

Joris and Catalina Rapalje, The First Colonists in New Netherland

by D. Reid Ross

The Catholic-Calvinist religious conflict in Europe that began in the sixteenth century, raged well into the seventeenth. Known as the Reformation, it began in the Lowlands in 1518, when Martin Luther's doctrines were first preached in Antwerp. In the Spanish Netherlands it resulted in a division between the seven northern Calvinist United Provinces on one side of the Rhine that became independent of Spain in 1581 and the ten Catholic provinces, half Dutch-speaking (Flemish) and half French (Walloon) on the south side of the Rhine, dominated by the Spanish Catholic kings.¹ These were the "obedient provinces." (1)

Spanish kings were devoutly Catholic, suspicious of other beliefs, fearful of Luther's heresy, and unswervingly loyal to Rome. Nevertheless, this religious orthodoxy did not prevent these kings from asserting their authority over the powerful and wealthy church, or taxing it heavily. Anyone in Spain who differed in the slightest particular with Catholic orthodoxy was branded a Lutheran and subjected to secret trial and torture, and probably execution, if found guilty.

Protestantism in the majority of Western Europe at the same time was becoming the religion of the principalities and the provinces, the feudal and urban interests, as the Reformation gained momentum. They were resisting the strengthening of authority and power of kings over their own economic and social domains. They wanted to preserve the cherished autonomy of their provinces. These opposing interests inevitably squared off to fight both civil and religious wars for more than a century. In this struggle, both sides attracted nobility and other powerful, articulate, and prosperous people with crusading zeal. In the case of the Dutch, who held strongly to their medieval heritage of constitutional representative government, new concepts of civil liberty and personal responsibility grew out of the conflict. This was true despite an ever-widening gap that developed between the aristocrats, merchants, and landlords who comprised the upper-class and the poverty