

Some reflections about the Reformation and the game of colf

Before the Reformation, church-related ordinances banning games mainly concerned churches and not religion itself. One of the many such decrees was an ordinance of the council of Leiden in 1463, which forbade to play any game or other amusement within a distance of 10 'roeden' (1 roede = 1 rod or perch of about 5 metres) from the church, the cloister, the hospital, or any other religious-related institution.

In 1480, the council of Amsterdam forbade playing colf and other games in the Nes, a narrow street in the centre of the town, enclosed by several monasteries. The monks regularly complained that they were disturbed by the colf players (and others) during their religious duties. The players who offended the law were fined by confiscating their clothes and sometimes even driven naked through the streets ('Golf & Kolf, seven centuries of history', Jacques Temmerman, 1993).

These ordinances are issued in the Low Countries before the Reformation, banishing colf from the streets for 'religion'-related reasons.

Playing colf on public roads was not banned. However, as the economy grew and towns became more crowded in the 16th century, the players of games such as colf became a real nuisance to the magistrates of the cities. Therefore, there was a significant increase in the number of ordinances against playing colf and other games in town. It became increasingly difficult to practice the game.

Alas, the grief of the colf players did not end. Around 1550, the Protestant religion in the Northern Netherlands dethroned the Roman Catholic religion, confiscated churches and forbade the Catholic faith.

How religion brought ice and colf together

The attitude of the new religion to playing games and other amusement was utterly different, but in the Northern Netherlands, the new religion was far less fundamentalist than in Scotland. People continued to play colf on Sundays, albeit only after the long church services.

Halfway through the 16th century, the Reformation took over from the Catholic religion, when the most severe period of the Little Ice Age commenced, and when the economic development reached its highest peak, life in the Netherlands changed entirely. In line with these changes, colf and colvers changed too.

The Roman Catholic Church had ample place for sports on Sundays and special religious feast days. In the Protestant doctrine, there was no place for sports. At the beginning of the Reformation in the Northern Netherlands, the new religion forbade any amusement in and out of town on Sunday.

According to the minister and often supported by the town council, Sunday was for praying, not playing, which almost meant the end of the game of colf. When could one play if one had to work six days a week and had to pray on Sundays? Other than Christmas, Easter and Whitsun, special festive days did not exist anymore; for the colf players and other sportspeople, playing games became practically impossible.



The attitude towards playing on Sundays changed when the Reformation advanced in the Northern Netherlands and finally took over from the Catholic religion. The Calvinistic clergy decided Sunday was a day for praying and abandoned the name days of saints. In an economy where people had to work at least six days a week, they had little time to play some colf. – Anonymous, illustration from Samuel Clarke's 'The marrow of ecclesiastical history' (1654) – © Trustees of the British Museum



In this winter landscape, painted in 1565, for the first time there are colf players together with other people just enjoying themselves on the ice independent of any religious significance. This painting was so much in demand that several copies were made. –

‘Winter landscape with skaters and bird trap’ by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1556 – Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussel

Fortunately, not only for the colvers, the change from Catholic to Protestant coincided with the start of a cold period: the Little Ice Age. The severe winters between 1550 and 1700, when the many canals, rivers, ponds and lakes were frozen almost yearly, were a godsend for the colvers who had lost nearly all their playing possibilities.

Netherlanders have always been very attracted to icy surfaces for all kinds of amusement, so the colvers went in large numbers to the frozen waters to play their game. They considered that the laws of the church and the council did not apply on the ice, so it was without success that the authorities tried to inflict them. The clergy, supported by the town magistrates, tried to act against this uncontrolled refuge where Protestant morality was ignored, especially on Sundays, although without much success. The frozen waters had become a refuge or safe haven for everyone looking for relaxation on Sunday.

On the ice, people decided for themselves what was allowed and what was not. Believers of the new religion found, first secretly but later more in the open, non-religious-related amusement and even replaced the (Catholic) winter Carnival feasts by boundless enjoyment on the ice, where nobody would be judged on the Calvinistic moral values as they were applied back in the town.



The frozen waters during the Little Ice Age were a kind of 'safe haven' against religious laws and council harassment forbidding Sunday play. Publicans set up their 'mobile' taverns to provide food and beverages for skaters, sledgers, ice dancers, and colvers. On these Sundays, there was a joyful mood on the ice. – Antonie van Stralen, c.1639 – www.iceskatesmuseum.com

Some historians consider the 'ice madness' in the Netherlands as a 'non-religious' Carnival for the Protestant believers, derived from so many religious rituals, including feast days as Carnival in the Catholic religion (Marnix Koolhaas, skate historian, interview in 'De Volkskrant', 2012).