

***A History of Christianity in Indonesia.* Edited by Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2008. 1,004+ pp.**

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Overview

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 the 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*,¹ Indonesia is not mentioned at all; indeed, there is only a brief mention of it in the latest edition.² The *Oxford Dictionary* presents 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*,³ we see why Indonesian Christianity may be said to have a "hidden history" from the Westerner's perspective. Most of the primary and even secondary sources of Indonesian Christian history were either in Malay, Indonesian, or local languages of Indonesia. Additional sources were in Dutch and German, and, in earlier years, in Portuguese and Spanish. Neill was conscious of this shortcoming, namely, that many in the English-speaking world were uninfluenced by a whole other, non-English literature, because, after he served as a British Anglican theologian and bishop in Britain and India, he was appointed Professor of Missions and Ecumenical Theology at the University of Hamburg, Germany, in 1962. His classic volume was published two years later, in 1964. When he looked at Indonesia's bibliography, he admitted: "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."⁴ 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 im Nederlandsch-Indië: Haar Ontwikkeling van 1620–1939*" (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1947).⁵ 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*⁶ may be mentioned. ... For Bali, the two indispensable books are: H. Kraemer: *De Strijd*

¹ F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

² F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, revised edition, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions (The Pelican History of the Church 6)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

⁵ Neill, *A History*, p. 592.

⁶ Third edition, published by Verlag des Missionshauses (Barmen), 1928.

over Bali en de Zending [Amsterdam: Paris, 1933] [and] J. L. Swellengrebel: *Kerk en Tempel op Bali* [’s-Gravenhage: W. van Hoeve, 1948].⁷

Against this background, the current volume is most important and welcome. 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 Indonesian Christianity, especially in the dominant English-speaking world. Here we have a hefty volume that tells the story of today’s twenty-four million Indonesian Christians (more people than the population of Australia), who constitute around 10 percent of the fourth most-populous country in the world. It is also the story of the most-populous Muslim country in the world, a place where the interaction between Islam and Christianity has been highly significant.

Historiographic Methodology

A History of Christianity in Indonesia is encyclopedic, 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 (pp. 4–6) to 2005. Indeed, because of this volume’s 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! This book is also remarkable in that it is a work of collaboration between Protestant and Catholic scholars (both Indonesian and European). This is significant because, 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 Johannes Verkuyl (p. 839). Moreover, the inclusion among the book’s contributors of the prominent Indonesian Muslim professor and scholar Azyumardi Azar (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’s point of view in the writing of Christian history, even regional histories where Islam is a significant player. 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 1800, and from 1800 to 2005) of the three parts of the volume are structured in relation to the Indonesian islands themselves. It is a history by geography. Moreover, these first two sections are evenly balanced among 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*.⁸ 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 in the numbers 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.

⁷ Neill, *A History*, p. 592

⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. I–VII (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1938–1946).

The volume, as noted, is encyclopedic. To their credit, the editors did not revise the entries with a heavy hand. This has the advantage of allowing voices to be heard on their own terms, particularly from each region. On the downside, 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, regarding North Sumatra, there is great detail on the upheavals of the dominant Batak church, the Huria Kristen Batak Protestant (HKBP, The Christian Protestant Batak Church), between 1980 and 2000, almost in the style of recent political history (pp. 560–69), while there is more of a long-term contextual theological assessment of the neighboring Karo Batak church, the Gereja Batak Karo Protestant (GBKP, The Karo Batak Protestant Church) (pp. 570–72, 577–84).

Strengths

A clear strength of this volume is its ability to produce a history “from below.” It thus adopts a quite different way of presenting history than do the volumes noted above, and its style differs from that of most Christian mission histories regarded as normative even in the 1960s. Throughout, the book makes clear the reactions of indigenous Indonesians to the coming of Christianity (p. 148–50), and, indeed, outlines and analyzes Indonesians’ 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 (that is, after the appearance of Christianity in the ninth century, noted above, of which we know so little), when the indigenous Christian community at Mamuya in northeastern Halmahera played its part in the defense of the faith (pp. 29, 50, 53). It was in this area (apart from the ninth century possibility) that the first indigenous converts and martyrs lived and died (pp. 50, 53, 95). This propagation of the faith by the indigenous converts is a major theme throughout the volume, particularly from the 1800s. Indonesians themselves were major players, and at times primary or sole players, in the spread 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 missionaries of Christianity in islands other than their own. This “history from below” has been successfully and satisfactorily conveyed in the volume.

Moreover, the volume is successful in pointing not only to Indonesians’ 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, with regional evidence provided throughout the volume: Flores (p. 242), Timor (p. 309), Papua (p. 375), the Minahasa (p. 422, 442–44), Kalimantan (p. 517), North Sumatra (pp. 577–84, 607), West Java (pp. 650–51), Central Java (p. 673), and 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, epitomizes 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 a helpful discussion on the variety of methods to advance Christianity 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. Second, there was the sociological missionary method developed in the Outer Islands at the end of the nineteenth century, with large numbers of converts to 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 of proselytizing at this time. 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, that informed Muslim perceptions of the nature of Christianity (p. 187). These methodologies are dealt with significantly in each island setting (pp. 171–73, 400–3, 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, this work exhibits a great ability to point to the close interrelationships of the personal, the political, and the public. Indeed, one of the unique features of this volume is its ability to demonstrate and explain these interrelationships, which have tended either to be ignored or to be severely downplayed in many histories of Christianity. In this effort the book makes a significant contribution to Christian historiography. 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 both 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. 212–226). Nationalism's influences have been brought out well in the volume. They are 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 cooperation with all the independence revolutionaries, of whatever background, had been part of his Christian calling. Likewise, Simatupang, a Lutheran turned Reformed Christian from North Sumatra, who had served as chief of staff in the Indonesian Army during that decade, insisted in his writings on the living relationship between the faith of Christians and their thinking and activities in relation to the ongoing revolution, pursued with the aim of bringing about a more just society.

Further, the book's 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, the ecumenical movement began with the creation of the Dewan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (DGI, the Council of Churches in Indonesia), which in 1984 became

the Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (PGI, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia). Protestant churches cooperated very closely, indeed, to the extent that the Reformed congregations and churches closely related to them within the DGI/PGI effectively had almost automatic ministerial interchange among the various Reformed and closely related synods. It was geography rather than theology that kept the Reformed churches apart. Theologically, 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 reflected the structures of the Protestant churches, in that each region was often developed by different Catholic Orders, in parallel with the differing Protestant missionary societies working in each area. Just as the Protestant church in Indonesia had a decentralized structure, with power resting in each region, so, too, the Indonesian Catholic church was much less centralized than it was in many other countries, again with power resting in each area. For the Catholic church, this had come about because different Orders had developed different areas, and there had been less attempt to provide uniformity across the nation. It was these parallel *de facto* structures between the Protestant and Catholic churches that enhanced pragmatic ecumenism, 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.

Weaknesses

As noted above, the first two of this volume's three parts is a history by geography. This is both good and bad. It does mean there's a very thorough treatment of areas that tend to be ignored elsewhere, particularly in Java-centred discourses. In fact, if anything, the book tends to be a non-Java-centered discourse, and can thus, in fact, speak of the nature of Indonesian Christianity. This decentralized discourse has considerable value in giving the picture "from below." However, it can appear to be a nineteenth-century form of discourse, concentrating on an agenda of the division of the country into mission areas prior to independence. Certainly, at least in the sections dealing with years prior to the 1940s, it would seem that such a fragmented discussion cannot be avoided. It certainly is justified. Nevertheless, it does mean that we must look elsewhere to find an overall discussion of the themes that permeate each of the chapters in the first two parts. The themes need to be brought together. Perhaps this is work that needs to develop as a companion 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 impact 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 any major impact internationally or, alternatively, has largely been influenced by other Catholic thinking in Asia, for example, from India and the Philippines. Equally, it is important to understand the influence 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 analyzed and evaluated, as does the interaction between the Lutheran churches and the Lutheran World Federation. Do Indonesian churches contribute to international religious communities' theological discourses, or are those churches merely recipients in terms of theological development?

One topic that is missing from this volume 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 (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 interfaith issues would have been helpful. Indonesia's interfaith 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 proselytize Indonesia has been significant (pp. 9–20). Second, the Barthian stance represented by Hendrik Kramer, particularly in his report *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*,⁹ delivered at the ecumenical Tambaram Conference in India in 1938, had a profound effect on Indonesian Protestants (p. 827). Pragmatic cooperation 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 result of Tambaram and the parallel Catholic concern had been a desire to protect Christian integrity and, at the same time, a need of the whole community to engage in close cooperation in practical issues. This was seen primarily in the solidarity among the faiths in the struggle for independence. In more recent times, Christians and Muslims have cooperated closely regarding national development, social justice, and ecological issues. In particular, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic welfare services have worked together closely. For instance, recently there has been cooperation among 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, dialogue became problematic both for the churches and for other faith-based organizations, as the Orde Baru government seemed to impose 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 leaders and theologians from other faiths. In particular, it would be helpful to see a discussion of on the interaction between indigenous Indonesian Christian theology and Indonesian Muslim scholarship. 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, this topic has largely been

⁹ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1937).

marginalized in international Muslim–Christian dialogue, which is bound up with discussions regarding Palestine–Israel.

This is an essential volume for future discourse in Indonesian studies, as well as for the study of global Christian history and theology. It will serve well any scholar of Indonesia, especially in religious studies, and students of Christian theology in an international context. This volume is entirely worthwhile, yet, despite its encyclopedic scope, has demonstrated the need for further work that can build on its primary sources to cover a range of thematic discourses. Indeed, this is a standard work, and hopefully a new beginning for further studies.