

Confessional Coexistence in the Habsburg Netherlands

The Case of the *Geuzenhoek* (1680-1730)

3

ROMAN ROOBROECK

For decades, early modern historians have mainly stressed the religious differences between the Dutch Republic and the Habsburg Netherlands. The former is usually represented as a tolerant Reformed state, while the latter is represented as a repressive Catholic regime. By consequence, the similarities in terms of confessional coexistence have never been considered. This article seeks to fill that gap by reviewing the *Geuzenhoek*, a small rural Reformed minority group in Flanders. Fortunately, a plethora of available sources allows us to research the interactions between the Protestants and the Catholic majority. This article shows that the divide between public worship and private devotion played a key role in keeping peaceful interreligious relations and that a stable system of connivance dominated the local framework. This situation was very similar to that of the Dutch Republic. As a result, this study concludes that confessional coexistence in the Habsburg Netherlands should be re-evaluated and merits further investigation.

Vroegmoderne historici hebben jarenlang vooral de religieuze verschillen tussen de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden en de Habsburgse Nederlanden benadrukt. De een werd gewoonlijk voorgesteld als een tolerante gereformeerde staat, terwijl de andere bekendstond als een repressief katholiek regime. De gelijkenissen op het vlak van confessionele co-existentie zijn daarom nooit nader onderzocht. Dit artikel wil dit hiaat opvullen door de *Geuzenhoek*, een kleine landelijke gereformeerde minderheidsgroep in Vlaanderen, onder de loep te nemen. Dankzij een ruime collectie aan bronnen konden de interacties tussen de protestanten en katholieken in beeld worden gebracht. Dit artikel toont aan dat de scheiding tussen publieke en private devotie een grote invloed had op het bewerkstelligen van vredige contacten

en dat in deze lokale context een systeem van ‘oogluikendheid’ domineerde. Deze situatie is vergelijkbaar met die in de Republiek. De conclusie van deze studie is dan ook dat de confessionele co-existentie in de Habsburgse Nederlanden een herevaluatie en verder onderzoek verdient.

Introduction

On 16 August 1654, a remarkable interaction took place on a narrow side road in downtown Antwerp, right in the heart of the Catholic Habsburg Netherlands. On one side, there was George Rataller Doubleth, a Dutch diplomat from The Hague and member of the Dutch delegation to the *Tweeledige Kamer*.¹ Together with a few fellow diplomats, he had taken some time away from the negotiations in Mechelen and decided to visit the famous *Onze-Lieve-Vrouwommegang* in Antwerp. On the other side, there was Dingeman Van der Hagen, a local painter who lived in the Leeuwenstraat for almost his entire professional life.

The two men met in the wake of the procession’s festivities and slowly started talking. When Van der Hagen noticed that Doubleth did not really care for the devotional aspect of the procession, the painter loosened up and admitted to being a follower of the Reformed faith, just like Doubleth. Van der Hagen went on to talk about the difficult life of the Reformed minority in Antwerp and the many hardships that they had to endure, but also admitted that things could definitely be worse. After all, the city magistrate seemed to condone the Reformed community to a large degree and even agreed to grant them their own graveyard. In his personal writings, Doubleth called it a state of ‘*stille oochluycinge*’ or ‘quiet connivance’.²

This is an interesting choice of words and one that begs many questions to the modern reader. In historiography, this wording was never used to describe the religious environment in the Habsburg Netherlands during the seventeenth century. On the contrary, the region was long considered a monoconfessional state, actively repressing remnants of the Reformation and leaving little room for dissident impulses.³

1 The *Tweeledige Kamer* was a Dutch-Spanish commission created to sort out any remaining border conflicts after the Peace of Münster (1648). See Chris Streefkerk, ‘Tweeledige Kamer (Chambre mi-partie) (1648-1675)’, in: Erik Aerts et al. (eds.), *De centrale overheidsinstellingen van de Habsburgse Nederlanden (1482-1795)* 1 (Brussels 1994) 441-447.

2 Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden, Manuscripts, cat. nr. 858, ‘Journael van de Mechelsche reyse, dec.

1653 tot 23 maert [etc.]’, f. 401. See also: Robert Fruin, ‘Een Hollander op de kermis te Antwerpen in 1654’, *Bijdragen voor Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde* 2:6 (1870) 319-334.

3 Paul Arblaster, ‘The Archdukes and the Northern Counter-Reformation’, in: Werner Thomas and Luc Duerloo (eds.), *Albert & Isabella, 1598-1621: Essays* (Turnhout 1998) 87-92.

The Dutch Republic, however, has frequently been depicted as a state of ‘quiet connivance’, as both modern-day scholars and contemporary spectators have used ‘connivance’ to describe the consistent, yet sometimes uneasy, system of coexistence and toleration between Calvinists and Catholics.⁴ So why did a seventeenth-century Dutchman use this particular word to describe the interactions in the South? Could it be that the differences between both parts of the Low Countries were not so significant after all?

This exact question has long been evaded. Instead, scholars have invariably stressed the differences between the two regions. For one thing, the Habsburg Netherlands were classically portrayed as embracing the path of the repressive Counter-Reformation, leaving little room for the study of religious diversity. Scholars such as Michel Cloet and his successors did at least acknowledge the lingering presence of religious dissidence in the seventeenth century, but they considered it too fragmented, fleeting and trivial to actively research. Instead, they prioritised studying the advancement of the Catholic Reformation and the moulding of a confessionalised popular devotion over studying the interactions between the Catholic majority and other minority groups.⁵ More recently, scholars did cover coexisting arrangements in the Habsburg Netherlands and hinted at a degree of de facto lenience towards religious dissidents, but the range of their studies is either limited to the sixteenth century or their analysis of coexistence was side-tracked by other research purposes.⁶

Conversely, the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands has long been represented as a champion of toleration. Unlike other European nations, the Republic did not have an official state religion. Rather, the state opted for the implementation of a voluntary Reformed Public Church, thus granting freedom of conscience to its citizens. This allowed for a pluralistic *modus vivendi* to materialise during the Dutch Golden Age, which was avidly written about and studied by contemporary scholars.⁷ They stressed the flexible

4 Willem Frijhoff, *Embodied Belief: Ten Essays on Religious Culture in Dutch History*. Studies in Dutch Religious History 1 (Hilversum 2002) 39-65; Christine Kooi, *Calvinists and Catholics During Holland's Golden Age: Heretics and Idolaters* (Cambridge 2012) 90-99.

5 Michel Cloet, *Het kerkelijk leven in een landelijke dekenij van Vlaanderen tijdens de xviiie eeuw: Tielt van 1609 tot 1700* (Leuven 1968); Marie Juliette Marinus, *De Contrareformatie te Antwerpen (1585-1676): kerkelijk leven in een grootstad* (Brussels 1995); Marie Juliette Marinus, ‘Het verdwijnen van het protestantisme in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden’, *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 13:1 (1997) 261-269.

6 Craig Harline and Eddy Put, *A Bishop's Tale: Mathias Hovius Among His Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders* (New Haven 2000); Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* (Oxford 2011); Victoria Christman, *Pragmatic Toleration: The Politics of Religious Heterodoxy in Early Reformation Antwerp, 1515-1555*. Changing Perspectives on Early Modern Europe (Rochester 2015).

7 Joke Spaans, *Haarlem na de Reformatie: stedelijke cultuur en kerkelijk leven, 1577-1620* (The Hague 1989); Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Calvinists and Libertines: Confession and Community in Utrecht, 1578-1620* (Oxford 1995).



An image of the The Classicistic *Hervormde Kerk* ('Reformed Church'). Numerous villagers from the *Geuzenhoek* travelled to Sas van Gent to celebrate Easter, or to marry according to Reformed rites. This church was built in 1648 and burned down in 1896. Author and year unknown. © Reliwiki, [https://reliwiki.nl/index.php/Sas_van_Gent,_Oostkade_14_-_Hervormde_Kerk_\(1648_-_1896\)](https://reliwiki.nl/index.php/Sas_van_Gent,_Oostkade_14_-_Hervormde_Kerk_(1648_-_1896)).

coping strategies of the Dutch population and their pragmatic attitude towards dissidence, both of which were long considered to be uniquely Dutch.⁸ In recent years, attention has shifted towards the study of interactions with a specific minority, mostly Catholics.⁹

In sum, scholars have always stressed the differences between the two regions of the Low Countries. But, this does not mean that similarities did not exist. In fact, over the past twenty years, the paradigm on confessional coexistence in the early modern era has evolved dramatically, making this a comparison that is worth revisiting. Originally, historians from the 1980s and 1990s characterised early modern coexistence as a predecessor of modern tolerance. Peaceful religious relations were supposed to have sprouted from legally established protection of dissidence. The Dutch Republic was seen as an early adopter of this ideology.¹⁰ However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, toleration was not considered a positive trait, not even in the Dutch Republic. It was actually considered to be an unfavorable but pragmatic attitude that was deemed necessary for the preservation of a complex multiconfessional society. The idea of religious freedom as a positive value only emerged later during the Enlightenment. This meant that successful coexistence strategies did not necessarily grow through legal impositions, but could naturally evolve from a bottom-up perspective, even in an unfavorable legal environment. Therefore, many historians have since discarded the term ‘tolerance’ and opted for alternatives that underline the pragmatic nature of confessional coexistence, like ‘toleration of practical rationality’, ‘*omgangsocumene*’ (intercourse oecumenism), and, most notably, ‘connivance’.¹¹

This paradigm shift led to a growing interest among scholars to study religious interactions in classically ‘intolerant’ regions. New studies showed

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198202837.001.0001>;

Christine Kooi, *Liberty and Religion: Church and State in Leiden's Reformation, 1572-*

1620. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 82 (Leiden 2000). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004473720>.

- 8 Willem Frijhoff, ‘Religious toleration in the United Provinces: from “case” to “model”’, in: Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop (eds.), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge 2002) 27-52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511496769.003>.

- 9 Charles H. Parker, *Faith on the Margins: Catholics and Catholicism in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge 2008); Benjamin J. Kaplan et al. (eds.), *Catholic Communities in Protestant States: Britain*

and the Netherlands, c.1570-1720 (Manchester 2009); Carolina Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek in de Republiek: de belevingswereld van een religieuze minderheid 1570-1750* (Nijmegen 2019).

- 10 Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, Jonathan Israel, and Guillaume Posthumus Meyjes (eds.), *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions* 76 (Leiden 1997).
- 11 Bob Scribner, ‘Preconditions of Tolerance and Intolerance in Sixteenth-Century Germany’, in: Peter Ole Grell and Bob Scribner (eds.), *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation* (Cambridge 1996) 32-47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511523328.005>; Frijhoff, ‘Religious toleration’, 35.

that people from such regions could indeed appropriate diverse attitudes of tolerance and could develop complex systems of coexistence. Specific case studies on Germany, England, France and Spain have shown the existence of complex arrangements of coexistence that can be interpreted as systems of ‘connivance’.¹² More and more, historians are considering a pragmatic form of toleration that sprouts from daily interactions in multi-faith communities to be the rule in post-Reformation Europe rather than the exception.¹³ Recently, this has also been suggested for the Habsburg Netherlands by Jesse Spohnholz, who hypothesised that ‘the difference in religious coexistence in the southern and northern provinces is more a matter of magnitude than of kind’.¹⁴

Despite Spohnholz’s suggestion, there is still no in-depth research on this pragmatic form of confessional coexistence in the Habsburg Netherlands. This article aims to fill this historiographical gap. In order to achieve this, I will examine the ‘Beggar’s Corner’ or *Geuzenhoek*, a somewhat concealed community of Reformed Protestants living in the countryside near the town of Oudenaarde in the south of the county of Flanders.¹⁵ Apart from the *Brabantse Olijfberg* in Antwerp, this group was the only major Protestant community in the Habsburg Netherlands that had survived the sixteenth century and established a permanent presence throughout the entire early modern era. Officially recognised as a church ‘under the cross’ by the Dutch Zeeland classes, the *Geuzenhoek* consisted of numerous Reformed families and individuals spread across fifteen to twenty villages in the southwest of Flanders, with its core in Sint-Maria-Horebeke, Mater, and Etikhove.¹⁶

12 Keith Luria, *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early-Modern France* (Washington 2005); Stuart B. Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (New Haven 2008); Jesse Spohnholz, *The Tactics of Toleration: A Refugee Community in the Age of Religious Wars* (Newark 2010); Adam Morton and Nadine Lewycky, *Getting Along? Religious Identities and Confessional Relations in Early Modern England: Essays in Honour of Professor W.J. Sheils* (Farnham 2012).

13 Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration In Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2007) 7-11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674039308>.

14 Jesse Spohnholz, ‘Confessional Coexistence in the Early Modern Low Countries’, in: Thomas Max Safley (ed.), *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World*

Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 28 (Leiden 2011) 56-57. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004216211_004.

15 Although this Reformed minority community is also known as the ‘Flemish Mount of Olives’ or *Vlaamse Olijfberg*, I will refer to them as the *Geuzenhoek* in this article for the sake of simplicity and consistency.

16 Arnold De Jonge, *De Geuzenhoek te Horebeke: van geslacht tot geslacht* (Horebeke 1993); Wayne Te Brake, ‘Emblems of Coexistence in a Confessional World’, in: C. Scott Dixon, Dagmar Freist and Mark Greengrass (eds.), *Living with Religious Diversity in Early-Modern Europe* (Farnham 2009) 53-56; Roman Roobroeck, ‘Van Geuzen tot Olijfberg: confession-building en de creatie van een gereformeerde gemeenschap in zeventiende- en achttiende-eeuws Vlaanderen’, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis* 21:1 (2018) 42-47.

Due to the villages' rural nature, it is a unique minority to examine within the context of the Low Countries.

Exact population numbers of the group are difficult to come by, but by using the estimates in the visitation reports, one can safely assume a number of approximately 300 Protestants in the entire deanery of Ronse.¹⁷ This is not a large minority, as it only constitutes one to three percent of the total population of the deanery.¹⁸ However, these absolute numbers are misleading as most villages only counted one or two protestants, which amounts to perhaps one family. The bulk of the group stayed in the three aforementioned villages of Sint-Maria-Horebeke, Mater, and Etikhove, where their numbers amounted to up to twelve percent of the total population. In 1698, one could find around 120 protestants in the parish of Mater making up around eight percent of the total population in relative numbers.¹⁹ In Sint-Maria-Horebeke, there were around 120 Protestants in 1706, which was roughly twelve percent of the total population.²⁰ I have therefore found the Reformed community in these villages to be impactful enough within their rural environment to investigate in this article.

This article will mainly focus on the *Geuzenhoek* between 1680 and 1730 for two reasons. Firstly, there is a wide array of sources at our disposal within this time frame. Local archives and their national counterparts hold numerous letters, ecclesiastical reports and judicial cases, vividly describing the interactions between local Catholics and Protestants. Secondly, this period heralded great changes for the *Geuzenhoek* itself. It signified the end of the short-lived French rule of the region of Oudenaarde (1668-1679), during which the Reformed minority was actively repressed.²¹ Following the Treaty of Nijmegen (1679), the pre-war status quo returned and the Dutch influence in the Habsburg Netherlands began to grow, as Dutch garrisons were established at certain key strategical locations. Lying on the banks of the river Scheldt, Oudenaarde held such a garrison, which was a true blessing for the local Reformed community.²² Not only did the military presence of a friendly power provide more security, but it also brought along

17 Rijksarchief Gent (hereafter RAG), Aartsbisdom Mechelen. Serie M (hereafter AMM), inv. nrs. 15 and 249.

18 Rough estimates of the total population numbers of the villages can be found in: Carlos De Rammelaere, 'De bevolkingsevolutie in het Land van Schorisse (1569-1796)', *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 13 (1959) 68-71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21825/hmgog.v13i1.68>.

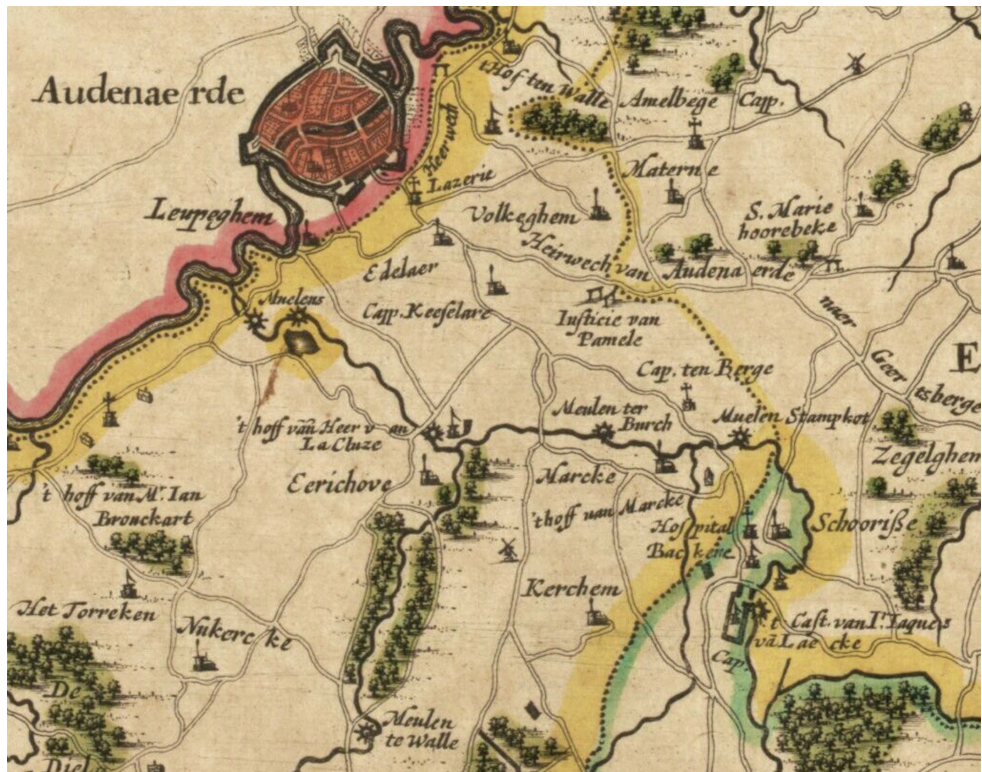
19 The exact numbers of both the Protestant and total population are known for 1697 due to a

census of grain stocks taking place during this year. See: RAG, Gemeente Mater. Oud archief, inv. nr. 80; RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 15.

20 RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 131.

21 Robert Collinet, *Histoire du protestantisme en Belgique aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Brussels 1959) 26-27.

22 Reginald De Schryver, 'De eerste Staatse barrière in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1697-1701)', *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 18 (1964) 73.



Extract of the map of 'Land van Aalst' by Antonius Sanderus (1586-1664). The villages of the Geuzenhoek were located in the countryside, east of Oudenaarde, and were part of the lordship Land van Aalst. Antonius Sanderus, *Flandria Illustrata, sive Descriptio comitatus istius per totum terrarum orbem celeberrimi* (Cologne 1641) 506-507. © Ghent University Library.

a garrison preacher, a greatly sought-after pillar for long-term religious services.²³

As a result, the Reformed population grew explosively at the end of seventeenth century, as garrison minister Hendrik Reinhard Sohnius welcomed more than 150 members over the course of two years.²⁴ The Catholic visitation reports confirm this trend: the Reformed population more than doubled between 1680 and 1690.²⁵ In addition, the changing geopolitical situation made the locals undergo a ‘confessionalising’ process in which they centralised their administration and religious activities in the village of Sint-Maria-Horebeke. The Reformed community then started organising sermons more frequently and more publicly, began registering its own baptisms and marriages, arranged education for the young through imported Dutch reading materials, and was even able to establish its own system of poor relief.²⁶ In doing so, the boundary between the Catholic and Reformed communities stiffened, making it the ideal time frame to study their co-existence.

As discussed, the *Geuzenhoek* is an exceptional and unique case within the context of the Habsburg Netherlands, both in terms of size and in terms of consistency. The Habsburg Netherlands knew but two sizeable minority communities, while their northern neighbours housed many more. Hence, comparing the two regions solely based on this case study would be unwise. Therefore, my intent is not to perform a comparative historical report, but to consider the *Geuzenhoek* as a product of ‘entangled history’ or ‘*histoire croisée*’ between the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic. The central idea of this approach is based on the interconnectedness of societies. Instead of limiting research to the constraints of a singular society as an exhaustive unit and focusing on the characteristics within this society, I examine the dependencies and transfers that can explain these characteristics.²⁷

For my case, this means that rather than simply comparing the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, I consider them to be one network of dynamic interrelations that have the potential to influence underlying components, like the *Geuzenhoek*. Here, the transnational scope is not just a supplementary level of analysis. Instead, all levels will be perceived as interacting with one another. In doing so, I hope to show how both the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic fit within the same network and therefore share a similar ‘connivant’ system of coexistence. Unravelling their interdependencies will shed new light on religious pluralism in both

23 RAG, Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B (hereafter BGB), inv. nr. 3648/5.

24 Zeeuws Archief Middelburg (hereafter ZA), Verzameling J. De Hullu, inv. nr. 111, f. 8.

25 RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 15.

26 Roobroeck, ‘Van Geuzen tot Olijfberg’, 42-47.

27 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity’, *History and Theory* 45:1 (2006) 30-50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2006.00347.x>.

regions and might explain why their subordinates searched for similar strategies in terms of confessional coexistence.

The Habsburg regime and the politics of coexistence

At first glance, it might seem self-evident to depict the Habsburg Netherlands as a strongly repressive and anti-Protestant regime. After all, the confessional state administration definitely knew its fair share of legal persecution. Archdukes Albert and Isabella launched a strong anti-Protestant narrative at the turn of the seventeenth century. In 1609, they promulgated an oppressive edict, effectively demanding all residents of the Archducal lands to be loyal to the Catholic Church. Those who did not comply with the Catholic faith or attended Protestant meetings would be prosecuted and tried accordingly.²⁸

When the region returned to the Spanish crown in 1621, the Archducal methods were upheld. For the remainder of the seventeenth century, persecution persisted as a baseline for religious policy in the Habsburg Netherlands. After ending hostilities with the northern Republic in 1648, the placard of 1609 was reconfirmed, thus maintaining the illegality of Protestantism in the South. Afterwards, more anti-Protestant measures were adopted to force dissidents into submission. Marriages conducted in accordance with the Reformed tradition were now corroborated as ‘public scandals’, making those who were involved liable to prosecution.²⁹ In 1654, all ‘heretics’ were disbarred from public offices, as only loyal Catholics were allowed to serve in magistracies and local councils.³⁰ Mixed marriages, though always frowned upon and considered illegal, gained renewed judicial attention in the 1660s.³¹ The Habsburg administration even committed to limiting day-to-day interactions between Catholics and Protestants: discussing religious matters with a member of the opposing confessional group became forbidden by law in 1672.³² Thus, the Habsburg officials established a legal framework in the region that sought to separate Catholics from the Reformed and criminalise the latter.

The results of these policies can easily be traced back to the *Geuzenhoek*. The villages were not known for their strong cross-confessional unity, but were rather characterised by the existence of two clear and

28 Victor Brant (ed.), *Recueil des Ordonnances des Pays-Bas: Règne d'Albert et Isabelle, 1597-1621* II (Brussels 1912) 26-28.

29 *Derden placcaet-boeck van Vlaenderen* (Gent 1685) 4-6.

30 *Derden placcaet-boeck van Vlaenderen*, 103-104; Alphonsus Varenbergh, *Vierden placcaet-boeck van Vlaenderen* (Brussels 1740) 80-81.

31 Herman F.W.D. Fischer, ‘De gemengde huwelijken tussen katholieken en protestanten in de Nederlanden van de xvie tot de xviii eeuw’, *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis / Revue d'histoire du droit / The Legal History Review* 31:3-4 (1963) 464-465. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718190-9000224>.

32 *Derden placcaet-boeck*, 6-7.

distinct confessional communities that were not allowed to intermingle. Interconfessional marriages in particular were considered to be extremely harmful by both communities and were actively hindered by coreligionists. On the Catholic side, local priests actively discouraged ‘blasphemous’ unions during their home visits, aiming to thwart possible marriages before it was too late.³³ Of course, such marriages did occasionally occur. When they did, the priests stepped in, handed the spouses’ names to the episcopal official, and attempted to legally annul the marriage.³⁴ Similar to the Catholics, Protestants were also reluctant to intermarry with Catholic families. They continued to seek marriages within their own circle, in spite of the sometimes incestuous relationships spawning from the limited number of viable Reformed spouses.³⁵

When we look a little closer, however, we can find some flaws in this seemingly strict regime of intolerance. The *de jure* harsh treatment of Protestants as it was recorded in the country’s legislation was not necessarily echoed in daily reality. The sovereign lords indeed decreed measures of religious intolerance, but their application was in the hands of bailiffs and lower clerical officials, who were generally disinclined to disturb the local peace. Consequently, these administrators often followed a self-imposed policy of *de facto* toleration instead of the systematic prosecution that was envisaged by the central administration.³⁶

In the region of the *Geuzenhoek*, very little action was undertaken against the large communities of known heretics. Priests were able to identify entire Reformed families, as they are attested in the region’s visitation reports, but did not actively bother them.³⁷ When confronted with their lack of engagement by their superiors, the priests claimed that they did what they could and emphasised that they never allowed the local Protestants to experience any ‘explicit’ religious freedom. Importantly, by doing so the priests did not deny that their lack of action allowed covert religious freedom to endure.³⁸

33 RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 249, visitation report of Mater in 1717.

34 The marriage between Judocus Vanden Driessche and Petronella Vermoten in 1683 is an example of this phenomenon. See: RAG, Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie k. Officialiteit, inv. nr. 9461.

35 For example: Frans De Smet and Luiyne Gossije were related in the second degree and got married in Sas van Gent. See: Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel (hereafter AR), Geheime Raad onder Spaans bewind (hereafter GRS), inv. nr. 890, preparatory investigation on 12 February 1686, f. 2v.

36 Eddy Put, ‘Les archiducs et la réforme catholique: champs d’action et limites politiques’, in: Thomas and Duerloo (eds.), *Albert & Isabella*, 260.

37 Especially in the visitation reports of Etikhove, Mater, Michelbeke, Nukerke, Sint-Denijs-Boekel and Sint-Maria-Horebeke, the parish priests meticulously and consistently recorded the Reformed population numbers. See: RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 15.

38 Hubert, *Notes et documents*, 32-33.

Apart from these internal obstructions, diplomatic pressure also led to concessions in the prosecution of Protestants. Ever since the Archdukes first aimed to introduce repressive measures, the geopolitical context following the Twelve Years' Truce (1609-1621) severely limited the execution of those efforts, as the Dutch Republic could cleverly use the wellbeing of its own Catholic minority as a bargaining chip. The Dutch thus threatened the Habsburg government with repercussions against local Catholics whenever the southern Protestants were excessively harmed or harassed.³⁹

During the 1680s, the Catholic community in the Dutch border town of Sas van Gent became the diplomatic mirror image of the *Geuzenhoek*. Whenever a Reformed villager from the *Geuzenhoek* was to be persecuted or subjugated to certain intimidations, the Dutch administration threatened to execute the same measures on Catholics in Sas van Gent. There are many examples of bilateral threats under this *quid pro quo* understanding. When in 1686 a Reformed Christmas celebration in Mater was investigated, the town magistracy of Sas van Gent stepped in with threats towards their own Catholic subjects to get the Habsburg officials to back off.⁴⁰ At other times, simple threats did not suffice: following the eviction of a minister from Sint-Maria-Horebeke in 1717, the Catholic church building in Sas van Gent was closed down and all religious services were temporarily suspended until the minister was allowed to return.⁴¹ The same thing happened again in 1724.⁴² Realising their interdependency, the *Geuzenhoek* and the Catholic community of Sas van Gent eventually came to a mutual understanding to protect each other's interests, thus facilitating this system of deterrence.⁴³

The Treaty of Münster in 1648 was another diplomatic obstruction to the execution of repressive measures in the Habsburg Netherlands, as articles four and nineteen of said treaty provided legal loopholes for the Protestants of the *Geuzenhoek* to exploit. The fourth article stated that 'the subjects and residents of the lands of the aforesaid Lords King and States [...] shall also be permitted to enter and remain in each other's lands and there conduct their business and trade in full security'.⁴⁴ This arrangement in itself would be

39 Werner Thomas, 'The Treaty of London, the Twelve Years Truce and Religious Toleration in Spain and the Netherlands (1598-1621)', in: Randall Lesaffer (ed.), *The Twelve Years Truce (1609): Peace, Truce, War and Law in the Low Countries at the Turn of the 17th Century*. Legal History Library 13:6 (Leiden 2014) 285-296. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004274921_015.

40 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, letter from the magistracy of Sas van Gent to the lord of the manor Schorisse on 20 April 1686.

41 RAG, AMM, inv. 135, letter from the commander of Sas van Gent to Archbishop d'Alsace-Boussu on 11 April 1717, f. 1v-2r.

42 RAG, AMM, inv. 135, excerpt from the register of resolutions of the Dutch States-General on 8 February 1724, f. 1v.

43 RAG, Kerkarchief Protestantse Gemeenschap Vlaamse Olijfberg, inv. nr. 1, f. 1-3.

44 Herbert H. Rowen (ed.), *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York 1972) 182. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-00612-0>.

of little use to the villagers, were it not for the statement in the nineteenth article outlining that Dutch visitors cannot be prosecuted for their religious dissidence as long as they 'conduct themselves in the matter of public exercise of religion with all piety, giving no scandal by word or deed and speaking no slander'.⁴⁵

The treaty benefited the Reformed villagers on two fronts. First of all, it legitimised the arrival of occasional ministers, sent from one of the Zeeland classes to service the Reformed minority.⁴⁶ As long as these ministers appeased the local Catholic population with a humble attitude and limited their activities to the private sphere, their presence was usually condoned, albeit still frowned upon. In 1717 for example, after some complaints, a Dutch minister was evicted from Sint-Maria-Horebeke, but the eviction was promptly put forward as a violation of the international treaty, forcing the Archbishop to undo the expulsion.⁴⁷ Secondly, the treaty gave legal protection to the large number of local Protestants who had registered themselves as citizens of a Dutch town. Despite living in Flanders, numerous villagers from the *Geuzenhoek* had taken the citizen's oath in Sas van Gent.⁴⁸ This meant that, theoretically, they were subjects of the Dutch Republic and, following the Treaty of Münster, were exempt from prosecution in the South.

This practice first appeared in the Middle Ages, though under different circumstances. In the Middle Ages, people in the Low Countries could apply for the citizenship of a town, without actually living within the city walls. These rural 'outburghers' (*buitenpoorters*) fell under the urban legislation and could therefore claim extra fiscal privileges and exemption from seigniorial obligations. Such cases of outburghers were especially common in the region of late medieval Oudenaarde, so it should come as no surprise that the tradition was reintroduced by the local Protestants.⁴⁹

Of course, the Protestants did not exploit the outburgher practice in an economic sense, but instead cleverly applied it to escape prosecution for confessional reasons, adding a legal buffer to fall back on in case of emergencies. It was often invoked as well: when two Protestants from Edelare

45 Rowen, *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times*, 186.

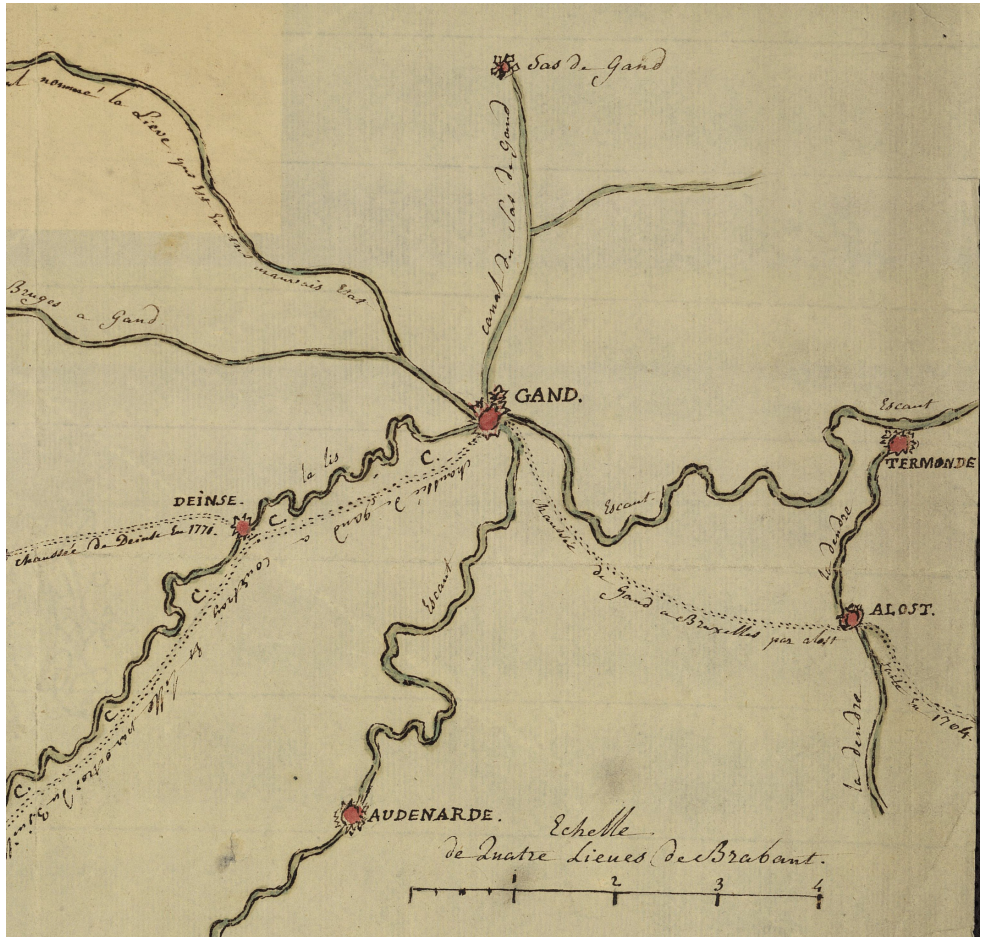
46 A fairly limited list of Dutch ministers who have presided over the Flemish churches 'under the cross' can be found in: ZA, Verzameling N.A. de Gaay Fortman, inv. nr. 15.

47 RAG, AMM, inv. 135, letter, 11 April 1717, f. 1r-1v.

48 Gemeentearchief Terneuzen, Archieven van de stad Sas van Gent, inv. nr. 281, register of the citizens by oath between 1663 and 1794.

49 Erik Thoen, 'Rechten en plichten van plattelanders als instrumenten van

machtspolitieke strijd tussen adel, stedelijke burgerij en grafelijk gezag in het laat-Middeleeuwse Vlaanderen: Buitenpoorterschap en mortemain-rechten ten persoonlijke titel in de kasselrijen van Aalst en Oudenaarde, vooral toegepast op de periode rond 1400', in: *Machtsstructuren in de plattelandsgemeenschappen in België en de aangrenzende gebieden (12de-19de eeuw): Handelingen van het 13de International Colloquium Spa, 3-5 sept. 1986* (Brussels 1988) 469-490.



A map of the main waterways of Flanders in 1774. The easy connection over water between Oudenaarde and Sas van Gent might explain why the Protestants of the Geuzenhoek eagerly chose this Dutch fortress town for their outburghership. *Carte routière de la partie de la Flandre comprise entre les villes d'Ostende, Damme, Gand, Termonde, Alost, Audenarde, Menin, Warneton, Ypres et Nieuport (1774)*. © National Archives of Belgium, Verzameling Kaarten en plattegronden in handschrift. Reeks I, inv. nr. 1282.

were subpoenaed for their ‘illegal’ marriage in Sas van Gent, the States-General intervened by quoting their Dutch citizenship and invoking the Treaty of Münster.⁵⁰ In 1688, outburghership brought the investigation of a ‘scandalous’ Reformed congregation to a sudden halt, as the majority of the attendees were citizens of Sas van Gent.⁵¹ And in 1700, the States-General demanded remuneration for two citizens of Middelburg who had been violently beaten and expelled from their native village of Sint-Kornelis-Horebeke, a grave violation of the aforementioned treaty.⁵²

In short, the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic seem to have been strongly interconnected, with bilateral diplomatic pressure preventing a literal interpretation of the aforementioned repressive placards. Hence, the strict oppression in the legal framework was never properly instituted in real life. Instead, the focus shifted towards a new policy in which heretics were ‘condoned’ and only the most ‘scandalous’ cases were to be prosecuted.⁵³ This left room for the creation of a fairly ‘open’ society in parts of the Habsburg Netherlands, where the Protestants of the *Geuzenhoek* could live in relative peace and careful coexistence with their Catholic neighbours.

All this considered, things were not that different from the situation in the Dutch Republic, albeit that the number of Catholics there was far larger than the number of Protestants in the Habsburg Netherlands. Apart from this, Dutch policies were actively favouring members of the Reformed Public Church, whilst Catholics were relegated to second-class citizenship. They had to worship in secret, were denied access to the sacraments, and were banned from holding public offices, just like the Protestants in the South.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, real prosecution was quite rare. Local authorities were not keen on disturbing the peace, and if they were, bribery was always an alternative strategy.⁵⁵ Dutch Catholics also happily exploited the aforementioned loopholes in the Treaty of Münster (1648), resulting in an extra legal buffer.⁵⁶ In addition, the Habsburg Netherlands proved to be a reliable ally to the Dutch minority, be it to exert diplomatic pressure or to provide confessional guidance.⁵⁷

50 Nationaal Archief Den Haag, Staten-Generaal, inv. nr. 11952, letter from the States-General to Archbishop Creusen on 10 May 1664, f. 137r.

51 RAG, Raad van Vlaanderen (hereafter RV), inv. nr. 31087, letter from the bailiff of Schorisse to the Council of Flanders on 5 June 1688, f. 1r-1v.

52 Eugène Hubert, *Les Pays-Bas Espagnols et la République des Provinces-Unies Depuis la Paix de Munster jusqu'au Traité d'Utrecht (1648-1713): La Question Religieuse et les Relations Diplomatiques* (Brussels 1907) 182-183.

53 Thomas, ‘The Treaty of London’, 296-297.

54 Parker, *Faith on the Margins*, 12-14.

55 Christine Kooi, ‘Paying off the Sheriff: Strategies of Catholic Toleration in Golden Age Holland’, in: Po-Chia Hsia and Van Nierop (eds.), *Calvinism*, 87-101. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511496769.006>; Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek in de Republiek*, 22-24.

56 Wayne Te Brake, *Religious War and Religious Peace in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2017) 293-298. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316104859>.

57 Paul Arblaster, ‘The Southern Netherlands Connection: Networks of Support and

It thereby seems that the entangled context in which both countries found themselves caused similar coexisting politics in both the Northern and Southern Netherlands, in which top-down regulations had little effect on the actual interactions between both confessional groups. Confessional coexistence could not be actively regulated within the political spectrum, but instead had to be negotiated on a local level between the confessional groups themselves.

Coexistence on the ground: public versus private

The politics of coexistence only paint a picture of the legal backdrop of confessional coexistence: a static image of ‘what is allowed’ and how the locals reacted to this. It disregards the actual interactions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century daily life. Since unclear treaties and regulations filled with loopholes left room for local ‘improvisation’, it is essential to move beyond a top-down approach of tolerance. Instead, one has to envision coexistence as a ‘lived’ experience: an experience with active struggles between Catholic and Protestant villagers, and with mechanisms and strategies guiding them back to a stable form of coexistence.

One of the most notable mechanisms in this coexistence repertoire was the differentiation between the public and the private sphere. With the rise of multiconfessional communities, dissident religions were banned from all public spaces and the favoured confession was unchallenged in its domination of the public domain. Still, there was some room for dissidence to flourish, for instance in the private realm. The confines of one’s own home were considered to be an extension of the individual conscience, which could be freely explored and used. This meant that the exercise of a dissident faith was condoned as long as it was limited to a private environment. Although it was at times a fictional divide, since the religious majority often knew where these dissident private spaces were located, the respect for this division was crucial in ensuring peaceful religious relations.⁵⁸

While the divide between public and private spaces and their importance for religious toleration was present throughout Europe, it proved to be an especially effective strategy in the Dutch Republic. In fact, this divide has been described as the key to maintaining cohesion in Dutch pluralism.⁵⁹ One practical and popular application of this arrangement that was typical for the Dutch Republic, was the use of Catholic *schuilkerken* (clandestine churches

Patronage’, in: Benjamin J. Kaplan et al. (eds.), *Catholic communities in Protestant states: Britain and the Netherlands, c. 1570-1720* (Manchester 2009) 123-138.

59 Frijhoff, *Embodied Belief*, 56-65; Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek in de Republiek*, 17-50; Spohnholz, ‘Confessional coexistence’, 68-69.

or house churches): inside, Catholics were unharmed in the practice of their faith, provided that the outside did not look like an official church. As long as their public appearance did not challenge the privileged position of the Reformed faith, people were relatively free to pursue private devotion.⁶⁰

When veering down to the *Geuzenhoek*, one can definitely see some striking similarities. For one thing, the differentiation between public and private space was more or less the same, with the public domain uniquely dominated by the Catholic Church. Protestant gatherings out in the open were considered to be extremely 'scandalous' and were heavily persecuted. All public rites, such as baptisms and marriages, were monopolised by the Catholic parish priest. Protestants were not buried in the parish graveyard and were not allowed to have their own public graveyard, so they could only find their last refuge in their private gardens.⁶¹ Furthermore, everyone was expected to blend in during the confessional usage of public space. During village processions for instance, every bystander, regardless of their religious adherence, was expected to bow respectfully when the cortege passed by. When two Protestants in Leupegem, who stumbled upon the procession by accident, did not do so, they were forcibly removed from the village.⁶²

Since the Protestant villagers did not get to employ the public space for their own religious needs, they developed strategies to appease the Catholic strife for public dominance, while at the same time laying claim to some form of public exercise of their religion. They for instance moved their public activities to other locations, outside of their own villages. This strategy is called *Auslaufen*, a well-documented practice in the Dutch Republic and across other parts of early modern Europe.⁶³ Basically, in order to prevent any transgressions of the dominance of Catholicism within their villages, the Protestants of the *Geuzenhoek* decided to temporarily migrate to confessionally-friendly territory to take part in religious ceremonies. After a few days, they would return to their villages. This practice was accepted by the Catholic villagers, since it allowed them to preserve religious conformity in the own public space.

Again, Sas van Gent played a major role in this. Yearly, hundreds of Protestants ventured to this Dutch town to attend the Easter celebrations and there were year-round comings and goings of young Protestant couples wanting to marry according to the Reformed tradition.⁶⁴ The Dutch garrison in Oudenaarde eventually provided a much closer alternative.

60 Benjamin J. Kaplan, 'Fictions of Privacy: House Chapels and the Spatial Accommodation of Religious Dissent in Early Modern Europe', *The American Historical Review* 107:4 (2002) 1042-1048. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/532663>.

61 RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 249, visitation report of Mater in 1717.

62 Hubert, *Les Pays-Bas Espagnols*, 181.

63 Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 161-171.

64 I have found hundreds of entries describing these religious excursions in the dean's visitation reports. The practice was first mentioned in the 1660s and made headway throughout the 1680s. See RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 15.



▲
 An etching of a *hagenpreek* ('hedge sermon') outside Antwerp in 1566. *Hagenpreken* were Protestant sermons that were organised outside the city walls in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. This was done to circumvent the ban of the public exercise of Protestantism. Thus, this phenomenon can be seen as a sixteenth-century variant of *Auslaufen*. Jan Luyken, *Predikaten der Gereformeerden*, A 1566. *buyten Antwerpen ondernomen* (Dutch Republic, ca. 1677-1679). © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.443177>.

The city attracted a large crowd of Protestants on a weekly basis and became quite popular as an external public domain to practice the Reformed faith.⁶⁵

Of course, it was not always possible to leave one's village, so Reformed villagers had to resort to other means to fulfil their religious needs. The use of private space played a vital role in this regard. The community used the comfort and safety of their own homes, whether they were barns, basements, or just standard living rooms, for almost all forms of devotion and celebration. Most of the time, the choosing of a home for a congregation to take place in was a pretty ad hoc decision that was only taken a couple days in advance.⁶⁶ However, there are a few known cases where a building grew into a rudimentary *schuilkerk*. Oral traditions refer to 'Elodie's cottage', a small house in the hamlet of Vrijsbeke just outside the village centre of Sint-Maria-Horebeke, that long served as such a Protestant *schuilkerk*.⁶⁷

Either way, Reformed congregations in private spaces were common in multi-faith villages. This did not escape the attention of the Catholic population. Numerous entries in visitation reports sum up where and when the congregations took place, and even who attended.⁶⁸ According to depositions by Catholic witnesses, the Protestants themselves were openly sharing the specifics of the planned congregations to everyone.⁶⁹ As a result, the Catholic villagers knew that these were organised 'first in one corner of the parish, then in another'.⁷⁰

Catholics were in the know and they seemed to condone these private congregations. This did not mean that they liked the idea of dissidents holding confessional meetings right under their noses, but no legal action was taken against them. Dutch ambassador Jacob Pestere, who was in close contact with the *Geuzenhoek* by 1722, described the situation in Sint-Maria-Horebeke as an informal understanding between the two communities, a deal made under the counter that Reformed congregations *en cachette* would not be persecuted nor disturbed. In return, the minority would remain obedient to the Habsburg leadership and would not plead for the same rights as their Catholic neighbours.⁷¹ This arrangement was upheld in everyday life and private gatherings were usually left undisturbed.

Only when the delineation between public and private was in danger did the authorities really intervene. One interesting case in this regard is the

65 RAG, BGB, inv. nr. 3648/5.

66 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, preparatory investigation, f. 11v.

67 De Jonge, *De Geuzenhoek*, 11-13.

68 RAG, AMM, inv. nr. 15, visitation report of Mater in 1657, Sint-Denijs-Boekel in 1661, Sint-Maria-Horebeke in 1662.

69 Aartsbisschoppelijk Archief Mechelen (hereafter AAM), Fonds Mechliniensia (hereafter FM), inv.

nr. 44, 'Ejectio Ministri haeretici e Parochia de Horenbeke S. Mariae Districtus Rothnacensis', f. 29v-30r.

70 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, letter from three local priests to King Charles II on 10 June 1686, f. 1v.

71 RAG, Gemeente Sint-Maria-Horebeke. Oud archief, inv. nr. 284, letter from Jacob Pestere to Marquis de Prié on 2 July 1722.

‘discovered’ and highly controversial celebration of the Reformed community on Christmas Day in 1685. Around noon, approximately twenty members of the *Geuzenhoek* gathered in the house of Adriaan Gossye, all of them intently listening to Jacques De Raet, who was sitting in the front of the room, reading from a Dutch Bible. He preached about the birth of Christ for about an hour and afterwards initiated a prayer to end the meeting.⁷²

At first, this might sound like a typical, run-of-the-mill private congregation. Yet, contrary to previous known meetings, it sparked outrage among the local Catholic population. The difference lay in the details. First of all, the historical context of 1685 should be taken into account. With the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, religious tensions ran high across Europe, and renewed confessional hostility was instilled in the minds of people. It is very likely that this had an effect and that the Catholic villagers were on edge.

A second difference was that Catholic passer-by’s deemed the meeting of 1685 ‘not private enough’. In fact, the bailiff of Schorisse, who was appointed to investigate the case, noted that the entire meeting took place ‘with open doors’ and that anyone could have walked in.⁷³ The fact that one of the Protestant witnesses confirmed that the meeting was held ‘with open doors and windows’ supplemented the bailiff’s accusations that the gathering was in fact a public event and was therefore in conflict with common practice.⁷⁴

A third factor explaining the public outrage was the fact that the male attendants did not remove their hats when entering the gathering and continued to wear their hats throughout the predication and the prayer.⁷⁵ This might seem like a trivial matter, but in the minds of the Catholic community this was highly problematic. Keeping hats on indoors was seen as a uniquely Reformed habit, thus causing a scandal for Catholic onlookers.⁷⁶ This further endorsed the idea that the meeting was held in public, since it was customary to remove your hat when entering a private environment.⁷⁷ The presiding preacher De Raet even apologised for this scandalous act, claiming full responsibility and excusing it as an unfortunate oversight, not a deliberate attempt to undermine Catholic dominance.⁷⁸

A similar conflict arose in 1717, when a Dutch minister arrived in the village of Sint-Maria-Horebeke. According to the Catholic authorities, Pieter Brandt came to take up the ‘public function’ of the Reformed faith in the region by organising congregations every Tuesday. He was promptly evicted

72 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, preparatory investigation, f. 3v-4v.

73 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, letter from the Council of Flanders to King Charles II on 11 May 1686; RAG, RV, inv. nr. 31087, letter, 5 June 1688, f. 1v.

74 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, preparatory investigation, f. 7v.

75 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, preparatory investigation, f. 4v.

76 Ulinka Rublack, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford 2010) 81-124.

77 François Boucher, *Histoire du costume en Occident des origines à nos jours* (Paris 2001) 254.

78 AR, GRS, inv. nr. 890, preparatory investigation, f. 6r.

following an order from Archbishop d'Alsace-Boussu.⁷⁹ The villagers of the *Geuzenhoek* disputed the eviction because Brandt lived and worked in the house of Joannes Liets, a local Protestant. Brandt only provided his services within the privacy of this house, in full silence, and as Liets himself pointed out when the bailiff came to execute the eviction: 'I am free in my house!'⁸⁰

While Liets was seemingly correct, the location was not what had led the authorities to intervene. Just as in 1685, a recent geopolitical shift might have caused some extra unrest in the villages of the *Geuzenhoek*. When Emperor Charles VI of the newly established Austrian dynasty was accused of being too lenient towards the Dutch, interconfessional tensions in the Habsburg Netherlands were rekindled.⁸¹ It was within these already volatile circumstances that the commander of Sas van Gent decided to write a letter to the priest of Sint-Maria-Horebeke announcing Brandt's arrival. In this letter, the Dutch commander demanded that no interference would be taken in relation to Brandt's activities. If they ignored his command, the Catholics of Sas van Gent would experience a fate that was even worse.⁸² The imagination of the local Catholics subsequently ran wild. If a Reformed minister could visit their villages whenever some Dutch commander made a threat, how long would it be before the minority attained complete control over their parishes? How long before the Protestants would take over their churches? How long before Protestant ministers would replace their priests? The Catholic villagers testified in witness interviews that these dystopian images continuously haunted their minds ever since Brandt's arrival was announced.⁸³

It was this seemingly arrogant attitude that instigated massive outrage among local Catholics and left the authorities no other choice than to take action. It was considered a rift in the established division between public and private worship, and as a breach of the understanding that the Protestants would act 'in full silence and modesty'.⁸⁴ Thus, it was not so much *where* the minister's activities had taken place that caused the peaceful coexistence to temporarily break down. Rather it was the *way* in which these activities were imposed that was considered an assault on the dominance of Catholicism in the public domain.

The cases of 1685 and 1717 were eventually dismissed, but they are a testament to the precarious role of the division between public and private

79 RAG, AMM, inv. 135, report from 10 April 1717 on the eviction of Pieter Brandt.

80 AAM, FM, inv. nr. 44, 'Ejectio', f. 25v-26r.

81 Klaas van Gelder, 'Succession et stratégies de légitimation de l'empereur Charles VI dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux', in: Pierre-Olivier de Broux et al. (eds.), *La transmission du pouvoir monarchique: Entre droits et devoirs du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Brussels 2019) 117-132.

82 AAM, FM, inv. nr. 44, 'Ejectio', f. 23v-24v. See also: Sibolt Jan Michael Hulsbergen, 'De positie van de protestanten in Vlaanderen: Over een brief die de commandeur van Sas van Gent op 18 maart 1717 schreef aan de pastoor van St. Maria Horebeke', *Zeeuws Tijdschrift* 33:2 (1983) 54-58.

83 AAM, FM, inv. nr. 44, 'Ejectio', f. 30r-31r.

84 RAG, AMM, inv. 135, letter, 11 April 1717, f. 2r.



▲
 An engraving of a sermon in a Dutch Protestant church. Most attendants of the depicted sermon kept their hats on their heads. This conflicted with the Catholic custom of removing one's hat when entering an indoors environment. For that reason, keeping one's hat on was perceived as very 'Dutch' and 'Protestant' behaviour by the Catholics of the Habsburg Netherlands. Robert de Baudous, *Vera imago veteris ecclesiae apostolicae. Ware abcontrofeiting der alter Apostolischer Kirchen* (Amsterdam, ca. 1600-1625). © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.75955>.

space in keeping interreligious relations peaceful. Conflicts like these served as moments of re-opened negotiations about what was allowed and what was not, which led to a new balance in the coexistence between Protestants and Catholics. In other words, through conflicts, both confessional groups participated in shaping the definition of the public sphere. This is a feature that was recently recognised as playing a major role in confessional coexistence in the Dutch Republic.⁸⁵

Conclusion

It is obvious that there were clear religious differences between the Dutch Republic and the Habsburg Netherlands. While the North boasted a large religious diversity, the South knew but a few minority communities, making religious coexistence much more exceptional. Furthermore, the Dutch local authorities tried to uphold a confessionally neutral stance, whereas the Habsburg authorities strongly advocated Tridentine Catholicism as the state religion.

However, there is no doubt that the historiographical emphasis on these differences has blindsided attempts to recognise the similarities between both regions' system of confessional coexistence. This article tried to fill that gap and found a number of parallels between the Dutch Republic and the Habsburg Netherlands by means of an entangled approach. We found that the way in which confessional groups in both countries communicated and lived alongside each other was mostly relegated to the lower levels of society. The authorities did not or could not get involved and legal persecution of dissidents was limited to the bare minimum. Instead, it fell on the locals to establish a coexisting way of life. Through trial and error, they managed to conceive a framework of informal rules, regulating the behaviour and interactions of the confessional groups.

These sets of rules in the *Geuzenhoek* shared numerous similarities with several Dutch cases. Most importantly, the distinction between public worship and private devotion was a central feature in both regions. Respecting this boundary became a symbol of good neighbourliness and strategies revolving around it, such as the *Auslauf* or the use of private homes for congregations, were conventional practices in both the North and the South. This does not mean that this system was set in stone. Just like in the Dutch Republic, the Protestants of the *Geuzenhoek* occasionally challenged the status quo. By testing the limits of the system, conflicts erupted in which the minority tried to re-shape their place in society.

85 Genji Yasuhira, 'Confessional Coexistence and Perceptions of the "Public": Catholics' Agency in Negotiations on Poverty and Charity in

Utrecht, 1620s-1670s', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 132:4 (2017) 3-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10258>.

It is clear that the development of the system of coexistence in the *Geuzenhoek* was in direct dialogue with the transnational relationship between the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, be it through the *wafelijzerpolitiek* (literally translated as ‘waffle-iron politics’) with Sas van Gent, the presence of a Dutch garrison in Oudenaarde, the dispatch of Dutch preachers, or the bilateral attachment to the 1648 Treaty of Münster. These interdependencies created the circumstances in which locals had to establish the aforementioned coping strategies. Through the diplomatic entanglement between both sides of the Low Countries, a similar way of coexistence, laying stress on pragmatism and connivance, slowly came into existence in both the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic.

Hence, in my opinion, Doubleth had the right idea when he used the phrase ‘*stille oochluyckinge*’ with regard to the Habsburg Netherlands. After all, the Dutch States-General also called the *Geuzenhoek* ‘a community acting in silence and with connivance’.⁸⁶ When examining the *Geuzenhoek*, one must indeed acknowledge an awkward system. This was a system in which the religious majority knew about the minority, but because of their inability or unwillingness to act on it, they showed a passive consent of dissidence, whilst imposing active limitations to the extent in which this dissidence was allowed.

Roman Roobroeck is a doctoral researcher at the Department of History at Ghent University. His PhD project ‘The Geuzenhoek. Religious Coexistence and Multiple Identities in Rural Flanders (1600-1750)’ is funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO/26382). His field of expertise is seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious history of the Low Countries, with a focus on religious coexistence and confessional identities. E-mail: roman.roobroeck@ugent.be.

86 RAG, AMM, inv. 135, excerpt from the register of resolutions, f. 1r.