

Mission, money and mutuality in 20th century Dutch Protestant discourse

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Wilbert van Saane, Ph.D. candidate, Utrecht University

This paper traces the major shifts in the discourse on money in Dutch Protestant mission agencies in the 20th century. Its primary interest is to explore to what extent the mission agencies gave space to mutuality, or partnership, in their financial relations with overseas churches. The Dutch discourse is viewed against the backdrop of the international ecumenical discourse on mission and money, as it developed in the International Missionary Council and in the World Council of Churches.

At the start of the 20th century, many Dutch mission agencies began receiving subsidies from the colonial government, particularly in the Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia). The colonial government viewed the mission agencies as convenient allies in the work of civilisation and education. Over the following decades, these subsidies gradually declined, while many Indonesian churches became independent. In this era, missionaries and mission scholars had ambivalent attitudes towards the government subsidies. Their views were increasingly informed by the stance of Indonesian Christians.

World War II roughly interrupted virtually all Dutch foreign missionary work. In the absence of the missionaries, local Christians took charge of the churches and institutions that the missionaries had managed. Hence, after World War II, the mission agencies faced a new situation and were forced to rethink their financial policies. This process of rethinking was carried out in the context of decolonisation. A new power balance was created by the Republic of Indonesia that had been proclaimed in August 1945. The mission agencies no longer invested their resources directly, but indirectly, through the local churches.

After the political decolonisation of Indonesia had been completed, the Dutch interest for Indonesia waned. New 'mission fields' were discovered in African countries and attracted the attention. The political climate in Indonesia was hostile to Dutch missionary involvement. Thus, the close contacts that had existed between Dutch mission agencies and Indonesian churches de-intensified. This resulted in a dramatic deflection of Dutch missionary resources away from Indonesia to other nations and churches. In these new 'mission fields' old ways of managing mission funds often reappeared.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a strong call to alter the structures of mission agencies resounded in international ecumenical circles. The economic and power imbalance between western mission agencies and non-western churches was exposed. Some mission agencies responded by reforming themselves, such as the Paris Mission and the London Missionary Society, which became CEVAA and Council for World Mission respectively. Bilateral financial relations were considered suspect; mutuality and exchange became key words. Dutch mission scholars and mission secretaries also talked about mutuality and partnership. This paper will explore the financial aspect of that discussion and its implications for Dutch missionary involvement.