Karel A. Steenbrink


With the publication of this volume, Karel Steenbrink, Professor Emeritus of Intercultural Theology at Utrecht University, has completed a magnificent trilogy in which the history of Catholics in Indonesia is described from 1808 up to today. Earlier volumes appeared in 2003 and 2007. All three volumes are accompanied by a number of relevant and sometimes revealing documents, though in the case of the present Volume 3 the amount and size of these documents is relatively small in comparison with the earlier volumes; Volume 1 included almost hundred documents, Volume 3 only thirty.

Volume 1 was given a well-chosen sub-title: ‘A Modest Recovery, 1808-1903’; Volume 2 also had an appropriate sub-title, ‘The Spectacular Growth of a Self-Confident Minority, 1903-1942’. However, such a sub-title is lacking in this final volume. Maybe the author had the feeling that it would be less easy to summarize the essence of this period in one brief sentence. On the one hand, the numerical growth of the Catholic Church in Indonesia continued and probably was even more spectacular during the time of Indonesia’s independence than during the colonial period. On the other hand, however, the author also has to conclude that the influence of Catholics in the Indonesian society did decrease, especially after the 1960s.

Of course, Steenbrink could rely on earlier work by other authors, as he readily admits (p. viii-ix): Muskens (1969), Boelaars (1991), Rosariyanto (2001) and in a sense also Heuken’s five (nine) volume Ensiklopedi Gereja (1991-1995; enlarged edition 2004-2005). Besides, together with Jan Sihar Artonang (Jakarta) Steenbrink edited a comprehensive volume on the history of (Catholic and Protestant) Christianity in Indonesia in 2008. Nevertheless, Steenbrink’s approach in this volume on the history of Catholicism during Indonesia’s independence differs from those of these other authors. For Steenbrink dedicated a substantial part of his academic career to the study of Islam, partly as a lecturer and researcher in Muslim institutes in Indonesia, and he deliberately wants to write as ‘an outside observer’ (p. x), who also has non-Catholic and non-Christian readers in mind. He does not intend to provide an ‘official’ or

---

1 Volume I, covering the period between 1808 and 1900, has been reviewed in Exchange 35/1 (2006), 139-140; Volume II, dealing with the period from 1908 till 1942, in Exchange 37/4 (2008), 526-528.
‘national’, that is: top-down sketch of this rich and varied history. Moreover he wants to emphasize the international contacts of this church. For those reasons he adds quite a few narrative elements: individual stories of believers, local aspects of culture and history, as well as examples of contacts (sometimes conflicts) with Muslims — and with Protestants. The latter were, in several places and periods, seen as direct rivals by Catholics, and vice versa. Also, repeatedly contacts with the Vatican and with European, predominantly Dutch, missionary orders are discussed.

In order to remain faithful to this starting point, this volume has been divided in two parts. First, seven chapters deal with ‘national issues’ such as religion in Indonesian politics; internal affairs of the church, clergy (both priests belonging to religious orders and diocesan priests, as well as nuns and lay brothers); the social and educational tasks of the church; forms and places of Catholic spirituality (including a table with almost forty major places of pilgrimage, p. 190-191) and finally an exposition of the role of creative theologians, philosophers, novelists and artists. The list of creative, independent thinkers could have been extended easily with, e.g. the poets Linus Suryadi, Wiji Thukul and Dorothea Rosa Herliati. The second part contains eight regional surveys. Since from the beginning, the center of gravity of Catholic mission work was to be found in the eastern parts of present day Indonesia, it is not surprising that the history of the Catholic presence at Flores, Timor (including a section on East Timor, p. 310-318), Sumba, the Moluccas and West-Papua receives a prominent place here. These regional studies provide a lot of detailed information about inculturation, the transition to indigenous leadership, the work of religious orders, animosity between Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore we find here several moving stories about the dedication of faithful members, such as the police-officer Josef Toekinoen in Banjarmasin, who kept the parish there alive and saved the sanctuary during the Japanese occupation, when all priests and Western officials had been killed or interned (p. 409-411).

A comparison with the developments in Protestant churches in Indonesia reveals at least two salient differences. First of all, until the 1970s (and even beyond that decade) the influence and presence of Western, especially Dutch bishops, priests, theologians and other religious workers was disproportionately large. In 1980 foreign (mainly Western) priests still outnumbered Indonesian priests (907 and 760 respectively) and even in 1995 almost ten percent (224) of all priests were foreigners (p. 61-62). *Mutatis mutandis* a similar situation existed as to nuns and religious brothers. Several foreign priests asked for and received the Indonesian nationality and then adapted their names.

A second difference can be observed as to the role of individual women in the church. The *index* of this volume counts less than ten names of women,