

The Synod of Dort, the Westminster Assembly, and the French Reformed Church, 1618–43¹

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The European Background

In an age of ecumenical councils, from 'Edinburgh, 1910' and 'Amsterdam, 1948' to 'Vatican II', and beyond, it is often forgotten that the Reformers, insular and continental, were no less 'ecumenically' minded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Richard Baxter wrote, 'The Christian world, since the days of the Apostles, had never a Synod of more excellent divines, taking one thing with another, than this [of Westminster] and the Synod of Dort.'² These were the nearest to the Council of Trent that Protestantism was to see.

Yet earlier correspondence between Geneva and Canterbury shows that closer union might have been possible three generations before. Calvin had written to Cranmer, 'if I can be of any service, I shall not shrink from crossing ten seas, if need be for that object',³ (that is, of uniting the Reformed Churches). This was in 1552, the 'high tide' of Anglican Reformation, with Melancthon and Bullinger for Cranmer's 'Lambeth Conference' also.

It is tragic that this ideal, so broadly based on international and eirenic lines, came to nothing until Protestantism at home and abroad was hopelessly divided. For it cannot be urged that the 'Dordrace-nists' and the Westminster Fathers were other than polemical in their intentions, and divisive in their results. The sixteenth century left the Reformed Churches inclusive and international. The seventeenth century left them enfeebled but embattled, exclusive and nationalistic.

The Synod of Dort, 1618

Inevitably Calvinism was closely equated with Netherlands Nationalism. Although William the Silent, alternately Lutheran, Romanist, Lutheran again, and finally Calvinist, was the incarnation of toleration and internationalism, this was impossible for his 'poor people' who had known Alva's 'Spanish Fury'. Calvinism had nerved their struggle against Spain, and was essentially the 'popular' party. The

more liberal Arminians were regarded as of dubious loyalty to both Church and State.

So when the great ‘heresy trial’ opened at Dordrecht, the Calvinistic Counter Remonstrants rallied round the Stadholder, Maurice of Orange, as the Captain General of their Creed. The Arminian Remonstrants, ‘remonstrating’ against their rigid Predestinarianism, were supported by the elder statesman, Oldenbarnevelt, and the Dutch oligarchy. In this politico-religious strife the dowager Princess of Orange, Louise de Têligny, identified herself and her son, Frederic Henry, with her Arminian Chaplain, Uitenbogaert, against her stepson and his Calvinist supporters. To find the daughter of *L’Amiral* and Charlotte de Laval, in whose arms *Le Taciturne* himself had died, identified with the opponents of the cause for which her father and two husbands were regarded as martyrs, seems paradoxical. But Louise was a lady of independent judgment, whose Huguenot pride had never forgotten the insults of Dutch mobs in the earlier years of her widowhood and Maurice’s Stadholdership. Never shedding her widow’s weeds and buried beside the ‘Father of the Fatherland’ at Delft, she had died at Fontainebleau, attended by her French Remonstrant Chaplain, Etienne de Courcelles of Amiens. Though revered as the ancestress of the House of Orange, she remained a Frenchwoman to the end.

At Dort the representatives of the United Provinces were all Calvinists, with the exception of the Remonstrants from Utrecht. Delegates of unimpeachable Calvinistic orthodoxy were invited from the Palatinate, Hesse, Emden, Bremen, Wetterau,⁴ Geneva, the Swiss Cantons, and Great Britain. These, four English and one Scotsman, representatives of James I and VI, were given pride of place among the foreigners. But the seats next to them remained empty, for both Louis XIII and the Calvinist Elector of Lutheran Brandenburg declined to allow representatives of their countries to attend.

Louis XIV summed up the Bourbons’ attitude to their Huguenot subjects by saying that while his grandfather loved and did not fear them, and his father feared but did not love them, he neither loved nor feared them! Undoubtedly his father’s fear of the Huguenots prevented Daniel Chamier and Pierre du Moulin, chosen by their National Synod, also André Rivet and du Plessis Mornay himself, from being present.⁵

The ‘Gallo-Belgic’ Churches were represented by six Walloon pastors, among them Daniel Calon, Jean Doucher, and Jérémie du Pours. The late Queen Wilhelmina, who was as proud of her Coligny as of her Orange origins, often worshipped at the Walloon Church at the Hague, while her funeral service at Delft was conducted in both the Dutch and French languages.

The Anti-Predestinarian Remonstrants were ‘predestined’ to de-

feat from the start. A Genevan delegate, Diodati, drily remarked 'The Canons of Dort shot off the Advocate's head!'. It is of pathetic interest to speculate what might have happened if du Plessis Mornay, the influential 'Huguenot Pope' had been present. Possibly his voice might have been raised against the judicial murder of the Advocate, Oldenbarnevelt, and the expulsion and 'silencing' of Grotius, Episcopius, and Uitenbogaert. Of the favoured Britons, even the future Bishop Joseph Hall left the Synod for 'reasons of health',⁶ while 'the ever memorable' John Hales, Chaplain to the British Ambassador, declared that here he 'bid John Calvin goodnight'.⁷ So far had the hope of Protestant Union, based on mutual toleration, been lost since John Calvin and his friend Thomas Cranmer bid each other 'good morning' in 1552.

The Westminster Assembly, 1643

The year of Dort saw the opening of the Thirty Years War, and the English Civil War was not a year old when the Assembly of Divines convened at Westminster. The English Parliament, Puritan and Presbyterian, was at war with Charles I, who was under the influence of Archbishop Laud, and of an 'Arminianism' far less liberal than that of the Dutch Remonstrants. His marriage with Henrietta Maria made him further suspect of sympathy with France, regarded as a danger to the Reformation, through recollections of Valois and Guisard machinations in Scotland, of St. Bartholomew's Day, and of recent events at La Rochelle.

In order to unite the Churches of the Three Kingdoms on the model of 'the best Reformed Churches' the Long Parliament had called the Assembly into existence. Like the Synod, convened by their High Mightinesses the States General, this was a Theocratic Assembly called by Erastian means. To enlist the support of the Scots against their Stuart sovereign the Parliamentarians bound themselves to the Solemn League and Covenant, the Presbyterians' price for the presence of their broadswords and 'blue bonnets over the border'. While all the Divines were Calvinists, they were all in Anglican Orders. The only non-Episcopalians, for the Commissioners of the Scots Kirk were 'observers' only, were two Frenchmen.⁸ These were MM. Jean de la Marche and Samuel de la Place, Ministers of the Strangers' Church in London. So, while not as embracingly pan-European as the Synod, the Assembly made some attempt at ecumenicity by including these Huguenots in its muster roll, representing the Isles of Jersey and Guernsey in the Diocese of Winchester.⁹

The Divines thought it necessary to circulate their co-religionists with a warning against the King's politico-religious policy at home and abroad. On 30 November 1643 letters went from the Jerusalem Chamber to 'the Belgic, French, Helvetian and other Reformed

Churches'. These were superscribed to 'the Reverend and learned elders' of the *classes* of the United Provinces, Geneva, the Swiss Cantons, Hesse, the Walloon Churches and, of course, the Church of Charenton. The answer from the Huguenot congregation was read early in March, from the Swiss and Genevese on 12 June, and from the *classes* of Guelderland and Amsterdam on 29 June. The Netherlanders expressed not only their approval of 'the proceedings of the Parliament and Assembly, touching the Covenant, but desired to join with the two Kingdoms therein'.¹⁰

Charles, believing himself to be misrepresented to the foreign Reformed, and being advised to vindicate himself from the imputation of Popery, caused a second manifesto to be circulated to them in Latin and English. This declaration did the Royalist cause little service among the Huguenots. The marriage of his daughter, Mary, to William II of Orange, was the only evidence of his charity towards the Reformed. There was nothing in the manifesto to encourage either the French or Dutch that His Majesty or His Grace of Canterbury, 'would own their Churches, Ministers, or Sacraments, or unite with them against the common enemy of the Reformation'.¹¹ It was a far cry from the days of Edward VI, 'the English Josiah', Queen Elizabeth, 'of famous memory', or even of his father, 'the wisest fool in Christendom'.

Their Effects on the French Reformed Churches

At Dort the vacant seats of the French, between the British and the Palatines, only stressed the absence of du Moulin. For he had written hoping that the Synod would draw up a Confession to which both Lutherans and Calvinists would subscribe. The Moderator Bogermann, 'that olde tuffe man', gave him 'fair words', and promised that the matter would 'be considered'. Sir Dudley Carleton, the British Ambassador, shrewdly observed that such a plan 'doth ill suit with our business of suppressing the Arminians, and therefore, it will not be thought fit to make mention of it'.¹²

But Dort gave full expression to the *Confessio Belgica* of the Walloon Guy de Brès, described by Professor Bakhuizen Van Den Brink, as '*le drapeau de l'Eglise Réformée Néerlandaise toute entière*' – the French language's gift to the Low Countries, North and South.

A quarter of a century later the Huguenot Pastors of London set their seal on the Assembly's Confession of Faith, 'a credal statement shaped in bronze', although it was not binding on the Strangers. But Reformed solidarity, as its zenith in the sixteenth century, had sunk low by the seventeenth. Things would never be quite the same again between *Ecclesia Anglicana* and her former allies. Perhaps the Huguenot and Walloon Church in the crypt at Canterbury, beneath the tomb of Louise de Coligny's uncle, Odet de Châtillon, remains the most enduring monument of the early hopes of Lambeth and

Churchman

Geneva for a full *rapprochement* between the English and European Churches.

[haec] sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.¹³ (The woes of man touch the hearts of men.)

for some of us at any rate.

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NOTES

- 1 This paper was first published in the Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London 1967, vol. XXI No. 2.
- 2 W. Orme, *Life and Times of the Rev. R. Baxter* (London, 1830), Vol. 1, p. 69.
- 3 *Original Letters relative to the English Reformation*, ed. Hastings Robinson (Cambridge, 1847), p. 713.
- 4 That is, Nassau.
- 5 E. G. Léonard, *Histoire Générale du Protestantisme* (Paris, 1961), II, p. 219.
- 6 G. Brandt, *History of the Reformation in the Low Countries* (London, 1723), III, pp. 203–4.
- 7 J. Hales, *Golden Remains* (London, 1673), Introduction.
- 8 See M. W. Dewar, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queen's University, Belfast, *How far is the Westminster Assembly of Divines an expression of seventeenth-century Anglican theology?* (1960), p. 176.
- 9 *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London*, IX, 402.
- 10 J. Rushworth, *Historical Collections* (London, 1721), V, p. 371.
- 11 D. Neal, *History of the Puritans*, ed. J. Toulmin (London, 1822), III, p. 75.
- 12 In John Hales, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
- 13 Vergil *Aeneid* I.462.