A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

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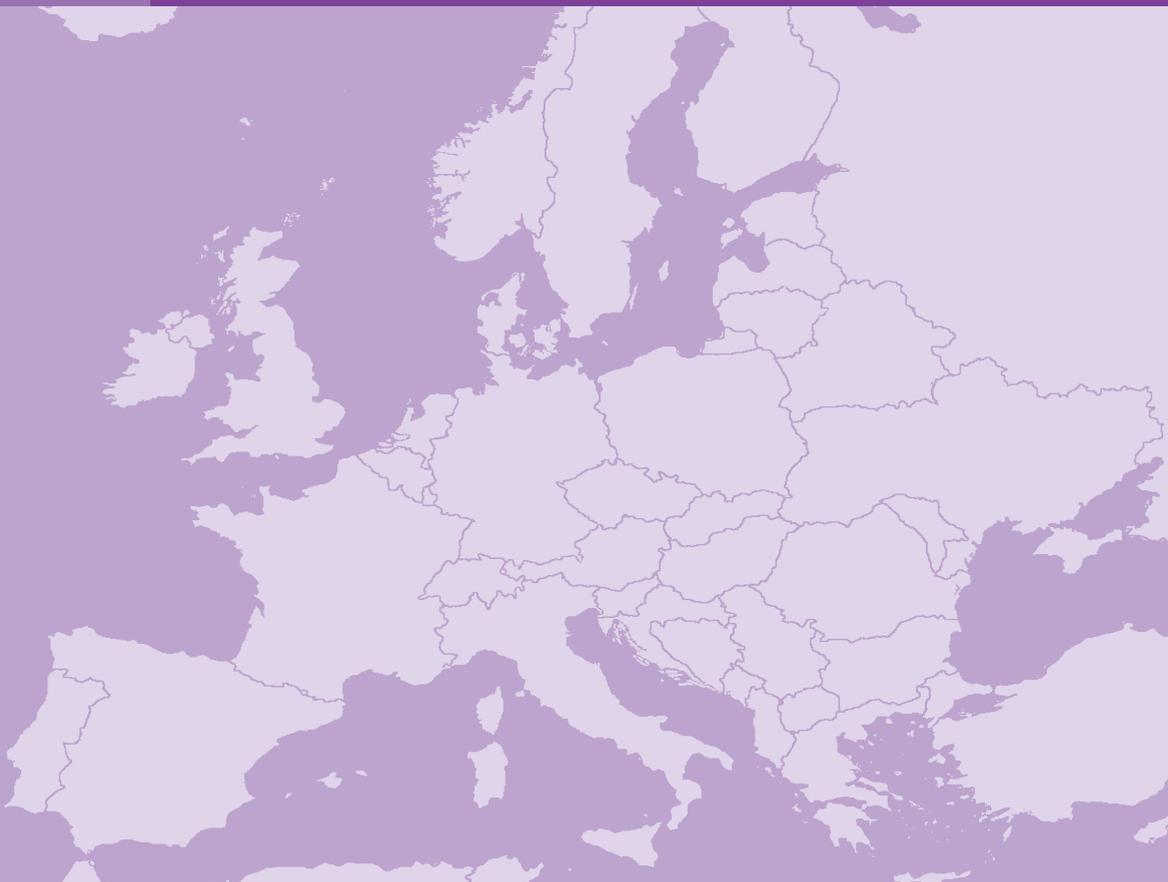
Belgian Protestantism from the Reformation to the Present
A Concise History of its Mission and Unity
Colin Godwin

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Obwohl ein großer Teil der belgischen Bevölkerung sich der Verkündigung verschiedener Reformer geöffnet hat, so haben doch schwere Verfolgung und eine Reihe von Kriegen den belgischen Protestantismus nach dem 16. Jahrhundert nahezu ausgelöscht. Im Jahr 1831 hatten nur 21 protestantische Gemeinden in Belgien überlebt. Heute gibt es nach mehreren Wellen missionarischer Tätigkeit von jenseits des großen Teiches im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert mehr als 700 protestantische Gemeinden in allen Teilen des Landes. Der vorliegende Artikel bietet einen geschichtlichen Überblick über das Wachstum und die Herausforderungen des belgischen Protestantismus.

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SUMMARY

Although a large part of the Belgian population was receptive to the preaching of the various Reformers, heavy persecution and a series of wars almost annihilated Belgian Protestantism after the sixteenth century. By 1831, there were only 21 surviving Protestant churches in Belgium. Today, after several waves of missionary activity from overseas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there are more than 700 Protestant churches in all parts of the country. This article provides a history of the growth and challenges of Belgian Protestantism.

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RÉSUMÉ

Une grande partie de la population belge s'est montrée réceptive à la prédication de divers réformateurs. Toutefois, de dures persécutions et une série de guerres ont presque anéanti le protestantisme belge après le xvie siècle. En 1831, il ne restait plus que vingt et une Églises protestantes en Belgique. Aujourd'hui, suite à plusieurs vagues d'activité missionnaire étrangère aux xixe et xxe siècles, on compte plus de sept cents Églises protestantes réparties dans tout le pays. Cet article retrace l'histoire de la croissance du protestantisme belge et des difficultés rencontrées en chemin.

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Belgium has recently been described by a prominent evangelical publication as 'one of the most needy countries in Europe, with great spiritual apathy and faith largely banished from the public sphere'.[1] This may be a bleak assessment of Christianity in contemporary Belgium, but few Protestants in Belgium yearn to return to days gone by. Fuelled by foreign missionary activity, the arrival of immigrant churches and recognition by the Belgian government, Belgian Protestantism has never been stronger than it is today. Since much of the history of Belgian Protestantism has been written in French, this essay seeks to make that research available to English speakers. It also includes a treatment of the important efforts at Protestant unity that have taken place in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The Reformation in Belgium

By 1566, approximately 300000 Belgians, roughly 20% of the total population, had affiliated themselves with the ideas of the various Reformers: Martin Luther from Wittenberg, Martin Bucer from Strasbourg, Ulrich Zwingli from Zurich, John Calvin of Geneva, and the Anabaptists

Conrad Grebel and Melchior Hofmann.[2] A large number of nobles embraced the new faith, sometimes organising themselves to take control of the local government. But these Protestant advances were not met with ambivalence by the Catholic authorities. Belgium had the unfortunate privilege of giving to the Reformation its first martyrs on July 1, 1523, when two monks who had converted to Lutheranism were burnt alive at the stake in the Grande Place in Brussels for their Reformed ideals. In 1536, the Englishman William Tyndale, who had made it his life's work to see the Bible translated into English, was executed at Vilvoorde, near Brussels. The interest in Protestant ideas was so strong, however, that the Catholic authorities were limited in their ability to implement repressive actions. Between 1577 and 1585, the city of Brussels was a Calvinist Republic, and a significant number of other Belgian cities and towns followed, including Ghent, Antwerp, Brugge, Courtrai, Tournai and Dendermonde.[3]

It was not until the Spanish King, Philip II, sent the Duke of Alba with Spanish troops to put down the heretics, that the threat of Protestantism was eliminated. In 1585, the Spanish conquered Antwerp and by 1604 the last Protestant rebellion was eradicated.[4]

Persecution and emigration

This persecution was so intense that it almost completely annihilated Belgian Protestantism.[5] Belgian Protestants had to choose between persecution and exile. The vast majority chose exile, with between 200000 and 225000 leaving Belgium between 1522 and 1630. Their destinations were England, Holland, Denmark, Germany and Sweden. By the end of the sixteenth century, 15 Walloon churches had been started in Holland.[6] Their Reformed confession of faith, the *Belgic Confession*, was originally written in French by Guy de Brès (1522-1567), who was born in Mons in what would later become the Belgian territory.[7]

Anabaptists were persecuted more severely since they lacked the protection of a civil power. In Tournai, Michel Delehaye was decapitated with five of his companions, despite the repudiation of his Anabaptist faith. Marie Boisière, a young widow and mother of two children, would not reveal the identity of her brethren to Pierre Titelmas, the inquisitor, who had shown great interest in the community despite its small size of only a few dozen members. She was strangled in the town square in July 1564, then her body was burned and the ashes thrown into the river.[8]

Sailing under a Dutch flag, a group of French-speaking Belgian Protestants emigrated to the New World with the Dutch West India Company in 1624 and founded the city of New Amsterdam on the island of Manhattan in the mouth of the Hudson River. The surrounding territory between the Delaware River and Lake Champlain was named New Belgium by the government of the Dutch United Provinces. In 1628, a Protestant pastor in Manhattan wrote, 'We hold all our church services in French because the majority of the inhabitants are Belgian Walloons.'[9] In 1664 the name of the city was changed to New York when King Charles II of England incorporated the territory into his North American possessions.[10]

Belgium was a European battleground in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the presence of foreign armies on its soil sometimes allowed for greater religious liberty, at least for a time. The wars against King Louis XIV of France at the turn of the eighteenth century for the Spanish succession brought English troops to Belgium, and under General John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, reforms were instituted in favour of Protestants and churches were built. This period ended in 1715 when Belgium passed under the control of the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs. Nevertheless, freedom of worship was granted to the soldiers in the various Dutch garrisons scattered in towns and cities around the country, and Belgian Protestants benefited from the presence of military chaplains and the worship services they led. In the countryside, however, Protestants still suffered persecution. The last Belgian martyr, Gilles Laurent, was killed at Dour in 1750, dragged behind a horse until his death.[11]

Napoleon and limited freedom (1789-1830)

Between 1789 and 1830, the Belgian territories changed hands several times: the United States of Belgium, the Austrian Restoration, French invasion, annexation by France. Religious freedom mirrored the political changes: a return to intolerance, freedom of religion, and the outright banning of Protestantism. It was not until Napoleon that Belgian Protestantism would officially become a legitimate religion. Under the law governing Protestant worship (18 Germinal An 10 / April 8, 1802), Napoleon granted Lutheran and Reformed

Protestants, including those in the Belgian department, freedom of worship. Nevertheless, the conditions for the exercise of Protestant religion were strict. A Consistorial Church required 6000 members, a number impossible to obtain in almost every region. In Brussels, permission was granted to establish a smaller 'oratory' because of the influence of the church members in the textile trade.[12]

The Congress of Vienna in 1814 reunited the Belgian territories with Holland under King William I, and under the Dutch king, Protestant churches were established in Liège, Huy, Tournai and Ostend, with military chaplains assigned to Bruges, Namur, Mons, Bouillon and Arlon. But the Catholic French-speaking upper class (Walloon and Fleming) objected to the economic practices of their Dutch Protestant king, and, inspired by the July 1830 revolution in France, Belgian nationalists rioted in Brussels the following month.[13] The Dutch army invaded a year later but, after some initial successes, it was halted by the French army under Marshall Gérard. Despite fears that France would annex Belgium, the other European powers were unwilling to send troops to Belgium, and Belgian independence was won. The European powers officially recognised the independence of Belgium in the Treaty of London in 1839.[14]

The impact of the persecution, war and the exodus on the Protestant population was so great that by 1830, there were only 21 Protestant groups in the whole country, five of which were expatriate communities.[15]

Belgian independence and the end of religious conflict

Sixteen churches which had survived the Belgian Revolution organised themselves as the Union of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Belgium on April 22, 1839. Although the synod established by this meeting did not include all the Belgian Protestant churches, and it had simply sought to establish a legal identity to represent its members, it was recognised by King Leopold as the sole legal representative for all Protestants in Belgium.[16] Some Protestant churches received state financing and some did not; nevertheless, the new Belgian constitution guaranteed freedom of religion and opened the way for the slow growth and expansion of Protestantism in Belgium. Some of the original churches were closed, missionary efforts were undertaken and evangelists worked to begin Protestant churches in areas of the country where no such church existed.[17] By the death of Leopold I in 1865, there were 43 Protestant churches in the country.[18]

Help from Europe

New growth also came from outside the country, in two phases. The first phase was the establishment of Protestant works in Belgium from neighbouring European countries. After the defeat of Napoleon, British Protestants sought to evangelise the continent through various missionary societies, such as the *London Missionary Society* (1875), the *British and Foreign Bible Society* (1803) and the *Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society* (1813). In France, the *Société Evangélique de France* was founded in 1833, and in Belgium, under the leadership of William Pascoe Tiddy, the *Société Evangélique Belge* began in 1837 with financial support and personnel from overseas. The churches founded by the Society, for the most part in Wallonia, became the Belgian Christian Missionary Church, which numbered nineteen communities by 1865.[19]

Anglican

Anglican churches were established in Belgium in the sixteenth century to service the spiritual needs of English-speaking Protestant merchants, who, because of their economic interests in the country, were excluded from the persecutions suffered by other Belgian Protestants. The 'Merchant Adventurers' of Antwerp were authorised to conduct Anglican worship services in their chapel during the wave of general persecution under the reign of Charles V.[20] Even under the relentless persecution by the Duke of Alba, Anglicans were tolerated, and it was only when Belgium fell under Spanish rule in 1585 that the churches were scattered.[21] But English economic interests persisted and favours were granted to those of the Anglican faith. In 1783 the Anglican church of Ostend was established, followed by the Anglican church of Brussels in 1786. These churches were emptied when Napoleon annexed the Low Countries, but after his defeat in 1815, the large number of British soldiers ensured the prosperity of the churches, and churches were founded in Antwerp, Bruges, Spa and Ostend. By 1829 there were three Anglican churches in Brussels.[22]

After the Belgian independence, the economic and social status of these communities in Belgium allowed the Anglican Church to be officially recognised as a state religion independently alongside

the (United) Protestants, Catholics and Jews.[23] Anglican churches, after the initial request from the pastor of Ostend in 1832, even benefitted from state subsidies for the exercise of worship and for the salary of Anglican pastors. This subsidy, voted by the Belgian government in 1835, was granted on the grounds that the Belgian Constitution respected the equality of all faiths, and permitted subsidies for ministers of religion. Until this time, the costs of Anglican worship had been borne by each local church, or through subsidies from England. By 1865, Anglicanism in Belgium was represented by ten pastors or chaplains.[24]

Brethren

The French evangelist Casimir Gaudibert began his ministry for the *Société Evangélique Belge* in February 1854 in the work which had been established in Fontaine l'Evêque. Six months later, however, the Society questioned Gaudibert because a fellow missionary accused him of teachings drawn from John Nelson Darby.[25] Gaudibert refused two summonses to Brussels to be questioned, and was excluded as a missionary of the Society.[26] He remained at the church, which gained its independence from the Society, and Gaudibert got the support of the Open Brethren assembly of George Müller in Bristol.[27] Despite the polemics between Gaudibert and the Society which continued until 1867, his work prospered and his printing press became the centre of Brethren work in the region. In addition to the French work in Fontaine l'Evêque, two more Open Brethren assemblies, this time German-speaking, were established in Liège and Verviers in 1865 and 1866.[28]

The Salvation Army

In 1889, the Salvation Army sent a Scottish officer to begin to work in Belgium, opening works in Malines, Ghent and Antwerp. The following year, a post was established in Brussels by General William Booth's eldest daughter, Catherine. In 1891, the first Belgian officers began their training. In the ensuing years, with an increase in personnel, the number of posts multiplied. By 1902, there were thirty officers serving in eleven posts and two social works across the country.[29]

Baptists

The first Baptist church in Belgium was planted in Ougrée, near Liège, in 1893 by two steel workers who had joined the Baptist church in Denain, France, while they had worked there.[30] In 1903,

a second church was planted in Péruwelz, near the French border, by two French evangelists, François Vincent and Samuel Farelly, and another in Mont-sur-Marchienne, near Charleroi, in 1904. These churches, along with six more in northern France, were planted as part of an outreach to the textile workers, coal miners and steel workers active in a geographical region that spanned across northern France, southern Belgium and the German Rhineland. In these regions, the workers were subject to hard working conditions and alcoholism became not only a major social problem, but also a hindrance to industrial and commercial development, so much so that the religious message and lifestyle preached by the Baptist evangelists was perceived positively, and even sometimes encouraged, by the authorities.[31] In 1922, these three churches led the founding of the Union of Evangelical Baptists in Belgium.[32]

Seventh-Day Adventists

Adventism arrived in Germany in 1875, in France in 1877 and in Holland in 1887, but these immediate neighbours were not the source of the Belgian mission, for it was the work in Switzerland which was the best organised. In 1880, the Swiss editor of *Signs of the Times* noted that copies of the Adventist magazine were sent to Belgium and Luxembourg[33] and in 1896 Charles Roth travelled to Belgium to assess the possibilities of starting a work. By 1899 the first church was established in Jemappe (Liège). The church had 18 baptised members by November 1906. A second church was started in Verviers in 1900 and a work began in Charleroi in 1901. The Adventist missionaries, all of them from Switzerland, spread their message through door-to-door work, evangelistic meetings in tents when the weather permitted, and meetings in rented halls when the church could afford it. Catholic opposition in some towns was strong, with one missionary complaining that with all the different kinds of Jesuits, Capuchins and other monks, 'the city of Namur is more clerical than the pope'.[34]

In Flanders, an American Adventist of German descent, Reinhold Klingbell, began the work in Antwerp in 1903 with a convert that came from the Salvation Army. A work in Brussels was opened in 1907 with ten baptisms. In 1909, there were four Adventist churches in Belgium, with the Brussels church offering bilingual services in French and Dutch.[35]

Mennonites

In 1550, Mennonites were among the largest non-Catholic Christian groupings in the Low Countries. John Calvin's wife, Idelette de Bure (1505-1549), was an Anabaptist from Liège who, with her first husband, John Stordeur, converted to Calvin's faith during their stay in Strasbourg. But the persecutions that followed in Belgium against Anabaptists were so intense that Anabaptism in Belgium completely died out by the seventeenth century. Many fled north to East Friesland, especially to Emden. In Flanders, Mennonites were given between one and six weeks to recant; in the south, they were executed within one week of capture. The number of Belgian Mennonite martyrs is estimated at 800.[36]

In 1945, the Mennonite Relief Committee (MRC) of Elkhart, Indiana, began post-war relief work. Between 1947 and 1948, the MRC rebuilt houses in the badly damaged village of Büllingen, near the German border. In 1950, missionaries David and Wilma Shank were sent to Belgium by the MRC, more with the aim of helping other Christian groups in the country, both Protestant and Catholic, than to re-establish a Mennonite movement.[37] Social work, mediation and educational work took place at the Protestant Social Centre in Brussels from the early 1960s and were continued by the Brussels Mennonite Centre after 1982.[38]

The Missions Interests Committee of the Beachy Amish Mennonites began work in Poperinge in 1986 and made three unsuccessful attempts to begin an assembly, with the last missionaries leaving in early 2007. At the time of writing, there were two Mennonite churches in Belgium, one in Brussels and the other in Flavion.[39]

Work in Flanders

The Flemish branch of the Dutch Reformed Church (beginning in 1894) and the Silo mission, under the leadership of Nicolas de Jonge (beginning in 1875), concentrated their missionary effort in Flanders. But the Protestant churches in French-speaking Belgium grew more quickly than those in the Flemish region. The Dutch Reformed Church was composed principally of Christians from Holland. The Silo movement was distinctively Flemish, while the work of the Salvation Army, the Baptists, the *Société Evangélique Belge* and the Brethren was almost exclusively in Wallonia. Only the historic *Union of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Belgium* was present proportionately across the whole country. Even in Wallonia, Protestant work grew faster in some regions than others. This difference was in part due to the receptivity of local government officials. In industrial Wallonia, socialist administrations accepted Protestantism more favourably than in the more Catholic-dominated Flanders.[40]

By 1909, there were a total of 115 Protestant churches in the country, operating in French, Dutch and German, and including nine foreign churches.[41]

Help from America (1918-)

The second phase of missionary activity begins with American activity in Belgium after 1918.

Methodism

Wesleyan Methodists from Britain had shown an interest in Belgium in the nineteenth century, starting a church in Brussels in 1816. But this mission post never grew into a larger work and did not continue into the twentieth century. A second beginning for Belgian Methodism came with American help after the close of the First World War. From 1917, Bishop J. Cannon of the (American) Methodist Episcopal Church South made frequent visits to Europe, and a Centenary Fund was established to encourage donations to the European Missionary work. In addition to war relief after the devastation of the First World War, Methodist evangelistic efforts were motivated by the breaking away of many Belgians from the Roman Catholic Church. American Methodists chose Belgium, alongside Poland and Czechoslovakia, as countries for a new missionary outreach.[42]

Aside from an immediate focus on war relief, Methodist ministry began two educational institutions, an orphanage and a boarding school for girls, both in Uccle, a suburb of Brussels. In 1919, a clinic was opened in Ypres and preaching posts were begun in areas where no Protestant witness was yet present. By 1925, fifteen new churches had been planted and membership statistics showed nearly 300 adult members. In 1926 or 1928, Methodists were the first to begin Protestant radio broadcasts in Belgium.[43]

With a substantial financial investment and the sending of personnel, the missionary effort brought considerable growth. Methodists were active in open-air evangelistic meetings and door-

to-door visitation and Bible distribution, organising an evangelistic campaign in Brussels in 1930 in which other Protestant churches took part. Bibles were sometimes distributed in newspaper format, because the Belgian working class would not easily accept the traditional New Testament format which too closely resembled the 'mass books' used by priests in Catholic churches.[44]

Despite considerable growth, the American depression severely affected the mission work and all American missionaries were withdrawn in 1932. Belgian Methodists had to sell properties and stop some ministries. By 1939, there were twenty Methodist churches in Belgium, with approximately one thousand members.[45]

After the Second World War, American and British chaplains preached in Methodist chapels and help to rebuild the congregations. Four churches had their buildings completely destroyed and twenty other Methodist church buildings or institutions required major repairs.[46] Funds from America helped to reconstruct church buildings and pay salaries. Twenty-two congregations, twelve French-speaking and ten Flemish, saw strong growth in their membership, which grew to about 5000 members and adherents. Existing churches were strengthened, but besides a new work in Hasselt in the early 1950s, no new churches were started.[47]

Methodists worked cooperatively with some historic Protestant groupings in Belgium, eventually leading to a union with the Evangelical Protestant Church in 1969, which was itself the 1959 merger of the historic United Protestant Churches and the (Flemish) Silo mission. In 1979, the Belgian Christian Missionary Church and the Reformed Church joined the other groups to form the United Protestant Church of Belgium. In 1980, there were 104 churches comprising the denomination.[48]

The Belgian Gospel Mission
At the close of the First World War, the American couple of Ralph and Edith Norton founded the Belgian Gospel Mission, originally an extension of their ministry to Belgian troops stationed in London, England.[49] Through intense evangelistic activity, despite his difficulties speaking both French and Dutch,[50] and with funds and workers coming from the USA and the UK, Norton and his colleagues began 33 churches in less than 20 years. The young churches later became the Belgian Evangelical Free Churches.[51]

After cooperative work with the existing Belgian Protestant denominations directly after the First World War, mainly in relief work,[52] the work of the Belgian Gospel Mission was carried out independently and sometimes in opposition to the existing churches. Ralph Norton was a graduate of Moody Bible Institute and considered the existing Belgian Protestant churches liberal. They were affected by the higher criticism of the Bible and so cooperation was out of the question.[53] If Norton and his colleagues were going to carry out a massive distribution of Bibles, 'they would have to do it alone'.[54] This separation was despite the fact that Ralph owed his own conversion to the work of Quaker and Methodist preachers.[55] By the death of Ralph Norton in 1934, more than 100 missionaries with the Belgian Gospel Mission were spread out in 66 cities and towns in the country.[56]

Pentecostalism
Mrs. Ada Esselbach, in charge of the Sailor's Rest mission post of the Dutch Reformed Church in Antwerp, was probably the first witness of the Pentecostal movement in Belgium. Cornelis Potman, after spending years in the United States, returned to spread Pentecostal teachings in Belgium soon after the end of the First World War.[57] By 1923, the first Pentecostal missionaries began holding meetings in Brussels. In 1928, the first (Flemish) church was founded, and towards the end of 1930 Theodore Lopresties, who had attempted at first to work with the Belgian Evangelical Mission, registered the first independent Francophone Pentecostal Church in Belgium.[58]

Douglas Scott crossed the Channel in the 1930s and held a series of revival meetings in France and, despite his poor knowledge of French, discovered a great receptivity to the Pentecostal message. By 1932, invitations were issued to hold campaigns in Belgium, with meetings following in Brussels, Liège, Charleroi and the region around Mons. The Baptist church in Ougrée, near Liège, invited Scott to preach at the church, and the church grew from 60 to 150 members in a few months. But tensions within the church, and with two neighbouring Methodist churches, lead the Pentecostals to leave the church and found an independent Pentecostal church in Liège.[59] After the campaigns, Scott organised enthusiastic converts into churches and appointed evangelists and pastors for the congregations.[60]

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Belgian Pentecostalism grew to become very

diverse, with eight different Pentecostal denominations in Wallonia and seven in Flanders, along with a considerable number of ethnic churches.[61] Two of these deserve particular mention. The Antioch church movement began with one church in Brussels in 1987 and has grown to include 81 congregations by 2012. Most of these congregations are composed primarily of non-Belgians (Brazilian, Hispanic, Congolese and Rwandan), even if the language in the church services is French or Dutch.[62]

The Church of God, led by Bishop Martin Mutyebele, has also seen remarkable growth. The denomination is almost exclusively African, although sermons are preached primarily in French. The Brussels congregation, started in 1986, is now the largest Protestant church in the country, with a membership of over two thousand. The Church of God numbered 37 congregations in 2012, including one Polish-speaking church.[63]

Movements toward unity

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the United Protestant Church of Belgium remained the only Protestant denomination that was officially recognised by the Belgian government, despite the significant number of Protestant churches that existed outside the movement.[64] In the 1990s, this privilege was increasingly contested by the evangelical churches not represented by the United Protestant Church,[65] which for that reason had no voice in any dealings with the government or access to government subsidy for those churches that would wish it.[66] Significantly, there was also no possibility of representation in the administration of Protestant education in schools, Protestant social work, Protestant television and radio programmes, or Protestant chaplaincy in prisons, hospitals and the armed forces. Rather than joining the United Protestant Church, the evangelical churches organised their own association and asked the United Protestant Church to join *their* association, the Federal Synod of Protestant and Evangelical Churches in Belgium.[67]

Are evangelical churches dangerous cults?

At the same time, the Belgian government became increasingly concerned about the activity of cults in the country, and established a commission to study the phenomenon. In April 1997, the commission published a report, including the names of groups that it considered to be cults. The list was made public and published on the front page of major newspapers, and live debates were held on television. Twenty-one evangelical denominations were on the list, representing more than 200 congregations, including the Evangelical Free Church, the Assemblies of God, the Amish and the Brethren. Charismatic Catholic organisations, the Catholic lay organisation Opus Dei, as well as Buddhist movements were also on the list.[68]

The 'cult list' had been drawn up on the basis of testimonies and complaints compiled by Belgian police and intelligence services. There was no recourse possible, and evangelicals mobilised to clarify their identity as Protestants in the eyes of the government and of the population as a whole. On May 7, 1997, the Belgian parliament voted to accept the report, but dissociated the 'cult list' from the report in order to sidestep a political crisis.[69]

The evangelicals would not merge into the United Protestant Church as the Methodists and Reformed Churches had done. They claimed that since they actually represented more Belgian Protestants than the United Protestant Church, they should be recognised by the Belgian government apart from the United Protestant Church. But the Belgian government insisted on only one organisation to represent Protestants.[70]

Evangelical disunity and unity

What unity existed among evangelicals suffered when a number of the older evangelical denominations which had started work in Belgium before the First World War entered into separate partnership agreements with the United Protestant Church. The Belgian Baptist Union (1997),[71] the Salvation Army (1999) and the Seventh-Day Adventists (2003) were among those who were prepared to negotiate directly with the historic United Protestant Church.

After four years of negotiations between the Federal Synod and the United Protestant Church, a solution was found: the two groups would be equal partners in a new organisation, the Administrative Council of Protestant and Evangelical Religion in Belgium, which became the official and unique intermediary between all Protestant Churches and the Belgian government in January 2003.[72]

Religion and the state

The initiative of the Belgian state to include newer Protestant and evangelical movements might seem somewhat surprising in the context of advancing

secularism in Western Europe, but it is part of an historic agenda to recognise the role of religion in Belgian society. In Belgium, religion is recognised as a positive influence on morality and on society as a whole. 'When the churches are full, the prisons are empty', explains one Protestant author. A separate reason applies to the Roman Catholic Church: government subsidy is compensation for the buildings and other assets confiscated from the church by the state under Napoleon.[73]

In practical terms, a recognised religious group having an established geographical area (a parish) can apply for a pastoral salary, which may be granted by the federal Minister of Justice. In addition, the church can apply to local authorities for financial help related to the maintenance of the church building. The principle of the mutual independence of religion is maintained, however, and the state is denied by the Constitution any authority in the *spiritual* affairs of the church: the choice of its ministers, its statement of faith and its organisation. There has been no known incident of the state overstepping its boundaries in any of the 'recognised' religious groups since Belgian independence. In addition, local churches can refuse subsidy even within a religious movement or denomination that is recognised by the government.[74]

The implications of Protestant unity

The unity of Protestants, even if it remains on an administrative level, has had and will continue to have profound consequences for Belgian Protestantism. First of all, the effort has been made by all major representatives of Belgian Protestantism and evangelicalism to be as inclusive as possible in the new Administrative Council. After 2003, any group that chooses not to be part of this body runs the risk of being considered a cult.[75]

The United Protestant Church has had to grieve the loss of its status as sole intermediary with the government, a role it held for 164 years. Evangelical churches, which had historically classed themselves as evangelicals first and Protestant second (or not at all), went to great efforts to re-identify themselves with Belgian Protestantism. Many denominations and local churches have changed their names to include the word 'Protestant' on signs and in official documents. For example, the Open Brethren changed their denominational name to the Assemblies of Evangelical Protestants. Another striking example of this is the name change of the Evangelical Free Churches (the denomination begun by the Belgian Gospel Mission) to the Evangelical Protestant Churches, a name almost identical to what the United Protestant Church called itself before 1969 (Evangelical Protestant Church), during decades of considerable tension with the Belgian Gospel Mission.[76]

The benefits of state recognition, both to achieve legitimacy and potential financing, were ultimately more important than the historical tensions that had existed between the different language groups; they were also more important than the theological differences between liberals, moderates, fundamentalists and Pentecostals. As this unity promotes and strengthens the witness of Belgian Protestants, it will be celebrated. By 2012, there were more than seven hundred churches registered with the Administrative Council of Protestant and Evangelical Religion in Belgium.[77]

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Endnotes

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2   Michel Dandoy (ed.), *A la découverte du monde protestante en Belgique* (Brussels: Eglise Protestante Unie de Belgique, 1994) 5-6.

3   Guido Marnef, 'Chapter Twenty: the Netherlands' in Andrew Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World* (Routledge Reference Resources Online, 2000) 344-364; Jacques Bosquillon, 'Les gueux et les Républiques Calvinistes (1566-1585)', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 42-46. For the story of the persecution of dissenters and the establishment of the Calvinist church in Tournai, see Gérard Moreau, *Histoire du Protestantisme à Tournai jusqu'à la veille de la révolution des Pays-Bas* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1962); Charlie Steen, *A Chronicle of Conflict: Tournai 1580-1567* (Utrecht: HES, 1985).

4   Emile Braekman, 'L'église sous la croix (1604-1781)', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 47.

5   Jean Meyhoffer, 'Les origines du Protestantisme Belge', *Le Messager Evangélique* 328 (1992) 181-198.

6   Michel Tilleur, 'Les débuts de la Réforme', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 22-27;

Frank Le Cornu, *Origine des églises Reformées wallonnes* (Utrecht: van Boekhoven, 1932) 45; E. M. Braekman, *Le Protestantisme belge au 16ᵉ siècle: Belgique, nord de la France, refuge* (Carrières-sous-Poissy, France: La Cause, 1999) 207-218. A French-speaking Protestant congregation still meets in the crypt of the Canterbury Cathedral and is officially affiliated with the United Protestant Church of Belgium.

7   The purpose of the Confession (1561) was to prove to the persecutors that the adherents of the Reformed faith were not rebels. Emile Braekman, 'L'extraordinaire destin de Guy de Brès (1522-1567)', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 28-33.

8   Moreau, *Histoire du Protestantisme à Tournai*, 200-205.

9   Cited in Tanguy de Gravelles, 'Un curé belge chez l'Oncle Sam', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 110.

10 Tilleur, 'Débuts de la Réforme', 27; E. M. Braekman, *Le Protestantisme belge au 17ᵉ siècle: Belgique, nord de la France, refuge* (Carrières-sous-Poissy, France: La Cause, 2001) 48-49.

11 Braekman, 'L'église sous la Croix', 59.

12 Michel Dandoy, *Le Protestantisme: mémoires et perspectives* (Bruxelles: Éditions Racine, 2005) 22-23; Michel Tilleur, 'Le regroupement des Protestants (1781-1830)', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 70-72.

13 In an interesting reversal for Dutch Protestantism, the Belgian revolution witnessed *Catholic* political and economic liberalism confronting *Calvinist* conservatism. John Molony, 'Christian Social Thought' in Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley (eds.), *World Christianities, c.1815 – c.1914* (The Cambridge History of Christianity; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 155.

14 Gordon Craig, 'The System of Alliances and the Balance of Power' in J.P.T. Bury (ed.), *The Zenith of European Power 1830–70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960) 247-250.

15 Emile Braekman, 'Le réveil du Protestantisme dans le royaume de Belgique (1830-1980)', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 87; Dandoy, *Découverte*, 8-9; Meyhoffer, 'Origines du Protestantisme Belge', 197.

16 Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 76; Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme en Belgique au XIXᵉ siècle* (Flavion-Florennes: Le Phare, 1988) 103-132.

17 One of these evangelists was Vincent van Gogh, who worked for the *Union des Églises Protestantes Évangéliques* among the coal miners in Mons from 1878 to 1879. Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 77.

18 Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 87.

19 Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 138, 163-166; Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 77-78.

20 The 'Merchant Adventurers' left Antwerp in 1563 but the cause was economic, not religious. The sale of English textile was forbidden and the English merchants returned in 1564 when the trade was renewed. Christine Lannoy-Payson, 'L'Anglicanisme en Belgique', *Belgia 2000: Toute l'histoire de Belgique* 5 (1984) 98.

21 Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 185-186.

22 Lannoy-Payson, 'L'Anglicanisme en Belgique', 99; Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 196-198.

23 Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 203-205; Lannoy-Payson, 'L'Anglicanisme en Belgique', 103.

24 There were disparities between the different Anglican parishes regarding the subsidies received from the Belgian government. The church of Spa only received partial subsidy. The churches of Malines and Liège were sponsored by the Colonial and Continental Mission Society. Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 210-212. The Belgian Anglican churches also asked for help from the British Foreign Office and the pastors of Antwerp and Ostend were granted subsidies in 1835 by Act of Parliament. In 1870, Belgian legislation confirmed subsidies for all Anglican congregations in Belgium, giving Anglicanism the same status as Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism. Lannoy-Payson, 'L'Anglicanisme en Belgique', 100-103.

25 Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of the Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006) 67-68.

26 Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name*, 95-96; Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 168-175.

27 Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 180-183; Grass, *Gathering to His Name*, 107-108.

28 G.W. Lorein and J.-L. Simonet, 'Le Protestantisme évangélique non-E.P.U.B. en Belgique', *Le Messager Évangélique* 344 (1994) 351; Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 167-184.

29 Dandoy, *Protestantisme*, 89-92; Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 80; Lorein and Simonet, 'Le Protestantisme', 350.

30 No authoritative history of Baptists in Belgium has been written and there is even a difference in the date given for the founding of the Ougrée church: either 1890, 1892 or 1893. Dandoy, *Protestantisme*, 35; Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 80-81; Sébastien Fath, *Une autre manière d'être Chrétien en France: Socio-histoire de l'implantation Baptiste (1810-1950)* (Histoire et Société; Genève: Labor et fides, 2001) 243; Jean Desy, 'Small Minority in a Catholic Land' in *Baptist Witness in Catholic Europe* (Rome: Baptist Publishing House, 1973) 52-53.

31 For example, in Bruay (region of Calais) the president of the mining society made a personal gift to François Vincent to enable him to buy land for a

building for the growing Baptist congregation; Fath, *Une autre manière*, 194-195, 243-245.

32 Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 87.

33 Door-to-door work was forbidden in Catholic Luxembourg, so the sending of the magazine was the only means of witness available to the Adventists. Georges Vandenvelde, *100 Ans d'Adventisme en Belgique et au Grand-Duché du Luxembourg*, Spécial Centenaire (Brussels: Fédération Belgo-Luxembourgeoise des Eglises Adventistes du Septième Jour, 1996) 3.

34 Vandenvelde, *100 Ans*, 6.

35 Vandenvelde, *100 Ans*, 6-7.

36 Dandoy, *Protestantisme*, 93; Tilleur, 'Débuts de la Réforme', 13-16, 19-20; Cornelius J. Dyck and Dennis D. Martin, *The Mennonite Encyclopedia. A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Pub. House, 1955) 270-272.

37 David Shank writes about the difficulties of re-establishing a Mennonite presence in Brussels in the 1950s in 'A Missionary Approach to a Dechristianized Society', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24 (1954) 38-55.

38 Personal interview with Robert & Wilda Otto and Peter Crossman, Director of the Brussels Mennonite Centre (Brussels, January 15, 2007).

39 Personal interview Otto/Crossman 2007; Nanne van der Zijpp and Robert Charles, 'Belgium' in *Global Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1987), http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B4447.html. The 2010 update shows the closing of the Beachy Amish work.

40 Dale, 'Aperçu sur l'évangélisation en Belgique pendant l'entre-deux-guerres' (Master's thesis, Faculté Libre de Théologie Evangélique, 1976) 2-3.

41 Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 87.

42 A Central Conference structure was established with the three countries, with the first held in Prague in 1927 and the second in Brussels in 1929. Two other American Methodist groups were active in Europe in the twentieth century. The Evangelical Association, with its German roots, focussed its work in Germany and Switzerland, while the Methodist Episcopal Church was active in Scandinavia, France, Italy and Eastern Europe. In addition, British Wesleyan Methodism had been active in several Western European countries (but not Belgium) since the end of the eighteenth century. Patrick Ph. Streiff, *Methodism in Europe: 19th and 20th Century* (Tallinn, Estonia: Impressum, 2003) 152-157; Paul Neff Garber, *The Methodists of Continental Europe* (New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, 1949) 27.

43 Streiff, *Methodism in Europe*, 198-199; Neff Garber, *Methodists of Continental Europe*, 27-28.

44 Dale, 'Aperçu sur l'évangélisation en Belgique', 18.

45 Egbert A. Bos, 'Church Planting in Flanders' (Master's thesis, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit te Leuven, 1988) 11; Streiff, *Methodism in Europe*, 199; Neff Garber, *Methodists of Continental Europe*, 85.

46 Neff Garber, *Methodists of Continental Europe*, 96.

47 Streiff, *Methodism in Europe*, 275-277.

48 Streiff, *Methodism in Europe*, 3; 'New Church in Belgium', *Christian Century* 86.30 (1969) 970-971; Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 85-87.

49 The Salvation Army and the *Société Évangélique Belge* (Bible Society) were also active in offering practical help and service during the war, but were hindered by limited financial and human resources. Dale, 'Aperçu sur l'évangélisation en Belgique', 4.

50 Norton was forced to use translators, which slowed the progress of the mission. Phyllis Thompson, *Tison ardent des Flandres: triomphes de l'évangile en Belgique* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1973) 55.

51 Braekman, 'Réveil du Protestantisme', 82.

52 Dale, 'Aperçu sur l'évangélisation en Belgique', 10-15.

53 Philip E. Howard, *A New Invasion of Belgium* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times Company, 1924) 88-89, 97; Dandoy, *Protestantisme,* 39-40. Ralph completed a two year course at Moody Bible Institute. Mrs. Ralph C. (Edith) Norton, *Opened Windows of Heaven* (Toronto: Evangelical Publishers, 1927) 11.

54 Thompson, *Tison ardent des Flandres*, 54.

55 Ralph Norton 'came under conviction of sin through the preaching of a Quaker evangelist … later, when the Methodists began a series of meetings, Ralph and a friend visited from house to house, praying with those they interviewed'. Edith's grandparents were Methodists as well. Howard, *New Invasion of Belgium*, vii, viii.

56 Thompson, *Tison Ardent des Flandres*, 65.

57 Cornelis van der Laan, 'The Pentecostal Movement in Holland: Its Origin and Its International Position' in *Pneuma. The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 5.2 (1983) 34.

58 From the outset, considerable tensions existed between the Belgian Gospel Mission and the nascent Pentecostal churches. David Bundy, 'Pentecostalism in Belgium', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 8.1 (1986) 44, 48.

59 Dale, 'Aperçu sur l'évangélisation en Belgique', 56. The Baptist church in Ougrée (Liège) was not only the first Baptist church in Belgium and the origin of one of the first Pentecostal churches in Belgium, it may also have been the source of Adventism in Belgium. In July 1897, the first Adventist missionaries were sent to Liège from Switzerland after a 'Macedonian cry' was received from what was probably a group of Baptists in Liège. In 1897,

the only Baptist church in Liège was the Ougrée church. Vandenvelde, *100 Ans*, 3.

60 Bundy, 'Pentecostalism in Belgium', 43-47.

61 Bundy, 'Pentecostalism in Belgium', 41.

62 John Doherty, 'L'implantation d'églises en Belgique' (Unpublished paper: Brussels, 2001) 10. John Doherty, 'Church Planting in Belgium: A Study of the Structures and Support for New Church Plants' (Unpublished paper, University of Wales, 2002) 17-18.

63 See www.cacpe.be/index.php?page=annuaire_f [accessed October 31, 2012].

64 Lorein and Simonet, 'Le protestantisme évangélique', 335-343.

65 There are also a large number of evangelicals within the United Protestant Church, which covers the entire spectrum of Protestant theology from liberal to conservative evangelical. Infant baptism is generally practised, although some congregations practise believer's baptism exclusively.

66 Whether or not evangelical churches should accept subsidies was a matter of debate. George Winston, 'L'église peut-elle accepter des subsides de l'état?', *Le Messager Evangélique* 360 (1997) 67-78; Jean-Louis Simonet, 'Des subsides de l'état? … oui, mais', *Le Messager Evangélique* 361 (1997) 91-105.

67 Jean-Louis Simonet, 'La Fédération Evangélique Francophone de Belgique', *Le Messager Evangélique* 359 (1997) 51-53; 'Fondation du Synode Fédéral des Églises Protestantes et Évangéliques de Belgique', *Le Messager Evangélique* 363 (1997) 166.

68 Willy Fautré, '21 Evangelical Denominations Labeled as Cults in Belgium', *Compass Direct*, June 23, 1997; Jean Valentin, 'Le Protestantisme évangélique belge à la croisée des chemins', *Le Messager Evangélique* 360 (1997) 59.

69 Dandoy, *Protestantisme*, 50-51; Paul Vandenbroeck, 'La chasse aux sorcières', *Le Messager Evangélique* 360 (1997) 61-66. In France, a similar debate among Protestants and evangelicals took place after the government commissioned a parliamentary report on the subject. Louis Schweitzer, ''Les sectes'. l'Etat de la question dans la société', *Les Cahiers de l'Ecole Pastorale* 28 (1997) 5-10.

70 Jules Lambotte, 'L'Assemblée Générale de la Fédération Evangélique Francophone de Belgique', *Le Messager Evangélique* 370 (1999) 15-16. One of the points of divergence between the two groups was the level of relations that the United Protestant Church maintained with the Roman Catholic Church. In 1971 the United Protestant and Catholic churches agreed to a mutual recognition of baptism. Hugh Robert Boudin, 'Churches in the European Community: 2. The Churches in Belgium', *Expository Times* 104.5 (1993) 134-135.

71 For Baptists, this was a change of position from the strict separation of church and state espoused in the 1970s. Rudolph M. Wood, 'Environment for Minority Mission', in *Baptist Witness in Catholic Europe* (Rome: Baptist Publishing House, 1973) 62.

72 Dandoy, *Protestantisme*, 99-103. For the case of the Baptists 'changing sides', see Samuel Verhaeghe, 'Report du Président, 1997' (Ostend: Belgian Baptist Union, January 16, 1998). In 1998, the year following the signing of the partnership agreement between the Baptist Union and the United Protestant Church, the Baptists saw two of their churches receive state subsidy for the salary of their pastors. Samuel Verhaeghe, 'Report du Président, 1998' (Ostend: Belgian Baptist Union, December 31, 1998).

73 Simonet, 'Des subsides de l'état?', 91.

74 Simonet, 'Des subsides de l'état?', 91-92. The recognition of Islam by the Belgian government in 1974 and the attendant growth of Islam in the latter part of the century also meant that increasing numbers of Muslim clerics were funded by the Belgian government. Ultimately, it was unpalatable for evangelicals to consider that Muslims would benefit from state recognition with all its attendant advantages while they would not. Meryem Kanmaz, 'The Recognition and Institutionalization of Islam in Belgium', *Muslim World* 92 (2002) 99-113.

75 Simonet, 'Fédération Evangélique Francophone De Belgique', 51.

76 In all fairness, however, the choices of a new name for the denomination which would include both 'evangelical' and 'protestant' were limited. What is significant is that 'Protestant' was formally added to the nomenclature of many denominations and local churches.

77 For information on the total number of Protestant churches in Belgium as well as individual churches in the different denominational groupings, see the website of the Administrative Council www.cacpe.be. [Editor: The Dutch name of the Council is Administratieve Raad van de Protestants-Evangelische Eredienst (ARPEE). In French it is Conseil Administratif du Culte Protestante et Evangélique (CACPE).]