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Department of History

Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35 - 9000 Gent

THE PEOPLE'S FAITH
RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AND PEASANT COMMUNITIES IN
THE RONSE DEANERY (1650-1725)

Roman Roobroeck

Supervisor: prof. dr. Anne-Laure Van Bruaene

Examiners: prof. dr. Thijs Lambrecht and prof. dr. Christa Matthys

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For Marie, my little sister
Thank you for always making me smile,
even in the most trying of times

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Acknowledgements

“This is how you do it: you sit down at the keyboard and you put one word after another until it's done. It's that easy, and that hard.” That is how Neil Gaiman, English novelist and 2009's winner of the John Newbery Medal, once described the ‘secret’ to finishing a story. After months of long nights and early mornings, full of the gloom of creative slowdowns or the ecstasy of sudden ‘aha! moments’, I finally understand what Gaiman was on about. No matter how daunting the task might seem at times, the only thing that gets the job done by the end of the day, is day after day diligently and tirelessly labouring, regardless of doubts and deadlocks. It is that simple, because the logic behind it is so sound. But it is that hard, because the practice behind it is so challenging. This seemed particularly true for this Master's thesis, as I can honestly say that writing about such a compelling topic was the most demanding, but at the same time the most rewarding experience of my life. I have assiduously worked everyday for the past two months, reflecting on everything I wrote, wondering if it is enough, if it could even slightly capture the imagination of those who will read it, because I believe that this is what a historian must hope to accomplish in the end. Indeed, 99% of writing a dissertation consists of persistence, self-doubt, constant contemplation, and completely losing yourself in deep thoughts, but the most precious element in every work is that remaining 1%: inspiration. It is the most difficult component to seize, but I hope that I have at least managed to partially sneak some thought-provoking features into my work.

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Roman Roobroeck
Ghent, August 2015

List of Abbreviations

AAM	Archiepiscopal Archives of Mechelen
AET	State Archives of Tournai
ARA	National Archives of Belgium
OKA	Church Archives dating from the <i>Ancien Régime</i>
OGA	Municipal Archives dating from the <i>Ancien Régime</i>
RAG	State Archives of Ghent
SAR	City Archives of Ronse

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Introduction

THE MASQUERADE OF OUDENAARDE

In the middle of March 1652, bishop Antonius Triest received a curious letter, the content of which must have had him frowning in a slight daze of gloom and disbelief. The letter, which was sent from dean Adrianus de Keyser, described a disgraceful incident that had befallen the city centre of Oudenaarde only a few days prior, an incident that was quite troublesome, even somewhat confrontational for a bishop who was actively engulfed in the logic of the Counter-Reformation. As it turns out, some Spanish soldiers who were stationed in the city had organised a masquerade on 12 March 1652, dressing up like members of the clergy and surveying the city in sacerdotal vestments. They had roamed the city from landmark to landmark, acting as if they were clerics parading in front of a liturgical procession,¹ sprinkling ‘holy’ water on unsuspecting bystanders. One Spanish soldier had even disguised himself as a bishop, wearing a mitre on his head, energetically swinging a book around and crossing the city on a donkey, while another soldier had put on women’s clothes and carried a small child, wrapped in a blanket, to the parish church where it could be christened.²

Of course, the clergy was not really amused with this type of “scandalus”. They designated the incident as mockery towards the Catholic faith and its holy representatives, causing them to request a formal investigation into the blasphemist affair. In doing so, the events transpiring in Oudenaarde caught the attention of bishop Triest, prompting him to get involved by demanding an oral hearing and cross-examination of witnesses to get to the bottom of the case. This thorough and almost instantaneous reaction of the ecclesiastical authorities is not completely incomprehensible, as the Catholic clergy was well aware of the use of mock processions as anti-Catholic propaganda throughout Reformed Europe (figure 1).

While these confessional fears might have been driving the clerical investigation, it is highly unlikely that Protestant ambitions stimulated the organisers of the entire masquerade. As it so happens, soldiers from the Army of Flanders were constantly inspected by a fully equipped clerical staff with the intent of avoiding a multiconfessional military: the Spanish king was the defender of the Catholic faith, and his armies were therefore a Godly instrument to eradicate all

¹ Their impromptu procession actually did pass by some of the landmarks that were visited during official processions. See: Bart A.M. Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren: toneelkunst en processiecultuur in Oudenaarde tussen Middeleeuwen en*

² RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3658/1.



FIGURE 1 A similar masquerade as the one in Oudenaarde took place in Protestant London on 17 November 1679. Of course, this London mock procession clearly possessed rather castigating intentions, and ventilated more radical anti-Catholic feelings than the one in Oudenaarde. For example, the engraving clearly exhibits priests selling indulgences, Jesuits carrying bloody daggers, and a demonic apparition whispering in the ears of the Pope. In the end, the London mock procession also took a more drastic turn, as an effigy of the Pope was pushed into a bonfire.

heretics. Dissident soldiers were not welcome among the Spanish ranks.³ So why did the Spanish soldiers organise this masquerade, if not out of religious nonconformance? If anything else, it was an expression of their popular consciousness, prying on traditional rituals of humour and social inversion, accommodated in the shape of carnival celebrations. Indeed, the masquerade was not an anti-Catholic statement, but rather a cultural festivity based on the soldiers' native carnival tradition. This is reflected in the actions of the participating soldiers, as cross-dressing and mockery of the powers that be were typical carnival elements of the early modern Spanish culture.⁴ Another big indicator of bacchanal influences in the masquerade is the date on which the event was organised. This was not random, as 12 March 1652 was not just any Monday, but Shrove Monday, the day before *Mardi Gras* and the traditional start of carnival celebrations all over Europe. For the Spanish soldiers, this day was a time of social inversion, of the lowest ranks of society ridiculing the top, of losing yourself in your popular roots.⁵

This anecdote raises an interesting point: while the Spanish soldiers were most definitely followers of the Catholic faith, they also exerted popular concepts that were contradictory to their confessional background. They were Catholic in some acts, yet they were not captured by the Catholic faith in all of their actions. How is this possible in the age of confessionalism, a time

³ Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road 1567-1659: The Logistics of Spanish Victory and Defeat in the Low Countries' Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 145.

⁴ Julio Caro Baroja, *El carnaval (análisis histórico-cultural)* (Madrid: Taurus, 1965), 151-390.

⁵ Acclaimed Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhael Bakhtin was the first to extract and describe these elements from medieval and early modern carnival festivities. See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

in which religion started to expand into a dominating mental structure and began to monopolize the modal action pattern of its subjects? It is observations like these that blur the entrenched interpretation of early modern religious identities as purely a sense of belonging to one of the established confessional Churches, and instead make us wonder: how do we actually have to envisage the religious identity of a community of lay commoners in the age of confessionalism? What did it actually mean for the *menu peuple* of the seventeenth century to be a follower of a religion? What significance did they give to religion, and to what extent was that understanding their own creation? In short: what did it mean for an average Catholic to be Catholic, and for a common Protestant to be Protestant?

In this dissertation, I shall concentrate on answering these questions about the construction, evolution and substance of religious identities. To do so, I have selected two key microhistorical cases from the second half of the seventeenth century, both of them emanating from a small rural deanery in the south of Flanders, namely the deanery of Ronse. In the first part of this thesis, the analysis of the Catholic identity of some rural villagers takes central stage, providing interesting insights into the daily religiosity of the peasantry, into the bottom-up applicability, exertion and internalisation of confessional concepts, and into the continual dialogue and syncretism between confessional and popular comprehension. The second part changes into a different gear, as it focuses on the subsistence of Protestant communities in a Catholic world instead. Obviously, the dissident minority was often met with adversity and consequently experienced a substantial amount of misfortunes, but the Reformed communities endured nonetheless into the eighteenth century. I will aim my attention at the construction of the identity that allowed for the survival and eventual blossoming of these communities.

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

But what do I understand by the term of ‘identity’, and more specifically by ‘religious identities’? The concept of identities is definitely not an unknown notion in recent historiography, especially for the analysis of the early modern Low Countries. For one, the research of historians like Judith Pollman and Guido Marnef and the investigations of research projects like “Multiple identities in a late medieval and early modern city: Mechelen in the 15th and 16th centuries” under the supervision of Peter Stabel at the University of Antwerp continue to stand strong in incorporating analyses of identity and memory into a broader historical spectrum.⁶ To capitalize on this focus, the *Vlaams-Nederlandse Vereniging voor Nieuwe Geschiedenis*, an academic network of historians from Flanders and the Netherlands who concentrate their efforts on the study of early

⁶ Guido Marnef, “Protestant Conversions in an Age of Catholic Reformation: The Case of Sixteenth-Century Antwerp,” in *Frontiers of Faith: Religious Exchange and the Constitution of Religious Identities, 1400-1750*, ed. Eszter Andor and István György Tóth (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), 255-66; Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Stabel, “Personal and collective identity: forename-giving in a guild milieu. Bruges in the 15th and early 16th century,” in *Konkurrierende Zugehörigkeit(en): Praktiken der Namengebung im europäischen Vergleich*, ed. Christof Rolker and Gabriela Signori (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 2011), 109-30.

modern history, even organised their seventh *Dag van het Onderzoek* (2010) completely in the spirit of the theme ‘Identiteit’.

However, this historiographical interest does not warrant a clear indication as to what identity exactly means, as it is definitely not an easy concept to comprehend nor explain, especially since it has known such a wide variety of applications in historiography over the past forty years. During all that time, no historian has ever truly consolidated its complete range of possibilities into one coherent definition, which caused the concept to start wearing off as an all-around cultural understanding as of the 1990s.⁷ There are some aspects of common ground though, like the importance of collective memory,⁸ but a general consensus remains to be seen. In my eyes, identity is all about the way you perceive yourself and your position in a community, whilst also demarcating that ‘imagined community’,⁹ and thus constructing a framework of ‘otherness’ for people who do not fit in the community that you have formulated. In that, identity is not a force created by external observers (like historians), but rather a cultural characteristic that is inherently present in the minds and behaviour of people and a dynamic superstructure that instigates cultural expressions (like rituals, conflicts, etc.). It is also an active and process-oriented notion, constantly under construction through the appropriation of new influences, meaning that it is a concept that can best be studied on a short-term basis.¹⁰

GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL DEMARCATION

Contrary to most historians, I have also opted to analyse identities in an ambiance that few tend their gaze to: the countryside. Indeed, my focus will be on the religious identity of the peasantry, of the *menu peuple* in rural villages. After all, the largest proportion of the early modern population continued to live in the countryside, even in the Southern Netherlands, which was one of the most densely urbanised regions in Europe by the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹¹ Furthermore, I believe rural communities to be extremely captivating in terms of cultural experience, as the early modern countryside is often characterised by a larger gap between so-called ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ understanding of religiosity than the urban body, even in the age of

⁷ Willem Frijhoff, “Identiteit en identiteitsbesef. De historicus en de spanning tussen verbeelding, benoeming en herkenning,” *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 107 (1992): 614-34.

⁸ Egyptologist Jan Assman was the key influence to spreading this concept, see: Jan Assman, “Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität,” in *Kultur and Gedächtnis*, ed. Jan Assman and Tonio Hölscher (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 9-19.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁰ The exact mechanisms of appropriation will be discussed in the fifth chapter of part 1. For an extensive theoretical approach, see: Roger Chartier, “Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France,” in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Steven L. Kaplan (Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1985), 229-54; Willem Frijhoff, “Toeëigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving,” *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 6 (1997): 99-118.

¹¹ Paolo Malanima, “Decline or Growth? European Cities and Rural Economies, 1300-1600,” retrieved May 2, 2015, <http://www.paolomalanima.it/default_file/Papers/CITY_COUNTRY1300-1600.pdf>.

growing confessionalism.¹² Studying the religious identities of rural communities can therefore provide quite compelling and alternative insights into the exact mechanisms that led into the construction of an identity, and can prove to be a thought-provoking addition to the historiographical body that mainly focuses on urban identities.

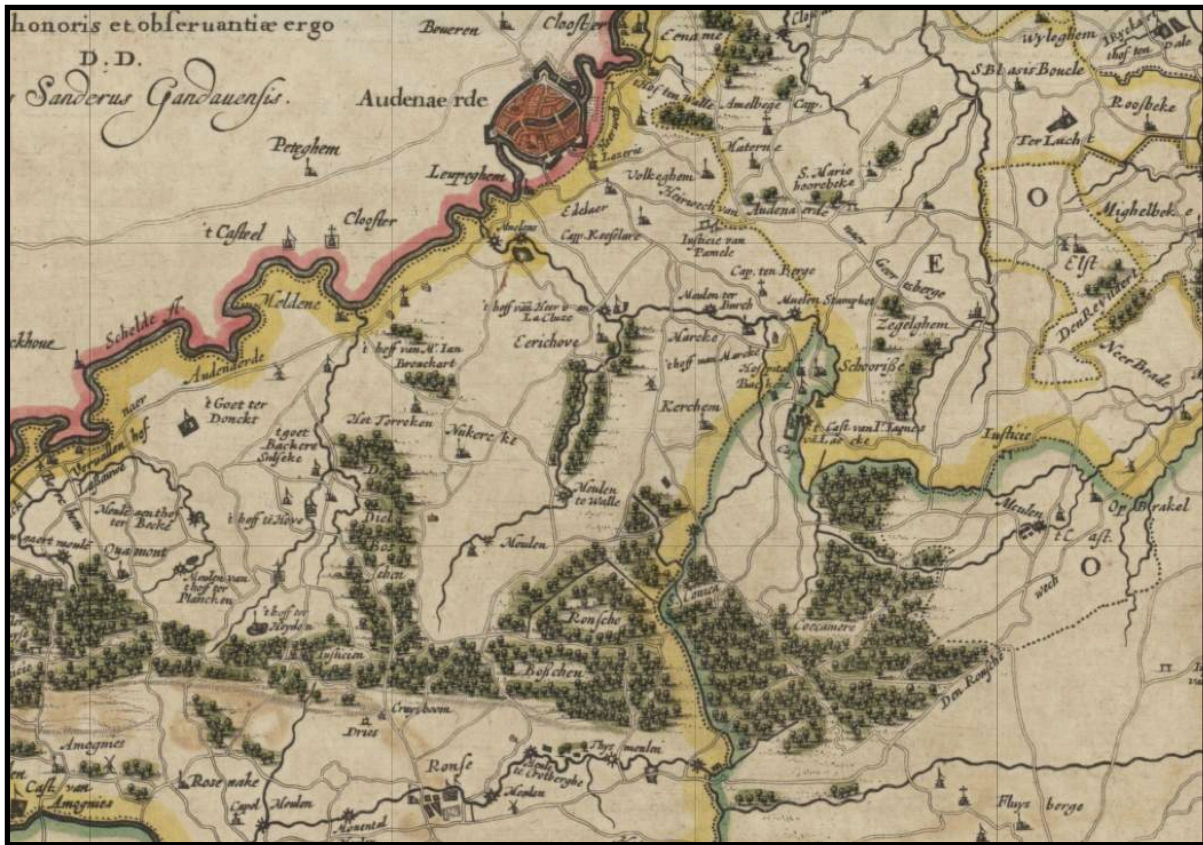


FIGURE 2 This map depicts the southern half of the Ronse deanery, which proved to be quite an afforested area in the seventeenth century. This geographical feature, in addition to the region’s high number of hills, definitely contributed to the remote status of many villages in the deanery, thus complicating any external influences.

This is what makes the Ronse deanery the perfect geographical demarcation for the type of analysis that I intend to perform. This small rural deanery in the south of Flanders was practically a band of little villages, located east of Oudenaarde and west of Geraardsbergen. While the city of Ronse, the largest and most populated locality in the deanery, definitely had some urban traits in its favour, an overwhelming amount of rural features dominated the outlook of the locality, making the deanery lack any explicit and clear-cut urban cores.¹³ Oudenaarde did prove to be an urban influence to some villages of the deanery, notably those located in its direct neighbourhood, as the city served as a local distribution centre and provided a number of entrepreneurs who invested in the proto-industrial textile economy of the surrounding

¹² Robert Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne (XV-XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991).

¹³ Peter Stabel, “Patronen van verstedelijking in het laatmiddeleeuwse en vroegmoderne Vlaanderen: demografische ontwikkelingen en economische functies van de kleine en secundaire steden in het Gentse kwartier (14de – 16de eeuw)” (PhD diss., University of Ghent, 1995), 143.

countryside.¹⁴ Generally however, most villages were quite remote, cut off from most external influences by a landscape that was dominated by hills and forests (figure 2). Combine this with a longstanding and intense Protestant tradition – Ronse was renowned as a major centre of the Reformed faith in the sixteenth century –¹⁵ and this rural deanery in the archdiocese of Mechelen proves once again to possess all the features necessary to make an analysis of its religious identities an interesting case study.

As for the chronological demarcation, I have opted for the age of confessionalism (1650-1725), or at least the extent of time in which the Flemish countryside was sufficiently affected by the confessionalising efforts of the Tridentine Church.¹⁶ Initially, these efforts had the intention of providing and implementing a clear-cut Catholic identity for every parishioner to pursue, but were generally met with opposition in the countryside. As of 1650, the opposition gradually dwindled, making it the perfect starting point for my analysis, since it allows me to focus on the dialogue between confessional and popular desires concerning the creation of a religious identity. The period of time around 1725 is therefore a suitable moment to end my thesis, since it heralded the emergence of a new age: the Age of Enlightenment.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This might be a good time to stress that this thesis is not, nor does it intend to be, a complete or exhaustive description of the evolution of confessional identities in the Southern Netherlands. In fact, I believe the very nature of identity proves such a *longue durée* approach to confessional beliefs inconceivable. Therefore, this paper instead offers a series of snapshots of local conflicts – taken from the rural context of the Ronse deanery and ranging from the second half of the seventeenth century until the first few decades of the eighteenth century – that spark underlying identities into life, clear enough for historians to ‘read’ their essence. Indeed, the conflicts that I have selected were not random, but substantiated by cultural meaning that can be extracted by an in-depth analysis of the incidents. After all, cultural expressions are like a collection of texts, which means that they can “be ‘read’ as fruitfully as a diary, a political tract, a sermon, or a body of laws”.¹⁷ This Geertzian outlook on culture and ritual frequently pops up throughout the main body of my thesis, and is ideally suited to dissect the presented microhistories.¹⁸ That is not to say that I have neglected to use other methodologies when seen fit, as some microhistories call for a more dynamic approach instead of a textual one. In these cases, I have opted for an

¹⁴ Erik Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst (eind 13de – eerste helft 16de eeuw)* (Gent: Belgisch Centrum voor Landelijke Geschiedenis, 1988), 980-1021.

¹⁵ Jozef De Brouwer, *Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van de kerkelijke instellingen en het godsdienstig leven in het Land van Aalst tussen 1550 en 1621* (Aalst: De Aankondiger, 1961), 180-81.

¹⁶ Michel Cloet, “Het gelovige volk in de 17^{de} eeuw,” in *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden – volume 8*, edited by Dirk Peter Blok, Walter Prevenier, Daniel J. Roorda et al. (Haarlem: Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 1977), 417.

¹⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), xvi-xvii.

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

analysis that evaluates every expression as a ‘performance’, in which human behaviour is framed in an active structure of human practice.¹⁹ Both historical-anthropological models directly underlie my means of analysis and become apparent in the applications.

The type of sources that was used in the research leading up to this dissertation generally reflects the methodological focus on conflicts and the theoretical focus on ‘the small people’. As such, I mostly opted for sources that contain the voices of *menu peuple* regarding the treatment of a conflict, like letters, testimonies in trial records, preparatory investigations, and other types of sources that have the characteristics of egodocuments. Of course, one can commonly not expect to construct a full-fledged historical investigation that is solely based on this type of sources because of their generally limited numbers, especially concerning rural populations. Thus, ecclesiastical documents, like the dean’s visitation reports, provide an interesting and important addition to the corpus of sources, as they are able to fill in the blanks left by the more individually focused testimonial sources. However, it is imperative to utter some words of warning before overrating the value of these clerical sources in the story that I am trying to present in this paper. As it turns out, the sources of this kind usually disseminate a clerical cosmology, in which lies the danger of overrepresenting the importance of a hierarchical religious experience for the laity. However, with a critical attitude, clerical sources still provide an excellent and versatile window into the religious lives of the peasantry, as the excellent work of Put and Harline on archbishop Mathias Hovius has demonstrated.²⁰

¹⁹ For an extensive theoretical treatise on ‘performance studies’, see: Richard Schechner, “What is Performance Studies?” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 5 (2013): 2-11. However, my methodology does not fully incorporate the complete theoretical basis of the performance studies. Instead, I prefer to use the practical way of thinking of human behaviour in terms of ‘performances’ to get results.

²⁰ Craig Harline and Eddy Put, *A Bishop's Tale: Mathias Hovius among his Flock in seventeenth-century Flanders* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

PART I
THE INTERNALISATION OF CATHOLIC IDENTITIES
WITCHES, FEAR, AND MILITANCY

Chapter 1

A Confessional People: from Peasants to Parishioners

TRIDENTINE RESTORATION OF THE RELIGIOUS ORDER

“N’ayez pas peur Madame, ce ne sont que des gueux!” Those would have been the legendary words uttered by Charles de Berlaymont, nobleman and counselor to the governor of the Netherlands, when the League of Compromise came to deliver a petition to Regent Margaret of Parma in 1566.¹ This covenant of nobles beseeched the Regent’s court for an alleviation of the relentless ordinances against the Protestants teachings in order to sooth the rising opposition among the population and restore order to the increasingly tense region. The petition was not met with a sympathetic response from the royal court, utterly rejecting the plea of the local nobility and thus throwing more fire onto the already unstable Netherlands, which would finally lead into the Dutch Revolt and several decades of intense religious strife that shook the very foundations of the Habsburg hereditary lands.² Indeed, the sixteenth century had generated discrepancies in the confessional experience of this region, dividing the population into Catholics and Protestants, which came to a head in the Eighty Year’s War, shattering the relative unity of the Christian identity, and consequently molding a new Catholic identity in the Southern Netherlands.³

By the end of the sixteenth century though, the population of the Spanish Netherlands had largely been remodeled into a monoconfessional people, both through the massive emigration of ‘heretics’ to the North⁴ and by converting the more moderate dissidents back to Catholicism.⁵ However, the fact that the region was again considered to be a uniformly Catholic one does not mean that every single individual was therefore immediately considered to be an exemplary Catholic; there was still a lot of confusion and variety concerning local devotion and piety, transgressions of the commendable behavioural model were obvious, and the region was by no means a united front of established beliefs and practices.⁶ This lack of devout consensus left a

¹ Louis Prosper Gachard, “Sur l’origine du nom de gueux, donné aux révolutionnaires des Pays-Bas dans le XVIIe siècle,” in *Études et notices historiques concernant l’histoire des Pays-Bas*, ed. Louis Prosper Gachard (Brussels: Hayez, 1890), vol. 1, 130-41.

² Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 137-54.

³ Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, 94-158.

⁴ The exact number of southern Protestants fleeing to the Dutch Republic is quite difficult to estimate, but some historians have made an assessment for a distinct region. For Antwerp for example, Van Roey could establish that approximately 32.000 inhabitants (around 40% of the total population) had left the city by 1586. See: Jan Van Roey, “De bevolking,” in *Antwerpen in de XVIde eeuw* (Antwerpen: Mercurius, 1976), 102.

⁵ Marnef, “Protestant Conversions,” 255-66.

⁶ Michel Cloet and the followers of his school of thought have systematically studied the spiritual and pious life of

huge regulatory void for the ecclesiastical authorities to fill by the beginning of the seventeenth century, mostly by means of implementing the degrees of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), in order to institute a joint confessional society in the Spanish Netherlands.

The impact of the Council of Trent on the experienced religiosity in Europe cannot be underestimated. After all, this ecclesiastical council is one of the most important episodes in the history of the Catholic faith, as it integrally enclosed the complete Catholic doctrine for the first time.⁷ Taking the Bible, but even more than that, the centuries of accumulated traditions as initial concepts, the Council outlined the elementary precepts and religious convictions that defined Catholicism and distinguished it from the competitive Christian faiths, such as stressing the existence of seven sacraments, reaffirming the veneration of relics and saints, instituting the afterlife as a three-way possibility in heaven, hell and purgatory, and accentuating the importance of salvation through good works.⁸ These explicitly Tridentine concepts were furthermore supplemented with measures that were characteristic for the early modern *zeitgeist*, namely a general tendency towards social disciplining⁹ and the internalisation of religious morals. As such, pastoral negligence in celibacy and residence was tackled in a more drastic fashion,¹⁰ while the provision of spiritual care by the local shepherd was increasingly personalised through the introduction of the individualised Easter Duty.¹¹

These tendencies for order, regulation, and discipline were not exclusively Tridentine impulses though; in fact, extremely comparable aspirations were ventilated in Lutheranism and Calvinism, as all confessional Churches shared certain ‘functional similarities’ in order to socially and culturally homogenize their subjects and unite them under one confessional banner, a process that numerous historians have dubbed ‘confessionalisation’.¹² Consequently, these historians dismiss the name ‘Counter-Reformation’ as too reactionary and dependent on Protestantism,

the Catholic population in several seventeenth-century deaneries and dioceses. For example: Michel Cloet, *Het kerkelijk leven in een landelijke dekenij van Vlaanderen tijdens de XVIIe eeuw: Tielt van 1609 tot 1700* (Leuven: Belgisch centrum voor landelijke geschiedenis, 1968); Tony Morren, *Het dekenaat Diest (1599-1700): bijdrage tot de studie van de katholieke hervorming in het aartsbisdom Mechelen* (Leuven: Belgisch centrum voor landelijke geschiedenis, 1993). A summarizing study entailing the religious experience in the entirety of the seventeenth-century Spanish Netherlands can be found in: Michel Cloet, “Het gelovige volk in de 17^{de} eeuw,” 393-417.

⁷ To this day, the most complete and exhaustive study on the Council of Trent is the massive undertaking of Hubert Jedin, who compiled practically all decisions and discussions made at the Council in five volumes: Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient* (Freiburg: Herder, 1951-1975).

⁸ The foremost authoritative English translation of the degrees of the Council of Trent is the edited version of James Waterworth. Therefore, for the degrees concerning the mentioned topics, see: James Waterworth, trans., *The Canons and Degrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent, Celebrated Under the Sovereign Pontiffs, Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV* (London: Burns and Oates, 1848), 36-37, 54-55, 232-36.

⁹ The term *Sozialdisziplinierung* was first coined by Gerhard Oestreich in: Gerhard Oestreich, “Strukturprobleme des europäischen Absolutismus,” in *Geist und Gestalt des frühmodernen Staates. Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, ed. Gerhard Oestreich (Berlin: Humblot, 1969), 179-97.

¹⁰ Waterworth, *The Canons and Degrees*, 175-78, 194-96.

¹¹ John Bossy, “The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe,” *Past and Present* 47 (1970): 51-70; Michel Cloet, “De personalisering van de zielzorg na Trente. Ambities en realisaties in de Mechelse kerkprovincie,” *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 9 (2000): 3-27.

¹² Wolfgang Reinhard, “Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters,” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 10 (1983): 257-77; Heinz Schilling, “Konfessionalisierung im Reich: Religiöser und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Deutschland zwischen 1555 und 1620,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 246 (1988): 1-45.

and instead opt for the most independently fitting name of ‘Catholic Reformation’, as the Catholic Church shared the same objective as the other Protestant confessions: pressuring their followers to reform into one large confessional community. Basically, the Catholic authorities aimed to create a Christianisation movement that homogenized its subjects as a uniform Catholic society, standardizing the behaviour of all people according to the confessional regulations, and thus unifying their instinctive behavioural sequences into a single Catholic modal action pattern. Indeed, the ultimate goal of the Catholic Church was creating a confessional identity that could be shared among all Catholics.¹³

COMMUNICATING A CONFESSIONAL IDENTITY

For the people to recognise and assimilate this identity, one had to implement these disciplinary regulations first, and that was not an easy task to achieve. The decrees of the Council of Trent had to be supported by both the regional ecclesiastical authorities and the central political body in order to be successful, but considering the unstable geopolitical status quo and the constant military induced border changes in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Spanish Netherlands did not have a clear-cut way of introducing and maintaining such far-reaching decrees. They had tried of course; the archdiocese of Mechelen knew two provincial councils, one in 1570 and another in 1574, both in an attempt to introduce and apply the Tridentine measures on a large scale, but they ultimately had very little direct impact, partially because archbishop Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle was no longer present in the region as of 1579 due to king Philip II summoning him to Madrid.¹⁴

Eventually, it was only in the first decade of the seventeenth century that the Tridentine facilities were effectively anchored in the legal framework of the Spanish Netherlands. Once again, a provincial council was arranged to reevaluate the current spiritual state of the archdiocese, but this time, the determined and spirited archbishop Mathias Hovius presided over the whole organisation. His mediating attitude and undying motivation would prove invaluable to the eventual successful incorporation of the Catholic Reformation and its confessional identity into the Southern Netherlands.¹⁵ Unlike the earlier councils, the council of 1607 was willfully backed by the central political body, as the new Governors General, archduke Albert VII of Austria and his wife Isabella of Spain, lent their full support to any encouragement of a devotional survival. Recording some of the Tridentine decrees in a *placard* in 1608 validated this

¹³ Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, eds. *Die katholische Konfessionalisierung. Wissenschaftliches Symposium der Gesellschaft zur Herausgabe des Corpus Catholicorum und des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995).

¹⁴ Fernand Willocx, *L'introduction des décrets du Concile de Trente dans les Pays-Bas et dans la principauté de Liège* (Leuven: University Library, 1929), 249-87.

¹⁵ Harline and Put, *A Bishop's Tale*.

political support, and brought the Catholic Reformation to the next level for the entire Habsburg Netherlands, including the Ronse deanery.¹⁶

Setting these rules up is one thing, having them incorporated in and scaling them up to a realistic livable environment is entirely different matter. After all, the subjects of the confessionalisation process were not mindless recipients who automatically consummated all upper class forms of cultural implications. Communal bodies knew their own religious customs and innately experienced their own type of religiosity, and more often than not, they were not very keen on a blunt naturalisation of external influences that stigmatised their traditions as spiritually ‘incorrect’. Principally, the Tridentine reformers of Europe were hindered in their confessionalising efforts by the opposition of the peasantry, as the more restricted presence of state and church representatives often did not manage to break the monopoly of a popular religiosity. Marc Forster found that the rural population’s preferences concerning sacraments and public veneration in the diocese of Speyer could not be easily transformed despite the best efforts of the local clergy.¹⁷ Philip Hoffman and Keith Luria reached similar conclusions for the French bishoprics of Lyon and Grenoble,¹⁸ and even in the Spanish hinterland – a region that was known for being one of the strongest European cores of the Catholic Reformation – the introduction of a new confessional identity was not met without popular opposition.¹⁹ Of course, a general attitude of inconvenience and resistance among a lot of communal communities is not necessarily tantamount to an equally immediate rejection of all Tridentine features. After all, the Reformed alternatives to Catholicism had reached popular acclaim partially due to their strident condemnation of pastoral misconduct, which the Council of Trent had equally criticised in its decrees. This means that the spirit of certain Tridentine measures, like the reiterated emphasis on clerical discipline, could definitely appeal to rural communities.²⁰

This model of rural opposition can also be found in most historical analyses of the seventeenth-century religiosity of the Flemish laity.²¹ Chiefly, these treatises focus on the study of one particular rural deanery or diocese, and aim to explore the meaning of the Catholic Church for the *menu peuple* of the investigated region by using a wide range of ecclesiastical documents, like the dean’s visitation reports and *acta episcopatus*. The dissertation of Michel Cloet about the

¹⁶ Pierre François De Ram, *Synodicon belgicum, sive acta omnium ecclesiarum Belgii a celebrato concilio tridentino usque ad concordatum anni 1801* (Liège: Centre National de Recherche d’Histoire Religieuse, 1996), vol. 1, 412-23.

¹⁷ Marc Forster, *The Counter-Reformation in the Villages: Religion and Reform in the Bishopric of Speyer, 1560-1720* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

¹⁸ Philip Hoffman, *Church and community in the diocese of Lyon, 1500-1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Keith Luria, *Territories of Grace: Cultural Change in the Seventeenth-Century Diocese of Grenoble* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Henry Kamen, *The Phoenix and the Flame: Catalonia and the Counter Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Forster, *The Counter-Reformation in the Villages*, 9. Several cases about clerical discipline brought before archbishop Mathias Hovius seem to confirm this point for the Southern Netherlands. See: Harline and Put, *A Bishop’s Tale*, 151-153.

²¹ Michel Cloet, “Een kwarteeuw historische produktie in België betreffende de religieuze geschiedenis van de Nieuwe Tijd,” *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 4 (1995): 208-10.

deanery of Tielt was vital to the launch of this tradition,²² and was soon followed by a dozen similar essays, all of them regarding a different geographical area.²³ Most of these pretty much shared the same structure, albeit with slight variations, and reached very complementary conclusions about the seventeenth-century Christianisation of the Southern Netherlands. For one, they noticed a palpable difference in the success of the confessionalising movement between cities and the countryside. Whereas the Tridentine Reformation fairly swiftly generated results in an urban environment, their rural counterparts required a longer period of confessional exposure before the majority started to comply with the new forms of religiosity.

For example, most peasant communities had a hard time abiding by the enforced church attendance and were even more obstinate in their adherence to Sunday Sabbath, mostly due to their professional and economical obligations on those days. Also the sacramental life of the general peasantry did not take off as quickly as its urban equivalent, as rural society initially did not submit to the Easter obligations and the now regulated baptism. Nor did the Church's civilization efforts, i.e. the introduction of a new Catholic moral code, necessarily reach the popular acclaim of its rural subjects. Violations of the prescribed marriage integrity and charges of *fornicatio simplex* remained commonplace throughout the entire seventeenth century. Eventually, the Flemish countryside did catch up with the main confessional trend of city life, but only after 1650, and with great difficulty and variation. As such, the second half of the seventeenth century made the Easter traditions increasingly start to take root, and the church attendance rate slowly but surely stabilized at a high level. Furthermore, the Trent-inspired devotion continued to flourish in the countryside in the course of the eighteenth century, while the Age of Enlightenment heralded a slight secularisation in the urban sphere.²⁴

THROUGH TRIAL AND ERROR: CONFESSIONALISM IN THE RONSE DEANERY

In the rural Ronse deanery, the *menu peuple* of the peasantry generally went through a similar evolution concerning their religious experiences. The first half of the seventeenth century was crammed with confessional violations and popular indifferences, while the second half casually showed signs of elevated confessional involvement, with more and more peasants steadily abiding by the ecclesiastical regulations. However, unlike most other deaneries, the region of Ronse had a complicated religious outset due to the extensive local popularity of the Protestant faith. As a result, the clergy was confronted with plenty of perceived confessional flaws and a

²² Cloet, *Het kerkelijk leven*.

²³ Some of the more notable ones are: Katrien Bergé, *Kerkelijk leven in de landelijke dekenij Deinze (1661-1762)* (Leuven: Belgisch centrum voor landelijke geschiedenis, 1981); Kristin De Raeymaecker, *Het godsdienstig leven in de landdekenij Antwerpen (1610-1650)* (Leuven: Belgisch centrum voor landelijke geschiedenis, 1977); Morren, *Het dekenaat Diest*; Marc Therry, *De dekenij Roeselare (1609-1649). Bijdrage tot de studie van de katholieke hervorming in het bisdom Brugge* (Leuven: Belgisch centrum voor landelijke geschiedenis, 1983).

²⁴ Cloet, "Het gelovige volk in de 17^{de} eeuw," 417.

radical lack of religious empathy, which made the integration of the Tridentine confessional identity even more challenging. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, few parishioners respected church attendance with weekly visits, the sacramental life was mostly put on the back burner, and the communal duties were prioritised over the Sabbath regulations.²⁵

The situation did not really improve in the following years. For one, the dean's visitation reports mention at least around seventy regular absentees from the weekly mass services in the first half of the seventeenth century, which is a staggering amount when compared to neighbouring deaneries.²⁶ The real figure of mass negligence was probably even higher, but is extremely difficult to pinpoint. Also, the respect for mass and the Eucharist was often a far cry. For example, the priest of Berchem commented in 1655 on the resilient habit of many parishioners to leave the church in the middle of the service.²⁷ Of course, church attendance was difficult to enforce, since absentees could only be approached and admonished for their behaviour, and not prosecuted for their actions. As it turns out, legal action was only taken when the regular absentee was also insinuated to be a full-blown heretic.²⁸ However, there were some priests who did manage to raise the church attendance rate by utilising some creative thinking. For example, the shepherd of Schorisse cut off poor relief for any negligent parishioner, while the priest of Ronse-Sint-Maarten lured dozens of homeless people to the Sunday mass by distributing bread in front of the church.²⁹

The other Sunday duty, i.e. the Sabbath, posed an even bigger problem for the peasantry to adhere to. As such, the visitation reports address countless cases of parishioners violating the imposed rest on Sunday far into the seventeenth century.³⁰ However, while there were definitely multiple cases of recreational transgressions of the Sunday Sabbath,³¹ most infractions on the holy day of rest were committed out of necessity, due to professional obligations or economical prerequisites. As it so happens, strict daily and seasonal schedules were essential for the peasantry to preserve the 'commercial survival economy' that characterised the countryside of inland Flanders.³² That explains why many violators of the Sabbath were linked to predominantly agricultural activities, like Hermynus Garyts from Ronse who stated that grinding grain on

²⁵ Jozef De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1550 en 1621*, 64-73.

²⁶ Jozef De Brouwer, *Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het godsdienstig leven en de kerkelijke instellingen in het Land van Aalst tussen 1621 en 1796* (Dendermonde: in own publication, 1975), 769-70.

²⁷ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Berchem anno 1655*.

²⁸ The only case that I could find concerning mass negligence are the charges against Johannes Walraevens de Oude from Mater in 1604. Here, this man is sentenced for both mass negligence and heresy, but the verdict clearly points to heresy as the main instigator of the trial. See: AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 879.

²⁹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Rothnaci St. Martini anno 1631; visitatio Schornaci anno 1633*.

³⁰ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 776-86.

³¹ For example, Maximiliaan Heyse was charged in 1604 for drinking and killing time in the tavern on Ascension Day, for which he was fined by the archiepiscopal officiality. AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 876.

³² Erik Thoen, "'Commercial survival economy' in evolution. The Flemish countryside and the transition to capitalism (Middle Ages - 19th century)," in *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (middle ages-19th century) in light of the Brennerdebate*, ed. Peter Hoppenbrouwers and Jan Luiten van Zanden (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 102-57. For a more specific analysis of the region of Ronse and Oudenaarde, see: Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking*, 704-75.

Sunday was essential to gain his livelihood.³³ This inevitable sinfulness for the peasantry is also reflected in the journal of dean Damiaan van Huffel, as he listed fining around seventeen millers and three ploughers in less than twenty years for this exact violation.³⁴ Other professional groups, like innkeepers and spinners, were also known to be regular transgressors of the Sabbath.³⁵ In short, professional responsibilities were generally prioritised over religious obligations, proving that the rural population felt very little towards the Tridentine interpretation of a Catholic identity.

Additionally, a popular negligence towards the other confessional obligations, like the Easter Duty or the abstinence from meat and eggs during Lent, was equally noticeable in pretty much every corner of the deanery. As such, De Brouwer provides a vast array of examples of Easter violations, extracted from the visitation reports for parishes from all over the region,³⁶ while the archives of the archiepiscopal officiality house a dozen examples of the same ecclesiastical infringement as well.³⁷ Furthermore, the Catholic Church did also not manage to transform the popular morality into a confessional one,³⁸ as unmarried couples continued to live in 'concubinage' even after multiple admonitions,³⁹ blasphemy still ran rampant,⁴⁰ and sexual transgressions were still the order of the day.⁴¹ To make it worse, some members of the local clergy did not exactly embrace an exemplary position in their community. For example, the outrageous adulterous behaviour of confessional shepherds like Jan Schuermans in Ename definitely did not help to remedy the moral code of the popular masses.⁴² The fact that there was

³³ AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 973.

³⁴ The dean composed a list of fines that he handed out in his active years as dean (1649-1669) at the end of his journal. See: Jozef De Brouwer, "Deken Damiaan van Huffel en de bestraffing van de overtreders van de kerkelijke wetten in de dekenij Ronse: Sint-Jan 1649 - Sint-Jan 1669," *Het Land van Aalst* 9 (1967): 21-31. The original journal is kept in the State Archives of Ghent: RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 16.

³⁵ For example, the priests of Ronse, Ename, and Nukerke denounced the innkeepers in their parishes for keeping their taverns open on holy days. See: De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 751. Petrus Viliers and his wife were both tried for using their spinning wheels on multiple holy days, causing them to be fined by the officiality. See: AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 996.

³⁶ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 810-14.

³⁷ The frequency and intensity of the problem is well demonstrated by the high number of cases and the wide geographical and chronological spectrum that they cover, despite the limited transmission of records from the officiality archives. For example, the earliest record that I could find originated from Zegelsem in 1606, while the latest was a case from Kwaremont in 1644. See: AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 889; AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 1039.

³⁸ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 951-93.

³⁹ A good example is the enduring relationship between Johannes Cuckelier and Dionysia De Cubbere from Schorisse, who lived together for over a decade before finally being subpoenaed by the archiepiscopal vicar. Their case file is very elaborate, and might prove interesting for further study. See: AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 965.

⁴⁰ In the early 1620's, Nicolas De Coster, a barber surgeon from Ronse, had publicly denounced God and the Catholic faith, probably in an ironical fashion. The fact that most parishioners found no problem in these 'scandalous' utterances clearly indicates a general feeling of indifference towards the Catholic Church. AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 955.

⁴¹ The archives of the officiality house a pretty high number of prostitution cases, especially cases against prostitutes in the neighbourhood of Ronse itself. See the thematic index in: Tom Bervoets, *Inventaris van het officialiteitsarchief van het aartsbisdom Mechelen in het Aartsbisshoppelijk Archief te Mechelen (1510) 1596-1796* (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 2015).

⁴² Ludo Milis, *De indiscrete charme van Jan Schuermans, pastoor van Ename (1645-1655)* (Antwerpen-Baarn: Hadewijch, 1994).

so little confessional discipline and empathy among the large body of rural villagers once again points to the very limited appropriation of the pre-constructed confessional identity along the lines of the Council of Trent. A popular form of religiosity continued to dominate the spiritual life before 1650.

The middle of the seventeenth century heralded slight and gradual transformations in the religious experience of the general population. For one, the eye-catching decline of confessional violations after 1660 broadcasts an expanded assimilation of the confessionalised moral code and external religious behaviour. While some Tridentine features, like the heightened communal control on marriages, already found some entrance in the peasant mind before 1650, confessional identifiers like a devout sacramental life and a regular church attendance became increasingly commonplace in the course of the second half of the seventeenth century.⁴³ Only the abidance by the Sabbath and some manner of unchastity generally stayed a problem,⁴⁴ but most other violations dwindled with the passing of time. In short, the confessionalised Catholic identity started to look more and more appealing for the majority of the rural parishioners.

Reflecting these shifts in popular religiosity is the emergence and blossoming of Tridentine-incited public devotions, like the local establishment of fraternities, whose numbers resolutely expanded in the Ronse deanery towards the end of the seventeenth century⁴⁵. These pious organisations were an excellent means of communication between the state and its subjects, and could thus prove very influential in shaping the parochial religiosity according to Tridentine standards.⁴⁶ For example, this was definitely the case for Zulzeke, where the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, which was founded in 1662, would basically come to define the religious identity of the village.⁴⁷ This does not mean that fraternities immediately caught on in village life: a Fraternity of the Holy Trinity was founded in Sint-Maria-Horebeke in 1660, but was initially not very popular among the villagers.⁴⁸ Only twenty years later, a devotional revival ensured its central position in the religious life of the village into the eighteenth century.⁴⁹

In conclusion, it seems safe to assume that the population of the Ronse deanery generally travelled a road of gradually growing confessionalism, a path they shared with the villagers from

⁴³ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 951-93.

⁴⁴ Earlier, I already mentioned the list of fines in the journal of dean Damiaan van Huffel. Since the list covers the period of 1649-1669, it proves very useful to evaluate the development of any moral and religious violations in the second half of the seventeenth century, both in terms of quantity and quality. Here, the two mentioned offenses stand out as dominant, together amounting to more than 75% of all listed fines. There also seems very little chronological difference in the distribution of the fines: the number of fines in 1669 is about the same as the number in 1649. See: De Brouwer, "Deken Damiaan van Huffel," 30. While the endurance of unchastity was rather common for the entirety of seventeenth-century Flanders, the negligence towards the Sabbath was not. See for example: Cloet, *Het kerkelijk leven*, 293-94.

⁴⁵ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 860.

⁴⁶ Cloet, *Het kerkelijk leven*, 344. There was a long tradition in the Southern Netherlands of using devotional fraternities as state propaganda, see: Susie Speakman Sutch and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, "The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary: Devotional Communication and Politics in the Burgundian-Habsburg Low Countries, c. 1490–1520," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010): 252-78.

⁴⁷ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 249, *visitatio Sulsecke anno 1734*.

⁴⁸ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Mariae Orebeke anno 1660*.

⁴⁹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Mariae Orebeke anno 1680; visitatio Mariae Orebeke anno 1698*.

most other areas in Flanders. For the longest time, it was a bumpy and unpredictable ride, accomplished through trial and error and with a high degree of continual give and take, but the journey smoothed in the course of the second half of the seventeenth century. Slowly but steadily, an increasing number of parishioners came under the spell of the Tridentine Reformation, abiding by its regulations and appropriating its fixed action pattern. As of 1650, religion became a confessional faith, and peasants became parishioners. A religious identity along the lines of the aspirations of the Catholic Church and the Habsburg state was on the rise.

Chapter 2

A Magical People

When freshly appointed dean Adriaan Baejens was holding his first tour of visitations in 1670, he came across a lot of enticing tales, many of which he later touched upon in his often short reports. One of the most interesting ones was the tragic life story of Adriana de Waele, a woman from Ronse who had been actively possessed by the devil for over a decade. Adriana had acknowledged her bewitched status a long time ago, and had gone through great lengths to eradicate her suffering. However, despite years of effort to rid herself from this possession, she never seemed to be able to completely free herself from the demonic influence. According to dean Baejens, she was truly ‘bound by the shackles of Satan’.¹

In hindsight, this statement seems like the perfect way to describe Adriana’s place in society. For years, this woman had been deprived of any form of normal life, both socially and religiously, due to her assertion of being possessed by the devil. For one, her desire to receive the sacraments was curbed by the priest’s unwillingness to absolve her sins through penance. Furthermore, he refused to grant her communion, thus totally excluding her from the rest of the Catholic society in Ronse. Reflecting this isolated existence, Adriana kept to herself, lived alone and never got married. The shackles that this bewitched status had bestowed upon her had indeed fitted her into a marginal communal position.

However, Adriana was never completely cut off from the Catholic community, and there was even a lot of effort put into her reintegration. As such, pastor Christofre de la Tenre appeared to have demonstrated the most empathy and eagerness to help, as he often reached out to the less fortunate and the underprivileged.² For years, he frequently conducted exorcisms in order to evict the harming demons from Adriana’s mind and invested a great deal of time in performing these exorcisms. By the time dean Baejens visited, pastor de la Tenre had already tried conducting them around 11 o’clock, and when this proved unsuccessful, had moved the exorcisms to coincide with the vespers.³ Over the next two years, he upped the quantity from a good half-hour per week to multiple hours per day, and even reined in a second priest to be

¹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Rothnaci St. Martini anno 1670*.

² For example: in his will, Christofre de la Tenre specifically stresses the importance of poor relief as a key feature of the local parish church. Consequently, he commits parts of his assets to establish a foundation that consistently delivers bread to the poor. RAG, *OKA Ronse (Sint-Martinus)*, nr. 137, f. 14r-14v, f. 16v.

³ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Rothnaci St. Martini anno 1670*.

present at the exorcism.⁴ It is thus without question that the priest always considered Adriana de Waele to be a part of his flock, although she was definitely a very peculiar sheep indeed.

Stories like this one, about people with magical afflictions and abilities, can be very commonly found in the rural *habitus* of the seventeenth-century Ronse deanery; accounts broadcasting the cursed and the marginal, but also narratives featuring those who endure in the centre of local society. In the small parish of Maarke, the of wizardry suspected Andreas Goelinckx and Joannes Walraet were visited by many on a daily basis, since they used their magical abilities to tend to the sick and to cure a wide variety of illnesses.⁵ Also Jacoba van den Daele, a resident of Sint-Maria-Horebeke, was quite popular for her magical healing powers,⁶ and the locals of Ename often called upon the mystic services of Michael van Cauwenberghe to nurse the sick back to health.⁷ Whereas Adriana de Waele was expelled to the edge of society, these ‘magical’ personae fitted into the heart of daily life for an abundance of parishioners. Even more so for the countryside, as people like Daniel van den Eijnde, a.k.a. ‘The Cow Whisperer’,⁸ managed the well-being of animals and cattle, an important resource for the livelihood of farmers.

In addition, the magical frame of mind of many parishioners was never exclusively limited to the agency of people. Certain objects could hold incomprehensible spellbinding powers and were consequently adored and/or feared by many. For example: sheets of magical paper were believed to have a vast array of beneficial effects. Accordingly, they were widely spread among the population of the Ronse deanery.⁹ Furthermore, the immaterial, and even the unseeable, could retain or be triggered by magical powers. When Jan Vuije, a twenty-one-year-old from Maarke, was found dead outside of his house in the summer of 1681, the coroner deduced that he had been killed by a thunderclap, no doubt the work of some malicious spirit.¹⁰ The same was said for the lightning strike that destroyed part of the spire in Schorisse in 1660.¹¹

This widespread domination of a magical worldview may seem strange in the narrative that I was presenting so far: how can a magical cosmology coincide with the continuing construction of a more explicit Catholic identity, as was described in the previous chapter? In fact, many historians have recently been prone to increasingly revise the association between religion and magic.¹² Officially, the Catholic Church may have been very clear in her directives to face down any form of ‘illegal superstition’, but daily convention evolved much more liberally. After all, the integration of the difference between magic and religion into local society mostly depended on

⁴ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Rothnaci St. Martini anno 1672*.

⁵ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Marckae anno 1659*.

⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1659*.

⁷ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Eenam superior anno 1661*.

⁸ His nickname was granted by the villagers and has only been registered in Latin: “*medicus vaccae*”. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Quaremont anno 1690*.

⁹ The dean occasionally denounces the use of these “*chartae deabolicae*” in his reports. Examples can be found in: De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 946-48.

¹⁰ RAG, *OGA Maarke-Kerkem*, nr. 33.

¹¹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Schornaci anno 1660*.

¹² Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Viking, 2006), 127-36.

the mediating capabilities of the local clergy.¹³ That's why magic and religion often went hand in hand for a large majority of parishioners.¹⁴

Of course, this raises the question about how the Catholic Church handled the previously mentioned magical beliefs in the Ronse deanery in the second half of the seventeenth century. While the deans often warned for the pressing repercussions of this 'superstition' running rampant, and priests were obliged to immediately charge any suspect and initiate legal action at the officiality, the actual reality was much less severe.¹⁵ In fact, trials and judicial proceedings were practically nonexistent.¹⁶ Fines were also rare; during a period of twenty years, dean Damiaan van Huffel handed out more than 150 fines and listed them all in his journal, but none of them are in any manner related to superstition.¹⁷ Most of the time, flirting with superstition only resulted in a warning, generally without result.¹⁸

The most direct component in the link between religion and popular magic however, was the local clergy itself. Not only did they serve as the first level of finding illegal superstitions, but they often also acted as primary practitioners of magic, notably in the form of exorcism. This double standard created a problem: while the difference between (legal) Church-sanctioned exorcism and (illegal) unauthorised healer's magic was clear to and well-defined by the Catholic clergy, the ordinary lay people often did not grasp its difference.¹⁹ After all, both were applied to the same kind of diseases, especially by priests who were overeager in the performing of their exorcist duties, the exact distinction thus being lost in translation.²⁰

As a result, the frontier between religion and magic was never set in stone in the perception of the masses. Consequently, the substance of the devotional reverence for the miraculous curative powers of the wooden statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the church of Volkegem did not necessarily deviate that much from the essence of the regard for a wonderworking amulet in the

¹³ Guido Marnef, "Een religieuze leefwereld aan de basis. Het beeld van Mechelse hekselijprocessen uit het midden van de zeventiende eeuw," *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 11 (2002): 295.

¹⁴ Robin Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995); David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Otranto* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ The most important ecclesiastical guidelines concerning superstition, decided at councils of deans and synods, are listed in: De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 932-36.

¹⁶ I couldn't find any dossier, file, or even verdict concerning superstitious offences in the archives of the Mechelen officiality. See: Bervoets, *Inventaris van het officialiteitsarchief*.

¹⁷ Almost all of the fines focus on correct moral behaviour, notably chastity, marital problems, Sabbath desecration, and the like. All of the fines are treated in: Jozef De Brouwer, "Deken Damiaan van Huffel," 21-31. The original journal is kept in the State Archives of Ghent: RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 16.

¹⁸ For example, the previously mentioned Jacoba van den Daele and Daniel van den Eijnde were both admonished for their services as magical healers. However, neither of them paid much attention to the warnings, and they refused to limit their activity. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1680*; RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Quaremont anno 1690*.

¹⁹ Charles Caspers, "Duivelsbannen of genezen op 'natuurlijke' wijze. De Mechelse aartsbisschoppen en hun medewerkers over exorcismen en geneeskunde, ca. 1575 - ca. 1800," in *Grenzen van geneezing. Gezondheid, ziekte en genezen in Nederland, zestiende tot begin twintigste eeuw*, ed. Willem de Blécourt et al. (Hilversum: Verloren, 1993), 46-66.

²⁰ Christofre de la Tenre, the priest from Ronse who performed exorcism on Adriana Baejens for years, was known to be one of those overeager priests. Apparently, he sometimes spent seven or eight hours per day performing exorcisms, causing him to forsake many of his other pastoral duties. Additionally, his exorcisms often included a few 'illegitimate' elements. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Rothnaci St. Martini anno 1667*.

hearts and minds of the common people.²¹ Nor did the ‘invented’ distinction between the abilities of a priest and of a lay healer matter in any groundbreaking way. After all, the above-mentioned magical healer Jacoba van den Daele did not acknowledge the difference when she prescribed a Catholic pilgrimage as a cure to numerous afflictions.²²

On the other hand, the separation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ magic left almost no room for doubt. This distinction was far more pronounced, and the contrast between helpful white magic and harmful black magic (*maleficium*) often owned a steadier and clearer place in the mental structure of early modern society. In fact, the firm belief in *maleficium* thrived to such an extent that it caused the systematic persecution of practitioners – branded as ‘witches’ – in the County of Flanders to persist far into the seventeenth century.²³ Even though the greatest fires of the Great Witch Craze had died down by the middle of the seventeenth century, several local outbursts led a few dozen *maleficiaria* to be tried and often executed.²⁴

Amougies-Russeignies, a small *seigneurie* in the southwest of Ronse (figure 3), was such a hub of persecution in the second half of the seventeenth century.²⁵ The records that these witch trials produced will be the main focus of this chapter. Just like all of the previous judicial files, these expose conflicts in which people state opinions, testimony and observations, all of which can be traced to a specific mental map. Through careful analysis, one can ‘read’ the confessional identity of a community; how they define it, what they appropriate as such, and most importantly, what it means to be a part of this specific identity group. But unlike the earlier ethical trials, these witch trials have the possibility to offer even more.

²¹ The devotional practice towards the statue – carved from a tree that originally stood in Scherpenheuvel (the most important pilgrimage site in the Southern Netherlands at the time, right at the border with the Republic) – was strongly encouraged by the higher clergy. In fact, the papal nuncio granted every participant indulgence for their contribution. RAG, *OKA Volkegem en Edelare*, nr. 5.

²² RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1659*.

²³ About the fear of *maleficium* stirring the Great Witch Craze: Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), chapter 14; Guido Marnef, “Between Religion and Magic: an analysis of witchcraft trials in the Spanish Netherlands, seventeenth century,” in *Envisioning Magic. A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schafer and Hans Gerhard Kippenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 235-54. About the duration and the intensity of the witch-hunts in the Southern Netherlands: Dries Vanysacker, “Het aandeel van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden in de Europese heksenvervolging (1450-1650),” *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 9 (2000): 340-44.

²⁴ Jos Monballyu has attempted to compile all witch trials in the County of Flanders in one list. This seemingly exhaustive list is available online: Jos Monballyu, “Chronological List of Burned Witches in Flanders / Chronologische lijst van de verbrande heksen in het graafschap Vlaanderen Flamingant,” retrieved May 14, 2015, <<https://www.kuleuven-kulak.be/facult/rechten/Monballyu/Rechtsgelanden/Heksenvlaanderen/Witches%20burned%20in%20Flanders.htm>>. The research that precedes this list is published in: Jos Monballyu, *Van heksverrij beschuldigd. Heksenprocessen in Vlaanderen tijdens de 16^{de} en 17^{de} eeuw* (Heule: UGA, 1996).

²⁵ Jean-Marie Vlieghe, “Sorcières en Amougies-Russeignies au XVII^e siècle,” *Annalen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Ronse en het Tenement van Inde* 31 (1982): 181-224; Jean-Marie Vlieghe, “Sorcières en Amougies-Russeignies au XVII^e siècle (suite),” *Annalen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Ronse en het Tenement van Inde* 32 (1983): 9-58.



FIGURE 3 In these maps, the two cores of the *seigneurie* are shown: the village centres of Amougies and Russeignies. Both parishes were located in very close proximity, less than two kilometres away from each other, and were mostly divided by fields and small forests. On the map, one can also note the concentrated population of Amougies (ca 680 inhabitants) and the rather dispersed distribution of houses in Russeignies (ca 525 inhabitants).²⁶

Guido Marnef and several other researchers at the University of Antwerp have explicitly investigated the opportunities these documents hold as alternative sources for the historical research into religious history – notably the mental context of believers and their dialogue with the ecclesiastical institutions – in the Southern Netherlands. They have uncovered some strong potential in these; indeed, witch trials offer interesting windows into the religious awareness of the common folk, and they consist of the reasoning of ordinary lay people in the defense of ‘their’ religion.²⁷ I will advance on this line of thought, but apply and extend it into identity analysis. The content of the trials expands on discussions of external morals, and additionally strikes upon the internal core of religious experience, since early modern rural society was basically enraptured by a complex frame of mind in which religion and magic were heavily intertwined. Witch trials therefore offer an exclusive approach to contemplate on the internalisation of an identity. Through an in-depth analysis of the narrative used in the witch trials in Amougies-Russeignies, I thus intend to present an illuminating report on the importance of magic in the creation and internal integration of a confessional identity.²⁸

²⁶ De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 132.

²⁷ The contributors to the research project “From bishop to witch: the religious and mental world of ordinary people in the diocese of Antwerp, 16th-17th century” at the University of Antwerp published a few articles in the 2009 special issue of the *Trajecta* journal in which they outline the significance and applicability of witch trials: Guido Marnef, “Inleiding,” *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 19 (2009): 291-96; Sonja Deschrijver, “Tussen heks, dief en moordenaar: ‘Magie’ aan de basis in ‘s Hertogenbosch, 1589-1598,” *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 19 (2009): 297-319; Vrajabhūmi Vanderheyden, “Betoverend Lier: de beleving van het bovennatuurlijke op het einde van de zestiende en het begin van de zeventiende eeuw,” *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 19 (2009): 320-44.

²⁸ For a more theoretical approach to the historical-anthropological ‘close reading’ of witch trials, see: Stuart Clark, “Introduction,” in *Languages of Witchcraft. Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Stuart Clark (London: Macmillan, 2001), 1-12.

Chapter 3

The Prequel of 1656: Maleficium and Fear

THE MARGINALITY OF CATHERINE MERYE

The saga of witch trials presented in this dissertation dawned in the summer of 1656 with the incarceration of Catherine Merye, a 70-year-old woman who was born, raised and residing in Russeignies.¹ For several months, local justice concentrated on the gathering of evidence on her malicious magical activities, resulting in a wide assortment of charges, ranging from pragmatic crimes, like the poisoning of people and animals, to impossible feats, such as human flight.² The combination of testimonies by a few dozen witnesses and a couple of weeks of persistent ‘questioning’ by torture accumulated in a full confession, after which the medical examination provided further evidence by unveiling the devil’s mark on Catherine’s left shoulder.³ Catherine Merye was consequently sentenced to ‘purification by fire’ and by the end of 1656, she was burned at the stake.

Before thoroughly analysing the reflections of the community towards the case, let us start off by reading into Catherine Merye herself: Who was she, and what made her a witch? First of all, she definitely seems to fill in some of the characteristics that were commonly associated with ‘the perfect witch’.⁴ She was an older woman, a widow, and most importantly, she lived alone.⁵ Since no one was watching over her, all manner of hidden malevolent acts could be concocted after the doors of her home closed behind her. This means that she was predominantly beyond the sight of public eyes, beyond social control that was thus only accounted for in the public sphere, which had rumours and gossip spurring to higher levels.

Secondly, Catherine had a long-standing bad reputation. She was known to be a maleficent sorceress for more than a decade.⁶ The trial of 1656 was certainly not a sudden discovery of her

¹ Throughout this chapter, I will be referring to the case files in two different ways: 1) the original files and archival documents, and 2) the transcription and modern translation of the documents in the article by Jean-Marie Vlieghe. For Catherine Merye: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, 97-98; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 194-220.

² In testimony offered on 28th August 1656, Pierre Sohier explicitly mentions that Catherine fled from him by soaring over a number of houses, after he went to confront her for allegedly making his daughter sick. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *testimony of Pierre Sohier on 28th August 1656*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 199.

³ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 97; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 202-206.

⁴ Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, 20-25.

⁵ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 97; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 201-202.

⁶ The aldermen and most of the witnesses mentioned this reputation on various occasions. For example: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 197-198, 216. The exact duration of the notoriety cannot be pinpointed, but it is highly likely that the accusations started around a decade before the trial. This can

magical abilities, but rather the follow-up of a protracted accumulation of whispered tales, public accusations and exposed scandals. Some of the testimonies reached back to events that had transpired more than five years before the outset of the trial.⁷ Furthermore, that magical notoriety was backed by her sexual infamy. When delivering judgment on 6 November 1656, the magistrate stressed Catherine's long-established status as a *ribaude* and points to her extramarital affair with Pierre Planchon, which produced a few children born out of wedlock.⁸

Thirdly, in respect to this overall bad reputation, Catherine experienced a very strained relationship with the rest of the community. As such, she had been verbally threatened or simply ignored for many years prior to the trial. According to Catherine herself, she could not cross the street without everyone calling her names or turning her a blind eye.⁹ One example of this type of verbal violence can be found in the testimonies of Gilles Piers and Martin de Pré, where both men threatened Catherine with harassment and bloodshed if she would ever return to grind her grain at Piers' house.¹⁰ Charles Gosse made similar threats, saying that he gladly wanted to break both her arms if he would have been healthy enough to do so.¹¹ It is not surprising that such threats sometimes amounted to actual physical assaults, as was the case when Catherine broke a leg in a hefty dispute with her daughter-in-law.¹²

In addition, Catherine also was not on the best of terms with the Catholic Church and its strict liturgy. In 1649, 1650 and 1652, she held off from confessing around Easter, for which the priest reprimanded her several times.¹³ She also did not bear much love for the local clergy. When the pastor of Ronse-Saint-Hermes was brought to hear Catherine's confession, she promptly refused his visit, calling him all sorts of bad names.¹⁴ Moreover, Catherine was on bad terms with her own family, as demonstrated earlier by the fight with her daughter-in-law. Some family members even blamed her for the death of her son Andries, with his widow deposing that Andries' last words cursed his mother for poisoning him.¹⁵

deduced since Catherine declared to be approached by the devil for the first time in 1644. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 98, *question 2*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 206.

⁷ For example: the testimony of Gilles Piers, a miller from Ronse, about the enchantment of his wife. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *testimony of Gilles Piers on 28th August 1686*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 197-98.

⁸ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 216.

⁹ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *description of the arrest of Catherine Merye*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 194-95.

¹⁰ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *testimony of Gilles Piers on 28th August 1686 and of Martin de Pré on 25th October 1656*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 198.

¹¹ Charles Gosse apparently didn't have full control over his body due to the sickness that Catherine Merye had allegedly gifted him. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *testimony of Charles Gosse on 28th August 1686*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 196.

¹² According to the baillif, the fracture mysteriously disappeared in a matter of hours. Of course, this further implicates the spellbinding powers of Catherine. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *description of the arrest of Catherine Merye*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 195.

¹³ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Amogys anno 1649, 1650 & 1652*.

¹⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *description of the arrest of Catherine Merye*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 195.

¹⁵ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *testimony of Antoinette Frarin on 28th August 1686*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 197.



FIGURE 4 The castle of Amougies is beautifully illustrated on this map from 1658 and shows its location just outside the village centre. The castle was the administrative and legal core of the *seigneurie* of Amougies-Russeignies.

Finally, it seems that Catherine Merye was a broken woman, driven to desperation after years of intimidation. The harassment, family feuds and feelings of general dissent that she had to endure every single day, made her miserable to such an extent that she even turned herself in to the bailiff, demanding that he would go find the executioner to put an end to her diurnal hardship.¹⁶ She said that she could not live in a community where everyone labelled her a witch, claiming that she would rather die than be banished from her home.¹⁷ When passing by the house of her son Louis shortly after her voluntary arrest, Catherine even screamed that she hoped for a fiery death as soon as possible.¹⁸ Soon afterwards, she was taken to the castle of Amougies (figure 4), where she was interrogated, tortured, and eventually convicted to the death that she had aspired to all along.

ACKNOWLEDGING WITCHES: DREAD AND FEAR

Under the mentioned circumstances, the community of Amougies-Russeignies played a major role in the ‘creation’ of Catherine’s status as a witch. Of course, this raises the question about how the populace handled the ‘finalisation’ of this status, namely the trial itself. How did the community – in the capacity of witnesses – deal with Catherine Merye as an accused *malefica* for

¹⁶ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *description of the arrest of Catherine Merye*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 194-95.

¹⁷ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 97, *interrogation of Catherine Merye on 23th August 1656*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 202.

¹⁸ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *description of the arrest of Catherine Merye*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 195.

the duration of the trial? What kind of stories did they allude to in order to mark her as a dangerous witch? What goal did the community aspire to in telling these stories? In other words, what was the underlying mentality that drove the Russeignies community to give such lively and often exaggerated account of Catherine's acts of *maleficium*?

The answer to these questions is not straightforward. Every witness tells his or her tales in a very particular way, and every account has its own details that distinguish it from the rest of main body. However, keeping in mind Hayden White's teachings on the adoption of emplotment in historical sources, these testimonies do share a common narrative structure that can be carefully extracted.¹⁹ Essentially, every witness tells a tragedy, in which the deponent gets on with his or her daily life, until disaster strikes. Mostly, this consists of someone getting sick, as was the case for the wife of Gilles Piers, the daughter of Pierre Julien and most others.²⁰ Next, the witness tacitly links the illness to Catherine Merye, implying that she used poisonous concoctions or enchantments. The way she administered those usually varies in every testimony, but every infliction is situated in a seemingly harmless episode from daily life, like touching an object that Catherine had used (Charles Gosse), grinding some grain (Gilles Piers' wife), smoking a pipe (Pierre Sohier and Barbe Quartrul's daughter), or loading some flax onto a wagon (Catherine Julien). Additionally, the witnesses stressed the fact that they had not been aware of Catherine's malicious intentions at the time; the realization only came afterwards. Finally, the attestants concluded with the help they sought – mostly by visiting doctors or receiving exorcism – and with underlining the burden that Catherine put or was still putting on her victims.²¹

In brief, every witness tells his or her own unique tale, but as narrative constructions, these tales hold certain similarities, ranging from the sequential order in which the events unfold, to the manner of concluding by putting extra weight on the attestant's personal suffering. Yet, the most meaningful parallel quality in these testimonies is the shared mentality that disseminates from all the accounts, a mentality focalized on one basic emotion: fear. Every parishioner in Russeignies seemed to be intensely frightened of Catherine and what she could do. This profound fear left some people frozen and unable to move, as was the case with Catherine Julien, who additionally started trembling out of extreme anxiety when she encountered Catherine Merye just outside Ronse.²² For other people, the fear made them actively avoid Catherine or even run away when she approached. A fine illustration of this was the reaction of Gilles Piers' wife, who fled the house every time Catherine tried to enter.²³

¹⁹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

²⁰ In some rarer cases, the tragedy comes in the form of the death of some animal, e.g. the sudden demise of the horse of Jacques Doignon. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, testimony of Jeanne Heere on 25th October 1656; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 199.

²¹ All the listed testimonies in this paragraph can be found in: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 3; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 195-99.

²² AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, testimony of Catherine Julien on 28th August 1656; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 197.

²³ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, testimony of Gilles Piers on 28th August 1656; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 198.

This fear was not necessarily aimed at Catherine as person. Catherine was a convenient scapegoat, a woman whose bad reputation stigmatized her as a witch, as a projection of the concept that every single individual in the community really feared: *maleficium*. Charles Gosse drove Catherine out of his house, not because he dreaded her as a person, but because he feared the magical powers that she possessed, the toxic *maleficium* that could make him relapse even further into sickness.²⁴ The perpetuating fear for this type of black magic was present in every testimony in this trial, whatever the specifics of the story, whomever the witness. One can essentially speak of a ‘cultural’ fear radiated from individuals, but at the same time it was common ground among the community. It was part of the local peasant culture in the *seigneurie* of Amougies-Russeignies.

That cultural fear was only focalized on *maleficium*, meaning that not all magic was worrying or even considered slightly dangerous. As noted in the previous chapter, the prevailing public was generally aware of the distinction between black and white magic, with some forms of healing magic even performing a central function in local society. A certain *magister* Joannes de Helft was such a healer, and although his actions were not authorised or even approved by the bishop, his skills at treating ill people and tending to sick animals made him quite popular among the locals for the time that he was staying there.²⁵ An even more important institution however, was the exorcisms that the local clerics administered very frequently. Almost every illness that had *une mauvaise aire plus grand que fièvre*, was treated primarily by the performance of exorcisms or *une neuwaine*.²⁶ Some people visited the doctor or a lay healer before running off to the priest,²⁷ while others immediately appealed to the services of the local clergy.²⁸

ENVISAGING MALEFICIUM: CONFESSIONAL OR POPULAR?

How then, did this cultural fear for *malificium* fit into the Catholic identity that had been emerging in the Southern Netherlands since the beginning of the seventeenth century? Traditionally, one might assume that this anxiety for *maleficium* corresponds with the general Catholic antagonism towards the devil. This is certainly not unthinkable; ever since the fifteenth century, theologians actively engaged demonological concepts, turning witchcraft into an extreme form of heresy and

²⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, testimony of Charles Gosse on 28th August 1656; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 196.

²⁵ RAG, Aartsbisdom Mechelen, nr. 15, *visitatio Amongys anno 1624*.

²⁶ A *newaine* or ‘novena’ was a period of nine days during which the patient spent all of his time in the church while reciting specific prayers that were mostly dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Traditionally, these nine-day prayer cycles were a devotional practice within the Catholic Church to obtain special graces, returning to health being one of them. The French quote originates from: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, testimony of Barbe Quartrul on 24th October 1656; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 199.

²⁷ For example: Charles Gosse visited some doctors five days into his sickness. Since these did not know how to cure him, they redirected him towards the clergy, claiming that exorcism might prove useful. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, testimony of Marie Moreels on 24th October 1656; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 196.

²⁸ When the daughter of Pierre Sohier became increasingly ill, they consulted the pastor of Russeignies. He then advised him to take her to a doctor, who in turn recommended him to visit *les gens d’Eglise* again. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, testimony of Barbe Quartrul on 24th October 1656; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 199.

witches into servants of the devil.²⁹ Spurred on by the Catholic Reformation, the ecclesiastical institutions attempted to implement this new demonological frame of reference into society, and slowly but surely, these concepts seeped into a broadening public, consisting of the lower clergy, the judicial system, and eventually the masses.³⁰ Indeed, the bailiff, the officials and the interrogators in the legal proceedings against Catherine Merye largely comply with this mindset.³¹ For them, Catherine Merye was a heretic who betrayed the Catholic faith and had forsaken God to serve the devil instead. They approached *maleficium* from a Catholic-demonological perspective, starting from an identity very much like the one the ecclesiastical institutions prescribed it.

However, the testimonies – which are a more representative source to analyse the mentality of the *menu peuple* – offer a totally different perspective. There are no allegations to be found of Catherine’s contact with the devil, nor is there any clever wordplay linking her to the devil, and the accusations that the witnesses propagated never seem to refer to demonological notions. When referring to *maleficium*, a lot of stress is put on the mysterious, malicious and bewitching effects of a witch’s spells, but not once does someone refer to *maleficium* as ‘demonic possession’. Interestingly, Catherine Merye herself shared these popular implications. Even though she had already accepted her fate – let us not forget that she turned herself in to be burned – she remained decisive on the sentiment that she was not a servant of the devil. During her interrogation, she emphasized that she had never forsaken God and had never been contacted by the devil.³² Eventually, she admitted being a minion to the devil, but only to prevent further torture.³³ For Catherine and other common folk, being a *malefica* did not correlate with serving the devil.

Clearly, a steep divide existed between the elite and the peasant commoners concerning the nature of *maleficium*.³⁴ Whereas officials, clergy and noblemen were heavily inspired by the tradition of diabolism, most parishioners maintained a far more aggregate significance, inheriting

²⁹ Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 1-10; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 435-546.

³⁰ Robert Muchembled has been exceptionally vivid in describing the political and legal integration of demonological concepts in the Southern Netherlands. See: Robert Muchembled, *Le Roi et la sorcière. L'Europe des bûchers. XV^e-XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Desclée, 1993). For a more specific psychological study about the evolution of the demonological concept in the minds of the masses, see: Lène Dresen-Coenders, *Het verbond van heks en duivel. Een waandenkebeeld aan het begin van de moderne tijd als symptoom van een veranderde situatie van de vrouw en als middel tot hervorming der zeden* (Baarn: Ambo, 1983).

³¹ Some fine illustrations of this statement can be found in the transcript of the interrogation of Catherine Merye. Here, the officials immediately ask about specifics of Catherine’s relationship with the devil: what he called himself when he approached her, how he appeared, what he promised her, how many sabbats she attended, et cetera. Additionally, the interrogators employ clever wordplay to link Catherine to the devil, e.g. by claiming that the noise that resonated from her cell at night sounded like the meowing of a cat (which was the most common form that the devil could appear in). Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 199-216.

³² AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *interrogation of Catherine Merye on 26th July 1656*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 199-201.

³³ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *interrogation of Catherine Merye on 7th September 1656*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 202.

³⁴ Briggs, *Communities of Belief*, 6-65.

sets of meaning based on popular religious beliefs.³⁵ In this distinct cosmology, *maleficium* was a notion to be seen as a threat stemming from a natural world, and a witch was a dangerous and heinous culprit that intentionally used mystic natural powers that were akin to this world.³⁶ In other words, the *menu peuple* did not fear and contempt *maleficium* as a tool from the devil, but rather as an earthly tool that was abused by evildoers.

This observation leaves us with interesting questions concerning the Catholic identity of the Amougies-Russeignies communities. The first chapter demonstrated that an increasing number of people in the Ronse deanery were adopting a Catholic identity by the first half of the seventeenth century. Why does the observed attitude towards magic deviate that much from its Catholic foundations, then? This rural community may have been an exception, harbouring many representatives of a pre-confessional identity and actively rejecting Catholic measures? No matter how appealing this is to assume, this was not the case. In fact, as of the 1630s, the parish seemed to gradually transform into a Catholic model community. As such, marriage became increasingly institutionalized along the lines of the Catholic Reformation, to such an extent that there were no known public sinners.³⁷ Other violations of imposed Catholic conduct were also lacking: There had been no more cases of *fornicatio simplex* since 1634,³⁸ and adultery never even cropped up in the small village.³⁹ In his twenty years of service, dean Damiaan van Huffel never found a reason to fine anyone from Russeignies.⁴⁰ Furthermore, many inhabitants were quite devout, and consequently wished to attend more than one Mass on Sunday. Arrangements had to be made between the priests of Amougies and Russeignies to allow this.⁴¹ Finally, every year a fairly popular procession took place during the feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁴² All in all, the parish of Russeignies can definitely be defined as a ‘Catholic’ community.

Thus, a crossroads has been reached. It seems that the villagers from Russeignies experienced a complex religious identity around the 1650s, one that possessed elements from traditional confessional sources on the one hand, and from a worldview that can only be described as ‘popular’ on the other hand. Interesting though, the resulting identity was not just a mix of elements of two separate cultural *habiti* and went beyond simple acculturation. For example: While demonology did not integrate the rural minds, other Catholic identity features concerning

³⁵ The belief in *maleficium* stems from long before the demonologists got their hands on it. As such, the European peasantry, who were the main protagonists in the ventilation of these beliefs, unconsciously inherited a rich tradition of popular, pre-Christian religious beliefs, which were consequently integrated into an own Catholic significance, and thus survived into the early modern period. See: Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 65-92.

³⁶ This kind of distinct cosmologies was not uncommon in peasant societies throughout Europe. The most famous one is the worldview of Mennochio, the sixteenth-century miller who stars in the historical classic by Carlo Ginzburg. See: Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

³⁷ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 983-84.

³⁸ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Roossenaecke anno 1634*.

³⁹ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 979-80.

⁴⁰ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 16, *list of fines at the end of the journal*; De Brouwer, “Deken Damiaan van Huffel,” 21-31.

⁴¹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Amongys anno 1656*.

⁴² RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Roossenaecke anno 1656*.

the *maleficium*, like the acknowledgment of the role of priests and exorcisms in healing a victim struck by *maleficium*, did internalise into the mental world of the parishioners.⁴³ Their identity was consequently not a consummation of top-down Catholic identity markers that bumped into some bottom-up opposition, but rather an entirely new socio-cultural construction that had been created through a continuous process of appropriation.⁴⁴ Indeed, the peasant community of Amougies-Russegnies had appropriated elements of Catholic significance and integrated them into existing popular attitudes, creating a Catholic identity in which demonological concepts stayed an external framework that the community was aware of, yet never internalised.

That is, at least, until twenty years later, when a true local witch-hunt surpassed this relatively small ‘prequel’ of 1656 in duration and in number of accusations. Mentalities shifted, diverse elements were appropriated, and new identities were created.

⁴³ It is not uncommon that popular, pre-demonological attitudes towards *maleficium* transpired in peasant communities throughout multiple centuries, while also merging with Catholic beliefs. For example: Ginzburg, *The Night Battles*, 65-92.

⁴⁴ The exact mechanisms of appropriation will be discussed in the fifth chapter. For an extensive theoretical approach, see: Chartier, “Culture as Appropriation,” 229-54; Frijhoff, “Toeëigening,” 99-118.

Chapter 4

The Witch-Hunt of 1678-1683: Catholic Militancy and Hierarchical Identities

A NEW CAST OF PROTAGONISTS AND ANTAGONISTS

The saga of witch trials continues, be it with a twenty-year gap. This time, in a period of four years, three women were almost simultaneously accused of witchcraft and sorcery, each of them escaping death at the verdict of their trials. The fate of the alleged witches is not the only difference with the trial of 1656 however; every case has its own specifics worth mentioning. Let us take the case of Cecile de la Huvene for example. She was the first of the three to be accused, she was also the one whose trial dragged on the longest (August 1679 – September 1680), and she was also the only one who was sentenced to banishment. One might suspect that this was because de la Huvene had an enduring infamy as a sorceress; this was not the case however. Before the accusations started flooding in in the spring of 1678, Cecile persisted in a fairly sociable life, as she found no trouble in paying regular friendly visits to the wife of Adrien Raguet¹ and could even go have a drink at the local tavern without being frowned upon.² Furthermore, she was married to the local butcher and lived together with her husband and daughter in a small farm in Amougies, which does not exactly make her seem to be a ‘marginal’ personality.³ She was also known to be a devout Catholic who kept a picture from the Blessed Virgin Mary on her at all times.⁴

All of this explains why Cecile was not very fond when Pierre Tellier started making wild accusations in the summer of 1679. She publicly defended herself on multiple occasions, daring anyone to call her a witch in her face⁵ and claiming that she is “just as puny and poor as everyone else”.⁶ However, the disingenuous assertions put a heavy weight on her shoulders, and she took

¹ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Adrien Raguet on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 10.

² AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jean de Saint-Mortier on 29th July 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 29.

³ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *description of the arrest of Cecile de la Huvene on 17th June 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 22.

⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *description of the arrest of Cecile de la Huvene on 17th June 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 25.

⁵ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Louis Hondequin on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 10.

⁶ “Te voila aussi pauvre et aussi maigre que moi!” AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Pasquette Borighem in August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 13-14.

comfort and reassurance in talking to her best friend, Christine Chamar.⁷ Involuntarily, this made Christine the second target for the local witch craze, as she became subject of a short investigation in late 1679. Again, it was Pierre Tellier who mainly provided accusations, but this time, he was less successful, as no evidence was found to support his allegations.⁸ Christine was cleared of all charges shortly afterwards.

The third and last woman to be officially charged and thus swept up by the local storm that started in the late 1670's, was Marie Clement. Just like Cecile, she was the victim of an abrupt accumulation of gossip that arose early 1680, with Jean Torcq and Pierre Bouelle as main instigators.⁹ Marie quickly adopted an offensive defense strategy, calling them liars at every turn,¹⁰ whilst never wavering in the firm believe of her innocence, rebutting every allegation with sparkling eyes and persuasive body language.¹¹ Furthermore, Marie was married with children and claimed to be a very loving wife, bearing nothing but deep affection for her husband Jacques.¹² She also proclaimed that she had a personal guardian angel and a very intimate relationship with God and Christ, calling them her 'mates',¹³ although she definitely did not strike the officials as a very devout type, since she cursed and swore at the merest trifle.¹⁴ In the end, insufficient evidence had come to light to support any of the charges, but the trial did take a hefty toll on Marie's personal life, seeing that her husband crumbled under the pressure of the months of accusations and declared that he never wanted to see Marie again.¹⁵

Apart from these three women, others were also accused, though nobody else was ever officially charged. Pierre Tellier, the instigator of plenty indictments in the aforementioned trials, seemed to be quite articulate in spreading a good deal of rumours concerning sorcery and *maleficiūm* in the follow-up of the three trials, at least until 1683. In this year, Pierre had overstepped his boundaries by publicly denouncing Guillaume Torcq (an alderman in the court of Amougies and Russeignies), Henri Torcq (Guillaume's father), and Marie Guinthe (Guillaume's wife) in the local tavern and out in the streets, permeating rumours that range from

⁷ Christine gives a detailed testimony about how Cecile came to talk to her in April 1678 while crying her eyes out, because everyone started whispering that she might be a witch. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Christine Chamar on 5th August 1679*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 35.

⁸ For countless examples of Tellier's accusations against Christine Chamar, see: Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 9-11.

⁹ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *introductory statement to Marie Clement's questioning on 2nd May 1680*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 16.

¹⁰ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *answers to questions 20-27 in Marie Clement's questioning*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 18-19.

¹¹ The interrogators registered the body language of the interviewee in order to extract her guilt. According to the interrogators, Marie seemed very genuine in her answers. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *answer to question 18 in Marie Clement's questioning*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 17.

¹² AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *answer to question 16 in Marie Clement's questioning on 4nd May 1680*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 17.

¹³ Marie Clement used the French word "camerades". AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *answer to question 16 in Marie Clement's questioning on 5nd May 1680*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 17.

¹⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *answer to question 18 in Marie Clement's questioning*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 17.

¹⁵ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *declaration of Jacques Ragnet before the baillif on 4th May 1680*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières [...] (suite)," 22.

bewitching horses to being sick too often.¹⁶ These disingenuous assertions resulted in a slander charge, the payment of a substantial fine, and Pierre's permanent silence on any matters relating to *maleficium*.¹⁷ In my eyes, that's when the local upsurge in witchcraft persecution came to an end, although arguments can be made to extend it into the eighteenth century, with a final investigation into two women in 1702.¹⁸ Nonetheless, I choose to limit the witch-hunt of Amougies-Russeignies – if one can even designate it as such – to the period 1678-1683, since these six years form a coherent story on themselves with a steady flow of events centered on the same protagonists and antagonists.

THE CHRISTIANISATION OF MALEFICIUM

The fact that I adopted terms like “witch craze” and “witch-hunt” in the previous paragraphs immediately suggests that drastic changes in mentality and identity have occurred since 1656. Indeed, it is pretty logical that an interval of more than twenty years culminated in at least some adjustments in the minds of people. Before delving more into new developments however, one has to acknowledge the continuities that had stood the test of time. The socio-cultural evolution of Amougies-Russeignies was by no means a *histoire immobile*,¹⁹ but there were definitely some elements of the peasant mental structure that had endured up to this point. As such, superstitions were still uncontroversial and eminently commonplace in the daily life of the peasantry, regardless of the Church's efforts to curb their influence.²⁰ The exchange of magical objects did not slow down over the years, and was sometimes touched upon in testimonies. For one, Marie Fourez gladly accepted a book that was supposed to alleviate her pregnancy.²¹ Other magical traditions, like the belief in miraculous powers of statues, were still alive and kicking, as was demonstrated by the magical references to a wooden sculpture of a flagellated Christ in Amougies.²² Also the appliance of healer's magic was still very broad, with many parishioners utilising their services, such as Pierre Bourgeois who had called upon a healer to cure one of his cows.²³

¹⁶ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 47, *testimonies of Quitin Morelle, Pierre Frighem, and Jean-Baptiste Cousart*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 47-48.

¹⁷ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 47, *conditions and stipulations concerning the reconciliation between Guillaume Torcq and Pierre Tellier, drafted on 8th July 1683*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 48-49.

¹⁸ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 99.

¹⁹ At least, not in the way that Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie coined the term to describe the cultural life of a small village in southern Languedoc. See: Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan, de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

²⁰ For example: in 1668, the archiepiscopal vicar strongly urged the local clergy to oppose and report any form of superstitious practice. De Ram, *Synodicon Belgicum*, vol. 2, 359-61.

²¹ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimonies of Marie Fourez and Charles Borighem on 29th July 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 31.

²² AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Antoine Merye on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 11.

²³ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Pierre Bourgeois on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 9.

Furthermore, the never-ending fear for *maleficium*, which was brought up earlier as characterising the mentality of the 1656 *menu peuple*, lived on in 1679 and did not seem to have died down in the slightest. One woman admitted that she did not want to share a beer with Cecile de la Huvène out of sheer fear for her rumoured powers,²⁴ while another witness said to have experienced a heavy anxiety attack just by seeing Cecile walk along the fields in the distance.²⁵ However, there are some subtle differences in the perception and processing of this fear. In fact, the anxiety towards *maleficium* has a more structured outlook than before. Whereas these feelings of fear were previously only part of the unspoken collective unconscious of individuals,²⁶ the parishioners were now quicker to discuss and share their fear, or even collectively address the issue of *maleficium*. As such, there was avid gossiping about who could be a witch during typical social gatherings, e.g. when drinking some *brandevin* in the tavern.²⁷ The obsessive attention for *maleficae* often went beyond this type of mere cordial exchanges, as some people even convened on the cemetery to initiate boisterous discussions about the identity of witches.²⁸ Fear of the *maleficium* thus became more explicit, more extraverted, more community-driven, as it was increasingly filtered through *bruits communs*.²⁹ Perhaps then, a more appropriate term for the ‘cultural fear’ of 1678-1683 is ‘collective witch phobia’.

This slight transformation is, once again, the result of the continuous process of cultural appropriation. Catholic confessionality and popular religion remained in constant dialogue, invariably creating new cultural implications and tweaking older existing ones. Local religious identities were never a finished product, but constantly experiencing current influences, and thus always under construction. Due to this constant ‘re-creation’ of local identity, several mentality features had shifted by 1678. Mainly, an expanding group of parishioners had appropriated the demonological concepts on the *maleficium* into their own, aggregate Catholic identity. This means that the external framework of Catholic demonology was progressively internalised into the minds of the peasant community, to such an extent in fact, that the nature of the *malifica* itself was transformed. Indeed, through the Christianisation of the *maleficium*, a witch had become a servant of the devil. This has some definitive ramifications for the perception of witches: since the devil was now perceived as a threat to the joint community, witches were, as representatives

²⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Pasquette Borighem on 16th March 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 13-14

²⁵ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Marie Salmon on 29th July 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 28.

²⁶ The ‘collective unconscious’ is a term that originated in psychological literature (notably in the work of Carl Jung), but has been adopted by many pioneers of historical anthropology, for example in the work of Pierre Ariès. Carl Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9, Part 1)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Pierre Ariès, *Le homme devant la mort* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1977).

²⁷ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Pierre Bourgeois on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 9.

²⁸ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Adrien Canlay on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 9.

²⁹ This term, which means something like “talk of the town” or “hearsay”, was frequently used in testimonies, for example in: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Antoine Merye on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 11.

of Satan, no longer just a threat to individual suffering, but had the possibility to bring an entire community down to its knees. That explains why individual fear became a collective phobia.

The intensified appropriation of Catholic understanding becomes blatantly clear when reading through some of the testimonies. As such, multiple witnesses started to address the accused women as “diablesses” in their statements, rather than simply “sorcières”, which was the commonly used term more than twenty years earlier.³⁰ Often, the devil himself was also implicated into a story by giving him an active role of some sort. Pierre Tellier for example, stated that it was the devil who determined the times at which Marie Guinthe fell ill.³¹ Furthermore, a lot of wordplay indirectly linked sorceresses to the devil. One bystander dubbed the husband of Cecile a “cuckold”, a term commonly used for husbands of adulterous wives,³² implying that Cecile had sexually ratified her bond with the devil.³³ Occasionally, even the content of the testimonies had directly morphed itself into a demonological framework. This is apparent in the high frequency of sudden appearances of toads in the corpus of statements (e.g. in the testimony of Jeanne Gerland). Jeanne stated that a slimy toad had appeared in the cow shed shortly after a visit by Cecile de la Huvène, that her sister had tried to chase the animal away, but ultimately failed, and that this toad had pursued the apparently very frightened woman into the house, after which she fell very ill.³⁴ While this depiction might seem pretty innocent in our eyes, a contemporary observer would immediately recognise the toad as the clear reference to the devil. That is because both folklore and demonology had identified the toad as a very likely form in which the devil could appear.³⁵

MILITANCY AS A CATHOLIC IDENTITY EXPRESSION

As a result of this demonisation of *maleficium* and the emergence of a more structured and collective fear, the practical attitude towards witches also shifted into new stages. Whereas witches were mostly ignored or verbally intimidated in the 1650s, the greater extent of Catholic concepts in the local religious identity of the 1680s warranted a more active and community-

³⁰ Some testimonies that used this term multiple times: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Michel Hondequin on 12th August 1679; testimony of Pierre Bourelle on 16th March 1680; testimony of Pierre Tellier on 16th March 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 10-13.

³¹ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 47, *testimony of Jean-Baptiste Cousart*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 48.

³² Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, “Introduction: Sexual Transgression as Social Metaphor,” in *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th century)*, ed. Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 1-8.

³³ The bystander used the French term “vihot”. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *description of the arrest of Cecile de la Huvène*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 22. This theme of physical intimacy and the diabolical pact was very common across Europe: Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, 25-32.

³⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jeanne Gerland on 16th March 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 14.

³⁵ Rossel Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown, 1959), 216-18. In some of the accounts in the case file, the link between toads and the devil was a bit more direct. For example, Christine Chamar was belittled as “race de Diable et race de crapaud” in the testimony of Jeanne Caulay: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jeanne Caulay on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 10-11.

oriented approach, in which the parishioners represented themselves as a united, Catholic community with the Mass playing an increasingly important role as the representative social body of the faithful community.³⁶ In this new demeanor, the community bound together and tried to fend off external threats, like witches, to protect the sanctity of the Mass, and by doing so, the purity of the Catholic community. When Cecile de la Huvene tried to enter the church during mass for example, the entire social body rose up to the occasion and stood together as they expelled her from the building.³⁷ Her devilish steps in the church were considered as much defilement to sacred ground as to the community itself, unified in their battle against the devil and his representatives. In other words, the battle against *maleficae* was no longer a personal battle, but a job for the community to perform.

This collective Catholic militancy was new among the *menu peuple* of Amougies-Russeignies and had not been present in the case against Catherine Merye. However, it was very present in the case against Cecile de la Huvene, with some parishioners taking their pugnacious attitude to a whole new level. One day before Cecile got arrested for example, a small crowd had gathered in front of her house, wildly flinging guns and knives around, as they demanded that she would be brought to justice immediately. If not, they would take the initiative in their own hands, and, as Pierre Tellier put it so very eloquently, “cut her up in more than a hundred pieces!” As evening fell, the tensions started to decrease however, and the crowd slowly dispersed. However, that was not the end of the night yet. Half an hour after she went to sleep, Cecile abruptly awoke and caught a glow, coming from outside her window, in the corner of her eye. As it turns out, someone from the crowd had lit her house on fire, basically condemning her to a fiery death. Luckily for her, she managed to escape the house with her family and some minor valuables, while seeing the rest of her property being reduced to ashes.³⁸ Here, the community had taken up the glove of executioner – quite literally, as Pierre Tellier had threatened earlier that evening that he would be her *bourreau* if no one else stepped up to the plate – with a very violent, though also quite symbolic, undertaking; they ‘sentenced’ Cecile to the fate that befalls all witches and followers of the devil, which is death by fire. As a result, it is reasonable to believe that the communal crowd saw itself as acting in the authorities’ stead, deeming them unfit and insufficient for the legal protection of the community, and thereby legitimising their own acts of violence towards witches as a necessary engagement to defend and purify their faithful community.³⁹ A few years later, a couple villagers again acknowledged their doubt about the commitment of the local justice to cleansing the region of witches and devil worshippers.⁴⁰

³⁶ John Bossy, “The Mass as a Social Institution, 1200-1700,” *Past & Present* 100 (1983): 29-61.

³⁷ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jeanne Gerland on 29th July 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 28.

³⁸ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *description of the arrest of Cecile de la Huvene*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 22-25.

³⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis elaborated on this kind of ‘political’ legitimisation for religious violence in her frankly excellent article on religious riots in sixteenth-century France. See: Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France,” *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 61-65.

⁴⁰ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 47, *testimonies of Pierre Frighem and Jean-Baptiste Cousart*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 48.

So, during the witch-hunt of 1678-1683, a distinct Catholic identity had caught on in the minds of many villagers. With popular notions of *maleficium* being supplanted by confessionalised ones, this identity was more straightforward, more along the lines of the confessional identity that the ecclesiastical institutions had been propagating across the Southern Netherlands.⁴¹ As a result, the big gap between elite and popular identities had been largely bridged, and the villagers began to identify themselves more and more as part of a Catholic community that provided a communal response to witches, often hinging on the brink of militancy and violence. In this mindset, the behaviour and reactions of villagers were thus heavily determined by the religious community to which they belonged; in other words, the Catholic identity had become a hierarchical identity that was internalised in the peasant community.⁴²

Hereby, I would like to take one step further, and stipulate that the presence of a hierarchical Catholic identity is what made these five years a witch-hunt. I believe that the local witch craze and witch phobia was fueled by a set of Catholic beliefs, and that those caused the more militant approach towards witches. That's why I called the case of 1656 a prequel; the lack of a hierarchical Catholic identity ensured a more moderate, passive attitude, one that resulted in no one ever turning Catherine Merye in to the authorities, even though she did have a reputation as a sorceress for more than a decade. A true witch-hunt is not just about projecting one's fear onto *maleficae*, but actively working to eradicate that fear, which was only possible with Catholic militancy backing it up. Consequently, I view the witch-hunt not as a top-down political or legal instrument, but rather as an identity expression from below. In fact, there are frankly no indications that the central authorities had any initiative in establishing the systematic prosecution of witches in Amougies-Russeignies, which is confirmed by the similar outset of other witch-hunts in the *Land van Aalst*.⁴³ In other words, I do not see a witch-hunt through functionalistic glasses, but rather as a cultural expression by virtue of the sudden surge of a Catholic-militant identity. A witch-hunt did not appear because a scapegoat was needed, and it did not disappear because it was no longer needed. It appeared when the local culture and identities had shifted in such a way that the witch craze was made possible, probable, and eventually definite (see next chapter).⁴⁴

However, the evolution of identities is never as straight-cut and linear as presented, and aberrances are possible, even likely, on an individual level. As such, there were villagers who opposed the 'hierarchical mob justice Catholicism' that drove a large part of the local community

⁴¹ Craig Harline and Eddy Put, *A Bishop's Tale: Mathias Hovius among his Flock in seventeenth-century Flanders* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁴² The concept of hierarchical identities was first drawn up in anthropological literature when dealing with ethnicity, but has since then been applied to religious communities as well (see next chapter for a more extensive approach on lateral and hierarchical identities). See: Don Handelman, "The Organization of Ethnicity," *Ethnic Groups* 1 (1977): 192-193.

⁴³ Jos Monballyu, "Heksenprocessen en andere toverijprocessen in het Land van Aalst en het Land van Dendermonde," *Het Land van Aalst* 53 (2001): 236.

⁴⁴ Of course, this way of 'reading' culture is directly founded on the anthropological principles of Clifford Geertz. His *Interpretation of Cultures* was a huge inspiration to fend off a functionalistic approach and adopt an alternative perspective on culture. See: Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.

and who continued to entertain a less confessional, more popular interpretation of Catholicism. When Pierre Tellier and his band of firebrands had assembled in front of the house of Cecile de la Huvene, Louis Hondequin was the first to stand up against the – in his eyes at least – unjust oppression of Cecile and her family. His nephew and him even proposed to sleep in the garden and serve as night-watch guards, in case any miscreant were to return to put Cecile’s family in harm’s way.⁴⁵ Other parishioners were also not too keen to go with the flow of aggression and rash retaliation, and saw it as their Christian duty to give the accused women the opportunity to defend themselves against the impeachments. Subsequently, Augustinus Meuris and Gregoire Cartreul approached Marie Clement in the street, and respectfully asked for her feelings on the negative rumours that were in circulation among the villagers, showing sincere and genuine concern for Marie’s well being.⁴⁶

Every single protagonist in every single one of these stories makes his or her actions out to be those of an exemplary Catholic, despite the conflicting intentions that they inherently entailed. Some villagers meant to oppose the “diablasses” by any means necessary, others had a more passive outlook that bears resemblance to the popular mentality around 1656. What it meant to be Catholic among the *menu peuple* in 1680, i.e. the significance of the contemporary Catholic identity, consequently varied. There were multiple Catholic identities – some were new, some were old – that coexisted simultaneously, implying that the appropriation and the consequent creation of an identity did not occur systematically and equally for everyone. How did it occur then? Why did one take up the mantle of vigilant militant in the name of their Catholic identity, whereas others did not? In other words, what kind of factors caused the creation of a hierarchical identity, which consequently caused the witch-hunt of 1678-1683?

⁴⁵ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *description of the arrest of Cecile de la Huvene*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 22-23.

⁴⁶ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimonies of Augustinus Meuris and Gregoire Cartreul on 2nd May 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 16.

Chapter 5

The Causality of Identity Appropriation

Identities came to be through the consistent appropriation of external influences and incorporating them into internal values, as has been attested earlier, so the Catholic-militant identity of 1678-1683 is the result of the *menu peuple* fusing accepted cultural markers with alien confessional thought. However, this does not explain **why** the appropriation process was altered between 1656 and 1678. In other words, what caused the *menu peuple* of Amougies-Russeignies to change their identity between 1656 and 1678? To figure this out, one must understand the mechanics of appropriation, and to apprehend these, one must look at all the possible factors that influenced the creation of the new identity. This makes it a very burdensome matter to analyse; not only is there a wide assortment of determinants, every single one has a varying level of impact, whether it is direct, indirect or conditional. One cannot simply point a finger at one factor that might have caused some people to appropriate confessional beliefs. Even if one deals with a combination of factors, how do these elements relate to each other? It is highly unlikely that poverty and family feuds held equal value in determining identity creation, which means that there is a hierarchy among the antecedents. And what about the type of impact that the factors imply? While some aspects from the cultural backdrop might have been necessary to structurally create the conditions in which a hierarchical Catholic identity was constructed, other small-scale events might have been equally crucial in giving the final push to finalise its creation.

The causal mechanisms leading up to the creation and internalisation of an identity are obviously a disorderly and complex topic to delve into. However, there is a solution to this unstructured chaos. As Anton Froeyman explains, microhistory inherently retains an interaction between small-scale events and larger structures, which makes the explanation of small-scaled cultural expressions, like a local witch-hunt and the identity that channelled it, by using multiple layers of causality more accessible.¹ In fact, Lawrence Stone has established a useful blueprint that distinguishes three levels of causation when explaining small-scale historical cases. First, there are the *preconditions*, which are elements of the broad, structural and cultural environment in which the events take place. This level of causality makes the cultural expressions *possible* and works counterfactual; the absence of certain preconditions immediately rules out the possibility of some events happening. The second causal layer consists of *precipitants*, which cause an event to be *probable*. In other words, the presence of certain precipitants heightens the likelihood of the

¹ Anton Froeyman, "Concepts of Causation in Historiography," *Historical Methods* 42/3 (2009): 125-26.

occurrence of particular incidents. Mostly, these short-range causes entail social change, economic developments, political transitions or judicial innovations. Lastly, Stone defined the third and final pattern of causality as *triggers*, which are the sudden and small sparks that subsequently ignite a reaction. They make the microhistoric events *definite* and *unavoidable*; they are the final straw that breaks the camel's back. The reasoning behind cultural expressions cannot be completely understood if one overlooks even one level.² That's why I will approach all three levels, thus creating an image that approaches completeness.

CULTURAL PRECONDITIONS

Let us kick things off by reading into the *preconditions*. One long-range cause that immediately springs to mind when dealing with the creation of the new Catholic identity is the cultural fear against *maleficium* that I have avidly discussed in the previous part.³ Indeed, the fear might have been based on popular conceptions, but that is not to say that the Catholic counterpart that had taken over by the 1680s did not overlap to at least some extent. No doubt the fear that the peasant communities had been passing on for centuries served as a substructure on which the newfound hostility in the hierarchical identity could be build. Without the popular fear as a basis, the peasantry could not have appropriated, much less internalised, the Catholic conceptions of communal militancy and collective demeanor. In other words, the hierarchical identity would have been *impossible* without the already existent fear fueling it.

Nevertheless, popular conceptions could not have been the only precondition in order to incorporate a new significance into a Catholic identity. Of course, there was some manner of Catholic comprehension being provided by the confessionalising efforts of the political and ecclesiastical authorities, as has been sufficiently discussed in the first chapter. In short, the introduction of Tridentine measures in the Flemish countryside was going up against a head wind in the first half of the seventeenth century, and only knew its gradual initial successes towards 1650. In the second half of seventeenth century, the reform program increasingly reaped the fruits of its labor, and more and more peasant communities began to embrace the values that were disseminated from the Catholic Reformation.⁴ While I have stressed that the increased adoption of external morals cannot be synchronized with an equal intensity of internal appropriation of values, the two are not entirely unrelated. Even if some measures were not internalised, they still provided an external framework that people could rely on when uncertainty flourished. In other words, due to the early devotional revival of Amougies-Russeignies,⁵ Tridentine morals and significance was constantly lurking around the corner in the

² Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of the Narrative," *History and Theory* 18 (1979): 3-24.

³ The role of fear in the origins of a witch-hunt has been discussed by multiple historian, most notably Robin Briggs. See: Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, 51-81.

⁴ Cloet, "Het gelovige volk in de 17^{de} eeuw," 417.

⁵ The parishes were said to experience a change for the better as early as 1605, with the dean stressing the expanding "populi pietatem et devotionem". See: RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 14, *visitatio Amongys anno 1605*.

accepted Catholic institutions. When linked with the right precipitants and triggers, previously unincorporated Catholic concepts could therefore be integrated more easily. Without the top-down confessionalisation, the appropriation of Catholic sets of meaning concerning *maleficium* would have been *impossible*, which means that the subsequent creation of a militant identity would have been equally impossible.

Besides, there already was a certain degree of Catholic interaction with magic and *maleficium*, namely in the form of exorcism. As discussed earlier, this form of Church-approved magical care filled the gap between Catholicism and popular *maleficium*, and played a major role in peasant society, as has become obvious when reading through some of testimonies used in the witch trials. Interestingly, the local dominance of exorcism was not a sudden appearance due to the witch trial of 1656, but knew its roots back in the first half of the seventeenth century. When the dean came to visit the *seigneurie* of Amougies-Russeignies in 1639 for example, it became apparent to him that the local clergy had not been very obedient in following ecclesiastical regulations when it came down to exorcism, as the priest had resorted to it for very minor confusions. The priest defended his policies, stating that an evil spirit had possessed the majority of villagers in both parishes, and that all his exorcisms, even if they were not authorised, were consequently necessary to preserve the sanity of the local population.⁶ By 1656, the preeminence of exorcism had dug itself deeper into the daily life of the peasantry, with almost all of the witnesses in the trial against Catherine Merye verifying that they had to undergo exorcism to recover from their malicious illnesses.⁷ The situation had not changed in the 1680s, except that the priests of Amougies and Russeignies were now actually authorised to perform exorcism; the ecclesiastical authorities had given them permission in 1667, but they had also provided some strict regulations to follow, no doubt to curb the exaggerated local dependence on exorcism to at least some extent.⁸ It is safe to conclude that the long-term parochial commonness with exorcism enabled the appropriation and internalisation of other Catholic identity features. Without the popularity of exorcism, the creation of a hierarchical Catholic identity might have been impossible.

AN EXTENSIVE RANGE OF PRECIPITANTS

Along those lines, there was one other regional characteristic that connected Catholicism, the peasantry, and demonic possession, namely the culturally inherent emphasis on madness, insanity and mental illness in the local Catholic experience. Indeed, in early modern Europe, mental illness was treated in an exclusively Christian context, with insanity being a form of diabolic possession. Consequently, the only treatment that would definitively cure madmen and

⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Amongys anno 1639*.

⁷ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *testimonies of Charles Gosse, Marie Moreels, Catherine Julien, Pierre Julien, Gilles Piers, Martin de Pre, Pierre Sobier, Barbe Quartrul*; Vlieghe, "Sorcières," 195-99.

⁸ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Amongys anno 1667*.

madwomen was exorcism.⁹ The regional obsession with insanity was mainly not linked with the popularity of exorcism though, but had everything to do with the geographical bearings of Amougies and Russeignies. As it so happens, both parishes were located within the cultural sphere of influence of Ronse, a region that is traditionally known for its devotional interest in curing mental patients and ‘idiots’ from diabolic possession and for its pilgrimage in honor of Saint-Hermes, the Catholic martyr of madmen.¹⁰



FIGURE 5 Engraving by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, depicting the extraction of a stone from the forehead of a madman. The *keisnijding* was a common literary and iconographical theme in the early modern Netherlands that the creator used to criticise the superstition and gullibility of people. In this engraving, the charlatan that removes the stone is portrayed as Pieter Titelmans, the inquisitor of Flanders and dean of Ronse.

The association of Ronse and surroundings with the status of ‘Catholic centre of madness’ was far-flung across the Southern Netherlands, and even descended into iconographic representations. In response to this regional reputation, the castigating engraving by Pieter Brueghel The Elder (figure 5) depicted Pieter Titelmans, dean of Ronse and inquisitor of

⁹ Petteri Pietikäinen, *Madness: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 43-48.

¹⁰ Erik Devos, “Sint-Hermes en de krankzinnigen: een verward verhaald vol verrassingen,” *Annalen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Ronse en het Tenement van Inde* 62 (2013): 13-98; Erik Devos, “Sint-Hermes en de krankzinnigen: een verward verhaald vol verrassingen – deel 2,” *Annalen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Ronse en het Tenement van Inde* 63 (2014): 16-80.

Flanders, as the personification of curing a madman.¹¹ The Ronse culture of madness also became a well-known theme of criticism among the sixteenth-century Protestants. For example, *De Santen*, a ironical chant among Protestants that chastised the Catholic dependence on saints, mentioned and condemned the local devotion around “sinte Remeus’ by reversing established roles and saying that “dulle lien” go there to celebrate the devil.¹² In conclusion, one can state that the Ronse region had appropriated a unique religious reputation that stressed the treatment of mentally disturbed individuals, and that was well known outside the region itself.

Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the majority of the *menu peuple* therefore approached insanity in a rigorously Christian fashion. After all, I have shown that the parishioners from Amougies-Russeignies held certain popular conceptions close to their heart, e.g. their perspective on *maleficium*. Interestingly though, most rural populations had long considered madmen and deranged people as victims of demonic possession in a strictly Christian tradition, unlike the generally more popular perspective on *maleficae*. Studies of early modern Germany have showed that the frequency of linking diabolic possession and madness swiftly multiplied in the second half of the sixteenth century, not just among the elite, but in all social strata.¹³ The peasantry of Amougies-Russeignies seemed to follow suit in this tradition; when Catherine Julien, a witness in the case against Catherine Merye, was not recovering from her chronic illness, her father took her to the Saint-Hermes chapter in Ronse, fearing that she was becoming “idiotte” due to a diabolical spirit possessing her mind. In Ronse, she served Saint-Hermes for quite some time, after which her condition improved immensely.¹⁴ It goes to show that an average parishioner from Amougies-Russeignies shared the Christian view on insanity, and even placed it within the Catholic framework that the devotion of Saint-Hermes provided.

This means that some concept of diabolism was already integrated into the minds of the *menu peuple* of Amougies-Russeignies before witches were identified as handlers of the devil. No doubt the appropriation of a more Catholic apprehension of *maleficium* was at least partially facilitated by the already internalised demonological notions of madness. However, unlike the earlier cultural tendencies, the regional devotion concerning insanity was not a precondition to the heightened tensions towards *maleficae*. Without it, the hierarchical identity that allowed for such a witch craze was still possible, as demonstrated by a multitude of similar witch-hunts in regions outside Ronse.¹⁵ Furthermore, the vicinity of Ronse was definitely not the most persevering core of witchcraft prosecution. Apart from those in Amougies-Russeignies, barely any witches in the

¹¹ For a short biography of inquisitor Titelmans, see: Albert Cambier, “Pieter Titelmans, Groot-Inkwisiteur, Deken van Ronse in Vlaanderen,” *Annalen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Ronse en het Tenement van Inde* 33 (1984): 19-28.

¹² The song can be found in: Johannes van Vloten, *Nederlandsche Geschiedzangen: 863-1572* (Amsterdam: Schadd, 1864), 301-305.

¹³ Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-century Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 3, *testimony of Catherine Julien on 28th August 1656*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières,” 197.

¹⁵ For example, see the sudden witch-craze in the surroundings of Laarne in the beginning of the seventeenth century: Monballyu, “Heksenprocessen,” 227-231.

area were convicted.¹⁶ There was one other sorcery suspect in Maarke in 1661, but this can hardly be called a witch-hunt.¹⁷ Consequently, it is safe to assume that the devotion of Saint-Hermes was not a requirement in the creation of the militant Catholic identity in the 1680s, but it did make it more *probable*, which means that it was the first *precipitant* in the explanation of the identity change.

Naturally, there were many more precipitants. One of the more pressing ones was the rampant poverty that had struck the villagers of Amougies-Russeignies in the second half of the seventeenth century.¹⁸ On multiple occasions, the dean pointed out the graveness of the situation that many parishioners of both villages were living in,¹⁹ and how it hampered the religious lives of the devout population.²⁰ The confession of Catherine Merye, which stated that the Devil promised her an eternal exemption from poverty, confirms that the theme did exist in the villages.²¹ To some degree, the local hardship was due to a few years of unfavorable weather,²² which proved to be catastrophic for a rural society that is largely dependent on good harvests.²³ However, the main source of local distress was caused by the destructions of war. Even compared to the high level of carnage in the villages near Oudenaarde during the subsequent French sieges of this city,²⁴ Amougies and Russeignies were often among those that were hit the hardest.²⁵ The villagers especially suffered towards the end of the Franco-Spanish War (1638-1659), since nearly all of the houses in both parishes were brought to ruin by the retreating

¹⁶ Monballyu, "Chronological List".

¹⁷ Lodewijk Van Lerberghe, and Jozef Ronsse, *Audenaerdsche Mengelingen – volume 1* (Oudenaarde: Van Gommar-De Vos, 1845), 21-22.

¹⁸ Many historians have avidly linked the theme of poverty to the beginning of witch-hunts. For example: Wolfgang Bheringer, "Weather, Hunger and Fear: Origins of the European Witch-Hunts in Climate, Society and Mentality," *German History* 13 (1995): 1-27. While they are not incorrect in establishing the link, they have overlooked the intermediate stage of identity creation: poverty was not directly linked to a witch-hunt, but it did facilitate the creation of the identity that subsequently led to a witch-hunt.

¹⁹ His phrasing might vary over time, but whether it was "omnes depauperantur" (1656), "totus mundus hic depauperatus" (1669), or "pauperima est communitas" (1671), the message pretty much stays the same: almost everyone was poor. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Amongys anno 1656; visitatio Amongys anno 1669; visitatio Amongys anno 1671*.

²⁰ Due to the prevailing poverty, the church of Russeignies remained in shambles, as there was no money to pay for the crucial repairs. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Roossenaecke anno 1650*.

²¹ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 98, *questionnaire from the Council of Flanders – question 5; Vlieghe, "Sorcières,"* 207.

²² RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Roossenaecke anno 1657; visitatio Roossenaecke anno 1659*.

²³ Some historians have pointed to climate change itself, i.e. the 'little Ice Age', as a central factor in explaining the origins of witch-hunts. See: Bheringer, "Weather, Hunger and Fear," 1-27; Christian Pfister, "Climatic Extremes, Recurrent Crises and Witch Hunts: Strategies of European Societies in Coping with Exogenous Shocks in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *The Medieval History Journal* 10 (2007): 33-73. However, I have found no indications of the weather conditions playing a significant role in the mentality of the local peasants, as there were no accusations towards the witches of Amougies-Russeignies concerning weather-magic. It is still possible that the climate was a precipitant though, but there is no clear evidence of this in the case files or testimonies.

²⁴ Especially the village of Edelare was converted to scrap, with many people being condemned to poverty as a result. Consequently, the inhabitants appealed to the king in 1661, asking for an exemption from taxes due to the destructions of the earlier years. RAG, *OGA Edelare-Leupegem-Volkegem*, nr. 327.

²⁵ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 34.

French soldiers.²⁶ Looting also brought considerable misery during the War of Devolution (1667-1668), which no doubt led to further substantial impoverishment.²⁷

Furthermore, the uncertainty and agony that the constant warfare generated unquestionably proved to be an additional stimulus to fear, and also led to a further identification with the local community and an overall stronger communal bond.²⁸ Because of this, many parishioners might have been more likely to actively oppose a new threat – e.g. in the form of *maleficae* – when it emerged from the horizon. In short, the aftermath of the war scares during the perpetual French assaults, whether it was the poverty or the traumatic mood stemming from it, decidedly increased the odds of the emergence of a militant identity and the subsequent witch-hunt.

Recently, historians have also been paying more attention to microscopic events that prompted a witch-hunt. For example, Robin Briggs analysed neighbour relations and concluded that accusations of witchcraft usually stemmed from strained social affiliations.²⁹ Unfortunately, historians regularly overlook the religious identities that allowed for such a thinking pattern to emerge; neighbour disputes made villagers more receptive to new influences, which in turn led to the creation of a new identity that consequently sparked a witch-hunt. In Amougies-Russeignies, tense social relations were definitely precipitants to unleashing a more assertive identity. Most testimonies pointed out that the accused women recently started to act more unsociable, that they started neglecting their previously frequent visits to friends and family, and that they increasingly preferred to stay away from other people.³⁰ This antisocial behaviour aroused suspicion among the villagers, and made them question the intentions of the accused. Sometimes, the social disruption took on a more explicit form, as was the case for Marianne Couplet, who got into a short drunken fight with Cecile de la Huvène during the carnival.³¹ In short, a crack in the social *status quo* increased the odds of the rise of a new identity, as non-participation and social marginality served like a framing mechanism that expelled people from the faithful community and placed them in the body of external threats.

Before moving on to triggers, I would like to accredit the legal proceedings against Catherine Merye in 1656 as a final precipitant. Not only did these cause a certain familiarity among the *menu peuple* with the *modus operandi* of the legal apparatus in witchcraft cases, it also brought villagers in direct and frequent contact with the Catholic-diabolic way of thinking of the bailiff and aldermen. Most importantly, the case of 1656 had resulted in the public execution of Merye, as she was burned at the stake on the village square of Russeignies (figure 6). It is very likely that

²⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Amongys anno 1659; visitatio Roossenaecke anno 1659*.

²⁷ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Roossenaecke anno 1667*.

²⁸ Erika Kuijpers has been very adept at analysing the trauma of war victims and its function in the creation of a social identity in the early modern Netherlands. See: Erika Kuijpers, “The Creation and Development of Social Memories of Traumatic Events: The Oudewater Massacre of 1575,” in *Hurting Memories and Beneficial Forgetting: Posttraumatic Stress Disorders, Biographical Developments, and Social Conflicts*, ed. Michael Linden and Krzysztof Rutkowski (London-Waltham: Elsevier, 2003), 191-201.

²⁹ Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, 393-418.

³⁰ Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 9-14, 16, 27-36.

³¹ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Marianne Couplet on 29th July 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 27.

seeing this witch burning left a considerable mark in the collective memory of the spectating villagers, one that facilitated the demonological perspective of the witch as a bearer of pure evil.



FIGURE 6 This map of the village centre of Russeignies was drawn only two years after the execution of Catherine Merye, in the year 1658. Consequently, it is an excellent illustration of the public sphere in which the witch burning transpired. For one, the map clearly shows that the location of the execution, the village square, lay in the shadow of the parish church, no doubt intensifying the link between witches and religion for the bystanders.

TRIGGERS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MICRO-EVENTS

Naturally, the earlier causality levels mean nothing without some *trigger* to activate the cultural expression that they have made possible and probable. Whereas the preconditions and precipitants were preparations for the whole process, these ‘releasers’ were the small-scale events or incidents that fired the starting gun for the creation of a new identity.³² For the case at hand, the most common and explosive trigger of them all was the surfacing of unexplainable, chronic illness that was very difficult to overcome. In fact, the core witnesses in any of the witch trials consisted of the family members of those struck by sickness. They were the first to start accusing the witches, and subsequently, they were the ones that spread the rumours that triggered other people into their mindset. In the cases against Cecile de la Huvene and Christine Chamar, the main instigator was Pierre Tellier, who indicated the health breakdown of his daughter as an eye-

³² Peter Gay proposed practically the same causality framework as Lawrence Stone, but adopted different terms for the three levels: long-range causes, short-range causes and releasers. See: Peter Gay, *Art and Act: On causes in history – Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

opener to the evil of the *diablasses*.³³ Jean Torcq had a similar personal epiphany when his wife came down with a mysterious disease, and consequently drove the investigation on Marie Clement forward.³⁴ Many other witnesses experienced similar incidents, some of them testifying about ill relatives, others about themselves or sick cattle.³⁵

The people who were triggered by sickness seemed to have been most strongly enraptured by the new Catholic identity, and were often prone to violently eradicating the Devil's influence – embodied by the witches – from the devout community. I have already mentioned the role of Pierre Tellier in the staging of mob justice in front of the house of Cecile de la Huvène, but this was not the only rally that he set up. According to Jeanne Caulay, Pierre started yelling expletives and threats on the village square, saying that he would gladly auction two cows to see the witches burn.³⁶ Some people went even further, and expressed their desire to be the executioner of the witches: Adrien Raguet exclaimed that he would “couperoit la gorge” of Cecile de la Huvène after he found out that his wife had been poisoned.³⁷ Other victims of malady stressed the sanctity of the local community and the purification theme; after his daughter fell fatally ill, Pierre Bourelle went to threaten Marie Clement and told the *diablesse* to go ‘bathe’,³⁸ which is an obvious reference to the polluting effect that the diabolical had on Catholic society.³⁹

Of course, not everyone was triggered into the new identity by witnessing sick relatives. Some ascertained a more militant attitude by means of the avid gossiping – “bruits communs” – that permeated throughout both villages. The accumulation of rumours about *malificae* stimulated many parishioners to think back to past events that left them sick or miserable, and with the many gossips backing them up, they unconsciously started projecting these previously moot incidents onto the rumoured scandals of *maleficae*. For example, Jean Erembault stated that he only realized that *maleficium* had caused the death of his daughter (which happened three years before delivering his testimony) after hearing the accusations by Pierre Tellier, and that he now wanted revenge against the *diablesse*.⁴⁰ In this example, the mere presence of accusations was enough for Erembault to trigger a more hierarchical identity. Sometimes, people recognised

³³ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Pierre Tellier on 16th March 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 12

³⁴ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jean Torcq on 16th March 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 12-13.

³⁵ For example: Marie Salmon said that she and two of her cows fell ill at the same time. AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Marie Salmon on 29th July 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 28.

³⁶ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jeanne Caulay on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 10-11.

³⁷ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Adrien Raguet on 12th August 1679*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 10.

³⁸ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Pierre Bourelle on 16th March 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 13.

³⁹ Mary Douglas was the pioneer in establishing the anthropological theme of pollution and purification in society. See: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2004). Since then, it has been aptly applied in historiography, most notably by Natalie Zemon Davis in her analysis of religious violence in sixteenth-century France: Davis, “The Rites of Violence,” 57-60.

⁴⁰ AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amongies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jean Erembault on 29th July 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 29-30.

rumours as similar to an anecdote of their own, which caused them to reevaluate the meaning of those stories. As such, it was only after Tellier had already started spreading tales about toads being harbingers of the Devil that Jeanne Gerland started linking a similar anecdote, i.e. the appearance of a toad in her stables, to the devilish status of *maleficae*.⁴¹ In short, rumours could trigger a reconsideration of past events, which in turn caused the release of a new militant attitude in the locally constructed Catholic identity.

In conclusion, it is clear that the reasons behind an identity transformation are not clear-cut. There are many influences, each of them with a different impact and reach. For this specific case, the deep-rooted fear for *maleficium*, the popular esteem of exorcism and the confessional pressure from above were necessary to make the identity shift possible. Furthermore, the already integrated concepts of demonic possession – due to the regional fascination with madness and insanity – provided with an extra cultural bonus that facilitated the transition into a new identity. The other precipitants – poverty, increased communal adhesion, legal and social familiarity with witchcraft, strained social relations – largely determined the time frame. While the preconditions were pretty universal, these precipitants ascertained that the identity alteration took place after 1656. Finally, the appearance of some enigmatic illness and the hearsay that followed it narrowed the time frame even further, and activated the witch-hunt as an identity expression.

⁴¹ Tellier started spreading rumours about the connection between Cecile, toads, and the devil in August 1679, prompting Gerland to recollect a story from 1678 and placing it in a new set of meaning. When she delivers her testimony in March 1680, the appearance of a toad in her stables is therefore automatically located in a demonological framework. See: AET, *Seigneuries rurales: Amougies et Russeignies*, nr. 96, *testimony of Jeanne Gerland on 16th March 1680*; Vlieghe, “Sorcières [...] (suite),” 14.

Chapter 6

Intermediate Conclusion: Identities From Below

While the Catholic imperative of Christianisation was set in motion in the beginning of the seventeenth century, the rural masses endured in a magical world for the longest time, completely immersed in a distinct religious experience that was based on popular conceptions. However, most historians agree that the Tridentine devotional experience started to take root in the Flemish countryside as of the 1650s (see first chapter) by overcoming the popular interpretation of religion and perhaps even incorporating some popular elements into the new confessional religiosity. As such, the implementation of a confessional identity did not result in a strict standoff between two entirely divergent cosmologies, but – in order to make the new confessional identity liveable – in a continuous negotiation between several social and cultural bodies that would lead into a mishmash of ideas and values.¹ In other words, the top-down confessionalisation provided a window of opportunity for a bottom-up appropriation of new confessional influences, so the eventual Catholic identity could only form as a gradual syncretism of popular and confessional sets of meaning.² However, the main stimulant of this syncretism is almost always implied to be the confessional pressure from the top of society, exerted through priests that increasingly indoctrinated their subjects by incorporating some popular elements into their confessional messages. This is due to the generalised use of clerical sources to dissect the religious lives of commoners, thus overvaluing the importance of ecclesiastical bodies. These types of sources only touch upon the external layer of religious experience, and do not give clues as to how people internalised these imposed sets of meaning.

On the other hand, the use of sources that include the voices of the *menu peuple* itself, like testimonies in witch trials, have the possibility of journeying directly into the mind of the villagers. As such, the story that I have presented here by using these alternative sources has demonstrated that the socio-cultural construction of a confessional identity that allowed for a witch-hunt to happen was a combination of many factors, ranging from cultural macrostructures to social micro-events, and from top-down constraint to bottom-up compulsion. However, the factors that finally gave the push over the edge, and thus the most important layer of causality,

¹ Peter Burke, “A Question of Acculturation?” in *Scienze, credenze occulte, livelli di cultura*, ed. Paola Zambelli (Firenze: Olschki, 1982), 197-204.

² C. Scott Dixon, *The Reformation and Rural Society: The Parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1528-1603* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 206; David Mayes, *Communal Christianity: the Life and Loss of a Peasant Vision in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 171-72; Marc Therry, *De religieuze beleving bij de leken in het 17de-eeuwse bisdom Brugge (1609-1706)* (Brussel: Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1988), 234-46.

were the so-called *triggers*, inherently individual features that were located in the daily experience of the masses. Indeed, it were these *triggers* that drove the people's religious identity towards the application of Tridentine features, towards the appropriation of confessional identity features into their popular magical religiosity. Thus, the Catholic identity of the villagers was a creation of their own, constructed through their own individual signification process, and the witch-hunt in itself was an equally bottom-up identity expression, rather than a top-down power affirmation. The triggers' level of individuality has further important implications, as they can result in an unequal appropriation of identity features. That is why people like Louis Hondequin, Augustinus Meuris, and Gregoire Cartreul (see chapter four, pp. 37-38) never seemed to fit into the militant Catholic identity; while they encountered the same cultural arena that people like Pierre Tellier did, they never experienced the necessary triggers to shift their identity into a new gear.

PART II
THE EXISTENCE OF DISSIDENT IDENTITIES
PROTESTANT LIFE IN A CATHOLIC WORLD

Chapter 1

A Forgotten People

By the end of the seventeenth century, things really started to heat up in the countryside around Oudenaarde. The strategic region along the Scheldt was mainly threatened by countless military offensives brought about by Louis XIV, causing great distress among the local population.¹ Indeed, the French troops generated all kinds of havoc in the area and terrorized the peasant communities for several decades. A great deal of houses were destroyed, others were deliberately torn down to be replaced by fortifications.² Several churches were also robbed,³ while multiple rectories were burned to the ground⁴ and numerous cemeteries were desecrated.⁵ As a result, many parishioners were left without a home, were unable to pay their debts,⁶ and sought refuge in a few central places of sanctuary, like the Saint Peter's Church in Ronse.⁷

On top of this, another form of conflict arose in the years leading up to the turn of the seventeenth century. This was not like any other average confrontation that was triggered by external influences like foreign soldiers, but an identity-driven strife that sparked from within communities themselves. As it turned out, the conflict that affected social life the most was the religious antagonism that was rooted in villages like Sint-Maria-Horebeke, Mater and Etikhove. In these localities, established Protestant minorities had endured a century of Catholic rule, somehow surviving within and alongside Catholic communities, though not always with the greatest ease. In this chapter, an analysis of the identity creation of these dissident confessional communities is provided by answering two key questions: How did the Protestant communities perceive themselves, and how did the Catholic bystanders view them?

This might seem a strange interlude to the dominant Catholic story from the previous chapters. On the one hand, the focus on Catholic identities is fairly obvious when writing about

¹ The composite work of William Young is an excellent introduction into these wars: William Young, *International Politics and Warfare in the Age of Louis XIV and Peter the Great* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2004), 123-65, 215-414.

² For example: in Edelare in the War of the Spanish Succession. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 249, *visitatio Edelare anno 1711*.

³ Willem Blyckaerts, the dean of Ronse in 1708, complained about the mischief conceived by the French soldiers in the church of Sint-Maria-Horebeke. AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 1129.

⁴ The rectory of Kwaremont was one of the many that did not survive the calamities of 1688. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Quaremont anno 1690*.

⁵ In 1708, French troops had pitched their tents on the cemetery of Mater, thus defiling the dead that lay there. AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 1130.

⁶ The villagers of Edelare appealed to the king for a temporary exemption from taxes. RAG, *OGA Edelare-Leupegem-Volkegem*, nr. 327.

⁷ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Rothnaci St. Petri anno 1695*.

the seventeenth-century Southern Netherlands. After all, this Spanish-controlled territory was often made out to be a jewel of the Catholic Reformation, with a reasonably quick transition from a Protestant hub to an exemplary Tridentine body due to resourceful ecclesiastical strategies and an abundance of Habsburg state support, especially under the reign of archduke Albert of Austria.⁸ Moreover, certain popular movements expressed a strong inclination towards the Catholic reforms, making the integration of Tridentine measures considerably smoother.⁹ Consequently, most cultural and religious historians have correctly approached Catholicism as key to grasping the identities and mentalities of the early modern commoner in the Spanish Netherlands, whilst also aspiring to fit them into theoretical structures like confessionalisation.¹⁰

On the other hand however, the Protestant confession – limited as its followers might be in this predominant Catholic region – cannot simply be ignored. While it is true that many Protestants fled to more puritan regions by the end of the sixteenth century, various small groups remained in scattered proportions, either in the form of underground bodies in the metropolis of Antwerp,¹¹ or as fairly public communities in the countryside near Oudenaarde and Ronse, a region with traditionally strong ties to the *Geuzen* of the sixteenth century. Here, the dissidents adapted to the new circumstances and survived throughout the seventeenth century, constantly contributing to local cultural and social life. The fact that they were able to manage this, as well as to keep their nonconformist confession alive, makes them worth investigating.

Unfortunately, this is often not the case. These communities are often overlooked, mostly due to their limited numbers and heuristic barriers. As a result, a remarkable hiatus has formed in the writings of Belgian historians, as the role of Protestants as religious minorities in the Spanish Netherlands after the Dutch Revolt has rarely ever been considered. Most of the times, the fall of Antwerp in 1585 marked the end of the appearance of Protestants in the Belgian historiography.¹² In the singular cases that they are analysed, the plot mostly revolves around the massive numbers of Protestants fleeing to the North,¹³ or around the conversions of those who chose to remain.¹⁴ Either way, the analysis of Protestant minorities rarely exceeds the sixteenth century. Therefore, to prove that dissident identities can and should be given heed to, the second part of this Master's degree dissertation concentrates on the study of the Protestants sheltered in the rural surroundings of Oudenaarde and Ronse by analysing their confessional implications,

⁸ James Tracy, "With and without the Counter-Reformation: the Catholic Church in the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, 1580-1650," *Catholic Historical Review* 52 (1985): 547-75; Harline and Put, *A Bishop's Tale*.

⁹ Janssen argues that radicalized exiles were essential in these movements as mobilizing forces. Geert Janssen, "The Counter-Reformation of the Refugee: Exile and the Shaping of Catholic Militancy in the Dutch Revolt," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63 (2012): 671-92.

¹⁰ Reinhard and Schilling, *Die katholische Konfessionalisierung*.

¹¹ Marie Juliette Marinus, "De protestanten te Antwerpen," *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 2 (1993): 327-43; Guido Marnef, *Antwerp in the Age of Reformation: Underground Protestantism in a Commercial Metropolis, 1555-1577* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

¹² Michel Cloet, "Een kwarteeuw historische produktie," 198-223; Guido Marnef, "Belgian and Dutch Post-war Historiography on the Protestant and Catholic Reformation in the Netherlands," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 100 (2009): 271-92.

¹³ Van Roey, "De bevolking," 95-108.

¹⁴ Marnef, "Protestant Conversions," 255-66.

comparing them to their Catholic counterparts, and finally indicating how their identity survived and even flourished towards the first quarter of the eighteenth century, despite a religiously hostile environment.

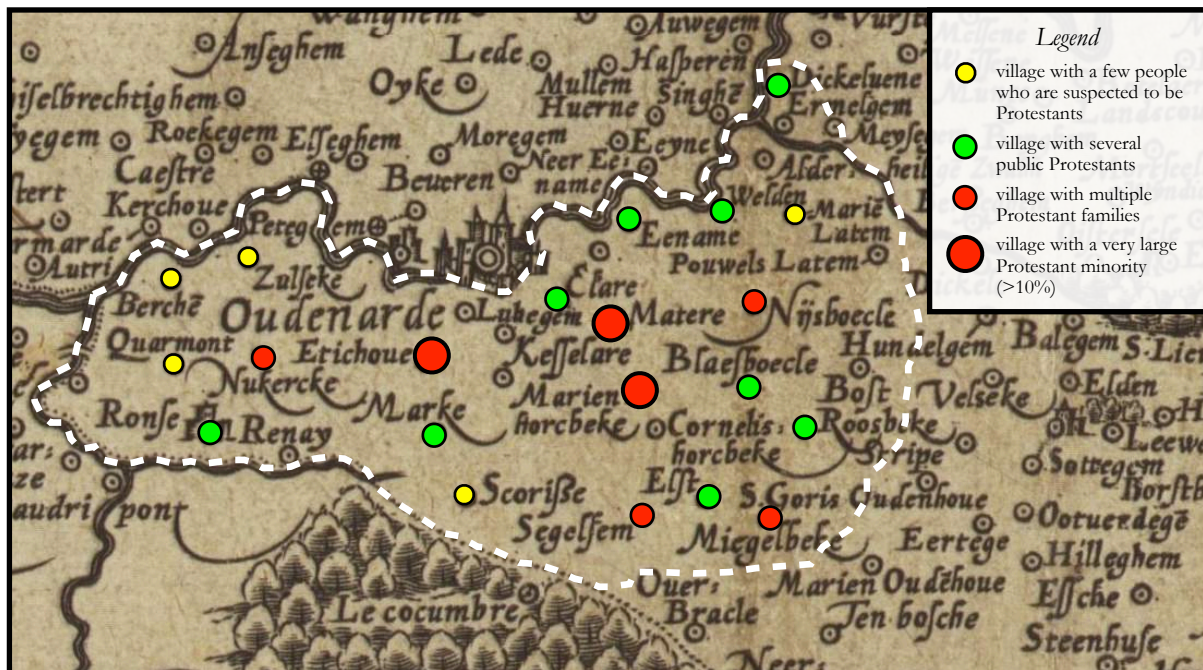


FIGURE 7 The data on this map, based on info from the dean's visitation reports, on own calculations, and on additional information in the work of De Brouwer,¹⁵ clearly demonstrates the distribution of Protestants in the Ronse deanery in the second half of the seventeenth century. Generally, the Protestants were quite widespread: some parishes, like Nukerke, Zegelsem and Michelbeke, consisted of multiple families, while other localities, like Berchem, Schorisse and Ename, can barely be labelled as full-fledged Protestant communities. Mater, Etikhove, and Sint-Maria-Horebeke stand out as having exceptionally large religious minorities.

Before getting to that however, it might prove useful to approximate the dissident population that one has to deal with. This is not an easy assignment, since any educated guess is based on indirect Catholic sources that only account for known 'heretics', thus concealing a large number of hidden and reclusive Protestants. Nevertheless, a crude estimate on the distribution and local intensity of Protestants is still possible. First of all, it is very clear that Protestants were widespread across the entire surface of the Ronse deanery in the second half of the seventeenth century, from Ronse in the southwest to Dikkelvenne in the north and Michelbeke in the east (figure 7). Furthermore, the number of Reformed followers in each village varied to a significant degree. For instance, while Maarke only harboured one or two Protestants, at least three dissident families lived in Michelbeke.¹⁶ One might think that these differences can be attributed to varying sizes of general village populations, and these could definitely pose a valid factor, but the correlation is generally too weak to emphasize it. As such, Maarke's population around 1680 was even larger than Michelbeke's.¹⁷

¹⁵ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 997-98.

¹⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Marckae anno 1671; Visitatio Michelbeke anno 1680*.

¹⁷ Jozef De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie van het Land van Aalst, 1570-1800* (Brussels: Pro Civitate, 1968), 131-35.

Secondly, figure 4.1 clearly shows the existence of a few cores of the Reformed religion, mostly in the axis Ronse-Oudenaarde and the countryside east of Oudenaarde, in which a large number of individuals and families were devoted to Protestantism. Of these concentrated communities, three in particular stood out. Firstly, the village of Etikhove has a remarkably-sized community of Protestants in their midst, consisting of at least eighty faithful followers in 1690, opposite 800 Catholic communicants.¹⁸ Considering the fact that both estimates do not take 'inactive' groups, like children, into account, one can carefully compare them and conclude that the Protestant minority was roughly 10% the size of the Catholic majority. In reality, this figure was probably even higher, since many more villagers were rumoured to be 'heretics'.

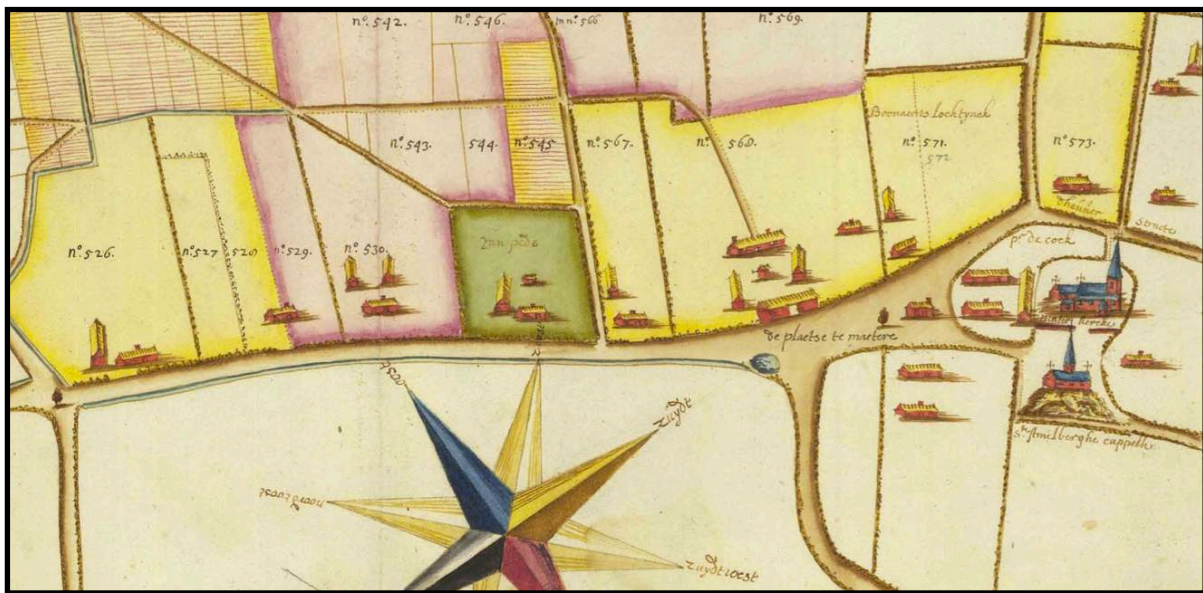


FIGURE 8 This embellished map illustrates the contemporary geographical layout of the village centre of Mater in the second half of the seventeenth century. Interestingly, the cartographer has sketched the most notable buildings, sites and landmarks of the parish, and has even named some of them. Here, one can see the parish church, the chapel of Saint Amelberga (*St. Amelberghe capelke*), and the village square (*de plaetse te Maetere*).

A second noteworthy centre of Protestantism is located in Mater, the largest and most densely populated rural parish in the deanery (figure 8).¹⁹ This village was quite conspicuous in the area due to its long tradition of popular, militant Protestantism that had dominated daily life at the end of the sixteenth century. At that time, the inhabitants had desecrated the local church multiple times, and they had even threatened the parish priest to reduce his house to ashes if he would rat out any dissident to the authorities.²⁰ In 1605, almost all villagers were known to be 'heretics', and it was apparently commonplace to use this nickname when referring to themselves.²¹ Although their numbers had definitely dwindled since then, the Protestant community still went fairly strong in the second half of the seventeenth century, amounting to

¹⁸ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Etichove anno 1690*.

¹⁹ De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 138-39; Georges Van Hoolandt, *Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van Mater* (Mater: s.n., 1986), 100-14.

²⁰ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 14, *visitatio Maternae anno 1593*.

²¹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 14, *visitatio Maternae anno 1605*.

the largest religious minority of the deanery in absolute numbers. As it so happens, pastor Pieraerts included some statistical data in his 1686 appeal to the king, saying that out of the ca 1400 souls under his wing, approximately thirty families were stringent followers of the Reformed faith.²² Roughly calculated, this equals about 135 – 165 individuals, or ca 10% – 12% of the total local population.²³ In the following years, this number would only go on growing.²⁴

Finally, the largest Protestant community in relative numbers can be pinpointed to one of the smallest villages in the Ronse deanery, namely Sint-Maria-Horebeke. This modest hamlet possibly harboured an even more populous minority than Mater; the local authorities reported approximately 29 heretic families in 1696, which presumably means that there were about 130 – 160 Protestants present.²⁵ Stack this figure up to the estimated general population of Sint-Maria-Horebeke,²⁶ and it can be deduced that approximately 14% – 18% of the locals would have been members of the Reformed faith. Whilst this is of course a very rough and moderate measurement, it is still a pretty impressive number, making the village's nickname, “*Geuzenboek*” or “Beggar’s Corner”, quite appropriate.²⁷

The relatively high percentages of Protestants in these communities at the end of the seventeenth century are not coincidental, nor are they solely the result of natural population expansion. Throughout the entire second half of the seventeenth century Etikhove, Mater, and Sint-Maria-Horebeke had a certain magnetic allure to Protestants of the neighbouring villages, leading to a high immigration rate of religious dissidents.²⁸ Mater for instance grew very quickly over a short amount of time, from only thirty heretics in 1664 to around sixty in 1669.²⁹ Sint-Maria-Horebeke had an equally intense growth, stretching from approximately thirty Protestant adults in 1666 to forty in 1669, and further accumulating up to fifty in 1680.³⁰ What’s more, the attractive reputation was not only part of the regional awareness, but even crossed borders into

²² ARA, *Gebeime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, *letter of appeal of pastors Arnoldus Pieraerts, Jacobus Verstrepen, and Rumoldus Jobyt to the king on 10th June 1686*. A transcription of this letter was included in: Paul Huys, ““Hereticque schandael” in Mater op Kerstdag 1685. Over een kwarteeuw geloofsvervolging (1686-1713),” in *Qui valet ingenio: liber amicorum aangeboden aan dr. Johan Decavele ter gelegenheid van zijn 25-jarig ambtsjubileum als stadsarchivaris van Gent*, ed. Joris De Zutter (Gent: Stichting Mens en Cultuur, 1996), 274-76.

²³ When calculating a population solely based on the number of families, historical demographers advise multiplying the figure by 4,5 – 5,5 when dealing with Flemish rural families in the Ancient Régime. See: Isabelle Devos and Chris Vandenbroeke, “Historische demografie van de Middeleeuwen en de Nieuwe Tijden,” in *Inleiding tot de lokale geschiedenis van de 12^{de} tot de 18^{de} eeuw*, ed. Jan Art and Marc Boone (Gent: Stichting Mens en Cultuur, 2004), 184. For a more detailed account on the common family structures in the rural region around Oudenaarde, see: Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking*, 105-97, 210-24.

²⁴ In 1690, the dean counts 120 heretics (with children not included in his estimate). RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Maternae anno 1690*.

²⁵ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1696*.

²⁶ De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 144.

²⁷ Arnold De Jonge, *De Geuzenboek te Sint-Maria-Horebeke: van geslacht tot geslacht* (Horebeke: Protestants historisch museum Abraham Hans, 2000); Wayne Te Brake, “Emblems of Coexistence in a Confessional World,” in *Living with Religious Diversity in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. C. Scott Dixon et al. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 53.

²⁸ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 996-1001.

²⁹ The numbers here do not include children and ‘hidden’ sinners. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Maternae anno 1664; Visitatio Maternae anno 1669*.

³⁰ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1666; Visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1669; Visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1680*.

the Dutch Republic. Several Calvinists who fled to the Dutch Republic in the 1640s, like Francisca Parduyn³¹ or Jacob van den Berghe,³² returned to one of the three aforementioned communities. Zacharius Pede, who had fled with his family from Sint-Denijs-Boekel in 1651, chose to return to the region in the late 1670's. Instead of resettling in the village of his birth however, he opted for a new residence in Mater.³³

While these three minority focal points grew and reached an all-time peak around 1700, the other minorities in the region dwindled.³⁴ First and foremost, this was due to the increased effectiveness of the authorities in their pursuit of a homogeneous Catholic society, thus upping the pressure on heretics immensely under threat of prosecution.³⁵ Sometimes, local authorities even performed tests to smoke out any unexposed heretics. In 1685 the Ronse magistrate ordered all Protestant residents to leave the city, but as nobody left, they deduced that there were no more dissidents in the city; all protestants “se seroient absentez”.³⁶ The increasingly undesirable and hostile environment that these measures brought about, combined with escalations in religious violence (see chapter four), determined more and more Protestants to either convert, move to larger communities like Mater and Sint-Maria-Horebeke (there was a certain strength in numbers), or flee to the Dutch Republic.

The village of Nukerke is an excellent illustration of this evolution. While many inhabitants were inclined to the Reformed faith in the 1660s and 1670s, their numbers unmistakably shrank towards the turn of the century. This decrease unfolded in a very gradual fashion with some early emigration in the 1680s (e.g. Petrus van Butsel to Mater),³⁷ but the strongest exodus manifested itself in the nineties. In 1690, Jacob van Butsel and his wife Petronella Verplancken were banished, while others emigrated of their own free will.³⁸ Seven years later, another family departed and two individuals converted to Catholicism.³⁹ There were some more conversions and cases of migration in the following few years.⁴⁰

All things considered, there was indeed a sizeable number of Protestant communities in the Ronse deanery. While they were originally quite dispersed over a widespread geographical area, they slowly but surely merged into larger, central communities in the course of the second half of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, followers of the Reformed faith were never a majority, not even in Sint-Maria-Horebeke, where they possibly represented up to 20% of the local population.

³¹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Etichore anno 1653*.

³² RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Cornelii anno 1653*.

³³ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Boucle Dionisii anno 1651; visitatio Maternae anno 1680*.

³⁴ C. De Rammelaere, “Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het protestantisme in het Oudenaardse gedurende de moderne periode,” *Handelingen der maatschappij voor geschiedenis en oudheidkunde van Gent* 14 (1960): 108-111.

³⁵ Marie Julliette Marinus, “Het verdwijnen van het protestantisme in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden,” *De zeventiende eeuw* 13 (1997): 261-69.

³⁶ SAR, *OGA Ronse*, nr. 903.

³⁷ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Maternae anno 1682*.

³⁸ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1690*.

³⁹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1697*.

⁴⁰ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1699*.

Chapter 2

The Dominance of Lateral Identities: Communities within Communities, 1650-1670

SURVIVING IN A CATHOLIC WORLD

Up until now Protestant communities have been approached as if they were distinct groups of religious nonconformists, fused in a joint network of doctrinal dissidence and disconnected from the rest of the Catholic society. However, this was never really the case. The Catholic villagers were aware of the Protestants living in their midst, but mostly seemed pretty unconcerned regarding their presence. More often than not, followers of the Reformed faith were actually incorporated in the Catholic community, living, although not always in perfect harmony, in the same streets and in the same neighbourhoods as papist devotees. Sometimes, the multiconfessional realm even existed on a more microscopic scale, namely the household. Cross-confessional marriages did actually exist,¹ and there are known cases of Catholic families taking in Protestant servants.² Also on the professional level, there seemed some degree of indifference among the *menu peuple* towards the religion of a particular individual, even when these individuals filled in a paramount and central role in local society. There was no particular uproar among the villagers of Etikhove when a protestant was chosen to be their tax collector,³ and the commoners of Melden did not seem to care that their new local Lord descended from a heretical family, as he had always acted in a faithful and accepting way.⁴ Some Protestants even assumed a meaningful political position in their respective locality. A Protestant was appointed as one of the communal aldermen of Mater,⁵ while the bailiff of the same village at that time was probably a follower of the deviant faith as well.⁶ Sporadically, even individuals with ties to the Catholic Church, like sextants, were known to be devoted to Reformed beliefs, but most of the times

¹ A few examples of these are sometimes touched upon in the dean's visitation reports: RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, , *visitatio Ermleghem anno 1650*; *visitatio Svalm Monachorum anno 1660*; *visitatio Segelsem anno 1680*.

² For example, a Catholic family from Roborst hired and accommodated a heretical maid. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Bost anno 1651*.

³ RAG, *OGA Etikhove*, nr. 193.

⁴ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Melden anno 1657*.

⁵ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Maternae anno 1655*.

⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Maternae anno 1653*.

these cases were directly rectified by the local clergy.⁷ Nevertheless, the fact of the matter remains that the Protestants of the Ronse deanery lived among Catholics in biconfessional communities, could even thrive in these communities and were generally accepted, except perhaps by the local clergy, as full-fledged members of the communal body politic.

How did this relatively stable situation come to be? In general, this type of religious coexistence can certainly not be interpreted as the outcome of successful legal coordination. In fact, the lack of straightforward regulations concerning the treatment of religious minorities is striking. With the end of Eighty Years' War in 1648, top-level diplomats from both the Spanish monarchy and the newly established Dutch Republic had made an attempt at negotiating a shared *status quo* of religious coexistence, but to no avail. The big differences in political culture between the two nations correlated with completely different perspectives on religion, with the Spanish 'defenders of the faith' deeming toleration as another form of capitulation.⁸ As a result, the main political bodies could not reach an agreement on the confessional situation in the Spanish Netherlands.⁹ The Catholic ecclesiastical authorities were equally unsuccessful in providing clear answers on how to deal with heretical minorities. In the beginning of the 1660s, some debate on this matter did emerge among the higher clergy, with two main issues being brought forward that all bishops agreed on: The local clergy should do everything in their power to avoid mixed marriages, and Protestants should be prohibited from holding public offices. Nevertheless, the remaining sentiments of the bishops had too little in common to take root. While some preached a more repressive approach, others pleaded for careful consideration of the consequences for the Catholics in the Republic, and bishops with a small number of Protestants in their diocese did not show any interest in the matter at all.¹⁰ As a result, the debate slowly died down with the Church failing at its initial intentions, as earlier examples have shown.

While the Peace of Münster did not provide a coherent understanding of the conduct towards minorities, it did have some effect on the living conditions of the Protestants of the South in an indirect fashion. Some of the minority members utilised two particular articles from the treaty to guard themselves from prosecution and increase their liberties. As such, article nineteen stipulated that Protestant subjects of the Dutch Republic were allowed to practice their religion in silence while on visit in the Spanish Netherlands, as long as they respected the public piety of the guest country and did not cause any scandals or ruckus.¹¹ Some of the Protestants in the

⁷ For example, the sextant of the Saint-Peter's church (Ronse) in the late 1650s was a public heretic, handing out pamphlets and dissident catechisms to anyone who was interested. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Rotbnaci St. Petri anno 1657*.

⁸ Laura Menzano Baena, *Conflicting Words: The Peace Treaty of Münster (1648) and the Political of the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Monarchy* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011), 197-234.

⁹ While the Peace of Westphalia did settle a legal recognition and *de facto* toleration of the three main confessions – Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Reformed Calvinism – in the German empire, the Habsburg hereditary lands, which included the Southern Netherlands, were not included in this arrangement.

¹⁰ Eugène Hubert, "Une enquête sur les affaires religieuses dans les Pays-Bas espagnols au XVII^e siècle," in *Mélanges Paul Frédéricq: hommage de la Société pour le progrès des études philologiques et historiques, 10 juillet 1904*, ed. Pierre Hoffmann (Brussels: Henri Lamertin, 1904), 329-336.

¹¹ An English translation of the original treaty can be found in: Herbert H. Rowen, ed., *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 179-87.

region around Oudenaarde made use of this clause by becoming *'buitenpoorters'* of Dutch cities on the borders with the Spanish-controlled territory, like Sas-van-Gent or Middelburg, and thus claiming to be covered by this article.¹² The same applies to article four of the treaty, which stated that the subjects of both nations were “permitted to enter and remain in each other's lands and there conduct their business and trade in full security.” When the Catholic authorities tried to deport a Protestant minister in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the locals referred to this article in an attempt to hinder the expulsion.¹³

All things considered, it is reasonable to conclude that neither the political nor the ecclesiastical authorities laid down a clear legal framework for a peaceful coexistence of the two religious groups. So this brings us back to the original question: How did the Catholics and Protestants manage to live together in balanced and resilient multiconfessional communities? The lack of top-down moderation immediately suggests that the other end of the scale – bottom-up agency – had a leading role in making the religious coexistence sustainable. Indeed, it required a great deal of effort from below, chiefly by the Protestants, to develop a perception in which dissidents were ‘allowed’ to live in the parish community. Wayne Te Brake postulated the existence of several social ‘mechanisms’, like secrecy, indifference, connivance, and casuistry, all of which ensured a constant dialogue between members of contrasting religions on the base level of society. Through this continuous renegotiating of the confessional status quo, religious diversity had the means to survive in the region, as the mechanism allowed the dissidents to fit themselves into local society.¹⁴ Of course, these bottom-up endeavours meant for the Protestants to adapt their doctrinal convictions to local society and to learn how to be part of local society while still being a follower of the Reformed faith.

First and foremost, this meant drawing a clear line that separated the public from the private sphere and limiting devotional practices to this last one.¹⁵ Mostly, this did not pose a real problem for the Protestants, whose puritan creed was mostly centered around private piety anyways.¹⁶ As a result, gatherings were exclusively organised in intimate settings,¹⁷ preferably at

¹² De Jonge, *De Geuzenboek*, 32; Huys, “Hereticque schandael,” 270. To know the exact number of *buitenpoorters* among the Protestants of the region around Oudenaarde, one has to establish an in-depth study of the *poorters* of said cities, using archival sources from the *Zeeuws Archief* and the city archives of Sas van Gent. Here, I can only make crude estimates; for example, during a surge of tension in 1686, the conduct of thirteen Protestants of Mater was investigated, six of whom were *buitenpoorters* of the Dutch town of Sas van Gent. See: ARA, *Gebeime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, *letter from the magistrate of Sas van Gent on 30th March 1686*.

¹³ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 135, *letter of C.V. Citters, commander of Sas van Gent, to the priest of Sint-Maria-Horebeke on 18th March 1717, concerning the deportation of Protestant minister Pieter Brandt*. This letter was also published in: S.J.M. Hulsbergen, “De positie van de Protestanten in Vlaanderen. Over een brief die de commandeur van Sas van Gent op 18 maart 1717 schreef aan de pastoor van St Maria Horebeke,” *Zeeuws tijdschrift* 33 (1983): 54-58.

¹⁴ Te Brake, “Emblems of Coexistence,” 68-79.

¹⁵ This was equally important for the conditioning of toleration towards the Catholic minorities in the Dutch Republic. See: Christine Kooi, “Paying off the Sheriff: Strategies of Catholic Toleration in Golden Age Holland,” in *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 87-101.

¹⁶ Judith Pollmann, *Religious Choice in the Dutch Republic: The Reformation of Arnoldus Buchelius (1565-1641)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 164-192.

night,¹⁸ and heretic books were only distributed and read behind closed doors.¹⁹ As the visitation reports explicitly indicate all manner of private nonconformist gatherings on a yearly basis, one can only assume that they were common knowledge among the Catholic parishioners. Yet, there were no complaints of these private assemblies, the Catholic majority seemed to find little trouble with them. The earlier mentioned sentiments of indifference – or should I dare use the word ‘toleration?’ – seem appropriate here. However, it is essential to stress that the moderate tolerance only lasted as long as the dissident worship stayed out of the public eye: While the Protestants of Sint-Maria-Horebeke had been holding private Easter assemblies for years, the organisation of a public “Calvinist Meal” on Easter Sunday in 1661 caused quite an uproar among the Catholic villagers, and subsequently sparked a legal prosecution of the organisers.²⁰ In other words, there was no toleration towards public worship, but private freedom of conscience was generally not frowned upon among the Catholic parishioners.²¹

The lack of Protestant public piety did leave the dominance of Catholicism in the communal sphere unchecked. Consequently, it is not very surprising that the Reformed minority had to develop some degree of acceptance towards Catholic traditions if they wanted to function and prosper in everyday life. That is why there are rarely any known cases of Protestants actively disturbing Catholic services or confessional ceremonies.²² Sometimes, they even participated in some. For example, Protestants were commonly present at the burial of someone from the community, even if the deceased was Catholic.²³ In other words, to survive in these communities, the minority had to adapt to the religious culture of the majority. In doing so, many Protestants took a step further, and incorporated Catholic practices into their own confessional understanding. The custom of the local Catholic priest baptising the children of Protestants for example, was very widespread, even in the three regional cores of the Reformed faith.²⁴ Additionally, people who died as heretics were often nonetheless buried on the local

¹⁷ Even when the Protestants had an inn at their disposal, they preferred practising their religion in their private homes. For example, Petrus van den Bossche was a Reformed innkeeper, but only had meetings at his own house. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Michelbeke anno 1655*.

¹⁸ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1659*.

¹⁹ For example, Hieronymus de Groote kept his unauthorised heretical books at the house of his brother-in-law, kept them to himself, and never brought them into public places, until the books were discovered by the priest. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Boucle Dionisii anno 1654*.

²⁰ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1661*.

²¹ Influential humanist and Flemish jurist Justus Lipsius (1547-1606) makes the same distinction in his work. Justus Lipsius, *Politicorum sive Civilis Doctrinae Libri Sex* (Amsterdam: Guilielmus Blaeu, 1632), 105-108 [book four, chapter two]. See also: Natasha Constantinidou, “Public and Private, Divine and Temporal in Justus Lipsius’ *De Constantia* and *Politica*,” *Renaissance Studies* 26 (2012): 345-363.

²² The only note concerning such disturbances that I have found in the visitation reports, was from Nukerke in 1666. Here, Petrus Issenbaert tries to obstruct parishioners wanting to attend Mass. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1666*.

²³ The priest of Munkzwalm talks about this habit in 1660. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Swalm Monachorum anno 1660*.

²⁴ In 1711, pastor Arnoldus Pieraerts of Mater wrote a letter in which he attests that up until recently, all Protestants of his village let their children be baptised by the local Catholic priest. This change will be discussed later, in the fourth chapter. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 80, *letter of Arnoldus Pieraerts, priest of Mater, to the archbishop concerning the Protestants in his parish, 1711*.

cemetery.²⁵ The adherence of some Protestants to confessing around Easter is remarkable too, certainly because the Sacrament of Penance was generally not accepted in the Calvinist doctrine.²⁶ There is a high probability that there are a lot more instances of Catholic practices being snuck into Protestant minds, but the nature of the available sources prevents an abundance of examples.²⁷ Nevertheless, it can be concluded that plenty of Protestants constructed an aggregate religious experience, drawn from two traditions, in order to endure in the local community.²⁸

THE EXPRESSION OF PROTESTANT OTHERNESS

However, this raises a new question: If the Protestants were really that much integrated into society, to what extent were they still a distinct community? In other words, is there still a Protestant community to distinguish, or do they simply represent a loose band of religious nonconformists? Well, there were definitely some peculiar customs and traditions that bound the Protestants together in a fairly disparate cultural community. In this regard, the private gatherings that the Protestants could attend have already been mentioned. These *conventicula* were moments of collective worship, concentrated on delivering sermons and reading the Bible, on standing together as a microscopic religious community.²⁹ In 1669, the priest of Sint-Maria-Horebeke attested that such *conventicula*, which were always hidden from plain sight and transpired on variable locations, regularly took place in his parish.³⁰ Also in Sint-Denijs-Boekel, Michelbeke, and Mater, there was said to be a persistent array of Protestant gatherings.³¹ However, there is no certain way to know the exact frequency of these assemblies taking place, but those that are known are either organised on Sunday,³² or on major public holidays such as

²⁵ Egidia Scheppers died in 1663, and was buried in her native village of Edelare. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Edelaer anno 1663*.

²⁶ For example: Jacob Perenay and Egidia Craeye in Elst, Petrus van Coppenhoele in Zulzeke, and almost all Protestants in Sint-Maria-Latem. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Sulsicke anno 1649*; *visitatio Lathem Mariae anno 1671*; *visitatio Elst anno 1693*.

²⁷ Only very rarely did the visitation reports explicitly mention Protestants who participated in Catholic practices, because the reports mostly only record forms of deviant behaviour, which results in an overrepresentation of Protestants who did not live by Catholic rules. Let us not forget that the reports often indicate a high number of 'hidden' Protestants, people of whom the priest did not know their true beliefs, because they generally participated in Catholic rituals.

²⁸ In her study of underground Protestantism in Antwerp, Marie Juliette Marinus reached the same conclusion. See: Marinus, "De protestanten te Antwerpen," 342-43.

²⁹ Due to their intimate and hidden setting, it is fairly difficult to discover the content and composition of these meetings. However, on Christmas 1685, the Protestants of Mater organised a public congregation, and we are adequately well informed on what happened during this meeting: "les hugenots de Materie [...] ont tenues une Congregation de plus de vingt personnes a porte ouverte, avecq la **predication** et la **lecture de la Bible**, le premier Jour de noël pendant les vespres qu'on faisoit dans l'eglise de Materie." RAG, *Raad van Vlaanderen*, nr. 31087, *letter of the bailiff of Schorisse to the Council of Flanders on 5th June 1688 concerning the 'Huguenots' in the barony of Schorisse*.

³⁰ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1669*.

³¹ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 998.

³² The report mentions a gathering that took place on 22th April 1657, which was a "dies dominicus". RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Maternae anno 1657*.

Easter.³³ Also the popularity of these assemblies cannot be surely ascertained, but the priests mostly assumed that almost all the dissidents attended the meetings.

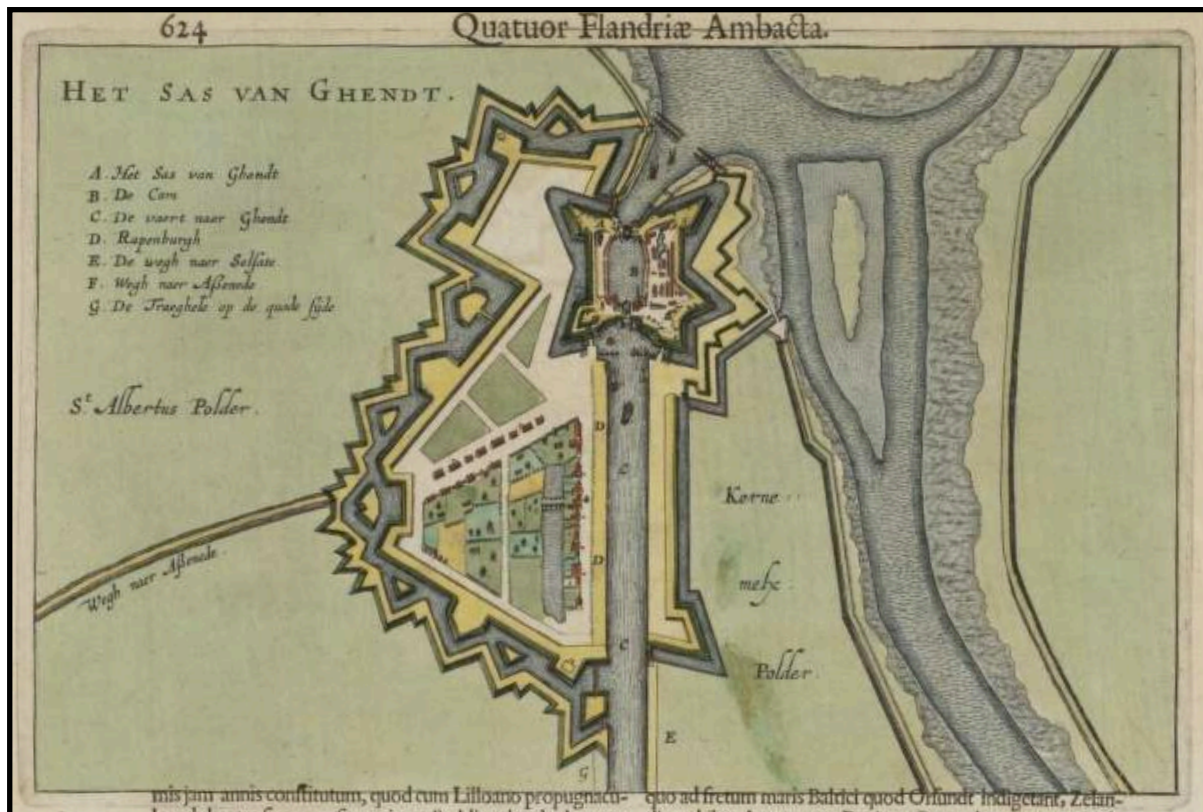


FIGURE 9 The Dutch stronghold city of Sas van Gent was located on the border with the Spanish Netherlands, and had a very particular connection with the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde. Due to its relatively easy accessibility and its tolerant population, the town provided a confessional and devotional safe haven for the religious minority of the South, as they could visit the city on a regular basis and openly practice their religion once they were there, shedding all the secrecy they had to live with back home.

Still, these *conventicula* were not the only identifiers for the Protestant communities of the Oudenaarde region. In fact, the decade-long traditions that they had built up in respect to the Dutch frontier town of Sas van Gent (figure 9) were probably even more meaningful for distinguishing themselves from the Catholic majority. As has been mentioned before, some Protestants had established themselves as *buitenpoorters* of this exact city to embrace more liberty in the practice of their religion in Spanish-controlled territory, but the affiliation went much further and deeper than simply just that.³⁴ In a way, Sas van Gent became the devotional heart of the Protestants of the South, an asylum where they could freely perform their most crucial devout practices, a sanctuary to completely immerse themselves in their Reformed faith. As such, marriages between two Protestants were practically never held in the villages of the Ronse deanery. Instead, the couples ventured to Sas van Gent, where they could marry in front of a

³³ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1659*.

³⁴ S.J.M. Hulsbergen, "De verhouding van Zeeland tot de Protestanten in Vlaanderen in de XVIe en XIXe eeuw," *Bulletin der Vereniging voor de geschiedenis van het Belgisch Protestantisme* 140 (2008): 7-57.

Reformed minister.³⁵ This custom originated in the 1660s,³⁶ but really broke through in the course of the 1670's, thus constructing a tradition in which dozens of believers gathered to travel as a collective body in some kind of 'pilgrimage' to Sas van Gent.³⁷ The popularity of this tradition became really widespread, with the majority of the Protestants getting married in Sas van Gent instead of in their native village.³⁸ For example, the priest of Sint-Maria-Horebeke mentioned thirty dissidents in 1672, the majority of which got married in Sas van Gent.³⁹ Almost twenty years later, the number of Reformed believers climbed up to fifty, and almost all of them had temporarily moved to Sas van Gent to wed their significant other.⁴⁰ In fact, the developing popularity of the ritual caused it to be perceived as quite a big problem by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Spanish Netherlands. In 1671, the dean of Ronse denounced the relevant crack in the ecclesiastical monopoly of officiating weddings and opened up an official investigation into the dissident alternative.⁴¹ However, there was little to be done. The archiepiscopal vicar declared that despite it being a worrisome development, the marriages were completely legal.⁴²

Around the same time, another yearly tradition that affiliated the southern Protestants with the Dutch town of Sas van Gent became apparent and constituted of the Reformed villagers of the South collectively journeying to the Dutch city, where they would be attending major Easter celebrations. While the earliest roots of this custom can be traced to the beginning of the 1650s,⁴³ the cultural institution slowly gained acclaim in the late 1660s, and provided a public extension to the private celebrations of the most important holidays. Each year, around three Protestants from Michelbeke, ten from Sint-Denijs-Boekel, forty from Sint-Maria-Horebeke, sixty from Mater, and a dozen more individuals from a variety of villages crossed the border to make an appearance at the public Easter dinner of Sas van Gent.⁴⁴ Such a sizeable yearly migration movement had a fairly public character, the confessional impact of which cannot be underestimated, as it was sure to prove a remarkable identifier for the followers of the Reformed

³⁵ Altogether, the visitation reports in the period 1660-1690 mention more than thirty Protestant marriages in Sas van Gent. The actual number is probably much higher though.

³⁶ The earliest entry describing a Protestant marriage in Sas van Gent can be pinpointed to a case in Edelare in 1664. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Edelaer anno 1664*.

³⁷ In 1672, twelve people from Sint-Denijs-Boekel traveled together to Sas van Gent to get married there, while eight people from Sint-Maria-Horebeke made the same trip in 1680, as well as four Protestants from Etikhove. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Boucle Dionisii anno 1672*; *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1680*; *visitatio Etikhove anno 1680*.

³⁸ This tradition was not only common in the larger Reformed cores, but was also quite popular in the smaller Protestant communities. See for example: RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Boucle Blasii anno 1671*; *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1690*; *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1695*.

³⁹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1672*.

⁴⁰ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1690*.

⁴¹ AAM, *Fonds Mechliniensia*, nr. 23, f. 40r.

⁴² AAM, *Fonds Mechliniensia*, nr. 27, f. 141r-143v.

⁴³ The visitation report of 1652 mentions the case of Henricus Ceuterix, an inhabitant of Michelbeke who had attending the Easter celebrations of Sas van Gent for years. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Michelbeke anno 1652*.

⁴⁴ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Etikhove anno 1667*; *visitatio Michelbeke anno 1668*; *visitatio Roosbeecke anno 1668*, *visitatio Boucle Dionisii anno 1669*, *visitatio Maternae anno 1669*, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1670*, *visitatio Boucle Blasii anno 1670*.

faith to distinguish themselves from their Catholic neighbours. As a result, its borderline public character sometimes generated a good deal of irritation among the Catholic majority, as was the case in Etikhove in 1667.⁴⁵ While there are some other examples of related customs (for example, when the body of a deceased heretic was transported to Sas van Gent to get buried there⁴⁶), the Protestant marriages and Easter celebrations are the main ones to reach a systematic and extensive frequency to be denominated as common traditions.

In summary, this means that the Protestants of the countryside around Oudenaarde had certain own traditions that defined their ‘otherness’ within the Catholic macrocosm, while still belonging to microscopic bodies by adapting to and participating in the Catholic public sphere of village life. In other words, they formed a dissident community within a village community, being both villagers and Protestants at the same time, a two-fold status that was made possible and condoned through careful ‘dialogue’ with their Catholic neighbours and respectful consideration towards the rituals of these neighbours.

This statement suggests that individuals were capable of having multiple identities at the same time, that they could be part of more than one cultural body, even if those bodies externally opposed each other. It completely flies in the face of the Durkheimian tradition,⁴⁷ and focuses instead on the level of the individual religious experience, repudiating the claim that religions were closed sociocultural communities of a set number of believers. Bernard Lahire has developed this alternative in sociological terms, stating that individuals hold multiple attitudes and beliefs that are activated at different times and has coined this notion “internal plurality”.⁴⁸ Indeed, it seems that the Protestants of Mater, Sint-Maria-Horebeke, and many other villages in the region were individual social agents whose identity was the result of “a complex chart of dispositions to act and to believe”.⁴⁹ They possessed **lateral identities**, meaning that they appropriated elements of the identity that the circumstances called for at the time of culturally expressing themselves.⁵⁰ In other words, situational factors determined which identity was activated, to which community the Protestant individuals decided to belong to for the time being. In the public sphere, all manners of social interactions conditioned them to be villagers, while intimate settings might have stimulated them to appropriate the behaviour of a religious minority. The same applies to the atmosphere of public holidays, during which they deserted their ‘villagerhood’ and completely immersed themselves into their Protestant identity. It was these lateral identities that made the religious coexistence between 1650 and 1670 possible.

⁴⁵ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Etikhove anno 1667*.

⁴⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Quaremont anno 1652*.

⁴⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: PUF, 1960), 31-51.

⁴⁸ Bernard Lahire, *L’homme pluriel. Les ressorts de l’action* (Paris: Nathan, 1998).

⁴⁹ Bernard Lahire, “From the Habitus to an Individual Heritage of Dispositions: Towards a Sociology of at the Level of the Individual,” *Poetics* 31 (2003): 348.

⁵⁰ Handelman, “The Organization of Ethnicity,” 192-193.

Chapter 3

Gradual Hierarchisation of the Protestant Identity, 1670-1685

While those lateral identities were predominantly present in said period of 1650-1670, there was also some representation of a **hierarchical Protestant identity** to be found. In this set of mind, all personality and attitude features can be retraced to one particular dominant identity, the Protestant one. Thus, the full pattern of actions and expressions that these particular Protestants experienced can only be explained in relation to the membership to their religious group.¹ For them, there was no room for being anything else than a Protestant at all time. All other possible identities were either non-existing or inferior to their religious identity. That is why they could not immerge themselves into rituals of public life as easily as individuals with lateral identities. Some refused to attend funerals on the Catholic cemetery, even if it meant missing the burial of their own partner.² Others refused their children to be baptised by a Catholic priest, even when the child was extremely sick and would die as an unchristened heretic shortly afterwards.³ The lack of a lateral identity also correlates with a shortage of sympathy towards the local community, so Protestants with a hierarchical religious identity generally found no problems in causing all kinds of ruckus in the village that they were residing. Petrus Issenbaert did not mind being branded a troublemaker and stayed determined to disrupt Catholic services in Nukerke.⁴ Despite many warnings, Joannes van Coppenhoele also had no intention of softening his regular disrespectful remarks towards the priest and continued publicly mocking Catholic practices at his every convenience.⁵

As chapter three has already demonstrated that the appropriation of confessional identities was an extremely individual process, since it was preceded by a high number of causes with their own particular set of impact and meaning, it is not that surprising that some of the Protestants in the rural villages around Oudenaarde had been triggered into a hierarchical religious identity. Of course, these Protestants constituted a minority within the overall dissident population, but this

¹ *Ibidem*, 192-193.

² Petrus de Ridder, a known heretic from Munkzwalm, refused to attend funeral of his Catholic wife. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Swalm Monachorum anno 1660*.

³ This occurred only very rarely, but there are a few examples. For example, the criminal case against Johannes Van den Oudere from Dikkelvenne, who had refused to christen his son out of 'heretical' motives, is preserved in the archive of the archiepiscopal tribunal. See: AAM, *Archief van de officialiteit*, nr. 1069.

⁴ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1666*.

⁵ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Sulsicke anno 1653, 1655-1657*.

was not set in stone over the course of time. In fact, as of the late 1660s, the frequency of apparent hierarchical identity expressions was on the rise. More and more examples of audacious and unconcealed Protestant behaviour began popping up in the dean's visitation reports, pointing to an increasing number of Protestants who were breaking the fine line between public and private devotion that previously shielded them from major persecution. As such, Sint-Maria-Horebeke's priest was convinced that the village's Protestants had become more persistent and persevering in their dissident beliefs over recent years, saying that they even started holding public discussions in an attempt to persuade indecisive Catholics into converting.⁶ Etikhove's priest alluded to similar circumstances and also hinted at the dangers that Protestant individuals in authoritative positions posed, as they could abuse their function to sway hesitant Catholics into their favour.⁷

This gradual 'hierarchisation' of the Protestant identity can also clearly be recognised in the confessional advancement of the earlier mentioned rituals concerning the yearly journey to Sas van Gent. While these previously transpired mostly under the radar, entire families were now joining up to participate in these collective 'pilgrimages'.⁸ Furthermore, many Protestants were increasingly reluctant to participate in public life if it meant cooperating in Catholic rituals or practices, which was very noticeable in the growing number of violations of the Easter obligations. Whereas there were no obvious transgressions mentioned in Zegelsem before 1670 for example, it was now noted that multiple families started neglecting the Easter Communion.⁹ The emergence of a hierarchical identity also meant for Protestant connections to spread over the borders of singular villages, with people like Petrus de Pottere starting to organise *conventicula* not just in their native village, but expanding their liturgical services to neighbouring hamlets.¹⁰

This expansion is reflected in the provision of new liturgical facilities, notably as alternatives for their Catholic counterparts. In the late 1670's, the Protestants of Mater had established a system of poor relief that was meant for all underprivileged Protestants of the surrounding villages, regardless of what village they originally hailed from. This foundation, headed by Zacharius Pede and largely funded with Dutch money, marked the beginning of the institutionalization of the Protestant communities in the South.¹¹ Even more important though, were the occasional visits of Reformed ministers in the region. While it is likely that Dutch preachers did sporadically journey to some of the villages before,¹² a certain systematic array of minister visits only surfaced in the years leading up to 1685. As such, an official investigation

⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Orebeke Mariae anno 1671*.

⁷ RAG, *OGA Etikhove*, nr. 193.

⁸ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 1003-1004.

⁹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Segelsem anno 1672*.

¹⁰ Petrus De Pottere hailed from Mater, where he was a driving force behind the local Protestantism, but he also provided services in Sint-Denijs-Boekel and frequently visited Sas van Gent to acquire Reformed reading material. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Boucle Dionisii anno 1661*; *visitatio Maternae anno 1664*.

¹¹ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Maternae anno 1680*.

¹² The dean made a remark in such a fashion when visiting Sint-denijs-Boekel in 1661. RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 15, *visitatio Boucle Dionisii anno 1661*.

from 1688 indicates that the number of visiting ministers in the villages of Mater and Sint-Maria-Horebeke knew an exponential growth over recent years. Furthermore, their numbers even started to expand, not only into neighbouring hamlets, like Etikhove and Melden, but also into more remote localities, like Nieuwkerke (a village in the south-west of Flanders, near the border with France).¹³ Around 1683, this Protestant institutionalization took a step further by assigning a resident minister, called Jacques de Raet, to the hamlet of Mater, thus opening the floodgates towards an unconditional religious autonomy for the Protestants. This measure proved to be successful too. Around three years after his appointment, de Haet had already persuaded seventeen families into joining the Reformed faith.¹⁴ In short, the establishment of these two institutions was unquestionably an essential step forward towards the complete emancipation of the Protestant minority in the region.

The expanding hierarchisation of the Protestant identity also coincided with the growth of the Protestant population in absolute terms and with the increased concentration of Protestants in Mater, Sint-Maria-Horebeke, and Etikhove. However, the direction of the causal connection between these two evolutions is unclear. Did the centralization of dissidents evoke the creation of a new identity, or did the surge of a hierarchical identity enhance the desire among Protestants to move towards communities consisting of a higher degree of religiously likeminded individuals? Due to a significant lack of in-depth sources, this remains hazy. Only a more intensive study of the matter – one that unfortunately exceeds the limits of this paper – can provide the definitive answer to these questions.

Nevertheless, all factors mentioned implied a compelling identity change among the majority of the Protestant communities over a period of time, resulting in a more public and emancipated form of Protestantism. However, this did not form the end of the Reformed identity evolution in the region. In fact, it would eventually lead into the **confessionalisation** of the Protestant identity, characterised by the steady unification of attitudes and ideas, as of the mid-1680s. However, the dawn of this kind of confessional identities among minorities remains an interesting puzzle for historians to solve. Ever since the introduction of the confessionalisation thesis in the 1980's, historians have mainly focused on the top-down implementation of new Church regulations and the ecclesiastical strife for homogeneity among their followers, thus creating a standard confessional identity for the *menu peuple* to incorporate.¹⁵ However, when faced with observations that the majority of the peasantry did not automatically and systematically assimilate the provided identity,¹⁶ historians opened up to the concept of bottom-up agency and started to perceive the creation of a confessional identity as the result of a

¹³ RAG, Raad van Vlaanderen, nr. 31087, letter of the bailiff of Schorisse to the Council of Flanders on 5th June 1688 concerning the 'Huguenots' in the barony of Schorisse

¹⁴ RAG, Raad van Vlaanderen, nr. 31087, letter of the bailiff of Schorisse to the Council of Flanders on 23th May 1686 concerning the 'Huguenots' in the barony of Schorisse.

¹⁵ Reinhard, "Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung?"; 257-77; Schilling, "Konfessionalisierung im Reich," 38-45.

¹⁶ For these studies concerning Flanders, see: Cloet, "Het gelovige volk in de 17^{de} eeuw," 393-417.

continual give and take between the Church, the elite, and the peasantry.¹⁷ Most of the time, this model of gradual syncretism is a fairly successful in interpreting the emergence of confessional identities (see part one), but in some very specific cases, like when dealing with religious minorities, it falls short. That is because religious minorities often do not have higher institutions to initiate dialogue with; the lack of top-down guidance and statist pressure immediately rules out an identity based on ‘negotiations’. So this raises the question: How did the rural Reformed communities construct a full-blown confessional identity as of 1685?

¹⁷ Chapter two gives a more in-depth explanation of this historiographical evolution, and provides a list of historians who were key in developing this model.

Chapter 4

Through Fire and Flames: Violence and Self-Confessionalisation, 1685-1725

A CATHOLIC BACKLASH

The fact that the Protestants had increasingly developed a hierarchical religious identity did not go by unnoticed among the Catholic villagers, nor did they remain unbiased to this entire evolution. Let us not forget that the increased audacity with which the Protestants were now experiencing their religion, not only endangered the dominance of Catholicism in public life, but also threatened to be a major disturbance to upset the balance of local community. The Catholic irritation that spawned from these developments is well captured in a letter that the priests from Etikhove, Sint-Maria-Horebeke, and Mater (the three Protestant cores; see p. 54) sent to the royal administration to acquaint the higher-ups with the problems that the Protestants had been causing the last few years. Here, the infection theme is central to the discourse. Many Protestants, who were called anything from “archlistich” to “bedriegelyck”, thrived in the middle of the Catholic community, expanding their influence and infiltrating the homes of many. They were described as some kind of vermin, which continued to grow everyday and to spread its poison in the form of “schandaleuse woorden, werken, gestien ende actien, bespottinghe ende beschimpinghen”. What is even worse, unlike a few decades ago, they did not hide anymore, but publicly professed their dissidence by means of “lesen ende aenprysen vande Bybels ende andere schandaleuse ende kettersche boeckxkens”. This preaching took place during the day, at the end of the street, in the presence of many followers, not afraid to overstep the boundaries of public order to bring their message across (“vermetelyck sonder eenige vreesse onthaudende”). This endangered everything that the priests held dear. Not only did it imply a “groot ende beclaeghelyck zielenverlies”, but more importantly, it caused a massive “rupture van het geloof ende liefde door den gedurighen stryt tusschen malcanderen”. This theme of cracks in the local community filled a central role in the Catholic irritation towards the Protestants, as “den man wyckt vande vrouw, de vrouw vanden man, de kinders vande ouders, de susters ende broeders van malcanderen”. The letter also implies that, through their provocations, the Protestants were picking a fight with the entire Catholic community: why else would they deliberately leave their heretical writings in the parish church, if not to mock or taunt the Catholic body? In conclusion, the new attitude permeated by the local Protestants was not well loved among the Catholic

populace, and the only solution that would put these developments to a halt was a “krachtighe hant”.¹

Indeed, the Catholic majority felt threatened and reacted in a way that would purify their communities of the flourishing infection that the spread of Protestantism posed: through prosecution and violence. The year of 1685 thus heralded a shift in Catholic attitude, not just among the authorities, but also in the local village communities, towards heightened distrust with the heretic communities, which initially led into intensive legal repression, and would eventually introduce a long string of confessional conflicts on the turn of the seventeenth century, during which the Protestant minority took the brunt of the assaults. The year 1685 might seem like a random or convenient temporal demarcation to set off this attitude change, but that is not the case. That year, and more specifically Christmas Day, held an important local event that can be perceived as some kind of trigger to set off the storm of the confessional clash, as it is often referred to as an eye-opener in later documents.² Here is what happened: While the devout Catholics of Mater were having their yearly Christmas service at nightfall, the Protestants of Mater had organised a simultaneous congregation on their own in the house of Adriaen Gosseye, luring more than twenty people into the dissident ceremony, which was headed by the village’s own minister Jacques de Raet.³ While this was pretty grave breach of commonly accepted behaviour on its own, the Reformed followers even had had the audacity of keeping the liturgical ritual open for everyone to see; they had exhibited their poisonous preaching and flawed interpretation of the Bible “a porte ouverte”!⁴ This pressing matter caused a communal uproar, with Catholic witnesses calling it a scandal and a disgrace to the entire village,⁵ and subsequently sparked an intensification of the legal prosecution of the Protestants in the following years.

Initially, it was the local authorities that drove the investigations into the wrongdoings of the rural Protestants, as the bailiff of the barony of Schorisse⁶ was the first to conduct interviews with the main suspects of the incident. Soon afterwards, the inquiry blew wide open, as a large number of possible Protestants – also the minister himself – were questioned, accused and subpoenaed into court.⁷ After a couple of months, the investigation was handed over to the Council of Flanders, which revitalized the entire case by holding new interviews and relaunching

¹ ARA, *Geheime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, *letter of appeal of pastors Arnoldus Pieraerts, Jacobus Verstrepen, and Rumoldus Jolyt to the king on 10th June 1686*; Huys, “Hereticque schandael,” 274-76.

² RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *correspondence between the bishop of Ghent and the archiepiscopal vicar of Mechelen in 1713 concerning the treatment of Protestants in Oudenaarde and surroundings*.

³ ARA, *Geheime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, *preparatory investigation into the incident concerning Protestants on Christmas 1685 in Mater, held by the baillif of the barony of Schorisse on 12th February 1686*.

⁴ RAG, *Raad van Vlaanderen*, nr. 31087, *letter of the baillif of Schorisse to the Council of Flanders on 5th June 1688 concerning the ‘Huguenots’ in the barony of Schorisse*.

⁵ ARA, *Geheime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, *preparatory investigation into the incident concerning Protestants on Christmas 1685 in Mater, held by a representative of the Council of Flanders on 19th May 1686*.

⁶ The barony of Schorisse was a small rural *seigneurie* within the *Land van Aalst* to which both Mater and Sint-Maria-Horebeke belonged. Since the barony had legal independence to an extent, it is fairly logical that the legal inquisition started at this level. See: Guy De Liedekerke, “La seigneurie d’Escornaix (Schorisse) du XIIe au XVIe siècle,” *Handelingen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Oudenaarde* 5 (1956): 98-125.

⁷ ARA, *Geheime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, *preparatory investigation into the incident concerning Protestants on Christmas 1685 in Mater, held by the baillif of the barony of Schorisse on 12th February 1686*.

an inquiry into the Protestant misconduct in the region.⁸ Eventually, the case even got some attention at the highest level, at the Privy Council of the Southern Netherlands, since the Catholic priests of the region wrote an appeal to the king for help against the spread of the Protestantism in the region.⁹ However, the exact long-term effects of this appeal are not entirely clear, but it certainly did not alleviate the harsh persecution of the following years. As such, a letter from 1688 implies that the Council of Flanders had even received multiple complaints that had pointed to groundless accusations, redundantly violent ways of treatment, and a general sense of inequality, solely based on religious discrimination.¹⁰ Apart from these forms of political prosecution, a grimmer attitude was also noticeable in the legal efforts to curb the relative religious liberty of the rural population. For example, the archiepiscopal authorities established a major crackdown on alternative ways of marrying by now forcing Protestants to marry in their own parish in front of the native priest. The dean of Ronse was commissioned the task of enforcing these new regulations and could even threaten insubordinate Protestants with imprisonment and other grave sentences.¹¹

Luckily for the rural Protestant communities, they did not stand alone in their agony. In fact, the foreign authorities of Sas van Gent were extremely vibrant in their efforts to contain the overly discriminating measures utilised by the legal apparatus of their southern neighbours. First of all, they claimed that multiple Protestants living in Mater were in fact citizens of Sas van Gent, and thus from the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. Under the Treaty of Münster, the southern jurisdiction thus held no legislative authority over them, which is why the magistrate of Sas van Gent cautioned the Council to immediately cease the constant harassment.¹² However, since the Flemish officials soon repudiated this argument by saying that most so-called *buitenpoorters* “n’ont jamais estez absent huit jours de leurs residences, estant consecutivement subjects comme leurs autres voisins”,¹³ the Dutch magistrate had to come up with other methods of providing protection. Most notably, the magistrate started to make good use of extortion and threats, for which they had the perfect precedent to work with. As the city of Sas van Gent had spent the majority of the first half of the seventeenth century in Spanish hands, the municipality knew a large number of Catholics among its urban population, and was actually still part of the diocese of Ghent.¹⁴ Despite the relative tolerance that had existed towards the

⁸ ARA, *Geheime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, preparatory investigation into the incident concerning Protestants on Christmas 1685 in Mater, held by a representative of the Council of Flanders on 19th May 1686; “Declaratie vande personen op kerstavond lestleden schandael gegeven hebbende” on 29th May 1686.

⁹ ARA, *Geheime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, letter of appeal of pastors Arnoldus Pieraerts, Jacobus Verstrepen, and Rumoldus Jolyt to the king on 10th June 1686; Huys, “Hereticque schandael,” 274-76.

¹⁰ RAG, *Raad van Vlaanderen*, nr. 31087, letter of the bailiff of Schorisse to the Council of Flanders on 5th June 1688 concerning the ‘Huguenots’ in the barony of Schorisse.

¹¹ AAM, *Fonds Mechliniensia*, nr. 32, f. 381.

¹² ARA, *Geheime Raad onder het Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, letter of city magistrate of Sas van Gent on 30th March 1686, rising up in defense of ‘their citizens’ being harassed by the local authorities in Mater and surroundings.

¹³ RAG, *Raad van Vlaanderen*, nr. 31087, letter of the bailiff of Schorisse to the Council of Flanders on 5th June 1688 concerning the ‘Huguenots’ in the barony of Schorisse

¹⁴ For a fairly complete religious history of the Dutch Republic in the second half of the seventeenth century, see: Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 637-76.

Catholics up to that point, the city magistrate established a status quo that can best be expressed as a form of *quid pro quo*: If the authorities continued to harass the Protestant minorities of the South, the Catholic minority of Sas van Gent would have to endure the same fate.¹⁵ In a sense, both minorities were thus dependent on each other, a link that became abundantly clear in 1713 when the Catholics of Sas van Gent wrote an appeal to their bishop, asking him to stop the bad treatment of Protestants in the South, since the Catholics of the North would suffer equally.¹⁶

This type of northern political pressure did eventually manage to make the legal persecution of Protestants in the South slowly and temporarily fizzle out. Wayne Te Brake conceives this factor of foreign influence to be incredibly important for the durability of religious coexistence in Sint-Maria-Horebeke. According to him, these types of political negotiations were the main determinant in establishing the long- and short-term local relations between the Catholics and Protestants in the rural communities around Oudenaarde. Te Brake inherently approaches religious coexistence as a dynamic and profoundly contentious political process, which involved constant renegotiating between native Catholic rules, foreign Protestant rulers, and their dissident and faithful subjects. In other words, any significant changes in the relations between Catholics and Protestants were mainly politically determined, rather than religiously.¹⁷ However, I beg to differ concerning this point. Of course, this type of political top-down mediation had an important impact, but it does not explain why religious violence intensified among the lower levels of society after the central and local authorities had started lessening their strict prosecution in the late 1680s. Indeed, more than ten known cases of religiously inspired violence towards the Protestant minority were registered for the period of 1690-1713. All of them were instigated by hotheads of the Catholic *menu peuple*, and some of them were even characterised by a fatal outcome.¹⁸ While the upper authorities were keen on restoring order and reinitiating an attitude of indifference, the local Catholic community chose to persevere in their rejection of religious coexistence, meaning that Te Brake's model of political negotiations cannot be the only factor in explaining local changes of attitude.

Instead, let us focus on religious violence as a cultural expression, built from the ground up, and what it meant for the protagonists that were involved.¹⁹ This way, one can see that the religious violence directed at the Protestants of Mater and the like was not really the result of socio-political negotiations gone wrong, but rather an inherently meaningful process. As such, most incidents were not cases of chaotic crowd violence, but neatly organised events. When Adriaen van den Abeelen and Pieter van den Banck were assaulted on their way to Sint-Maria-

¹⁵ ARA, *Gebeime Raad onder bet Spaans bewind*, nr. 890, letter of city magistrate of Sas van Gent on 20th April 1686, rising up in defense of 'their citizens' being harassed by the local authorities in Mater and surroundings; RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 135, letter of C.V. Citters, commander of Sas van Gent, to the priest of Sint-Maria-Horebeke on 18th March 1717, concerning the deportation of Protestant minister Pieter Brandt; Hulsbergen, "De positie," 54-58.

¹⁶ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, letter of appeal of the Catholics of Sas van Gent to bishop Philippus Erardus vander Noot on 4th July 1713, asking for better treatment of the Protestants of the South.

¹⁷ Wayne Te Brake, "Emblems of Coexistence," 68.

¹⁸ Records of these violent incidents have been preserved in the following case file: RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2. They have also shortly been summarized in: Huys, "Hereticque schandael," 272-73.

¹⁹ Much like the methodology applied by Davis in her influential article: Davis, "The Rites of Violence," 51-55.

Horebeke, it was because a collection of youths had anticipated their movements, and had patiently lain in wait for them to go by.²⁰ Minister Schafter was ambushed in an equally well-organised fashion, since his assailants had carefully foreseen the exact moment when he would be alone.²¹ This level of management and organisation demonstrates that these cases of increased aggression were not just moments of frustration gone awry, and heralds the existence of a goal behind the violence. It has already been mentioned how the theme of infection and pollution was essential in the Catholic discourse: Here, the Catholic peasants once again used it as a justification for their violence. Indeed, a “krachtighe hant” was perceived to be the only way to rid the faithful communities of its stains, either by removing them permanently, as was the case with the murder of Pieter van Kouwenberghe in 1700,²² or by holding a blade to a heretic’s throat and forcing him to convert, like what happened to Gysel van Elleputte in 1712.²³ Either way, the vile elements in society – since the peasants of Mater were known to frequently pelt Protestant individuals with manure or excrements, this description might be quite representative of their actual mindset²⁴ – were removed using violent measures. This need for purification was enforced by the softening persecution by the responsible authorities, as the Catholic villagers legitimised their actions of mob justice as necessary to make up for the inadequacy of top-down repression. This self-legitimation might also have been aided by the presence and support of authoritative figures. The priest of Sint-Maria-Horebeke for example had a key role in organising raids and was quite vocal in the need to provoke the Protestants,²⁵ while the mayor of Melden also had his fair share in threatening dissidents.²⁶ In short, a new mindset among the Catholic *menu peuple*, hell-bent on communal purification from below, stimulated a definite accumulation of confessional conflicts far into the eighteenth century, despite it being the dawn of the increasingly ‘tolerant’ age of Enlightenment.²⁷ While this might seem awfully conflicting with this macrohistorical tendency, the recent work of Benjamin Kaplan has demonstrated that, while seemingly minor incidents were capable of triggering major religious clashes, conflicts and toleration were not mutually exclusive. According to Kaplan’s observations, there were many levels and types of (in)tolerance, and conflicts could only arise if confessional communities were

²⁰ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1698, as attested by Protestant witnesses.*

²¹ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1712, as attested by Protestant witnesses.*

²² RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1700, as attested by Protestant witnesses.*

²³ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1712, as attested by Protestant witnesses.*

²⁴ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1692-1713, as attested by Protestant witnesses (article 10).*

²⁵ During one raid, the priest had cried out several ferocious battle cries, like “val aan, val aan, slaa dood de geusen!” See: RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1698, as attested by Protestant witnesses.*

²⁶ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1712, as attested by Protestant witnesses.*

²⁷ Illustrative of this statement are the many other examples of eighteenth-century tensions in the parish of Mater, mentioned in: Van Hoolandt, *Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van Mater*, 115-22.

already living in a relatively interactive fashion (as was the case for the biconfessional communities in the Ronse deanery).²⁸

THE PROTESTANT FAITH ABOVE ALL ELSE: ORGANISATION AND VICTIMISATION

How did the Protestants fit into all this? It is unreasonable to think of them just as passive recipients of brutalities without ever experiencing any changes in the practice of their religion. So how did their confessional attitude adjust to the constant experience of danger in an increasingly hostile environment? Well, many Protestants were pushed to flee their native villages and instead sought refuge in the Dutch Republic.²⁹ Without a doubt, the years of violent mannerisms and growth of intolerance towards even private dissidence had a tremendous influence on the substantial exodus of Protestants out of the region, mostly on the emigration out of villages with smaller minorities to begin with (see chapter one). However, the followers of the Reformed faith that chose to remain started experiencing a much stronger Protestant identity towards the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, whilst completely seceding from Catholic community and thoroughly enduring in their otherness by increasingly appropriating the name of “*Vlaamse Olijfberg*” or “Flemish Mount of Olives” to themselves.³⁰ This became apparent in the revamping of their collective rituals, making them even more noticeable in the public eye. Several cores of the Protestant faith were now assigned an own minister, like Etikhove in 1692³¹ and Sint-Maria-Horebeke in 1717,³² whilst the city of Oudenaarde, where another resident preacher had set up shop, also gained further spiritual importance for the dissident inhabitants of other villages. For example, every Sunday the Protestants of Mater gathered just outside their village and jointly journeyed to Oudenaarde to attend the liturgical services in the new Reformed church that had been established there.³³ Apparently, the location of this church was not very hidden, but very much part of public knowledge, as it is attested that Catholic troublemakers often shattered the windows of the building with rocks.³⁴ The regular interruptions of Protestant services by rascals loudly banging the doors of the church indicates that the time schedule of their ceremonies was barely secretive.

²⁸ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Cunegonde's Kidnapping: A Story of Religious Conflict in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015), 244-48.

²⁹ De Brouwer, *Bijdrage [...] tussen 1621-1796*, 997-98.

³⁰ This name was first granted by Lodewijk van Nassau in the course of the seventeenth century, and referred to the state of repression and minority that the Protestants of the South had to endure. See: De Jonge, *De Geuzenboek*, 10-12.

³¹ Robert Collinet, *Histoire du Protestantisme en Belgique aux XVII^{me} et XVIII^{me} Siècles* (Brussels: Editions de la Librairie des éclairés Unionistes, 1959), 27.

³² AAM, *Fonds Mechliniensia*, nr. 44, f. 22v-38r.

³³ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 80, *letter of Arnoldus Pieraerts, priest of Mater, to the archbishop concerning the Protestants in his parish, 1711*.

³⁴ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1692-1713, as attested by Protestant witnesses (article 10)*.

Apart from new ministers, the region also welcomed other Reformed personnel into their midst. A letter from pastor Arnoldus Pieraerts of Mater in 1711 clarifies that the Protestants of his parish had recently appointed an official almoner to their community and that the dissidents had become increasingly audacious in their religious practice because of it.³⁵ This boldness expressed itself in an advancing disrespect regarding Catholic traditions and public rituals, which was also noticeable in other parishes. Several heretics of Melden and Nukerke refused to kneel in front of the Eucharist, and stirred up the local peacefulness by publicly exclaiming that there are only two ‘true’ sacraments.³⁶ The increased Reformed institutionalization of the region also meant that the religious nonconformists did not have to venture as far as Sas van Gent to perform their most crucial devout practices. Instead, many Protestants now chose to marry in front of the Reformed minister in Oudenaarde.³⁷ Finally, there was one definitive institution of public life, shared by both Catholics and Protestants, that had not been broken thus far: baptism. Generally speaking, most Protestant children were baptised by the local priest, mainly because it might have been too dangerous for a newborn to travel as far as Sas van Gent to be christened in front of a Reformed minister. The lateral identity that dominated the Protestant mindset of 1650-1670 allowed for an acceptable substitute: better to be christened by a Catholic priest, than not be christened at all. However, the growing number of ministers in the region meant it was a losing battle. Mater’s priest complained in 1711 that all Protestants of his parish were now ignoring the old custom of Catholic baptism, and instead chose to let their children be christened in Oudenaarde or at their private home.³⁸ By the middle of the eighteenth century, the baptism of dissident children had ultimately become a Protestant monopoly, with baptismal records being kept for everyone in the *Vlaamse Olijfberg*.³⁹

In short, the dawn of the eighteenth century immensely expanded the daily accessibility for dissidents to a Reformed public platform, whether it was in their native village or in the neighbouring town of Oudenaarde. The religious nonconformists of the region were consequently no longer organised in a multitude of distinct communities within a biconfessional society, but had become a consolidated institution in its own right, i.e. the *Vlaamse Olijfberg*, which subsequently started acting as a completely emancipated ecclesiastical organisation that represented its followers in a religiously hostile environment. The Flemish Mount of Olives was now a body, the Reformed followers were its ‘leedemater’, a corporeal analogy that was thoroughly employed in their administrative records that had been set up in the early 1720s.⁴⁰ In other words, the rural Reformed communities had undergone a process of confessionalisation

³⁵ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 80, letter of Arnoldus Pieraerts, priest of Mater, to the archbishop concerning the Protestants in his parish, 1711.

³⁶ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 249, *visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1711; visitatio Nunc Ecclesiae anno 1717; visitatio Melden anno 1717*.

³⁷ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 249, *visitatio Melden anno 1717*.

³⁸ RAG, *Aartsbisdom Mechelen*, nr. 80, letter of Arnoldus Pieraerts, priest of Mater, to the archbishop concerning the Protestants in his parish, 1711.

³⁹ RAG, *OGA Schorisse*, nr. 24, *extracts from the parish registry of the Flemish Mount of Olives, 1750-1776*.

⁴⁰ RAG, *OKA Protestantse Gemeenschap “Vlaamse Olijfberg”*, nr. 1, 1-3.

and were now united under one banner. This might seem problematic to comprehend; as I have mentioned earlier, most historians see top-down pressure and mediation as key to initiate the confessionalisation of a community. While the transformation of the geopolitical status quo in the beginning of the eighteenth century did warrant a boost to Dutch influence in the now Austrian Netherlands, the support that the Republic was able to provide was mostly indirect and superficial, and it did not stimulate the Protestants on a daily or constant level.⁴¹ So the question remains: How did this religious minority manage to undergo a confessionalisation without a top-down incentive? As it turns out, several historians who focused their analysis onto microhistorical evolutions have concluded that specific communities could actually undergo a process of **self-confessionalisation**, instigated at the roots of society. Heinrich Richard Schmidt was one of the first to introduce this possibility of a solely bottom-up confessionalisation with his study of the *Chorgerichte* of Bern, in which he deduced that these institutions were tools created by the locals, and not instruments of statist control and regulation.⁴² After this influential study, there have been many propositions concerning the instigation of self-confessionalisation, ranging from inherent communal piety to the establishment of internal institutions.⁴³ For the Protestants of Mater it was neither of those. Instead, it was instigated very much like Burkhard Dietz and Stefan Ehrenpreis suggested for the multiconfessional duchy of Berg: through the fires of local conflict between multiple confessional communities, as a “konkurrierende Konfessionalisierung von unten”.⁴⁴

Indeed, the confessional competition and the violence that emanated from it, had transformed the previously dominant worldview that regarded the slight integration of Protestantism in a Catholic public sphere possible, into a cosmology in which both were insatiably separate. Through the construction of an ideological image in which the Catholic locals were ruthless and dangerous, the Reformed community had gained full self-awareness and had internally confessionalised itself. Consequently, the constant struggles had blown all bridges to a lateral Protestant identity, and had moreover stimulated the Reformed minority to stand on its own, united and fully emancipated. Furthermore, these memories of violence and unjust treatment continued to play an important role in the ensuing confessional identity of the Reformed community. In a letter from 1713 for example, the Protestant writers created a central narrative that permeated a feeling of frustration towards the unpunished Catholics crimes against

⁴¹ For a time during the War of the Spanish Succession, the Southern Netherlands were collectively ruled by a Anglo-Dutch alliance, and afterwards, the Republic of the Seven United Provinces had gained several military outposts in the South through the Barrier Treaties. See: Young, *International Politics and Warfare*, 303-413.

⁴² Heinrich Richard Schmidt, *Dorf und Religion: Reformierte Sittenzucht in Berner Landgemeinden der Frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1995).

⁴³ For influential studies of bottom-up confessionalisation stemming from communal piety, see: Marc Forster, *Catholic Revival in the Age of the Baroque: Religious Identity in Southwest Germany, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a study on confessionalisation through institutions, e.g. local synods, see: Wiebe Bergsma, *Tussen Gideonsbende en Publieke Kerk. Een Studie over het Gereformeerd Protestantisme in Friesland, 1580-1650* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1999).

⁴⁴ Stefan Ehrenpreis, “Konfessionalisierung von unten. Konzeption und Thematik eines bergischen Modells?,” in *Drei Konfessionen in einer Region. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Konfessionalisierung im Herzogtum Berg vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Burkhard Dietz and Stefan Ehrenpreis (Cologne: Rheinland-Verlag, 1999), 8-9.

their brothers and sisters. Of course, all cases of “overlast, menighvuldige ongelijken, en vexation” were still engraved in their memories, but those crimes that had gone unpunished for more than a decade – like the brutal murder of Arent Cuterijck in 1692 – were dominant in the construction of the writers’ discourse.⁴⁵ The self-perception of the Protestants was not solely defined by suffering from the past though, as contemporary incidents could serve just as well in stating the own identity. In 1722, such an opportunity arose in the form of a controversial assignment of guardianship. The immediate reason for this case was the sudden tragic death of a Reformed married couple from Sint-Maria-Horebeke that left their six children without parents and without a home. Their uncle, also a Protestant, had come forward to claim custody of the children, but the local magistrate had assigned some unrelated Catholics as their legal guardians, who immediately had these children rebaptised by a Catholic priest. Of course, this sparked a massive uproar among the local Protestants. The Reformed testimonies in the subsequent trial that disputed the magistrate’s decision have frustration written all over them. For the Protestant attestants, this incident was perceived as yet another example of injustice, which had almost become an integral part of being Protestant in the region.⁴⁶

Indeed, for the Protestant minority, victimisation was a central pillar in the definition of their confessional identity. In the few letters written by members of the Reformed minority the authors casually refer to themselves as “*belijders* der ware gereformeerde Religie”,⁴⁷ a caption of which the first word could mean both “follower” and “sufferer”. In the salutation of another letter, the analogy is even clearer: A representative of Sas van Gent addressed the members of the *Vlaamse Olijfberg* as victims of “groote violente questie tot doot slagene toe”.⁴⁸ The rural Reformed communities of Mater and Sint-Maria-Horebeke had developed a self-perception of victims and casualties, suffering and violence had become essential identifiers to their confessional being. In other words, they had appropriated a violence-driven identity. In this type of identity, the long-lasting experiences of hardship made the concept of ‘suffering’ have deep roots in the collective memory of the Reformed minority, by which the Protestants could therefore distinguish themselves from the oppressive majority.⁴⁹

In summary, the local micro-event of violence provided the trigger necessary for the Protestant minority to fully emancipate its religious understanding from the social environment they lived in. The Protestant communities had undergone a process of confessionalisation, not instigated from the top, but rather determined by the agency of people at the bottom of society.

⁴⁵ RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2, *description of the nuisances and acts of violence that the Protestants of the countryside surrounding Oudenaarde had to endure in 1692-1713, as attested by Protestant witnesses.*

⁴⁶ RAG, *OGA Sint-Maria-Horebeke*, nr. 284.

⁴⁷ For example, in most of the letters in: RAG, *Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent. Serie B*, nr. 3605/2.

⁴⁸ RAG, *OKA Protestantse Gemeenschap “Vlaamse Olijfberg”*, nr. 1, 4.

⁴⁹ Originally, this concept has been conceived in philosophical literature, most notably in the works of Robert Fisher. See: Robert N. Fisher et al., ed., *Suffering, Death, and Identity* (New York: Rodopi, 2002). Unfortunately, there is very little coverage of this topic in historiography. The few historical research papers that do venture into this domain of identity studies usually entail an exploration of the Jewish identity. See: Esther Benbassa, *Suffering as Identity: The Jewish Paradigm* (London: Verso, 2010).

Conclusion

In the course of the year 1655, the Ronse magistrate got wind of an extraordinary rumour that had been circulating in the town, a rumour that speculated the existence of a centenarian woman in the city. Inspired by this rare revelation, the magistrate ordered a full investigation into the identity of the woman, and after a few days the truth turned up in the form of an old lady that went by the name of Pierijntje Huysmans. Indeed, Pierijntje was born in Ronse around 1551, making her approximately 104 years old, the majority of which she had spend living in the nearby village of Nukerke. The city magistrate realised this to be a unique opportunity to get an exceptional point of view on the history of the city, so they decided to interview her and record her retelling of more than a hundred years of local history. In this report, Pierijntje travelled back to her first memories, describing the events of the big city fire of 1559, before moving on to her depiction of the troubling years of war violence that had characterised the region in the second half of the sixteenth century. Finally, she concluded her portrayal with a description of her professional life, which she equally perceived as an important feature to the region: the production of textile products, notably the spinning of wool.¹

What this testimony heralded, is a one-of-a-kind account disseminating the memories of an average Jane Doe, straight from the source of the observer and unhampered by secondary narrators. In its core, this testimony is representative of the voices of the *menu peuple*. For me, one thing in particular stands out: the remarkable lack of religious references in the account. It is not like there was nothing religious to talk about, as the history of Ronse is filled with vast array of religious shocks (the *Beeldenstorm*, the conviction and expulsion of many Protestants, etc.) and confessional changes that could have been included. However, Pierijntje unconsciously chose not to. After reading through this Master's thesis, one can start to understand why: Pierijntje's religious identity did not fully correlate with the Tridentine identification of the past, but was instead a complex mix of popular and confessional influences.

As my two main case studies have attempted to demonstrate, religious identities of the *menu peuple*, both in Catholic and Protestant communities, were indeed a bit more complicated than simply the degree to which rural communities consummated the top-down imposition of a confessional identity. Instead, the peasant experience of religiosity was a distinct construction, created at the bottom of society, with its development being dependent on a wide variety of factors. Notably, villagers were tangled in a local web of sociable interactions that brought about social and cultural micro-events like violence or neighbour disputes, in turn triggering a continual

¹ SAR, *OGA Ronse*, nr. 656, f. 126.2 – f. 126.4. A facsimile of this testimony is published in: Guido Gadeyne, *Imagines Historiae Rothnaci: beelden uit de geschiedenis van Ronse* (Ronse: Stedelijke Museumcommissie, 1972), 21-22.

appropriation of new religious ideas and influences into the meaning of the people's identity. In other words, the construction of a religious identity definitely required a strong sense of agency from below, and contrary to what most historians imply, I would even like to postulate that micro-events on the lowest levels of society were the most significant determinants in establishing what general direction the local religious identities were evolving towards. The way that the Catholic identity in Amougies-Russeignies and the Protestant identity in Mater and Sint-Maria-Horebeke changed over time due to the emergence of different local triggers are striking illustrations of this statement.

As a result, religious identities during the age of confessionalism cannot simply be approached as static mental structures, but have to be addressed as dynamic and process-oriented systems of religious significance, making a *longue durée* analysis of identity metaphysically impossible. That makes the microhistorical methodology ideally suited to perform such a short-range type of analysis, as microhistory provides a small-scale window for historians to elaborate on a wider history. Hopefully, the interpretations in this dissertation have properly shown the value of microhistorical treatises in providing key information on identity evolution, and have sparked the interest of historians to delve into this research path in the near future.

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Summary in English

The age of confessionalism sparked many compelling societal features into life, one of which was the transformation of the people's religious identity. Through an in-depth analysis of two case studies from the Ronse deanery, this dissertation tells in vivid detail the story of how rural communities handled their religious identities in such an ever-changing confessional world. By microhistorically exploring the identity features that emanated from small-scale conflicts, this thesis provides new insights into the local appropriation mechanisms that determined the evolution of religious identities in the period of 1650-1725, and subsequently challenges the dominant top-down way of approaching identities.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Het confessionele tijdperk bracht veel fascinerende maatschappelijke veranderingen tot uiting, maar één van de meest invloedrijke was de confessionaliserende transformatie van de religieuze identiteit van het volk. Met behulp van twee intensief bestudeerde case study's uit het dekenaat van Ronse poogt dit proefschrift toe te lichten hoe rurale gemeenschappen omgingen met hun religieuze identiteiten in deze voortdurend veranderende confessionele wereld. De microhistorische analyse van enkele kleinschalige conflicten leidt in deze paper tot nieuwe inzichten in de lokale toe-eigeningsmechanismen die de evolutie van religieuze identiteiten in de periode 1650-1725 ondersteunen. Op die manier tracht deze scriptie het dominante *top-down* model om identiteiten te benaderen te betwisten.