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On the morning of the first day of July in the year 1523, the Grand Place of Brussels was scene to an unusual event. Before the city's resplendent late Gothic town hall, as crowds gathered, a procession of mendicant monks bearing banners and crosses solemnly entered the square. They were followed by theologians from the University of Leuven, mitred abbots and other high dignitaries of church and state, who assembled on a platform constructed in front of the town hall. Shortly thereafter a young Augustinian monk, dressed in full priestly vestments, was brought out to the platform and made to kneel before an altar placed there. Behind him a Franciscan friar preached a sermon to the assembled onlookers. At the same time a bishop slowly and methodically stripped the Augustinian of his clerical regalia in a solemn act of degradation. Two more Augustinians were brought out to the square to receive the same treatment; all of them underwent their ordeal calmly and without resistance. Having been publicly defrocked, they were then asked by an inquisitor to renounce the errors of which they had been convicted, but they refused. The inquisitor then handed them over to the custody of the worldly authorities in the city hall, who not long afterward brought two of them out again to a pyre erected in the middle of the square and tied them to a stake. Once more they were asked to repudiate their heresies and again they refused, declaring that they wished to die as true Christians. To some observers they almost seemed cheerful. As the flames slowly consumed them, they were heard singing the *Te Deum* and the *Credo*.¹ Their executions were the climax of a powerful moment of high ceremony that symbolically united church, city and state in the purgation of heresy from the Christian community.

What beliefs had brought these two Antwerp Augustinians, Hendrick Vos and Johannes van den Esschen, to their deaths? According to their accusers, the monks were guilty of erroneous thinking on at least sixty-two points of Christian doctrine. The men had declared, among other things,

¹ Cramer and Pijper, *BRN*, pp. 35–36.

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that Holy Scripture was the only true authority for Christian faith, that any ecclesiastical institution not resting on scriptural foundations was improper, that there were only three legitimate sacraments (baptism, communion and confession), that salvation came through the grace of Jesus Christ alone, that the Eucharist should be served to the laity in both kinds, and that purgatory probably did not exist. They had even reportedly told their confessors, “We believe in God and in one Christian church. We do not believe in your church.”² From these assertions the inquisitors had concluded that the men were guilty of Lutheran heresy.³

The executions made a deep impression on contemporary observers. Reading of their deaths in Basel, the humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus commented in a letter to the reformer Huldrych Zwingli in Zurich on the friars’ “exemplary and unheard-of determination,” and even six years after the event he still wrote with evident feeling about it, admiring the composure with which the men reportedly went to their deaths.⁴ The Saxon reformer Martin Luther, upon hearing of the executions of his fellow Augustinians Vos and Van den Esschen, immediately claimed them as martyrs to the cause of reformation, writing a letter of encouragement to Netherlandish evangelicals extolling “those two precious jewels of Christ, Henry and John, [who] have held their lives of no account in Brussels in order that Christ and his Word might be glorified,” and even composing a hymn commemorating their deaths.⁵ The Antwerp monastic house to which Vos and Van den Esschen belonged was part of the Saxon province of the Augustinian Eremite order, Luther’s own province, and it had close ties to Wittenberg.⁶

Between 1518 and 1522 the Antwerp cloister’s prior had been Jacob Praepositus, a sympathizer with Luther, whose evangelical preaching was so deeply felt that he won the admiration of Erasmus and the hostility of inquisitorial authorities.⁷ It was thanks to dissenters like Praepositus, Vos and Van den Esschen that Lutheran and Zwinglian notions of church reform had spread in the early 1520s within the bustling city of Antwerp, the foremost commercial metropolis of the Netherlands. To their sympathizers who witnessed their execution in Brussels it was immediately apparent that Vos and Van den Esschen had died for their faith.⁸ For their

² Cramer and Pijper, *BRN*, pp. 16–17. ³ Cramer and Pijper, *BRN*, pp. 39–43.

⁴ Estes, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, no. 1384, p. 81; Allen, *Opus Epistolarum Des Erasmi Roterdami*, no. 2188, pp. 211–212.

⁵ Tappert, *Luther*, p. 193; Akerboom and Gielis, “A New Song Shall Begin Here . . .”

⁶ Vercruysse, “De Antwerpse augustijnen en de lutherse Reformatie.”

⁷ Vercruysse, “De Antwerpse augustijnen en de lutherse Reformatie,” p. 199.

⁸ Decavele, “Vroege Reformatorische Bedrijvigheid in de Grote Nederlandse Steden,” p. 16.

pains the latter two monks ended up becoming the Netherlands' first Protestant martyrs.

And not only the Netherlands. As a tradition of martyrology developed across Protestant Europe by the mid-sixteenth century, its authors and compilers claimed Hendrick Vos and Johannes van den Esschen as the Reformation's protomartyrs, the first people in Europe to be put to death for espousing identifiably Protestant beliefs.⁹ Almost six years after Martin Luther's initial protest in Wittenberg, two years after his condemnation as a heretic and a rebel at the Diet of Worms, these two Antwerp friars were celebrated by evangelical dissenters as the first Christians to give up their lives for the sake of the movement calling for church reform that he had first ignited.¹⁰

The fact that the two men who were later deemed the Reformation's first martyrs were killed in the Netherlands was not mere chance. The Netherlands were the patrimonial lands of the powerful Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, scion of the house of Habsburg, and here he had a freer political and legal hand to fight heresy than in the German-speaking territories of the Empire where dissident reformers were first active. With great determination Charles mobilized all the considerable juridical apparatus at his disposal to suppress what he and most people regarded as Luther's dangerously heretical ideas in his family lands. Already in 1520 he issued an edict banning the publication of heretical books in the Netherlands, and the University of Leuven had responded by publicly burning some of Luther's writings. More such decrees followed, and in 1522 Charles further authorized the formation of an inquisition to root out and exterminate heresy in the Low Countries. This inquisitorial regime, supported and abetted by the Catholic Church, claimed the lives of Vos and Van den Esschen and approximately two thousand others by the end of the sixteenth century.

The executions of Hendrick Vos and Johannes van den Esschen thus highlight one of the distinctive features of the Reformation in the Low Countries, the very well-organized and sustained judicial persecution it provoked. For at least the first fifty years of their existence the various Protestant movements in the Netherlands were harassed, hounded, pursued and persecuted by a strict government campaign against heresy. More than thirteen hundred people would be executed for heresy in the Netherlands between 1523 and 1566. During the same time in France, a kingdom with nine times the population and equally roiled by religious

⁹ On the evolution of a martyrological tradition in the Protestant Reformation, see Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, pp. 139–196.

¹⁰ Christman, "Early Modern German Historians Confront the Reformation's First Executions," pp. 245–250.

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dissent, about five hundred people would be killed.¹¹ That early and prolonged history of illegality, danger and oppression influenced the character of the various Protestant churches that later won legitimacy in what became the Dutch Republic. In the immediate post-Reformation era Mennonite and Reformed churches continued to harbor ambivalent attitudes toward the society and polity in which they found themselves, and they spent the better part of the seventeenth century slowly settling into the republican regime. Likewise Catholics in the Low Countries found themselves subject to persecution in those regions where Protestants gained ascendancy, suffering banishment, exile, violence and imprisonment. The memory of persecution, suffering and violence remained a long one for all parties involved and deeply colored the various confessions' relationships with each other and with political authority.

Another notable feature of the Netherlandish Reformation this incident reveals was how these religious protests were very much reformations from below.¹² The Habsburg government's reaction to religious dissent was so harsh in part because there was popular sympathy to evangelical ideas evident among the Low Countries' inhabitants; calls for church reform had been echoing in the Netherlands since the beginning of the century, if not earlier, at all levels of society. Vos and Van den Esschen were ordinary monks who harbored and taught risky ideas; they were not men of power or authority. The Netherlandish Reformation was in many respects an oppositional movement, not one imposed by princely or magisterial authority, as was the case in many imperial territories, the Scandinavian monarchies or the kingdom of England. There was deep sympathy within significant sectors of the population for serious religious change and church reform, and it was from those wellsprings of sentiment that reformation first arose. Very few Netherlanders advocated heresy, but many of them saw in the established church considerable room for improvement.

This vignette also underscores another characteristic of the Netherlandish Reformation – its deeply international character. The two friars burned in Brussels had ties to evangelical movements flourishing in the European hinterland far from the Netherlands. Perhaps more so than any other region of northern Europe, the sixteenth-century Low Countries, by virtue of both geography and economy, were broadly open to foreign influence. That the first stirrings of religious dissent were found in Antwerp, the region's commercial hub into which virtually all European commodities (including books and ideas) flowed, made

¹¹ Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, p. 177. ¹² Israel, *Dutch Republic*, p. 74.

perfect sense. That outside influence remained a factor in the evolution of religious reform in this region. Throughout its history the Netherlandish Reformation would be in constant conversation with religious influences, Protestant and Catholic alike, from abroad, be they from the Empire, the Swiss cities, France or Rome.

A final peculiarity of the Reformation in the Low Countries is that it led, unexpectedly, to the creation of an entirely new state, the Dutch Republic or United Provinces. Nowhere else in Europe did the religiously charged wars of the sixteenth century result, however haphazardly and unintentionally, in such a redrawing of the political map. To be sure, initially the separation of the seven northern Netherlandish provinces from the Habsburg *imperium* starting in the 1570s was nothing more than the consequence of military happenstance; there was no expectation that permanent independence for some provinces would be the final outcome. That this ultimately proved to be the case was due at least in part to the fierceness of the confessional passions and discord the Reformation had unleashed – for many decades neither side was willing to concede either ground or principle. Those passions were greatly fueled by spectacles such as occurred on the Grand Place of Brussels on the first day of July in 1523.

The history written about the sixteenth-century Low Countries has been dominated by two themes: religion and war. In the historiographical literature of the past half-century the Netherlandish Reformation (religion) and the Netherlandish Revolt (war) have developed a peculiar relationship with each other. When it comes to surveys, broad overviews and general treatments, the Reformation in the Low Countries is almost invariably eclipsed by the wars (only half-accurately called the “Dutch” Revolt) it helped in part to incur. In the predominant narrative arc the Reformation happens until about 1566 and then the Revolt entirely takes over the story. In this scheme religious dissent and protest serve principally as prologues to conflict and then somewhere around 1566 elide with hardly a trace into political and military accounts of the wars (despite the fact that religious questions continued to plague the politics of the period well after 1566). In 1977 Geoffrey Parker first published his pathbreaking *The Dutch Revolt*, which novelty (and controversially) placed the Netherlandish wars squarely in a larger Spanish geopolitical context; while his narrative explains the role religious discontent played in the origins and the course of the Revolt, it is primarily focused on political and military questions.¹³ The most recent

¹³ Parker, *Dutch Revolt*.

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synthetic accounts of Netherlandish history have tended to follow this pattern. W. P. Blockmans's treatment of the "Habsburg century" of Netherlandish history in Blom and Lambert's *History of the Low Countries*, for example, devotes a scant three pages to the subject of the Reformation before moving on to an account of the Revolt three times as long.¹⁴ Jonathan Israel's magisterial *The Dutch Republic* devotes only one chapter to the "early Dutch" Reformation up to 1565 but four to the subsequent Revolt (which themselves contain occasional discussions of religious issues).¹⁵ Paul Arblaster's *A History of the Low Countries* narrates the Reformation up to 1566 and then with the iconoclastic riots of that year turns to a largely political-military description of the wars.¹⁶ Most even-handed is Groenveld and Schutte's textbook *Delta 2: Nederlands verleden in vogelvlucht. De nieuwe tijd: 1500–1813 (A Bird's-Eye View of the Dutch Past)*, which dedicates a chapter each to the Reformation and the Revolt, though here again the former is treated up to roughly 1570 and then the latter takes over the story.¹⁷ The second edition of the *General History of the Netherlands* published around 1980 does address the Netherlandish Reformation, but only in chapters devoted to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious history more generally.¹⁸ James C. Kennedy's more recent survey *A Concise History of the Netherlands* largely subsumes the story of sixteenth-century religious change within chapters about Habsburg centralization and the revolt against it.¹⁹ Juliaan Woltjer's *Op weg naar tachtig jaar oorlog (The Path to the Eighty Years' War)* can be summarized by its subtitle: "The Story of the Century in which Our Land Began."²⁰ More than most treatments of the Netherlandish sixteenth century, it pays a great deal of attention to religious developments, but in the end its chief interest, the creation of an independent Dutch state, remains political. It remains the case that in most of the recent literature on the Netherlands in the 1500s religion is quickly superseded by war.

Synthetic works dealing with the general religious history of the Netherlands treat the Reformation era more directly and extensively, of course, but still not in ways that are fully comprehensive. Even in these

¹⁴ Blom and Lambert, *History of the Low Countries*, pp. 129–140.

¹⁵ Israel, *Dutch Republic*, chaps. 5, 7–10.

¹⁶ Arblaster, *History of the Low Countries*, pp. 113–131.

¹⁷ Groenveld and Schutte, *Delta 2: Nederlands verleden in vogelvlucht*, chaps. 5 and 8.

¹⁸ Blok et al., *AGN*, vols. 5, 6.

¹⁹ Kennedy, *Concise History of the Netherlands*, pp. 112–135.

²⁰ Woltjer, *Op weg naar tachtig jaar oorlog*.

accounts a more holistic narrative is still lacking. Otto de Jong's 1972 institutional history *Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis* devotes several chapters to the period, primarily concentrating on the various Protestant movements, and the southern Netherlands effectively disappears from this account after the Habsburg reconquests of 1585.²¹ Two more recent overviews, one focused on church history, stressing institutions and doctrines, and the other on religious history, with a more broadly cultural and social perspective, also give the Reformation a distinctly Protestant and northern-Netherlandish cast.²² Both overviews describe sixteenth-century reformation primarily as a reaction to (or against) the Catholic Church, even though it was a phenomenon that also took place within that church, and both confine their narratives to the boundaries of the modern Dutch nation-state.

Recent syntheses that are more specifically devoted to the history of the sixteenth-century Netherlands have been exclusively about the Revolt.²³ The Reformation in the Netherlands per se, related to but distinct from the Netherlandish wars, has not been the subject of a general, book-length survey since the distinguished University of Liège historian Léon-Ernest Halkin published *La Réforme en Belgique sous Charles-Quint* in 1957.²⁴ Halkin's account, brief in both length and chronology, extends no further than the end of the reign of Charles V in 1555. The English historian Alastair Duke's seminal *Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries*, published in 1990, makes a nod in the direction of a survey but is a collection of essays chronologically arranged rather than a true synthesis.²⁵ The closest we have to a modern general account of the Netherlandish Reformation is the collection of essays in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Ketters en papen onder Filips II (Heretics and Papists under Philip II)*, which was organized by the Catharijneconvent Museum in Utrecht in 1986.²⁶ Its individual essays are insightful, but as a collection it lacks the narrative cohesion of a single account. Likewise the essays assembled in the 2017 volume *De Reformatie*, commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's initial protest, treat a variety of topics about the Reformation and the Netherlands, but not as a unified synthesis.²⁷ In 2012 Huib Noordzij published *Handbook van de*

²¹ De Jong, *Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*.

²² Selderhuis, *Handboek Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis*; Van Eijnatten and Van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis*.

²³ See, for example, Darby, *Origins and Development of the Dutch Revolt*; Limm, *Dutch Revolt*; Van der Lem, *Revolt in the Netherlands*; Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots*; Woltjer, *Op weg naar tachtig jaar oorlog*.

²⁴ Halkin, *La Réforme en Belgique sous Charles-Quint*.

²⁵ Duke, *Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries*.

²⁶ Dirkse, *Ketters en papen onder Filips II*. ²⁷ Van Leeuwenberg et al., *De Reformatie*.

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Reformatie: De Nederlandse kerkhervorming in de zestiende en zeventiende eeuw (*Handbook of the Reformation: Dutch Church Reform in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*); the work's expansive title belies the fact that it is not really about the Reformation itself but instead is mostly a confessionally tinted history of the early modern Dutch Reformed church.²⁸ In the past two decades a number of important essays and book chapters have appeared briefly relating the general history of the Netherlandish Reformation, but no extended monographic treatments.²⁹

That this should be the case is perhaps not surprising, for as a historical phenomenon the Netherlandish Reformation was decidedly inchoate, fragmented, eclectic and chaotic, certainly more a congeries of reformations than a single process. This was due to the nature of the Low Countries themselves. For such a small region, with a population of at most three million at the mid-sixteenth century, the Low Countries proved surprisingly diverse, linguistically, socially, culturally, economically and legally. The Burgundian dukes who in the later Middle Ages labored to fashion a coherent union out of these lands could not come up with a more comprehensive name for the region than “the lands over here.”³⁰ Those lands comprised a host of discrete and prickly sovereignties, powers, privileges and customs that the Burgundian and later Habsburg lords who nominally ruled them interfered with at their own risk; it was a composite state with a minimal central government. One might say that the Netherlanders of the sixteenth century enjoyed too much liberty for us to generalize about them easily.³¹ Or, to paraphrase the British historian J. S. Bromley, Netherlandish history is very much the sum of its local histories.³² The diffused nature of the Low Countries' polity made their reformations equally fissiparous; religious upheavals that afflicted urban Flanders, for example, were barely felt in rural Luxemburg. As Alastair Duke has aptly noted, “One cannot write an adequate account of the Reformation in the Low Countries from the standpoint of Brussels.”³³ The history of religious change in this region is therefore exceedingly complicated because it is highly variegated.

²⁸ Noordzij, *Handboek van de Reformatie*.

²⁹ Marnef, “The Netherlands”; Leeuwenberg, “De religie omstreeks 1559”; Bergsma, “The Low Countries”; Spaans, “Reform in the Low Countries”; Woltjer and Mout, “Settlements.”

³⁰ Blockmans and Prevenier, *Burgundian Netherlands*, p. 9.

³¹ My thanks to Thomas A. Brady Jr., who shared this observation with me in conversation.

³² The original quote is: “Dutch history, more than any other, is the sum of local histories.” Bromley, “Rise and Fall of the Dutch Republic,” p. 987.

³³ Duke, *Reformation and Revolt*, p. x.

National sentiment has been another hindrance to a fashioning a cohesive account of the Netherlandish Reformation. The region's wars of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, fueled in part by religious discord, resulted eventually in the emergence of two distinct states whose present-day descendants are the kingdoms of Belgium and the Netherlands. This in turn has resulted in the development of two separate sets of national historiography.³⁴ Later historians looked through a presentist lens to explain the religious upheavals of the period. In the nineteenth century especially, historians in both states were at pains to portray the events of the sixteenth-century Low Countries in a national light, trying to discern in them the origin of their national identity, be it Dutch or Belgian. Thus Dutch historians, for example, tried hard to demonstrate what was distinctively and natively "Dutch" about the Reformation in the Low Countries, particularly in its early stages, while Belgian historians used sixteenth-century religious history as fodder in contemporary political debates between liberals and Catholics.³⁵ Many of these accounts confined themselves to the geographic parameters of the two modern states, as if a north-south divide existed before the Revolt. They were attempts to uncover a national past out of a time when neither of those two nation-states existed. As Nicolette Mout has pointed out, national history is an anachronistic framework upon which to construct a history of the sixteenth-century Netherlands.³⁶ Until rebellion and civil war permanently split the region into two polities toward the very end of the sixteenth century, the Low Countries were of a piece, a fractious collection of discrete sovereignties tenuously gathered under a single ambitious dynasty, and should be understood in that way.³⁷

Further confounding the historiographic picture, besides nationalism, was of course religious conviction. The sectarian writing of Reformation history, whether Catholic or Protestant, colored its historiography well into the first half of the twentieth century.³⁸ For a long time, depending on the confessional allegiance of the historian, the Reformation tended to be portrayed as either triumph or disaster. Belgian and Dutch historians were not immune from this trend. Catholic Church historians writing in Belgium in the nineteenth century highlighted the perseverance and eventual triumph of the traditional church against the onslaught of heresy

³⁴ Soen, "Which Religious History?" pp. 764–769.

³⁵ Nauta, "De reformatie in Nederland in de historiografie," p. 214; Vercauteren, *Cent ans d'histoire nationale en Belgique*, pp. 178–179; Tollebeek, "Enthousiasme en evidentie."

³⁶ Mout, "Reformation, Revolt and Civil Wars," p. 23; De Schepper, *Belgium Nostrum*, p. 2.

³⁷ A point underscored recently by Beyen, Pollmann and Te Velde, *De Lage Landen*, pp. 7–13.

³⁸ Dickens and Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought*, especially chaps. 5–8.

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and celebrated the role the Habsburg government played in bringing about Catholic restoration.³⁹ Meanwhile in the kingdom of the Netherlands the neo-Calvinist revival of the nineteenth century ushered in a wave of confessional histories written by Reformed scholars celebrating the triumph of the Reformed Church and underscoring the “naturally” Calvinist character of the Dutch people.⁴⁰ Not to be outdone, non-Reformed Dutch historians in turn argued instead that the native religious character of the Dutch was spiritualist, Erasmian and tolerant and that Calvinism was a foreign theology imposed by a state-supported religious minority (on this latter point they were joined by Dutch Catholic historians).⁴¹ This kind of sectarian historiography, in both kingdoms, was at least as much about contemporary confessional competition and identity as it was about religious turmoil in the sixteenth century.

The secularized, post-confessional history writing that started emerging in the post-World War Two era largely left these kinds of essentialist arguments behind in favor of more neutral and more specialized approaches. The gradual secularization of Dutch and Belgian society was accompanied by a parallel historiographical secularization, one that considered social, economic, cultural and political factors and not just doctrine as determinants of religious change. This new perspective drove historians to concentrate on particular circumstances to explain the nature of religious transformation in the sixteenth-century Low Countries, and that in turn caused them to narrow their analytic lenses down to the level of locality. The general character of contemporary historical research on the early modern Low Countries has thus also discouraged the construction of any kind of general, synthetic history of the Netherlandish Reformation. Grand narratives, so beloved of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, have long ago been eschewed for painstaking archival research in the rich repositories of the contemporary kingdoms of Belgium and the Netherlands.⁴² Specialization prevails, driven along by its motor the local study. The themes of locality and diversity predominate and current research favors the particular over the general.⁴³ Depth has been favored over breadth and this has enriched our knowledge of the Netherlandish Reformation

³⁹ Soen, “Which Religious History?” pp. 767–768.

⁴⁰ Van Veen, “Tegen ‘papery en slaverny’”; Van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes*, pp. 147–168.

⁴¹ Soen, “Which Religious History?” pp. 765–767.

⁴² Janse, “The Protestant Reformation in the Low Countries”; Decavele, “Historiografie van het zestiende-eeuws Protestantisme in België.”

⁴³ Pollmann, “The Low Countries”; Cloet, “Een kwarteeuw historische produktie in België betreffende de religieuze geschiedenis van de Nieuwe Tijd.”