

Belgium

The area covered by the present-day Federal Kingdom of Belgium found itself under the rule of various European powers and empires throughout its history, being used as a pawn on the international political chessboard.

Christianity was gradually introduced into the country at the end of Roman rule, but evangelism did not really start until the sixth and seventh century, when missionaries such as Eloi, Aubert, Amand and others came into the area from present-day France. At that time, the local population still worshipped Gallo-roman and Germanic deities. In the eighth century, monasteries enjoyed exceptional prosperity and became the centers of intense agricultural and economic activity. The Catholic Church dominated social and political life throughout the Middle Ages.

In the fifteenth century, the Belgian territories fell under the rule of the House of Burgundy and later, the Austrian Hapsburgs. In the sixteenth century, Charles V, grandson of the Hapsburg Archduke Maximilian of Austria and son of Joanna of Aragon, inaugurated Spanish rule over the Low Countries. Initially encompassing present-day Belgium, Luxembourg, and The Netherlands, the Low Countries progressively became part of a wider empire, which included German and Austrian territories, a part of Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, and recently discovered territories in Central and South America. Under Charles V's rule, the Protestant Reformation was introduced into Belgium by the Lutherans, Anabaptists and Calvinists. The first decrees curbing heresies were passed in the 1520s. The Inquisition raged over the Low Countries; with the encouragement of Charles V, it was carried out by civil courts, but clerics of the Catholic Church were also involved in the proceedings as experts. In 1523, two Lutherans were burnt at the stake in Brussels as the Inquisition's first martyrs. Thousands of heretics or suspected heretics were tortured, hanged, drowned, decapitated, burnt or buried alive. Many Protestants fled the country and settled in Germany, England or the New World where one of the villages they founded became the current location of New York City.

Charles V's son and successor, Philip II, retained the policy of supporting the inquisition. In 1565, two thousand noblemen requested the then governor of the Low Countries, Margaret of Parma, to put an end to the Inquisition and establish freedom of religion. Encouraged by this defiance, Protestants set out to destroy images, paintings and statues in Catholic churches, an uprising called iconoclast fury. A number of Calvinist noblemen set up an army to obtain freedom of religion but were defeated by Spanish troops in 1567, north of Antwerp. In the same year, Philip II sent the Duke of Alba to the Low Countries to stamp out Protestantism for good. The Earls of Egmont and Hoorne, leaders of the rebellion, were decapitated, around 1,100 death sentences were pronounced and the total possessions of about 9,000 people were confiscated. By 1585, the Catholic Counter-Reformation had been successful in the southern part of the Low Countries (present-day Belgium) but war continued with the northern provinces (mainly the present-day Netherlands) which eventually managed to become independent, serving as a refuge for persecuted Protestants from the southern provinces.

Until the beginning of the 18th century, the area now called Belgium remained under Spanish rule (a rule challenged by the Kings of France) and also under the influence of Roman Catholicism. However, from 1640 onwards, the Roman Catholic Church faced an internal conflict between jansenists and jesuits. At its origin was the publication of the book *Augustinus*, written by the late bishop of Ypres, Corneille Jansen, whose doctrine was close to

Protestant ideas of the time. The Jansenist movement inspired by the book survived in the country until around 1725-1730.

In the eighteenth century, the area now called Belgium was under Austrian rule, with the exception of a few years of French occupation. In 1781, the Austrian Hapsburg emperor, Joseph II, published an « Edict of Tolerance » which recognized freedom of worship and established that all citizens, whatever their religion, would have equal access to public jobs. He also attacked the privileges of the Catholic Church, dissolving hundreds of convents, replacing all episcopal seminaries by one general seminar under his authority and limiting the number of processions and the like. These measures caused widespread opposition among the clergy.

In 1789, the French Revolution abolished absolute monarchy and the privileges of the Catholic Church in France. Six years later, the French Republic opened war against Austria, annexed the Belgian territories and converted them into nine French administrative divisions to be ruled according to the French law and Constitution. Many churches were closed or desecrated, abbeys were burnt down and hundreds of nonjuring priests were deported. To restore religious peace, Napoleon reestablished freedom of worship for the Catholic Church and concluded a concordat with the Vatican.

After the fall of Napoleon in 1815, Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia agreed to include the (Catholic) Belgian territories in the (Protestant dominated) Kingdom of the Netherlands, to protect themselves against France. Through various repressive measures, the new sovereign, William I, tried to bring the Catholic Church to its knees, quickly alienating his new Catholic subjects in the process. He closed Catholic schools, expelled the Christian Brothers, left three of the five dioceses vacant and broke off concordat negotiations with the Holy See. All the minor seminaries were closed, and candidates for the priesthood had to attend a state-run college. It was in this context that unionism, a political coalition between Catholics and anticlerical liberals to drive out the Dutch, began to take shape in the 1820s:.

In September 1830, the Belgians rebelled against Dutch rule and gained independence under the protection of England and France. A parliamentary monarchy was created and Leopold I, a German Lutheran, was chosen as the first King. The Belgian Constitution of 1831 guaranteed complete freedom of worship, including the right for each religious body to select its own officials without state interference. Freedom of education was also recognized.

Catholicism, Protestantism (about 5,000 members, only 2,000 Belgians of whom were Belgians) and Judaism (about 1,000 members) enjoyed de facto state recognition. The state did not endorse the theological claims of any religion but afforded a privileged status to all of them on the basis of their social utility, providing for the payment of the salaries and retirement pensions of their clergy and chaplains, the maintenance of their places of worship, and so on. Anglicanism (only a few hundred members) was recognized in 1835.

In 1846, the Catholic-Liberal political alliance disintegrated. During the next thirty years, bitter political battles took place between Catholics and Liberals, especially over Catholic and public school issues.

Under Leopold II (1865-1909), Protestantism's various denominations experienced some significant growth. The Salvation Army opened a mission in 1889. In 1904 the first Baptist church was established. In 1899 the (Dutch-speaking) Reformed Churches were created.

WW I (1914-1918) slowed down the expansion of Protestantism, but this conflict drew the attention of British and American Protestants to Belgium. A number of missions, which had helped war victims and Belgian troops under siege, opened several churches after 1918. The American evangelists Ralph and Judith Norton founded the Belgian Evangelical Mission and a Biblical Institute in 1919. The Jehovah's Witnesses movement also started in the 1920s. British and American Methodists created the Methodist Mission in 1922. In 1923, a Swedish couple began to spread Pentecostal teachings but it was only in the aftermath of WW II (1940-1945) that the Pentecostal denomination emerged under the name of Assemblies of God. Between the two World Wars, a number of Protestant denominations joined the main branch of Protestantism that had been recognized just after the creation of the Belgian state.

Since 1945, Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches have grown rapidly. Their followers now number more than those of the state-recognized United Protestant Church of Belgium. Administrative merging of both branches of Protestantism (about 100,000 believers in total) is in process.

The influx of peoples from Central and Eastern European countries along with Muslim countries has opened the door to Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam in Belgium. Islam (numbering about 250,000) was recognized in 1974. Most Muslims come from North Africa (the Malikite School of Islam) and Turkey (the Hanafite School of Islam). Orthodox Christians numbered about 40,000 in 1985 and are affiliated with either the Greek Church or one of the Russian Churches. Secular humanism was also recognized in 1994. Jehovah's Witnesses, who number about 40,000, have not been recognized.

Many other non-Christian groups settled in Belgium in the second half of the 20th century, and Belgium is now home to a wide spectrum of the world's religions (including Buddhist, Hindu, esoteric, and magical groups). In 1997, a parliamentary commission on cults issued a report listing 189 religious movements. Most of them represented this new pluralistic religious community, but there were over 20 Evangelical and Pentecostal-oriented groups mentioned, and even some Catholic movements such as the Charismatics. Since the publication of that report and the creation of an observatory on cults, many minority religions have complained about religious intolerance and discrimination.

Willy Fautré

Sources:

Braekman Emile. *150 ans de vie protestante en Belgique*. Brussels, Belgium. Bulletin VIII-7 de la Société d'histoire du protestantisme belge, 1980.

Le protestantisme belge au 16^e siècle. Carrières-sous-Poissy, France. Editions La Cause, 1997.

Hasquin, Hervé. *La Wallonie, son histoire*. Brussels, Belgium. Editions Luc Pire, 1999.

Jansen, H.P.H. *Prisma Kalendarium. Geschiedenis van de Lage Landen in jaartallen*, Utrecht, Nederland. Uitgeverij Het Spectrum, 1995.