

[Conference report: Amsterdam as Haven for Religious Refugees in the Early Modern Period](#)

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Embassy of the Free Mind

Keizersgracht 123, Amsterdam

In the Early Modern Period, Europe was rife with confessional disagreement and religious persecution. The escalating conflicts between various belief systems reached an apogee in the Thirty Years' War. During such tumult, where was a Huguenot, a Jew, a Quaker, an Anabaptist, or a spiritualist mystic to reside, worship freely, write, or publish their work? One of the most important cities for religious exiles and refugees in the period was Amsterdam.

From November 10-12, 2022 the Ritman Research Institute in Amsterdam hosted an international conference dedicated to exploring the theme of "Amsterdam as Haven for Religious Refugees in the Early Modern Period." The conference kicked off on Thursday evening with opening remarks by Dr. Lucinda Martin, Director of the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica and Ritman Research Institute. She emphasized that the "House with the Heads" -- the 17th century canal house in which the Research Institute, library and associated museum, the Embassy of the Free Mind resides -- served in the Early Modern Period as a haven for dissidents and as an intellectual and religious melting pot, attracting reformers such as Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670), Christian Høberg (1607-1675) and Friedrich Breckling (1629-1711).

Martin was followed by the conference's keynote speaker, Dr. Emile Schrijver, General Director of the Jewish Historical Quarter in Amsterdam. Schrijver's address focused on "The Book Culture of the first Generations of Portuguese Jewish Refugees in Amsterdam." This history begins with Menasseh Ben Israel (1604-1657), among the first Portuguese Jews to immigrate to Amsterdam in the early seventeenth century. Importantly, Menassah founded the first Jewish-owned Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam. In developing the press in 1626, Menasseh of course had to develop a script and typeface for the letters. His typeface became very well-

known and set the standard for Hebrew printing in Europe. His work thus played an important role in making Amsterdam a center for the publication of Hebrew literature during the period. As Schrijver demonstrated, Menassah was involved in all of the roles associated with early Amsterdam book printing, including agent, dealer, producer, author, and of course reader.

The morning of day two began with a guided historical tour of the building, followed by a rare book tour of some of the rarest and most relevant treasures from the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica collection. The group looked at writings by Quakers, Anabaptists, the mystical philosopher Jacob Böhme, Johann Georg Gichtel, Baruch Spinoza, Menasseh Ben Israel, and others. Lively discussion ensued during the tour and each participant's expertise helped foster an environment of enthusiasm for the content of the conference; a microcosm of the broader city's macrocosm of different expertise, cultural backgrounds and viewpoints coming together in fruitful dialogue.

The first session of day two focused on "cities as spaces for refugees" and was moderated by Bart Wallet (University of Amsterdam). The first presenter for this session was Dr. Susanne Lachenicht, (University of Bayreuth, Germany). The well-known scholar of refugee studies delivered a paper on "Refugee Cities in 16th and 17th Century Europe," in which she provided a general context for discussing Amsterdam as a haven for religious refugees. Lachenicht discussed the climate of tolerance (or lack thereof) in London, Hamburg, Emden, and Amsterdam. Importantly, she problematized the idea that Amsterdam was as tolerant as present-day wishful thinking commonly presumes. For example, there were no laws in place ensuring the protection of these refugees, but more of an "understanding" based on factors such as utilitarianism, economic opportunity, and Christian compassion. Lachenicht's paper argued convincingly that any self-fashioning of a city as tolerant requires careful comparative investigation, and that scholars should be specific about the application of these terms.

The next paper, "Jewish Advocacy," was given by Hans Wallage, PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam. Wallage focused on the role and influence of the first arriving groups of Sephardic refugees in Amsterdam in 1590. Before the arrival of these Spanish and Portuguese Jews, Amsterdam had never experienced the presence of a large "visible" Jewish population. Wallage showed that many of these Jewish refugees and/or migrants commonly introduced themselves as "Portuguese merchants" (as opposed to "refugees"), and due to their international connections,

were able to lobby successfully with the Amsterdam and Haarlem city councils to adjust laws and, especially, to block repressive ones. Thus, Wallage demonstrated that the climate of tolerance for these early Sephardic refugees and migrants was in fact partially created by the group itself through its own advocacy.

The final paper of this session was by Stephanie Bode, a PhD candidate from Augsburg University. Her contribution, titled “Le Refuge & l’Azile de toutes les Nations” focused on the construction of Amsterdam as a haven for religious refugees in publications in the period 1680-1715. Like Lachenicht, Bode problematized the idea of Amsterdam as a haven by indicating important exceptions to this often casually used terminology. She showed that in many Amsterdam prints, especially those favoring Louis XIV, Catholic France was portrayed as the ideal haven for religious refugees. Thus, French Catholic printers and Dutch Protestant ones fought a kind of proxy battle over which place, France or the Netherlands, could really be considered a “haven.” This is but one example of how the first session provoked issues surrounding terminology: When is someone a migrant and not a refugee, and *vice versa*? And when can we really use the term “haven”?

The second session was chaired by Heide Warncke, Curator of the Ets Haim Library in Amsterdam. Kyra Gerber, (University of Amsterdam & Ritman Research Institute) was the first presenter for this session. Gerber’s talk, “The Peculiar Ordinary” was devoted to a microhistory of everyday Jewish life in Amsterdam in the 17th and 18th centuries. She recounted the fascinating tale of a journey undertaken by a Jewish settler in Amsterdam named Elias Joseph Goldt, an educated member of the Ashkenazi community. Goldt was given special permission to venture to Calumbria to retrieve items needed for the Jewish thanksgiving ritual called Sukkot (Lulavim and Etrogim). Although given special permission by Charles VI for the travel and permitted as well to carry weapons for defense, Goldt did not manage to return to Amsterdam, probably perishing along the way. The story of Elias is one of many examples of how the Jewish community struggled to maintain their customs in a foreign environment.

Next, Florian Wiesner (University of Edinburgh) gave a paper titled *Señores de la Cofradía de Holanda*, which discussed Amsterdam and the Jewish diaspora in the 17th century Spanish Empire. Wiesner’s contribution examined the 1634 inquisition trials of the Jewish-descended population of Cartagena de Indias in modern-day Colombia (who had converted to Christianity). At the heart of the trials lay accusations that individuals in this population had relapsed into their ancestral

religion and were conspiring with the Dutch trade companies through an ultimately fictional organization called *Compañía de Holanda*. In essence, Wiesner provided a perceptive glimpse not so much into processes within Amsterdam so much as the city of Amsterdam's role in the world and especially its role within the perceptions of the Spanish empire and its inquisitors.

Daniel Rafiqi (King's College, London) gave a paper titled "That Town I Yearned For: Representations of Arrival in Huguenot Refugees' Autobiographical Writings, 1686-1712." The paper focused on arrival experiences of French Huguenots in Amsterdam as depicted in their own biographical and literary writings. Rafiqi juxtaposed passages from two arrival accounts. The first, by Alexandre Savoie, who expressed "unbridled joy" upon his arrival, whereas the second, by Anne du Noyer was characterized by a much more sober account of difficulty, partly because she donned a disguise as a cook's male apprentice. Overall, these stories concentrated on the personal experiences of happiness, fear or disorientation in moving to a new location.

Rafiqi's paper closed the final session of Friday, which was followed in the late afternoon by a walking tour of "Radical Amsterdam." The walking route stopped by homes of important authors such as Jan Amos Comenius, Christian Hoburg, Friedrich Breckling, as well as locations for printing presses responsible for the publication of many works by these religious exiles and refugees.

The first session of Saturday, the final day of the conference, was chaired by Nina Schroeder (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). The first presenter was Leigh T.I. Penman (Monash, Australia), who presented a talk titled "Books in Exile," which dealt with German-language anti-clerical printing. Penman made the case that more focus should be devoted to individuals involved in printing anti-clerical works as opposed to the printing industry as a whole, and not only in Amsterdam but also in Leiden. For Penman, the "crucial decade" for the printing of anti-clerical works was the 1620s. Specifically, Penman looked at the theologian, political theorist, and diplomat Johann Angelus Werdenhagen, who was an important source for Abraham von Beyerland's translations of the works of German mystic Jacob Böhme (1575-1624). One of the surprises of the conference, Penman was able to correct older scholarship and show that an early Böhme print was published at Leiden, most likely at Werdenhagen's behest.

Following Penman, Andreas Pietsch (University of Münster) gave the paper "A Hub in a Network of Dissent," which discussed Amsterdam's role in the publication of

Hiël's mystical treatises around 1700. "Hiël" was the pseudonym for the Dutch mystic Hendrik Jansen van Barrefelt (d. 1594). Hiël's works became popular at the start of the 18th century when a long eulogy of his religious insights were published in the highly influential *Impartial History of the Church and Heretics* (1700) by pietist historian Gottfried Arnold. However, as Pietsch argued, this reception was the climax rather than the start of Hiël's popularity. Long before 1700, German speakers all over Central Europe had Hiël in their libraries. The increasing number of German religious refugees in Amsterdam played a pivotal role in repopularising Hiël's mystical treatises and prompted their republication beginning around 1687/90. German spiritualist exiles such as Friedrich Breckling and Loth Fischer and the Quaker Jacob Claus played key roles in distributing Hiël's works to a German audience, raising interesting questions for researchers about connections between older dissenting literature and its reception and influence in the 17th century.

The session continued with a paper by Victoria Franke (Enschede) on the exiled German spiritualist Friedrich Breckling (1629-1711). An important networker among 17th century reforming circles, Breckling is also connected to the "House with the Heads" where the conference took place. Born at the height of the Thirty Years' War, Breckling spoke out against corruption in the Lutheran church and especially its involvement in war. His opposition led to dismissal from his church post and eventually flight to the Netherlands. During his stay in Amsterdam, Breckling was supported by the de Geer family, owners of the House with the Heads and patron of the Moravian exile John Amos Comenius. Franke's analysis of Breckling's *Catalogus Testium Veritatis* (1700) traced the outlines of the radical pietist community in the Dutch Republic at the turn of the 18th century.

Rounding out the session, John Exalto (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) presented on the Latin school of Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670) in Amsterdam in the 17th century with special focus on his pansophic, didactic, and chiliastic efforts. After being exiled from his native land of Moravia in the Czech lands, Comenius became a sort of wandering philosopher, theologian, and pedagogue in exile. After becoming famous for his *Janua linguarum reserata* (*The Door of Languages Unlocked*, 1629), a textbook used for teaching Latin, he was invited to come to Amsterdam and stay in the House with the Heads under patronage of Louis de Geer. Exalto also focused on the interactions Comenius had with his teaching assistant, Johann Jacob Redinger, an exiled preacher from Switzerland. Exalto's contribution shed important light on the position of Comenius and Redinger in Amsterdam and European-wide networks

of religious and educational reformers by exploring Comenius' Latin School and the significance of this institution for his broader educational and pansophic efforts.

The next session, and the final one of the conference, was chaired by Andreas Pietsch (Münster). The first presenter was Miriam van Veen, professor of early modern church history at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Veen's talk, "The Divine Gift of the Van den Corput Sisters: Reformed Women in Search of a Home," told the fascinating story of the Van den Corput sisters who fled with their family from outbreaks of religious violence in the Low Countries and went to Duisburg and its surroundings. Veen analyzed the correspondence network which permitted the family to keep in touch during this time as well as the role played by the sisters in their Reformed refugee communities in the 16th century. Interestingly, the sisters interpreted their migration experience in terms of biblical narratives, and in fact had a rather positive view towards it. Veen emphasized that female migrants in the early modern period are largely understudied. She also introduced the hitherto unexpressed notion that migration, even sometimes under unfavorable circumstances, does not always have to be perceived as a traumatic or difficult process.

Francesco Quatrini (University College Dublin) followed with a talk that also took letters as the source material, "Unitarian Letters from Exile: The Polish Brethren between Betrayal, Liberty, and the Needs of a Banished Church (c. 1658-1668)." Quatrini's contribution was the only one dealing with the "Polish Brethren and Sisters," also known as Socinians or Unitarians. Their story is one of persecution, banishment, and eventual disappearance. After their stronghold in Raków was destroyed in 1638 due to charges of blasphemy, and two royal decrees later in 1658 and 1659 resulted in their banishment, many of the leaders moved to Amsterdam. Quatrini discussed letters sent by three of these exiled leaders, specifically their attempts to obtain assistance, financial and otherwise, from Remonstrants and Collegiants in Amsterdam. Quatrini's contribution shed new light on the significant role played by other Christian dissenting groups for the Unitarians in exile.

The conference's final contribution came from Mike Driedger (Brock University, Canada) on "Digital Evidence of Amsterdam as a City of Refuge or Contributors to the Growing Book Industry during 'the Golden Age': The eCartico Website." Driedger introduced an online repository for looking into the names, family history, publication history and related information of early modern Dutch dissenters and provided some examples of how digital tools can be used by humanities scholars.

The 'eCartico' website and similar digitization efforts offer promising new directions for experts and lay persons alike to do research into intellectual, socio-cultural, and family histories in the early modern period. At the same time, the presentation sparked a discussion about the reliability of the data that such tools use.

The conference brought to light important new evidence about Amsterdam's role in welcoming those with dissenting opinions - a historical phenomenon that has led to Amsterdam being called the "birthplace of liberalism" (Russell Shorto). At the same time, the conference cautioned us to not accept labels carelessly. Although Amsterdam surely was a haven, refugees still faced many challenges in the city. And while some refugees cultivated the label "refugee" or "exile" because it helped them to receive patronage, others found it favorable to represent themselves in other ways. Historians must ask themselves, when is it appropriate to categorize a person as an exile, migrant, or refugee? With this conference, as in the 17th century, the "House with the Heads" has provided a forum for freethinking and the exchange of new ideas.