

Review

Genji Yasuhira, *Catholic Survival in the Dutch Republic. Agency in Coexistence and the Public Sphere in Utrecht, 1620-1672*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2024, 425 pp. ISBN 9789048558452.



The rich archives of Utrecht have provided us with much information on the fate of Dutch Catholics there in the early modern period, thanks to the research of such scholars as Benjamin Kaplan, Bertrand Forclaz, and Jaap Geraerts. In this new monograph, Genji Yasuhira offers his own interpretation of this well-trod ground, arguing that Utrecht's Catholics were not merely the passive objects of political and religious toleration but also active agents in carving out a place for themselves in the city's multiconfessional landscape. In the seventeenth century, despite the constraints of the city's regime of toleration, Yasuhira argues, Utrecht's Catholics used a variety of schemes and tactics to flourish not just inside their own private confessional world but also to secure themselves a place within the city's religiously pluralist public sphere.

Previous research on Catholics in the Dutch Republic, the author argues, has relied too heavily on perspectives that centered the Reformed Church, Catholicism's principal sectarian antagonist, and civic magistracies, who policed the Republic's confessional boundaries with a sometimes-heavy hand. This in turn has led to a portrait of early modern Dutch Catholics as a passive, subaltern confession largely driven into the private sphere of the household in order to worship God according to their beliefs and consciences. Yasuhira counters that in fact Catholics in Utrecht exercised considerable agency, employing various social, cultural, and political means to expand the public sphere to accommodate them. The result was a vital and vigorous confessional community that in turn shaped and influenced the multiconfessional culture and society of which it was the largest part.

Yasuhira's argument relies on the public/private distinction in early modern European society first theorised by Jürgen Habermas and elaborated upon by subsequent historians,

most notably Benjamin Kaplan. Taking previous scholars to task for emphasising too heavily the private nature of Dutch Catholic confessional life, that is, accepting magisterial prescriptions of what religious practice was and was not allowable in the communal urban landscape, Yasuhira argues that this 'top-down' approach does not tell the whole story. In Utrecht, he insists, Catholics sought to 'delimit' the public sphere by pushing its boundaries outward. They did so by exploiting their social capital and social networks, conniving with sympathetic or greedy magistrates, carving out urban religious spaces for charity and education, and presenting themselves in their discourse as legitimate citizens whose freedom of conscience compelled them to claim their share of the *corpus christianum*. To support this argument the author presents a wide range of sources, but most especially marshals legal ones, that is, criminal cases brought against Utrecht Catholics in the course of the seventeenth century.

The argument for Catholic agency in the Dutch Republic is of course not new. Charles Parker's magisterial *Faith on the Margins* (2008) made the first clear and compelling case for seeing activism and agency among Dutch Catholics, both lay and clerical, during the seventeenth century. Similarly, the research of Judith Pollmann, Geert Janssen, and Carolina Lenarduzzi, as well as my own work (which the author mischaracterises as whiggish), have all contributed to a growing understanding that early modern Dutch Catholics made choices, negotiated situations, capitalized on social relationships, and pursued cultural strategies that garnered them the space, both literal and metaphorical, to follow their confessional consciences. None of this happened easily or consistently, to be sure, and because of the decentralised polity of the Dutch Republic, the circumstances of this effort varied from place to place. Still, Catholics were ultimately able to secure a condition for themselves that went beyond mere survival. Recent research over the last twenty years has thus revealed a substantial degree of agency exercised by Dutch Catholics in the early modern period.

Yasuhira's most important contribution to the question of agency lies in his impressively deep dive into the criminal records of Utrecht to uncover what the legal prosecution of the city's Catholics reveals about their degree of agency. Through careful archival work he has found more than one hundred criminal cases against Catholics during the period 1620-1672. His analysis of these cases persuasively demonstrates that Catholics successfully mobilised extensive confessional and kinship networks of patronage among nobles, jurists, and patricians as advocates in order to defend themselves against the legal onslaughts of the Utrecht magistracy. They paid fines, they stood surety, they provided legal counsel, and they connived with authorities. These Catholic elites sometimes had close ties to their Reformed counterparts, both professionally and personally, and Yasuhira convincingly shows that they cultivated and exploited those relationships to the fullest extent possible in order to insulate their co-religionists against the city's tolerationist regime. While the legal prosecution of early modern Dutch Catholics is a known phenomenon, his is the first study to tackle these criminal cases in such depth of detail.

The author's careful examination of the legal sources thus reveals that Utrecht's Catholics could sometimes quite nimbly defend themselves against religious persecution. He brings out, quite vividly, their voices and their agency, and this is the great value of the book. Still, one might well wonder to what extent his reliance on such sources inadvertently

continues to underscore, or at least reflect, the top-down, magisterial perspective that Yasuhira says he is trying to eschew. Criminal records, however creatively and insightfully they are mined, start unavoidably from the position of the persecutors rather than the persecuted. Catholics in Utrecht made space for themselves in the city's multiconfessional environment, but theirs remained a population with second-class status, tolerated in the early modern sense of the word. Religious toleration in Utrecht was a power relationship in which magistracy predominated; it set the conditions for religious coexistence. This study reveals that Utrecht's Catholics could, sometimes quite deftly, flout or manipulate those conditions, but they could not overcome them. Regardless of all the agency confessional minorities were able to exercise there and in the rest of the Dutch Republic, they all remained subaltern captives to the same regime of toleration.

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