CHAPTER 10

The Catholic Church and the Vernacular Bible in the Low Countries: A Paradigm Shift in the 1550s?

Wim François

Confronted with the increased biblical fervour of the 1520s, the authorities in the Low Countries did not respond with a severe and general prohibition of Bible reading in the vernacular, as sometimes has been argued. Since the late Middle Ages, the Low Countries had become familiar with semi-religious women and even laypeople in the world who nourished their spiritual life through reading the Scriptures, and this was not considered flirtation with heresy. After the spread of humanism and the Reformation, and the Bible versions that originated in their wake, the religious authorities in the Low Countries continued to tolerate Bible reading in the vernacular; nevertheless, from an early stage—in the mid 1520s—a strict ban was proclaimed on versions that contained dubious paratextual elements such as prologues, summaries above the chapters, and marginal glosses. It was also forbidden to read and comment on the Bible in all kinds of clandestine ‘conventicles’ that had come into existence at the time and in which heterodox ideas were nurtured. Bible reading in the vernacular had always to be pursued in connection with the official liturgy of the Church.¹ In the midst of the century, however, both in the Low Countries and on a Roman level, a change became apparent in the Church’s attitude. It is the aim of this essay to shed light upon what we may call a paradigm shift.

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1546 was an important year for the Church's biblical policy, in the Catholic world in general and in the Low Countries in particular. On 8 April 1546, during its fourth session, the Council of Trent had declared both the Scriptures and apostolic traditions to be the channels through which evangelical faith and morals were brought to the faithful. The fathers of the Council further proclaimed the Latin Vulgate to be the authentic version of the Church, as it was considered to be completely conform to sound evangelical doctrine. In addition, they expressed a desire that a critical edition be produced as soon as possible. The fathers of the Council, however, did not pronounce any judgment regarding the permissibility of Bible translations in the vernacular, despite the lobbying work of both proponents and adversaries of a prohibition. The Council fathers in this way tacitly confirmed the prevailing customs of local churches.2

About a month later, on 9 May 1546, the Louvain theologians issued an Index of Forbidden Books, in which 42 Dutch Bible editions that were considered to be unreliable were censured, in addition to six French Bibles.3 In an

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3 Edictum Caesareae Maiestatis promulgatum anno salutis m.d.xlvi. Praeterea Catalogus & declaratio librorum reprobatorum a Facultate sacrae Theologiae Lovaniensis Academiae, Issu & ordinatione praenominatae Maiestatis Caesareae (Leuven, Servatius a Sassen: 1546). For the Dutch version, see Mandament der Keyserlijcker Maiesteyt wyttegeven int Iaer xlvi. Met Diffutulatie ende declaratie vanden gereprobeerde boecken gheschiet bijden Doctoren inde faculteit van Theologie in Duniversiteit van Loeven: Duer dordonnantie ende bevel der selver