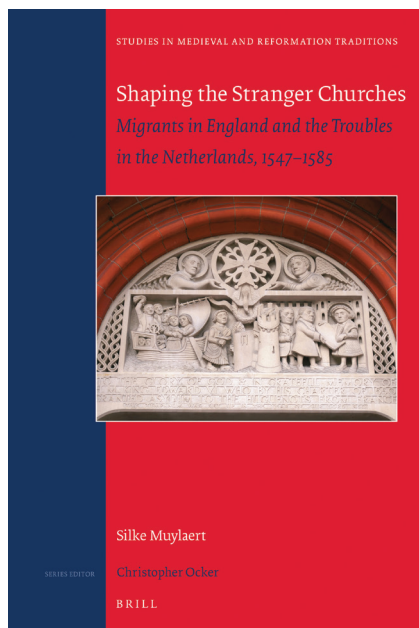


Review

Silke Muylaert, *Shaping the Stranger Churches. Migrants in England and the Troubles in the Netherlands, 1547-1585*. (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions, vol. 224), Leiden, Brill, 2020, xii + 268 pp. ISBN 9789004389366



The so-called stranger churches in sixteenth-century England have already received ample attention. Books by Andrew Pettegree on London, Marcel Backhouse on Sandwich, Raingard Esser on Norwich, and Andrew Spicer on Southampton published in the 1980s and 1990s greatly deepened our knowledge about these churches. They also altered our perspective on these churches because they left the narrow paths, often coloured by the author's own stand on religion, of older historiography.

In this book – the result of a dissertation defended in 2017 at the University of Kent – Muylaert brings together data relating to all the stranger churches in England, both Dutch and French, and explores the ways they contributed to the development of Reformed churches in the Low Countries and to the Dutch Revolt. This global approach undoubtedly has important advantages. It does not

merely focus on the dominant and well-documented London case, but also brings the provincial stranger churches into the picture. Moreover, it allows an examination of the relationships between the churches themselves and to identify similarities and differences. Muylaert's research is mainly based on three types of sources: consistory records (especially those available for London), correspondence of the stranger churches, and publications stemming from these churches or their members. Muylaert's findings are presented in six well-structured chapters. In all these chapters, she emphasises the complexity and the diversity present in the refugee churches.

Chapter one outlines the first attempts to form exile churches in Canterbury and London at the beginning of Edward VI's reign (1547-1553), culminating in the royal charter of

1550. That charter brought official recognition for the London Strangers' Church headed by superintendent John à Lasco. Muylaert explains at length the influences and the *dramatis personae* involved in the foundation of the Strangers' Church and makes clear how this church was both embedded in an international network of Reformed theologians and well-connected to English church leaders. The church order and a number of writings used in the first Strangers' Church had a considerable influence on the institutional form and development of the Reformed movement in the Low Countries. Furthermore, several refugees returned to the Low Countries after the ascension of Mary I and, in turn, exerted influences there. With the resettlements and new foundations under Elizabeth I, a new period started for the refugee churches. Their composition became more complex, comprising members who had stayed under Mary, while others returned and new migrants joined the church. Muylaert emphasises that we have to distinguish the settlements from Edward VI and those of the Elizabethan period. The Elizabethan stranger churches had considerably less impact on the Reformed communities in the Low Countries. During their first years, they were more cautious and focused on self-preservation, sometimes struggling for survival and soon divided by internal disagreements. Muylaert combines her primary sources with an extensive list of secondary literature, although I missed Philippe Denis's fundamental book on the refugee churches in the Rhineland, *Les Églises d'étrangers en pays rhénans (1538-1564)* (Paris 1984).

Chapter two is the only one that deals with the entire period covered by the book. It focuses on the relations among the English stranger churches. In the Elizabethan period, the number of foreign churches increased significantly – one could choose from as many as twenty congregations situated in London, East Anglia, and the south-east of England. There were, of course, connections between these churches. At the same time, they enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. From 1575 and 1581 onwards they held common assemblies – *colloquia* – for the Dutch and French churches respectively. These meetings acted as vehicles of solidarity, discussing assistance to poor churches or looking for a much-needed minister. The main goal, however, was the realization of unity in doctrine and church discipline. Despite the growing cooperation, there remained divergent opinions and tensions among the churches, for instance about the attitude towards the political resistance in the Low Countries. To make matters even more complicated, the leaders of the stranger churches had to take into account the priorities and sensibilities of the English authorities that could cause conflicting loyalties. In any case, the benefits of Muylaert's global and comparative approach are very clear in this chapter. Nonetheless, I would have liked to see a table with an overview of the size of the different stranger churches. This would have been helpful for the reader throughout the book.

Chapter three deals with the years 1560-1561 and focuses on the question how the stranger churches dealt with the issue of armed resistance. In these years, the Reformed movement realised a significant growth in the Southern Netherlands. At the same time, the authorities maintained their policy of repression. Therefore, the Reformed were faced with the pertinent question of whether armed resistance, such as prison breaking, was allowed. Inevitably, this issue came also on the agenda of the consistories of the stranger churches. In the past, historians such as Marcel Backhouse more than once made a direct connection between the refugee churches and armed resistance in the Low Countries.

Muylaert, however, argues that this interpretation is too simple. In London, the consistories of the Dutch and French church rejected armed resistance. The Flemish church of Sandwich was divided about the issue, although the supporters of a militant approach increased over time.

The problem of armed resistance retains a central place in chapter four, which focuses on the so-called Wonderyear (1566). Muylaert examines to what extent the stranger churches were involved in the outburst of iconoclasm and its violent aftermath. The answer to this question is not easy, since there are no consistorial records for any of the stranger churches for the year 1566. Nevertheless, Muylaert argues that the foreign churches played only a limited role in the troubles of the Wonderyear. In principle, the violent iconoclasm was at odds with the Reformed values of obedience, but in practice, things were less simple. This was especially the case for those who had been confronted with the reality of severe persecution. Also on this topic, the situation in the stranger churches presents a picture that reveals variety. In 1566, there were iconoclasts who had belonged to the English stranger churches. Especially the Flemish church of Sandwich was well represented among the iconoclasts but this does not mean that there was an 'institutional' approval of the iconoclasm by the consistory. Among the Reformed ministers who were active in the Low Countries in 1566 and who had previously resided in England, some condemned violent iconoclasm while others belonged to the instigators of the iconoclastic wave. Even after the Wonderyear, the issue of iconoclasm continued to cause problems within the stranger churches. In Sandwich, a majority of the consistory members condemned iconoclasm and armed resistance. This seems to explain why several militant church members left and joined the Flemish congregation of Norwich.

Chapter five deals with the stranger churches and their involvement in the Dutch Revolt in 1567-1585. Muylaert's central argument is that the foreign churches did not explicitly support the Dutch Revolt, although there were variations from church to church and over time. The French churches were less reluctant to support the Revolt than the Dutch. The awareness of the French Wars of Religion and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre undoubtedly reduced the reserves against armed resistance in their ranks. In general, an atmosphere of distrust towards William of Orange lingered in the stranger churches. Their church leaders were also critical towards the Sea Beggars, whose actions often involved robberies and violence. The close connection between the stranger churches and the Beggars, as it is portrayed in the older historiography, must therefore be strongly qualified. William of Orange's calls for financial support yielded less than expected. Only in 1572 there was nearly unreserved support from the stranger churches, after the rebels had taken Brill and Flushing. The situation became even more complex from 1577 onwards when 'Calvinist Republics' were set up in several rebellious Flemish and Brabantine cities. However, in my own view, Muylaert's analysis (172) to see these Calvinist regimes as a second rebellious movement separate from the general revolt led by William of Orange, is incorrect. Indeed, the focus of Muylaert's research, the Ghent Calvinist Republic, was the furthest removed from Orange's religious policy but it was certainly not a *pars pro toto*. It is also curious that Muylaert's analysis relies on an article by H.G. Koenigsberger from 1955 while more recent fundamental contributions, especially by Johan Decavele, are missing. Finally, Muylaert rightly emphasises that the stranger churches' attitude towards Orange

and his revolt was also influenced by the changing policy of Elizabeth I and her government. Her analysis is mainly based on primary sources, but recent work on Elizabeth I and some of her councillors like Lord Burgley and Francis Walsingham could certainly have been valuable – I am thinking of books by Stephen Alford, Susan Doran, and John Guy.

The sixth and final chapter deals with the stranger churches' relationship with the Reformed churches in the Low Countries in 1567-1585. The foreign churches were primarily occupied with their own organisation. At the same time, they showed a greater willingness to support their co-religionists in the Netherlands. Especially in the 1570s, requests came from Holland-Zeeland and Brabant-Flanders to send ministers and provide financial assistance. Not surprisingly, it was the London stranger churches – particularly the Dutch one – that made the greatest contribution. However, Muylaert notes that the uneven quality of the surviving archives, favouring the London churches, undoubtedly contributed to this London predominance. Here too, the English context played a role. The leaders of the stranger churches had to acknowledge the English Church and its bishops. For example, they had to be careful not to be too friendly towards the Puritan movement in England.

Finally, some general remarks. Muylaert's global-comparative approach certainly leads to interesting insights. I think, for instance, of her conclusion that exile not necessarily led to radicalisation and the formation of a militant identity. In practice, there were other, also more moderate options. Her observation that in the previous historiography, the stranger churches were too strongly associated with the development of a militant Calvinism, and were seen as unconditional supporters of the Revolt, also fits in this context. Muylaert could benefit from earlier work on the stranger churches and at the same time did extensive primary research. However, she often remains very close to her sources: I would have liked to see her engage more in a debate with other authors. In this way, she does not always make clear what is new about her research. For example, it would be interesting to know how her data and interpretations about the London churches relate to the research and insights of Andrew Pettegree. These remarks, however, do not prevent this book from putting the topic of the foreign churches back on the agenda and prompting new research.

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