Chapter

27. "Clearly Counter to the Spirit of Christianity"? The Church in the History of Dutch Slavery

Martijn Stoutjesdijk

In January 1628, the Amsterdam classis (a layer of the regional church administration) of the Dutch Reformed Church wrote, in response to a question from the church council of Batavia (present-day Jakarta), that it was "not Christian to have serfs."[1] That same year, the classis of Walcheren came to a similar conclusion, and in July 1629, it deemed holding people in slavery "improper and impermissible for Christians in the Indies."[2] Those answers, and the questions that they were a reply to, came late. Long before 1628, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had begun large-scale slave trading and importing enslaved people to Banda and Batavia.

More than two centuries later, in May 1858, the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church petitioned Dutch king William III to abolish slavery in the West Indies because the church:

> in recent years especially … has come to the … awareness that, like many other wrongs denounced by Christianity, this inheritance from days past is, if not counter to the letter of the Holy Scriptures, clearly counter to the spirit of Christianity, and leaves a blemish upon it, of which it must cleanse itself as soon as it can.[3]

For the more than two centuries between these two moments, however, the Dutch actively dealt in enslaved people, both in "the East" and in "the West," under the auspices of companies like the VOC and the West India Company (WIC). All that time, the Reformed Church, the public, or privileged church of the Dutch Republic, was a reliable partner to the companies and overseas authorities in the organization of colonial slave societies. The

church supplied ministers who preached aboard ships, during wartime, and in the colonies, and rarely spoke out against the institution of slavery or specific slavery practices. In fact, the church itself owned slaves and some of its ministers supplied the ideological justification for trading in and owning enslaved people. This raises several questions. Why, over the years, did the church and its ministers take different stances on the permissibility of slavery? How did the church deal with slavery and the enslaved in practice? And, how, in turn, did the enslaved themselves react to the church and Christianity?

Current State and Quality of Research

Even though the church appears to have played a big part in the legitimization of colonialism and slavery and was also an important guardian and shaper of colonial society, very little research has been done on its role in the history of colonial slavery. It is telling that, to my knowledge, no academic work entirely devoted to the relationship between the church and slavery was published until 2023.[4] Even in recent research projects, religion is sometimes disregarded entirely. The edited volume on the city of Amsterdam's role in the slave trade (2020), for instance, has more than forty chapters, but not a single one dedicated to the role of the church(es).

It is hard to say why the knowledge on this subject is so underdeveloped. Part of the answer probably lies in the fact that for a long time, church historiography and colonial historiography did not intersect. Older church history often did not go beyond descriptions of congregations and ministers, while research on colonial history was characterized by "a secular perspective that obscures the entanglement of Christianity with colonialism in the Republic."[5] In addition, research into the role of the church is complex and time-consuming, requiring knowledge of various religions and languages (Dutch, German, and Latin as well as Papiamentu, Malay, and Sinhala). It also requires much patience to sift through church archives, many of which have not been digitized and some not even cataloged. However, in the past decade, theologians, church historians, and historians of colonialism have started to research the church's role in the history of slavery. Examples are projects led by Geertje Mak; Alicia Schrikker; and Annette Merz, George Harinck, and Rose Mary Allen. Several churches now also feel the responsibility to examine their own history with regard to slavery.

The Reformed Church and the Ecclesiastical Landscape

As the public or privileged church, the (Dutch) Reformed Church (originally known in Dutch as *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, later as *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, and later still, *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, or PKN) had a uniquely prominent position in the Dutch Republic and in the colonial societies. In the metropole, other religions were tolerated, but this tolerance did not apply to most of the colonies. Other religions only established themselves in the Dutch colonies overseas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and often only after consulting with the Reformed Church. Because the Reformed Church—as the privileged church—worked hand in hand with the colonial administration, it grew into the church of the status quo, the (white) powers that be, the slaveholders. Therefore, when the authorities actively encouraged missionary work among the enslaved in Suriname, it was mainly the other churches—particularly the Moravian Church (or *Evangelische Broedergemeente*, EBG) and the Roman Catholic Church—that made many converts and thus became "Black" churches. This brings us to the three most important churches aside from the Reformed church that could be found in the Dutch colonies—other religions and forms of spirituality practiced there are not discussed in this chapter.

A church that was close to the Reformed Church in terms of origins and religious beliefs was the Lutheran Church, which is also Protestant and has been subsumed in the PKN since 2004. In the Netherlands, the Lutheran Church had been present from early on, since 1558. In the colonies, too, it was often the first to appear after the Reformed Church. In Suriname, the Lutherans entered the stage in 1741.[6] They were not slow to arrive in other parts of the colonial empire either; in 1745, a position for a Lutheran minister was established in Batavia, and in 1780, one was set up in the Cape Colony. The Lutherans do not only resemble the Reformed in terms of origins and beliefs but also in their approach. Just like the Reformed Church, the Lutheran Church in the West Indies focused on the white planter elite and was hardly active in proselytizing enslaved or free people of color. This is why in Suriname, both churches have always been considered *deng bakra kerki* (white churches). In Curaçao, the United Protestant Congregation (*Verenigde Protestantse Gemeente*)—the result of an early (1825) merger of the Reformed and Lutheran churches—has a similar reputation.

Members of the Moravian Church (or EBG, also called *Hernhutters*) in front of their church, de Grote Stadskerk (on the left, behind the trees) in Paramaribo, circa 1885.

A very different story is that of the *Hernhutters*, also known as the Moravian Church or EBG. This Protestant missionary church was mainly active in the West Indies. Although the EBG's history goes back further, the part that is relevant for this chapter begins with Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) and the establishment of the Christian colony of Herrnhut on his estate in Germany. From Herrnhut, and later from the Dutch city of Zeist (*Zeister Zendingsgenootschap* [Zeist Missionary Society], est. 1793), Moravian brothers and sisters were sent to do missionary work in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Thanks to Von Zinzendorf's connections, they were allowed into Suriname at a very early stage, in 1735.[7] In the West Indies, they devoted themselves to the biggest demographic for missionary work: the enslaved population, in which virtually no one was Christian yet. Although the missionaries did not preach resistance against the social order (which was or-

dained by God), they did manage to convert many enslaved and formerly enslaved people to Christianity through their solidarity with the Black population (among whom they often lived), the education which they provided, and their promise of a better world. To this day, they are the biggest Protestant church in Suriname.

The Roman Catholic Church played a complex role in the Dutch colonial empire that warrants further research. Because of the Reformation and the war against Catholic Spain, the Dutch tended to oppose the Catholic Church. Initially, they disapproved of slavery as a Catholic, "papist," and therefore reprehensible practice. In many colonies, the Dutch had been preceded by Catholic Portuguese settlers. The Dutch took great pains to convert those Catholics to Calvinism, which was particularly successful in Sri Lanka, for instance. However, in most colonies, the presence of the Catholic church was tolerated sooner or later. As a minority church, the Catholics focused on the conversion of the Black population in some parts of the Dutch colonial empire, as they did in Suriname after 1840.[8] In Curaçao, the Catholic church even became the dominant branch of Christianity among the Black population, but that was also due to the fact that Curaçao served as a transit port for enslaved people bound for the Hispanic colonies of South America. Those colonies insisted that the enslaved Africans sent to them were baptized Catholics, and to this end, a handful of priests were permitted to live on the island.

Concrete Complicity

Churches and clergymen themselves were also actively involved in slavery in various ways. In Dutch Brazil, enslaved people were made to construct the church buildings, and Johannes Basseliers, the first Reformed minister of Suriname, had his own plantation and used large numbers of enslaved people to work his fields.[9] The Lutheran Church of Suriname and Berbice are known to have run their own plantations, and both the Catholics and the Moravians owned enslaved people. At the same time, it appears that in most colonies, the Reformed Church did little to concern itself with the (spiritual) well-being of the enslaved. In early seventeenth-century New Netherland (a colony that included present-day New York, New Jersey, and Delaware), it was possible at first to coexist with enslaved people within the same church "without social segregation and without the twisted religious legitimization that accompanied it."[10] But the tide soon turned, and

on the rare occasions when enslaved people were converted, they were relegated to a second-class position in the "white churches." In Suriname, Black people had to sit in the pews at the back of the church (*baka banyi*) and in the Lutheran church, free white people were baptized on Sundays and people of color on Wednesdays. In a letter from Saint Thomas, seven people who were kept in slavery by Dutch and Danish plantation owners described how their white fellow Christians mocked their EBG baptism as a "dog's baptism," and how they called the baptized enslaved people "firewood for hell."[11] A question that remains to be answered is to what extent the churches, perhaps by means of church discipline, took measures against slave owners who mistreated, abused, or killed their enslaved people.

While there was little interest in converting enslaved people in the West Indies—"Heaven was not made for them, anyway," Jan Willem Kals quoted a slaveholder as saying in 1759[11]—in the East Indies, missionary work seems to have been taken more seriously, partly because the Dutch encountered so many Catholics in the areas which they captured from the Portuguese. For the enslaved in the East Indies, it was permissible and advantageous to convert because the rules for enslaved Christians were less strict; in Sri Lanka and South Africa, for instance, the VOC initially had specific schools for the enslaved, and there was a special category of "Christian slaves in the service of the Company."

An enormous task lies ahead of us with regard to the study of the church's concrete involvement in slavery. Not only are there major geographical gaps in our knowledge, about the church in India, for example, but we also know very little about the financial flows between the colonies and the (homeland) churches and clergy. What, for instance, is the origin of the substantial diaconal funds of the congregations in The Hague and Amsterdam? And if there is some connection to slavery, what implications does that have for how the money was spent in the past and should be used in the future?

Jacobus Capitein was the first Black minister educated in Holland. He served as a WIC preacher in Fort Elmina, in his homeland of Ghana.

Theology and Exegesis

Various theologians and ministers of the Reformed Church commented on slavery from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century. Their statements ranged from outright rejection to staunch defense of the practice, and all shades in between. Although detailed studies on the theological debate on slavery are rare, several scholars have compiled lists of—usually the same—theologians who engaged in this debate. The names mentioned

include Udemans, Voetius, Picardt, De Mey, De Raad, Hondius, Smytegelt, Kals, Capitein, and—on the subject of abolition—Millies and Beets. These theologians' publications repeatedly cite certain arguments in the defense of slavery, particularly regarding the enslavement of Africans. One of the frequent references is to the Curse of Ham, based on a biblical story in Genesis 9, in which Noah curses Ham and condemns him to a life of servitude to his brothers. Some theologians in the colonial period, such as Johan Picardt, saw Ham as the forefather of the (Black) African peoples, which enabled them to use this bible passage as a justification for the enslavement of Africans.

Others, such as the Black minister Jacobus Capitein, emphasized the distinction between spiritual slavery and physical slavery. They argued that the church should concern itself with the former and encourage its flock to be free of sin, and disregard physical slavery as inconsequential. Theologians who were critical of slavery and the slave trade pointed out that all people share the same nature (Jacob Hondius) or referenced the biblical prohibition against (human) theft (Bernardus Smytegelt). However, there is much more to uncover, and the role of the Bible and theology in both legitimizing and criticizing slavery deserves to be examined more systematically. In addition, little or no attention has been paid to the perspectives of the enslaved and other groups of color (with the notable exception of Capitein), even though they—both as laypeople and theologians—contributed to the debate. Some of those who spoke out were Johannes King in Suriname, Black Harry in Saint Eustatius, and Petrus Kafiar in Papua.

Cultural Legacy

A great need is felt within organizations of the descendants of the enslaved and in the churches themselves (e.g., the ecumenical organization called *Stichting Heilzame Verwerking Slavernijverleden* [Beneficial Processing of the Legacy of Slavery]) to examine the relationship between the church and slavery beyond the framework of colonial history and to also look at what they call the "cultural legacy" of slavery.

The cultural legacy of slavery is multidimensional. Studies are currently being done into the physical traces of slavery in church buildings and cemeteries, into the relationship between the Bible, slavery, and racism in the hermeneutic practices of present-day white and Black churches, and into the relationship between race and religion. As part of such research into

the afterlives of slavery, we can also look into trauma, discrimination, and reparations. For philosophers and systematic theologians, this legacy offers opportunities to reflect on concepts such as guilt and punishment, (original) sin, freedom, and slavery. From a practical theological and liturgical/ritual perspective, we could ask which rituals and religious celebrations could contribute to dialogue and reconciliation.

In Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that there is a great deal of work to be done in the field of slavery and the church. This is a clear-cut challenge for current and future generations of researchers who are interested in the intersection of church history and colonial history. The discourses of religion, history, race, and ethnicity have shaped the colonial era and are still palpable, visible, and tangible in churches and society in the Netherlands and in the former Dutch colonies. The challenge is to renew the traditional one-sided perspective of (church) history, most of which was written from a white (European) male point of view. New research can ensure multiperspectivity by incorporating the perspectives of enslaved women and men, free people of color, and Indigenous populations. In that line of endeavor, research should also include other religions and forms of spirituality which existed alongside Christianity, such as Winti (in Suriname) and Montamentu (in Curaçao), Islam (Indonesia), Buddhism (Sri Lanka), and Hinduism (Bali and India), as well as the issue of multiple religious belonging. To ensure multiperspectivity, it is not enough to read existing sources against the grain; they will also have to be supplemented with other data by drawing on oral history, archaeology, visual data, materiality, and data-driven methods. The study of slavery and the church also stands much to gain in terms of theory development from New Imperial History and from research on the relationship between race and religion, for example. Finally, it goes without saying that our knowledge of the relationship between slavery and the church actually comprises just fragments of the overall history and afterlives of the Dutch colonial empire. This is partly due to the fact that many archives have yet to be digitized or even discovered, and partly due to the scope and complexity of the Dutch colonial empire. Many potentially valuable cases for research in the field of slavery and church (the *Mardijker* community,[12] Dutch India, the smaller Caribbean islands, Dutch Brazil) have barely been explored. It is time for that to change.

Notes

1 GB Inv. no. 23, outgoing letters 1625–1642, fol. 10–17; Batavia church council to Amsterdam and Walcheren classis, January 2, 1628. See Henk Niemeijer, "Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur Batavia 1619–1725" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 1996), 176.

2 Minutes of the Walcheren classis, July 12, 1629.

3 "Adres der Synode," *Tijdschrift uitgegeven van wege de Nederlandsche Maatschappij ter bevordering van de afschaffing der slavernij* 4 (1858–1859): 2.

4 Bente de Leede and Martijn Stoutjesdijk, eds., *Kerk, kolonialisme en slavernij: Verhalen van een vervlochten geschiedenis* (Kampen: Kok, 2023).

5 Janneke Stegeman, "'De kinderen der heydenen.' Utrecht, de kerk en slavernij," in *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht*, eds. Nancy Jouwe, Matthijs Kuipers and Remco Raben (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2021), 173.

6 Pearl I. Gerding, *Op weg naar grotere hoogten: Een geschiedenis van een kerk / On the Way to Greater Heights : A History of a Church* (Paramaribo: Evangelisch Lutherse Kerk in Suriname, 2019 [rev. ed.), 25–29.

7 Johan M. van der Linde, *Het visioen van Herrnhut en het apostolaat der Moravische Broeders in Suriname 1735–1863* (Paramaribo: C. Kersten & Co., 1956).

8 In many Spanish colonies, the Catholic church was dominant. There has been extensive debate about whether slavery in a "Catholic" colony was better than in a "Protestant" colony. See Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946) and the debate sparked by this publication.

9 For Dutch Brazil, see Danny L. Noorlander, *Heaven's Wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 171; for Suriname, see Johan M. van der Linde, *Surinaamse suikerheren en hun kerk* (Wageningen: H. Veenman, 1966), 75.

10 Willem Frijhoff, *Wegen van Evert Willemsz: Een Hollands weeskind op zoek naar zichzelf* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1995), 777.

11 Jan Willem Kals, *De nuttige en noodige bekeeringe der heidenen in Suriname en Berbices* (Leeuwarden: Pieter Koumans, 1759), 84.

12 *Mardijkers* were an ethnic community in the Dutch East Indies made up of mostly Christian descendants of freed slaves. Mardijker is a Dutch corruption of *merdeka* (from Sanskrit *maharddhika*, rich, prosperous, powerful), which in Malay originally meant "freed slave" and has come to mean "independent."

Geertje Mak and Marit Monteiro

Missionary Work in the Dutch Colonies: More than Evangelism and "Civilization"

Ideologically speaking, Protestant churches and the worldwide Roman Catholic church were ambivalent towards colonialism. Systematic exploitation went against the Christian principle that all people are equal as they are made in the image of God. In practice, however, missionaries of both branches of Christianity strove to win souls and gain influence. How did they cooperate with the colonial authorities to this end, and how did they try to control the daily lives of the local population, their languages, cultures, family relations, sexuality, and reproduction? And how did people react to this? What lasting impact has this had? Mission archives contain relevant sources for the purpose of trying to answer these questions.

Until the nineteenth century, the VOC and WIC were responsible for the Protestant church and its missionary work in overseas territories. As these areas were transferred to the Dutch state at the end of the eighteenth century, so was the responsibility for church and missionary affairs. When freedom of religion was enshrined in the Dutch constitution in 1848, this created room for new Protestant and Catholic missionary zeal in the Dutch East Indies, Suriname, and the Caribbean. Laws and agreements were drawn up, detailing which Christian missionary organizations were allowed to carry out which activities and where, which population groups they were allowed to target, and how much the missionary organizations had to pay for these permissions. The sources containing these laws and agreements can reveal how deeply the colonial authorities and missionary work were entangled.

Some archives contain reports of voyages and expeditions, notes on the language, culture, or specific customs of certain local population groups, and sometimes even ethnographic photographs. Detailed information about local populations and the enslaved can also be found in chronicles, parish records, official and personal correspondence, and missionary magazines. There, we find details on customs, language, kinship structures, work, clothing, hairstyles, body decorations, and beliefs and views on age, sexuality, and gender. The sources are written from a European Christian perspective, but by painstakingly reading mission archives against the grain, we can gain knowledge about the local population and their perspectives and agency. The archives of Christian missionary organizations do contain references to statements, actions, and other forms of cooperation and resistance by Indigenous people. Thus, the frustrations of missionaries about the "unruly" population can start to speak volumes about their stubborn resistance.

In the course of the nineteenth century, missionaries were given more room to maneuver by the Surinamese and Dutch Caribbean authorities and plantation owners. That meant that they could expand their work among the enslaved, offering them (religious) education which was needed to convert, baptize, and incorporate them into their local congregations. Before 1863, some missionaries themselves kept enslaved people. They were also involved in manumissions, when owners freed their enslaved. In Indonesia, where slavery continued into the twentieth century, missionaries purchased the freedom of enslaved children, youths, and vulnerable adults and housed them in foster care and other care institutions. The missions spread stories about the people whom they freed, prompting the Dutch churchgoing public to give charitable donations. Mission archives give us a picture of the colonial aspects of this Christian humanitarian aid. In this "soft" colonialism, aimed at spreading "civilization" and "development," a European way of life was upheld as the norm for the (formerly) enslaved to aspire to. However, this endeavor was anything but "soft," as it institutionalized the superiority of white Christians and disqualified local kinships, customs, and childrearing practices.

Abstract

This chapter explores the historiography and future directions of research on the impact of Dutch colonial slavery. Dutch historians have long regarded colonialism and slavery as an "overseas" phenomenon, unrelated to the "miracle" of Dutch prosperity and economic growth. Recent research challenges this narrative and reveals that slavery and colonialism were integral and formative aspects of Dutch history. It also shows that colonial slavery in the Atlantic and in Asia was the result of a deliberate, imperialist policy aimed at extraction and profit. Its impact extended well beyond economic processes, however. Taking stock of this historiographic shift, this chapter discusses the implications it has for our understanding of the history of slavery, colonialism and the development of Europe and the world.

Keywords: slavery and capitalism; Atlantic; Indian Ocean; Cultivation System; colonialism