

Review Article

Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink
(eds.), *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*¹

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OVERVIEW

ON 7 TO 8 AUGUST 2009 THE YARRA THEOLOGICAL UNION held an important seminar, sponsored by the Melbourne College of Divinity. It was based on the then recent publication of certainly one of the most important documents in both Christian and Indonesian history, Brill's *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*. There is no doubt that this is a very significant volume, for the study of Indonesian Christianity, for the understanding of global Christianity, and for the enhancement of Indonesian studies as a whole. It is significant in the first place because it deals with a major "hidden history" in global Christianity. This history of Indonesian Christianity has been largely hidden from the English-speaking world. There are two very clear examples of this. First, in the first edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*² Indonesia is not mentioned at all; indeed, there is only a brief mention of it in the latest edition.³ The dictionary is largely an English language, and indeed a British, view of the world. Second, in the classic 1960s history of the Christian worldwide mission, that is, in Stephen Neill's *A History of Christian Missions*⁴, we see why Indonesian Christianity has been a "hidden history". For most of its primary and even secondary sources were either in Malay, Indonesian, local

1. Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink (eds.), *A History of Christianity in Indonesia* (*Studies in Christian Mission*, Volume 35)(Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008) pp. xvi + 1,000.

2. F. L. Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

3. F. L. Cross (ed.), revised edition E. A Livingstone (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (*The Pelican History of the Church* 6) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

languages of Indonesia or in Dutch and German and Indonesian and, in earlier years, in Portuguese and Spanish. At least Neill was very conscious of this “hidden factor”, and he was aware of this, because, although he had served as a British Anglican theologian and bishop in Britain and India, he had in 1962 been appointed Professor of Missions and Ecumenical Theology in the University of Hamburg, in Germany. His classic volume was published two years later, in 1964. When he comes to look at the Bibliography of Indonesia, he admits:

Almost all the literature is in Dutch or German. A history of the Churches in Indonesia has been prepared (in Indonesian) by Dr T. Müller-Krüger; it is hoped that versions in German and English may be made available before long.⁵

Neill then goes on to say:

The classic work on the Protestant Church in Indonesia is: C. W. Th. Baron van Boeltzelaer van Dubbeldam: *De Protestantsche Kerk in Nederlandsch-Indië: Haar Ontwikkeling van 1620 – 1939*.⁶

He continues:

There seems to be as yet no English life of Nommensen; there are a number in German, of which J. Warneck: *D. Ludwig I. Nommensen, Ein Lebensbild*⁷ may be mentioned.... For Bali the two indispensable books are: H. Kraemer: *De Strijd over Bali en de Zending*⁸ [and] J. L. Swellengrebel: *Kerk en Tempel op Bali*.⁹

Against this background, this volume is very important. It tells, in English, the long, involved and significant story of what has been hidden or written out of much of the sweep of the history of Christianity, especially in the dominant English-speaking world. Here we have a volume which tells the story of what are currently at least twenty-four million Christians (more people than the population of Australia), that is around ten per cent of the fourth most populous country in the world. It is also the story of the most populous Muslim country in the world, in which the interaction between Islam and Christianity has been highly significant.

5. Neill, *A History*, p. 592.

6. *De Protestantsche Kerk in Nederlandsch-Indië: Haar Ontwikkeling van 1620 – 1939* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1947).

7. *D. Ludwig I. Nommensen, Ein Lebensbil* (3rd ed. Barmen: Verlag des Missionshauses, 1928).

8. *De Strijd over Bali en de Zending* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1933).

9. *Kerk en Tempel op Bali* ('s-Gravenhage: W. van Hoeve, 1948). See Neill, *A History*, p. 592.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

It is encyclopaedic, as the editors admit (p. vii). Ranging over more than one thousand pages, it traces the story of Indonesian Christianity from its earliest signs in the ninth century CE (pp. 4-6) to 2005. Indeed, because of its sheer size, one needs to be cautious in making comment, in that at some point in the text evidence to the contrary may well appear! It is also remarkable in that it is a work of collaboration between Protestant and Catholic scholars (both Indonesian and European). This is significant in that even in the early 1960s the relationship between these two Christian traditions in Indonesia “was characterized by tension and rivalry”, as evidenced in the writing of the very influential Johannes Verkuyl¹⁰ (p. 839). Moreover, the inclusion of the prominent Indonesian Muslim scholar Professor Azyumardi Azar among the contributors (pp. 9-21) is both important and necessary in the Indonesian context. Few histories of Christianity have had the courage and transparency to include a Muslim scholar in the writing of Christian history where Islam is a significant neighbour. For these reasons alone this volume will be essential for any scholar of Indonesia, of global Christian history, and of Christian theology in an international context.

The first two parts (up to the year 1800, and from 1800 to 2005) of the three parts of the volume are structured according to the islands. It is a history by geography. Moreover, they are very evenly balanced between geographical areas, from both Protestant and Catholic perspectives. Thus these two parts are rather akin to an Indonesian version of Kenneth Scott Latourette’s seven-volume classic account of the development of global Christianity, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*.¹¹ In the third part there are comprehensive chapters on Indonesian theological thinking, primarily by indigenous Christians, on ecumenical efforts especially after 1945, and on the enormous growth of evangelicals and Pentecostals. This is supplemented by important chapters on the Chinese churches, on the development of indigenous Christian art, and on the Christian media.

The volume, as noted, is encyclopaedic. Moreover, the general editorship is not heavy. This has the advantage of allowing voices to be heard on their own terms, particularly from each region. On the other hand, it does mean that the material presented varies a great deal from region to region, and even from area to area within a region. For example, in North Sumatra, there is great detail on the upheavals of the dominant Batak Church, the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP), between 1980 and 2000, almost in the style of recent political

10. Johannes Verkuyl, *Geredja dan Bidat-Bida* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1961).

11. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Volumes I-VII (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938-46).

history (pp. 560-569), while there is more of a long-term contextual theological assessment of the neighbouring Karo Batak Church, the Gereja Batak Karo Protestan (GBKP) (pp. 570-572, 577-584).

STRENGTHS

A clear strength of the volume is its ability to produce a history "from below". It is thus a quite different way of doing history than that of the volumes noted above, and the style of much Christian history regarded as normative even in the 1960s. Throughout it makes clear the reactions of indigenous Indonesians to the coming of Christianity (pp. 148-150), and indeed outlines and analyses their own self-propagation of Christianity (pp. 150-52, 353). This is seen even at the well-established beginnings of Christianity in Indonesia in the sixteenth century CE (that is, after the appearance of Christianity in the ninth century CE, noted above, of which we know so little), where the indigenous Christian community at Mamuya in north-eastern Halmahera played their part in the defence of the faith (pp. 29, 50, 53). It was in this area (apart from the ninth century possibility) that the first indigenous converts and first indigenous martyrs lived and died (pp. 50, 53, 95).¹² This significant self-propagation of the faith by the indigenous converts is a major theme throughout the volume, particularly from the nineteenth century CE. Indonesians were major players, and at times primary or sole players, in the propagation of the Christian faith in the archipelago, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions (pp. 167-68). In sheer numbers, the people of Flores, Ambon, the Minahasa, the Batak Lands, and the Sangihe and Talaud Islands, among others, were central propagators of Christianity in islands other than their own. This "history from below" has been most successfully carried out in the volume.

Moreover, the volume has been successful in pointing not only to the indigenous involvement in the growth of Christianity in Indonesia, noted above, but also to the central role of Indonesian Christians in the development of indigenous theologies and forms of Christian faith and life in the archipelago. This is especially clear from the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century CE, and runs throughout the volume, from Flores (p. 242), to Timor (p. 309), to Papua (p. 375), to the Minahasa (p. 422, 442-444), to Kalimantan (p. 517), to North Sumatra (pp. 577-84, 607), to West Java (pp. 650-51), to Central Java (p.

12. J. Haire, *The Character and Theological Struggle of the Church in Halmahera, Indonesia, 1941-1979: Studien zur interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums*, Band 26 (Frankfurt am Main und Bern: Lang, 1981) 104-107 (Indonesian translation: J. Haire, *Sifat dan Pergumulan Teologis Gereja di Halmahera, 1941-1979*, trans. S. Suleeman [Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1998] 122-27).

673), and to Bali (p. 737). Of course, major figures in this area, referred to as "proto-theologians" (p. 752), such as C. L. Coolen (pp. 713-14) and Sadrach Surapranata (pp. 753-54), are well presented in their contexts. Moreover, the chapter on indigenous Christian art (pp. 925-49) is primarily a discourse on contextual public theology. The picture on the volume's cover, Nyoman Darsane's *Sermon at the Seaside* (pp. 942-45) in Balinese form, epitomises this indigenous application of theology. For global Christian theology this discourse is significant, in that it explains why in Indonesia contextual forms of Christianity are manifest in mainline Christian traditions, unlike the situation in many parts of Africa, where there are independent indigenous churches unrelated to churches in any other part of the world (p. 152).

Related to these issues there is helpful discussion on the variety of methods used within the Christian mission in Indonesia. First, there was the development of pietistic conventicles (pp. 149-50), that is, small groups of deeply committed disciples. These developed in the early years of most of the nineteenth century missions. Secondly, there was the sociological missionary method developed in the Outer Islands at the end of the nineteenth century, with large movements into Christianity and the consequent separation of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. It is significant that there was no major difference between Protestants and Catholics as to their methods. Both tended to use slight variations on the same theme. Moreover, it is the perception of these two methodologies, and of the move from the first to the second, which informed Muslim perceptions of the nature of Christianity (p. 187). These are dealt with significantly in each island setting (pp. 171-73, 400-403, 456-61). However, there needs to be further discourse across the nation on the nature of Christianity thus formed, as this experience is so central to Indonesian Christianity.

Again, there has been great ability to point to the close inter-relationship of the personal, the political and the public. For Indonesian Christianity, in both Protestant and Catholic forms, this is important. On the one hand, the strong nationalist tendencies in Indonesian Christianity from the 1930s secured the faith a place in the independent nation (pp. 955, 972) and a seat at the discussions on the nature of the state from 1945, initially in the persons of A. A. Maramis and Johannes Latuharhary (pp. 187-91). On the other hand, this nationalism explained the churches' reactions, both positive and negative, to government policies over the years (pp. 212-26). This has been brought out well in the volume. It is seen, for example, in the work of Johannes Leimena (pp. 190, 194-95, 201, 784, 827) and of T. B. Simatupang (pp. 192, 208, 212, 785), particularly in relation to the debates on the nature of the state, and the nature of national development. Leimena, a Protestant (Reformed) Christian from the

Moluccas, served in very senior positions in the various governments of President Soekarno in the 1950s. He insisted that his co-operation with all the independence revolutionaries, of whatever background, had been part of his Christian calling.¹³ Again, Simatupang, a Lutheran turned Reformed Christian from North Sumatra, who had served as Chief of Staff in the Indonesian Army during that decade too, insisted in his writings on the living relationship between the faith of Christians and their thinking and activities in relation to the ongoing revolution, with the aim of bringing about a more just society.¹⁴

Further, the analysis of ecumenical activity is important. The remarkable period of inter-church activity came after 1945 and particularly after 1949 (pp. 823-65). Before this the mission areas had largely been discrete entities. For the Protestant churches, it began with the creation of the Dewan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (DGI), which in 1984 became the Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (PGI). Here Protestant churches co-operated very closely indeed, to the extent that the Reformed and the churches closely related to them within the DGI/PGI effectively had almost automatic ministerial interchange between the various Reformed and closely related synods. It was geography rather than theology which kept the Reformed churches apart. To that extent, the many Reformed synods and those closely related to them were effectively one church. For example, during the violence in the Moluccas, many congregations and ministers of the Halmahera synod fled to the Minahasa. There the ministers were treated as ministers of the Minahasa synod, and the congregations were treated as congregations of the Minahasa synod (pp. 445-46). Although the Roman Catholic Church was more unitary, in many ways it ran in parallel with the structures of the Protestant churches, in that each region was often developed by different orders, in parallel with the differing Protestant missionary societies working in each area. It was these parallel structures which enhanced pragmatic ecumenism between the Protestant and Catholic churches, which in turn has defined Indonesian ecumenism. In pragmatic terms here in places is one of the most integrated forms of ecumenism in the world; it needs further examination.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPMENTS ON THIS WORK

13. J. Leimena, "De Ontmoeting der Rassen in de Kerk", *De Opwekker* (1941) 626-42; J. Leimena, "The Task of Restoring Fellowship Within the Church and the Indonesian Nation", *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 9/3 (1968) 57-64; G. van Klinken *Minorities, Modernity and the Emerging Nation: Christians in Indonesia: A Biographical Approach* (Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Volume 199). (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003) 122, 137, 189-90, 218-20.

14. T. B. Simatupang, *Tugas Kristen dalam Revolusi* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1967); T. B. Simatupang, *Keselamatan Masa Kini* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1973).

Some weaknesses seem to be as follows. First, as noted above, the first two of the three parts of the volume is a history by geography. There are a number of consequences of this. It does mean a very thorough treatment of areas which tend to be ignored elsewhere, particularly in Java-centred discourses. In fact, if anything, it tends to be a non-Java-centred discourse, and can thus in fact speak of the nature of Indonesian Christianity. This decentralised discourse has considerable value in giving the picture "from below". However, it can appear to be a nineteenth century CE form of discourse, concentrating on an agenda of the division of the country into mission areas prior to independence. Certainly, at least until the 1940s, it would seem that this way of discussion cannot be avoided. It certainly is justified. Nevertheless, it does mean that we also should have overall discourse on the themes that permeate each of the chapters in the first two parts. The themes need to be brought together further. Perhaps this is work that needs to develop as a further volume from this primary work.

Moreover, it would have been helpful to locate indigenous Indonesian theology or theologies within the wider international frameworks of the major traditions. For example, it would have been interesting to see what the impact of Indonesian Catholic theology has had on the Vatican and on the wider debates of Asian Catholic thinking. It would be important to understand whether Indonesian Catholic theology has had major impact internationally or, alternatively, has largely been only the recipient of other Catholic thinking in Asia, for example from India and the Philippines. Equally, it is important to understand the impact of Indonesian Protestant theology on the World Council of Churches. There is some reference to the interaction with the Christian Conference of Asia, the regional ecumenical body related to the World Council of Churches (pp. 926, 969). However, the impact of theological interaction internationally needs to be further developed. Specifically, the interaction between the Reformed churches of Indonesia and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches needs to be analysed and evaluated, as does the interaction between the Lutheran churches and the Lutheran World Federation. Evaluation needs to be given as to whether the Indonesian churches were international contributors or merely recipients in terms of theology. One area that is strangely lacking is the study of women ministers among the Indonesian clergy. Although there is good discussion of Indonesian feminist theology (pp. 798-800), strangely there is virtually no mention of the fact that many Indonesian Protestant churches have been at the forefront of ordaining women. Indeed the Minahasa Protestant Church, the Gereja Masehi Injili Minahasa (GMIM), probably has one of the highest percentages of women ministers in the world.

Again, further analysis of Christian involvement in inter-faith issues would have been helpful. Inter-faith relations have been complex. Two factors are of significance here for Christianity at least. First, Schrieke's theory of the race between Islam and Christianity between 1530 and 1670 to proselytise Indonesia has been significant (pp. 9-20). Secondly, the Barthian stance represented by Hendrik Kramer, particularly in his report, *The Christian message in a non-Christian World*,¹⁵ at the ecumenical Tambaram Conference in India in 1938, had a profound effect on Indonesian Protestants (p. 827). Pragmatic co-operation with other faiths on the one hand and theological tension with them on the other had often been problematic, particularly as many of the churches have been the inheritors of the theology of Karl Barth. Parallel with this had been the Catholic struggle as to how to deal with the uniqueness of Christ in the plurality of religions. The effect of Tambaram and the parallel Catholic concern had been, on the one hand, a desire to protect Christian integrity and, on the other, a need of the whole community to engage in close co-operation in practical issues. This was seen primarily in the solidarity between the faiths in the struggle for independence. In more recent times Christians and Muslims have co-operated closely in national development, in social justice and in ecological issues. In particular, Muslim, Protestant and Catholic welfare services have co-operated very closely. Most recently there has been co-operation between the faiths in the face of the issue of HIV/AIDS. Pragmatic needs have meant that dialogue could not be avoided. Indeed, at times during the *Orde Baru*¹⁶ dialogue became problematic both for the churches and for the organisations of other faiths, as the *Orde Baru* government seemed to direct a particular style of dialogue on religious groups as a way of seeking to control their view of how society should be managed.

Moreover, it would be helpful to see further reflection on indigenous Christian theology in Indonesia by the leaders and theologians of other faiths. In particular it would be helpful to see discourse on the interaction between indigenous Indonesian Christian theology and Indonesian Muslim scholarship. Moreover, this is important in that the interaction between Christianity and Islam in Indonesia is the most significant in the world in terms of numbers. However, it has largely been marginalised in international Muslim-Christian dialogue, which is bound up with discussions regarding Palestine-Israel

15. Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1937).

16. *Orde Baru*, meaning "The New Order", was the title applied by the Soeharto Government to its own period in office (1966-1998). It was to be in contrast to the *Orde Lama*, meaning "The Old Order", of the previous President Soekarno (1945-1965).

CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, this is an essential volume for the future discourse both in Indonesian studies and in the study of global Christian history and theology. The volume has opened up the need for a further volume, building on this primary work, with a range of thematic discourses. It needs to look further at common themes in Christian history across the archipelago. It needs to look further at common indigenous Christian theological themes and methodologies across the nation. It needs to analyse and evaluate the Indonesian contributions to international Christian theological discourse, Catholic, Protestant, and ecumenical. It needs to analyse and evaluate pragmatic Indonesian Christian ecumenism across the nation. It needs to examine gender issues further in Indonesian Christianity. It needs to analyse and evaluate Indonesian Christian contributions to inter-faith dialogue, particularly international Muslim-Christian dialogue. Indeed, this is a standard work, and hopefully a new beginning for further studies.