

7th Interfaith Dialogue: Religion in Colonization and Decolonization

The road to partnership in mission: how churches keep struggling with coloniality

1. Introduction

Knowing European Protestantism, it should come as no surprise that European Protestants invented words to deliver our world from its colonial past. Over the last century the words partnership, equality, reciprocity, and mutuality, were carefully introduced, negotiated, and continuously redefined within the mission relations (i.e., relations between churches in various parts of the world). As a result of growing awareness of the impact of colonialism and Christianity's historical affiliation with colonial power these words were promoted as ideals in mission relations, in order to undo the patterns of dominance and asymmetry (Catto 2013).

In the last decade at least two Dutch PhD students have completed a dissertation on the ideals of partnership, equality, mutuality, and reciprocity within global mission relations in a postcolonial context. Eleonora Hof studied how mission can be reconceptualized in our postcolonial world, while Wilbert van Saane actually wrote about the genealogy of partnership in the relations between Dutch and Indonesian churches. It would seem like Dutch perspectives are sufficiently covered, yet here I am giving a contribution on this topic.

In this contribution I will highlight two moments in (post)colonial history, which may have impacted Dutch churches' attempt to reconfigure mission relations based on these ideals. The first moment is the colonial government's self-proclaimed ethical policy, and its effect on Dutch missions. The second moment is the rise of world diakonia and international development as autonomous partners of Christian mission. I will conclude with some thoughts on future avenues of research on this topic.

2. First moment: ethical policy and theology as patronage

Institutionally the ethical policy marks an even closer and more harmonious collaboration between the colonial government and the Christian mission societies. Many historians

have for example explained the impact of the government's so-called "civilizing subsidies" for educational and healthcare facilities run by mission societies. On a theological level and within Dutch church-culture however, the ethical policy also affected perceptions of the relationship with churches in the Netherlands Indies. While "mutual assistance" was already employed to characterize interchurch relations on an international platform in 1910, Dutch Calvinist Abraham Kuyper spoke of the ethical calling of the Dutch towards the colonized population and legitimized this attitude theologically by insisting on Dutch patronage as a divine vocation (Van Saane 2019: 141).

Alongside the ethical school in politics Dutch Protestantism also developed an ethical movement within theology. This movement may have fostered a new appreciation of Indonesian religions and cultures among Dutch missionaries, with theologians like Hendrik Kraemer and Albert Kruyt (Van Saane 2018: 150). This appreciation however carried an evolutionist approach to religion and culture in which the Dutch, as missionary-ethnographers, constructed distinctions between what they considered appropriate religious notions and cultural elements yet to be reformed (Keane 2007: 99). Thus, while the abovementioned missionaries may have supported Indonesian nationalism to some degree, especially after the 1920s and 30s, their theologies also advanced an asymmetrical understanding of Indonesian-Dutch interchurch relations.

In general, the ethical paradigm reaffirmed conceptions of mission relations in terms of guardians or educators and pupils (Van Saane 2019: 183). Its effect however was also felt after independence. First, in Dutch colonial historiography guardianship served as a legitimation of Dutch imperialism (Cote 2009: 89). Second, as some historians have demonstrated, the Dutch post-World War II international development policy shows striking similarity to the colonial ethical policy in its paternalistic approach to Indonesia (Van Saane 2019: 320).

3. Second moment: international diakonia and development as inequality

After Indonesian independence and World War II international diakonia (meaning, aid from the church to the world) emerged as an autonomous field, somewhat simultaneous with the rise of international development. Besides the connection with the ethical policy, international diakonia and development were more generally shaped by western ideologies of progress, civilization, and individual improvement. From this time onward mission is thus accompanied by world diakonia and international development employed

from within churches and church-affiliated organizations, however in reality these three areas were interconnected, and their differentiation often remains unclear (especially between world diakonia and mission) (Crijns 2018: 193).

While at this point in time Indonesian churches had already been independent institutions for decades and equality and reciprocity were considered guiding principles in international diakonia, Karel Steenbrink has explained how the 1960's and 70's could still become a moment of unequal mission relations. Steenbrink narrates the history of various developmental aid programs initiated by Dutch churches or church-affiliated organizations, often without much consultation of their Indonesian counterparts (Steenbrink 2010: 108). Like many European nations, the Dutch government had started using aid programs as part of their foreign policy. In doing so they relied heavily on churches and their partner-organizations in the formerly colonized nations. As such, Dutch churches received massive government funding to be donated to churches in Indonesia and spend on development projects in the country.

Between the 1960s and 80s the process of decolonizing mission relations was interrupted by this alliance between the Dutch state and Dutch churches. While the Indonesian churches were already independent and mutuality and equality had become important principles of mission and world diakonia, Dutch churches were still persuaded to assume positions of dominance.

4. Concluding thoughts

At least twice over in the last century the progress of ideals of partnership and equality in mission relations have been disrupted: first through participation in the colonial ethical policy and second, after Indonesian independence, through collaboration with the government in international diakonia.

At the risk of shifting the responsibility for these protracted patterns of colonial dominance to the Dutch (colonial) government, I would like to suggest that decolonizing Dutch Protestantism could also imply redefining church-state relations. Increasing our distance from the state may foster critical self-reflection and prevent future uncritical collaboration in state power. Furthermore, who has a voice in shaping Dutch church-state relations? If this relationship has such a bearing on the mission partners abroad, should they not get a voice in how Dutch churches define their relationship to the state?

On a more fundamental level, the last century seems to warrant an exploration into the the significance of power in Dutch churches and theologies (in whatever shape it may be: money, influence, knowledge, education, or otherwise). Besides participation in colonial power this exploration could also include the impact of churches' decreasing social and political influence, due to secularity, on its perceptions and attitudes towards power. Secularity may have generated a climate less conducive for critical theological reflection on the powerful (colonial) church-state collaboration.

As a final thought, the ideals of partnership, mutuality, equality, and reciprocity cannot become tools to separate our world from colonialism as a distant past reality and imagine ourselves free to reinvent mission relations (Rieger 2004: 207). The contrast between the coloniality within our societies, churches, theologies, and relationships and the ideals of equal partnership may help us understand that there is no pure space and time within Christianity.

Literature

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