

When Catholics Attack

The Counter-Reformation in Fractured Regions of Europe

MICHAEL QUESTIER

This review looks at Judith Pollmann's *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands 1520-1635* in a number of contexts, but particularly the one supplied by the British Isles' experience of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Following the line taken in Professor Pollmann's account of the reaction against Calvinism in this period, it argues that if one wants to see what the sharp edges of the Counter-Reformation look like, then one should look at the regions of Europe which experienced conflict over faith. The Netherlands was one such area; the British Isles was another. The latter has more often than not been ignored by accounts of the European reaction to the Reformation. I want to suggest that it is of real relevance to put the two together and see what can be made of the similarities and differences between them.

Let me start by saying that *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands 1520-1635* is a refreshingly jargon-free and vividly written account of key aspects of the political, social and religious history of the Low Countries, though it focuses mainly on the Southern Netherlands.¹ It describes the way in which people outside the *arcana imperii*, as it were, responded to the most brutal aspects of – and reactions to – Spanish rule. It relies on and exploits very well a range of diaries and memoirs written by often apparently confused but committed individuals who were trying to make sense of how their society had fallen apart, and what might be done about this. The major achievement of Judith Pollmann's book is to convey the relationship between high politics and popular politics, political control in the broadest sense of the word and the reaction of the people (again broadly defined) to the challenge of the Reformation.

The focus is in some sense quite narrowly on the urban reaction to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation as these events affected the Netherlands in the course of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This volume attempts – with considerable success, in my view – to get away from the dominance of clerical sources and perspectives (12), and speaks to exactly those issues which were of immediate concern to people in other parts of Europe and – from my own perspective, for what it is worth – especially

England and, in fact, the whole of the British Isles. The parallels, if not exactly unpredictable, are nevertheless often quite remarkable.

As students of later sixteenth-century European history will know, the divided state of the Netherlands following the revolt against Spanish rule was one of the constant influences on both the formulation of late Tudor and early Stuart foreign policy options, as well as on the way in which regimes within the British Isles tried to persuade their own subjects to go along with their self-positioning on certain key ecclesiastical and theological issues, even though Elizabeth Tudor was notoriously reluctant to become involved in defending the Dutch rebels against the Spaniards' attempt to reassert Philip II's rights in the Low Countries just as, in the early seventeenth century, James I was usually prepared to talk the talk of Protestant internationalism and European Calvinist solidarity, but not to do much more than this to assist his European Calvinist friends.

The principal fact, however, of the revolt against Spain was that those in the Netherlands who objected to the worst predatory aspects of Spanish rule did not all do so in the same way, or with the same ideological assumptions, nor were they driven exclusively by their attitudes to religion (narrowly understood). The conundrum the book goes on to address is this: why should there have been such a vigorous assertion of Counter-Reformation Catholic values and culture in the South when, at the time that the revolt started (in spite of the zeal of some Catholics), Catholicism seemed relatively powerless to defend itself in the face of Calvinist resistance to Habsburg power? This book is, therefore, about understanding religious change; something which becomes more problematical in this region the more one looks at it. I remember, as an undergraduate, being simply baffled, for example, that the Northern Netherlands – which I had been led to understand was a beacon of the 'Protestant cause' – was not uniformly Calvinist, and that the supposedly Catholic South produced a fair number of Calvinist rebels.

Netherlands Catholics and the Counter-Reformation

Although an in-depth knowledge of how Church and State in the Low Countries divided along religious lines could not but serve as a useful perspective and might be able to tell us something about the English and British Reformation/s that we might not necessarily grasp from the still all-too-frequently Anglocentric, though supposedly 'mainstream', accounts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the British Isles, I suspect that many

1 Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands 1520-1635* (Oxford 2011).

English historians would still look completely nonplussed if you were to use in front of them the phrase ‘the Counter-Reformation in the British Isles’. Clearly, there was not an English/British renaissance of Catholic culture in anything like the same way that contemporaries witnessed in the Southern Netherlands after the reassertion of Habsburg authority there, though evidently there were parts of Ireland where something like this was happening in the period before the English/British civil war/s. But Pollmann’s crucial point that, in the Low Countries (and indeed elsewhere in Europe), historians have viewed Catholics ‘unlike Protestants, as the objects rather than the agents of religious change’ (12) is certainly true for England and Britain, mainly because of very restrictive modern definitions of what it meant to be a Catholic there and what seems, at times, like a sedulous determination simply to ignore this dimension of the Counter-Reformation.

To demonstrate this convincingly, of course, requires an analytical narrative, and any attempt at this kind of account of Netherlands politics can be problematic. The nuncio in Madrid commented in November 1577 that he could not for the life of him ‘comprehend how it should be that today the prince of Orange enters in triumph, tomorrow [the archduke] Matthias, and then forthwith they call for the duke of Anjou’.² I know exactly how he felt. However, Pollmann’s accessible structure of events allows the reader to think about and around her analysis of her principal source material and how her selection of contemporary writers tried to work out what the impact for the commonwealth or the common good would be of adopting one form or expression of faith and preventing another.

In Chapter 1, the book looks at why Catholics should have taken their religion seriously in the face of the scepticism and damage caused by the Reformation process. This is a perhaps not dissimilar exercise to that performed in the early 1990s for the English Church by Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars* (1992). Of course, one might say that some Christians always take their religion seriously, whatever the circumstances, just as there are always some deviants and dissidents, and frequently learned but still intemperate naysayers, such as Erasmus (36-37). However, the dividend to be gained from a comparative approach becomes clear from Chapter 3 onwards, i.e. at the point where the divisions in religion in the Netherlands became politically embedded in the face of what looked like Spanish tyranny, and in such a manner that it was unclear what the status quo was or, if there even was one, and how long it might last.

Of course, in this period the peoples of the British Isles did not experience quite the same kinds of chaos, anarchy and violence that the Netherlands did (although in actual fact at certain points in Scotland, and

2 J.M. Rigg (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers ... Rome* (2 vols [for 1558-1578], London 1916, 1926) II, 354.

often in Ireland, they did). But there was a comparable range of divisions over religion in both places.

From the end of Chapter 2, Pollmann demonstrates how political events focused zeal and renewed enthusiasm for the expression of counter-reformed styles of faith and mobilised confessional differences (70). Appalling though the Duke of Alba's troops were (combining utter brutality, flagellant religiosity and prying Orwellian interference), what Alba was doing was not dissimilar to the policy pursued at various points by the Tudors (especially Henry VIII and Elizabeth) and the Stuarts (particularly James I): an appropriation, by the State, of certain styles of religion directly pegged to the politics of obedience to sovereign authority; a process which fractured religious opinion on both sides of the formal confessional divide.

The British Isles

There was also a good deal of traffic between the two regions. Rebels crossed from the Netherlands to England and back (95) in much the same way that, say, Elizabeth's rebels in 1569 (and Scottish rebels during the later sixteenth century) crossed back and forth over the border with Scotland. While Elizabeth tried to assert her authority over her northern neighbour, and Scottish politics threatened to destabilise the Elizabethan polity, so Netherlands politics caused Elizabeth all sorts of difficulties just as she helped to turn the Low Countries upside down in her efforts to keep them free from either Spanish or French supremacy.

This kind of political and religious import/export process was hardly unique to the British Isles and the Low Countries, of course. Nevertheless, in both places, irretrievably divided in religion after the Reformation, the question was who could create a cross-confessional consensus sufficient to guarantee political obedience and compliance and to prevent foreign interference. Just as William of Orange (the Habsburgs' potential nemesis) tried to adopt a politically expedient pose in matters of religion, so from time to time did the queen of Scots (Elizabeth's worst nightmare). In the face of William's political bridge-building across the confessional divide (the only way he could challenge the militarily superior Spaniards), the Spaniards were forced to do something similar, just as Elizabeth – even if in somewhat different circumstances – struggled to prevent the ascendancy of a certain kind of Protestant agenda (sometimes referred to as 'puritanism'). Habsburg government in the Low Countries changed tack dramatically when Alba was replaced by Luis de Requesens in November 1573 (101-102), though Requesens's new-style government was itself destroyed by Spain's financial collapse in the autumn of 1575; his successor Don John of Austria tried briefly to secure some sort of compromise settlement, before resorting again to force. For many Catholics, even clerics, the main thing was to stop the escalation

of violence and tit-for-tat atrocities, even if this necessitated some kind of confessional parity. Formal acts of toleration, as Alexandra Walsham has definitively stressed for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, did not have to come from a principled belief in tolerance.³ However, Don John's military successes, e.g. at Gembloux in 1578, led in some places to a Calvinist revolution (108–109), the radicalism of which then compelled some Catholics – who did not like Don John at all – to make peace with him (110). What many in the South wanted was neither the supremacy of Spain nor of Orange and his supporters; but the more widespread the fighting got, the less choice they had (112).

There really are parallels here to events in Elizabethan England and Ireland, and in Stuart Scotland. In all three, there was a loyalist tendency among Catholics which was faced with the horrific implications for themselves of unrestrained Catholic political radicalism. In the Low Countries (and, of course, in France) they saw the terrifying potential outcome of this kind of radicalism, i.e. full-scale wars of religion and, in their own case, the withdrawal of toleration by those who argued that Catholicism was synonymous with political disobedience.

Those who had carried out a kind of Calvinist revolution in parts of the Low Countries started to bring in measures to safeguard this revolution, and these measures were comparatively hard-line (116). There is a similarity here between these safeguards (designed to proscribe central aspects of Catholic religion) and the statutory measures and policy of enforcement the Elizabethan authorities adopted at much the same time, for example in 1580–1581, in the face of the challenge from a certain style of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, represented for instance by the Jesuits Edmund Campion and Robert Persons. So rigorous was the style of Catholicism of such people that other Catholics rejected them, wanting to maintain a *modus vivendi* with the State and not to be forced into what they regarded as impossible choices.

In Ireland, it became clear that, if the queen wanted to maintain majority support and national security in the face of the threat of Spanish invasion, it was arguably counterproductive to enforce any kind of Protestant-based religious uniformity and conformity; there were those, however – particularly committed Calvinist churchmen – who argued that it was the other way round, and that laxity and tolerance concerning religion had instigated disobedience and rebellion.

The calculation, however, of some English and Irish Catholic activists was that, by upping the ante, all those who considered themselves to be Catholics would be forced unequivocally to take sides. This appears to have

3 A. Walsham, *Charitable Hatred* (Manchester 2006).

been the problem faced by some of Pollmann's diarists and commentators, for instance Willem Weijdt (120).

Specific political events frequently show how interrelated the two regions were. In the later 1570s, for example, the prospect of a Calvinist takeover of the Netherlands was temporarily forestalled by the States General's appeal to the duke of Anjou to unite the rebels against Philip II. This was not exactly an unalloyed success. But the significance of Anjou's arrival in the Netherlands in 1582 is brought out extremely well by Pollmann (117-118) and the controversial and occasionally visibly Catholic style of his intervention there tells us exactly why he had been so divisive in England in 1579-1580, when it appeared he might pull off an Anglo-French dynastic alliance by marrying Elizabeth – a prospect aggressively supported by some English Catholics.

In Chapter 6, Pollmann argues that 'after 1585 the war came to be understood and explained as a conflict that was primarily being waged to protect Catholicism rather than to support the Habsburgs in their ambitions for power. The regime presented itself as the protector of the faith' (159): exactly, of course, as a number of English, Irish and Scottish Catholics, from time to time, wanted the Spaniards to represent themselves in their dealings with the British Isles, although others, for example some Catholics in war-torn France, accused Spain of using religion merely as a mask for Habsburg temporal ambition; in the Southern Netherlands, it was evidently possible to persuade many that the Spaniards were telling the truth.

In conclusion, it is hardly surprising that, looking around Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe, the same issues repeatedly crop up: unity and division, exile and compromise. But there are some extraordinarily close correspondences between the Netherlands and England/Britain which are really worth thinking about. These can help us understand the course of events and politico-religious mentalities in each region much better. In the historiography of the English Reformation, there is still a reluctance to take into account the ways in which European political events affected the mindsets of those whom contemporaries reckoned were Catholics. (The leading study of how this worked for Protestants is, of course, Simon Adams's doctoral thesis on the 'Protestant cause' in English/British politics.⁴)

There is, in other words, in the Netherlands (but not only there) a version of a European 'Catholic cause'. Like its Protestant equivalent, it had pro and anti-monarchical elements, and incorporated a debate about what constituted the common good. This made me think about other parallels as

4 S. Adams, 'The Protestant Cause: Religious Alliance with the West European Calvinist Communities as a Political Issue in England, 1585-1630' (D.Phil., Oxford 1973).

well (though these are perhaps beyond the scope of this volume), for example the ideological affinities between, say, some of the Catholic secular clergy in England in the 1620s and Low-Countries clergymen such as Philip Roveen, who were fighting similar battles in the Northern Netherlands against the privileges and agenda of the religious orders. This book certainly made me see, in a Catholic as much as a Protestant context, why Arminianism was such a crucial political issue in both Britain and the Dutch Republic in the early seventeenth century. ◀

Michael Questier (1964) is Professor in History at Queen Mary, University of London. He has interests in the British and European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Recent publications: *The Trials of Margaret Clitherow: Persecution, Martyrdom and the Politics of Sanctity in Elizabethan England* (with Peter Lake) (London 2011); *Stuart Dynastic Policy and Religious Politics, 1621-1625* (London 2009) and *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c. 1550-1640* (Cambridge 2006). Email: m.c.questier@qmul.ac.uk.