Chapter 2

Maria Petyt against the Background of the Political and Religious Situation in Flanders in the Seventeenth Century

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Ecologically and politically speaking, the seventeenth century was a turbulent and unstable century.1 There was a minor ice age going on. Crops failed and dangerous diseases like the plague and typhoid fever caused many deaths. Europe was ravaged by power struggles and wars. The Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) called forth a vicious circle of violence, which in the Habsburg empire alone claimed eight million lives.2 For the inhabitants the consequences of the massacres and sackings were nearly incalculable. Not long after the Peace of Westphalia, Louis XIV (1638–1715) was crowned king of France in 1654. His expansive power politics brought a new wave of warfare over Western Europe, which we are introduced to in the document on the Dutch War.

Contributions from the history of mentality show the toll this took on the seventeenth century mind. People became anxious and confused.3 Structures of interpretation, certainly religious ones, were put under pressure and events were interpreted on the basis of personal experiences and subjectively ex-

1 I want to thank Sr. Rebecca Braun osc for the translation of this article.
plained. Although the world of Maria Petyt’s experience fits in seamlessly with this development, this transition did not take place unambiguously, either in the mind of Maria Petyt, or in her surroundings. From a historical viewpoint such irregularities make the discovered document an interesting source, which opens a clearer view on the diachrony of this process.

In order to situate the figure of Maria Petyt against the background of her times, this chapter first sketches a rough image of the process of confessionalization and the political and religious situation in the Southern Netherlands at the time. Attention is paid to the impact of the Council of Trent, especially in Flanders, and the emergence there of the spiritual daughters, who drew their inspiration mainly from Teresa of Avila. Next the Tridentine reform of the Carmelite Order (o.carm.) and the figure of Maria’s spiritual director, Michael of St. Augustine, are described. Finally both, Michael and Maria, are situated in the context of Jansenism and anti-monachism. In each part, where applicable, we will focus on the position and/or spirituality of Maria Petyt.

Confessionalization and the Political Situation in the Southern Netherlands

From a historical perspective the figure and spirituality of Maria Petyt become visible against the background of the catholic reformation or, phrased more broadly and properly, the process of catholic confessionalization in the seventeenth century. After the violent polarization of the Reformation, at the end of the sixteenth century the theological and social tensions between Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists subsided. Authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, attempted to strengthen their power by creating religious uniformity in

4 Roeck (1999) 331. This observation is shared in historical studies of spirituality, in which a turn is seen in the sixteenth and seventeenth century from an essentialistic piety focused on unity with God, to a spirituality centered on the human being which was of a more psychologizing nature. See Hoppenbrouwers (1996) 40 and Steggink (1985) 42–46.

5 Cf. Deblaere (1962) 232f.

6 Within historical research a paradigm shift can be seen in the past decades from the terms counter reformation / catholic reformation to the term confessionalization. These concepts proved no longer appropriate for identifying the cultural-historical developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, on the one hand because they placed too much emphasis on church history, on the other because the antithesis between reformation and counter reformation was historically untenable. See for an overview of the discourse Reinhard (1995) 419 - 452 and Burschel (1999) 588f.