RELIGIOUS WARS AT HOME:
THE PROBLEM OF CONFESSIONALLY MIXED FAMILIES

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A number of years ago in Belgium’s National Archive, my eye was drawn to an intriguing description of a document listed in the inventory of the “Jesuit Collection.” Of course many documents sound intriguing, only to disappoint when they are finally in our hands. But this one did not disappoint at all. Here was a detailed journal, kept during 1654, of a young Dutchman’s secret conversion from the Reformed religion to Catholicism.

This alone caught my notice, but two other things stood out as well. First, about half of the journal’s entries were written in code—always a sure way to grab a historian’s attention. And second, enough words were immediately understandable to determine that this young man’s father was not merely a member of the Reformed church, but a preacher. What sort of drama must have gone on here, I mused? And why were these documents now in Belgium rather than the Netherlands? Determined to find out, I set myself to breaking the journal’s code. After two or three days of heroic struggle, I did just that, and was quite proud of myself—until I realized that the key to the code had been in plain sight on the journal’s inside cover all the while, written there by a later hand.

I didn’t dwell on this bruise to my ego, for now that I could read the whole I was riveted by the scenes unfolding before my eyes regarding its author, named Jacob Roelants, and his religiously divided family. I also began to think about the larger significance of these scenes: what did I know about confessionally mixed families more generally of the time? A growing body of historical literature on tolerance had already made me aware of the extensive religious diversity in the Dutch Republic, where this story largely played out. Members of rival confessions lived quite peaceably side by side, a condition broken only occasionally by fits of violence, and up to half the people in towns such as Haarlem belonged to no church at all. Yet it now struck me that I had allowed this strong image of relative tolerance among confessions to stop me from considering the nature of relationships within the many confessionally
mixed homes that surely existed in the Republic, either in the heart of the land or near its borders with Catholic states. It was one thing to bear the religion of one’s neighbor or grocer, and quite another to bear the conversion or mixed marriage of one’s child.

Despite a number of insightful works regarding mixed families in France or England, overall this was not a topic which seemed well-studied, either in the literature on tolerance or in the related bodies of literature on the family and conversion. Yet it must have been a daily problem for tens of thousands around Europe. Not knowing exactly where to go, I did what many before me have done: I read what I could and made sure to have a talk with Tom Brady. Few people are more generous and frank than Tom with encouragement and (when asked) criticism—which to him seem to be merely different ways of showing affection. As usual, he made me feel like a genius for raising the subject. Even though I knew I was hardly the first to have done so, and knew as well that he encouraged just about everyone this way, it helped motivate me to continue.

Over the next several years I found in other archives still other detailed papers about Jacob Roelants and his family—especially about Jacob’s preacher-father, named Timothy, and Jacob’s sister and only sibling, the staunchly Reformed Maria. These dense papers led me to conclude that there might be an entire book here, which would offer not only a rare glimpse at this sort of flesh and blood drama, but also the opportunity to explore the wider spectrum of possibilities open to other mixed families of the age—either in areas where confessional boundaries were fixed, as in the Swiss cantons and German territories, or areas where confessional mixing was more fluid, as in France, England, and especially the Dutch Republic. With the research still at an intermediate stage (archival work finished but reading in secondary literature barely begun), my main purpose here is to piece together the complicated outlines of this family’s story, while a secondary purpose is to suggest the variety of contexts which I will explore in my larger study so as to give this particular case larger significance.

We may enter the story of the Roelants family at any number of revealing points, such as the fourth Sunday of May 1654, inside the family’s home in the southern Dutch Republic, near the city of Den Bosch. There, just before midnight, we would see twenty-one-year-old Jacob at the open window of his upstairs bedroom, quietly lowering his traveling bags to a servant in the garden. We might follow the servant