ECUMENICAL RELATIONS IN SURINAM

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Ecumenism in Surinam came on the agenda a few decades ago. The special place of Christianity in this former Dutch colony makes that ecumenism has a history of its own. Together with Hinduism (30%), Islam (20%) and the other religions and cults (5%) the many christian churches or groups (40%) make up the religious pluriformity of Surinam. Their intermediary position with regard to the other religions will keep ecumenism on their agenda also in the future.

A History of Colonialism and Slavery

The indigenous people or Indigenes (a name they prefer to that of Amerindians) of the Wild Coast of the New World met the first Europeans, Spanish traders who sought high quality wood, in the first half of the seventeenth century. Later the English and French conquered parts of the north east coast, the Guyanas. As a consequence the lingua franca in this region is not Spanish or Portuguese like in the rest of Latin America.

The first large group of colonists came from the Caribbean island Barbados, occupied by the English. They arrived in 1651, bringing the Anglican tradition with them, and built a church at the first residence of Europeans, Thorarica. An Anglican minister was for some years in charge. The English tried to experiment with the plantation economy, especially sugar. Slaves were brought in from Africa. Also a large group of Jews came in from Brasil, expelled by the Catholics after the defeat of the Dutch settlement of Recife and Pernambuco.

In 1667 a navy of the Dutch province of Zeeland captured the small and new colony from the British by force. The peace negotiations led to the departure of the English population, which meant the end of the presence of the Anglican Church till the twentieth century.

The Dutch from Zeeland introduced the calvinist tradition, thus adding a new religion to that of the Jews, the Indigenes, and of the slaves from Africa. Within the framework of their trade monopoly in the Caribbean region, they emphasized the necessity of the promotion and expansion of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). The governor was made responsible for this duty, while the new colonists had to collect money for a religious minister. The first, J. Basseliers, was hired in 1668.

Like in Holland, also in the colony the public policy was really anti-papistic at the time. Catholics were not eligible for public functions and it
was not possible to bring in a catholic priest. When the Dutch from Zeeland became aware that the ruling and running of the new colony was a heavy burden, they sold it to the city of Amsterdam, to the family Van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck from Zeeland, and to the West Indies Company: the three parties were combined in the "Patent Society" (Geoctroyeerde Societeit).

Catholic trade partners and Amsterdam friends of the first governor Cornelis van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck, asked him to kindly take some priests with him to Surinam. He agreed on condition that they would not be Jesuit fathers, wear no cassocks, nor perform any public service on board. On the 23rd of November 1683, three Franciscans from Belgium arrived with the first governor in Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam.

The calvinist citizens of the colony soon discovered the presence of the catholic priests. They sent a protest to the Board of the Geoctroyeerde Societeit in Amsterdam. Luckily for the governor two priests soon died and one left, which meant the end of this problem for the governor. The few catholics had to baptize their children and to marry in the DRC.

Along with the first governor came his three sisters. They were followers of J. de Labadie (1610-1674), a pietist who established at Middelburg (Zeeland) a religious community of anabaptists which in 1675 moved to Wieuwerd in Frisia. The three sisters came with other followers and tried to live, isolated from Paramaribo, in the countryside at the plantation La Providence. The group had a lot of internal difficulties which, combined with the conditions of tropical life, led in 1719 to the end of the community.

According to the sensus of 1688 there were 579 Christians (who owned 2,983 slaves) and 232 Jews (with 1,198 slaves). The colonial government denied the slaves their cultural and religious traditions brought with them from West Africa, and in the name of Christianity a process of deculturation started. Only around New Year the slaves of the plantations were allowed to perform their dances and rituals. Nevertheless many traditions survived.

In Amsterdam, count L. von Zinzendorf, leader of a new pietistic group in Herrnhut, the Moravian Brethren, had good contact with the directors of the Geoctroyeerde Societeit. He asked permission to send missionaries to Surinam for the people of the interior. In 1732 the first Moravian missionaries arrived at St. Thomas, a Danish colony. In 1735 the first three brothers arrived in Surinam, but the conditions in the interior were very severe. The brothers died or left, and thus came an end to the first attempt. In 1765 the Moravian Brethren tried again and now with success. The Amsterdam section of the DRC protested against the permission and even published a booklet against the Moravians, accusing them of fanatism and bigotry.