Religious identity in the Low Countries 1520–1650

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1. Introduction

The opportunity to contribute an essay to this volume on the keyword "identity" is both daunting and stimulating. Daunting, because it invites me to reflect on my use of this keyword in a more abstract fashion than I have done until now. I trained and worked in a scholarly environment in the UK and the Netherlands that does not force the student or scholar to put their theoretical cards on the table. Stimulating, because it encourages me to reflect on the development of my work in its broader historiographical context.

In the three decades I have written about "identity", I have often been asked what I mean by the term. My answer has been fairly simple. I use the term "identity" to describe who people think and feel they are. This is not to say that identity is just a personal matter. Ideas and feelings about the self emerge in a social context—that of communities and groups of which people feel themselves to be a part, as well as the labels and attitudes assigned by outsiders. Identity formation is therefore not just a personal but very much a social and cultural process—one that is affected by politics, religion and culture, as much as by issues such as socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity.

When I trained as a historian in the 1980s, in the middle of the "cultural turn" in history, it seemed rather self-evident that identities were constructs, stories that we tell about ourselves and others. At that time, it was especially the construction of national identities that was attracting scholarly attention. Modernists, in particular, were excited by the idea that national identities were built on "invented traditions" which had been used to "imagine" national communities. Some early modernists were at that time working on the origins and deployment of ethnic stereotypes and this is also where I started. One of my first publications appeared in 1992 in a collection of essays on *Feindbilder*, "images of the enemy", that was edited by Franz Bosbach. It was based on my MA dissertation in which I had studied pamphlets and propaganda songs to research the European roots of anti-Hispanism in the Netherlands during the Dutch Revolt.[1]

Having learned to accept the constructed and unstable nature of identity as a matter of course, at the graduate level I wanted to explore how this played itself out in lived experiences. I was and still am especially interested in identity formation in periods

1 Pollmann, "Eine natürliche Feindschaft", p. 73–93.

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of rapid change at the level of the individual people who lived through these episodes, and this is what most of my work since has been about. I began by focusing on religious change, then moved on to studying how war, political change and memory affected identity formation; currently, I am exploring changing attitudes to old and new, to innovation and modernity. The religious, political and social identities I study tend to be under pressure, not just because of the spiritual, civic or ideological concerns of the individual, but also because people are being faced with political or religious changes that are not of their own making.

That I began my career by studying the impact of religious change on identities was no accident. My interest in this type of low-level change emerged from my family history. I was born of Roman Catholic parents who, like many other Dutch people in their generation, were in the process of abandoning their faith, and had definitively done so around the time I took my first communion. As I grew up, I came to realize, however, that secularization had turned my parents into ex-Catholics rather than non-Catholics. My father would sing the litany with his siblings while doing the dishes at my grandmother's home, and they would swap anticlerical jokes in a way that only Catholics do. Their Catholic upbringing meant that my parents shared memories of a frame of reference with their siblings and families, and in their social networks, a large part of which consisted of ex-Catholics like themselves. This involved, on the one hand, a common narrative about the world they were glad to have lost, but it also allowed them to retain a sense of belonging.

Having encountered the individual and generational negotiating of change in my own family, as a history student I became curious about this phenomenon in the past, and that drew me to studying the Reformations. How had individual people, their families and their communities coped with the enormous transition that was the Reformation? In the process of researching this topic, it turned out that I was writing about identity. In this chapter, I will first take a closer look at our keyword, and its relevance for the study of the Reformations, before turning to religious identity as a problem in the study of early modern Christianity, the reasons why it is important to the history of the early modern Low Countries, and the methods by which I have tried to study it. In doing so, and as I have been doing in much of my work, I will draw frequent comparisons with France.

2. Identity

Most of us use the term identity in one of three ways: to describe how people see themselves, how they imagine others, and how others imagine them. The current meanings of the term identity are ambiguous. In its original meaning, it means likeness, and so we still use it when we speak about identical twins or identity cards. From Immanuel Kant onwards, philosophical enquiry into the nature of the self, and the

relationship between mind and body, led to the question whether older people were "identical" to the person they had been when young, and if not, what that tells us about the self. This question triggered a shift in the meaning of the term, with a new focus on ways in which we as "selves" are different from other humans.[2]

Modern usage of the word identity has some roots in the work of Sigmund Freud, but in its most influential guise it was the work of psychologist Erik Erikson. Among students of early modern religion, Erikson is best known for his 1958 book *Young Man Luther*, a psycho-historical study of Martin Luther. Whereas Freud's work began with his role as a medical doctor who wanted to treat people with mental health issues, Erikson was interested in systematizing the study of the way human identity develops over time. He postulated that in the process of developing from one stage of our life to the next, we experience "identity crises". There is a steady core to our "selves", but this grows and changes in a dialectical process that makes us more mature and gives us the ability to move on and leave issues behind. To demonstrate this process, he turned to the biography of Martin Luther, in which, he argued, we could discern three such crises, of which his "Tower Experience" was of course the most famous. For Erikson, personal identity evolves not just as a result of family pressures and one's individual life trajectory, but also under the influence of society and social groups. Thus, Erikson argued that it was the culture in which Luther had grown up, with its fear of a punitive God, of hell and long years in purgatory, that shaped his identity and identity crises, and which, in its turn, explained why society was "ready" for Luther's ideas.[3]

Why did this notion of identity become so influential? In 1983 a very useful answer to this question was formulated by Philip Gleason. He argued that the conceptual appeal of identity was owing to its promise of understanding individuals in their relationship to society and vice versa. When young people in the 1960s rebelled against the status quo, Erikson's youth psychology was quickly popularized. In Reformation history, we can see some of its influence, for instance, in the work of Steven Ozment, and his interest in the formation of young Protestants, like the Behaim boys. Some work was also done on the Reformation as a youth rebellion.[4]

In the meantime, however, there had also emerged another reading of identity, which was the product of sociologists who had redeveloped Freud's ideas on identification to think about the process by which people come to appropriate one or more possible identities through the use of "reference groups" they do or do not want to identify with. This tradition was picked up by sociologists like Ervin Goffman, who had been studying the development of self-consciousness, and had become increasingly convinced that

2 Gleason, "Identifying Identity", p. 910–931.

3 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*. On its reception, e. g., Zock, "Erik H. Erikson, Young Man Luther", p. 61–75.

4 Moller, "Youth as a Force in the Modern World", p. 237–260; Ozment, *Three Behaim Boys*. A recent reflection on the role of age and generations in the Reformation in Walsham, "The Reformation of the Generations", p. 93–121.

identity was created primarily by social pressures.[5] In the sociologists' reading, Gleason noted, identity was not "deep, internal and permanent", as Erikson had argued, but "shallow, external and evanescent". Gleason showed that this line of thinking was as relevant to public debate as Erikson's. In the middle of the twentieth century policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic worried about the potential instabilities of personal and national identity, in the face of mass culture, totalitarian indoctrination and "brain-washing". At the same time, the civil rights movement challenged the racist foundations of the identity politics that had led to the exclusion, oppression and marginalization of people of colour.[6]

By the late 1960s identity was a buzzword, such as memory was to be forty years later. This seemed to pose scholarly risks, partly because scholars used the term in different ways, partly because it was deployed so generically in public debate that the term rapidly began to lose meaning. In 1983, Gleason argued that historians should use the word identity with extreme caution. Had he written the article ten years later, I think he would have been less concerned. At that stage, the scholarly solution for the identity crisis surrounding the term identity had been found in social constructivism, which allows us to see that both personal and social identities can be experienced as stable and continuous while simultaneously being constantly in flux.[7] As constructivist ideas began to spread across the social sciences and humanities, and were married to those of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, identity became identities, sex became gender, and nations became imagined communities.

The impact of this "cultural turn" in history has been enormous.[8] When the selection for the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* was made, for instance, concepts such as religion, identity, individual, sex, self, and body had not made the cut.[9] Apparently they were deemed either self-evidently stable or irrelevant to historiography. Yet as a result of the cultural turn, categories that had so far been treated as ahistorical proved to have a relevant history too. In historical practice, they started to play a key role from the 1990s, and in the process they also transformed our view of the Reformations. That is not to say the term identity became less controversial. In an influential article published in 2000, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argued that the word was made to do too many things at once, and that we should distinguish between "identification", "self-understanding" and "commonality". Yet since in early modern European societies the understanding of the self is so closely tied to that of groups and communities, it seems to me that in the early modern history of religion, this division creates more

5 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*.

6 Gleason, "Identifying Identity".

7 Frijhoff, "Identiteit en identiteitsbesef", p. 614–634.

8 Bachmann-Medick, "Cultural Turns".

9 Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.

conceptual problems than it would solve. Thus for now, I use the terms identity and identity formation.[10]

3. The Reformation Context

When I started graduate work around 1990, one of the most central and exciting debates revolved around the question to what extent, and by what standards, the Reformation could be judged to be a success. Textbooks such as Geoffrey Elton's *Reformation Europe* (1963) presented the Reformation as "complete" by 1559. Studying the Reformation, in that take, meant to describe the work of the Protestant Reformers and the political consolidation that had led to the acceptance of Protestantism by rulers in northwestern Europe. The Counter-Reformation was then a phase that followed. Yet as social historians of early modern Europe became attuned to the differences between popular and elite culture, they began to ask how, and at what pace, new religious ideals had actually been diffused and accepted.

It was historians of Catholicism who first explored such questions, perhaps not least because they considered them helpful to explain why the old church had been so slow to rally to the challenges posed by Luther. A 1963 book by Abbé Jacques Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du Moyen Âge*, used new quantitative methods to assess the religious commitment of believers in fifteenth-century Flanders. He concluded they had a shallow understanding of doctrine, were committed to "superstitions", and were lax both in their taking of the sacraments and in their morality.[11] Inspired by Toussaert, Jean Delumeau in 1971 posed a similar question for France: how Christian had people actually been before the Reformation? After all, they were illiterate, and their priests were poorly trained and not celibate. Most people took communion only once a year. His "acculturation thesis" argued that the "Christianisation" of French Catholics had been a slow and mostly post-Tridentine process.[12]

In the 1980s and 1990s, the "cultural turn" turned such questions on their head. New scholarship encouraged us to study the believers who "identified" as Christians in the Middle Ages on their own terms, rather than to assess how medieval Christians performed by post-Tridentine standards. These had other ideas of what constituted a good Christian than post-Tridentine Catholics did a century later, while these, in turn, did not think like Catholics in the twentieth century.[13] In England, Eamon Duffy encouraged readers to abandon the term Catholicism for medieval Christianity, and

10 Brubaker, Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", p. 1–47.

11 Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux, la vie et la pratique religieuse*.

12 Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages", p. 519–552.

13 An early critique of this approach is found in Galpern, *The Religions of the People in Sixteenth Century Champagne*, p. 2; see also Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain*.

to use the term "traditional Christians" for those who remained committed to pre-Reformation beliefs and practices.[14]

This did not, of course, resolve the question in what ways believers had come to accept change, a question which had by now also begun to preoccupy students of Protestantism. In a seminal article in *Past & Present,* Gerald Strauss argued in 1971 that it took very long for Lutheran norms and practices to be implemented and interiorised in Germany.[15] Strauss arrived at such conclusions through the study of education efforts and visitations, the very same sources that were being used by students of Catholicism. In Germany, Walter Zeeden was the first to compare and note the similarities between Protestant and Catholic methods to indoctrinate believers. The discovery that the toolkit of Catholic and Protestant Reformers had in fact been very similar was all the more exciting because it chimed with the oecumenical trends of the time. Yet it also gained a new political edge. In France, Robert Muchembled suggested we should see both Catholics and Protestant Reformations fundamentally as efforts not just to Christianise, but also to discipline the lower classes; in Germany, Schilling and Reinhard analysed how political and religious interests conspired to consolidate and politicise confessional difference.

How quickly could we expect such efforts to have succeeded?[16] Comparing similarities as well as differences between Catholic and Protestant measures to effectuate change was a real breath of fresh air. Yet measuring their impact proved complicated. Scholars developed new ways to study what influence the Reformation of theology and institutions had in fact had on religious life on the ground, and on religious identities. New social history methods were tested to quantify changing religious expressions in wills, and the nature of bequests.[17] The spending of money at pilgrimage sites and gifts for church building could be an indication of confessional commitment.[18] Visitation reports were being mined for signs of resistance and obstruction, and the persistence of Catholic or "superstitious" practices. Scholars counted the number of clerical complaints in visitation records and cases of excommunication in consistory records.[19] All this confirmed that reforming Europe had not been a swift process; it took many, many

14 Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*.

15 Strauss, "Success and Failure", p. 30–63.

16 Zeeden, "Grundlagen und Wege der Konfessionsbildung"; Muchembled, *L'invention de l'homme moderne*. A summary of Schilling's and Reinhardt's views of "Konfessionalisierung" in Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation*; Schmidt, "Sozialdisziplinierung", p. 639–682.

17 For a discussion of this approach, see e. g. Alsop, "Religious Preambles", p. 19–27.

18 E. g. Marnef, *Antwerp in the Age of Reformation*, p. 48–56.

19 See for visitations, e. g., Vogler and Estebe, "La genèse d'une société protestante". On the quantification of church discipline, see Kingdon, "The Control of Morals in Calvin's Geneva", p. 3–16; Schilling, "Reformierte Kirchenzucht als Sozialdisziplinierung", p. 261–327. A review of this method is found in Pollmann, "Off the Record", p. 423–438.

decades before believers internalised the new confessional standards set by the reformers. In the new histories of the Reformations, therefore, the end date is no longer 1559 but 1648, or even later, at the start of the Enlightenment.[20] In the process, however, the Reformations had also been recast as a top-down process that was driven by church and state, in which the role of individual believers was reduced to the question of whether they accepted or resisted change.[21]

To me, as a young scholar who was reading around for inspiration, this picture did not look altogether satisfactory. This was partly because I looked at it from a Netherlandish perspective rather than from the German or British. In the Low Countries, reformation ideas had initially emerged and spread as they had in France, from the bottom-up, in the face of fierce persecutions, and without consistent clerical input. It was evident that many believers were self-confident enough to exercise a great deal of religious agency; among those arrested for heresy between 1517–1566 were former priests and monks, but also weavers, bakers, hatmakers, and even middle-class women. Researchers from the Low Countries had already devoted considerable interest to studying the social profile of the first generation of Calvinists. As in France, they had done so by studying the victims of persecution as well as Reformed activists. This had helped to disprove arguments about Calvinism as the faith of either the poor, the bourgeois, or the nobility—adherents came from all those groups. But a lack of qualitative sources meant such analyses remained nevertheless quite schematic.[22]

In the Netherlands, moreover, it was evident that many of these lay believers were highly eclectic in their beliefs. Their interest in dissenting ideas very often did not lead to a clear confessional choice. It was usually their opponents who in the sources labelled them as martinists, Calvinists, anabaptists, spiritualists, libertines, or adamites. They themselves insisted they were just "Christians".[23] True, both in France and the Netherlands, persecution unwittingly resulted in the hardening of confessional differences.[24] Work on religious exiles by Johan Decavele, Andrew Pettegree and Heinz Schilling has suggested that the faith of many eclectic believers became more distinctly Protestant while in exile. Exiles banded together in "Stranger Churches", which themselves defined their theological and ecclesiological basis through the confrontation with other exiles as

20 Rublack, *Reformation Europe* runs to 1648; MacCulloch, *Reformation*.

21 Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation*; Schmidt, "Sozialdisziplinierung".

22 Moreau, "La corrélation", p. 286–301. Decavele, *De dageraad van de reformatie in Vlaanderen*; Duke, *Reformation and Revolt*. For France, see, e. g., Davis, *Society and Culture*; Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion*; Heller, *The Conquest of Poverty*.

23 Duke, *Reformation and Revolt*; Trapman, "Le rôle des 'sacramentaires'", p. 1–24.

24 Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology*.

well as the host communities.[25] Yet, there were also a considerable number of believers who themselves refused to choose between the new confessions, as Thierry Wanegffelen and Allan Galpern noted for France, and Juliaan Woltjer and others did for the Low Countries. These believers wanted to remain "Christians".[26]

For the Netherlands, the existence of this phenomenon is easier to prove than in France, because it seems to have lasted longer. When the Dutch Revolt at last produced a state in which Protestantism was legalised, from around 1580, the Reformed churches acquired a monopoly on public worship, but the authorities did not follow this up with legislation to force people to actually attend this 'public church'. Because "freedom of conscience" was enshrined in the 1579 Union of Utrecht, which developed into the constitution of the Dutch Republic, people could not be challenged in court for their religious ideas (this, incidentally, also virtually put an end to witch trials, although not to prosecutions for atheism).[27]

The Dutch Reformed churches, moreover, themselves only admitted those to the Lord's supper who, as adults, had been prepared to subscribe to the Heidelberg catechism and the Dutch confession. But since these churches could only exercise discipline over members, many male believers, especially, never took the step to formally join the church, or only did so when they were middle-aged. To be sure, many non-members attended church, where they were known as *liefhebbers* or amateurs. Yet others opted to attend what started as Catholic, Mennonite and Lutheran house-churches, which were officially banned, but nevertheless were often tolerated by the authorities. While confessional subcultures evolved rapidly, they thus did so with virtually no positive government input.[28] This was quite unlike the situation in France, where the regime became more and more adamant that one had to be a Catholic to be a loyal subject, and Calvinists were steadily marginalised long before the formal Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 put an end to confessional coexistence.[29]

While ideas on confessionalisation as a politically driven, top-down process thus did not sit comfortably with the French or Dutch situation, in the 1990s Dutch scholars tended to assume that by 1650 voluntary church membership had nevertheless led to the emergence of a religiously segregated society, in which people identified so strongly with their churches that they tried to stay within their own confessional subculture.[30] This is certainly how Dutch society had worked between 1880 and 1960, and in the

25 Decavele, *De dageraad van de reformatie in Vlaanderen*; Schilling, *Niederlandische Exulanten im 16. Jahrhundert*; Pettegree, *Emden and the Dutch Revolt*. This view is nuanced in Spohnholz, *The Tactics of Toleration*.

26 Galpern, *Religions of the People*; Wanegffelen, *Ni Rome ni Genève*; Woltjer, *Friesland in hervormingstijd*.

27 Mout, "Limits and Debates", p. 37–47.

28 Hsia and van Nierop, *Calvinism and Religious Toleration*.

29 Tallon, *Conscience nationale*.

30 In most scholarship this has remained implicit, but see Groenveld, *Huisgenoten des geloofs*.

world in which my parents and grandparents had grown up; historians tended to project this image back onto the past.

Yet better local studies that emerged in the 1980s showed that commitment to these subcultures was by no means universal or stable. By 1620 only about 20% of the adult population of a city like Haarlem was a registered member of the Reformed churches, another 20% probably identified as Catholic, and there were 10% Lutherans and Mennonites; among the others were many *liefhebbers*, who attended church regularly but never joined, or deferred that decision until they were older. Some people shopped around between churches, and there were mixed marriages and conversions.[31] Although it is clear that people tended to take religion as seriously as they had always done, it seems that they had taken advantage of the chance to exercise the right to choose their own type of confessional allegiance.[32] Moreover, in everyday life and sociability, there prevailed what Willem Frijhoff in 1985 termed *omgangsoecumene*, a pragmatic acceptance of religious difference in everyday social interaction.[33]

4. Studying Believers' Identities

In the Dutch context, it is thus pertinent to ask, first, how and why people made these religious choices, and secondly, what happened to them if they did. Yet how to answer such questions? As we have seen, there had been attempts to create a social profile for sixteenth-century Calvinists especially. Yet this only went so far—indeed, booksellers were overrepresented in the Calvinist minorities in France and the Netherlands, for instance, yet that did not explain why some booksellers did, and others did not, end up opting to break with the church. In the seventeenth century, women were overrepresented in the membership of all Dutch churches, but this was as yet unexplained.[34]

When it came to studying individual decisions, the 1990s literature was still heavily reliant on two much older types of explanation—the one religious, the other related to socio-economic factors. The first considered religious choice as a process of conversion. In the Christian tradition there are of course two cultural scripts for describing a conversion—that of Paul, who had a sudden insight on the road to Damascus, and that of Augustine, which is about a long and arduous struggle.[35] Both were used very frequently in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to describe conversions to a more religious life *within* a confession.

31 Spaans, *Haarlem na de Reformatie*; Pollmann, "From Freedom of Conscience to Confessional Segregation", p. 123–148.

32 The category of the *liefhebber* was highlighted in van Deursen, *Bavianen en slijkgeuzen*.

33 Frijhoff, "Katholieke toekomstverwachting ten tijde van de Republiek", p. 430–459.

34 Pollmann, "Women and Religion", p. 162–182.

35 Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine", p. 3–34.

Yet while Reformation scholars widely assumed that such "conversion" experiences had also driven people to *change* confessions, I noted that very few Protestant conversion narratives were actually written in order to account for a change of confession or a break with Rome. The few converts who wrote a conversion narrative, like Luther, tended to do so not as an end in itself, but as an explanation or excuse for something else. The most extensive account of Luther's *Turmerlebnis*, for instance, emerged in the introduction to his collected works, in which he tells how many younger followers found it hard to understand why he had not made a clean break with Rome sooner. The story of the tower experience was introduced to explain how he had arrived at his theology.[36]

If and when sixteenth-century Protestants reflected on their decision to leave the old church, they tended to do so not in terms of conversion but as the result of a learning process; once they had been ignorant, but now they had become knowledgeable. This is very literally so, for instance, in the memoirs of Thomas Platter from Basel, whose quest to become literate fused with his decision to break with the old church.[37] Such a development did not require one to kill the old Adam, or to become a new man; rather, believers could conceive of it as a way of growing up. They were like children who had "attained knowledge". This had several advantages. First, it allowed them to retain some sense of continuity with their former selves, and perhaps also to retain the connection with their relatives and ancestors. After all, one of the most frequent and stinging questions traditional Christians could ask of dissenters was whether they believed their ancestors were in hell. Many Protestants solved this problem by arguing that their ancestors would be forgiven because they simply could not have known. Secondly, this type of reasoning also fitted the general rhetoric that Protestants used when addressing Catholic laypeople; these were not bad, but "ignorant" and "deceived". Their beliefs were often dismissed as those of "little women" and the poor.[38]

The self-image of Protestants as more intelligent, educated, and literate was carried over into the second way of thinking about religious choice in the Reformation, that of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Protestants (and many Catholics) have argued that individual agency and spirituality was itself either cause or effect of Reformation thought, and was thus largely restricted to Protestants.[39] This case was and is usually made with reference especially to the English Puritans, who also furnished the spiritual autobiographies that allowed Weber to study the "Puritan mind". Yet as sources these are, in fact, not at all typical for first-generation Calvinists on the continent. These only began to write such texts in the second half of the seventeenth century, under the influence of Puritan and Pietist models. By that time, they no longer

36 Pollmann, "A Different Road to God", p. 47–64.

37 Le Roy Ladurie, *Le siècle des Platter*.

38 Pollmann, "A Different Road to God". More extensive comments on the "scripting" of personal religious experience in Pollmann, *Memory*, p. 18–46.

39 Pollmann, "Being a Catholic", p. 165–182.

described choosing a new confession, but a rebirth within the faith in which they had grown up.[40] As an explanation for the conversion of first-generation Protestants, I found Weber of no help at all.

With so few Protestant conversion narratives in evidence, how then can one study religious choices and their consequences? In my attempts to do so, I have usually stayed clear of institutional sources, but combined a number of approaches that often involved the study of non-institutional narrative sources such as diaries, chronicles, memoirs, letters and poetry, even if these did not fit traditional notions of spiritual life-writing. I was by no means the only scholar to start using such material in new ways. James Amelang pioneered it for artisans' texts, Hans Rudolf Velten and Wiebe Bergsma for diaries, Susanne Rau for German chronicles, and Geoff Mortimer, Hans Medick and Benigna von Krusenstjern did so for the Thirty Years War.[41]

This material is not necessarily easy to use. Early modern diarists, chroniclers and memoirists did not see introspection or the recording of emotions as their prime goal and are often frustratingly silent on matters that we might deem private. Yet they are very informative both on what mattered to them, and on issues of practice. And by following them on that route, we can assess very well how they weighed the pros and cons of different religious positions. In the context of the urbanised Low Countries where literacy rates were exceptionally high, this is an approach that does not just reflect the voices of the elites. The rise of "microhistory" encouraged the use of sources on random but well-documented individuals from the past, to explore past patterns of thought. While these sources are of course not "representative", they do allow us to probe and better understand some of the motives for patterns of action and speech that we see emerge more anecdotally, or in fragments, in other sources such as judicial records or consistories.[42]

My first major exercise in doing this was by studying Arnoldus Buchelius (1565–1641), an exceptionally well-documented humanist lawyer from Utrecht, who was baptised a Catholic in 1565, spent some time without religious affiliation, then joined the "libertine" Reformed church that his wife attended, and ultimately evolved into a hard-line Calvinist. In the process he never reflected in writing on that change himself, but it was quite possible to follow him during this development. Using his writings, I argued that a failed suicide attempt constituted crucial evidence to him that he was in God's hand, but that this was unrelated to his confessional choice. In organised religion, he searched especially for a way to keep order in his world, a world in which everything else had changed as a result of the Dutch Revolt. This is also what made him so hard-line, at

40 Pollmann, "A Different Road to God".

41 Bergsma, *De wereld volgens Abel Eppens*; Velten, *Das selbst geschriebene Leben*; von Krusenstjern, Medick, and Veit, *Zwischen Alltag und Katastrophe*; Amelang, *The Flight of Icarus*; Rau, *Geschichte und Konfession*; Mortimer, *Eyewitness Accounts*.

42 Pollmann, *Memory*, p. 18–46; Pollmann, "Archiving the Present and Chronicling", p. 231–252.

least in theory. It led me to conclude that "lay believers made their religious choices not just on the basis of doctrine, but weighed the different, and contradictory, benefits of religious continuity, godly living and harmony between the civic and religious elements of the social order."

With hindsight, some theoretical reading on identity might actually have helped me contextualise the discovery that I struggled to articulate while working on my doctoral dissertation, i. e., that religious identity formation is a religious process but not *just* a religious process.

> One of the great attractions of the studying of individuals is that it forces us to reintegrate the different branches into which the historical profession has split the object of its studies. Individuals are not just political, intellectual, economic, religious, gendered or local animals; they are all these things at once. Even if we study them because we are interested in their capacity as farmers, university professors or widows, we have to understand their other capacities as well.[43]

Perhaps we will eventually be able to build on the theorising of intersectionality, to better study and understand how different identities intersect to create positions of power or disadvantage. This might also help to account, for instance, for the role that notions of masculinity and femininity played in the spread of new religious ideas.

My second major question about Buchelius was how he had managed to keep up emotive friendships with non-Calvinists, while simultaneously being a hard-line Calvinist in his own church. As a member of the consistory, he insisted on orthodoxy, yet with his non-Calvinist friends, he communicated in non-confessional terms, which focused on pietas and generic Christian values.[44] The latter observation, especially, helped to explain the practical dimensions of the *Omgangsoecumene* that helped to keep the peace in the urban corporate culture that continued to flourish in Dutch towns. Guilds, militia companies and literary societies continued to function with a mixed religious membership. Whereas earlier scholars argued that Dutch society of the seventeenth century consisted of some tolerant and some intolerant people, Buchelius' case and comparisons with some others suggested that many Dutch believers operated two norms for religiosity at once, one confessional, and another much more practice-based and generically Christian. They decided which one to use dependent on the setting and situation.[45]

43 Pollmann, *Religious Choice*, p. 10.

44 Pollmann, *Religious Choice*.

45 Pollmann, *Religious Choice*; Pollmann, "The Bond of Christian Piety", p. 53–71.

5. Catholic Violence and Catholic Identity

My dissection of Buchelius' development was useful in rethinking the process of religious choice, as something that was neither social/political or religious, but both. In a Netherlandish context, the next question that now presented itself for further exploration was, first, to see what would happen if we were to read texts like those of Buchelius' comparatively, and secondly, to see what light this might shed on the other side of the religious spectrum in the Low Countries, that of the people who had opted to stick with Catholicism.

Whereas there was an established tradition of thinking about choices for Protestantism as an individual issue, this was not the case for Catholics. In the Low Countries, as elsewhere in Europe, Catholic historiography was shaped both by its clerical roots and by the abundance of institutional sources. For a long time, the interest in orthodox laypeople as religious agents was very limited, and where it existed, ecclesiastical archives proved not the best place to do research on the role of the laity.[46] Inquisition archives, so exceptionally rich when it comes to researching dissent, are not necessarily the best place to study mainstream religion.

My new focus on Catholics was also inspired by a growing interest in the history of religious violence. In France there was a tradition of seeing "religion" as the "cloak" for political and economic self-interest in the wars of religion, a position that is sometimes associated with the work of Henri Hauser, but that also goes back to the seventeenth century. Yet from the 1980s Natalie Zemon Davis and Denis Crouzet were arguing that the popular violence in the French wars of religion was intrinsically religious, and was triggered by the presence of Calvinists in Catholic communities that were trying to protect the *corpus christianum* against the mostly symbolic attacks on their religious values by Calvinists. The conflicts in France, the Low Countries, and England that historians of the 1970s had studied as "revolutions" were now being recast as "wars of religion".[47]

To scholars of the Netherlands, the work on France revived the question why there was so much less popular violence by Catholics in the Low Countries.[48] These Catholics, after all, encountered as big a threat to their values as their co-religionists in France, when in the 1560s Calvinists began to break images and then to attack the clergy.

As Peter Marshall has argued for England, it was not self-explanatory that traditional Christians self-identified as Catholics.[49] That they should have mobilised as such was

46 Pollmann, "Being a Catholic".

47 Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu*; Holt, "Putting Religion Back", p. 524–551.

48 Van Nierop, "Similar Problems, Different Outcomes", p. 26–56; Woltjer, "Geweld tijdens de godsdienstoorlogen in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden: een vergelijking" , translated as Woltjer, "Violence during the Wars of Religion", p. 26–45; Benedict, Marnef, van Nierop, and Venard, *Reformation*.

49 Marshall, "Is the Pope Catholic".

not inevitable. Calvinists, moreover, were not born as outsiders—most of them were ex-Catholics, who had many ties to others in their societies. Comparing the situations in France and the Low Countries, I noticed that much of the violence in France had in fact been headed by militant clerics, who for some time had been developing a new and much more aggressive ethos which they now used to mobilise the laity for the defence of community. In this reading it became the duty of "good Catholics" to fight Protestantism if the authorities failed to do so.[50] In the Low Countries, by contrast, laypeople felt little commitment to come to the rescue of the clergy. As the Catholic chronicler Marcus van Vaernewijck recorded in the summer of 1566, Catholics in Ghent were unwilling to pay for the defence of churches, saying:

> 'tis their war, 'tis their business, the [Calvinists] are preaching against their soup bowl and avarice and other abuses, and many of the [Calvinist] preachers are runaway friars and monks, so it's their own sort who are the source of this unrest and the errors, and it would be much more sensible for them to control and resist their own kind themselves […] but they want to urge others to fight while they themselves sit back comfortably, waiting to hear later how things have gone.[51]

Even after the great wave of Calvinist iconoclasm and rebellion in 1566, Catholics barely organised. In 1572, they did not mobilise to stop the violent Reformation of the rebellious cities in Holland and Zeeland, while around 1580, Calvinists were able to take control over a string of Flemish and Brabantine cities without eliciting more than passive popular resistance. This demanded an explanation, especially because after 1585, the Habsburg southern Netherlands would rapidly turn into a bulwark of militant Counter-Reformation piety.[52]

In my *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520–1635* (2011), I used the writings of individual Catholics, mostly urban chroniclers and female poets, to chart how individual Christians initially rejected violent solutions to the problem of heresy because they continued to see their kinsmen and fellow citizens among the Calvinist crowds. Unlike in France, there was no clerical leadership to encourage confessional mobilisation. In the Netherlands the clergy had been told, as early as the 1520s, not to preach about heresy to the laity, because this might just put ideas into their heads. Instead, they preached that the laity should focus on its own sins and leave it up to clerics to sort out ecclesiastical matters.[53] Contacts with French clergy were limited during the Valois-Habsburg wars, and there was a ban on studying in France, for instance. Moreover, clergy

50 Pollmann "Countering the Reformation", p. 83–120.

51 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, there p. 67.

52 Harline and Put, *A Bishop's Tale*.

53 Pollmann, "Each Should Tend His Own Garden", p. 29–45.

in the Netherlands was preoccupied with a controversial plan to reform the bishoprics. For this reason, there was almost no effort to unite Catholics around their confessional identity. Only when the Flemish and Brabantine cities were forcibly reformed, around 1580, did traditional believers develop a greater sense of Catholic solidarity, and a heightened sense of antagonism towards Protestants. In Brussels, the patrician widow Katharyna Boudewijns wrote poetry in order to encourage mobilisation:

> You Catholics make sure
> that Calvin be chased away
> and Luther eradicated
> with their senseless ministers.
> Get on the move, you Calvinists,
> full of mutiny and discord.
> You've lived in Brussels all too long.
> Of your tyranny and thieving
> we have seen quite enough.[54]

When the Habsburgs reconquered the southern Low Countries in 1585, they heeded Boudewijns' call to expel the Protestants. Even so, Protestants were given a grace period in which to decide whether they chose to reconcile with the church, or to sell their property and leave. About 100,000 Protestants went, at first mainly to cities like Frankfurt and Bremen, but later mostly to the Dutch Republic. For the subjects who remained, the Habsburgs used a familiar strategy to force closure to civic conflict, that had also been deployed in the French edicts of pacification and that eventually was to be part of Henri IV's Edict of Nantes. The peace agreements, by which the Habsburgs overlords "reconciled" the cities, all began with an oblivion clause that legislated for a full amnesty and the "forgetting" of civic conflict and any previous war crimes. This forced all parties to accept the status quo, and allowed any subjects who were prepared to make their peace with the Catholic church and wanted to make a fresh start, to do so.[55]

Yet this Habsburg policy does not in itself account for the rapidity with which the Southern Netherlands from 1585 were to turn into a bulwark of Counter-Reformation. Habsburg state power as such had not notably increased, and the Tridentine agenda was not easy to implement in the war-torn provinces. One of the explanations I presented in my book was that the Habsburg regime sought the help of thousands of former Catholic refugees, who now returned to their homesteads. When in exile, Catholic elites, both lay and clerical, had found a safe haven in Cologne, Liège or Douai. There, Netherlandish Jesuits especially had begun to test new methods to actively involve

54 Cited in Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, p. 123–124.

55 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, p. 159–175; on this strategy, see Pollmann, *Memory*, p. 140–158.

lay men and women in the struggle against heresy, for instance, through the new confraternities. The Jesuits now furnished arguments that Catholic activists could use in everyday discussions with heretics, and offered new forms of sociability that encouraged joint resolve and action. This effort was to pay off also politically. As Geert Janssen has subsequently demonstrated, the Habsburg regime followed the advice of bishop Willem Lindanus to put these former exiles in charge of urban politics. This sealed a much closer collaboration between upper- and middle-ranking clerics and local Catholic leadership to rebuild the cities as self-identifying Catholic bulwarks against heresy, and to deliver thereby a new form of Habsburg leadership on the ground.[56]

Even so, the campaign could only succeed because, as a consequence of the wars and the local Calvinist regimes, there emerged a much greater sense of Catholic distinctiveness than had been in evidence twenty years earlier. This created room for a Counter-Reformation "from the middle", in which laypeople and clerics could collaborate in new confraternities, in investments in sacred spaces, in rituals and in education. This process was to gather pace from 1598, when the Habsburg Low Countries passed into the hands of the "Archdukes", the Infanta Isabella and her husband Albert of Austria. Luc Duerloo had shown that these royals treated religion as a key tool in winning the war in the heretical North and invited active involvement of the population by arguing that there was a "new covenant" between the Virgin Mary and their Netherlandish subjects, and that devotion could help win the war.[57] Their message was amplified by Flemish artists such as Peter Paul Rubens—son of a one-time Protestant refugee—and Theodor Thulden. How successful they were is also evident from the large numbers who joined confraternities, flocked to new pilgrimage sites, and supported new devotions. It was also apparent in the resistance to Protestantisation that emerged in territories which were conquered by the Dutch Republic in 1620s and 1630s. Even in the Brabantine cities which had had a history of heresy in the sixteenth century, Dutch ministers now found it virtually impossible to get anyone to convert to Protestantism. No wonder that many of these strategies were subsequently copied by other Habsburg rulers, for instance in Bohemia.[58]

6. Memory and Confessional Identity

When a truce was agreed upon in 1609 and the borders between the Dutch Republic and the Habsburg Netherlands opened, tens of thousands of Southern emigres flocked to Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels to see their families and their home towns. Most of them

56 Janssen, *The Dutch Revolt*.

57 Duerloo, "Pietas Albertina", p. 1–18.

58 Louthan, *Converting Bohemia*.

had not been back since the 1580s, and for many of them, it became a great deception, a shocking confrontation with a new type of Catholic piety, that was not at all what they remembered from their childhoods.[59]

In the process of working on the development of Catholic identities, I had noticed the important role that memory was playing in forging and maintaining the cultural fissure between the inhabitants of the Southern Netherlands and the Dutch Republic. Also inspired by work by Philip Benedict on the politics of confessional remembering in seventeenth-century France, in 2007 I developed a plan to study the role of memory in the creation of new political identities and notions of "Netherlandishness" as a result of the Dutch Revolt.[60] With funding from NWO, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, I could, for the first time, collaborate with a larger research team, and spent the years between 2008 and 2013 collectively studying different aspects of war memory and the influence they had. Although none of the members of the team focused explicitly on religion, the project had some major implications for understanding how religion, politics and personal memories interacted.

Team member Jasper van der Steen, who worked on the emergence of a "national" public memory discourse in both North and South, was the first to note that whereas in the Habsburg Netherlands public memories tended to focus on the religious, in the Dutch Republic they tended to be secular. In Dutch public spaces, the memory culture hinged on the juxtaposition of "Spanish" cruelty and "Dutch" liberty and victimhood, the very same juxtaposition I had studied as the start of my career. Just as memories of the heretical past had been ousted in the cities of the Southern Netherlands, in the Dutch Republic the Revolt was framed as a war against a foreign enemy rather than as the civil war it had essentially been. References to providence and the divine remained quite generic. We would be wrong to see this as a sign of its modernity, however. Van der Steen's explanation for this is that in a religiously pluriform society it was impossible to reach consensus on a national narrative about the past that was religious. And in tandem with the secular public memory culture in the Dutch Republic, there existed confessional memory cultures, some of them transnational, and within all religious communities. In all Dutch Christian communities, religious memories were defined by victimhood, martyrdom and exile.[61]

Team members Johannes Müller and Erika Kuijpers worked on the personal dimensions of war memories, which also had important religious dimensions. Müller explored how family memories of exile continued to be mobilised by new generations of Protestants to assert their credentials, and in some cases also became a source of pride and status for other members of their religious communities.[62] Kuijpers did pioneering

59 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, p. 187–188.

60 Benedict, "Divided Memories", p. 381–405.

61 Van der Steen, *Memory Wars*; Pollmann, "Met grootvaders bloed bezegeld", p. 154–175.

62 Müller, *Exile Memories*.

work on the study of personal memories of violence. Using insights regarding the pre-mediation and re-mediation of memory and new psychological theory, Kuijpers showed how providential thought and miracles helped individuals make sense of memories of violence, loss, and pain. By emphasising the providential or miraculous nature of one's own survival, or that of one's own community, early modern believers were able to turn painful experiences into "secondary gain". Together, we also identified this strategy in public memory, which helped explain how Catholics in the Southern Netherlands had somehow turned memories of the Reformed destruction of images into evidence for the triumph of Catholicism.[63]

The history of religious change in the Low Countries, as in France, demonstrates that it is helpful to think of the Reformation as a process in which people who had once had a shared identity developed new religious positions that could pit them against their ancestors, their neighbours and communities, as well as the state. Becoming a Protestant was rarely conceived of as a conversion, but as positioning oneself as a believer in the face of new ideas, social pressures, and changing political environments. Protestants may have turned into aggressive militants, but many also worried about breaking with the past and with those around them. They thus also developed strategies to paper over the cracks. Many traditional Christians who were attracted to Reform ideas also found there was much that argued against religious changes threatening the breakup of local communities, family ties, and ancestral loyalties. They did not automatically come to identify themselves as Catholics or anti-Protestant—or know what to do with that idea when they had. For traditional Christians, to turn into self-styled "good Catholics", let alone to mobilise as such, took more than the presence of Protestants, decisions in Trent, or state policies. In the choice for Protestantism, too, local politics, leadership from the middle, and personal factors all had their role to play. The sort of religious strategies this involved for Catholics who ended up living in a clandestine subculture have since been wonderfully explored by Carolina Lenarduzzi, who has worked on the role of sound and touch, clothes and music among Catholics in the Dutch Republic.[64]

In the process of thinking about the individual experience of change, I have been well served by the notion of identity, as have many others. Both theoretically and in historical practice, we have learned to see identities as the fluid outcome of a dynamic between individuals and broader communities, imagined or otherwise. In the context of Reformation studies, identity has become important in the course of discussions about diffusion, the success or failure of reform processes, the agency of believers, and religious conflict. By the time I published my own synthetic study *Memory in Early Modern Europe* in 2017, my original questions about religious choice had broadened

63 Kuijpers, "Fear, Indignation, Grief, and Relief", p. 93–111; Kuijpers, "The Creation and Development of Social Memories of Traumatic Events", p. 191–201; Kuijpers and Pollmann, "Turning Sacrilege into Victory", p. 155–170.

64 Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek in de Republiek*.

into a much wideranging interest in how early modern people negotiated change. Yet I believe we can take many of the methodological insights we gain when studying early modern religious identities straight to questions about the diffusion of other forms of change, innovation, or new knowledge. This will undoubtedly help us find better explanations for other transformations that took place in the societies and cultures of early modern Europe.

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