In Memoriam: Karel A. Steenbrink 1942–2021

Exchange Is Our Mission

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On 22 August 2021 Karel Steenbrink passed away. From 1994 to 2004 Steenbrink served as the managing editor of *Exchange*. Under his capable guidance, *Exchange* (then still called *Exchange. Journal of missiological and ecumenical research*) developed into one of the leading peer-reviewed journals on Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

For Steenbrink *Exchange* was more than just another academic journal; both as editor of *Exchange* and as scholar more generally, Steenbrink personified *Exchange's* main mission, which is to provide a platform for scholars from outside the Western world to share their research. The fact that many upcoming academics from Africa, Asia, and Latin America published their first articles in *Exchange*, was something that Steenbrink was particularly proud of; and with good reason.

Steenbrink also supervised the transferal of *Exchange* to the prestigious academic publishing house Brill Publishers. Cognizant of the mechanisms of exclusion this could occasion, he negotiated the so-called “exchange-subscriptions” as part of the contract with Brill: academic institutions from Africa, Asia, and Latin America that agreed to send copies of their newsletters and journals to Utrecht University Library¹ would receive a subscription to *Exchange* free of charge. With this imaginative form of Open Access *avant la lettre* Steenbrink not merely ensured a worldwide distribution and readership of *Exchange* but also masterminded what over the years has become a unique collection of materials at the Utrecht University Library, which documents the developments of Christianity worldwide through the prism of local journals and newsletters. For Steenbrink these developments of *Exchange* contributed

¹ Initially, the journals and newsletters were sent to the library of the Interuniversity Institute of Missiology and Ecumenism, which is now part of the Utrecht University Library.

to his wider vision of the need for worldwide scholarly exchange and sharing of resources. To cite his favorite motto “Exchange is our mission”.

In this issue of *Exchange*, we would like to commemorate and celebrate Karel Steenbrink as a person and a scholar; we commemorate his life with this *In memoriam* and celebrate his scholarship by republishing one of his articles, that we consider illustrative of Steenbrink’s scholarly work and drive.

Karel Adriaan Steenbrink was born on 16 January 1942 into a large Catholic family in Breda, the Netherlands. Inspired by the example of the Belgian missionary priest Father Damian de Veuster, he entered the minor seminary of the *Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary* in Sint-Oedenrode in 1954 and became a member of the congregation in 1961. After graduating from the Catholic University of Nijmegen (nowadays: Radboud University) in January 1970, Steenbrink continued his education by pursuing a PhD degree at Nijmegen. The research for his PhD project took Steenbrink to Indonesia, a country that would continue to draw and fascinate him for the rest of his life.

In March 1970, Steenbrink travelled to Indonesia to study Islamic education at Javanese *pesantrens*, Islamic (boarding) schools where students studied Arabic, Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*) and Islamic law (*fiqh*). After a tour of various institutions, Steenbrink requested and received permission to join the staff and student body of the *pesantren* Darul Salam in Gontor (Ponorogo Regency), an institution that drew students from the whole of Indonesia. In Darul Salam, Steenbrink participated in the everyday life of the *pesantren*, taking classes and engaging in interfaith discussions, thus gaining firsthand experience of discussions about some of the classical tropes in Christian-Muslim encounters, such as debates about the oneness of God and the position of Jesus. Eventually, and after much discussion, Steenbrink, who was well-versed in Arabic, also received consent to participate in the prayers at the *pesantren*, provided he conducted the prescribed ablutions. The spontaneity and sincerity with which Steenbrink participated in these rituals, presage the view he later would articulate academically, being that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam form a hermeneutical family and draw on the same oral and literary corpus. In an article entitled “Can a Catholic also be a Muslim?”² Steenbrink reflected on his participation in the religious life at Gontor.

2 K.A. Steenbrink, ‘Kun je als Katholiek ook Moslim zijn? Ontmoetingen met Moslims in Indonesië,’ in I.N. Bulhof and M.J.H.M. Poorthuis. *Mijn Plaats Is Geen Plaats. Ontmoetingen Tussen Wereldbeschouwingen*. Kampen, 2003, 51–66.

The experience of living at the *pesantren* in Gontor, the exchanges with its director al-hajj Zarkarsji, and the intimate encounter with Indonesia and Islam during this period, shaped Steenbrink both as a person and as a scholar. Indonesia and Islam, in their intersection and as distinct research foci, would become the central pivots on which his research hinged.

Steenbrink returned to the Netherlands in 1971 and in 1974 successfully defended his PhD dissertation, entitled *Pesantren, madrasah, sekolah. Recent developments in Indonesian Islamic education*.³ In the meantime, he had met Paule Maas, who was to become his life partner. They married in December 1972 and have two children: Floris (1974) and Stijn (1977). Consequentially, in September 1974 Steenbrink formally left the *Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary*, though his relations with the congregation remained cordial.

In 1981, when after a period of teaching at a secondary school in Eindhoven, the opportunity presented itself to return to Indonesia, Steenbrink and his young family jumped at the occasion. From 1981 to 1983 Steenbrink lectured at the Institute Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN, State Institute for Islam) Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, teaching courses on the history and development of Christianity, on religious studies and on the Western reception of the Qur'an. After a short interlude in the Netherlands, the Steenbrink family returned to Indonesia once more in 1984, when Steenbrink accepted an appointment as lecturer at the IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, a position he held until 1988. During this period he wrote what became his Indonesian bestseller *Beberapa Aspek tentang Islam di Indonesia abad ke-19*, a book about the history of Islam in 19th century Indonesia.⁴ From 1988 onwards the Steenbrinks settled permanently in the Netherlands, but the special bond with Indonesia and Indonesians remained: Steenbrink and his wife Paule continued to visit Indonesia on a regular basis and over the years opened their home to countless friends, colleagues and students from Indonesia.

After working briefly at an institute that supervised collaborations between Indonesia and the Netherlands in the field of Islamic Studies, in 1989 Steenbrink was appointed deputy-director of the Interuniversity Institute for Missiology and Ecumenism (IIMO). Working first in Leiden and later in Utrecht, Steenbrink would serve the institute as deputy-director and from 2004 onwards as director and full professor of intercultural theology (Utrecht University) until his retirement in December 2006.

3 K.A. Steenbrink, *Pesantren, Madrasah, Sekolah. Recente Ontwikkelingen in Indonesisch Islamonderricht*, Meppel 1974.

4 K.A. Steenbrink, *Beberapa Aspek Tentang Islam Di Indonesia Abad Ke-19*, Jakarta, 1984.

During these years at IIMO Steenbrink proved himself to be a versatile scholar and prolific writer. He lectured at a range of universities, both within the Netherlands and abroad (e.g. Leiden University, Utrecht University and the Catholic Theological University Utrecht, McGill University and various institutions in Indonesia) and published numerous books and articles. With publications such as *Dutch colonialism and Indonesian Islam*⁵, his trilogy *Catholics in Indonesia. A documented history*⁶ and *A history of Christianity in Indonesia*⁷ which he co-edited with Jan Sihar Aritonang, Steenbrink established himself as one of the foremost specialists on the history of Christianity in Indonesia. Steenbrink's expertise on and commitment to Indonesia was publicly recognized when in October 2019 he received the Anugrah Kebudayaan decoration from the Indonesian minister of Education and Culture for his contributions to the intellectual development of Indonesian lecturers of Islam and for his scholarly work on Indonesia.

Whereas in Indonesia Steenbrink had endeavored to educate Muslims about Christianity, in the Netherlands Steenbrink made it his mission to sensitize Dutch audiences to Islam. For many years, he was actively involved the interfaith activities of the national Council of Churches in the Netherlands, served on the editorial board the journal *Begrip* (Understanding), that popularized topics in Christian-Muslim dialogue for the wider public and wrote a several books in Dutch, to explain the Qur'an to Dutch audiences, such as *De Jezus verzen in de Koran*⁸ and (with Gé Speelman) *Een kleine Koran*.⁹ Also on the academic level, Steenbrink contributed to Christian-Muslim relations: he established long-term cordial relations with the Islamic University of Rotterdam, frequently took students from Utrecht University and University College Utrecht to the *iftar* meals or symposia at the IUR or to *dhikr* performances at the mosque in Ridderkerk and between 2015 and 2020 served as editor for the Indonesia-related lemma's in the series *Christian-Muslim relations. A bibliographical history*, a series to which he contributed numerous entries.

5 K.A. Steenbrink, *Dutch Colonialism and Indonesian Islam. Contacts and Conflicts 1596–1950*, Amsterdam, 2006.

6 K.A. Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, 1808–1942. A Documented History*, 3 vols., Leiden, 2003, 2007, 2015

7 J.S. Aritonang and K.A. Steenbrink, eds. *A history of Christianity in Indonesia*, Leiden, 2008.

8 K.A. Steenbrink, *De Jezus Verzen in de Koran [The Jesus Verses of the Qur'an]*, Zoetermeer, 2006.

9 G. Speelman and K.A. Steenbrink. *Een Kleine Koran. Praktische Hulp bij het Lezen van de Koran aan de Hand van de Tweede Soera [A brief Qur'an. A practical guide to reading the Qur'an by means of Surah 2]*, Gorinchem, 2011.

Karel Steenbrink was an authority on Christianity and Islam in Indonesia, an engaged scholar and an ardent proponent of Christian-Muslim relations. But those of us who had the privilege of knowing Karel Steenbrink and working with him, will first of all remember him for his enthusiasm, his vivaciousness and joviality, his endless array of stories, his hospitality, and his warm personality.

We are grateful for who he was, for what he accomplished and for the difference he was able to make to the lives of many. We will miss him.