

Christine Kooi, *Reformation in the Low Countries, 1500-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 196 pp., ISBN 9781009072793).

Although the Low Countries have received their due scholarly attention, surprisingly a ‘more holistic narrative’ (7) about the Reformations in this part of Europe was lacking so far. Christine Kooi, Professor of European History at Louisiana State University, has sought to overcome this historiographical lacuna by studying the ‘Netherlandish Reformation’ in the area that now comprises the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg and parts of northern France. As Kooi explains, the focus on particular topics such as the Dutch Revolt, the emergence of a ‘kind of sectarian historiography’ (10) that was inward-looking and focused on history of the religious denomination in which it originated, as well as the existence of different nationalistic historiographical traditions, was characteristic of the existing scholarship. Making use of and combining the insights generated by generations of historians, Kooi has written a concise, clear, and admirable synthesis of the Reformations in the Low Countries.

The introduction starts with a description of the ‘Netherlandish Reformation’ which is characterised by means of several peculiarities: it was an ‘oppositional movement’ from below, ‘deeply international’, and it yielded an unforeseen outcome, namely the birth of a new state, the Dutch Republic. However, this book does not solely focus on religious developments, which would be hard anyway, given the difficulty of disentangling politics from religion in the early modern era. Although the focus is firmly on the Reformations, ‘the central contention of this book is that the political environment of the Low Countries determined the course and outcomes of reformation there’ (11).

Given this contention, it is only logical that the first chapter, which is introductory in nature, includes an explanation of how the Low Countries became a Habsburg composite state. Kooi emphasises the fact that this state was everything but centralised. Rather, it was an amalgam of smaller political entities that relied on the ‘cooperation and collaboration’ between its constituent parts. Each of the local and regional powers fiercely defended its autonomy and privileges, something which influenced the character of the Reformations as well as the response from the secular and religious authorities to processes of religious change. The fragmented political nature of the Low Countries inspired the Habsburg overlords to embark on a course of political centralisation, one of the causes of the Dutch Revolt. Interestingly, however, because the Low Countries were their patrimonial lands, the

Habsburg rulers had a freer hand when it came to the persecution of heresy than they did as Holy Roman Emperors.

Unfortunately for those at the receiving end of their anti-heresy policies, Charles V and his son Philip II decided to fight religious deviance with tool and nail, another factor that contributed to the Dutch Revolt. According to Kooi, criticism of the Catholic Church and some of its doctrines and practices found a receptive ear in the Low Countries because many of its inhabitants were actively involved in the religious life of the Church and the 'expectations of religious professionals could therefore be high' (35). Eventually the criticism levelled at the Church by humanists and reformers morphed into discontent on a larger scale, the main topic of the second and third chapters, which zoom in on the Netherlandish Reformation in the sixteenth century. In its early years, in the 1520s, the Netherlandish Reformation was everything but organised and tightly managed. Hence, Kooi uses the term 'inchoate' to describe it – it was 'more a sentiment than a movement' (46). The trajectories of religious change are studied by focusing on the most important religious currents, including Anabaptism, Calvinism, Catholicism and Lutheranism. According to Kooi, there was a 'confessional turn' in the middle decades of the sixteenth century as the confusion of the early Reformation gave way to initiatives that aimed to create 'order and coherence' among the different religious groups. The gradual emergence of clear confessional identities and the establishment of boundaries between the different religious groups, was accompanied by polarisation and, ultimately, war.

This war, commonly known as the Dutch Revolt or the 'Revolt in the Netherlands', is examined in the fourth chapter. Although political and military events feature to a larger extent than in the other chapters, they are situated in the context of broader politico-religious developments such as the persecution of heresy by Philip II and the radicalisation of Protestant refugees. The unforeseen outcome of the Revolt is the central topic of the fifth chapter, 'Schism', which studies how the 'bifurcated Low Countries grew apart from each other into two discrete political-religious entities' (141). Although the Northern and Southern Netherlands are presented respectively as a Protestant but religiously plural country and a Catholic bulwark, Kooi complicates this contrast by pointing at local differences and the extent to which both societies were heterogenous, albeit to a varying extent. Still, in terms of religion and politics, the two countries moved into a different direction and '[b]y the time of the expiration of the Twelve Years Truce in 1621, the separation of Netherlandish identities became permanent' (179).

As indicated by the book's title, the period covered starts in the early sixteenth century and ends 'with the emergence of two separate states with distinct confessional identities around 1620' (11-12). However, by that point in time the Netherlandish Reformations were far from over, as proponents of the 'Further Reformation' in particular would have been eager to assert. Moreover, the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 inaugurated a period

of institutional expansion of the Reformed Church, in particular in the Generality Lands. Likewise, some of the Reformation debates, always latently smoldering, were reignited in the Catholic Church around the middle of the seventeenth century and would leave deep marks on Dutch Catholicism. Following the trajectory over religious change over the course of the seventeenth century would have greatly inflated the size of the book and the decision to stop in 1620 is understandable. As such, these remarks primarily stem from the desire to have a similar synthesis for the period after the Twelve Years' Truce between the Southern Netherlands and the Dutch Republic came to an end.

This 'we want more'-comment bears witness to the quality of this book. Christine Kooi has managed to write a clear, elegant, and succinct synthesis of the Reformations in the Low Countries. There is much in this book that is to be admired, not in the last place her ability to discern larger developments and trajectories of religious change in an area that was as fragmented as the Low Countries. This book, which has been translated in Dutch, will be invaluable, in particular in classroom settings. It deserves a wide readership.

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