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CONCLUSION

An Eastern Adventure: The early years of the Reformed Church in Java

The Reformed Church in Semarang, like other churches in the vast area of the VOC, came into existence after the government of Java's Northeast Coast was established in Semarang. This was typical of churches in Asia during the west's expansion in the seventeenth and eighteenth century: where the Dutch went the church followed suit. In the time before the separation of church and state became the rule, development of churches following the expansion of European power was a given, much as the sun always rises in the east.

This study was not conducted with any intention to prove something completely new. My main intention is to bring to the light the unknown and forgotten past of the early Christian community in Java. Historians of the Christian mission tend to see only shortcomings in the first 200 years of Protestantism in the Indonesian archipelago. This unbalanced view is pervasive among many Indonesians and among those who study the Indonesian religious situation. In one fell swoop 200 years of Protestantism were dispatched to the gutter, according to the chair of the PGI, Yewangoe.¹

The study's second objective was to contribute a piece of historical writing that might provide a better and more complete picture of the topic in the field of Indonesian socio-religious studies so that our knowledge and understanding of its pluralistic society might expand. Even before it became as a nation, the Indonesian archipelago was never a monolithic society.

A historical study is not only a way to present facts or to discover what happened in the past; it is a way to understand how people lived their lives and to find a reflection of ourselves in this ever-expanding world.

The *zendingarchieff*, which was the first love of many church historians and experts on Christianity in Indonesia, proved unable to give a complete picture of the Christian presence in Indonesia. The TANAP Project introduced older materials other than the *zendingarchieff* to give a more comprehensive view of history before the nineteenth century. This also allows a new reading of seventeenth and eighteenth century Christianity under the VOC, which for a long time was under the influence of Van Boetzelaer and others. They were primarily historians and theologians who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who found that the close-knit relationship between church and government, something quite common in the early modern period, was incompatible with their own thoughts and understandings.

Without a doubt, the first 200 years of Protestantism in Indonesia should be seen as a continuation of the late medieval and early modern Europe. The latter overlapped with the expansion of European power to the east. Most of the chapters in this book tell the story of religious practice and thought in the eighteenth century in the Netherlands and primarily in Java. Those who were trained and instructed in

¹ See Appendix E.

the history of Indonesian Christianity of the late nineteenth and twentieth century will notice the differences between the VOC period and the period of the Netherlands East Indies colonial government.

Previous studies of church history in Java were inclined to diminish the new undertakings of churches under the VOC. Unsurprisingly those studies assessed Christianity's penetration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as superficial, marked by excessive government intervention in administration as well as pastoral and doctrinal matters.

More recent studies (including this one) have shown that despite the complicated religious and political reality of seventeenth and eighteenth century Java, the church in many respects was independent and not necessarily subordinate to the government.

Chapter Two shows that in the absence of a consultative and supervision meeting body such as the classes in the Netherlands, the consistory in Batavia played a strategic role between the Company and other churches in Asia. This was indeed unthinkable, given the principle that no single church should be higher than any other church in the Reformed tradition. Yet under the circumstances it was understandable. Without the consistory the government in Batavia would have gained the upper hand over all overseas churches.

The consistory in Batavia did, for better or for worse, play a countervailing role to the government, protecting church interests not only in Batavia, but also for most overseas churches. The church sent army chaplains to support the Company's venture to the kingdom of Mataram from the very beginning. Wherever the Company went, the church followed. Each was bonded to the other, whether by choice or proximity.

Sending ministers out was part of the classis' responsibility to supervise churches without ministers. This job was handled by the consistory in Batavia up to the time when Semarang obtained a permanent minister in the mid-eighteenth century. Even when the presence of the Company in Java was close to non-existent, as in the early seventeenth century, Batavia sent ministers to the frontiers. Later on the ministers of Semarang regularly visited Christians in the old and new settlements in Java.



That meant that ministers in Semarang not only served Christians in town in all of Company settlements in Java's Northeast coast. One of the most important public duties of the ministers was to baptize all children, regardless their legitimate status, in the area. In the following century, this important public duty was found to be unacceptable by Brückner, the missionary stationed in Semarang from 1814-1816. He resigned his commission as a minister in Semarang. The very reason he gave up the ministry of the state-church in Semarang in 1816 was his obligation to baptize illegitimate children, which went against his better judgment.² From a nineteenth or twentieth century perspective one can understand his position. However support for the widespread baptism of children (*royale kinderdoop*) is also understandable from the perspective of the eighteenth century public church.³

The close connection between company servants and the consistory in Semarang was another complaint raised by theologians for whom the separation of church and state was a ruling principle. Article 36 of the seventeenth century Reformed Dutch Church's confession concerning the government's responsibility for Christians was taken seriously by all public functionaries.

² Coolsma, S., *De Zendingseeuw voor Nederlandsch Oost-Indië*, p. 242.

³ As people who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Coolsma and most of his contemporaries knew well enough what the Dutch state-church was. However in the early nineteenth century, people were still used to the idea of a public church. Coolsma was not aware of the differences between the state-church of his own time and the public church of previous centuries.

In this new light one can judge this unknown and forgotten part of the history of Christianity in Indonesia on its own terms – and not from a modern or twentieth century point of view. Having said that, one needs to address the themes of continuity and change in the period.

There were continuities in this particular period. Chapters Two, Four to Eight showed how changes and adaptations were made in order to help Christianity take root in alien soil.

From a local point of view, the first generations of local Christians were forcibly disconnected from their local or cultural heritage. There was indeed no guarantee that this would work out. At first local Christians comprised only a small fraction of the membership of Reformed churches in the Indies. They were members as well as church helpers. As for the latter, there were indeed quite a few locals who contributed to Christian life in general. Some indeed embraced Christianity for ulterior motives, since there were social incentives for slaves to become Christian. But even so, the entry requirements for full membership in the church were still high.

It is also noticeable that no local Christians became ministers or at least junior clergymen in the era. In fact, there were some efforts by the Company to educate a few candidates from the local Christian community to become *landpredikers* (indigenous clergymen) and *proponents* (aspirant minister) with the opening of seminaries in Ceylon in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century.⁴ Unfortunately the result of this undertaking was not satisfying.

What kind of Christianity was present in Java in the late eighteenth century? Did the Dutch Reformed Church, as usual, comply with the principles of the 1618 Dordrecht synod?

I argue that there was no such a thing as a fixed or permanent Christian identity in the period. On the contrary, one ought to be aware of dynamic Christian identities. This study is one among others that show that encounters between western Christianity and indigenous populations comprised new experiences, which in turn brought about theological and legal breakthroughs.

For example, the practice of the widespread baptism of children was an abuse of the Holy Sacrament, but also a good example of a dynamic Christian breakthrough in answering the theological and legal issues at hand.

Another difference was in the understanding of church missions. As far as the period of this study is concerned, the success of missions was by no means based on the number of members of the Reformed church. Numbers were neither an indicator of success or failure for the mission and were not necessarily of importance in the period. In the early years of the Reformed church in the Netherlands the number of the *gereformeerde liefhebbers* was greater than the number of members. The presence of new churches in Company-controlled areas cannot be used as an indicator of the expansion of Christianity *per se*. VOC men (soldiers, officials and also church personnel) soon populated every new area given by the indigenous authorities to the Company. In a nutshell, the expansion of the VOC was followed by the expansion of the overseas public church, and not the other way around.

⁴ Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie as schoolmaster, Dutch Education in Ceylon 1690-1795*, Chapters Two and Three.

More recent studies on the field of missions have shown that in fact numerical growth is no longer the most effective measure of missionary efforts. Each and every generation is entitled to have their own definition of what missions were all about.

The common understanding of church obligations, i.e., the mission of the early modern Dutch Christianity, is exactly what I have detailed in this study. The church together with the Christian government worked to promote civilized Christian living. Its accepted method was through education, whether in the house (by parents, by foster parents or in the orphanage), in school (by schoolmasters, since all schools were basically Christian schools) and in the church (by following catechist instruction).

Dutch colonial society was neither a perfect world nor a completely terrible world. The church and government went as far as they could to root their Christian world in alien soil. In that sense, the mission effectively began when any form of Christian educational effort as mentioned above began.

This study has shown several important aspects of cultural Christianity:

- a) The propagation and Christianization of local people *en masse* in the Moluccas, which happened much earlier than the period of this study, is consistent with the notion of Christendom (Christian society) in early modern Dutch Christianity.
- b) The church, not by individual missionaries or the missionary board, promoted propagation.
- c) The government went all out to help the church to accomplish its mission. The government worked side by side with the consistory to provide society with pastoral care as well as a Christian infrastructure. Regulations (in the *plakkaatboeken*) – such as designating Sunday as day of worship (*zondagsheiliging*) – and the existence of Chinese temples (in Batavia), show how keen the government worked to secure a prominent place for Christian norms and values.
- d) Compared to other places, such as Batavia, Banda or even the Moluccas, Semarang was not large. However as a latecomer, its society was formed and was well equipped with all that was necessary to present itself as a colonial Dutch Calvinistic society.
- e) The most often undervalued fact that typified this cultural Christianity was that the church functioned within the colonial framework under the VOC as a matter of fact. Colonial society was a meeting place of many cultures, therefore in the church one could find not only Europeans, but also many Eurasians and even many Asians (the *mardijkers*, slaves, former slaves, free Javanese, etc). The dynamics of this colonial setting were the result of a two-way movement, since Christianity was no longer solely defined by churches in the Netherlands. The colonial situation contributed a great deal to the characteristics of ‘local’ Christianity, which raised the suspicions of the younger missionaries who started to arrive in Java in the nineteenth century.

This study is also meant to raise more questions and stimulate investigation of the open field of the first 200 years of Protestantism in Indonesia. As the land was once

a place for adventure for European Christianity, let that piece of the past now be a new adventure for everyone, as well.

The TANAP Project has long since ended. However future projects may blossom. I look forward to more studies of this forgotten period in Indonesia, as well as in other places, so that historians and students of humanities and inter-religious studies will have more to consider.

Leiden, Jakarta, Utrecht, 2004-2010