



University of Dundee

Danny Noorlander, Heaven's Wrath

Van Ittersum, Martine

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Danny Noorlander, *Heaven's Wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2019, 300 pp., ISBN 978-0801453632; Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019, 294 pp., ISBN 9789087283308).

In *Heaven's Wrath*, the American historian Danny Noorlander successfully disproves some of the 'most persistent claims' (5) made in Anglo-American scholarship about the role of religion in early modern Dutch expansion. Allegedly, the directors of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) neglected the needs of the Dutch Reformed Church for the sake of the bottom line. Allegedly, the Dutch colonies were glorified trading posts, lacking European political, social and religious institutions. Allegedly, the WIC and Dutch East India Company hired incompetent ministers in order to cut costs and assure themselves of submissive, pliant clergy. Allegedly, the clergy's main purpose was to serve company employees in Dutch forts and ships, rather than converting indigenous peoples to Christianity. Unlike the Portuguese Jesuits in Asia and New England Puritans, so the story goes, 'businesslike Dutchmen' (5) could not care less about dogmatic differences or about spreading their religion, but concentrated on commerce and trade instead. This makes for a comfortable, Weberian tale about Calvinist merchants as harbingers of 'the modern world' – except that they were not.

According to Noorlander, the WIC and the Dutch Reformed Church formed a close partnership in the first half of the seventeenth century, with profound consequences for Dutch expansion in the Atlantic World. As he shows in Chapter 2, a remarkable number of WIC directors served on the vestries of Dutch Reformed churches in their home towns and attended classis and synod meetings as lay members. In the Dutch Republic, WIC directors supported the church's poor relief by means of significant private donations, and, in each town with a WIC chamber, through a self-imposed tax of 0.1 percent on all imported goods. As the author argues in Chapter 8, the amounts of money expended by the WIC on the establishment of the Dutch Reformed Church overseas were staggering. On clerical salaries alone, the WIC must have spent over a million Dutch guilders in the fifty-three years of its existence. If one adds up 'all the other religious costs' – for example the establishment of school and church buildings in the colonies, organising poor relief in overseas settlements, and the provision of bibles, catechisms and other educational materials – then one quickly reaches the conclusion that 'the WIC's civic purpose and functions' outweighed 'its commercial ones' (199). This continued to be the case even when the WIC could least afford it, for instance

after the loss of its monopolies on fur and sugar. In Noorlander's view, 'the directors did not neglect the church as much as they drove the WIC into the ground and took everything, including the church, with them' (199).

Heaven's Wrath consists of eight chapters and an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction reviews the historiographical debate on the role of religion in the commercial and colonial endeavours of the Dutch Golden Age. Chapter 1 narrates how the Dutch Reformed Church became the established church of the Dutch Republic, and emphasises that the WIC was born 'in the shadow of religious controversy and war' (21). Both the Synod of Dordt and the resumption of armed conflict against the King of Spain and Portugal in 1621 served to define the WIC. Right from the start, it embarked on a self-proclaimed crusade against the popish enemy and sought to roll back Catholicism everywhere in the Atlantic World. Chapter 2 examines the WIC directors' enthusiastic collaboration with the Dutch Reformed Church, both on a personal and professional level. Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the role of both the ordained and lay clergy on board of the WIC fleets and in the WIC's early forts and settlements.

Chapter 5 examines the Calvinist mission in Dutch Brazil. Noorlander argues convincingly that the 'great reformation' pursued by the clergy and the WIC directors was an important factor in the uprising of the Portuguese planters in 1642. Nor does Noorlander consider Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen to be the enlightened, tolerant ruler we know from the historiography. Yes, the governor of Dutch Brazil was willing to defy the WIC directors regarding the timing of the 'great reformation' and the political and legal mechanisms that could help bring it about. However, he shared their belief that the religious freedoms granted to the Portuguese planters at the time of the conquest should be curtailed, and that Calvinist ministers were there to "draw [Catholic] souls away from Papist superstition and reclaim them for Christ" (131-132). Chapter 6 focuses on the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Caribbean and New Netherland (for instance in the Hudson Valley). Missionary work among Africans and Native Americans is the subject of Chapter 7, which includes a powerful analysis of the Dutch Reformed Church's failure to condemn the WIC's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. The question why Calvinist ministers overseas could become the locus of strong, local opposition to WIC officials and their policies is answered in Chapter 8.

The concluding chapter is a comprehensive comparison of the missionary efforts of the Dutch Reformed Church in the East and West Indies, clearly marking out the numerous similarities and several notable differences. Noorlander also addresses the question why the Dutch Reformed Church was less successful than, for example, the Catholic Church in spreading its faith. Or was it? As the author points out (225), the ratio of ordained ministers to the number of inhabitants of Dutch Brazil – one minister for every 1,762 white colonists and one for every 2,142 people overall – came very close to

the ratios in the Dutch Republic of one minister for every 1,233 inhabitants. Lay clergy played an important role in spreading the gospel as well. It were readers, *ziekentroosters* (literally ‘comforters of the sick’) and schoolmasters who did most of the heavy lifting overseas. The WIC employed 360 clergy between 1621 and 1674, only 120 of whom were ordained (29-30). Still, aside from the number of clergy employed overseas, the Catholic Church had other, marked advantages over the Dutch Reformed Church in its efforts to convert the indigenous inhabitants of Asia, Africa and the Americas. As Noorlander notes,

Protestantism was less ritualistic, with no images or objects to take the place of indigenous ones, and no saints who could replace or merge with indigenous deities. Given the added issues of corporate sponsorship and the heightened instructional requirements of Calvinist membership, perhaps the key question isn’t about why the Dutch had fewer clergy and smaller missions than Catholics in the early modern era, but how they managed to convert anyone. (226-227)

Noorlander’s findings are based on wide-ranging archival research in The Netherlands. An impressive list of archives can be found on pages 227 and 228. However, the absence of a bibliography makes it difficult for the reader to assess the depth of his archival research. Similarly, a complete list of the secondary literature consulted by the author would have been useful, if only to get a clear sense of the historiographical debates addressed in this monograph. It is a shame that such cost-saving measures on the part of Cornell University Press detract from an otherwise impressive study.

Martine van Ittersum, University of Dundee