Reformation: 1500-1550

Introduction

This is the second in a series of articles describing Europe during the rise of the anabaptist movement, through the lives of people whom I can identify as ancestral members of my family tree. The Reformation and the emergence of anabaptist theology led to the establishment of a unique Netherlandic Mennonite ethnological group. Historians often portray the story of these people in religious terms. In contrast, this series of articles will present a narrative dealing with the more secular political, economic, and social dimensions of this group.

Social and Political Stability

Throughout history, social and political stability has at times been elusive, however desirable for the success of regimes and their leaders. Sixteenth century European leaders used a variety of methods to achieve stability. These included granting or withholding social and economic freedoms and benefits, legal controls, and military coercion. Often a layered class system of nobles, merchants, trades people and indentured servants would provide resistance to any social polarization that could threaten stability: each class would work jealously to preserve their rights and wealth from the classes below.

The church contributed mightily with its unique system of existential influence. From cradle to grave the Church wielded immense power. Infants were baptised by their priests to save their souls for eternity. Priest's granted absolution for sins to preserve the salvation of souls. The Church was the doorway to everlasting life. In exchange, the Church received financial rewards and benefits that enabled it to grow rich. The protocols of the Church demanded submission and fostered stability.

Wise rulers formed alliances with the church for mutual benefit. Church leaders would reciprocate, bestowing divine right upon rulers to govern. This godly anointment cemented the powers of such rulers, while creating a bond of dependency with the Church. This was the state of the power dynamic in the Habsburg Empire in the era preceding the Reformation, at the time when the Netherlandic region fell under the control of the Empire.

However, this model of bilateral reliance between the Church and the State rested on the acceptance by the governed people of the legitimacy of both parties. A forceful challenge of such legitimacy could undermine the stability of the system.

Religious upheaval

Desiderius Erasmus was among the first members of the 16th century clergy to posit the need for changes to church practices, primarily the elimination of corrupt activities and the imperative for a more scriptural basis in Church teaching. Church officials viewed his perspective as a constructive effort to improve the Church.

A later contemporary of Erasmus, Martin Luther, elaborated on the need for Church reforms. When Luther posted his list of concerns and proposals for change on a church door in 1517, he believed he was making a choice between reforming church practices from within or establishing a breakaway church. He opted for and encouraged internal reform. Instead, he unleashed a theological revolution leading to a completely fragmented church.

While Luther wished to pursue an incremental approach to reform driven by clerics within the Church, other reformers adopted a more aggressive approach. During Lent in 1522 Ulrich Zwingli, a parish priest in Zurich and former army chaplain, defended friends who ate sausage in defiance of church fasting rules prohibiting meat. This story is iconic, writers having repeated variations of it without explaining the crucial principal Zwingli expounded. He believed that only rules and traditions anchored in sound biblical teaching were acceptable. The Church's fasting rule was not among these. Later that year he defied the Church further by getting married, advancing rapidly the reform movement. The religious tradition that emerged from his work was a significant departure from the path his earlier contemporaries preferred. However, an even more radical departure was to come.

Zwingli denounced the Church as unbiblical, proposing that the Church adopt a literal interpretation of the bible. Two of his adherents, Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, extended this thinking when they observed that the Bible said nothing about infant baptism. In consequence they repudiated the practice. In Zurich, the Church viewed this position as a step beyond what they could accept as healthy debate. Zwingli, under pressure from church authorities, adopted a flexible approach to his own propositions. He rallied to the Church in opposition to his adherents. The city council declared those opposing infant baptism to be dangerous radicals and used their power to arrest and execute four offenders, Manz among them.

However, once new, radical ideas reached the public sphere, containment was impossible. Reform movements of all kinds sprang up to challenge the authority of the Church and the State. The Anabaptist movement launched by Grebel and Manz took flight.

Amsterdam

Serfdom was never widespread in Netherlandic Europe. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was nonexistent. Consequently, the inertia of a downtrodden underclass, easily kept under control by political or ecclesiastical overlords, did not exist in the Netherlandic region. At the same time an emerging merchant class in Amsterdam had prevailed to wrest power and

wealth from the archaic noble classes. Henry Schapansky has observed that for decades before the Reformation the Church had been poorly organized in the Netherlands, leading to undisciplined clerical practices and absenteeism and causing great dissatisfaction among the public [1]. Thus, the political and social attitudes of the region were already in transition when ideas about religious reform became popularized. An increasingly wealthy and cosmopolitan population welcomed radical new social and religious ideas.

As early as 1521 Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of the Habsburg domain, alarmed at the surge of reformist activity throughout his realm, had published a decree in his Netherlandic territory prohibiting any form of religion that did not adhere strictly to Roman Catholic Church traditions. It is clear from his reactionary response to potential social change that he was aware of the fragile state of his control over this recently acquired portion of his empire. Despite Royal prohibition, the Reform and Anabaptist movements surged in the Netherlandic territories.

Amsterdam by now had become a major trading port and cosmopolitan center. It attracted wealth, enterprise, and a growing, intellectually sophisticated middle class. The citizens of Amsterdam were no different than their counterparts in other major European centers in questioning the traditions and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The city attracted religious dissenters and refugees from foreign places, elevating the pressure to force societal and religious change. The independent merchant class felt constrained by the prohibitions on reform imposed by Charles V. The more radical ones were unwilling to accept this imposition.

Jacob Harnasveger, an armorer in Amsterdam, practiced his trade during the period when the tide of reformation swept through his city. He was a member of the congregation of the Oude Kerk, located at the confluence of the Rokin and Damrak canals in the De Wallen district at the heart of Amsterdam. Dating back to the original wooden chapel erected in 1213, the Oude Kerk was, through the sixteenth century, the religious home of generations of Jacob's family.

In May 1535 Radical Anabaptist rioters stormed Amsterdam City Hall, their objective being to take control of the city. Administration officials defeated the riot in brutal fashion. Officials determined that Jacob was a participant in the plot, responsible for providing weapons of self-defense to the rioters. Soldiers arrested Jacob in Amsterdam, but he escaped, only to be recaptured weeks later in The Hague. A court tried him, found him guilty, and punished him with banishment from Amsterdam for two years. Upon Jacob's return an informer overheard him making derogatory political remarks about the Church. Court officials charged Jacob again. This time the investigation dissolved, and Jacob remained free.

The Crown persisted in persecution of any deviance from the prescribed religious faith. This did nothing to slow the growth of the Reform movement. It did drive the movement underground while mobilizing frightened but determined Reformers who fled northward to Friesland where the Emperor's influence was much weaker. From Friesland the path to religious freedom led to Danzig and the Vistula Delta.

It was around this time, in the first half of the sixteenth century, that the important merchant shipping family of Jan de Veer rose to prominence. Some researchers speculate that the ancestors of the de Veer family originated in Veere, an island off the southwest coast of modern Netherlands. This is uncertain, but what is known is that at the time of the Reformation the family lived in Schiedam and later Amsterdam. Operating a merchant shipping business between Amsterdam and Danzig, the family was typical of the wealthy merchant class of Amsterdam: worldly, cosmopolitan and socially progressive. Jan's son became a prominent Mennonite in Amsterdam and Danzig in later years.

Reformation in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth

From the thirteen century until the mid-fifteenth century the territory comprising the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth was a crusader state established by the Knights of the Teutonic Order and called the State of the Teutonic Order. The Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights ruled the State.

Midway through the fifteenth century, a series of military confrontations occurred between the Polish Crown and the Teutonic Knights as they struggled for control of territory. The Polish Crown defeated the Knights. In turn, the Polish Kingdom annexed the western territories, including the major cities of Danzig, Elbing, and Marienburg. While the Knights of the Teutonic Order maintained control of the eastern territories, including the important city of Konigsberg, the Grand Master became a vassal of the Polish Crown.

The Polish Crown, while officially Roman Catholic, supported a policy of religious tolerance dating back at least to the fourteenth century. The Kingdom permitted Orthodox Catholics and Jews to live in peace and pursue their religious preferences. Royal policy extended tolerance to Protestantism early in the period of the Reform movement.

The Inquisitors of Charles V and his successors pursued the Netherlandic Anabaptists, who found respite in Danzig and the Vistula Delta. Newcomers discovered a land not much different from their homeland. They found major commercial centers and broad marshlands in need of draining to unlock the rich farmland. Even the common spoken language in the region was familiar, due to the broad cultural impact of the Hanseatic League and its use of Plautdietsch for conducting business.

Konigsberg-Kneiphof

The commercial center of the State of the Teutonic Order was the Hansa city of Konigsberg-Kneiphof. In the years before the Reformation Mathaus Maraun operated a merchant shipping business between eastern Lithuania and Danzig. His elder son lived in Danzig from about 1531,

employed as a Councillor and Magistrate. His younger son Georg assumed control of the family business after Mathaus died in 1521.

The ruler of the Monastic Order of the Teutonic Knights, Grand Master Albrecht, struggling for independence from the Polish Crown in the early 1500s, engaged in a program of military subterfuge to undermine the throne. He failed. It was Albrecht's good fortune that he was a nephew of the King. Otherwise, his future may have played out differently. Albrecht repudiated the monastic order and the Catholic Church, converted to Lutheranism, secularized the Teutonic State, and became the Duke of the newly christened Duchy of Prussia.

With his change of religious affiliation Albrecht initiated a rapid adoption of Lutheranism in the Duchy of Prussia. The Maraun sons appear to have been among the converts to Lutheranism. When their professional and business interests took them to Danzig they encountered like-minded reformers as well as more radical reformers such as the Mennonites.

Notes

[1] Henry Schapansky, Mennonite Migrations (and The Old Colony), Rosenort MB, Henry Schapansky, 2006, p. 38.