Summary

This study explores the negotiation of otherness within the network of mission, world-diaconate and development cooperation designed and implemented in Brazil by Kerk in Actie (KiA) and the ICCO Alliance, the main Dutch Protestant organisations that develop international missionary and diaconal work. Looking at the religious and secular repertoires at issue in the endeavour and the practices and encounters it promotes, this exploratory study shows how ideas about and relationships with the “far-away” other influence the making up of the network that mobilises people, symbolic repertoires, money and objects to configure the mission, world-diaconate and development cooperation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN).

The expression “Dutch Protestant world” employed in its title points to three different aspects of this network: (1) the transnational connections and relationships established around KiA missionary and diaconal initiatives; (2) the configuration of relationships between central organisations of the Protestant church and parishes in the Netherlands; and (3) the panorama of the world that is produced within the missionary endeavour. These three aspects of the Dutch Protestant world are addressed in the main question guiding this study:

How does the process of negotiating otherness, as apprehended through the symbolic repertoires and personal encounters at issue in Kerk in Actie’s network of mission, diaconate and development cooperation in Brazil, influence Dutch Protestant organisations and their members’ perception and experience of the globalising world?

This question unfolds through five ancillary questions, each one related to one of the chapters of this book, as follows:

(1) What are the main processes and issues connecting the three organisations in the Netherlands that are directly involved in the elaboration and implementation of Dutch Protestant missionary and diaconal initiatives in Brazil?

(2) What are the differences and similarities between the images of otherness emerging from the various religious and secular repertoires used to define the missionary, diaconal and development enterprise of the Dutch Protestants in Brazil at different moments during the last fifty years?
(3) How are otherness and sameness negotiated in the daily practices of missionary, diaconal and development cooperation regarding Brazil?

(4) What are the corporeal/bodily dimensions of the experience of otherness, as it unfolds with the local communities of the PKN, through the financial and ritual activities related to mission, diaconate and development cooperation?

(5) How do geographical and spatial repertoires associated to KiA’s network produce specific religious maps and how do these maps situate Dutch Protestant subjects in the global world?

The first ancillary question, tackled in the second chapter, make the complex relationships between the three dimensions of the “Dutch Protestant world” explicit, through the analysis of the central nodes of the network and the processes that have recently unfolded therein. Using the analysis of spatial distribution within the PLD building, in Utrecht, as the narrative axis of the chapter, the text addresses the kaleidoscopic moves that characterised the Dutch Protestant missionary and diaconal enterprise over the last few decades. The process that resulted in the emergence of the PKN is introduced as part of the Dutch religioscape, whose most visible feature is the de-churching process. The forging of the ICCO Alliance is explained within the broader context of the recent changes in the Dutch governmental policies for development cooperation.

The second sub-question, which orients the third chapter, addresses the symbolic repertoires that frame and organise relationships with the far-away other. Detecting ruptures and continuities in time, especially in relation to the oscillation between secular and religious repertoires, the chapter analyses how the “other” and the missionary world are cognitively organised according to The “far-away other” was defined as spiritually ignorant, socially oppressed or as a potential entrepreneur, according to dominant theologies, policies and principles orienting the organisations, which were themselves the result of specific power balances and institutional configurations (approached in chapter IV). Similarly, these symbolic repertoires also orient the choice of possible partners in the “South”, fundamental for the implementation of actions and projects. The establishment of partnerships that mediate between sameness and radical otherness depends upon the existence of elective affinities with the principles orienting organisations’ policies. Furthermore, partnerships also depend on the partner’s ability to fulfil complex technical requirements for development enterprises.
The detection of continuities in the format of the process of negotiating otherness, despite radical changes in the contents of the principles and policies contained in the documents, was facilitated by the comparison with the missionary efforts of the Dutch migrant church established in Southern Brazil. The relative rigidity of the divide between “us” and “them” that underlies all documents analysed in the chapter became clearer when contrasted with the dilemmas faced by migrants, who engage in different sorts of relationships with their Brazilian “others”. For them, negotiating the Dutchness or Brazilianness of their families and communities becomes a matter of complex symbolic investments in which their Protestant denomination plays a fundamental role.

The fourth chapter, whose corresponding question addresses daily practices and encounters within the network, directly tackles the problem of power. The text described meetings and encounters occurring at different points along the network, emphasising their performative character and their ability to produce effects and objectify institutional power. It addresses these encounters as chaotic experiences that are organised through the mobilisation of different symbolic repertoires, translated into worldviews, principles and policies that govern network fluxes.

Describing three different events which occurred in different places in Brazil and in the Netherlands, the chapter addresses processes whose developments are similar, although involving different actors. Firstly, the actual engagement of whole persons with each other in encounters and interactions is a determinant of negotiations and their results in the meetings. Beyond the official panoramas drawn by authorised actors, which situate people in official positions in relation to each other and to the whole network, daily interactions and the mobilisation of prosaic details related to the everyday nature of the encounters can have important effects over the configurations that are constantly constructed in the network.

Second, images of sameness and otherness are constantly conjured to justify and authorise positions and decisions. Identification and difference are negotiated in loco, within daily interactions, and actors often switch between these two images. Thus, encounters can be sometimes enacted as meetings between colleagues, and on other occasions as encounters between intrinsically different parts.

The third process addressed in the chapter relates directly to power. The fluxes and configurations of the network depend upon a fundamental opposition between, on the one hand, the institutional power emanating from the direction of the financial fluxes and
organisational structures and politics; and on the other hand, the legitimacy of the knowledge and proximity with “real” others and their needs and expectations.

The fourth and fifth ancillary questions are directly related to the Netherlands and the way the international missionary endeavour fits the parochial lives of the Dutch Protestants. In this sense, both try to show how the global character of transnational networks and contacts can be actually encompassed by apparently smaller local realities.

Chapter V describes the so-called ZWO-commissies, the committees that organise the local level missionary and diaconal activities in the parishes of the PKN. A few examples of campaigns and services, the main activities these committees develop, are introduced and analysed. Two main points are stressed in the connections linking the international missionary enterprise and the churchgoers: monetary donations, which is how the overwhelming majority of the members of the PKN relate to its international action, and the use of sensational forms to render the missionary endeavour accessible to the senses.

Finally, chapter VI addresses the spatial constructs that PKN activities produced, developing an analysis of the “Dutch Protestant world” as a panorama produced by the international missionary and diaconal work of the church. Describing the main features of the maps circulating in the KiA network, the text analyses those activities as spatial practices that situate Protestant subjects in the global world.