



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

Review of Gorter, P. Gereformeerde migranten: de religieuze identiteit van Nederlandse gereformeerde migrantengemeenten in de rijkssteden Frankfurt am Main, Aken en Keulen (1555-1600)

Müller, J.M.

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Review

Peter Gorter, *Gereformeerde migranten. De religieuze identiteit van Nederlandse gereformeerde migrantengemeenten in de rijkssteden Frankfurt am Main, Aken en Keulen (1555-1600)*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2021, 235 pp. ISBN 97890808048693.



The Dutch- and French-speaking Reformed stranger congregations in the Holy Roman Empire and England have received a great deal of scholarly attention since the nineteenth century. A dominant strain of historiography has presented these communities as protagonists of new religious cultures or even of a new type of Reformation – the ‘Reformation of the refugees’, as the late Heiko Oberman called it. According to Oberman, Heinz Schilling, and other scholars, Reformed migrants developed new ‘theologies of exile’ and the experience of displacement turned them into hardened Calvinists who would later have a crucial impact on the religious landscape of the newly-founded Dutch Republic.

This perspective has come under criticism during the last decade. As newer scholarship has argued, both the experience of exile and

the identification of religious communities as marginalized and persecuted minorities were phenomena that were shared by members of all early modern religious confessions: Calvinists, Lutherans, Anabaptists, Mennonites, and even Catholics. As Jesse Spohnholz, Mirjam van Veen, and others have argued, the experience of exile did not necessarily lead to confessional hardening or distinct ‘exile theologies’ but could also inspire different outlooks and lead to religious compromise. This book develops a similar argument and fills an important scholarly gap by studying the interactions between three migrant communities and their local host societies in detail. Focusing on the Dutch-speaking Reformed congregations of Frankfurt, Cologne, and Aachen, Peter Gorter examines the religious identities of these groups and how they negotiated their positions within these three imperial cities. Gorter’s definition of ‘religious identity’ involves three aspects: theological ideas, rules (most notably church discipline), and practices.

This definition of religious identity allows Gorter to map the interactions between migrants and locals who adhered to different religious confessions. Through a meticulous analysis of an impressive body of source material, the book demonstrates convincingly that Reformed migrants often had to compromise and arrange themselves with local communities and authorities. In the first three chapters Gorter provides a chronological account of each of the three stranger churches; he then continues with four chapters that examine the negotiation of sacramental, liturgical, and doctrinal practices and the ways in which the three migrant communities established themselves in non-Reformed urban environments. The case studies presented in each of these chapters provide a nuanced subtext to the larger argument of the book. Indeed, theological ideas and specific practices are an important aspect of confessional identity, and openly professing them could require balancing acts in places where the authorities held different religious ideas. However, religious identities also involve more emotive and affective aspects, such as a sense of belonging to a specific group and community. The fact that believers were prepared to compromise on liturgical or even sacramental practices does not necessarily imply a loss of confessional identity.

As Gorter argues, early modern Reformed networks in Germany should not be characterized as communities of 'refugees', but rather of 'migrants'. This terminological choice is a reaction to the tropes that have long dominated Dutch and international church-historical accounts about these groups. Rather than being uprooted refugees who fled their homelands for the sake of their faith, Reformed migrants often had more pragmatic choices to leave the Low Countries. As Gorter argues, replacing 'refugees' with 'migrants' allows for a more contextualized discussion of the factors that informed the movements of the thousands of women and men who left the Netherlands for the German Rhineland.

Migration is sometimes addressed in rather casual terms, and the fact that people moved from one place to another is often mentioned only indirectly, such as in the case of the congregation of Aachen, where Reformed worship was no longer tolerated and its leaders tried to establish a new community in the town of Worms. When the ministers failed to convince the Worms authorities of their interpretation of the Holy Supper, 'the members spread over the stranger congregations of London, Frankfurt, and Wesel' (61). However, we should not forget that moving from Aachen to London and crossing the Channel was a dramatic event: not only individuals but entire families, including children and often elderly parents, had to be transported across dangerous terrain, especially during the Revolt in the Low Countries. Businesses had to be re-established in a new city and local commercial networks had to be explored and understood. Even without the heroic tropes of religious suffering and confessional steadfastness, migration was still a dramatic and often disruptive choice. The fact the people 'spread' over the various cities with Dutch Reformed stranger churches also illustrates the importance of such confessional networks that provided individuals with important lifelines.

Despite the necessity to conform to local religious environments, religious identities did not lose their significance but continued to inform allegiances, practices, and even practical decisions. This book offers an important nuance to the idea that confessional convictions and the struggle for a 'pure' Reformed community shaped all aspects of the lives of early modern Calvinist migrants, but its case studies also illustrate the complexities

of confessional identities, which always needed to be negotiated and adjusted to local circumstances. The choice to explore the significance of these identities on a local and communal level, in three important cities, makes this book an important contribution to the debate on early modern migration and religion. Written in Dutch, it will probably miss a wider international audience of experts on early modern religion and migration, but for those working on Dutch-speaking migrant communities this is an indispensable study.

Johannes Müller, Leiden University