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Sources of Secession: The Netherlands Hervormde Kerk on the Eve of the Dutch Immigration to the Midwest (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Sources of Secession: The Netherlands Hervormde Kerk on the Eve of the Dutch Immigration to the Midwest, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, No. 17. Gerrit J. ten Zythoff. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 189 pp., \$12.95 paper. Reviewed by Arnold Koekkoek, Associate Professor of History.

Martin Marty, in his foreword to this book, notes that to the non-Reformed historian, the complexity of Calvinist splits, denominations, and different groups makes Reformed church history appear Byzantine, almost hopelessly complicated and intricate. I do not believe that ten Zythoff's book will dispel that notion. If anything, it will help to justify the label, even for those who are part of the Reformed tradition. This is not to say that the book is at fault, but rather that it is helpful in laying bare more of those intricacies and their roots.

Generally *Sources of Secession* lives up to its subtitle in acquainting the reader with the diversity of movements, schools of thought, and individualistic approaches to the church that existed within the framework of the Netherlands Hervormde Kerk in the four decades preceding the Secession of 1834, or the *Afscheiding*. It was this secession which, in turn, preceded the first major Dutch immigration to the American midwest.

The prospective reader should pay careful attention to that subtitle, because it means what it says. The focus of the book is on the Hervormde Kerk, *not* on the secession or what ten Zythoff calls the Christian Seceded Church or the seceders themselves. The seceders get relatively brief treatment, their church none at all. I say this because I expected to find out more about the latter, especially after reading Martin Marty's characterization of Albertus C. van Raalte as "this book's hero" (xiii). This is not really so, for the book is not about van Raalte but about the soil from which he grew. Careful re-reading of the author's preface and introduction after I'd finished the book showed me my expectation was mistaken. I was disappointed, but I should not have been.

Examined in the light of what the author promises, this book does its job quite well. It deals with a subject usually neglected and little known, particularly in North America: the background of the secession and immigration, rather

than those movements themselves and their subsequent history. The author argues that those movements cannot be understood properly apart from their background, which he here seeks to bring to life. The complexities described by ten Zythoff bear out Marty's description, and I have the feeling the non-Reformed reader may be even more bewildered after reading and trying to sort through all the disputes. The problem is that no amount of explanation, however lucid, can make the complexities go away. That was the situation, and ten Zythoff describes it as it was. I believe he clarifies as much as is possible without distorting and oversimplifying the thought and word of that day. And, though it is definitely not within the scope of this book, Reformed church history in the United States makes more sense when one has read about the *Sources of Secession*.

If the book has a "hero," and I question whether such a romantic concept is appropriate, Martin Marty notwithstanding, it is not A.C. van Raalte but King William I. (Incidentally, it seems inconsistent to anglicize his name while using Dutch forms for everyone else.) Ten Zythoff's monarch is neither a self-willed petty tyrant (see esp. pp. 35-42) nor a doctrinally indifferent liberal (see esp. pp. 103-104). Instead he is cast in the mold of a *politique*, after the model of an English Elizabeth I or a French Henry IV. William is pictured as a king who is genuinely concerned about doctrine and order in the church but above all desirous of national unity. Thus, for example, it is asserted that the need to placate Belgian Catholic opinion made the king and his government insist on maintaining state control over all denominations and suppressing the Dordrechtian wing of the Reformed church (see esp. pp. 112-113). While ten Zythoff makes a good case and presents much evidence to support such a view, I think he tries to swing the pendulum too far. He admits that "the king...*might* (italics mine) personally have favored the mild over the strict wing

in the Reformed Church" (p. 113). He concedes that "liberalistic enmity against orthodox doctrine" was "a factor" in determining official church policy. All I have read elsewhere and the testimony of the seceders, including van Raalte, whom the author quotes (esp. pp. 130-135), suggests strongly that this was more than "a factor."

Still, there is no question that this is a scholarly book, thoroughly—indeed, exhaustively—researched. But what is its strength is also its weakness. One does not expect such a book to be light reading, but *Sources* was written originally as ten Zythoff's Ph.D. dissertation and has all the earmarks thereof. The writing marches; it never soars. It is prosaic, never imaginative. Any inclination to flair and brilliance has been sternly suppressed by the requirements of sober academic judgment and documentation for every statement—very nearly one page of small-print endnotes for every three pages of text. That the work reads as well as

it does is a credit to Dr. Milo Van Veldhuizen, who "smoothed out" the grammatically correct writing of a man whose basic language was Dutch, thereby making the style seem natural for an American audience. Still, this is not bedtime reading for the casually interested; it is reading at which one often has to work, albeit with considerable profit.

A couple of minor points. There are a few errors which the proofreader did not detect, rather noticeable because they occur in proper nouns. And there is an odd reference (p. 2) to King William Frederick II of Prussia; this ought to be Frederick William II.

All in all, this is a scholarly, worthwhile book on a topic little known or understood. Those of Reformed background who have any interest in their roots ought to read it, and they can do so with considerable benefit.

Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace. Harold Fickett and Douglas R. Gilbert. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

What Harold Fickett and Douglas Gilbert have done in *Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace* is piece together a testimony—part biography, part critical study, part devotional—to the work of the foremost Christian fiction writer of the twentieth century. Via a scholarly essay by Fickett and a photographic essay by Gilbert, the book, handsomely printed by William B. Eerdmans, celebrates the works and days of Flannery O'Connor, who died at the age of 39, already somewhat famous for her two difficult novels and two collections of short stories.

Fickett's biography reveals no secrets. In fact, now that O'Connor scholarship has become a sprawling enterprise, there is not much anyone can add to the already well-documented, short life. She was born in a small town in Georgia, spent some time at the University of Iowa in the early years of the Writer's Workshop, then returned to live with her mother and a brood of yard birds, pheasants, and peacocks, in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she died. There is no rakish behavior in the biography, no long-standing feuds, no arresting drama at all to speak of, nothing but her own long bout with a rare disease named lupus, a battle she fought valiantly—even joyfully at times—and eventually lost. But as she was fond of saying herself, for a Christian there are far worse things in life than dying.

Although others have told the O'Connor story before, Fickett traces it again with a special eye for the way in which both her faith and talent may have developed. "The conflicts in her own personality became a means by which she would learn to identify with the impaired, the outcast, and the poor," he writes in the opening chapter. "And through this identification she would see, at last, the 'ultimate image of reality,' the Christ who himself went

beyond identification to become, in actuality, impaired, outcast and poor."

What is unique to this study of O'Connor is the faith of the collaborators. Fickett's carefully worded text has the sturdy feel of a reminiscence undertaken by a blood relative—both he and O'Connor, fiction writers and fellow believers bonded together by the blood of the Lamb. And the study has the strengths and weaknesses of any such study.

One strength, for instance, is Fickett's ability to plumb the sometimes opaque depths of O'Connor's imagery and symbolism in order to discover the spiritual truth lying at the bottom. Much of this essay is composed of a long and detailed analysis of the two difficult novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. By pursuing O'Connor's "radical images" with scalpel-and-forceps care, Fickett reveals the deeply theological tenets of faith and life which undergird her work. The result is sometimes surprising and even joyous. Fickett—and the Christian reader—have much cause to celebrate the results of the analysis. He proves her to be everything she ever claimed she was. "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy," she once wrote in an essay entitled "The Fiction Writer and His Country." She continues: "This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in relation to that." Fickett's careful analysis illustrates that there is no discrepancy between teller and tale.

Of course, the danger of the kind of deeply detailed analysis which Fickett undertakes is that O'Connor's stories may have to be pronounced clinically dead before they can be dissected. Readers of this book should see to it that they read O'Connor's fiction—and read her well—before they