinistic pressure, mass open-air preaching and the iconoclastic riots forced the local authorities into a more lenient attitude toward the Protestant churches against the will of the central authority. The Calvinist underground community became a publicly recognized church. This change had a profound effect on social recruitment of the Calvinist congregations. Before the wonderyear the bulk of the membership came from craftsmen, workers and lower tradesmen. During the wonderyear, however, many property owning merchants, lawyers and persons with intellectual professions became leading figures of the Calvinist movement. As a result of the public recognition of the Calvinist Church, they could profess their Calvinist sympathies and no longer had to fear for their commercial interests and their social and political position. Religious tolerance, however, did not extend to the Anabaptists. Even so, they enjoyed greater freedom during the wonderyear than ever before.

Part three deals with the years 1567-77, in which Protestantism was again driven underground. The regent Margaret of Parma managed to quell the rebellion in March 1567. She pursued a moderate policy towards the rebels and did not infringe upon the traditional privileges of Antwerp. Her successor Alva, however, did not respect the autonomy of city but imposed several central institutions, such as the Council of Troubles, to punish the rebels and restore the Catholic church. Next to punitive action, positive measures were taken for the restoration of the Catholic faith: the appointment of a bishop, the reshaping of the school system and the proclaiming

of the general pardon. Government action, however, did not succeed in stamping out Protestantism in Antwerp. The Calvinist congregations became mobile underground churches again. Despite the persecution, the Calvinist churches were well organised. They received help from the international network of Calvinist refugee churches. The Anabaptists were not so successful as the Calvinists. In the face of persecution they showed no unity, but were greatly weakened by numerous internal disputes and lack of a sufficient organisation. The Anabaptist brotherhood, contrary to the Calvinist community, could not fall back on an international system of refugee churches.

Marnef concludes with a sociocultural portrait of the Protestant community. Influenced by the work of Natalie Zemon Davies, he discerns several factors which had an effect on the occupational recruitment of Calvinism: a high degree of literacy, occupations with specific skills, geographical mobility and a low degree of integration into traditional guildlife. He proceeds to connect Calvinists and their socio-economic background with geography. Many of the Calvinists persecuted in the wonderyear lived in the financial and economic centre of Antwerp. After 1567, however, they resided in more modest and peripheral houses. The Anabaptists, by contrast, never lived in the city centre but always in the periphery. This geographical distribution was a reflection of their position as a persecuted minority in the margin of urban society.

One of the most important conclusions of 'Antwerp in the Age of Reformation' is the shifting social background of the Calvinist congregation. During times of oppression membership of the Calvinist church came from the crafts sector and lower classes. During the wonderyear, however, the property owning middle-class took a leading part in the Calvinist movement. Marnef's book fits in with the research into middle groups initiated by professor J.J. Woltjer. These religious middle groups were neither adherents of orthodox Catholicism nor resolute followers of Calvin and Luther. Although many members of the middle-class obviously had Protestant sympathies, they only dared to profess their convictions when their commercial and social position was not in danger. This conclusion is only one aspect of this interesting and multidisciplinary study based on elaborative archive material.

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