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**Autor:** Feenstra, Madelief

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# «It's Time To Lead the Way» – Postcolonial Memory at Work in Two Dutch Protestant Churches

Madelief Feenstra

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the way that the Dutch slavery past is researched, made public and remembered. Following decades of grassroots activism and critical work done by postcolonial scholars working inside and outside academia, accelerated by the global Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, more and more mainstream institutions – from museums to municipal governments – now have programs to examine and acknowledge *their* historical involvement with the transatlantic slave trade, or in other ways have moved towards critical examinations of the ways in which traces of this past permeate the present.<sup>1</sup>

Already in 2017, at the time of the 42<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Surinamese independence, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Amsterdam and the Moravian Church<sup>2</sup> Amsterdam City and Flevoland initiated a collaboration with a notable external party, the *National Institute for the History and Legacy of Dutch Slavery* (NiNSee), to form a working group of initially around ten to twelve members dedicated to the topic of the slavery past.<sup>3</sup> The working group was called *Heilzame verwerking van het slavernijverleden voor <wit> en <zwart>*. In English, this can be translated as Beneficial processing of the slavery past for *<white>* and *<black>*.<sup>4</sup> The central aim of the working group was formulated as follows:

<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was conducted under supervision of Prof. Dr. Franziska Metzger, during a research internship of the author at the SZRKG between April and July 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the article, I use the term most commonly used in the English language literature on the topic. However, in the Netherlands, they are known as the Evangelische Broedergemeente or Herrnhutters.

<sup>3</sup> Erica Meijers, *Heilzame verwerking van het slavernijverleden in de kerken*. Interview met Rhoïnde Doth en Andreas Wöhle, in: *Handelingen. Tijdschrift voor Praktische Theologie en Religiewetenschap*, 50/1 (2023), 70–77.

<sup>4</sup> The connotation of «Heilzame verwerking» is lost a bit in translation to English. The German *heilsam* comes closer to capturing the notion of this process being wholesome or healthy, i.e. healing.

«[To] start a process of conscious observation and processing of the congregations' involvement in the transatlantic slavery past and its little-known ›legacy‹ and repercussions in the current structures of society and each community.»<sup>5</sup>

Drawing from concepts and approaches in social and cultural memory studies, this article explores this aim of the working group more in detail. Through an analysis of a 2020 publication bearing the same name as the working group, it identifies three recurring key points of transformation of memory pertaining to the entanglement of religion and slavery.

The article is structured accordingly. The first key point of memory pertains to the churches' participation in slavery society in Suriname. The second key point of memory revolves around the churches' stances in the historical anti-slavery debate and abolition movements. Finally, the third key point of memory relates to mission and Christianization in Suriname. In the conclusion, I return to the questions in what ways postcolonial memory is ›at work‹ in these two congregations, and reflect on the function of this postcolonial memory for these churches.<sup>6</sup> First, however, it is necessary to briefly address the background of the working group and outline what it means to ›do postcolonial memory‹.

### *(Post)colonial legacies: historical migrant churches in the Netherlands*

The current working group of these two congregations was in part initiated due to frustration about a perceived lack of action after the 2013 acknowledgement by the Dutch Council of Churches.<sup>7</sup> In 2013, the Netherlands commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the kingdom of the Netherlands. Leading up to this official nation-wide commemorative year, various institutions were challenged to come with further steps, including many Dutch churches.<sup>8</sup> On

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.diaconie.com/nieuws/2020/heilzame-verwerking-slavernijverleden-voor-wit-en-zwart.html> (May 11, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> A brief comment on my positionality: I have conducted the analysis and written this article as a white, Dutch cultural historian in training, working in the academic framework of social and cultural memory studies. I am not affiliated with the churches or activities discussed in this paper, but I have collaborated elsewhere on the topic of postcolonial memory of the Dutch colonial past. See: Liedeke Plate/Vicky J. Fisher/Farida Nabibaks/Madelief Feenstra, *Feeling the Traces of the Dutch Colonial Past: Dance as an Affective Methodology* in Farida Nabibaks' *Radiant Shadow*, in: Emma van Bijnen/Pepijn Brandon/Karwan Fatah-Black/Imara Limon/Wayne Modest/Margriet Schavemaker (eds.), *The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past. Curating Heritage, Art and Activism*, Amsterdam 2024, 126–139.

<sup>7</sup> Meijers, *Heilzame verwerking van het slavernijverleden in de kerken* (see note 3), 71.

<sup>8</sup> The Council of Churches in the Netherlands consists of fourteen official ›member churches‹ and five associated members: General Baptist Society, Anglican Church in the Netherlands, Union of Free Evangelical Congregations in the Netherlands, Evangelische Broedergemeente in Nederland, Salvation Army, New Apostolic Church in the Netherlands, Orthodox

June 14 2013, in the Koningskerk<sup>9</sup>, the Dutch Council of Churches presented the results of a year of «contemplation»<sup>10</sup>: a 530 word long statement. The statement was not an official apology, like the one issued by Pope John Paul on behalf of the Catholic Church in 1992, nor like the acknowledgement presented by the General Synod of the Anglican Church in 2006. Rather, it aimed to encapsulate what the churches united in the Council considered to be representative of the entanglement of Dutch churches and the slavery past:

«We acknowledge our past involvement of individual church members and of church affiliations in maintaining and legitimizing the slave trade; slavery took place under the Dutch flag for centuries until 1863 [...] As churches, we know our part in this guilty past and must note that theology has been misused in certain circumstances to justify slavery. As churches we name this involvement, and we want to help bring justice to the descendants of those who were enslaved and exploited sometimes for generations, realizing that churches at the time differed in their abilities and that there were also different voices within various churches.»<sup>11</sup>

Despite not being an official apology, the statement nonetheless signified a notable shift in the ways in which the entanglement of churches and slavery were recognized across the contemporary Dutch (religious) landscape.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, for some members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Amsterdam and Moravian Church Amsterdam and Flevoland, a perceived «silence»<sup>13</sup> after the 2013 statement was reason to return to the topic in 2017, which resulted in the working group. Since its establishment, the members of the working group have organized a variety of different activities. There has been an ongoing exposition in the Luthermuseum in Amsterdam, as well as yearly symposiums held at the Old Lutheran Church in Amsterdam, where the working group invites speakers from within and outside the church community to reflect on different aspects of this history.

Church in the Netherlands, Protestant Church in the Netherlands, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands, Remonstrant Church, Syrian Orthodox Church in the Netherlands. The associated members are: 2of3bijEEn, Kerkgenootschap der Zevende-dags Adventisten, Verenigde Pinkster- en Evangeliegemeenten, Vrijzinnigen Nederland, Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt) and the Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken. See: <<https://www.raadvankerken.nl/organisatie/lidkerken>> (May 11, 2022)

<sup>9</sup> The Koningskerk is the church of the Moravian Church Amsterdam in the neighborhood Watergraafsmeer. See: <<https://www.ebga.nl/>> (March 17, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Raad van Kerken in Nederland, Verantwoording slavernij, June 15, 2013, in: <[www.raadvankerken.nl/nieuws/2013/06/verantwoording-slavernij/](http://www.raadvankerken.nl/nieuws/2013/06/verantwoording-slavernij/)> (May 31, 2023). Translation mine.

<sup>11</sup> Raad van Kerken in Nederland, Verantwoording slavernij, (see note 10). Translation mine.

<sup>12</sup> The year 2013 has been recognized as marking a pivotal point in Dutch collective memory of the slavery past more in general as well. Diantha Vliet, *Resisting the Abolition Myth: Journalistic Turning Points in the Dutch Memory of Slavery*, in: *Memory Studies*, 15/4 (2022), 784–797.

<sup>13</sup> Meijers, *Heilzame verwerking van het slavernijverleden in de kerken* (see note 3), 71.

According to the working group, the interest in – and attention for – the topic of the slavery past can be explained by the «mixed composition»<sup>14</sup> of these congregations. Compared to other Dutch Protestant churches, which are in the words of the working group «almost exclusively <white>»<sup>15</sup>, both the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Moravian Church in the Netherlands have close historical and contemporary ties with former Dutch colonies, specifically Suriname.<sup>16</sup> For the Moravian Church, these ties go back to 1735, when Moravian missionaries received permission from the Society of Suriname, the private Dutch company in charge of the organization and administration of the colony, to start a mission.<sup>17</sup> Moravian missionaries were active first amongst the indigenous populations, and officially from 1830 onwards amongst enslaved populations as well.<sup>18</sup> Today, the Moravian Church in the Netherlands is commonly defined as a «historical migrant church»<sup>19</sup>, as the majority of its members originate from former Dutch colonies, specifically Suriname.

Similarly, the Lutheran Church settled in Suriname in 1741. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, after Suriname gained independence in 1975, many Lutherans immigrated from Suriname and joined Lutheran congregations in the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup> For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Amsterdam, this relatively recent influx of Surinamese Lutherans can be connected to the European immigrant origins of the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the website of the congregation stating that «[t]hus, our congregation is traditionally a migrant congregation.»<sup>21</sup> In this way, the colonial background and entanglement with Suriname is an important part of the identity of both the Moravian Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Amsterdam and Flevoland, influencing how these congregations are engaging with the slavery past.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Egbert Boeker/Rhoïnde Doth/Urwin Vyent/Andreas Wöhle, Voorwoord, in: Egbert Boeker/Rhoïnde Doth/Urwin Vyent/Andreas Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking van het slavenrijverleden voor <wit> en <zwart>*, Den Haag 2020, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle, Voorwoord (see note 14), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Suriname was a Dutch colony until 1975.

<sup>17</sup> Joop Vernooij, Mapping Religious Suriname, in: *Exchange*, 31/3 (2002), 231.

<sup>18</sup> Maria Lenders, *Strijders voor het Lam: Leven en werk van Herrnhutter Broeders en- Zusters in Suriname, 1935–1900*, Leiden 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Kathleen Ferrier, *Migrantenkerken*, Zoetermeer 2002, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin Steven Jabini, *Christianity in Suriname. An Overview of its History, Theologians and Sources*, Carlisle 2012, 320.

<sup>21</sup> <<http://luthersamsterdam.nl/geschiedenis>> (July 26, 2022)

<sup>22</sup> For more about the relationship between memory and identity in the context of the Dutch slavery past (both in the former Dutch Caribbean and the Netherlands), see for example: Glenn Willemsen, *Dagen van gejuich en gejubel. Viering en herdenking van de afschaffing van de slavernij in Nederland, Suriname en de Nederlandse Antillen*, Den Haag/Amsterdam 2006; Artwell Cain, *Slavery and Memory in the Netherlands. Who Needs Commemoration?*,



*Doing postcolonial memory*

Within the transdisciplinary field of social and cultural memory studies<sup>23</sup>, the term *memory* in itself is a contentious topic.<sup>24</sup> Following seminal memory scholar Michael Rothberg, I approach *memory* as having two crucial features: first, memory is a contemporary phenomenon: «something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present.»<sup>25</sup> Or, as cultural memory scholar Astrid Erll formulates it, drawing from (amongst others) the foundational theories of Maurice Halbwachs: «[...] the interplay of the present and past in socio-cultural contexts.»<sup>26</sup>

Second, building on poststructuralist and performative theories, memory is constructed and enacted, i.e. practiced. It is something that is *done*.<sup>27</sup> Specifically in regards to painful, violent and contested pasts, such as the Dutch history of slavery, the conceptualization of memory as something that is *done* is fruitful as it meets discussions about the public acknowledgement of these histories, its legacies and the inclusions of counter-narratives of the slavery past into a Dutch collective memory culture.<sup>28</sup> The slavery past is configured as needing to be *worked through* in order to attend to and remedy present-day issues marked by «colonial legacies such as racism, asymmetrical power relations and uneven access to resources and opportunities.»<sup>29</sup> Postcolonial memory can thus, following Rothberg, be conceptualized as «a form of work, working through, labor or action.»<sup>30</sup>

Scholarship on postcolonial memory of Dutch slavery has for the large part focused on the dimension of cultural and contested material heritage, the push for and activism surrounding official commemorations, such as the creation of a national slavery monument, and the politics of postcolonial memory within the

in: *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology & Heritage*, 4/3 (2015), 227–242; Valika Smeulders, *Slavernij, erfgoed, herdenken en identiteit in het Koninkrijk*, in: *OSO. Tijdschrift voor Surinamistiek en het Caraïbisch gebied*, 35 (2016), 39–53.

<sup>23</sup> For a seminal text on the difference between social/collective memory and cultural memory, see Jan Assmann, *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, in: Astrid Erll/Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin 2008, 109–118.

<sup>24</sup> Astrid Erll, *Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction*, in: Erll/Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies* (see note 23), 1–18.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford (California) 2009, 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> Erll, *Cultural Memory Studies* (see note 24), 3–4.

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Franziska Metzger and Dr. Anne Schillig for introducing me to the term *doing memory*, which they are developing in the context of a large-scale research project.

<sup>28</sup> See for reflections on the more general development towards inclusive commemorative practices: Martin Lücke/Irmgard Zündorf, *Einführung in die Public History*, Göttingen 2018; Peter Cauvin, *Public History. A Textbook of Practice*, Abingdon 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Dirk Göttsche, *Introduction*, in: Dirk Göttsche (ed.), *Memory and Postcolonial Studies. Synergies and New Directions*, New York 2019, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* (see note 25), 3–4.

context of a hardening socio-political climate since the mid-2000s.<sup>31</sup> Less scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which concrete communities have responded to – or have been active agents in – the recent shifts in the collective memory culture since 2013.<sup>32</sup> In particular, the ways in which Dutch churches are responding to and engaging with these shifts and debates has only recently gained more academic attention.<sup>33</sup>

Attending to this development, the analysis primarily draws from the publication that the working group put out in collaboration with NiNsee in 2020. The publication, or volume, consists of four sections, each containing a different genre of texts. The first section includes four essays from an essay competition that was issued in 2019, with cooperation from the Werkgroep Caraïbische Letteren.<sup>34</sup> This essay competition was open to the public and the call was distributed in the Netherlands, Suriname and the (former) Dutch Caribbean. Contributors were provided with the following prompt:

«The transatlantic history of slavery and the role of the churches in it, as well as the repercussions of that past in the present, in order to make current generations of <white> and <black> Dutch citizens aware of slavery as a part of their own history; then give that awareness a place in Dutch society and transatlantic relations.»<sup>35</sup>

As described in the jury rapport, which precedes and functions as an introduction to the essays in the publication, there were twenty-five entries in total, from which four were selected by the jury to win one of the money prizes.<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to note that although the jury expressed contentment with the number of entries, they also mention in their report that in the majority of these twenty-five entries, a critical

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Markus Balkenhol, *Silence and the Politics of Compassion. Commemorating Slavery in the Netherlands*, in: *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 24/3 (2006), 278–293; Gert Oostindie, *Postcolonial Netherlands. Sixty-five years of forgetting, commemorating, silencing*, Amsterdam 2011; Esther Captain, *The Selective Forgetting and Remodelling of the Past. Postcolonial Legacies in the Netherlands*, in: Stefan Jonsson/Julia Willén (eds.), *Austere Histories in European Societies. Social Exclusion and the Contest of Colonial Memories*, London/New York 2017, 73–87.

<sup>32</sup> A notable exception being: Markus Balkenhol, *Tracing Slavery. The Politics of Atlantic Memory in the Netherlands*, New York/Oxford 2021.

<sup>33</sup> As of May 2023, no analysis from the perspective of memory studies has been paid to the case study discussed here. However, in January 2023, a large-scale research project funded by the Dutch National Science Foundation started which deals specifically with the relationship between Dutch churches and slavery and also collaborates with the working group discussed here. For the project, see: <<https://www.pthu.nl/kerk-en-slavernij/>> (May 31, 2023)

<sup>34</sup> Working group Caribbean Literature, see: <[werkgroepcaraibischelitteren.nl](http://werkgroepcaraibischelitteren.nl)> (January 1, 2024).

<sup>35</sup> Michiel van Kempen/Egbert Boeker/Wendeline Flores/Henna Goudzand Nahar/Mildred Uda-Lede, *Juryrapport*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 13.

<sup>36</sup> The first prize was 2500 euros. The second prize was awarded to three essays, for which the authors each received 1,000 euros. Van Kempen/Boeker/Flores/Goudzand Nahar/Uda-Lede, *Juryrapport* (see note 35), 16.

reflection on the colonial past and postcolonial present was «too ambitious.»<sup>37</sup> Moreover, they note that they «expressly declined to award some texts that, while perhaps well written, clearly employed stereotypes of peoples or populations.»<sup>38</sup>

The second section includes the lectures from the speakers at the annual symposium of the working group in November 2019. The symposium had the same theme as the working group, with a more specific focus on what role the churches can play in healing the slavery past.<sup>39</sup> The speakers invited and whose texts are included in the publication are a well-known Dutch transcultural psychiatrist, Glenn Helberg; full professor of Caribbean History at Erasmus University Rotterdam, Alex van Stipriaan; the Surinamese pastor and author of a book on the history of the Lutheran Church in Suriname, Pearl Gerding; as well as Johannes Wel-schen, a pastor and member of the Provincial Board of the Moravian Church. The section also includes the introductory words spoken by the chairperson of the working group, Bianca Groen Gallant, and the scribe of the General Synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, René de Reuver. The symposium was attended by circa 150 visitors.<sup>40</sup>

The third section of the publication includes examples of contemporary biblical explanation from church services within the communities that took place around Keti Koti on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2019, the traditionally Surinamese commemoration and celebration of the abolition of slavery.<sup>41</sup> A final, fourth section of the book summarizes some of the key themes and advice to the churches offered in the essays and includes reactions from the working group to these suggestions. From these four sections, three recurring key points of transformation of memory pertaining to the entanglement of religion and slavery stand out, and these three form the basis for the further analysis below.

### *«They had slaves»: Recognizing a painful past*

The first key point of memory that is transformed in the publication is mirrored in the central aim of the working group and the main overarching subject: the churches' participation in slavery society in Suriname. Self-evidently, this is the most recurring theme throughout the publication. In the essays, the symposium

<sup>37</sup> Van Kempen/Boeker/Flores/Goudzand Nahar/Uda-Lede, Juryrapport (see note 35), 16.

<sup>38</sup> Van Kempen/Boeker/Flores/Goudzand Nahar/Uda-Lede, Juryrapport (see note 35), 16.

<sup>39</sup> Egbert Boeker/Rhoïnde Doth/Urwin Vyent/Andreas Wöhle, Symposium: voordrachten en discussie, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), Heilzame verwerking (see note 14), 121.

<sup>40</sup> Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle, Symposium (see note 39), 11.

<sup>41</sup> In Suriname this day is celebrated as «Emancipation Day». For a discussion of the differences between the use of «abolition» and «emancipation» and the historiography of these terms, see: Alex van Stipriaan, Disrupting the Canon. The Case of Slavery, in: Maria Grever/Siep Stuurman (eds.), Beyond the Canon. History for the Twenty-First Century, London 2007, 205–219.



lectures and in the examples from the Ketu Koti church services, the central fact that these two churches – but also other Dutch churches – owned enslaved people, forms the red thread throughout.

In the contributions from the professor of Caribbean History, Alex van Stipriaan and the Surinamese pastor and author of a work on the history of the Lutheran Church in Suriname, Pearl Gerding, the historical facts come to the fore most concretely. These two speakers were there at the symposium in 2019 to provide the historical background and academic footing. In his lecture, titled *The slavery past, there's no getting around it*, Van Stipriaan provides a broader introduction to Dutch transatlantic slavery, before touching on the specific historical role of the churches in Suriname. The title of his lecture already suggests that the tone of his talk will be informative yet argumentative: if, up to today, the slavery past has been viewed as negligible or irrelevant, Van Stipriaan is here to demonstrate its importance and relevance to everyone present at the symposium – something you can no longer look away from. It is an integral part of Dutch history.

Drawing in the listener (and reader), Van Stipriaan first describes the Atlantic passage of a specific Dutch slaver ship from the departure in Rotterdam to the West African coast and then to Suriname. He invites the listeners and readers to take up the perspective of these enslaved men, women and children, describing in great detail the conditions on the ships and what enslaved people faced once they reached this 'new world'. Van Stipriaan's contribution is illustrated with various striking and recognizable historical visual sources (tapping into cultural memory or 'archive') for example an 1830 drawing of the hold of a slaver's ship, as well as an image depicting a common punishment afflicted on enslaved people as well as, later on, a carved gourd dated c. 1820, which is presented as an example of «the Afro-Surinamese culture which was shaped during slavery.»<sup>42</sup>

Whereas Van Stipriaan starts his discussion of Dutch slavery history with the departure of a Dutch slaver ship from the port of Rotterdam, Gerding marks the starting point with the arrival of the Dutch captain Abraham Crijnssen on Surinamese shores on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1667. For her, from this moment onwards, «the Netherlands and Suriname [are] inextricably linked.»<sup>43</sup> These differing starting points may reflect the background of each speaker; Van Stipriaan writes from a Western-European (he is Belgian and Dutch) perspective, whereas Gerding is Surinamese and based there as well. For Gerding, this connection means that «the slavery past is also PART [emphasis in original] of Dutch history, a part that cuts deeply into

<sup>42</sup> Alex van Stipriaan, *Slavernijverleden, daar kun je niet omheen*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 153.

<sup>43</sup> Pearl Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie. De basis voor heling*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 165.

the flesh of whites and blacks alike». <sup>44</sup> Speaking from a Surinamese perspective, Gerding reiterates Van Stipriaan's assertion that «there's no getting around» the slavery past for Dutch people.

Interestingly, Gerding follows up her point about approaching the slavery past of Suriname as Dutch history with the statement that «[s]lavery has existed since time immemorial». <sup>45</sup> Through a comparison between Dutch transatlantic slavery and slavery in the Bible, Gerding seems to want to demonstrate the extreme cruelty and violence of slavery in Suriname and other colonies. <sup>46</sup> She points out how in the Old Testament, Biblical laws about slavery were, in the first place, there to ensure the wellbeing of an enslaved person. She also touches on slavery in the Roman Empire, drawing on examples of Roman slaves being sold for high prices, or that some Roman slaves had possessions or «were even rich.» <sup>47</sup> Although she does not provide a historical source or academic literature for reference, she concludes that «you may say that the average situation of Roman slaves was bearable.» <sup>48</sup> This in stark contrast to Dutch transatlantic slavery, which she characterizes as follows: «Atrocities, humiliations, beatings, misconduct, sexual excess, cheating, exploitation and degrading treatment by the slave masters were immeasurable.» <sup>49</sup>

After drawing this striking comparison, Gerding clearly states that «[t]he denominations at the time: the Reformed [Church], the Moravian [Church], the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran Church had slaves.» <sup>50</sup> Her exclamation of these words must have held power at the symposium, and would have been (and might still be for readers of the publication) a shock to some. Johannes Welschen confirms this in his contribution, when he shares that in 2012, the information that the Moravian mission owned enslaved people was something that many church members in Germany and the Netherlands did not know. Welschen remarks how this «new knowledge» amongst Dutch and German church members about the church's past was «hard to digest.» <sup>51</sup> Was this also the case for Surinamese church members? Gerding and Welschen's comments speak to the differences between the knowledge and memory of the slavery past amongst «white» and «black» church members, in

<sup>44</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 165.

<sup>45</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 165.

<sup>46</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 165.

<sup>47</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 166.

<sup>48</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 166.

<sup>49</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 166.

<sup>50</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 167.

<sup>51</sup> Johannes Welschen, *Waarlijk vrij. Geroepen om een gezamenlijke weg te gaan*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking van het slavernijverleden voor «wit» en «zwart»* (see note 14), 177.

line with literature on Dutch slavery memory which tends to focus on – and highlight differences between – different communities of memory, with those communities delineated along the lines of racial, ethnic and national identities.<sup>52</sup>

About specifically the Lutherans and Moravians in Suriname, the contributors draw from primary sources to offer vivid examples of what Van Stipriaan dubs the «schizophrenic relationship»<sup>53</sup> of the churches with slavery. He explains how churches were implicitly complicit in the violent practices of plantation slavery, for example by accepting gifts from violent planters who directed their and other plantations owned by the Lutheran church.<sup>54</sup> Gerding explains how the different churches employed their enslaved. She describes how in the Lutheran church, enslaved people worked on the church's plantation, in the church, the diaconate and rectory. She makes mention of the fact that pastors were often given enslaved persons as part of their salary, a fact which others mention too. About the Moravians she notes how they employed enslaved people for various crafts, such as in the bakery, tannery or clothing store.<sup>55</sup> The Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church are also taken under the loop. Gerding sums up her rather dry exposition of these facts with the statement that just like the slave trade-focused policy of the Dutch government, this was also true for the church, «in a sense, the church was a reflection of society in colonial times, which was a slave society.»<sup>56</sup>

In the prize winning essays, the authors also grapple with the «dubious»<sup>57</sup> relationship of the churches with slavery. For example, in the opening essay, sociologist Herman Fitters unequivocally states that «transatlantic slavery was a system supported by church, business and government. The colonial economy was focused on winning money, the mission [...] on winning souls. This was done for mutual benefit [...]».<sup>58</sup> This notion of transatlantic slavery as an oppressive system is echoed in Ben Ipenburg's essay. Ipenburg, who according to the author's biographies has a background in theology and management, seems to suggest it was the forcefulness of the system which led missionaries to participate in violent practices:

«An example of the coercion of the system thus set up are the Labadists who went to Suriname full of Christian ideals to spread the «kingdom of godliness». To make a living, they started a plantation, La Providence [...] They wanted to be gentle with

<sup>52</sup> On the entanglement of memory and identity in the context of the Dutch slavery past, cf. note 22.

<sup>53</sup> Van Stipriaan, *Slavernijverleden, daar kun je niet omheen* (see note 42), 151.

<sup>54</sup> Van Stipriaan, *Slavernijverleden, daar kun je niet omheen* (see note 42), 151.

<sup>55</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 167–168.

<sup>56</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 169.

<sup>57</sup> Bianca Groen Gallant, *Opening*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 122.

<sup>58</sup> Herman Fitters, *Peerke en het verdeelde verleden*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 23.

their slaves; not as rough as the other planters. But fellow planters had already predicted them: «that beastly [race] of people» only worked if they were beaten [as beasts], according to a contemporary former Labadist.»<sup>59</sup>

In this quote, which Ipenburg draws from a historical primary source, it is suggested that there is a tension between «Christian ideals» and the realities of slavery society, and that the Labadists were somewhat forced to abandon these ideals in order to make a living. Ipenburg further characterizes this as a «power exercise», which others, like the Labadists, for instance the reformed pastor Johannes Basseliers and the Lutheran Church, could not «avoid» because they needed to «cover expenses.»<sup>60</sup> Again, this phrasing suggests that it was not necessarily the will of these historical actors to participate in slave society in Suriname, but that it was almost something that happened *to* them; something inevitable. Then again, Ipenburg follows these examples up with an unambiguous declaration: «It is quite clear. Both politics and religion are about power. We know that where there is no law, there is only power. And where there is only power, there is terror. White people, supported by states and churches, terrorized people with a different skin color, with a different religion and without powerful weapons.»<sup>61</sup>

In addition to these specific reckonings with the churches' involvement in slavery in Suriname, the publication as a whole is also about the more overarching Dutch slavery past. This is most evident from the striking cover of the publication (see fig. 1). Transatlantic slavery is visualized in the background of the publication's cover through the depiction of a simplified two-toned world map, zoomed in on the Atlantic Ocean. Three white arrows, from Western Europe to the West coast of the African continent and then via Suriname on the North-Eastern coast of South America, back to Western Europe, signify the historical movements of the transatlantic slave trade. The subtitle *A contribution from the churches*, is in combination with this visual slightly ambivalent, suggesting that this publication offers a contribution to the debates and practices of reconciliation and dealing with the slavery past from the perspective of what the churches can do in this process. In other words, the cover does not suggest that the publication deals explicitly with the slavery past of «the» churches. Nevertheless, as the above makes clear, this recognition and «new knowledge» about the direct relationship with slavery is one of the central features and arguably the most significant key turning point in the publication.

<sup>59</sup> Ben Ipenburg, *De nieuwe zendingsopdracht*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 65.

<sup>60</sup> Ipenburg, *De nieuwe zendingsopdracht* (see note 59), 65.

<sup>61</sup> Ipenburg, *De nieuwe zendingsopdracht* (see note 59), 65.



Figure 1: Cover of the publication.

### *Christian legitimization of slavery and the abolition movement*

In addition to the facts of the churches' relationship with slavery, and specifically their possession of enslaved peoples and active participation in Surinamese planter society, a second aspect of the dominant narrative about the entanglement between religion and slavery that the publication grapples with is the extent of the participation and influence of Christians in the historical anti-slavery debate and abolition movement. Although it is never explicitly stated that there was or is a common-held belief or dominant narrative about Christians in the abolition movement amongst these two churches, the many explicit mentions to the lack of Christian support from the Dutch churches in Suriname and also the churches in the Netherlands for the abolition movement suggest that this is indeed the case – or



at least is perceived to be the case. For example, Van Stipriaan does mention in passing that «there have always been thinkers, authors and pastors who did take a critical view or found slavery outright incompatible with Christianity.»<sup>62</sup> However, he immediately makes the following statement:

«But far more often, with the Bible in hand, the enslavement of Africans has been defended as God's will. In that view, Africans were the descendants of Ham,<sup>63</sup> condemned to eternal servitude [...] In Orthodox circles, this interpretation has been heard even until very recently.»<sup>64</sup>

Slightly more specific, Johannes Welschen provides an example from within the Moravian Church, telling the following story of the Moravians' stance in relation to the abolition movement:

«[...] when representatives of the movement for the abolition of slavery came to Herrnhut from England to win the Brotherhood as supporters in that struggle, they had to leave again without success. Even when the Dutch government began to consider the abolition of slavery, the leadership of the mission in Paramaribo expressed reservations.»<sup>65</sup>

The figure of Ham recurs in various places throughout the publication. Throughout the publication, it is put forth as an example of a misuse – or abuse – of Christian theology. However, in one instance, namely in Ken Mangroelal's essay, it is incorporated in a really interesting way. Mangroelal writes the following, identifying with the enslaved ancestors of the Suriname: «We, descendants of [Ham], whose ancestors suffered the abject sacrifices, the horrors, the tortures, the humiliations, these outcasts of the earth, still lay rejected on the earth.»<sup>66</sup> In a way, Mangroelal re-appropriates the figure of Ham, employing it to draw a direct connection between Ham, the enslaved, and people with enslaved ancestry, ergo himself, today. His use of the figure is personal, his voice in the first person.

In the final essay, Martijn Stoutjesdijk first-prize winning essay titled *The pastor as influencer*, the different standpoints taken up by Christian thinkers, writers and pastors during slavery are analyzed more in-depth. Stoutjesdijk discusses three standpoints in the historical slavery debate through the perspectives of three historical figures: the formerly-enslaved African minister Jacobus Capitein

<sup>62</sup> Van Stipriaan, *Slavernijverleden, daar kun je niet omheen* (see note 42), 152.

<sup>63</sup> That the biblical story of the curse of Ham, mentioned above in the quote from Van Stipriaan's lecture, forms an important motif within the communities and an overarching Dutch Christian landscape is strengthened by the fact that it features not only as the title of one of the prize-winning essays, but also forms the introduction to the third section of the publication: the introduction to the present-day Bible explanations.

<sup>64</sup> Van Stipriaan, *Slavernijverleden, daar kun je niet omheen* (see note 42), 152.

<sup>65</sup> Welschen, *Waarlijk vrij* (see note 51), 177.

<sup>66</sup> Ken Mangroelal, *De vloek van Cham voorbij*, in Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 79.

(1717–1747), introduced as «the most famous and most interesting defendant of slavery»<sup>67</sup>; then as an example of a «slave preacher», the Norwegian Moravian missionary Nils Otto Tank (1800–1864) and lastly a well-known Dutch abolitionist author and pastor, Nicolaas Beets (1814–1903). According to Stoutjesdijk, these three examples and standpoints serve as a multiperspective lens through which to view the historical slavery debate, and also function in Stoutjesdijk's essay as a way to demonstrate that it is not self-evident what the answer is to the question: «What does it mean to behave «Christian-like» when it comes to slavery?»<sup>68</sup> In his essay, Stoutjesdijk's background as an academic researcher in theology and religion studies are evident: he aptly applies a historian's approach, emphasizing the various historical agents in their contexts.

Both Stoutjesdijk and Van Stipriaan touch on the role of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Reveil-movement within the eventual abolition movement<sup>69</sup>, but also take care to note that within these circles, the idea was that former enslaved people still first needed to be «Christianized and civilized», which Van Stipriaan interprets as the following: «So again, the idea was that even if they became free people, they were still second-class citizens whose minds had to be subjugated first.»<sup>70</sup> With this statement, Van Stipriaan, and others in the publication, both implicitly and explicitly counter or transform the apparently still existing narrative within these communities.

*«Spiritual colonization» or «conscious decision»? Multiple meanings of mission and Christianization*

The final recurring theme which the publication addresses pertains to mission and Christianization. Whereas with the recognition of the slavery past of the churches in Suriname, as well as the Christian standpoints and (lack of) participation in the anti-slavery debate and abolition movements, the narrative around mission and specifically the process of Christianization is not transformed as unilaterally.

On the one hand, mission and Christianization are included in a critical post-colonial narrative of power and violence. Images of heralded missionaries are adjusted, such as is done by Herman Fitters in his essay about the Dutch Roman Catholic priest Petrus Donders (1809–1887). Fitters for example cites a historical primary source, which demonstrates Donders' aggression towards practitioners

<sup>67</sup> Martijn Stoutjesdijk, De predikant als «influencer», in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 100.

<sup>68</sup> Stoutjesdijk, De predikant als «influencer» (see note 67), 96.

<sup>69</sup> See: Elly Mulder, *Kerken en het koloniaal verleden. Religieuze standpunten over slavenemancipatie in Nederland tussen 1840 en 1863*, in: *Radix* 43/4 (2017), 203–214.

<sup>70</sup> Van Stipriaan, *Slavernijverleden, daar kun je niet omheen* (see note 42), 152.

of local religions such as Winti in Suriname. He then further challenges the positive iconography of the beatified Donders through an interesting comparison with Willibrord, in which he draws comparisons between the destruction of pagan shrines in Friesland to Donders' violent outbursts.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, in his lecture, transcultural psychiatrist Glen Helberg mentions being Christianized in the same vein as a host of violent and today controversial practices. Referring to the enslaved Africans, Helberg states that «The savage had to be baptized, tamed, civilized, developed and [...] raped.»<sup>72</sup> Fitting this narrative and employing postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, Ben Ipenburg, in turn, interprets enslaved people's conversion to Christianity as a deliberate choice to ensure safety and survival: «For the colonized, mimicry, imitation, was the strategy to survive within the colonial system or at least capture some degrees of freedom. Converting to Christianity was one aspect of this strategy.»<sup>73</sup> Fitters draws a similar conclusion. Drawing an analogy between the 8<sup>th</sup> century Frisian kingdom and 19<sup>th</sup> century Surinamese society, he states that although hagiographers like to present missionaries as successful, this was rarely the case: «There was a double reality [...] Both on the plantations and in the interior. So a lot of superficial conformity and socially desirable behavior. Underneath was secret resistance and antagonism.»<sup>74</sup> This emphasis on private and covert resistance fits recent historiographical developments and postcolonial approaches, which looks for the voices and agency of oppressed historical actors, and is also present in Van Stipriaan's lecture.

However, a different, more positive narrative can be found in the publication as well. One in which Christianization is not presented as violent, nor conversion as a survival strategy, but rather as a peaceful and conscious process. This is notably present in the sermon during a Ketu Koti service given by pastor Martin Thiele in the Koningskerk in Amsterdam in 2019:

«I sometimes hear people say, that the Dutch forced their religion on the Surinamese. So nothing could be further from the truth, at least for this first century of the Hernhutter mission. It was the other way around: the God of the Bible was considered by the Dutch to be a God of white people, of whom the Afro-Surinamese were precisely not allowed to hear. [...] And yet things were different. For the Hernhutters remained in Suriname, several generations in a row. They kept telling the story of the humane God they had come to know in Jesus Christ [...] First they told it to the Indians and Maroons in the interior, and only to a few in the city. And these people listened with attention.

<sup>71</sup> Fitters, *Peerke en het verdeelde verleden* (see note 58), 31.

<sup>72</sup> Glenn Helberg, «Door jouw liefde en de liefde van mijn voorouders gaat het goed», in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 129.

<sup>73</sup> Ipenburg, *De nieuwe zendingsopdracht* (see note 59), 63.

<sup>74</sup> Fitters, *Peerke en het verdeelde verleden* (see note 58), 32.

One by one they came to the Christian faith [...] One by one. Singles, families, villages. Not the entire population. And certainly not by pressure or coercion.»<sup>75</sup>

Of course, it is in an instance such as this that it is crucial to emphasize that context matters. Memory is deeply contextual. A story about the slavery past that is told by a professional, academic historian at a symposium will be different from a story about the slavery past told by a pastor during a service in a church for a commemorative day, such as is the case here. Nevertheless, it points to an interesting tension in the ways that the process of Christianization is remembered, especially in a faith-based setting.

A less negative and violent narrative is also present in Pearl Gerding's lecture, when she contrasts her accounts of the participation of the churches in slavery society with a list of <positive> aspects of the missions, stating that «[i]n most cases, the church is portrayed as the villain in this context; however, the church has also produced achievements.»<sup>76</sup> Amongst others, the achievements she lists are similar to those that Johannes Welschen of the Moravian Church also mentions, centered around education, medical care and the systematization of the local Sranan language.<sup>77</sup> Mission and Christianization are thus remembered distinctly differently within the same publication, and also in contrast to the other recurring themes much more ambiguously and less in line with dominant postcolonial, academic discourse.

### *Conclusion*

This article has attempted to shed light on the transformation of memory of the entanglement between religion and slavery past within the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Moravian Church in Amsterdam. Through an exploration of three key shifting points of memory, namely those pertaining to the churches' participation in slavery society in Suriname; the churches' stances in the historical anti-slavery debate and abolition movement; and mission and Christianization, it becomes clear that overall, the <memory work> that these two churches are doing, in collaboration with NiNsee, in many ways reflects the recent shifts in the ways the Dutch slavery past is being researched, made public and remembered. However, where the memories of the churches' slavery past intersect with notions of faith, such as is the case with the different narratives around mission and Christianization, interesting tensions and competing memories arise. It is tensions such as these that merit closer attention, analysis and theorization.

<sup>75</sup> Martin Theile, *Dit is ons overkomen, maar wij zijn u niet vergeten*, in: Boeker/Doth/Vyent/Wöhle (eds.), *Heilzame verwerking* (see note 14), 228.

<sup>76</sup> Gerding, *Erkenning en acceptatie* (see note 43), 170.

<sup>77</sup> Welschen, *Waarlijk vrij* (see note 51), 175; 177.

Moreover, the aims of the working group demonstrate that it is not just about remembering and commemorating, healing from the colonial past of the church and other religious organizations in the Dutch former colonies; it is also about asserting a central role for these churches, and churches more in general, to be at the forefront of societal debates and discussions. In this way, the working group is advocating for more historical knowledge, more attention for the histories and memories of those who were at the receiving end of colonialism and slavery, as well as taking stock of the potential churches have to play a role in these broader societal debates, which are not limited to acknowledging these histories but also pertain to social equality and societal cohesion. As Martijn Stoutjesdijk concludes in his essay, a sentiment which is echoed throughout the publication by other contributors as well: «It is time, taking into account all the forms of publicity available to the churchgoer today, to strive for awareness of the colonial slavery past, for reconciliation, for freedom and reciprocal respect [...] It is time to lead the way.»<sup>78</sup>

*«It's Time To Lead the Way» – Postcolonial Memory at Work in Two Dutch Protestant Churches*

Much like in other former colonial metropolises, The Netherlands has in recent decades seen the emergence of significant societal and academic debates about the nature and legacy of the country's colonial, and specifically slavery, past. More and more mainstream institutions – from museums to municipal governments – have in recent years started programs to examine and acknowledge «their» historical involvement with the transatlantic slave trade, or in other ways have moved towards critical examinations of the ways in which traces of this past permeate the present. This article explores how two Dutch church communities, namely the Evangelical Lutheran Church Amsterdam and the Evangelical Brotherhood Amsterdam City and Flevoland, are currently actively taking part in this shift and engaging with the history and legacy of the slavery past. It does so through an analysis of a publication initiated by both congregations and published in 2020, which details the program of a working group these two communities jointly installed and includes texts from an essay competition, symposium and sermons.

Postcolonial Memory – The Netherlands – Slavery – Religion – Mission – Suriname – Evangelical-Lutheran Church – Moravian Church.

*«Es ist an der Zeit, voranzugehen» – Postkoloniales Gedächtnis am Werk in zwei niederländischen protestantischen Kirchen*

Ähnlich wie in anderen ehemaligen kolonialen Metropolen sind auch in den Niederlanden in den letzten Jahrzehnten bedeutende gesellschaftliche und akademische Debatten über das Wesen und das Erbe der kolonialen Vergangenheit des Landes, insbesondere der Sklaverei, aufgekommen. Immer mehr Institutionen – von Museen bis hin zu Stadtverwaltungen – haben in den letzten Jahren Programme zur Untersuchung und Anerkennung «ihrer» historischen Verstrickung mit dem transatlantischen Sklavenhandel lanciert oder sich auf andere Weise damit beschäftigt, wie Spuren dieser Vergangenheit die Gegenwart durchziehen. In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie zwei niederländische Kirchengemeinden, nämlich die

<sup>78</sup> Stoutjesdijk, De predikant als «influencer» (see note 67), 115.



Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Amsterdam und die Evangelische Brüdergemeinde Amsterdam Stadt und Flevoland, derzeit aktiv an diesem Wandel teilnehmen und sich mit der Geschichte und dem Erbe der Sklaverei auseinandersetzen. Dies geschieht durch die Analyse einer von beiden Gemeinden initiierten und 2020 erschienenen Publikation, die das Programm einer von beiden Gemeinden gemeinsam eingerichteten Arbeitsgruppe beschreibt und Texte eines Aufsatzwettbewerbs, eines Symposiums und von Predigten enthält.

Postkoloniale Erinnerung – Die Niederlande – Sklaverei – Religion – Mission – Surinam – Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche – Mährische Kirche.

*«Il est temps de montrer la voie» – La mémoire postcoloniale à l'œuvre dans deux églises protestantes néerlandaises*

À l'instar d'autres anciennes métropoles coloniales, les Pays-Bas ont connu ces dernières décennies l'émergence d'importants débats sociétaux et académiques sur la nature et l'héritage du passé colonial du pays, et plus particulièrement de l'esclavage. Ces dernières années, de plus en plus d'institutions traditionnelles – des musées aux administrations municipales – ont lancé des programmes visant à examiner et à reconnaître «leur» implication historique dans la traite transatlantique des esclaves ou, d'une autre manière, à procéder à des examens critiques de la façon dont les traces de ce passé imprègnent le présent. Cet article explore la manière dont deux communautés ecclésiastiques néerlandaises, à savoir l'Église évangélique luthérienne d'Amsterdam et la Fraternité évangélique de la ville d'Amsterdam et du Flevoland, participent activement à ce changement et s'engagent dans l'histoire et l'héritage du passé esclavagiste. Elle le fait à travers l'analyse d'une publication initiée par les deux congrégations et publiée en 2020, qui détaille le programme d'un groupe de travail que ces deux communautés ont conjointement mis en place et qui inclut des textes issus d'un concours d'essais, d'un symposium et de sermons.

Mémoire postcoloniale – Pays-Bas – esclavage – religion – mission – Suriname – Église évangélique luthérienne – Église morave.

*«È tempo di guidare il cammino» – La memoria postcoloniale al lavoro in due chiese protestanti olandesi*

Come in altre ex metropoli coloniali, negli ultimi decenni i Paesi Bassi hanno visto emergere importanti dibattiti sociali ed accademici sulla natura e l'eredità del passato coloniale e in particolare schiavista del Paese. Negli ultimi anni un numero sempre maggiore di istituzioni tradizionali – dai musei alle amministrazioni comunali – ha avviato programmi per esaminare e riconoscere il 'proprio' coinvolgimento storico nella tratta transatlantica degli schiavi o si è orientato verso un esame critico dei modi in cui le tracce di questo passato permeano il presente. Il corrente articolo esplora il modo in cui due comunità ecclesiastiche olandesi, la Chiesa evangelica luterana di Amsterdam e la Fratellanza evangelica di Amsterdam e Flevoland, stanno partecipando attivamente a questo cambiamento e si stanno confrontando con la storia e con l'eredità dello schiavismo passato. Lo fa attraverso l'analisi di una pubblicazione avviata da entrambe le congregazioni e pubblicata nel 2020, che illustra il programma di un gruppo di lavoro istituito congiuntamente dalle due comunità e che include i testi di un concorso di saggi, di un simposio e di sermoni.

Memoria postcoloniale – Paesi Bassi – schiavitù – religione – missione – Suriname – Chiesa evangelica luterana – Chiesa morava.

Madelief Feenstra, MA, junior researcher at Radboud University Nijmegen and educator at the Comenius Museum & Mausoleum in Naarden, the Netherlands; <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2691-6698>.