

Barrel Ecumenics

Ab Flipse¹

(On the Lighter Side)

Till well into the 1960s, the members of the student corps of the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam, founded by Abraham Kuyper, would meet the Catholic student corps of Sanctus Thomas Aquinas during the annual gazing rite on the Museum Square in Amsterdam. They would fight each other robustly after they had equally gobbled down a barrel of beer. The Reformed students of the VU would keep up their courage by roaring rousing Protestant revolutionary songs from the 80-year war of independence against Catholic Spain²

Although the Dutch student culture, like the national culture in general, was strongly divided into religious or worldview groupings called “*zuilen*” or “pillars,” this was not the only annual event at which these two student groups would meet each other. Ever since the founding of both around 1900, they would also have amicable contacts. For example, during election campaigns they would cooperate in support of Christian politics in the context of a propaganda club. When the “rightist coalition” of Christian parties won the election in 1901 by voting in Abraham Kuyper as Premier, they all sang the famous “*Da Costa*” Reformational song together in a brotherly spirit of political victory.³

At a philosophical debate about Thomas Aquinas, the Reformed students became acquainted with the Neo-Scholastic philosophy even before Dooyeweerd’s philosophy known as “*Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*” was

¹*Beweging*, Fall 2010, p. 9. Transl. Jan H. Boer. Original title: “Oecumene van het vat.”

²They were called “*Geuzenliederen*.” The most famous and enduring of these is the current Dutch national anthem, “*Wilhelmus van Nassauen....*” See <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geuzenliederen>.

³Note the quotation marks. Probably the author meant to indicate that the term was only partially appropriate, for the Christian coalition politics in that context was nothing silly, trivial or conservative like the (infamous) so-called “Christian right” in the USA 2017, the year of this translation.

developed at the VU. Though the situation for the VU students was different from that of those studying at secular universities, they saw themselves challenged by comparable problems, namely, how to face the spirit of the secular, liberal academic world. What is the relationship between faith and science or scholarship in general?

In spite of the joint challenges, true ecumenical attitudes were out of the question. The chasm between the Catholic Aquinas and the Reformed Da Costa was too wide. One Thomist remembers a joint society programme: "The Reformed were not good at bridge, but they excelled in drinking beer." Anyway, the Thomas group met an inglorious death during the 1970s on the wave of secularization and misconduct.

It is ironic that in 2002, the VU's student corps called "*LANX*", searching for sister associations, sought to join the successor of the Thomas corps, the national Union of Catholic Student Societies, the so-called "*Aller Heiligen Convent*" or "All Saints Convent."

Whether all this teaches us anything about the vitality of either the Reformed or Catholic traditions, I don't know. The fact is that currently no more religious battles are fought at the Museum Square.