

## WOMEN AND THE REFORMATION

Each Dutch child is taught in the first lesson of national history about the life of duchess Jaclyn of Bavaria, Jacoba van Beieren. She was born in 1401 and died in 1436. Her short life has become an example of a woman who lived her heavy life with great courage and perseverance. At the age of fifteen the young widow had to succeed her father who had died. The form of government in the Netherlands, the so-called Low Countries, was quite different from nowadays. The country was divided in regions, countyships, reigned by a count or duke. Lady Jaclyn became duchess of Holland and Zeeland (the western part of the country) and Henegouwen, an area in Belgium and France. The country and the cities of importance were also divided by two political groups, the Hoeken and the Kabeljauwen. The Hoeken (Corners) represented the nobility and great landowners and the Kabeljauwen (codfishes) the rich merchants. Jaclyn was in the first place a sensible and diplomatic ruler, but in case of a conflict she did not hesitate to fight as the commander of the army amidst her soldiers. And also in her private life she was an exceptional woman. Her arranged marriage with John of Brabant, a full cousin, she tried to declare illegal by the Pope, but in spite of the legality of her request – the Church had forbidden to marry a full cousin – the Pope did not answer. So she followed her heart and married Humphrey of Gloucester, a brother of the British king, in anticipation of the declaration of the Pope, which did not come. When she returned to her motherland, she was captured by the opposition and closed into the citadel Gravensteen in the city of Gent. Some faithful partisans were successful in helping her to escape. The news of Jaclyn's escape effected a great admiration and together with her followers she tried to win back the lost cities. Her husband organized a British army to come over to support his wife, but his brother the British king, did not give permission. At the same time Jaclyn received the message that the Pope was not prepared to declare her marriage with John van Brabant illegal and although John had died already, the outcome of this declaration also meant that her marriage with Humphrey was illegal. Humphrey married another woman and this was a real knockout-blow for Jaclyn. Her cousin Philip who had inherited the property from John van Brabant and who had the regency over Jaclyn's regions during her absence, forced Jaclyn to give up her possessions. She could not bring up the passion to give resistance and agreed. In 1436 she died of tuberculosis, after having some quiet but happy years in a secret marriage with Frank van Borssele, her youth lover, with whom she did not receive the permission for a marriage at the age of seventeen. She was

buried in the castle of Teylingen, from which the ruin is still to be seen in the neighbourhood of Haarlem.

It must be disappointing to hear that with this picture of a strong woman in the Netherlands I'm almost sold out concerning the Reformation and later centuries. This has something to do with the Dutch church history. In the Netherlands the reformation was a Calvinistic one and the followers of Calvin became very mighty. The Reformed Church became the national church and the Roman Catholic religion, as well as the Lutheran, remonstrant and Mennonite were forbidden. They had to come together in deep secret in private houses, farm sheds or in the forest. The Lutherans got more room when the reformed local and national government noticed that they became dependent from Lutheran Prusian soldiers to maintain the security of the Dutch citizens and the also lutheran Scandinavian kings only wanted the Dutch as partners in trade if they would allow the Lutherans to have their own churches. In my city Zutphen Lutheran Prusian soldiers had to protect the city against the Spanish army and they formed the base for the Lutheran congregation, together with the merchants who came to live here as a result of the Hanseatic League of European trading towns. They got permission, yes, but the condition was that one could not see at the outside of the building that it was used as a church. No church tower, no churchbells. Today we still come together in a shelterchurch, a cityfarm where the Prusians brothers in faith started their services. In the last century the frontwall and the rooftop were decorated with the symbols of the swan, which became the symbol for the Dutch Lutherans.

The influence of the national Reformed Church did hardly enter into the southern part of the Low Countries, beneath the large rivers. There the Roman Catholic Church succeeded to keep her parishes alive and today it is still the Dutch area which is mainly Roman Catholic. In that time a nun, named Anna Bijns, became a well known woman teacher and poetess. During the Reformation she defended the mother church against dr. Martin Luther, whose person she saw as the devil incarnate. Because of this appreciated service she got permission as the only woman to participate in the fellowship of teachers. The Franciscans encouraged her to publish her book "Chambres de Rhétoriques" and she became one of the most goodselling authors in the Netherlands during the 16th century. She wrote religious and moralistic poems and was an opponent of marriage and made fun with simple girls who enter into a marriage without thinking. At the same time she made no disguise of her feelings about men, who – in her opinion – did nothing else as drinking and

abusing women. So whatever you may think about her poetry – which are in technical and rhetorical view excellent – she was a great mistress and also courageous in having her heart on her sleeve. Her poems are still read today in orthodox families as a warning for young women to keep their virginity. We return to the northern part of the Low Countries, the empire of the Reformed Church.

The Dutch Reformed Church was and still partly is an orthodox church where the theological foundation is concentrated around men. It was a surprise to discover that a female member of this church, Anna Maria van Schurman, was given full scope to her natural gifts. Not for free, because the price for her development was the promise at her father's deathbed not to marry. We write the life of Anna Maria from 1607 until 1678. Her specialism was theology and in 1634 she got permission from the still famous professor in theology Voetius to follow his lectures at the university of Utrecht. The condition was that the male students could not see her, so she was hidden behind a curtain. In 1666 she became the assistant of pastor Labadie in the city of Middelburg. She became more famous because of her knowledge of foreign languages and her artistic gifts in literature, poetry, music and painting. In her poems she is warning her sisters not to be busy with their exterior as clothes and hairdress, but to feed their inner life by study. It must be said that this kind of education was a privilege for prosperous, well respected and mostly unmarried women. Two and a half centuries later the first official female university student Aletta Jacobs, a young socialistic woman, successfully finished her medical study.

Was it because of the reformed oppression that the first female pastors were members of the so-called small liberal churches? 1911 Annie Zernike, Mennonite; 1918 W.F. Rappold, Remonstrant; 1926 L.C. Dufour, Lutheran. It was not a matter of course that these female pastors reached this without problems and were able to start their ministry happily in a congregation. Not only a great number of their male colleagues but also many members of congregations showed resistance. In 1923 the Circle of Female Pastors in the Netherlands was founded. There it was discovered that there were also Reformed women who were graduated in theology. However, the church leaders did not allow them to accept a pastorate in a congregation. They had to be satisfied with a position in healthcare, social or diaconal work and education. First in 1966 and 1968 the two Reformed Churches in the Netherlands gave female pastors the same rights as their male brothers. This period is the beginning of the rising of

the feministic theology and the movement which is still striving for equal rights for men and women in church and society.

In 2004 the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands merged with the two Reformed Churches into the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Within this church there is still an orthodox wing which does not accept female pastors, deacons or elders. It is difficult to understand that the same church does not see the necessity of organized women activities and removed in the last four years all the possibilities to meet each other as reformed and Lutheran women within the church organization. The Lutheran women organization has kept her independancy and is operating outside the Protestant Church. Even if it may be true that "women can reach everything they want" there are also groups of women for whom these words are only a dream. Last week in the Dutch newspapers we could read that in the city of Amsterdam about 250 muslim women are captured and abused by their husbands, never or seldom leave their houses. This is only one example... We still have a lot of work to do... For more information I refer to the Dutch country report.

Coby Aartsen

liaison Evangelical-Lutheran Womenwork in the Netherlands