



PROJECT MUSE®

10. Calvinism in the Northern Netherlands from a farmer's point of view

Published by



Hermans Professor of Dutch and Comparative Literature at UCL and Director of the UCL Centre for Translation Studies, Professor Theo, et al.

From Revolt to Riches: Culture and History of the Low Countries, 1500–1700.

University College London, 2017.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81339>.

➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81339>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[172.69.6.215] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 23:16 GMT)

10

Calvinism in the Northern Netherlands from a farmer's point of view

Wiebe Bergsma

Translated by H. Bannatyne

Religion has no influence on life...little thought is given to religious practice. (Abel Eppens)

Introduction

An itinerant priest, on a clandestine mission in the province of Groningen in the seventeenth century, was astonished and bewildered at the decline of the Roman Catholic Church, the rise of so many different forms of heresy and the dominance which Reformed Protestantism had acquired in Groningen since 1594. Angrily he described the process by which Calvin's heresy had gained the upper hand; a heretical bonfire had blazed up in Germany, France and England, fanned by a seditious north wind in the teachings of Luther, Calvin and Menno Simons, all three of whom were apostates from the Catholic Church and monsters of evil. The sparks from this fire were blown throughout the Netherlands too, by foreigners who had either been drummed out of their own countries or had fled to escape the gallows. Wickedness reigned supreme; charity had disappeared; people's pockets were empty; the people were eager to hear new voices; their hearts, blown this way and that by the wind, responded like sulphur to a flame. Indeed, the people resembled unbridled horses or undisciplined children; moreover, the nobility were lost in drunkenness and lust. Many people were therefore receptive to

the new doctrines. Heretical books, slanderous pamphlets and verses could be found in every street, market and inn; they even ‘fell like snow’ on the Regent, Margaret of Parma.¹

This was, of course, a Jesuit’s view of the Reformation in the Netherlands. His account contrasts sharply with that of Abel Eppens, a sixteenth-century Calvinist farmer in exile, who could see little trace of interest in Reformed Protestantism in his native district, the Frisian Ommelanden, which forms the modern province of Groningen. This chapter sets out a number of general observations on the religion of Protestants in general and Calvinism in particular. Above all, I am concerned with what Margaret Spufford has called faith without history:

orthodoxy, like happiness, has no history. We can scarcely say anything of the overwhelming mass of parishioners who went on going to their parish churches, whatever the changes in liturgy and belief imposed on them. Amongst them were presumably some who went, not solely because worship was required of them by ecclesiastical law, but because they had a meaningful faith. But this faith has no history.²

Nonetheless, some sources have survived which make it possible to gain an impression of the faith of believers and churchgoers in general, although such sources must be used with caution. They include *acta ecclesiastica*, the records of the consistories, diaries, personal documents and reports of visits of inspection. My reflections on Calvinism in the Northern Netherlands will be based on one such document, a letter written in 1586 by Johannes van der Mijlen, a Reformed Protestant minister in Delft, to his former congregation in Appingedam in the Ommelanden, which was published with comments by the Frisian chronicler Abel Eppens (1534–90).³

Rusticus Eruditus

Abel Eppens was a learned man, a farmer from Eekwerd. His school-days in Groningen were followed by a *peregrinatio academica* through the universities of Louvain, Cologne and Wittenberg. He subsequently married a woman from a prominent family, took over his family’s farms and fathered eight children. He was a landowner of importance in the village, involved in the church and in local politics and the settlement of water management disputes. However, Eppens is remembered for more than just references in contemporary records or account books; while in exile he took up his pen and composed a detailed chronicle

of his times. He had increasingly identified himself with the cause of the Dutch Revolt, rapidly becoming well-known as an enemy of Spain. After Rennenberg's notorious coup in 1580, Eppens was forced to abandon his farm. During his ten years in exile in Emden, that 'refuge of the oppressed and the God-fearing', he produced a lengthy account of religious, political and economic developments garnished with quotations, original documents and personal reflections. He wrote about Luther's deathbed, Melanchthon's funeral, endemic unbelief and religious indifference; about lapwings and ways to improve milk yields; he wrote letters to his wayward son Eppo, who had given up reading the Bible and taken to frequenting ladies of easy virtue. And that is merely a sample.

Eppens' life and chronicle reflect the multi-faceted nature of religious life in the sixteenth century. He was born in an area where Anabaptists were numerous and active, even instigating a large-scale riot in 1534. At school, he heard the Catholic Church being severely criticised by Regnerus Praedinius, a scholar who was famed throughout Europe. In fact, the principal of one of Groningen's two municipal schools was secretly in sympathy with the arch-heretic, David Joris. Eppens went on to study at Catholic Louvain and Lutheran Wittenberg. He attended Melanchthon's lectures and was present at his funeral. The chronicle lists many categories of heretics for whom Eppens felt no sympathy: Anabaptists, libertines, atheists, Lutherans and the followers of Kaspar von Schwenckfeld, Sebastian Franck and David Joris. In addition to polemic and theological essays, Eppens recorded the stories he heard around him. One such story introduces the Beggar Willem Maler who, when asked for his opinion on Calvinists, Zwinglians and Lutherans, replied: 'That question is too difficult for me to answer. Just give me a nice piece of veal covered in orange sauce. That's a very tasty dish.'

Eppens was not indifferent or neutral in religious matters, nor did he sit on the fence. On the contrary, he was a convinced adherent of Reformed Protestantism. And it was that particular variation on the Christian theme which largely determined his view of events in the Ommelanden and East Friesland. Abroad in Emden he saw his ideal: a community of Calvinists led by Menso Alting, whom he greatly admired. He could only watch with sorrow the oppression suffered by the Reformed in his native district. His detailed description of religious life in both the Ommelanden and East Friesland includes theological debates, character sketches, judgements on and criticism of other variants of Christianity and sometimes letters in reproduction. One of these was the letter which the Delft minister Van der Mijlen sent in 1586 to the members of the Reformed congregation in Appingedam. I shall begin by

sketching the framework in which Eppens places the letter, then paraphrase its contents and finally offer some reflections on what it has to tell us.

Pastoral care by letter

Eppens contrasted the slow progress being made by Reformed Protestantism with the growth of Anabaptism. The Catholics tolerated the Anabaptists provided the latter paid up. The Reformed Church, however, was short of ministers, its services were restricted to private meetings of small groups of people and as a community it was hated. Even the troubles in the Ommelanden were blamed on the preaching of the true religion. These sad tidings were conveyed to Johannes van der Mijlen in Delft. In response, he wrote to console 'all the forsaken Christians' in Appingedam, and it was this letter which Eppens thought 'worthy of remembrance' and therefore copied, doubtless for the encouragement of his children, for whom he was compiling his chronicle.

Van der Mijlen had heard that there were still some pious, God-fearing Christians in Appingedam, members of the congregation who had not only spurned Roman idolatry and all manner of sects but had also held steadfastly to the true Reformed faith. They met every day in a private house to read the word of God and to offer one another comfort. Van der Mijlen thanked God that a few seeds still remained from the scattering of the church, seeds which could bear fruit in time. He was glad that the faithful were standing firm in the midst of the wolves and that his work in Appingedam had not been in vain. Many members of the congregation had fled to East Friesland, where they were bearing themselves in an edifying manner. 'We are united in the Spirit', wrote Van der Mijlen, expressing the hope that the remaining faithful would not lose courage in the face of tyranny, threats, sectarians and wicked men who might distract them briefly from the truth but could never tear them away from it altogether. As long as there were any individuals with a taste for God's word and a glimmering of knowledge, the congregation should make every effort to bring them into the fold. He told the members of the congregation to arm themselves against the enemies of the Gospels and to read diligently from the Holy Scriptures. It would do no harm to read Bullinger's *Hausbuch* at their meetings, as it contained the main points of Reformed doctrine. This would strengthen them in their faith and enable them to offer more effective resistance to the sectarians. Members who had strayed from the truth were to be guided

back on to the proper path. Van der Mijlen asked to be told the names of errant members and the reasons for their lapses so that he could write to admonish them with the word of God. He concluded by pleading with his former flock, in a warm pastoral tone, not to let their courage fail them. It was a benevolent letter, certainly in comparison with another epistle, dating from 1578, on unbelief in East Friesland, in which Van der Mijlen claimed that the people of that district showed ‘a loathing for the Word and for every valuable ordinance of the congregation’.

Historical background

The background to this letter can be reconstructed from Abel Eppens’ chronicle, which gives the impression that most of the population of Groningen and East Friesland were reluctant to commit themselves one way or the other. The ministers complained that they preached to no more than twenty or thirty people at a time. According to Eppens, unbelief was endemic and religious indifference widespread. In Emden, even the Jews were allowed their freedom, in the interests of trade. He thought that the hymn of faith had largely fallen silent. Nonetheless, Eppens was well informed about the various currents of religious opinion flowing through the Northern Netherlands, as is clear from the history of Appingedam itself.

To a twentieth-century eye, what Van der Mijlen and Eppens regarded as pernicious dissension looks like religious pluralism. The history of Appingedam provides an excellent illustration of such pluralism and of the interplay of magic and religion. Appingedam was notorious for numerous cases of witchcraft, and indeed might be described as the Endor of the Ommelanden. Eleven of its residents were burned at the stake for witchcraft. In 1587, Eppens ascribed the devil’s success in gaining so much power to the fact that the townspeople were ‘Papists’. Moreover, Appingedam was a hotbed of heresy. The Mennonite leader Obbe Philips had baptised people there in 1534. Jan van Batenburg, the revolutionary, sword-wielding church-robber, stayed for a short while in an inn in the town and had numerous followers in the area. Scenes reminiscent of Munster took place in the nearby village of ’t Zand, where a crowd led by a prophet who thought he was the Messiah went into a frenzy. Leenaert Bouwers, an Anabaptist missionary, claimed to have baptised no less than 130 people in Appingedam. When Mary of Hungary visited the town in 1545, she found one monk in the monastery who was a follower of another prophet with Messianic pretensions,

David Joris, the notorious spiritualist. Joris did indeed have many followers in the area; the sources published by Mellink confirm Eppens' jeremiads on this subject.

Amid the heretical voices raised in the Ommelanden, criticism of the mother church grew louder. Eppens wrote that many priests, inspired partly by the renowned schoolmasters Verrutius and Praedinius, began to preach in the style of Luther, Brenz and Melanchthon. The consecration of churches, the mass, matins, vigils and masses for the souls of the dead were abolished and mocked. Communion was celebrated in the Reformed manner, church services were held in the vernacular and the monks of Appingedam cried: 'Stay at home, dear friends. The Lord God is no more present here than He is in your own homes. Pray to God and call on Him there.'

It is clear from Eppens' account that the progress made by Calvinism in the Ommelanden was not without its ups and downs. The proclamation of the Religious Peace in 1578 seemed a promising development to the Calvinists, and the chronicle demonstrates its significance to the congregation of Appingedam. Johannes van der Mijlen was the first to preach there, on the Wednesday before Sant Gangen, in October 1578. He had been called from Twickelsum in East Friesland. He preached in the monastery's refectory, taking as his text Matthew 23: 'Woe unto you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites'. The church was then purged of altars and images. The same month saw the arrival of three other ministers from East Friesland: Johannes Bogerman senior, a former priest, and Johannes Aerarius and Obelus Ipius. Although we are told, by a prominent resident of Appingedam, Doede van Amsweer, who joined Eppens in exile, that their sermons attracted crowds of people from Appingedam and the surrounding villages, Eppens was not satisfied. As he saw it, while it was true that the Catholics no longer celebrated mass but did preach the Gospel, they were still not prepared to submit to the true apostolic Reformed Church. In other words, they were not willing to be examined, deny their past lives and reform their way of life.

Rennenberg's defection to Spain in 1580 drove many people, Eppens of course among them, to take refuge in Emden. In exile, Eppens saw interest in the Reformed religion wane, as many people wanted to make peace with Philip II in the interests of trade. Defeatism affected the exiles too. Even men who had been elders and deacons in Appingedam turned away from the Reformed Church and urged reconciliation with the enemy. These developments caused Eppens profound

sorrow. Having given up the fleshpots of his farm *religionis causa* he was now being compelled to watch the ruin of all that he had striven to build.

General remarks

This, then, was the background to Van der Mijlen's letter to his old congregation in Appingedam. Prompted by this letter, I shall now venture to make a number of sweeping statements, which I have supported with more detailed arguments elsewhere. Many of the issues raised would repay consideration in more depth. They include the wide variety of thinking within Calvinism itself, the role of Heinrich Bullinger's *Hausbuch*, Van der Mijlen's remark that Catholics and Anabaptists could not detach the members of the congregation from the truth, the letter's mild pastoral tone, the image of God portrayed by Van der Mijlen, which is different from the hackneyed representation to be found in other writers, the situation in Appingedam itself, the Anabaptists in the town and its environs, the letter's ecclesiology and the minister's involvement in the fortunes of his former flock. However, I shall look at no more than three of these topics.

The first point of interest is Van der Mijlen's surprise on hearing that there were still some church members left in Appingedam. Such surprise becomes understandable if we remember that Calvinists who had openly embraced Reformed Protestantism should have left the Ommelanden in 1580. The war did nothing to assist the growth of the Reformed Church. Fighting and plundering as they went, the troops of both sides burned and pillaged up and down the province. However, Van der Mijlen's surprise at the number of members remaining and Eppens' view that many people were reluctant to join the Reformed Church in the 1580s reflect the ambivalent nature of contemporary Calvinism as it has been demonstrated by A. Th. van Deursen and A. C. Duke, for example.⁴

On one hand, the Reformed Protestant Church was a broad church, with room for those who were unable or unwilling to become fully fledged members – 'adherents' (*liefhebbers*), as they were called. On the other hand, it was a community of those who were permitted to take holy communion. Anyone wishing to take communion had to become a member and members were supposed to destroy the old Adam in themselves. But, as the consistory clerks noted, when nature made her presence felt, the church members were subjected to church discipline, the *exercitium disciplinae ecclesiasticae*. Many people were prevented from

joining the church by its disciplinary practice. Indeed, adherents played a major role in the Northern Netherlands. In short, Eppens' remarks about small congregational rolls reflect both the specific situation in Appingedam and the nature of Calvinism in general.

Secondly, the letter illustrates the wide variety of religious belief in the Northern Netherlands. A religious spectrum which is familiar from other sources can be seen in both Eppens' own chronicle and the letter he reproduced. At one end of the spectrum we see those who formed part of the three major churches: Roman Catholicism, Reformed Protestantism and the numerous, different Anabaptist communities. The other extreme comprised the large numbers of people who were indifferent to religion in any form. The centre was occupied by another large group: those who were neutral or, in Eppens' words, sat on the fence. It was these people who for many years would not, could not or dared not commit themselves to one of the many religious options open to them. The letter expresses a profound fear of the attraction exerted by Anabaptism in all its forms which, to an even greater extent than in Holland and Zeeland, was characteristic of the Northern Netherlands, especially the present-day province of Friesland, where approximately a quarter of the population were Mennonite.

Thirdly, the letter provides still more evidence of the immense importance of Emden to the Reformation in the Netherlands in general and the more northerly provinces in particular. Johannes van der Mijlen and the other three ministers who, Eppens tells us, came to Appingedam in 1578 had all held posts in East Friesland. Emden's significance has been analysed by many historians. Large numbers of Lutherans, sacramentarians, followers of the Family of Love, of Karlstadt, Melchior Hoffman, Schwenckfeld and Franck found a temporary home in Emden from where they kept in touch with the Netherlands. The city was also an important publishing centre; the *Hausbuch* referred to by Van der Mijlen was printed there. Moreover, as Eppens makes very clear, Emden was the mother church for the congregations 'under the Cross'. Reformed ministers such as Van der Mijlen and the others I have mentioned received their training there. The synod of Emden in 1571 laid down the structure of the Reformed Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Lastly, Emden afforded a refuge to hundreds of prominent refugees from the Ommelanden. While none of this is new, Van der Mijlen's letter presents emphatic evidence of the role played by the city of Emden in the Reformation of the Northern Netherlands.⁵

Conclusion

Abel Eppens' chronicle shows that the situation in the Ommelanden in the last quarter of the sixteenth century was very different from that in the western part of the Netherlands. The difficulties encountered by the Reformed Church caused him great grief. He noted that there was no longer a significant difference between 'those of the Church' and 'the children of the world'. People did not want to go to church, preferring to stroll down Emden's main street or meet in the churchyard during the services or – which was even worse – opting for false sects like the Anabaptists. Perhaps we need not attach too much importance to Eppens' condemnation of church members for being too concerned with worldly things. The significant thing about his observation is that it helps us to understand the notion of a *purior ecclesia*, which was such a feature of sixteenth-century Calvinism.⁶

When Eppens points out that, while many people in the Ommelanden did not attend mass they would not join the Reformed Church and submit to its discipline either, his lamentations probably hide a considerable measure of historical truth.