

The Roman Catholic Church and the Dutch slavery past



Meld mij aan voor de Nieuwsbrief van Perspectief

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Front page: cathedral basilica Paramaribo. Photo credits: Diocese of Paramaribo.



1. The slavery past of the Roman Catholic Church within the Dutch colonial empire: a brief overview

Martijn Stoutjesdijk



In June 2023, theologian, historian and journalist Remco van Mulligen published a flaming essay in the magazine *Volzin* entitled "Catholic reflection on slavery: missed opportunity." In this article, Van Mulligen briefly describes the "gigantic history" of the (global) Roman Catholic Church when it comes to slavery, in which he refers to doctors of the church as well as Thomas Aquinas – who saw slavery as a "logical consequence of the fall", as Pope Pius IX who even in 1866 – three years after the belated abolition of slavery in the Dutch colonial empire – the

slavery "not at all contrary to the natural law and the divine law".² However, Van Mulligen observes: "In our country there is little or no account of the Catholic part in the slavery crime."³ He therefore finds it astonishing that in addition to the research project on the role of the Reformed Church (of which the author of this article is a part, see www.kerkenlavernij.nl) there is no equivalent research into the Roman Catholic Church in the Dutch colonies.

Less than a year later (January 2024), Rose Mary Allen, Esther Captain, Matthias van Rossum and Urwin Vyent published their *Knowledge Agenda 2025-2035* regarding the Dutch colonial slavery past and its impacts. This Knowledge Agenda resulted from a motion by the House of Representatives to make an inventory of the state of research into the Dutch slavery past. In the Knowledge Agenda we read:

The Reformed Church had a historically formed privileged position within the Dutch state and the Dutch culture in general, an influence that

*also asserted itself in the worldwide Dutch colonial empire. But less is known about the role of the Catholic Church; Her role in relation to slavery has yet to be investigated and documented.*⁴

Although the wording is a lot more businesslike, the conclusion of the *Knowledge Agenda* is no different from that of Van Mulligen: research into the role of the Catholic Church with regard to slavery is necessary. When I was asked to compile a special issue on slavery for *Perspectief*, a magazine of the Catholic Association for Ecumenism, it was clear to me that that issue should focus specifically on the role of Catholics and the Catholic Church in the Dutch history of slavery, in line with the scientific, ecclesiastical and social interest in this theme, both in the Netherlands and abroad.⁵ In this introduction I give a brief sketch of the background of that slavery past and the various roles that the Catholic Church has played. I will then briefly introduce the various contributions. The focus of both this introduction and the following articles is on the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the West, because its history in the East – especially when it comes to involvement in slavery – is much more limited.

Background: the Dutch colonial empire, slavery and the churches

Until recently, the emphasis in historiography with regard to Dutch slavery was strongly on the western part of the Dutch colonial empire: the Atlantic slave trade between the west coast of Africa and the Caribbean. This was it

¹ Remco van Mulligen, "Catholic Reflection on Slavery: Missed Opportunity," *Sentence* 22:6 (2023), 18-21, 19.

² Van Mulligen, "Catholic Reflection," 20.

³ Van Mulligen, "Catholic Reflection," 21.

⁴ Rose Mary Allen, Esther Captain, Matthias van Rossum and Urwin Vyent, *The Dutch colonial slavery past and its effects. Knowledge Agenda 2025-2035* (KITLV, 2024, [pu-kitlv-kennisagen-da-slavernijverleden-nl-def2.pdf](https://www.kitlv.nl/onderzoek/kennisagenda-2025-2035/onderzoek/kennisagenda-2025-2035-16-17) ([staatenslavernij.nl](https://www.staatenslavernij.nl))), 16-17.

⁵ For recent international publications on the subject, see, for example, Christopher J. Kellerman, *All Oppression Shall Cease: A History of Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022); for the medieval Catholic Church, Mary E. Sommar, *The Slaves of the Churches: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); for one specific elaborated case: Rachel L. Swarns, *The 272: The Families Who Were Enslaved and Sold to Build the American Catholic Church* (New York: Random House, 2023).

domain of the West India Company (WIC). The Dutch were responsible for transporting about 500,000 to 600,000 of the total of about 12.5 million enslaved people who were brought from Africa to America.⁶ The Dutch empire in the West was formed by, among others, New Netherland and a number of smaller Caribbean islands in North America, as well as Dutch Brazil and Dutch Guiana (including Suriname) in South America (see map below).



(area light green, WIC area dark green)⁹

However, newer historiography increasingly emphasizes the extent of the slave trade in the eastern part of the Dutch colonial empire, the domain of the East India Company (VOC).⁷ The number of slaves traded and/or used by the East India Company varied, according to estimates, between the

⁶ Matthias van Rossum, *Colourful tragedy: The history of slavery in Asia under the VOC* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015), 25.

⁷ See, for example, Van Rossum, *Colourful tragedy*; Reggie Baay, *Daar werd wat gruwelijks doen* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2015); Alicia Schrikker and Nira Wickramasinghe (eds.), *Being a slave: histories and legacies of European slavery in the Indian Ocean* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

660,000 and 1,135,000.⁸ The center of the eastern part of the Dutch empire was the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) with Batavia (Jakarta) as its capital. Other colonies that belonged to the Dutch possessions for some time were, for example, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), parts of India, Formosa (Taiwan), and the Cape Colony in South Africa. In all colonies, the Dutch trading companies, WIC and VOC, and later the Dutch state, were joined by the churches, in particular the Dutch Reformed Church (later the Dutch Reformed Church, now the Protestant Church in the Netherlands), the privileged or public church. Reformed ministers were present on the ships, founded churches in the trading posts and colonies and played a role as gatekeepers of the Christian colonial communities. The Dutch Reformed Church was also involved in slavery and the slave trade in various ways (missionary, pastoral, as slave owner). To a certain extent, this applies to all churches that were active within the Dutch colonial empire: the Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Brethren Congregation (also called Moravian Church or HERNHUTTERS) and – of special importance to us – the Roman Catholic Church.^{A 10}

The Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands and overseas

The Roman Catholic Church was not present in the Dutch colonial empire from the beginning and that had everything to do with the history of the still young Republic of the Seven United Provinces. Because of the Reformation and the war with Catholic Spain, the Netherlands usually opposed the Catholic Church. In the new, professional state, Catholics were tolerated, but they were also disadvantaged in all kinds of ways. For example, Catholics were not allowed to hold (high) government positions, priests were barred and Catholic church buildings were initially confiscated, and the Catholic parts of the Republic were not fully-fledged provinces, but government countries.¹¹ Although the historical reality was more nuanced, these were

⁸ Van Rossum, *Colourful Tragedy*, 25.

⁹ Map: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DutchEmpire15.png>, last accessed 4 September 2024.

¹⁰ For a brief overview, see Martijn Stoutjesdijk, "In open conflict with the spirit of Christianity? The Church in the Dutch Slavery Past," in Rose Mary Allen, Esther Captain, Matthias van Rossum and Urwin Vyent (eds.), *State & Slavery. The Dutch colonial slavery past and its effects* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genneep, 2023), 372-381.

generality countries are often perceived as domestic colonies or colonies.¹² This is also, in my experience, exactly the reason why research into the Roman Catholic Church and slavery is not seen as a priority in the Catholic Netherlands: in the Dutch Catholic self-image one sees oneself mainly as oppressed, and not as a (possible) oppressor. In contrast, the first association of Protestants who came into contact with slavery was that of Roman Catholicism. Slavery was dismissed as a bad, "papist" phenomenon, and theologian Georgius de Raad (1625-1667) later warned against selling enslaved people to the Catholics, or the antichrist, as it would mean eternal damnation for them.¹³ A slightly more moderate voice such as Godefridus Udemans nevertheless remarks that Christians should not sell slaves to "Spaenjaerden, Portugysen or other cruel people, who are tyrannical over their souls and bodies: for that fights against love, and justice."¹⁴

Apart from these theological debates, the confrontation with Catholicism was also simply a reality in the Dutch colonial empire. After all, before the arrival of the Dutch, there was already a Portuguese presence in a large number of colonies and therefore also a Catholic presence. The Dutch made great efforts to convert these Catholics to Calvinism, which was particularly successful in Sri Lanka, for example,¹⁵ but – according to Danny Noorlander – was even one of the reasons that Brazil was lost as a Dutch colony.¹⁶ However, in most colonies

¹¹ On the position of the Catholic Church in the Republic, see, for example, Carolina Lenarduzzi, *Catholic in the Republic: The perception of a religious minority 1570-1750* (Nijmegen: Vantilt Publishers, 2019).

¹² Zie bijv. G. Bruin, "Den Haag versus Staats-Brabant: IJzeren vuist of fluwelen handschoen?" *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 111:4 (1996), 449-463, 449. <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.4338>.

¹³ Georgius de Raad, *Bedenckingen over den Guinneeschen slaef-handel der gereformeerde met de Papisten* (Vlissingen: Abraham van Laren, 1655).

¹⁴ Godefridus Udemans, *'t Geestelyck Roer van 't Coopmans Schip* (Dordrecht: François Boels, 1640), folio 182 verso.

¹⁵ Gerrit Jan Schutte, "Een hutje in den wijngaard: Gereformeerd Ceylon," in idem (ed.), *Het Indisch Sion: De Gereformeerde kerk onder de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2022), 177-188.

¹⁶ Danny L. Noorlander, *Heaven's Wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company in the Atlantic World* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019), 110-135.

any presence of the Catholic Church as a minority church,¹⁷ sooner or later, tolerated. In Suriname, for example, the Catholic Church made its entrance in 1786, albeit years after the Lutheran Church (1740) and the Evangelical Brethren Congregation (1735).¹⁸ In Suriname, the Catholic Church is said to focus mainly on the black population, both free and unfree. Of course, the work of the Surinamese Catholic Church among lepers, in which the famous father Petrus ("Peerke") Donders (1809-1887) was active, is also known.

In the Leeward Islands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao) the Roman Catholic Church has its own life course, because it developed there as the pastoral church of the black population. A number of factors play a role in this. In the case of Curaçao, a factor is that Curaçao served as a transshipment port for enslaved people to the Spanish-speaking colonies of South America. These colonies demanded that the captured Africans delivered to them be baptized Catholic – for which purpose a handful of priests were allowed on the island.¹⁹ In a general sense, it was in line with the policy of the Dutch Reformed Church to focus first on the white European population, then on the free black population, and in particular to exclude the black enslaved population. She was therefore happy to leave the missionary work of the latter group in particular to churches that she herself considered inferior – the EBG in Suriname and the Roman Catholic Church on the Leeward Islands. In a recent dissertation on the Catholic Church in Curaçao, Christine Schunck speaks in this context about "religious tolerance [of the Roman Catholic Church, MS] out of racist intolerance."²⁰ A third factor for the Catholicization of the black population of the Leeward Islands – one that moreover does more justice to the *agency* of that part of the population – is the fact that at least a part of them had probably already become acquainted with Catholicism in the (African) country of origin.

¹⁷ In many Spanish colonies, the Catholic Church was the dominant church. The question of whether slavery in a "Catholic" colony would be better than in a "Protestant" colony has been much debated. See Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946) and the ensuing debate.

¹⁸ Joep Vernooij, *The rainbow is in our house: The colorful history of the church in Suriname* (Nijmegen: Valkenburg Pers, 2012), 14-15.

¹⁹ See, for example, Christine W.M. Schunck, *Intolerant tolerance: The history of Catholic missionary work on Curaçao [1499-1776]* (Nijmegen: Valkenburg Pers, 2019), e.g. 136-137.

This point in particular will be discussed in detail later in this issue in the contribution by Jeroen Dewulf.

When it comes to the Roman Catholic Church's handling of slavery in the "West", it is clear that it did not categorically oppose slavery in the colonies where it dominated or where it formed a minority church. The priest and apostolic prefect Martinus Niewindt (1796-1860), who was important for Curaçao's church history, is known to have purchased pieces of land including enslaved people (there were 27 slaves to his name at the time of emancipation).²¹ According to research by Joop Vernooij, the Roman Catholic Church in Suriname owned 16 enslaved people (so-called church slaves) in 1825. When the later bishop Jacobus Grooff (1800-1852) left Suriname, the slave child Cornelis was freed (manumitted) by him and he received the surname Foorg – a reversal of the bishop's surname, as was customary among the slave owners and their enslaved people. Although individual priests were sometimes critical of slavery (Donders wrote in a letter from 1846 that: "All this, I hope, will with God's goodness hasten the liberation of the Slavs"²²), as an institution it never spoke out against slavery *as such*, at most against certain excesses. The priest and researcher Armando Lampe wrote in a critical study that the Roman Catholic Church considered its own emancipation (vis-à-vis the established Reformed Church) to be of greater importance than the emancipation of the enslaved. In his conclusions, he writes: "the Catholic Church in Curaçao did not stir up the slaves against their masters; instead, it educated them to be obedient."²³ If this assessment is historically correct, it did not prevent the former enslaved people from remaining faithful to "their" church even after the abolition of slavery.

²⁰ Schunck, *Intolerant Tolerance*, back cover.

²¹ Rose Mary Allen and Christel Monsanto, "Three Amsterdammers in Curaçao in the nineteenth century," in P. Brandon, G. Jones, N. Jouwe and M. van Rossum (eds.), *Slavery in East and West: The Amsterdam Research* (Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2020), 181-189, 184.

²² Vernooij, *The rainbow is in our house*, 51.

²³ Armando Lampe, *Mission or Submission? Moravian and Catholic Missionaries in the Dutch Caribbean During the 19th Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 186.

The role of the Catholics with regard to slavery in the "East" is an even greater blind spot in historiography than the situation in the West. This is also partly due to the fact that the Catholic Church made its entrance in the East later than in the West, since part of the efforts of the Reformed Church in the East was aimed at leading the native Catholics present to the Protestantism. It was not until 1808 that the Catholic Church was allowed to operate in the Dutch East Indies. Since the other Dutch colonies in the East had already passed into British hands before that time (Ceylon 1796, Cape Colony 1795/1806), this permission would no longer come from the Dutch, but from the British side. In the Dutch East Indies, the handful of Catholic clergy who were admitted to the colonies tried to revive the last vague remnants of Catholicism that the Portuguese had once left behind. This led to a modest growth in the nineteenth century and a rather spectacular increase in the twentieth century, according to Karel Steenbrink, who wrote the standard work on the Catholic Church in Indonesia.²⁴ Because of its rather marginal role in the early modern church history of the Dutch East Indies, the involvement of the Catholic Church in slavery there is also limited. It should be mentioned here that Catholic missionaries, as well as Protestant missionaries, sometimes "ransomed" local enslaved people and then used them as workers in their own households. Both in the current research and in the historical context at the time, the question was asked whether the missionaries/missionaries were not actually guilty of a disguised form of slavery.^{A 25}

²⁴ Karel Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, 1808-1942: A Documented History*, two volumes (Leiden: Brill, 2003 and 2007).

²⁵ Geertje Mak, "'How should the servile situation on New Guinea be changed into that of Christian freedom?' Freedom in the missionary discourse of the Protestant Réveil movement," in Bente de Leede and Martijn Stoutjesdijk (eds.), *Church, colonialism and slavery. Stories of an intertwined history* (Utrecht: Kok Boekencentrum, 2023), 115-133; and see the forthcoming research by Maaïke Derksen.

This number

This issue consists of five contributions, divided into three sections. The first section has a historical angle. Anthropologist and professor Rose Mary Allen of the University of Curaçao gives an overview of the churches on the Caribbean islands with, of course, a special focus on the Roman Catholic Church. As mentioned above, the Leeward or ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao) are special case studies in the Dutch colonial empire, because – despite the fact that the Republic had embraced Reformed Protestantism – they are predominantly Catholic.

Professor Jeroen Dewulf of the University of California then posits *the provocative and convincing proposition that many of the first generation of African enslaved people already knew some form of Catholic Christianity on the basis of his recent book Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Black Christians* (2022). Not only does this explain the flexibility with which African enslaved people "embraced" Christianity in some contexts, but it also explains the sometimes very specific customs and preferences of black Christians in the colonies. In his article, Dewulf speaks specifically about the situation in the former Dutch colonies of Curaçao, Suriname and New Netherland.

The second part – which is more systematic-theological in nature – opens with a contribution by Monsignor Karel Choennie, bishop of the Diocese of Paramaribo. Bishop Choennie is an authoritative voice regarding Suriname's slavery past, including through his 2022 Christmas message, in which he forcefully made the connection between slavery, neocolonial relations and climate change.²⁶ In this article, Choennie discusses the Maroons in Suriname and the impact of the slavery past in the present.

The next contribution is by Dr. Duncan Wielzen, pastoral worker in the Roman Catholic Church in The Hague. In his contribution, Wielzen critically examines the theological concepts in the recent statement of the Dutch bishops about the slavery past.

²⁶ Speech given on 25 December 2022. For the full text, see <https://www.waterkant.net/suri-name/2022/12/26/christmas-message-from-the-bishop-of-paramaribo/>, last consulted 4 September 2024.

The song closes with a more practically oriented contribution. Marciano Viereck, who recently graduated as a spiritual counselor at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences Theology Philosophy of Life in Utrecht, describes how he tried to have a conversation with churchgoers in the Dominicus Church in Zwolle about the church's slavery past on the basis of the so-called *Slave Bible*. Perhaps this method can also be useful in other (Catholic) church contexts. More generally, the editors of *Perspectief* and this writer hope that the present special issue may be useful material in the conversation about slavery and the study of it in Dutch, Catholic circles.

2. Churches and faith on the Dutch Caribbean islands seen from the point of view of the *agency* of enslaved people

Rose Mary Allen



When talking about the churches in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, there are six islands, of which a group of three are geographically located in the southern part of the Caribbean, close to the coast of Spanish-speaking South America, and are called the Leeward Islands. The Windward Islands is the other group of three, which is located in the northern part of the Caribbean, surrounded by an archipelago of English, French and Spanish-speaking islands (see image below). The Windward Islands were damaged by continuous colonial wars between the Eu-

European countries are alternately owned by the French or the English. From 1648 onwards, Saint Martin was divided into a French and a Dutch part, which only became a permanent Dutch possession in 1817.

In addition to similarities, there are also differences between the islands in terms of culture, language (Papiamentu versus the English creole language) and also religion. As far as the theme of religion is concerned, there have been several studies that have described the role of the Christian churches in the Dutch Caribbean. Some are studies of a denomination on an individual island, others include the islands as a group, such as Kruijer's study of the Windward Islands and also Knappert's book (1934). The recent book by historian Ronald Donk (2019) about civilisation, conversion and guardianship on the three Leeward Islands reflects the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in the education of the three Leeward Islands.²⁸ Still other writers take the six islands as a whole, such as the



Caribbean Part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Green: Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius (from left to right; together Caribbean Netherlands). Other colors are independent countries within the Kingdom: orange Aruba, blue Curaçao, red Sint Maarten.^{A27}

book by Hartog that describes the development of the Protestant Church on the islands (1970).²⁹ What is also striking is that Curaçao, which has been the seat of the royal government for a long time, has also been studied more thoroughly in this area of studies than the rest. The studies from the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century usually focus on a historiography of the mission on the islands.

What has not been studied much is the role that the churches have played in the slavery past of the islands, the way in which Christianization of enslaved people took place and the *agency* of enslaved people and their descendants: how they could protect their religious

²⁷ Map: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caribisch_deel_van_het_Koninkrijk_der_Nederlanden#/media/Bestand:Dutch_Caribbean_location_map.svg, last visited 17 December 2024.

²⁸ Ronald Donk, *Civilization, conversion and guardianship. One hundred years of education on Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire (1816-1916)* (Edam: LM Publishers, 2019).

²⁹ J. Hartog, *May the islands rejoice. History of Protestantism on the Netherlands Antilles* (Curaçao, 1970), 147.

they have also steered development themselves. This article is written from this last angle, with – given the theme of this issue – a special focus on the Roman Catholic Church. First of all, the various Christian churches will be contextualized within the political and social power structures of the islands. The position that the churches occupied within the field of tension of Christianization is also examined. Finally, it examines how the descendants of the enslaved people behave as *agents* within this unequal distribution of power in the course of this period.

Agency

The search for *agency* among the enslaved people means looking at how they were able to retain their humanity within the dehumanizing system of slavery and continue or develop their own cultural and other processes. The term "resistance" is often used for this, which can take on different dimensions. On the one hand, a distinction is made between open and hidden resistance on the other; The latter is so called because it takes place outside the visible, public sphere. Resistance can also involve a form of adaptation. In the case of accommodation, as it is also called, it seems as if the enslaved person agrees with his situation, so that he feels less like a victim of the system of dehumanization and deprivation. Resistance can take on different dimensions. On the one hand there is open resistance, and on the other hand there is hidden resistance. Both forms can disrupt the power system, but do not have to immediately threaten or transform it. Richard Burton (1997) applies the concept of "play", and argues that Afro-Caribbean people manifested their autonomy by circumventing the prevailing rules.³⁰ Their arena of self-affirmation and *agency* manifested itself not so much during work, where the control of the owners was prominent, but mainly within the cultural areas such as music, dance and food, as well as their religious views and customs. This gave them comfort and a sense of autonomy and self-worth, as they could prove themselves as human beings and not as someone else's property.

³⁰ Richard Burton, *Afro-Creole. Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

State, church and slavery

The West India Company (WIC) conquered the six Caribbean islands in the course of the seventeenth century. First Curaçao, later Aruba and Bonaire; these three islands were directly under the rule of the WIC. Then Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius and Saba, which on the other hand were issued to Zeeland merchants under patronage. Those merchants had to organize the territory, but had to be accountable to the WIC if it asked for it. With the WIC, the Reformed Church also settled on the islands. In addition to trade and colonization, the WIC was given the mandate to take care of Calvinist Christianity. This led to a connection between Christianity and the colonial occupation. On the Windward Islands, however, the Reformed denomination was already absent in the eighteenth century, partly due to the migration of the white plantation groups of merchants. An English visitor at the time therefore spoke of the "Dutch Deformed Church."³¹

Even after the abolition of the WIC in 1792, the Dutch Caribbean islands did not have a dominant plantation economy with, as in other parts of the Caribbean, a large slave force operating on sugar cane plantations. Until 1765, Curaçao and St. Eustatius were not only smuggling centres but also important centres for the regional slave trade. A large part of the slave power present on the islands was destined for transit to the surrounding colonies in the Caribbean and on the coast of South America. Others were put to work on the few plantations that were owned by white Protestant owners or Sephardic Jewish owners who had fled Southern Europe because of the Roman Inquisition and had ended up in Curaçao and later Aruba via Amsterdam. On Sint Maarten, enslaved people were put to work on salt plantations and on some sugar plantations, among other places.³² This was also true for St. Eustatius. On Saba there was no plantation and the small number of slaves were employed in the household. Bonaire as a whole was government property until 1791 and from 1793 onwards the enslaved persons who were put to work were referred to as government

³¹ G. J. Kruijer, "Kerk en religie op de Bovenwindse Eilanden der Nederlandse Antillen," *De West-Indische Gids* 34 (1953), 238-251, 240.

³² Alejandro F. Paula, "*Free*" *Slaves. A social-historical study on the dualistic emancipation of slaves on Dutch Sint Maarten, 1816-1863* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1993).

ment or imperial slaves, and from 1815 as "king slaves" (*catibu di Rei*).³³ Aruba was used by the WIC for the meat supply of Curaçao and as a horse breeding farm. After the WIC began to allow colonization on Aruba, African enslaved people also came to the island. The historian Luc Alofs states in his book with the striking title *Slaven zonder plantage* (1996) that in 1849 21% of the Aruban population was enslaved and that on July 1, 1863 about 500 people were given their freedom there.^{A 34}

The Christianization of enslaved people

On all the islands of the Dutch Caribbean, the Dutch Reformed Church was the only recognized church in the early days of colonization. The divisions and rivalries that existed in Europe among the Christian churches also occurred in the colonies. This division and rivalry, together with the prevailing ideas about Africans, determined the attitude of the "state church" towards whether or not to convert enslaved persons and indigenous people to Christianity. Neither the WIC nor the Dutch state was in favor of converting these groups to Reformed Christianity, which offered room for other churches to do missionary work among the black population. The Catholic Father Memmo Brada (1946), known as a writer of Curaçao history, therefore notes with great satisfaction that the old stipulation of the WIC that "Within prescribed borders no other religion or religion will be committed, much less taught or reproduced, be it in secret or publicly, than the Reformed Christian religion, as is taught in the public churches of the united Netherlands" has not endured.^{A 35}

On Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire, Christianization was left to the Roman Catholic Church, which became a minority in the Netherlands after the Reformation and the revolt against Spain. On these three islands, the Protestant Dutch did not want to allow enslaved people into their churches. From 1661 onwards, the WIC turned a blind eye to Catholic priests being able to stay and preach temporarily in Curaçao.^{A 36}

³³ Boi Antoin and Cees Luckhardt, *Bonaire, a colonial salt history* (Edam: LM Publishers, 2023).

³⁴ Luc Alofs, *Slaven zonder plantage: (kinder-)slavernij en emancipatie op Aruba* (Aruba: Charuba, 1996).

³⁵ Father Memmo Brada O.P., "Catholicism on St. Eustatius before Mgr. Niewindt," *Lux* 4 (1946), 18-22, quote p. 18.

³⁶ Christine W.M. Schunck, *Intolerant Tolerance. The history of Catholic missionary work on*

Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church had little influence from 1700 to 1824 because of all kinds of measures that restricted religious practice. For example, on Curaçao, only one priest was allowed on the island at a time. For a long time there was only one church where people were allowed to be baptized and heard the gospel. Furthermore, certain owners denied priests access to plantations and the colonial government imposed all kinds of legal restrictions on the enslaved people. The gathering of enslaved persons in churches was viewed with concern, partly because it might make the enslaved persons aware of the strength of their numbers.³⁷ The fear of a revolt like that of Tula and Karpata in 1795 was still deeply engraved in the memory of the white upper class in the nineteenth century.

This situation changed in Curaçao with the arrival of the Catholic priest Niewindt in 1824, who became the first apostolic vicar of the island two decades later. Niewindt promoted education among enslaved people and freedmen, despite the fact that the colonial administration did not consider elementary education for enslaved people necessary and even dangerous until 1857.³⁸ Several schools were built and people were recruited to engage in Catholic education. In this context, Niewindt published the first Papiamento catechism (*Catecismo corti- cu pa uso di catolicanan di Curaçao*) in 1826, the second edition of which appeared in 1837. In the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church began to play an increasingly important role in the Leeward Islands and a new era began as far as the Christianization by the Catholic Church was concerned.

On the Windward Islands, which were surrounded by Protestant British islands, the Christianization of enslaved people was provided by Methodism in the first place, Catholicism in second place and Seventh-day Adventism in the second place. Catholicism was shaped in the Windward Islands by priests from the nearby French islands. The white slave owners on the Upper

Curaçao 1499-1776 (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2019).

³⁷ G.J.M. Dahlhaus, *Monsignor Martinus Joannes Niewindt, First Apostolic Vicar of Curaçao. A life sketch, 27 August 1824-12 January 1860* (Baasrode: R. Bracke-van Geert, 1924), 157.

³⁸ Donk, *Civilization, conversion and guardianship*.

³⁹ John de Pool, *Del Curaçao que se va. Pages torn from "The Book of My Memories"* (Willemstad,

winds were against Methodism. The Reformed government took very strict action against the Methodists. The founder of this Church was the English theologian and preacher John Wesley (1703-1791), who clearly despised slavery because of the deprivation of freedom, the domination of one man over another and especially because of the cruelties that slave owners practiced. This is evident from Wesley's book *Thoughts upon Slavery*, published in 1774. On the Windward Islands, prayer meetings were forbidden and violations were punished severely with corporal punishment. Saba, which had a relatively large white population, was more attracted to the Anglican Church, which was more conservative than Methodism.

Agency of enslaved people on the Leeward Islands

The tension between the imposition of Christianity and the *agency* of the enslaved and their descendants is clearly evident in the correspondence of the priests. The frustrations that can be extracted from the letters show that the black population gave its own interpretation to certain Catholic practices. In 1830, the Catholic Society for Benevolence was founded with a fund for the poor, mostly descendants of the enslaved. This Society later became a burial association that provided a coffin and burial in the event of death. In Curaçao it was known as a *seter* or *sociedad di kaha*. In exchange for a small amount per month, a decent burial was guaranteed. For the black population, the funeral was accompanied by all kinds of rituals, such as the ritual of "washing hands" (*laba man*) after the funeral, where the men were given a shot of brandy to drink and some food was served. What the Roman Catholic Church had more difficulty with was the ritual of the *ocho dia*: an eight-day ritual after the funeral of a deceased person, which also exists on Aruba and Bonaire. During this ritual, an intercessor prays litanies in a mixture of Papiamentu and Latin and there is singing

– the so-called *kantikanan di Dum Ve* or *kantika di salbe*; as well as the *kantikanan di Ocho dia*, songs sung at an *ocho dia* ritual; and *kantikanan di Jukán*, songs sung at the dismantling of the altar on the last day of a complete *ocho dia*. During an *ocho dia* meeting, Nanzi stories are told, which had served as a form of resistance during the slavery period. The Catholic Church had difficulty with

this custom deviated from the European Catholic faith and tried hard to eradicate it. John de Pool describes the custom as a mixture of Catholicism, African culture and witchcraft that he said was even more uncivilized than the *tambú*³⁹ – an Afro-Curaçao genre of music, song and dance that was also fiercely criticized by the Roman Catholic Church and that it also tried to eradicate.

In his recently published study, *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Christians* (2022; see also the next article in this issue)⁴⁰ Jeroen Dewulf takes a closer look at rituals such as *the ocho dia* that have long been seen and fought as superstition by representatives of the local Catholic Church. The Church clashed with what he calls Portuguese-African Catholicism, which was present in Curaçao very early on among the Luangos, a certain group of enslaved people brought from Africa. The name Luango refers to the Irural Niari Valley in the Kingdom of Loango, locally known as the Bakamba.⁴¹ Enslaved people who were transported to Curaçao from areas under the Kingdom of Congo, among other places, were influenced by an early modern Portuguese Catholicism. After all, Catholicism had already spread to various parts of Africa under Portuguese influence in the fifteenth century, first on the archipelagos of Cape Verde and São Tomé and later also in parts of the African continent, such as the Kingdom of Congo, where Portuguese influence was very strong. The enslaved Africans who came to America from these areas in early colonial history took these variants of early Portuguese Catholicism with them during their forced transatlantic migration. The Curaçao anthropologist Richenel Ansano also mentions this phenomenon in his article "Malungo, Praise Names and Places: How Dead Can a Language Really Be" (2014).⁴²

Curaçao: 1981 [original edition Panama, 1934]).

⁴⁰ Jeroen Dewulf, *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Black Christians* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

⁴¹ Jeroen Dewulf, "From Papiamentu to Afro-Catholic Brotherhoods: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Iberian Elements in Curaçaoan Popular Culture," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 36 (2018), 69-94.

⁴² Richenel Ansano, "Malungo, Praise Name and Places: How Dead Can a Language Really Be," in Nicholas Faraclas, Ronald Severing, Christa Weijer, Elisabeth Ehteld, en Wim Rutgers (red.), *Creole Connections: Transgressing Neocolonial Boundaries in the Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the ABC-Islands and the Rest of the Dutch Caribbean* (Curaçao/Puerto Rico: Fundashon pa Planifikashon di Idioma, 2014), 23-37.

Both Dewulf and Ansano describe the brotherhoods or *confrarias* that already existed in the sixteenth century Congo and that venerated Our Lady of the Rosary, the Holy Spirit and Saint Anthony. The Lele Tony feast is still celebrated on Curaçao every year on June 13, the feast day of St. Anthony, with a lot of dancing, trumpet playing and prayer. This tradition, which has existed since the time of slavery, in which the Christ child is removed from Saint Anthony statues or the statue is placed upside down in the water to put pressure on Saint Anthony, has also been spotted as a popular custom among enslaved people in Brazil. And similar practices have been observed in Lower Congo, a region of Africa with strong historical-Portuguese influence, where the statues of Saint Anthony are known as Ntoni or Toni Malau, a Kikongo translation for "Saint Anthony who brings good luck." Further investigation could be done into how it is that this originally African-Portuguese Catholicism continued to manifest itself among Curaçao enslaved people as something of their own, in which they could confirm themselves as human beings and have been able to maintain their autonomy.

Agency of enslaved people on the Windward Islands

On the Windward Islands, Methodism was a leading church among the enslaved people. The founder John Wesley, who, as mentioned earlier, was completely against slavery, worked at the local level with lay preachers, including women as well as men. In the Caribbean, enslaved lay preachers also worked, who were emotionally closer to their fellow sufferers. In 1759, partly due to the efforts of some enslaved people baptized by Wesley himself, the first Methodist congregation in the Caribbean was established on the island of Antigua, after which Methodism quickly spread to the neighboring islands. Methodism clearly sided with the enslaved, to the annoyance of the economically powerful. On St. Martin, John Hodge, a free, colored person from Anguilla who had converted to Methodism on St. Barth or St. Eustatius, pre-diked the Methodist doctrine under a tamarind tree in Cole Bay, after he had been chased away from the Catholic French side. Twelve years later, a Methodist church was built.

On St. Eustatius, too, Methodism soon found acceptance among the enslaved people. Important here is the role of the Methodist preacher of African descent,

Black Harry, who, as the sources indicate, was born in the south of the United States and stayed on St. Eustatius from 1780 to 1788. In 1786 he formed a group on the island, whose adherents were called *jumpers*. The faith of these *jumpers* was considered by Kruijer in his article "Church and religion on the Windward Islands of the Netherlands Antilles" (1953) as a mixture of Christianity and African relics. Kruijer argues that this movement has similarities with the *shouters*, as the Baptists were called in Trinidad.⁴³

These *shouters* have been studied by the American anthropologist Herskovits and interpreted in his book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) as an attempt to reinterpret African forms of religion in a protestant sense.⁴⁴ Like the *Trinidadian shouters*, Methodists go into ecstasy during their services, accompanied by raptures, cramps, and loud clapping of hands. As the Statian historian Kenneth van Putten (1937-2014) put it during an interview: *his preaching was spirited*.⁴⁵ The Methodist Black Harry was quite

critical of slavery. The governide Neur of St. Eustatius had him flogged, but Black Harry continued to spread his faith anyway. Eventually, he was banished from the island for his faith. According to oral history, when he was forced to leave, he put a curse on the island, namely that worms would eat all agricultural products.⁴⁶ The stories surrounding Black Harry are still passed on from generation to generation. He also lives on in the material heritage. The Black Harry Lane in Oranjestad is a street named after him and the tree where he was scourged is a monument.

To what extent the split on the issue of slavery, which occurred within the Methodist church in the United States, also played a role on the islands, should be further investigated. The group of followers of Methodism on St. Eustatius and St. Maarten continued to grow and at a certain point white people also joined the audience of the Methodist preachers.

⁴³ Kruijer, "Church and religion on the Windward Islands of the Netherlands Antilles," 238-251.

⁴⁴ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941 [herdruk 1958]).

⁴⁵ Interviewed Kenneth van Putten. Interviewers Rose Mary Allen and Eric Ayisi, Sint Eustatius 3 July 1981 and 4 July 1981.

⁴⁶ Interviewed Arthur Spanner. Interviewer Rose Mary Allen, St. Eustatius, April 19, 1988.

For reflection

In my article, I intended to emphasize that the enslaved people and their descendants in the Dutch Caribbean, despite the oppression, held on to religious beliefs and practices that they or their ancestors had brought from Africa. They adapted the rituals of Christianity and developed new rituals that were more in line with their environment and circumstances. For them, religion functioned not only as a means of cultural survival, but also as a way to resist the existing power structures and injustices. Within the limitations of their situation, enslaved people and their descendants gave substance to this power in their own way.

A more in-depth, comparative study of the backgrounds of these different forms of *agency*, as well as the various attempts made by the Christian churches on the islands of the Dutch Caribbean against them, would be valuable. Armando Lampe describes in *Mission or Submission? Moravian and Catholic Missionaries in the Dutch Caribbean* that the Christian churches in both Curaçao and Suriname did not always give room for the *agency* of the enslaved in their urge to discipline.⁴⁷ In promoting the interests of the enslaved people, their *agency* for the churches was certainly not in the first place and was rather seen as a disruption of the established order. This theme is further explored in Margo Groenewoud's dissertation, *Nou koest nou kalm*, in which she shows that this mechanism still showed the after-effects of slavery in the twentieth century.^{A 48}

This also needs to be further investigated for the Dutch Windward Islands. In this context, a comparative study between the Catholic Church in the Leeward Islands and the Christian churches, especially the Methodist Church in the Windward Islands, could make an important contribution to the understanding of the role of religion and church institutions in the process of *agency*, as well as the mechanisms used for this and the reasons behind the choices that were made. In addition,

⁴⁷ Armando Lampe, *Mission or Submission? Moravian and Catholic Missionaries in the Dutch Caribbean during the 19th century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001).

⁴⁸ Margo Groenewoud, *Well calm down. The development of Curaçao society, 1915-1973: from colonial and ecclesiastical authority to self-government and citizenship* (dissertation, Leiden University, 2007).

a comparative study with Suriname, until 1975 the other Dutch colony in the Caribbean, could provide valuable insights into the manifestation of religious *agency* in the form of Winti in comparison with the various forms of this in the Dutch Caribbean islands. These studies could further illuminate the dynamics of religion, Christianity, power and resistance in these areas.

3. Afro-Atlantic Catholics

Jeroen Dewulf



Research on Christianity in the United States shows that of all population groups in the country, it is the African-American group where most people identify as Christians (79%, compared to 77% of the Latino population and 70% of the white population).⁴⁹ Elsewhere in the Americas, too, a large majority of the black population considers themselves Christians. This raises interesting questions. Why did the black community embrace the religion of the same people who were responsible for the enslavement of their ancestors? If, as some have done,

As I argued, Christianity was forced on the slave population by colonial oppressors who bore responsibility for an African cultural and religious genocide, how can it be explained that so many of their descendants profess this faith in such a passionate way?

The book *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Black Christians* (2022) offers a new answer to these difficult questions.⁵⁰ It argues that historians in the past have placed too much emphasis on conversion by white missionaries and underestimated that the black population itself played a crucial role in the spread of Christianity on the African and American continents. Another important point is that historians have wrongly assumed that the conversion of the slave population is a process that only started in America. In actual

⁴⁹ Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study, Christians by Race/Ethnicity," <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/compare/christians/by/racial-and-ethnic-composition/>, laatst bezocht 17 december 2024.

⁵⁰ Jeroen Dewulf, *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Black Christians* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2022).

A small, but influential, minority of Africans identified as Christians before their arrival in America. These were so-called "Afro-Atlantic Catholics" who brought their own form of the Christian faith from Africa. What characterizes this group is that they all came from parts of West Africa with a strong Portuguese influence: the African-Atlantic archipelagos of Cape Verde and São Tomé, parts of Senegambia and the old Kingdom of Congo in the northwest of present-day Angola.

To understand this influence, it is important to emphasize that Portugal had been active in Africa since the fifteenth century. Thus, the king of Congo converted to Christianity under Portuguese influence even before Columbus had discovered America and half a century before the famous ecclesiastical council began in Trent. This means that the kind of Christianity that the Portuguese introduced to Africa still had a strong medieval character and was much closer to the indigenous religions than the Christianity that European missionaries brought to Africa in later centuries. Another essential point is that the African continent was still firmly in the hands of Africans at that time. The Portuguese may have had colonial ambitions, but in practice they were highly dependent on their African allies. Except on the (previously uninhabited) African-Atlantic islands, where the first colonies arose, the initial spread of Christianity along the coast of West Africa by the Portuguese was therefore often the result of alliances with African leaders. The fact that Portugal also suffered from a chronic lack of priests and was dependent on local catechists further strengthened the African character of Christianity that spread in those regions.

The history of Christianity in the Kingdom of Congo shows how quickly an African variant of Catholicism could develop. When Mvemba a Nzinga, the eldest son of the king of the Congo, was baptized there by Portuguese priests in 1491, he took the baptismal name Afonso. With Portuguese military help, he manages to defeat his half-brother in a battle for succession a short time later. He attributed this victory to a miraculous intervention by the holy James the Greater. In an account of the battle that he sent to Portugal, Afonso claimed that Saint James had appeared on the battlefield on a white horse. Dressed

in a scarlet cape and under a white Constantine cross, he brought with him an army of riders who fought side by side with Afonso against his "heathen" half-brother. After his victory, Afonso used his privileged partnership with Portugal to reorganize the kingdom and thus promote unity and loyalty to himself. He used Portuguese as the diplomatic language of the kingdom and sent numerous young Congolese, including his own son Henrique, to Portugal to be trained for leadership positions. He also set up a Portuguese education program by gathering "four hundred young men and boys," "having large walls built with many thorns on them so that they could not jump over them and flee" and then "entrusting the priests with the teaching." Thanks to that school, Afonso was able to gradually replace Portuguese teachers with Congolese and send the graduates, known as "mestres," to all corners of his kingdom to spread the new religion.⁵¹ They did this by establishing brotherhoods, among other things. A document by the Congolese ambassador to Portugal from 1595 shows that in the capital of the Kingdom of Congo alone there were no less than six Catholic brotherhoods.⁵² These were prestigious organizations led by the country's elite. Anyone who was a member of a brotherhood enjoyed Congolese royal protection and in principle could never be sold as a slave. Moreover, membership was essential to obtaining influential positions. Brotherhoods were an ideal tool for Congolese to reinterpret medieval Portuguese Catholicism from an African perspective. It was therefore the brotherhoods – more than churches – that made it possible for Christianity to evolve into an African religion.

African enslaved people and Christianity in America

As a result of Portuguese influence in Africa, a significant minority of the African slave population in America did not experience Christianity as a foreign religion.

⁵¹ "Carta do Rei do Congo a D. Manuel I" (1514), in António Brásio (red.), *Monumenta missionário Africana (MMA)*, 15 delen (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar/Academia Portuguesa da História, 1952–88), 1:294–323.

⁵² "Interrogatória de statu regni congensis fact ulissipone" (1595), in Brásio, *MMA*, 3:500–504.

After all, many of them had already been baptized as children by a local catechist, had grown up with Afro-Catholic rituals around Christmas and Easter, knew the Lord's Prayer and the Ave Maria in their local language, were familiar with fraternity rituals at funerals and turned to the Virgin Mary and the Catholic saints for comfort in times of adversity. Some of them were so familiar with the Catholic religion that they could be employed as catechists in Iberian colonies by local missionaries and take leadership positions in local brotherhoods. No one familiar with slave society in colonial Latin America would deny the importance of brotherhoods for the black population. In rural regions, such organizations exist to this day. They often have a reference to Congo in their name, such as the *Cofradía de los Congos del Espíritu Santo* in the Dominican Republic or the many hundreds of *congadas* in Brazil, which often have Our Lady of the Rosary or Benedict the African as their patron saint.

Less well known is that such Afro-Catholic communities also arose in protestant colonies. A fascinating example of this can be found in the Danish Virgin Islands, where the German Christian Oldendorp, a missionary of the Moravian Church, was surprised to find around 1760 that some Africans on these Caribbean islands were already familiar with Christianity. From conversations with a man from Congo, Oldendorp learned that "most people in his country went to a Christian church and were baptized and married by a priest. The man also told Oldendorp that the Congolese "had priests of their own people, who baptized people, organized masses, could read and had their own religious books. Oldendorp also noted that it was common "among blacks who came from Portuguese lands [...] especially those from the Congo" to carry out "a kind of baptism" on children and that the Congolese had even set up their own missionary work and "taught, absolved and baptized" other Africans."⁵³ Oldendorp's notes thus clearly show that there were also Protestant colonies with a slave community originating from parts of Africa with a strong Portuguese influence and that

⁵³ Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp, *Historie der caribischen Insel Sanct Thomas, Sanct Crux und Sanct Jan, insbesondere der dasigen Neger und der Mission der evangelischen Brüder unter denselben*, uitgegeven door Gudrun Meier, Stephan Palmié, Peter Stein en Horst Ulbricht, 2 delen (Berlin: VWB, 2000), 1:445–48; 2:758.

many of them had been familiar with Christianity for a long time before they were approached by European missionaries.

Curaçao

This was also the case in Curaçao, where the oldest slave community came almost exclusively from the Cape Verde Islands and parts of Senegambia with a strong Portuguese influence. Many of them had been on Portuguese slave ships that were on their way to Iberian colonies, but were hijacked by the Dutch West India Company and then shipped to Curaçao. It is not surprising, then, that in the early eighteenth century the German Jesuit Michael Joannes Alexius Schabel noticed that all members of the black population on this island "claim to be Christians, to be Christians, even though they have not yet been baptized," that "all those whom I have questioned so far, without exception, continue to claim to be Christians and Catholics. 'Por la gracia de Dios,' they say, because most of them speak Spanish or at least Creole, that's broken Spanish" and that "rosaries, crosses, medals and the like [...] are so very dear to them and [...] hang and worship them freely around their necks. He therefore regretted that in Curaçao "not too many of those Ethiopians [i.e. Africans] are admitted to mass at once in the church" because "the governor and with him the inhabitants of the island [are] afraid that those Ethiopian slaves, hundreds or thousands together in mass, when they come out of mass, would unexpectedly start a rebellion and rebellion."⁵⁴

Various traditions of the black community in Curaçao, such as announcing someone's death by blowing a horn, honoring the deceased with eight days of mourning (known as *ocho dia*; see also the previous article), praying novenas for hours and singing the *dumve* (bastardized versions of Gregorian prayer songs) led by a *resadó* (cantor), the expulsion of the spirit of the deceased from the house at the end of the *ocho dia*, the singing of Ave Maria prayers during the mourning of an *angelito* (innocent child who became an angel), the playing of *tambú* music in honour of Saint Anthony, the use of rosaries as a

⁵⁴ Wim Rutgers (red.), *Michael Joannes Alexius Schabel S.J. - missionaris op Curaçao, 1703-1713* (Curaçao: University of Curaçao, 2015), 69-71, 86.

amulets (especially during Lent, when the evil spirits or *zumbis* are strongest), the celebration of Saint John with bonfires, and the bathing of statues of that saint on Saint John's Eve all correspond to customs in African regions with historically strong Portuguese influence.

The Dominican Paul Brenneker, a pioneer in the study of Curaçao folklore, also pointed out the importance of Afro-Catholic societies, known as *sociedades di caha* ("associations of the coffin," i.e., funeral funds) or *setters*, referring to the candlesticks that these societies provide for the *ocho dia*. "Every neighborhood has a few," he explained, "many are members of two or more funds." Every month people paid a sum because these funds were "counted among the necessities of life. No matter how little many foresee and calculate, no one will like to fall behind with the contribution to the fund. This is to prevent a poor people's funeral."⁵⁵ These societies had their own banners and bore names referring to a Catholic patron saint, such as *San Pedro*, *La Birgen Nos Mama*, *San José* or *Santa Lucia*.

The important role of such funds in Curaçao society may also help us to understand Han Jordaan's observation that there was considerable resistance within the Catholic black population to organizing the funeral for newcomers from Africa who died before they could be baptized.⁵⁶ In- mers, these people had never contributed to any of the funeral funds. In addition, unbaptized Africans were considered inferior. It is significant that black Catholics in Curaçao referred to the latter with the swear word *bouriques*, a pun on the Iberian *burro* (donkey) and *bozal/boçal* (unbaptized African), and that they called the cemetery for the unbaptized the *chiké*, derived from the Portuguese *chiqueiro* (pigsty).^{A 57}

When the Roman Catholic Church tried to impose a post-Tridentine, Eurocentric form of Catholicism in Curaçao in the course of the eighteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church

⁵⁵ Paul Brenneker, *Curaçaoensia: Folkloristic notes on Curaçao* (Curaçao: Boekhandel St. Augustinus, 1961), 17; Paul Brenneker, *Sambumbu: Folklore of Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire*, 10 volumes (Curaçao: Drukkerij Scherpenheuvel, 1969–75), 1:105; 5:1091, 1106–7; 10:2487–89.

⁵⁶ Hans Jordaan, *Slavery and Freedom on Curaçao* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2013), 150.

⁵⁷ Rutgers, *Michael Joannes Alexius Schabel*, 112; Brenneker, *Sambubu*, 3:555; 5:1092–93.

This met with resistance from the black community, which stubbornly held on to its centuries-old Afro-Catholic traditions. In 1759, tensions rose so high that the black population threatened to leave the Catholic Church and establish their own church community.⁵⁸ These tensions increased after the elevation of Curaçao to an apostolic prefecture in 1823. In their desire to "civilize," the church authorities went so far as to exclude people from the congregation because they played *tambú* music according to time-honored Afro-Catholic custom and honored *ocho dia* funeral traditions. The population resisted this, as a popular song put it: "Ta un kachó mi tabatin / tende kon m'a yam'é?

/ M'a mara un sinta na sua garganta / dunele nòmber di kongrenis" (I used to have a dog / Do you know what I called him? I put a belt around his neck / and called him congregation).^{A 59}

Suriname

In contrast to Curaçao, only a small part of the slave population in Suriname came from parts of Africa with a historically strong Portuguese influence. After all, colonization only started later and by that time the West India Company had built up its own slave trade network, often in places where Portuguese influence was minimal, such as Koromantijn or Loango. Yet even there, long before the arrival of the Evangelical Brethren in 1735, we come across documents that refer to Africans with Iberian Catholic baptismal names such as Lucretia, Victoria, Diana, Thomas, Gabriel, Francisque, Matthew, Christina and Congo Maria.⁶⁰ In later centuries we find an intriguing reference to the presence of Afro-Atlantic Catholics in Coronie, a district where plantations were not established until the beginning of the nineteenth century. During his mission to Coronie in the 1820s, Father Paulus Wennekers discovered

⁵⁸ J.A. Schiltkamp and J.Th. de Smidt (eds.), *West-Indisch Plakaatboek: Publications and other laws as well as the oldest resolutions relating to Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, 1638-1816, 2 volumes.* (Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1978), 1:246.

⁵⁹ Rose Mary Allen, *Di ki manera? A Social History of Afro-Curaçaoans, 1863–1917* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2007), 165.

⁶⁰ Julien Wolbers, *Geschiedenis van Suriname* (Amsterdam: H. De Hoogh, 1861), 146; L. Junker, "Eenige mededelingen over de Saramakkaner Boschnegers," *De West-Indische gids* 4 (1922): 449–80.

"a multitude of Portuguese slaves, who come to church for hours." Elsewhere in Coronie he also met Catholic-baptized Africans who had a cross on their chest and made the sign of the cross.⁶¹ It was also in Coronie that a certain Colin tried to organize a slave revolt in 1817. Research found that Colin was influenced by Christianity and that he referred to gatherings, for example, as "going to church. Although this Christian influence is traditionally explained by referring to the influence of Moravian missionary work in Suriname, the fact that "King Colin" was addressed by his followers as *tata*, the Kikongo term for "father," indicates that these Christian influences may also have been of Congolese origin.⁶²

New Netherland

In the other Dutch colony in America, New Netherland, later New York, the vast majority of the slave population came from Congo and northwestern Angola and enslaved people bore Portuguese baptismal names such as António, Susana, Manuel and Isabel. Others, such as Francisco of Capo Verde, Anna of Capoverde, Pieter Santome, Christopher Santome and Maria Santomee came from the Atlantic archipelagos of Cape Verde and São Tomé. Some even came from Portugal and may have had Portuguese ancestors, such as Anthony Ferdinand, a "young man of Cascalis [Cascais], in Portugal," Willem Antonys Portugies, Pieter Portugies and Maria Portugies.⁶³ Among the black population of New Netherland, there was a great desire to have their children baptized, something that was only possible in Manhattan in the Reformed Church. Although Dutch Calvinists had strict criteria for baptism, the Reformed Church baptized at least fifty-six black children.^{A 64}

⁶¹ Elisabeth Maria Leonie Klinkers, *Op hoop van vrijheid: Van slavensamenleving naar creoolse gemeenschap in Suriname, 1830–1880* (Utrecht: Department of Culture Anthropology, 1997), 33.

⁶² H. van Renselaar and J. Voorhoeve, "Messianism and Nationalism in Surinam," *Bijdrage tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 118, no. 2 (1962): 193–216.

⁶³ Samuel S. Purple (red.), *Marriages from 1639 to 1801 in the Reformed Dutch Church, New Amsterdam, New York City* (New York: Genealogical and Biographical Society, 1940), 10–30; Thomas Grier Evans (red.), *Records of the Reformed Dutch Church in New Amsterdam and New York: Baptisms from 25 December 1639, to 27 December 1730* (New York: Clearfield, 1901), 10–38; Arnold J.F. van Laer (red.), *New York Historical Manuscripts: Dutch*, 4 delen (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing, 1974), 1:23 en 4:35, 53, 60, 62, 96–100, 208–9, 212–213.

Under pressure from the owners who were afraid that baptized slave children would eventually be freed, the Church stopped this practice around 1650. Another reason was that doubts had arisen within the Reformed Church whether the parents "did not try more, as there to deliver their children from physical Sla- vernije, Sonder te try na Godtsalicheyt en Christelijcke Deugden," as Reverend Henricus Selijns put it in 1664.⁶⁵ Even after the English conquest of the colony in 1664, Dutch slaveholders in what was now New York and New Jersey continued to resist the baptism of slave children. For example, in 1708 the Anglican missionary Elias Neau complained that he had not been able to give catechism in New Jersey because "almost all of them are Dutch and [...] fear that their slaves will demand their freedom after baptism."⁶⁶

Despite the opposition of both English and Dutch slave owners, Neau already had more than 150 black students by 1712, 31 of whom he baptized. After he died in 1722, his successor William Huddelston reportedly found "swarms of blacks at my door, who asked if I would please teach them."⁶⁷ other Anglican pastors in New York and New Jersey had similar experiences. In 1714, Thomas Barclay had forty black catechumens in Albany and baptized seventeen of them. "If I wanted to," Barclay wrote, "I could easily form a congregation of slaves alone."⁶⁸ An intriguing story is that of a certain Aree [Arie] of Guinea, a black man who had come to New York via Suriname and opened his house there for the first Lutheran service in August 1714.⁶⁹ Even long after the conquest of New Netherland, members of the black community continued to approach the Reformed Church. In 1788, for example, Peter Lowe, the Reformed minister

⁶⁴ Jaap Jacobs, *New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 312–18.

⁶⁵ A.P.G.J. van der Linde (red.), *Old First Dutch Reformed Church of Brooklyn, New York: First Book of Records, 1660-1752* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1983), 230-31.

⁶⁶ Gragham R. Hodges, *Slavery, Freedom & Culture among Early American Workers* (Armond, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 37.

⁶⁷ Patricia U. Bonomi, "'Swarms of Negroes Comeing about My Door': Black Christianity in Early Dutch and English North America," *Journal of American History* 103:1 (2016): 34–58.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Norman C. Wittwer, *The Faithful and the Bold: The Story of the First Service of the Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Oldwick, New Jersey* (Oldwick, NJ: Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1984), 19.

in Kings County (now Brooklyn), a group of black men who applied for full membership in the Church "worthy [...] for the privileges of the Evan-gelie," but his Dutch-American churchgoers disagreed, claiming that "Negroes have no soul" and that "their pretended zeal [...] is nothing but vain pomp."⁷⁰

Eighteenth-century newspaper reports from New York and New Jersey also regularly mention Christian missionary work within their own black community. For example, when the Anglican missionary Pierre Stoupe began his mission to the black population in New Rochelle, New York, in 1728, he was surprised to find that some had already "received some instruction" from other members of the black community who were versed in "the fundamentals of the Christian faith."⁷¹ Newspaper advertisements of slave owners looking for runaways regularly refer to such self-proclaimed preachers. For example, in 1740 we find a report in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* about a certain Simon of New Jersey who "pretended to be a physician and was very religious, and said he was a clergyman."⁷² In 1775 an advertisement in *Rivington's New York Gazetteer* mentioned a certain Mark of Bergen County who was said to be a "preacher", and in 1783 the *New York Gazette* placed an advertisement about one Anthony "pretending to be a preacher and sometimes acting in that capacity among the blacks."⁷³ It is important to emphasize that this all took place before the (second) Great Awakening, the great wave of evangelism of 1790-1840 that is traditionally considered the beginning of African-American enthusiasm for Christianity.

This shows how much the role of one's own black community in the spread of Christianity among black Americans has been underestimated. It is therefore important to emphasize that the foundations of African-American Christianity lie not so much with the famous Anglican preachers John Wesley and George Whitefield.

⁷⁰ Andrea Mosterman, "‘I Thought They Were Worthy’: A Dutch Reformed Church Minister and His Congregation Debate African American Membership in the Church," *Early American Studies* (2016): 610–16.

⁷¹ Bonomi, "Swarms of Negroes," 53.

⁷² *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (11 september 1740).

⁷³ *Rivington's New-York Gazetteer* (8 juni 1775); *The New York Gazette and the Weekly Mercury* (10 november 1783).

As is often assumed, but have much older roots dating back to the Afro-Atlantic Catholic Africans of the seventeenth century. By focusing on the history of this community, the image of the black Catholic community in the history of African American Christianity changes dramatically. From passive spectators, they change into active pioneers who have introduced and spread an African variant of Christianity in America. A variant that grew into a community of brothers and sisters who proudly call their churches "African" in the realization that it is not contradictory to be a convinced Christian and at the same time proud of your African origins.

4. From maroons to the childcare benefits affair. Church and slavery in the past, present and future⁷⁴

Mgr. Karel Choennie



Rewriting the history of the indigenous people and Maroons

One of the ways to process the slavery past is to rewrite colonial history from the eyes of the descendants of the conquered indigenous peoples and the enslaved people from Africa. Although the focus of my story is on the Maroons, history compels me to say something about our indigenous people. After all, they were the first slaves. As a child we learned that the first governor Cornelis van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck (1637-1688) had

developed vigor. What we were not told, however, is that he waged a bloody war against the native population in which he had the upper hand with superior weapons, while the simple bow and arrow warriors did not stand a chance. The prisoners of war were clubbed to death to save bullets. The oral tradition, the *mofo koranti* as we call it in Suriname, nevertheless keeps intact some of the truth of what the history books conceal. The resistance had to be nipped in the bud and Van Sommelsdijck made sure that the native population starved to death and could no longer offer resistance by burning down all indigenous villages and farmlands from Paramaribo to the Coppename River. The war against the indigenous population and the African resistance fighters cost a pretty penny and the planters were not always willing to pay for it. So it was cheaper to make peace. In 1686 peace came with the native population; the text of that peace has been lost. It is clear that from then on the Caribbean and the

⁷⁴ This article is an adaptation and abridgement of a lecture given in Breda during the "Church and Slavery Symposium" that took place on January 26, 2024.

Arowaks had stipulated that they no longer wanted to be enslaved.

Although I use the word "maroons" above and in the title of my story, I object to the name "maroon" for the enslaved Africans who fought for their freedom and kept it in Suriname for centuries. Historian Gert Oostindie gives an interesting reconstruction of the word:

The word probably has an Indian origin. In 1530 it was used in colonial documents for escaped Indians ("yndios cimarrones"), in 1544 for escaped slaves ("negros cimarrones"). The word also came into use for runaway and feral cattle.⁷⁵

Van Goor's Spanish dictionary gives for cimarrón, as a noun, "slaves and domestic animals that flee and go wild," "wild, growing in the wild (plants)" and "lazy, work-shy."⁷⁶

As you can see, the word maroon has predominantly negative connotations attached to it. Most scientists have no objection to the name because it is generally accepted internationally. But the rewriting of history does require, in my opinion, that we free the suppressed consciousness from words that continue to humiliate.

The realization that words do matter is alive in some people. Deacon Freddy Todie of our Diocese of Paramaribo and descendant of the Aukaners says that in the oral tradition of his family they call themselves *frimanpransun*. Translated, this name means the offspring of the free. It is a huge difference if you see yourself as a child of a free people or as a child of runaway and feral cattle. After all, respect always starts with self-respect first.

⁷⁵ José Juan Arrom, "Cimarrón: Apuntes sobre sus primeras documentaciones y su probable origen," in José Juan Arrom and Manuel A. García Arévalo (eds.), *Cimarrón* (Santo Domingo: Fundación García-Arévalo, 1986), 16, 21, 25, 28. Reference in Gert Oostindie, "'Cimarrón' A Spanish-Caribbean contrast with Suriname," *OSO. Journal for Surinamese linguistics, literature and history* 11:2 (1992), 194-208, 195.

⁷⁶ Van Goor, *Spanish handdictionary* (Amsterdam: Van Goor Zonen, 1969), 240. Reference in Oostindie, "'Cimarrón' A Spanish-Caribbean contrast with Suriname," 195.

However, there is the image of the heroic Maroon. I quote Oostindie a bit more extensively:

As much as Maroons were hated and fought by planters and colonial authorities, so much are they glorified in the rhetoric of modern Caribbean nationalism [...] It is precisely the remarkable survival power of the Surinamese Maroons that makes them on the one hand a pronounced object of heroization, on the other hand more lifelike, an identifiable group in the past and present, and therefore also politically more sensitive. As far as the latter is concerned, one only has to think of the conjuncture of the relations between the Bouterse regime and the Maroons. Initially, the military put forward the Maroons as proto-nationalists, but that changed drastically when they started to resist Bouterse et al. by force. And of course, in a plural society such as the Surinamese one, an eminently Afro-Caribbean heroism will almost by definition not be able to appeal to all population groups. Prejudices still rule the image of the Surinamese Maroon. Perhaps further integration would change this for the better. But even then, their past will never be the history of "the Surinamese" (who is that?) will symbolize.⁷⁷

Since 2005, the Maroons have occupied an important independent place in Surinamese politics and economy. They are prominent throughout society and actively participate in social life at all levels.

I will be forced to continue to use the term maroon in this article. The descendants prefer to call themselves by their tribal name: Saramaccaner, Aukaner, Aluku or Kwinti. They use *Businengre* as a collective name. *Nengre* should not be translated as negro but with man, forest man, like the child of two white parents, *pikinengre*, should not be translated to little negro, but just child. According to the last census of 2012 in Suriname, there are 117,000 Catholics, of which 30,000 are Maroons.⁷⁸ In our diocese, four religious sisters and seven deacons are of Maroon descent.

⁷⁷ Oostindie, "Cimarrón! A Spanish-Caribbean contrast with Suriname," 203-204.

⁷⁸ See <https://statistics-suriname.org/censusstatistieken-2012-2/>, last visited 2 May 2024.

Missionary Maroons by invitation

With the following example, I want to show that the missionary work of the Maroons took place in a very different way than in the rest of South America, where they had to deal with the conquistadors who forced the indigenous population to accept the faith by force. I want to emphasize this form of mission, because for the sake of convenience, the Catholic Church in Suriname is lumped together with that on the rest of the continent where people were baptized violently and under duress. I also want to get rid of the idea that Catholic missionaries have lured people with mirrors and beads. The Catholic Church in Suriname was not the dominant church, but rather a church that was opposed by the Protestant government and tolerated if there was really no other option.

Father Toon te Dorsthorst writes an exemplary piece about this in his book *Father Toon boslandpater*.^{E-79} He describes the history of his pectoral cross. For years it was part of the wooden prayer pole (*faaka pau*) in Lantiwe. This village is located in the far south of the Granrio, one of the two source rivers of the Suriname River. The *faaka pau* (banner pole) is a sacred place where the elders of a village perform the daily prayers and libations. Anana Keduwaman Keduwapon, God creator of heaven and earth, and the ancestors are invoked. Without ever an attempt by the church to Christianize these people, the village leader Thomas Pobosi took the initiative in 1925 to invite the Roman Catholic Church to establish a school and a church. Pobosi had eleven wintis left over him but got a twelfth called Maasa Hepiman. Maasa Hepiman means Lord the Helper, in other words: the Holy Spirit the Helper. The Hebrew word for winti (wind) is *ruah* and that also means Spirit. So there is a revelation of God himself here. The twelfth winti was so powerful that Pobosi threw the eleven others into the river. The village was prepared to renounce the traditional religion and all religious attributes. The villagers were willing to remove their sacred place, the *faaka pau*. It was Father Morssink who convinced them that they could keep the prayer pole and only have to add a crossbar to it. Catholics

⁷⁹ Toon te Dorsthorst, *Pater Toon boslandpater: geroepen tot pastor en profeet* (Paramaribo, 2019).

after all, we also believe in the communion of saints. So it was not wrong to gather there at that place to call on God and all the saints. In 1930 the village was abandoned and the jungle recaptured what had previously been taken from it. A new village was founded with the name Ligorio, named after the founder of the Redemptorists. The most devout Catholics in Suriname live in that village where a priest only comes once or twice a year and sometimes not at all. In 1997, Father Toon went looking for this place and found the *faaka pau*. He made pectoral crosses from that brownheart pole, one of which I also own, a gift from deacon Nelson Pavion, an great-grandson of Thomas Pobosi.

The present: How does the theme of slavery still play a role in Suriname and in the Netherlands? From the Maroons I make the transition to contemporary history. When it comes to the impact of the theme of slavery in Suriname, I don't have to look far. Who has a more Dutch name than Karel? The whole of Suriname carries the Dutch past and therefore slavery with it. Our language, our legal system, our education system, our family structures, the political ethnic coalitions that are a result of the divided and rule politics that have been pursued. Furthermore, race and color are still determining factors in Surinamese society, no matter how much we pretend to be a *bromki dyari*, flower garden. All of this isolates us from the Caribbean and Latin America. We live on a piece of wild coast surrounded by jungle with daily full flights from Amsterdam to Suriname and vice versa. The Netherlands and Suriname are condemned to each other, as the writer Anil Ramdas said, no matter how much the Netherlands wants to deny that it was ever our motherland. Condemned to each other in the same sense as in existentialist philosophy. We do not choose each other, but are condemned to each other. To illustrate this, I would like to give just two examples that show how slavery still has an impact in Suriname.

The language

At Christmas 2023, I preached the Christmas sermon entirely in Sranan Tongo, the lingua franca of Suriname, without using a single word of Dutch. I deal with the subject of domestic violence, which has reached epidemic proportions in Suriname.

Taken. I created a contrast between the warmth that Jesus received at Mother Mary's breast and the harsh reality of spiritual and physical violence in which our children have to grow up. Nowhere in the world, notes the Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul, are children beaten as much as in the Caribbean.⁸⁰ It is, in my view, a direct consequence of the corporal punishment of slavery. The word for breast in Sranan is *bobi*. After the service, a faithful churchgoer came to me very indignantly to complain. She found it absolutely inadmissible that a bishop in the cathedral had used the words *bobi* and *motyo* (prostitute) on Christmas Eve. It took a while before I could give this rage against me a place. This is an expression of the inflated inferiority complex that we are struggling with in Suriname. Our language is not lofty enough to speak about God in the church. Difficult concepts and philosophical treatises would not be possible in Sranan. This idea persists, although renowned poets such as Trefossa, Koenders, Venetiaan and others have proven it to the contrary. That suppressed consciousness is not going to disappear overnight in Suriname, because time does not heal wounds. On the contrary. An unprocessed past gets worse with time. If we do not actively work on reconciliation with the Netherlands, we will always remain a forgotten piece of mud land on the wild coast.

Caribbean Family Type

My thesis in Leuven was about the Caribbean family type, where I found that the current family type has its roots in the West African matrilineal family systems. The ban on marriages, having a lover on another plantation and the fact that partners could be sold separately has made that especially the Surinamese man of African descent has a traumatic fear of marriage. A visiting relationship developed that eventually became permanent, but could also remain permanently temporary. This was because partners usually stayed and worked on different plantations. The strong matriarch also doesn't make it easy for the daughter to leave home to live with her husband in a house of her own far from her sisters. A third reason why this system after slavery

⁸⁰ Toon te Dorsthorst, *Pater Toon boslandpater: geroepen tot pastor en profeet* (Paramaribo, 2019).

was the grinding poverty. The Caribbean family is an answer to structural poverty. It stems from a culture of poverty, but also produces poverty itself. This is an undesirable vicious circle in which many families, even here in the Netherlands, are trapped. It has become part of the culture and functions perfectly as an *extended family system* and is in many ways more stable than the Western nuclear family. However, when cultures come into contact with each other or collide, problems arise. On the one hand, the desire for a lasting close relationship between a man and a woman remains, and on the other hand, there are so many unknown factors that stand in the way of a marriage. Not an easy task.

The role of the Catholic Church in the impact of the slavery past In my 2022 Christmas sermon, I said that although the Roman Catholic Church took care of the enslaved people, it remained trapped in the system of master and slave. Historian Mildred Caprino summed it up for me like this: "The physical horrors of the slave masters can be compared to an ant bite and the mental suffering that the churches have caused with a scorpion bite." An ant bite hurts, but it passes, while the venom of the scorpion is deadly if you don't find an antidote on it. The church taught the enslaved that there was nothing good in their religion and culture. That civilization meant to despise everything that is one's own and to imitate the whites in everything. In our search for our own identity, we became *mimic men* (copycats) as V.S. Naipaul calls it, or as Frantz Fanon puts it in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In that book, Fanon describes how black people are made clear in all kinds of ways that they are considered inferior and how they try to compensate for this by behaving *white*. Black people were forced to put on white masks. Until independence in 1975, the church legitimized and sanctioned this mentality.

Now I am taking the step towards the impact of the slavery past in the Netherlands.

Alledaags racism en *entitlement racism*

Philomena Essed describes *typical racist situations in the Netherlands* in her 1984 book *Alledaags Racisme*.⁸¹ This met with resistance, because the Dutch had to change the self-image

have to be a tolerant and open-minded people. Her publication became part of a short-lived anti-racism wave in the Netherlands, but the 1990s brought about a severe *backlash* that would last for two decades. This subject was swept under the carpet, even in scientific circles. When the book was republished in 2017, more than thirty years later, little appears to have changed. On the contrary. Racism has even become more evident. The recently held elections in the Netherlands reflect what Essed calls "self-righteous racism: in the name of freedom of speech."⁸² *Eigen-recht-racisme* is the translation of *entitlement racism*, a word that is not easy to translate into Dutch. *Entitlement*, according to Essed, presupposes a sense of self-righteousness with which you believe that something is due to you. With regard to racism, the ultimate consequence is that racism does not matter: "I decide for myself what racism is or is not, what I can say and what I can't. What the other person thinks of it is not my problem." Social media play an important role in this. Humiliating the public via social media has become one of the tools of everyday racism.

Apologies – and compensation?

In the Netherlands, however, there is a burgeoning awareness going on, as evidenced by Prime Minister Rutte's unilateral apologies on December 19, 2022. I thought that the apologies should be pronounced by the king on a symbolic date and then in such a way that they were accompanied by reparation and could be accepted and steps could be taken towards reconciliation. There has still been no official appropriate response from the Surinamese side to the apologies offered. Apparently because when it comes to repair, a zero after a decimal point remains a zero. There is no remorse and penance, and therefore no compensation. Former colonies say to the European countries: "Sorry is not enough. You should put your money where your mouth is." Armand Zunder has calculated how expensive the sugar was and is therefore an unwelcome guest at conferences on the slavery past where repair is in order.⁸³

⁸¹ See Philomena Essed, *Alledaags racism* (Amsterdam: Feministische Uitgeverij Sara, 1984).

⁸² See Philomena Essed, *Racism knowledge* (Amsterdam: Van Gennip, 2020).

⁸³ See Armand Zunder, *Reparations: The "Wiedergutmachung" for the damage that Suriname and its protection have suffered under Dutch colonialism* (The Hague: Amrit Consultancy, 2010).

The Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Amor Mottley, has taken the lead on the world political stage. It always comes up with exact amounts, so much so that the world leaders looked at the floor in shame during the climate summit in Cairo. She wants 4.9 trillion as a repair from the United Kingdom for small Barbados. How much do the former mother countries have to pay to the former colonies in total? England 24 trillion dollars, Spain 17.1 trillion, France 9.2 trillion and the Netherlands 4.86 trillion.⁸⁴ As a result of the sinister slave trade, it is estimated that between 200,000 and 300,000 African enslaved persons were shipped to Suriname. After the abolition of slavery for economic reasons, only 34,000 of them remained. The exact number is still under discussion among scientists. In my opinion, these figures sufficiently indicate how hard and short-lived life was on the plantations. After the abolition, only the planters were compensated; They received 200 guilders per slave. The slaves later had to pay back this compensation themselves by means of special taxes.

The sums mentioned by Prime Minister Mottley seem very high, but they are justified, according to her, accumulated over a period of several centuries of slavery. If you think in terms of centuries, then the amounts are small.⁸⁵

The childcare benefits scandal and white supremacy: from Susanna Du Plessis to Melitia Atminah

I will briefly say something about the benefits affair that is well known to you, which has its origins in white supremacy. When we speak of modern forms of slavery, it means that it occurs now, but that the root cause remains the same, namely that one population group feels elevated above another and therefore believes that it is allowed to oppress the other. I start with a story that I heard in my childhood on radio Apintie on which Harry Jong Loy told history stories (*fosten tori*).

⁸⁴ Amelia Gentleman, "Barbados PM says country owed \$4.9tn as she makes fresh call for reparations," *The Guardian* 7 december 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/06/barbados-pm-says-country-owed-49tn-as-she-makes-fresh-call-for-reparations>, laatst bezocht 15 oktober 2024.

⁸⁵ Palki Sharma, "Barbados Seeks \$4.9 Trillion in Slavery Reparations," *Firstpost*, 7 december 2023, [Barbados Seeks \\$4.9 Trillion in Slavery Reparations | Vantage with Palki Sharma - YouTube](https://www.firstpost.com/world/barbados-seeks-49-trillion-in-slavery-reparations-vantage-with-palki-sharma-10376088.html), laatst bezocht 15 oktober 2024.

The story I knew as a child I now find recorded in Hilde Neus' book. It's about the cruel plantation mistress Susanna Du Plessis. Just the mention of this name made people tremble. Hilde Neus deconstructs the story and makes it clear to the reader that it is a myth. Myths, however, have their own power of expression in determining the identity of a people. This is the story:

Susanna Du Plessis is on a journey to her plantation Envy and Regret. To get there they had to cross the Commewijne River by rowing boat. In the boat was also a slave girl with a small child. This child cried heartbreakingly. Several times Susanna asked the mother to stop her child crying, each time raising her voice and increasing anger. The slave tried to soothe the child, but she was unable to quiet the baby. Susanna then said: "Give it to me, I'll make sure it stops crying. Then she kept the child under water until it was drowned. The desperate mother threw herself into the water and died a bitter death."⁸⁶

For me, the story is true, even if it didn't really happen that way. It is true that similar or worse atrocities were committed. For example, Armand Zunder told me that the square Spanhoek where I always ate delicious Fernandes ice creams is so called because slaves were quartered there on horses.

Why do I tell such horror stories? I tell you because it still happens here in the Netherlands. History repeats itself. The slave girl and her child have no name in the story of Susanna Du Plessis. But in the childcare benefits scandal, the 5214 children do have a name. The mothers also have a name and a face, especially the name Melitia Atminah will never be forgotten or mispronounced by Humberto Tan. The details of ethnic profiling and overt racism are covered up and institutionalized in a ruthless tax system. As a result, it does not matter who from the government or who from the tax authorities gave the order or which police officer or social worker took the children from home.

⁸⁶ Hilde Neus-van der Putten, *Susanna du Plessis: Portrait of a slave mistress* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2003), 15.

Mr. Orlando Kadir, who has been assisting these desperate mothers free of charge since 2014, has buried me in piles of files that show exactly how expensive sugar has become now. Of the 5214 children, only 35 have returned to their parents in the last two years. This suffering is immense and begs for a solution, but in the meantime the Netherlands has cycled on to other problems. The survivors of Auschwitz did not think the crimes in the camps were so bad as the forgetting of the crimes and removing them from the collective memory. We talk about slavery past, but should rather speak about slavery present. Freedom, the highest good, is taken away from a person, just because he has a different skin color. The cry of Melitia Atminah continues to echo: "I want to be seen and treated as a human being." That is the cry of all migrants in the Netherlands today.

There are several versions of the story of Susanna Du Plessis. In one variant, the mother jumps overboard and dies a bitter death. But the oppressed do not get rid of their misery that easily. Another version tells that the rowers jumped after the woman and rescued her from the water, led her to the plantation and gave her some good whippings. That is rather the fate of those mothers of the childcare benefits scandal. Getting a kick after, but not having made any progress.

The future

I already predicted that I would not be able to end on a happy note, but I do cherish the hope that we can create a new consciousness through dialogues like this. A consciousness that will stand like a David against Goliath for a long time. Goliath will feel offended and scorn David, but sooner or later it will dawn on Goliath that white supremacy will also have an end. In doing so, the Church should emphasize that every human being is created in the image of God.

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5. Theological reflection on the "Declaration of the Dutch Bishops on the slavery past"

Duncan Wielzen



On July 1, 2023, the Roman Catholic bishops of the Netherlands issued a statement on the occasion of the celebration and commemoration of the abolition of slavery.⁸⁷ This declaration, entitled, "Slavery is Incompatible with Human Dignity," is an important document that gives rise to theological reflection on the Catholic Church's attitude toward slavery. In this contribution, I make a first attempt to do so, in which I first assume that I am not aiming for completeness. The history of slavery is too complex and extensive to be adequately covered in a few pages.

reflect. In this contribution I reflect on a number of Catholic theological concepts that can be useful in the beneficial processing of the slavery past. My starting point is that such an exercise provides an impetus to explore the meaning of some Catholic theological concepts, including human dignity, sin, penance and reconciliation, in the context of the slavery past and its contemporary impact. In addition, I will give a critical reflection on the explanation, with which I want to contribute to the further discussion about the role of the Catholic Church in the slavery past.

Human dignity

The Dutch bishops base their statement on the conviction that slavery is incompatible with human dignity. That human dignity is the foundation on which the ecclesiastical talk about slavery since the Second Vatican

⁸⁷ The entire statement can be read at: <https://www.rkkerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Slavernij-verklar-ing-bisschoppen-2023-def.pdf> . In this contribution I refer to this as "[this] explanation."

Council (1962-1965).⁸⁸ The bishops agree with this ecclesiastical speech in their statement. In their statement, they take a balanced position by stating that Catholics were complicit in slavery, but were also enslaved themselves. That does not take away from the fact that the Catholic Church did not sufficiently oppose slavery. "That is at odds with the Christian message," the bishops themselves acknowledge. This Christian message of the gospel shows that the truthfulness of man is paramount. The Second Vatican Council has given theological legitimacy to this concept of human dignity in various documents. It is central to the social teaching of the Catholic Church, where social justice and human rights are concerned. In the Council document *Gaudium et Spes*, on "the Church in the modern world," a substantial part (chapter 1, nos. 12-22, of volume 1) is devoted to this.

The bishops appeal to this Conciledocu- ment in their rejection of slavery. For the Catholic Church, human dignity is the basis for freedom and responsibility. That dignity is inherent to being human, because every human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27).⁸⁹ In their statement, the Dutch bishops explicitly refer to numbers 29 and 27 of this Council document and describe slavery in its contemporary form in terms of political and economic oppression. But slavery went much further. There was also cultural and religious oppression. The African culture and religious views (worldview) of the enslaved people had to suffer. The attitude of the Catholic Church and missionaries towards that culture and that worldview was one of superiority, incomprehension and rejection. When I compare this fact with *Gaudium et Spes* no. 29, I have to conclude that the Catholic Church did not sufficiently realize the human dignity of the enslaved. Perhaps

⁸⁸ The Catholic Church has historically had an ambiguous attitude towards slavery and the slave trade. Only since the Second Vatican Council has there been a more consistent approach. See, Remco van Mulligen, "The Church and slavery" (2016), <https://www.lucepedia.nl/dossieritem/slavernij/de-kerk-en-slavernij> accessed 2 October 2024.

⁸⁹ There is no consensus among biblical scholars about what it means that man is created in God's image and how that relates to human dignity. Cf. Robin ten Hoopen, "Man in the image of God?(2016), <https://www.pthu.nl/bijbelblog/2016/02/mens-als-beeld-van-god/>, consulted 13 October 2024.

This fact is reason for the bishops to emphasize twice in their declaration that the slavery past with the associated injustice and the dehumanization of enslaved persons must be faced. But what that "facing up" means in concrete terms is not mentioned in the statement. In fact, there are no clear leads that can give any direction. The statement would gain in persuasiveness if attention was paid to this.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, n°29, the Catholic Church denounces any form of discrimination and calls for respect for the dignity of every person. In addition, differences in culture, race or religion should not be a reason for inequality. This principle of equality is deeply rooted in the Christian conviction that all human beings are created in the image of God. And in issue 27, the Catholic Church describes slavery as "an attack on human civilization" that is "completely contrary to the honor of the Creator." It is precisely the scope of this thesis that should encourage the bishops to put their own house in order, because the demonization, rejection and disapproval of indigenous and African religions and traditions must be seen as an attack on these civilizations. The historical fact that the church has not always been able to respect and reverence these civilizations can lead to nothing but guilt, sincere regret and penance. There is little or no mention of this in the statement.

The Catholic Church also emphasizes the importance of human dignity in other Council documents. In *Dignitatis Humanae*, the "Declaration on Religious Freedom," she considers human dignity as the foundation of religious freedom. In it, she emphasizes the right of every person to choose freely in matters of faith and conscience. However, enslaved people did not have this freedom. In *Lumen Gentium*, the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," it emphasizes, under number 16, that all human beings, regardless of their beliefs or beliefs, have this dignity because they are created by God and are called in Christ to salvation. And in *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to the Non-Christian Religions," the Catholic Church recognizes the dignity of all people, regardless of their faith or culture. She feels obliged to act on it, because all have the same origin in God.

The Council documents that I have briefly quoted here place the dignity of the human person at the center. In more recent documents, the Catholic Church has reiterated and strengthened its position on this issue, especially in the context of modern forms of slavery, including human trafficking, forced labour and sexual exploitation. In each case, it underweighs the inviolable dignity of every human being. The statement of the Dutch bishops is in line with this.

Sin

In their statement, the Dutch bishops acknowledge that the slavery past continues to have an effect on the present. This effect is expressed in the way in which people today still suffer from the sinful structures of the slavery past. Concretely, this effect is expressed in, among other things, attitudes of superiority of white people over black people and feelings of inferiority among black people towards white people. But also in institutional racism⁹⁰ and everyday racism,⁹¹ and in discrimination on the basis of a dark or tinted skin colour, there is an impact of the slavery past in the present. In their statement, the bishops – following *Gaudium et Spes* – mention exploitation, child labor, forced labor and prostitution as contemporary forms of slavery. These new forms show parallels with the slavery past, in which those in power abused their power to subject free people to slavery. In these new forms, individuals and criminal organizations use power, coercion and violence against vulnerable people. Power is abused as a means to rob them of their human dignity. From a theological point of view, the use of power to deprive people of their freedom and human dignity is a sin against man as well as against God himself.

The bishops declare that slavery still exists "where there is political and economic oppression." By characterizing slavery in this way, however, this explanation ignores the total dehumanization that enslaved people had to

⁹⁰ Some researchers see the childcare benefits scandal that took place in the Netherlands as a case of institutional racism, in which the Tax and Customs Administration systematically used discriminatory practices against citizens of non-Western origin.

⁹¹ Philomena Essed, *Alledaags racism* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij van Gennep, 2018).

. There was no legal system to which they could relate. They were without rights and were traded as a commodity, as property. In these respects, transatlantic slavery differs from the current forms of slavery to which the bishops refer. What they have in common is the oppression that still rages through sinful structures of injustice and dehumanization. In their statement, the bishops call for recognition of this structural sin. In addition, they call for the condemnation of slavery in all its present forms, by recognizing the dignity of every human being. Moreover, the bishops state in their statement, people *can* still suffer "from these sinful structures of the past." The fact that people here in the Netherlands still suffer from the effects of the slavery past is a fact that is weakened by the word "can". The declaration would also gain strength on this point by explicitly mentioning this fact. Nevertheless, with the chosen formulation, the bishops implicitly indicate that the slavery past continues to have an effect on the present. In other words: "the sin of slavery" continues to this day in "the slavery of sin." This assertion I will now elaborate on from Saint Thomas Aquinas's definition of sin, and the definition given by the Catholic Church in its Universal Catechism of 2008.

The church father Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) considers sin to be "nothing but an evil human act. This definition seems to suggest that evil is inherent in sin. When I apply this concept of sin to the slavery past, in which slave owners caused immense human suffering to enslaved people,⁹² it seems justified to me to characterize this past as "the sin of slavery." After all, enslaving people is an evil human act, a sin, according to the definition of Thomas Aquinas.

The Universal Catechism (2008) of the Catholic Church defines sin as "an offense against reason, truth and right conscience" (n. 1849). According to the Catechism, sin is harmful to man: "It hurts man's nature and affects human solidarity. In addition, she is "an insult to God" (no. 1850).

⁹² Cf. the Declaration of the Dutch bishops, in which they state bluntly: "Slavery brought unimaginable suffering."

Reasoning from this definition of sin, I conclude that this concept of sin covers the content of the contemporary forms of slavery, to which the bishops refer. They are an attack on the freedom and integrity of man. However, in my opinion, there is a double assessment. Because perpetrators also become entangled, entangled and boned by these sinful structures of modern slavery. These structures have an addictive effect on perpetrators (addicted to the power of exploitation). In this respect they perpetuate evil, and as such they limit the possibility of repentance, of a choice for freedom and truth, of reconciliation with God and fellow man. On this basis, it seems plausible to me to characterize these forms of modern slavery as "the slavery of sin."

In Catholic theology, in addition to the concept of sin, there is also the concept of social sin. Slavery can be regarded as a collective or structural sin, in which entire societies are embedded in a system of injustice. In their statement, the bishops acknowledge that slavery was not only an individual evil, but that it arose from entrenched social and economic systems based on exploitation. Systems that, on the basis of slavery and colonialism, made it possible for the rich West today to have an advantage in economic development compared to the poor South. The relationship between these two parts of the world is still characterized today by, among other things, economic dependence that has its origins in the colonial and slavery past; in systemic and structural sin. In their statement, the bishops call for recognition of this structural sin. This is an important moment of introspection for both the Catholic Church and society, as it shows that sin is not only an individual matter, but can also occur in social structures that perpetuate injustice. But that also means that the church cannot withdraw itself as part of a social structure that perpetuated slavery, because it showed little or no resistance to that same structure that caused immense suffering.

Penance and reconciliation

According to Catholic theology, man is not at the mercy of death through sin and guilt. In Christ man finds salvation. Christ has through his suffering and death

conquered death: "By the death he died, he dealt with sin once and for all" (Romans 6:10a). However, this does not exempt man from sin. But God is rich in mercy, and His faithfulness endures forever, is the conviction. The Catholic view on forgiveness of sins is deeply rooted in the belief in God's mercy and grace. God is willing to forgive sins. But forgiveness does not happen automatically. The following conditions are attached to this: sincere repentance (through a form of penance), repentance and reconciliation (with God and fellow man). The Catholic Church as an institution – apart from protest voices from individual priests in East and West⁹³ – tolerated slavery during the Dutch colonial past or did not offer sufficient resistance to its practices. The concrete consequences of this are not reflected in the bishops' statement. It lacks a clear recognition of the role of the Catholic Church in the colonial and slavery past, in addition to its involvement in education, health care and social welfare – the "whole story" – which paves the way for repentance and an invitation to reconciliation with the affected communities. After all, from a theological point of view, penance plays a central role in conversion and restoration of relationships, both with God and with others.

Reconciliation can only take place when there is a sincere acknowledgment of the wrongs done (repentance), followed by an attempt to repair the damaged relationships (atonement in the form of retribution⁹⁴). This is true in both a spiritual and a social sense. In their statement, the bishops emphasize that they want to face the slavery past – with its injustice and dehumanization. This does not only apply to the bishops; it also applies to Dutch society as a whole, because slavery was structurally embedded in society through the laws and regulations of the Dutch kingdom. The bishops' call to address the consequences of

⁹³ In their statement, the bishops cite Peter Donders as one of "the few voices of protest and hope [...] who spoke dismissively about slavery." However, Herman Fitters' critical social historical study, "Peerke Donders and the deconstruction of a myth" (2024), sheds a different light on this historical figure. See: <https://werkgroepcaraibischeletteren.nl/peerke-donders-en-de-deconstructie-van-een-myth> / accessed 4 November 2024.

⁹⁴ Vgl. Duke L. Kwon en Gregory Thompson, *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair* (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2021).

To continue to recognize slavery, and the responsibility to address the legacy of that injustice, also relates to contemporary forms of inequality and racism. Commemorating the slavery past is necessary "to build together a future of justice, reconciliation and peace," the bishops conclude their statement. According to Catholic theology, justice, reconciliation and penance are closely linked, especially in relation to man, sin, and the redemption that Christ has wrought.

Conclusion: A Path to Justice and Accountability

The statement of the Dutch bishops at the commemoration of the abolition of slavery calls for an in-depth reflection on a number of Catholic theological concepts, including human dignity, sin, penance, reconciliation and justice. Theologically, this is an opportunity for the Catholic Church to both acknowledge its past and assume its responsibility in the present. Slavery, as one of the greatest violations of human dignity, provides a powerful reminder of the need for continued conversion, reconciliation, and struggle for social justice. This also applies to the Catholic Church. It is precisely on this point that the explanation falls short. It would gain in persuasiveness if the bishops had attached concrete consequences to the less positive role of the church in the colonial and slavery past, or at least had expressed the intentions to do so. The theological concepts that I have discussed in this contribution can be useful in the beneficial processing of the slavery past. As such, they are fundamental to building a future of justice, reconciliation, and peace.

The Catholic faith offers hope that, despite the suffering caused by slavery – and its impact in the present – healing and restoration is possible through the grace of God. The theological implication of this belief is active involvement in our society, to ensure that the wounds inflicted by the injustice and dehumanization of the slavery past are healed; and that the forms in which the slavery past continues today – modern slavery included

– are stopped. This requires us to take joint and unanimous responsibility for the further development of the Kingdom of God here and now among us.

6. Talking together about the Slave Bible: about slavery and the Bible

Marciano Viereck



My name is Marciano Viereck and I studied spiritual care at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences. I recently graduated and have become involved in the theme "Slavery and the Bible" through my studies and the church I attend. I go to the Dominican Church in Zwolle and last year a working group was set up there around the theme "Slavery Memorial Year." Last year I did research into the missionary work of Peerke Donders (1809-1887) among the enslaved people in Suriname (where Peerke Donders was active as a Roman Catholic missionary) and through this research I became involved

at the working group. This working group was set up to organize various activities around the Slavery Memorial Year (2023). In addition to an ecumenical celebration, a city walk in Zwolle and a movie night, the idea also arose to organize an evening around the Slave Bible. I knew that this could potentially be a sensitive topic, but it was a topic that I would like to discuss with a group of people. I thought it would be nice to contribute to the Slavery Memorial Year in this way and I immediately started my research into the Slave Bible (see box 1). In my younger years I never got involved in slavery, although both my parents are from Suriname and my ancestors did have to deal with it. To be honest, it never seemed relevant to me to do research on it, because it is something that happened in the past. Now that I'm older, I realize that our past colors us, shapes us and influences our present (and future). It is not always visible, but I still carry my family's past within me.

From my research into Peerke Donders and slavery in Suriname, I had already come across several articles and texts in which it was indicated that the Bible was

certain ways were used against the enslaved people. This discovery made me feel uncomfortable. I myself am also part of the Christian tradition and people in the past who are also part of this tradition have used (abused) certain texts to treat other people inhumanely. Despite my discomfort, I think it is important to be aware of this, because the temptation always remains to use certain texts from the Bible to justify inhuman purposes.

Box 1: What was the Slave Bible?

The "Slave Bible" is officially called *Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the use of Negro Slaves, in the British West India Islands*. This anthology of the Bible, printed in 1807, was an initiative of the British Society for the Conversion of Negro Slaves, to be used in the mission of enslaved people in the British colonies in America. In the Bible, only a tenth of the Old Testament and about half of the text of the New Testament was maintained (see also box 2). Many – although it was precisely the texts that are critical of slavery that have disappeared from this Bible – for example, the story about the exodus from Egyptian slavery (the Exodus). The edition was probably small, about a thousand copies. There are no indications that such a Bible was developed for the Dutch colonies. However, in their speaking and writing, Dutch clergy in this period often seem to have ignored the same Bible texts that had been removed from the Slave Bible.⁹⁵

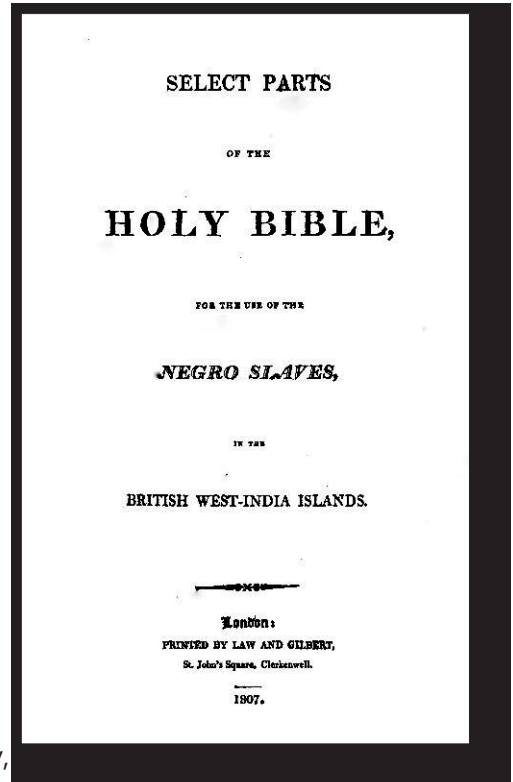
The set-up of the evening

Through my theological education, love for the Bible and also my awareness of different views on certain themes and Bible passages, I have chosen a set-up for the

⁹⁵ See Rianneke van der Houwen-Jelles, "Uncomfortable heritage: the 'Slave Bible'," blog *debijbel.nl*, <https://www.debijbel.nl/berichten/ongemakkelijk-erfgoed-de-slave-bible>, last accessed 8/2/2024. For research into the Dutch situation, see Martijn Stoutjesdijk, "Forgetful Remembrance in the Dutch Theological Debate on Colonial Slavery. Preliminary results of a quantitative approach," in Ari Ackerman e.a. (ed.), *Memory. In search for lost time, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, in press).

In which I not only tell the content of the Slave Bible, but I also make the participants an active part of the evening. The evening would last about two hours, including a half-hour break. So it has not become a lecture, but a mix between a lecture and a group discussion. The purpose of the group discussion was to have the participants talk to each other about certain Bible passages from the Slave Bible, in which I was the moderator and I guided the conversations. At the beginning of the evening, I emphasized that the conversations are not about convincing each other, or finding the truth, but about learning from each other. It is about learning the perspective of the other, how the other sees these texts and what it does to the other. Bible texts, in my opinion, are always read from a certain perspective and are read by certain Reading texts from the context (glasses) of slavery,

different. Texts that are very familiar to us and that we may hear every year, can suddenly read very differently. From the perspective of enslaved people, from someone who lived in the time of slavery or even from the perspective of a plantation owner, these texts suddenly read very differently. My intention with the evening was to first outline the context by talking about slavery and about the use of the Bible against enslaved people. Then we read a text that, from that perspective, suddenly reads very differently. As a moderator, I was curious about what this lecture evoked in people and did to them. My hope was that they would talk to each other and learn from each other.



An overview of the evening

The discussion evening was opened by a member of the local working group Slavery Remembrance Year. He gave an introduction to the theme, to the working group and also to other activities that the group has organized. After his introduction, I took the floor. I talked about who I am, what my background is and how I got involved in the group and the theme. Then I also told what the purpose of this evening was and what we are going to do. After the general explanation, I read Psalm 107:1-16, because for me this psalm deals with various aspects that touch on this theme. Aspects such as redemption, slavery, bondage and justification for enslaving people.

Box 2: intact, shortened and omitted Bible books in the Slave Bible

Old Testament

- Intact: Prediker
- Abridged: Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, Job, Proverbs, Isaiah, Daniel, Hosea, Joel
- Weggelaten: Leviticus, Numeri, Jozua, Richters, Ruth, 2 Samuël, 2 Kronieken, Ezra, Nehemia, Esther, Psalmen, Hooglied, Jeremia, Klaagliederen, Ezechiël, Amos, Obadja, Jona, Micha, Nahum, Habakuk, Zefanja, Haggai, Zacharia, Ma-leachi

New Testament

- Intact: Matthew, Luke, Acts
- Abbreviated: John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 John
- Left out: Mark, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Revelation

It was my intention to do a round of introductions with the group, not only to learn the names of everyone, but also to learn what brings people here. I was curious what motivates them to participate in an evening about the Slave Bible. "Unfortunately" the group was too big and so I skipped this part. Instead, I opened with a general (provocative) question: "Is the Bible, in your opinion, for or against slavery? This is an impossible question to answer and it wasn't necessarily about finding a "right" answer. It was my intention to involve the people in the evening right away, to give them a chance to think about their own perspective and it also gave me a sense of how the different people present look at the Bible (and slavery). By asking this question, it became clear that people had different views and perspectives on the Bible and slavery.

After this opening, I gave an introduction to transatlantic slavery and the Slave Library. Among other things, I talked about motivations for transatlantic slavery and also about the motivations for designing the Slave Bible. The Slave Bible is based on the King James Bible and during the introduction I gave the participants a handout with an overview of the Bible books in the King James Bible and the books in the Slave Bible. The Slave Bible does not contain all the books (or chapters) that can be found in the King James Bible (see box 2 for an overview). Here I indicated what I found remarkable about the absence of certain Bible passages, also in connection with the theme. The participants also shared what struck them about the presence or absence of certain texts. This started the conversation about the Slave Bible among the group. At the end of my introductory story about transatlantic slavery and the Slave Bible, I had prepared some questions that participants could discuss in groups. Then I discussed various Bible passages that touch on the theme of slavery, such as the passage Luke 12:41-47, where Jesus tells a parable about slaves and their master. I wanted to discuss this part in particular with the group:

But if that servant [Greek, slave] says to himself, "My master will not come, and if he is going to beat the servants and maids [slaves and slaves], and to eat his fill, and to get drunk, then the servant's master will come on a day when he does not expect it and at a time when he does not know, and then he will punish him with his sword and make him suffer the fate of the treacherous. The servant who knows what his master wants, but does not prepare and does not act according to his will, will have to endure many blows. (Luke 12:45-47, NIV 21)

These texts were already known to the group, but by reading them within the context of slavery, the texts suddenly sounded very different. When reading the texts, I first told myself what struck me about the text, what tension I felt and my own struggles with this text (or similar texts). Because how does someone who has been enslaved hear such a text – for example, an enslaved person who has just been punished for his or her disobedience and is also Christian? Do these kinds of texts keep enslaved people in their place, does it keep them from rebelling, from longing for liberation?

In the remainder of the evening I quoted several of these kinds of Bible texts to talk to the group and to let the group members talk to each other. Sometimes I was looked at to give a conclusive interpretation of these texts, but I didn't do that, to let that tension be there and also to give space for it.

After dealing with several Bible passages, I took the floor again and gave context information about slavery in the Bible. I told them that transatlantic slavery is not the same as slavery in the Bible. I gave a brief overview of the different ways and places in which enslavement occurs in the Bible and also how it differs from enslavement during transatlantic slavery.

In addition to all the conversations around Bible passages, I also mentioned some (theological) views that various theologians had at that time with regard to transatlantic slavery. For example, the curse of Ham, which is a theological view in which the enslavement of Africans is justified on the basis of a text

uit Genesis 9:18-27. Of juist een theologische visie die gebaseerd is op de bevrijding uit

the slavery from Exodus, which in turn advocates the liberation of enslaved people. I

have named, explained and shared these different visions with the group, and then entered into a conversation with each other. But above all, with the aim of also showing that our theological vision (our theological glasses) is relevant when reading certain texts. I ended the evening about slavery and the Bible with a question. I asked what people take away from it and how they liked it. Then I shared all the sources I used in the research, so that the participants could continue reading on their own or on their own

could do more research.

During the evening what I had hoped for happened, that people discovered that they have different (theological) views and that these affect their reading of certain Bible texts. By confronting them with a completely different way of reading, from a different starting point (slavery), this brought new insights to the people. This brought them into conversation with each other and I look back on this with pride. I liked to see how different the (theological) views of different people are. We also managed to get these different people to talk to each other, in order to learn from each other and to discover that it is not so easy to read and use certain texts.

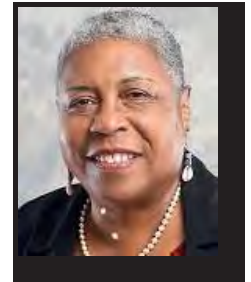
Personal details

Martijn Stoutjesdijk (1989) obtained his PhD in 2021 for a study of slavery in early Christian and early rabbinic parables. Since 2023, he has been conducting postdoctoral research at the Protestant Theological University on the role of the (Protestant) church in the Dutch slavery past. He has published (together with Bente de Leede), *Church, colonialism and slavery. Stories of an intertwined history* (2023).

(Photo credit: Rob Nelisse/Image Workplace)



Rose Mary Allen (1950) is Professor by Special Appointment at the University of Curaçao Dr. Moises da Costa Gomez, where she holds the chair of Culture, Community and History. Among her reviewed publications is the edited volume *State and Slavery: The Dutch Colonial Slavery Past and its Effects in Kingdom Relations* (2023). Allen received several awards, including the Culture Fund Award in 2024 for her contribution to the cultural heritage and history of Curaçao.



Jeroen Dewulf is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. He is director of the Dutch Studies Programme and professor of Folklore Studies. His most recent books are: *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Black Christians* (2022); *The Congo in Flemish Literature: An Anthology of Flemish Prose on the Congo, 1870s – 1990s* (with Luc Renders, 2020); *Gray slavery past? About Black*

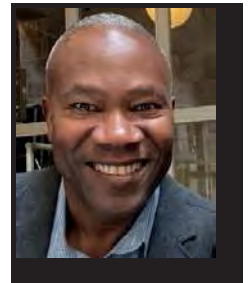


milities en redimoesoegedrag (2018); *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square: Kongo Dances and the Origins of the Mardi Gras Indians* (2017) en *The Pinkster King and the King of Kongo: The Forgotten History of America's Dutch-Owned Slaves* (2017).

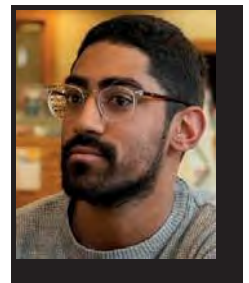
Mgr. Karel Martinus Choennie (Paramaribo, 1958) studied theology at the KU Leuven and the University of the West Indies. He was active as a pastor in various Surinamese parishes and has held the episcopal seat of Paramaribo since 2016. He is also chairman of the Committee of Christian Churches (CCK) of Suriname.



Dr. Duncan Wielzen is a pastoral theologian and works in the diocese of Rotterdam. In 2009 he obtained his doctorate at the Catholic University of Leuven. For this he wrote a dissertation on the relationship between Afro-Caribbean folk religiosity and the Roman liturgy in the context of a contemporary theology of liturgical inculturation. In addition to his profession as a pastoral worker, Dr. Wielzen conducts research in the field of intercultural theology and interfaith pedagogy.



Marciano Viereck, who lives in Zwolle, studied Theology - Spiritual Care at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences Utrecht and is now working as a spiritual caregiver. What moves him is being close to people, walking along in their lives. Sources of inspiration for him are the Bible, the Ignatian and Franciscan tradition.



Colophon

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