

SOURCES OF UNITY OR DISRUPTION? A REFLECTION ON SOME MID-SIXTEENTH CENTURY REFUGEE CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

The sixteenth century refugee churches in “Germany” show a near universal tendency towards disputation and discord. While this rather depressing picture can be placed at the door of Lutheran hostility, it is sad to record that the refugee churches themselves were not without fault in heightening the conflict between Lutheran and Reformed – making unity between the two confessions increasingly unlikely. The refugee churches were also a product of the circumstances in which they lived, the intimacy of which often gave rise to tension and argument. From these churches can be traced the seeds of congregationalism that took root in the following century. The London Strangers’ Churches present a somewhat different picture. While not free from internal dispute, the social work of their consistories played a large part in the integration of refugee communities into late sixteenth century London. This can be counted as one of the more positive aspects of the sixteenth century refugee church.

Keywords: Lutheran; disputation; congregationalism; refugee churches

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Refugee communities are often seen as tumultuous bodies and this was certainly true of most of the refugee churches established in Western Europe during the sixteenth century.¹ This might not be what one would immediately expect from churches

1 This article follows upon a previous article, “The liturgy and order of the mid-sixteenth century English church in Geneva,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 1 (1), 2015: 167-186.

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which were the product of persecution, undertaken by defenders of the traditional church against supporters of the Reformed faith, but it is a marked characteristic of most of them.

It has been said that in the Netherlands more martyrs suffered for the Christian faith than in any other country, for, as Carter Lindberg has observed: “Charles V’s determination to root out heresy might be frustrated in Germany but in his hereditary Netherlands the evangelicals had no powerful patrons to intercede for them.”²

It was thus Walloon (French-speaking) and Dutch (Low German-speaking) refugees, fleeing persecution in the Netherlands, who became the shock troops of the refugee churches subsequently established in Germany.

At the time we are considering most of Western Europe – outside of France and England – was under the control of the Emperor, who was a strong supporter of the traditional church. But the word control has to be used carefully, for a large part of the empire was constituted by Germany where traditional rights of local princes or city authorities resulted in a certain tolerance of the Reformed faith that would not otherwise have been accepted by Charles V.

France also produced its own Protestant refugees who, though far less numerous than their French-speaking Walloon counterparts, were plentiful enough to constitute the basis of the first refugee church, founded in Strasbourg as early as 1538.

The phrase refugee church undoubtedly requires definition. As defined here, a refugee church is understood as a church founded outside the country of origin of its members for their own use. Thus in Strasbourg in the mid-sixteenth century there existed a Reformed church, but there was also a Reformed refugee church in the city for French speakers, referred to above. In Geneva in the 1550s there was also a Reformed church. But here, the French Protestant refugees, who overran the city at this time, worshipped with the local population. Language was thus a key factor behind the formation of a refugee church in the sixteenth century.

Mention should also be made of the peculiar case of Emden in East Friesland, on the far outskirts of the empire. Here, geographical inaccessibility had led the local Regent to strike out a markedly independent path by establishing a local Reformed church in 1545, its membership subsequently becoming strongly influenced by refugees from the nearby Netherlands. However, the church at Emden had not been established specifically for these refugees, so it does not, on the definition used above, constitute a refugee church.

THE FRENCH CHURCH IN STRASBOURG

Given the date of its beginnings, it would be appropriate to begin our survey with a short comment on the refugee church in Strasbourg. It was the child of Martin Bucer who, no doubt taking advantage of Calvin’s arrival in the city in 1538 (following

2 Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 283.

his expulsion from Geneva), conceived the idea of creating a church for French speakers. Following the initial ministry of Calvin, four ministers served at the church before its closure in 1563. Twenty five years can be counted as a long life by the standards of a sixteenth century refugee church; and one of the ministries – that of Jean Garnier – lasted 10 years. Yet each ministry appears to have had something ephemeral or impermanent about it, with the exception of that of Calvin, which admittedly occupies only three pages of the 79 that Philippe Denis devotes to his history³ of the church.

In what resides this feeling of impermanence given to the reader? It is undoubtedly in the disputes which arose at the church, their common feature being that – with the possible exception of the ministry of Guillaume Houbraque – they were as much personal as theological and that they involved, in varying degrees, criticism of their minister by the congregation. But criticism has its own rationale and a church is influenced by the background in which it lives. In the case of Strasbourg one could say that this background was the slow but persistent erosion of the city's long established liberties as the sixteenth century progressed. The Augsburg Interim in 1548 and later the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, which gave official recognition to the Lutheran church within the Empire (but to no other Protestant confession), made for an increasingly unfavourable background for the refugee Reformed church in Strasbourg.

One can see this illustrated in the movements of Peter Martyr. Following the Augsburg Interim, Martyr left Strasbourg to take up a university post at Oxford in Edwardian England. When Edward VI died in 1553, Martyr returned to Strasbourg, but not for long. Finding that the situation under the Peace of Augsburg was no better than under the Interim, he subsequently left Strasbourg and moved to Zurich in 1556. The uncongenial atmosphere of increasing Lutheran intransigence had made continued existence in Strasbourg untenable for him. It also contributed to the closure of the French church in Strasbourg some years later in 1563. The first refugee church thus fell victim of Lutheran hostility, a fate which also met several of its successors.

THE STRANGERS' CHURCHES IN LONDON

A markedly different atmosphere surrounded the Strangers' Churches in London. Between the death of Henry VIII in 1547 and the advent of Mary Tudor in 1553, England lived under the very young and very Protestant Edward VI. It was Edward himself who issued a letter of privilege creating the Strangers' Church – the name given to the refugee churches in London – in 1550, whose ministers at the churches held their position subject to the King's approval. It was to this England and the

3 French-speaking Philippe Denis, *Les Eglises d'Etrangers en Pays Rhénans*, (Société d'Édition. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1984), 67–69.

Strangers' Church in London that came many refugees in flight from persecution in the Netherlands.

The London Strangers' Churches occupy what might be called a quasi-ionic status in sixteenth century Reformed church history for reasons that are not immediately apparent. On closer examination, however, it appears that there are three factors involved. Firstly, the churches are the first example of an officially sponsored church, yet one with an order and liturgy quite independent of the church of the authorities who were sponsoring it. This bizarre situation had not been arrived at without difficulty and, indeed, was one of considerable irritation to the Bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley – fervent Protestant as he may have been. Secondly, and linked to the first factor, the churches represented a striking example of what may be called the “Prague Spring” of Edwardian England when, at least in the years up to 1551, a remarkable diversity of opinion was tolerated. As Diarmaid MacCulloch has said: “Part of the popular excitement of the Edwardian Reformations was the variety of independent thought which they generated.”⁴ Ironically, the Strangers' Churches later became a tool to control this liberation, with the growth of ever weirder beliefs in Edwardian London which were seen to be closely associated with the immigrant community. The third factor involved is undoubtedly the personage of the man at the head of the Strangers' Churches, John à Lasco, described by Philip Benedict as the “most aristocratic of reformers” yet one who “helped draft an exceptionally democratic church order”⁵ reflected in a work⁶ which undoubtedly contributed to the status that he subsequently acquired in Reformed church circles.

John à Lasco had been born to a family of the lesser nobility in Poland in 1449. The family had been propelled upwards by John à Lasco's uncle who became a trusted secretary to King Sigismund and, ultimately, chancellor of Poland and archbishop of Gniezno. However, as they had been propelled upwards, so the family were later propelled downwards when, in 1528, they supported the wrong candidate for the vacant Hungarian throne following upon the Turkish victory at Mohacs. The bishopric in Hungary promised to à Lasco – who had been ordained at the age of 22 – slipped from his grasp; the family subsequently losing favour in Poland as well.

Following his ordination, à Lasco had undertaken a European tour in which he had met Zwingli in Zurich and stayed, for several months, in the house of Erasmus in Basel where he attended Oecolampadius's lectures on theology. As his prospects for higher ecclesiastical office dimmed in his own country, à Lasco “moved” westwards. His marriage in 1540 declared his rupture with the traditional church and in the

4 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant*, (Allen Lane, 1999), 140.

5 Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, (Yale, 2002), 72.

6 *Forma ac ratio tota Ecclesiastici Ministerii, in peregrinorum, potissimum vero Germanorum Ecclesia* (Frankfurt 1555) or, as translated into English, *Full Form and Manner of the Ecclesiastical Ministry*.

same year “he fled to East Friesland, known as a safe haven for dissidents of various stripes”.⁷

Reference was made earlier to the peculiar position of East Friesland and its capital Emden, part of the empire, yet separated from it by a barrier of marshes. In 1540 its ruler Count Enno died, leaving his widow, Anna Von Oldenburg, with three young sons. A resourceful and cultured woman, Countess Anna brushed aside opposition to her assumption of regency power on behalf of her children, planning to build them a secure and well-governed inheritance in East Friesland that might form the basis of greater things for the dynasty. In politics she sought out alliances with rulers who, like herself, wanted to keep out of religious or diplomatic entanglements. In religious policy she likewise sought to avoid alignment with either Lutherans or Catholics. She thus threw in her lot with à Lasco and named him superintendent of the territorial church in 1543. As Benedict says, “he thus gained in East Friesland the Protestant equivalent of the episcopal office he had been unable to obtain back home.”⁸

The new superintendent went about his job with vigour. He convinced his patron to order the removal of all altars and images from the territory’s churches. Shortly thereafter, he was able to put in place a Discipline managed by ministers and lay elders with powers to exclude individuals from communion for misbehaviour and false belief. He also, under the influence of Zwingli in Zurich, put in place a ministerial *Coetus*, a weekly meeting of ministers whose purpose was to discuss issues of doctrine, review and censure one another’s behaviour and examine candidates for the ministry. à Lasco also prepared a catechism for the church as well as a confession of faith and encouraged Countess Anna to introduce laws requiring attendance at church on Sunday, the punishment of blasphemy, excessive feasting and usury.

The superintendent needed to go about his new task with vigour for, even in East Friesland, the Regent was forced to accept a mitigated form of the Augsburg Interim, the result of which was à Lasco’s departure from the territory and his emigration to London.

Edward VI acceded to the throne of England in January 1547. In July 1550 the King issued a letter of privilege creating the Strangers’ Church and appointing à Lasco as its superintendent. Before this time French and Dutch speaking congregations had been worshiping separately, whereas the royal charter established a corporate framework that united both congregations into a single ecclesiastical body. However, in the event the churches, who answered directly to the King, continued to work separately in different premises in London which were provided for them by the

7 Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, 69.

8 *Ibid.*, 69–70.

English authorities. The royal charter, allowed them to follow their own practices “provided they did not contradict the English doctrine”.⁹

The existence of the Strangers’ Churches was short, for Edward VI died in 1553 and before the end of that year his successor and step-sister Mary Tudor – a staunch supporter of the traditional church – had arranged for them to be closed down.

John à Lasco is most commonly known for his publication *Forma ac ratio*, the purpose of which was to defend the rites of the Strangers’ Churches from attack as well as to give wider audience to a liturgy and Order which, in the eyes of à Lasco, was proper for a Reformed church. In fact, although à Lasco began writing *Forma ac Ratio* while in London in the 1550s, he had not completed the work at the time the churches were dissolved in 1553. The final parts of the work were only completed in Emden and, subsequently, in Frankfurt where it received publication in 1555. It is thus not possible to know to what extent the liturgy and Order of the Strangers’ Churches actually followed that of *Forma ac Ratio*, or whether it simply served as a model towards which à Lasco endeavoured to move the two churches. The Dutch had, after all, been worshipping in a private house in London during the early years of Edward’s reign, while a group of French refugees began meeting for worship in Canterbury in 1548.

All Reformed churches in the sixteenth century followed what might be called a “common model” in their liturgy and Order, but with variations in its application. In the case of Order one can see how the tensions which arose between democracy and authority were played out, not least in the different procedures that were laid down for the election of church officials. On the one hand there is the power given to the congregation, and on the other the power given to the ministers¹⁰ and elders to influence the congregation in the use of that power.

How did this work out in the case of the Strangers’ Churches? Here, the process for the election of church officials moved along the following lines. The vacant post should first be made known to the congregation. A week before the vote the congregation would be assembled for a sermon about the duties of the office to be filled and the qualifications sought in suitable candidates. Church members could then nominate persons for the vacant post during the following seven days by giving names to the preachers or elders. All ministers would then meet to select a replacement, à Lasco stating that the ministers “must consider who had received the most nominations from the congregation”.¹¹ The ministers would then examine, publicly, the “elected” candidate before presenting him to the church for their approval. At this point the congregation was given one week to register any objections which would be investigated by the ministers. Once all disagreement

9 Michael Springer, *Restoring Christ’s Church*, John à Lasco and the *Forma ac Ratio*, (Ashgate, 2007), 44, footnote.

10 See Glossary.

11 Michael Springer, *Restoring Christ’s Church*, 70.

had been resolved, where the election concerned a new preacher, he would then be ordained in front of the entire church subject; in the case of superintendents and preachers to the approval of the king (Edward VI) beforehand.

Benedict has said that à Lasco “helped develop an exceptionally democratic church order”.¹² This comment is, presumably, based on the words in italics above. But to *consider* is not the same as to *be bound by*, and à Lasco was as keen to ensure that unsuitable pastors did not emerge from a congregational election procedure as any other Protestant reformer. The democratic element in *Forma ac Ratio* should not be exaggerated. Preachers and superintendents were, after all, in the case of the Strangers’ Churches, subject to the approval of Edward VI beforehand.

The other distinctive factor of à Lasco’s Order was the institution of a Superintendent, “a type of reformed bishop who was chosen from among the preachers to oversee the clergy and congregation”.¹³ Among their tasks envisaged by à Lasco were the supervision of congregations and their leaders, to ordain and oversee the other ministers, maintain unanimous opinion and purity of doctrine, advise on matters of Discipline and defend the congregations against detractors. Superintendents were also expected to continue to preach, in addition to these other duties.¹⁴ à Lasco thought that the role of superintendent had scriptural authority – John Calvin did not. It was the latter view which carried the day in the Reformed movement, for although the superintendent came to play a part in the Reformed churches of Eastern Europe and, briefly, in the Reformed Church in Scotland, the position did not become a feature of the “mainstream” churches of the Reformed tradition.

A church is influenced by the environment in which it lives, as we mentioned in the case of Strasbourg, but for the Strangers’ Churches in London, this background was neither Lutheran hostility nor that of the traditional church but rather the variety of heterodox beliefs circulating in Edwardian London. Sixteenth century London was a major European city and had long been the home of foreign merchants and workmen. Andrew Pettegree has estimated the number of foreigners in London in 1547 at between five and six thousand, or between five and eight per cent of the city’s population.¹⁵ This figure clearly increased sharply during the reign of Edward VI, with the inflow of religious refugees, when Pettegree estimates that the number of foreigners in London reached 10 thousand or 10 per cent of London’s population. Our commentator adds that “on this reckoning the members of the French and Dutch

12 Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, 72.

13 Michael Springer, *Restoring Christ’s Church*, 62.

14 *Ibid.*, 62.

15 Andrew Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 9.

churches would have made up less than half of the total foreign population of the capital".¹⁶

It was from this other majority of non-church members that à Lasco wished to protect the Strangers' Churches. Thus one could say that each rite of the Strangers' church was seen by the author of *Forma ac Ratio* as an opportunity not so much for the congregation to confirm their faith, but rather to be instructed in it. Thus à Lasco says, regarding baptism, "we shall not allow any foreigner to offer their children for baptism in our churches if they have not sworn publicly their faith in front of us, and in addition they must agree to follow the ecclesiastical Discipline."¹⁷ He viewed baptism "as a valuable tool to strengthen religious consensus and to protect against religious radicals";¹⁸ and not without reason, the most prominent example which occurred at the churches, being that of the Dutch surgeon George van Parris who was handed over to the English authorities by the Strangers' Church for denying the Trinity and "acknowledging only God the Father as true God".¹⁹

Participation was seen as an accompanying element to instruction, no doubt making the latter more palatable. Participation was a feature of Reformed liturgy and Orders elsewhere, but à Lasco appears to have given it special emphasis. One sees this in the procedures for excommunication where the congregation was involved in the disciplinary process from an early stage. Benedict recalls that when Jehane Saloe confessed her adultery before the French church in London in 1560, many of the church broke into tears at her evident regret for her behaviour, accepting her back into the communion of the faithful.²⁰ This event may have occurred during the Strangers' Churches' second life during the reign of Elizabeth I, but one senses that it testifies to the merits of a procedure advocated by à Lasco some years before. It is for this, perhaps, that à Lasco should be remembered, as much as for the procedure for the election of ministers. However, participation undoubtedly laid the seeds of congregationalism which we see emerging at the English refugee church at Emden as well as at the refugee churches in Frankfurt.

THE ENGLISH CHURCH IN EMDEN

The closure of the Strangers' Churches in London led to the return of a large part of their congregations to the continent of Europe. The accession to the throne of England by Mary Tudor also led to the departure from England of other "Marian exiles" who were hostile to the new regime. Some of them eventually landed up in Emden – after a journey in which Lutheran hostility had pushed them from port to port – and

16 Ibid., 78.

17 Michael Springer, *Restoring Christ's Church*, 84.

18 Ibid., 84.

19 Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities*, 65.

20 Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, 466.

formed their own English Church there. It was very small by the standards of the Strangers' churches in London, probably not counting more than 100 people. There was an even smaller Reformed Church in Emden for French speakers, while the Dutch-speaking refugees appear to have functioned, at least initially, as a subsection of the state Reformed church – but can be assumed to have become subsumed by it within a relatively short period of time. For, in spite of the Augsburg Interim which had led to à Lasco's departure from the territory, Anna von Oldenburg had been able to preserve her compromise form of a Reformed Church, which was still in operation when the refugees from London reached the territory.

The organisation of the English Church was undoubtedly influenced by à Lasco's ideas which would have been known to many of the English refugees. There were two ministers at the church; one a former Bishop of Rochester and future Bishop of Chichester, the other a future Archbishop of York in Elizabethan England. The two ministers were assisted by six elders and nine deacons. There were also two school masters. The congregation met three times a week in a house especially set aside for the purpose; on Sunday for their main service and for prayers on Wednesday and Friday. It is generally thought²¹ that there was a Discipline, with congregational participation, in the tradition of à Lasco. At all events, the small size and consequent intimacy of the church undoubtedly led to expectations of high standards of personal conduct – not least on the part of the ministers and elders. From this stemmed the problem brought about by one member of the congregation, John Dowley.

The background to the issue raised by Dowley was one common to the sixteenth century; that of plague. Put bluntly, the question asked was: Should the Christian save his or her life, metaphorically and literally, before that of others? This question had already posed itself to the Reformed Church in Geneva. Should Calvin, for example, spend his time writing another version of his *Institutes* or visiting the sick? For Calvin the Genevan authorities had answered the question for him. Decreeing that his life was too precious to be put at risk by visiting plague victims, they specifically forbade him from doing so.²²

At the English Church in Emden, the specific issue raised by Dowley was the decision of the ministers and elders of the church to abandon the normal place of worship as a result of a local outbreak of plague. As Dowley stated: "I and a few others were offended that we would abandon our usual place for prayers and assemblies to God in this manner because of a visitation from God."²³ Dowley records that he met with his pastor alone to express his misgivings, subsequently suggesting to him that he (the Pastor) spoke to the congregation. It was from this moment that the temperature of the debate rose sharply. It was not, after all, considered proper

21 Andrew Pettegree, "The English Church at Emden," *Marian Protestantism*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), 20.

22 William Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, 68–69 and 90.

23 Andrew Pettegree, "The English Church at Emden," *Marian Protestantism*, 20.

for a member of the congregation to make a suggestion to the pastor, but for the pastor to make a suggestion or admonition to a member of the congregation. Dowley subsequently asked one of the ministers whether they felt obliged to visit the sick if they knew that they were plague victims, while another member of the congregation asked whether the normal mid-week services would continue to be held? The answer to the first question was equivocal, while to the second question the answer was clearly in the negative.

When Dowley and other members of the congregation decided, upon their own initiative, to visit the sick, open conflict broke out. Getting nowhere with his own church, Dowley then sought the mediation of the local Dutch and French Reformed Churches. When asked to appear before the Dutch Consistory the officials of the English Church refused, arguing, by letter, that the issue was a purely internal matter. The Dutch Consistory took a different view, entering into their minutes a judgement that essentially endorsed Dowley's position. There the matter rested, for within a few months the English Church appears to have been dissolved when most of its members left Emden and returned to England.

Whether or not there was a Discipline at the English Church at Emden, it is unlikely that it would have been able to deal with the issue raised by John Dowley. For Disciplines at this period were concerned with personal behaviour rather than with what might be described as corporate behaviour or, more bluntly, the possibility that the whole government of the church might go wrong. It is in this that one can see the seeds of congregationalism, which were reflected with a vengeance at the English Church in Frankfurt.

THE ENGLISH CHURCH IN FRANKFURT

In its initial phase, this church had eventually come to acquire an image of high respectability, both with the Frankfurt authorities as well as with the leaders of Protestant sympathisers who remained in England. The church had, after all, arranged for the expulsion of dissidents who wanted a more fully Reformed liturgy, most of whom moved to Geneva and formed their own church there. But, as Patrick Collinson has observed, "the secession of Knox had not brought peace but a sword to the Frankfurt church."²⁴ For, the troubles that racked the church between 1555 and 1558, do indeed seem to be extraordinary, by any standards.

The arguments within the English Church at Frankfurt on this occasion stemmed from the question of money, for, as M. M. Knappen records, most of the members of the church were living below or near the poverty line. At first sight this seems surprising as the congregation in Frankfurt was made up of predominantly privileged people. But privileged people do not always have money, or at least access to it,

24 Patrick Collinson, "The authorship of a Brief Discours of the Troubles begonne at Franckford," *Godly People* – "Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism," p. 193.

which was a particular problem of the sixteenth century English exile. They may also not have possessed a work ethic – despite their Protestant affiliations – for Knappen records that some of the congregation who had been clergymen at home scorned to work as printers or serving men.²⁵

The particular problem of the church at Frankfurt was that among the deacons – who would normally be assuming the role of administrators of poor relief – were some recipients of alms that they themselves were supposed to be distributing. This was clearly an unsatisfactory situation and it was, therefore, decided that the job should be undertaken by one of the elders of the church, a wealthy merchant, Richard Chambers, who thus found himself doubling up as deacon. This could be regarded as “unconstitutional” but was clearly a situation brought about by circumstances. Given the efforts that the Marian government in London was making to obstruct the exiles from use of their assets in England, it was understandable that there came to appear a non-transparent, clandestine aspect to Chamber’s activities. Raising funds in England – from where most of them came – had to be undertaken in the utmost secrecy.

This was not how things were seen by the majority of the Frankfurt congregation – the “Congregationalists” – who complained about the distribution of alms and how much various people were receiving. Ranged against them was the minister and elders at the church. Proceedings eventually took on what could be described as a *Comedia del Arte* with the pastor rushing in and out of meetings at the church – when he condescended to attend them – sometimes sitting in the pastor’s chair, then leaving it to sit with the congregation, then returning to the chair. “At the church the minority made stormy exits and, on one occasion, an equally stormy entrance properly timed by a signal from spies.”²⁶ The local magistrates became involved and arbiters – other English exiles based elsewhere – were brought in with a view to bringing peace to the church.

As at Emden there was no legal provision for dealing with the situation; the pastor and elders arguing that the existing Discipline gave them the right, subject to their election, to direct and manage the church. Eventually, however, a new Discipline was drawn up which was subscribed to by the majority of the congregation. By the standards of the time the provisions of the new Discipline were extraordinary. Article two stated that: “The Congregation thus assembled is a particular (distinct) visible church.”²⁷ And, while there were to be six elders to assist two ministers they “shall have no authority to make any Decrees or Ordinances to bind the Congregation to them delivered”.²⁸ Among other measures provision was made for the body of the church legally to assemble itself. The majority of such a meeting might bind the

25 M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism*, p. 155.

26 *Ibid.*, 156, quoting the *Discours*, 134.

27 *A Brieff Discours*, 150.

28 *Ibid.*, 185.

whole congregation.²⁹ Provision was also made for trying the church officials as a body, or any part of them, by congregational committee. Any disagreement among the ministers and elders about the interpretation of the Discipline was to be referred to the entire congregation.³⁰

It will no doubt be surprising to readers to know that among all this, there appears Article five which states: “We observe and keep the Form and Order of the Sacraments and Common Prayer, as it is set forth, by the authority of the blessed King Edward.”³¹ The English Church in Frankfurt had thus separated liturgy from Order which, by the standards of the time, was unknown. How was it that supporters of the *Book of Common Prayer* had suddenly become Congregationalists? Philippe Denis provides us with the answer when he says that “le congrégationalisme des églises du refuge ne fut jamais revendiqué: il allait de soi”.³² And continues: “L’histoire montre, en effet, que les églises d’étrangers de la vallée du Rhin ont connu un développement non seulement agité mais finalement éphémère.”³³ One can certainly say this about the English Church at Frankfurt where supporters of the *Book of Common Prayer* hardly thought of importing their form of church government into England. As it was, the church lived on until the death of Mary Tudor and the return of the exiles to England in 1558.

THE FLEMISH AND WALLOON CHURCHES IN FRANKFURT

The French and Dutch-speaking communities that constituted the refugee churches in Frankfurt had, for the most part, come from Wesel, the economic capital of the Duchy of Cleves, which was situated close to the frontier with the Netherlands. While the authorities in Wesel had granted the refugees the right to hold religious services in their own language, they had forbidden them from celebrating communion. In spite of the emollient attitude shown by Melancthon in this dispute, the rise of Lutheran orthodoxy (typified by the Hamburg pastor Joachim Westphal) led to the eventual closure of the refugee churches in Wesel, a large part of whose members departed for Frankfurt. From this development stemmed a conflict in the Flemish and Walloon churches in Frankfurt that lasted several years, leading to their eventual closure in 1557.

The conflicts at these churches – with which we conclude our survey – incorporated three elements: Sin, or the old human power struggle for which the refugee churches in Frankfurt had become notorious; “theological/political” disputes

29 Ibid., 188.

30 *A Brieff Discours*, 198.

31 Ibid., 199.

32 Philippe Denis, *Les Eglises d'Etrangers en Pays Rhénans*, 622.

33 Ibid., 624.

concerning the question of access to communion and the place of the secular authorities in “regulating” church affairs – the same questions that had divided the Reformed Churches in Zurich and Geneva; and, finally, the question of relations with the Lutherans.

In Frankfurt the authorities were initially more conciliatory in their attitude towards the refugees than those in Wesel. When Valérand Poullain, together with a group of Walloon weavers, arrived in Frankfurt from Wesel in 1554, they were not only granted a place of worship but permitted to celebrate the sacraments. But a welcoming town council did not prevent the Walloon church from creating new problems for itself. These stemmed from the arrival in Frankfurt of a more privileged group of refugees, typified by the wealthy Bruges merchant Augustin le Grand. As Philippe Denis remarks of the arrival of Le Grand and his friends: “La différence sociale entre les premiers arrivants et ceux qui les suivirent à l’automne était donc on ne peut plus nette.”³⁴ The conflict that arose between these two groups centred on the Discipline of the church and the workings of the Consistory. Although both the new and the old immigrants were members of the Consistory, the new arrivals accused Poullain, as minister, of unjustly favouring his Glastonbury colleagues.

The temperature among the exiles in Frankfurt rose markedly with the arrival of à Lasco from Emden. Although the vast majority of the immigrants from the Netherlands had been Walloons, there were among them an increasing number of Flemings (Dutch speakers) who hankered after a church of their own. The ever energetic à Lasco was only too happy to oblige and soon there was a church in Frankfurt for Dutch speakers as well as one for French speakers – with à Lasco acting as a sort of supernumerary Superintendent at both churches, rather similar to the position he had earlier held in London. à Lasco’s great asset is generally regarded as that of a church organiser yet, whatever his skills in this area, he was unable to quell the disputes at the Walloon church. As Denis states somewhat bluntly: “L’impuissance de cet ancien familier d’Erasmus n’en fut que plus désolante.”³⁵

Events at the Walloon church approached a crisis towards the end of 1555 when Le Grand and his associates peremptorily resigned as elders of the church. Poullain then nominated six new elders from Glastonbury who promptly excommunicated the old Consistory, three of whom approached the town council with a complaint against Poullain.

Calvin had long taken an interest in the refugee churches and had frequently been approached by them for advice. He had followed events at the Walloon church in Frankfurt closely and eventually decided that the seriousness of the disputes merited his intervention. He arrived in Frankfurt in September 1556 and immediately arranged for the formation of a commission whose ultimate objective was to settle disputes at the church. While the judgement of the commission was generally

34 Philippe Denis, *Les Eglises d’Etrangers en Pays Rhénans*, 327.

35 *Ibid.*, 333.

favourable to Poullain, it made certain criticisms of his behaviour which prompted the minister to resign. The departure from the scene of one of the principal players in the dispute, as well as the return of à Lasco to his native Poland in October 1556, should have lowered the temperature at the Walloon church, but within a year a further dispute broke out between the two new ministers: Perrussel and Houbraque, over the question of access to communion.

The dispute appears to have begun over the response of Perrussel to a slanderous comment that was directed against him by a member of the congregation. Houbraque decreed that communion should not be celebrated until the disputes and wounds within the church had been solved and healed. Perrussel disagreed. When the congregation turned against their own Consistory over the election of elders and decreed that they should be replaced by “un tribunal extraordinaire de six hommes élus par la multitude auxquels seraient adjoints deux juristes”,³⁶ the town council was only too happy to oblige, for this could enable them to step in and take on the powers of the Consistory, at least as far as powers of excommunication were concerned. Thus emerged a bizarre alliance between what could be called congregationalists and supporters of a church under magisterial control, a turn of events almost as odd as those at the English Church in Frankfurt.

While the recently formed Flemish Church avoided the tumult of its Walloon sister, it was not without its own problems. Both churches had been closed down in 1561 and it was from this situation that the Flemish Church, existing in a semi-official capacity, was faced with the question: Was it legitimate to present a child to a Lutheran minister for baptism? The two ministers at the church were divided on the issue, a situation that probably contributed to the termination of the semi-official status of the churches in 1567, after which they passed into semi-clandestinity.

CONCLUSIONS

The sixteenth century refugee churches leave an uncertain yet uninspiring legacy. The constant bickering, which was a feature of several of them, makes for depressing reading. While they undoubtedly suffered from the rise of Lutheran orthodoxy, the refugee churches were themselves not without fault in increasing the conflict between Reformed and Lutheran Confessions and widening the divide between them. Calvin, whose advice to the refugee churches had been to cooperate with the Lutherans where their doctrine was pure, subsequently stiffened his attitude as Pettegree, in reference to the leader of the orthodox Lutherans, Joachim Westphal the minister in Hamburg, states:

The Reformed had from the beginning treated their opponent with an unconcealed contempt. Calvin's initial reluctance to answer Westphal, his dismissal of the *Justa Defensio* as a “silly

36 Ibid., 363.

and poisonous book” and repeated references to “Luther’s apes are all indications of a serious misjudgement of Westphal’s abilities and of the potential appeal of his rallying cry against the Reformed”.³⁷

Denis has something similar to say, when speaking of the refugee churches in Frankfurt:

Bientôt, cependant, les luthériens découvrirent que l’Eglise française, l’Eglise anglaise et, à partir de septembre 1555, l’Eglise flamande se donnaient des institutions, prenaient du développement, bref vivaient, sans qu’ils fussent consultés, ni même informés de rien à leur propos. Les étrangers échappaient totalement à leur contrôle : une pareille chose leur était difficilement tolérable.³⁸

However, the same writer records one exception, that of the “Villages Welches” in the county of Nassau-Sarrewerden:

Les réfugiés dans les villages Welches et les luthériens dans le reste du comté vécutent en si bonne intelligence que deux siècles plus tard l’inspecteur Beltzer...tenaient encore à célébrer le fait, jugé à l’époque extraordinaire: “La maison de Nassau-Sarrebruck, déclarait-il, s’est adonnée depuis les temps les plus anciens à la religion évangélique-luthérienne, elle a cependant de tout temps traité les réformés avec une courtoisie et une bienveillance qui n’ont la pareille dans aucun Etat de l’Allemagne évangélique.”³⁹

One is compelled to ask, could not this situation have been produced elsewhere?

No doubt – to state a truism – events at the refugee churches covered in this article were very much the product of circumstances which, in some of the cases that we have seen, laid the seeds of Congregationalism. The Congregationalism of the English and Walloon churches in Frankfurt was, admittedly, of an eccentric variety, and it is interesting to note that similar pressures were successfully fought off in the “churches under the cross” in the Netherlands and France. If one excludes the “eccentric” cases of the refugee churches in Frankfurt, one might say that the first “official” manifesto for Congregationalism appeared with Jean Morély’s *Treatise on Discipline and Christian Government* in 1562. This work was not pleasing to supporters of Presbyterianism, and Morély was subsequently excommunicated from the French Reformed Church. The French National Synod of 1562 condemned the book for its “wicked doctrine tending to dissipation and confusion of the church”⁴⁰ and his treatise was burnt in Geneva.⁴¹

The churches under the cross in the Netherlands and in France do not seem to have had too much time for Congregationalism. Indeed, it was probably regarded by the ordinary church member – if they ever had the opportunity to think of it at all –

37 Andrew Pettegree, “The London Exile community,” *Marian Protestantism*, 79.

38 Philippe Denis, *Les Eglises d’Etrangers en Pays Rhénans*, 350.

39 Ibid., 409.

40 Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, 136.

41 Ibid., 136.

as a luxury of exile. As Benedict says, talking of the Reformed churches in France, “the proliferation of independently established churches across a broad kingdom in the face of governmental persecution suggested to those involved that they needed to cooperate with each other to maintain unity of doctrine and Discipline.”⁴² Similar comments could be made of the help given by the London Strangers’ Churches to their confederates in the Netherlands, whether it was in the provision of ministers or financial or military aid. But such factors appear to have had little influence on the major refugee churches in sixteenth century Germany.

The London Strangers’ Churches stand rather apart from these churches, not least in the fact that one of them, the Dutch church in London, exists to the present day.⁴³ Cynical observers would say that this longevity has much to do with the fact that the churches took on the aspect of social clubs as much as that of churches, an aspect that was already evident in their second life during the reign of Elizabeth I. However, the social work of their Consistories, the support given to the immigrant communities, as well as the aid given to co-religionists in the Netherlands at this time can be counted as one of the more positive aspects of the sixteenth century refugee church.

It was suggested in an earlier article that the nature of the order and liturgy of the sixteenth century English Church in Geneva was an important factor in its peaceable nature. The church also benefitted from the protection of the local church and that of Calvin. Within the refugee churches in Germany, such factors did not play the same role. On reflection it is hard to avoid the conclusion that these churches were the sources of disruption, rather than of unity.

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42 Ibid., 135.

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GLOSSARY

Minister, Pastor and Preacher are treated as one and the same in this article. All officials of the church in the Reformed tradition are regarded as “ministers” and in the secondary literature this often gives rise to confusion.