



Yusak Soleiman, ***The Dutch Reformed Church in Late Eighteenth Century Java: An Eastern Adventure*** (Ph.D. thesis Amsterdam 2011, Mission 54; Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012, 271 pp., ISBN 978 90 239 2078 6).

Yusak Soleiman's history of the Dutch Reformed Church's 'Eastern adventure' in the later eighteenth century Java addresses what he correctly identifies as a significant lacunae in both Dutch imperial and Indonesian history. Where the period is generally identified with the expansion of the VOC, the Dutch East Indies Trading Company, institutional religion typically receives attention only in its role as an agent of the Dutch state in expunging earlier Portuguese/Catholic influences in the eastern parts of the archipelago (see for instance Boxer, 1965 or Van Goor, 1987). Even in church histories eighteenth century Java has also been largely ignored – more accurately, avoided – by, as Soleiman defines them, the historians of the modern missionising era. (The recently published voluminous *History of Christianity in Indonesia* (Aritonang and Steenbrink, 2008), for instance, cited in the references but not discussed begins its chapter on 'Christianity in Java' in 1800.) One reason for this blank page, as the author demonstrates, is the limitation of the extant archive and the value of this book lies in the author's detailed search through that limited archive.

While the title of Yusak Soleiman's book (and the focus of its publisher) emphasizes the history of the Dutch Reformed Church, the author himself declares his concern is to 'provide a better and more complete picture of the topic in the field of Indonesian socio-religious studies' (203), which is not necessarily the same thing. It proves a difficult aim to realize since there appears to have been little interest in 'natives' during the period under review. The Dutch Reformed Church at the time was not 'in to' missionising in the conventional (nineteenth and twentieth century) sense: theologically it was a significantly different church from that which was to later espouse a role for 'missionary Christianity' in Dutch imperial expansion. It 'had a different relationship to local culture and Islam in Java, since it had a different theological position from the missionary Christianity that appeared in the nineteenth century' (3). It was a theology that Soleiman defines as 'cultural Christianity', a term I thought is more generally understood as describing those with little interest in religion. It is a thesis that fails to take account of the fact that within the Iberian-Catholic sphere, 'missionary Christianity' had

been practiced vigorously for some time (see for instance dos Guimarães Sá, 2007). It is then an explanation that would need to be more rigorously investigated than it is here.

Whatever the explanation, the history that emerges from these pages suggests that the Church's representatives showed as little interest in 'non-Christians' – i.e. the Javanese – as those Europeans who were in the East for 'gold and glory' – or just survival. While the focus of the book on eighteenth century Java is of great interest, the archive has resisted the author's valiant attempt to discover much about the responses of Javanese society to the presence of the Reformed Church. A somewhat more detailed picture, however, emerges of the largely Eurasian and economically depressed European community, the focus then, as it was later, of the Church's philanthropic institutions in urban Java.

The structure of the book, which is based on the author's dissertation, is designed, much like Doreen Grieg's 1987 study of the Netherlands' commercial institutions in the same era, to allow a comparison to be made between the nature and role of the Reformed Church at home and abroad. Two long introductory chapters enable the reader to see how a metropolitan institution was transplanted abroad, how it responded to the structure of the quasi-polity the Dutch traders established in Asia and how the Church's 'headquarters' in Batavia (although as the author notes centralisation was not part of the vocabulary of the Reformed Church) attempted to ensure its ecclesiastical and secular functions were replicated and maintained within the fragile, largely Eurasian, enclaves the VOC established. We also gain an insight into how VOC operatives supported the Church's activities and the extent to which 'church and state' were also intertwined in the East. After this general review, the book focuses on Java's North coast and on Semarang in particular. After a brief introduction (Chapter 3), in the course of a further six chapters it proceeds to examine how the Reformed Church operated there examining in turn Dutch ministers and the 'consistory', 'Ziekenroosters', Church membership, poor relief, orphanages, and government relations. Significant 'slices' of documentary evidence are later included as appendices.

The primary focus of this study, Semarang, grew in importance as a key VOC centre following the company's gradual domination of the Javanese state of Mataram. Referencing the (incomplete) record of the ministers of that city's iconic eighteenth century Immanuel church, 'Gereja Blenduk', the author has scoured the relevant VOC and Reformed Church records to be found almost exclusively in the national archives of Indonesia and the Netherlands. This reveals that '[n]o sources [have] survived to give us an extensive picture of all [Immanuel's] ministers and their activities' (87).

The author has undertaken the difficult task of piecing together what little information exists to document the workings of the Dutch Reformed Church in Java. Unfortunately, this has not resulted in a fluent text. Too often the material retrieved from limited sources has remained at the level of 'information', while the writing itself and the translation from an older Dutch often further mars the book's readability. These are issues that a good editor could have attended to.

Joost Coté, Monash University