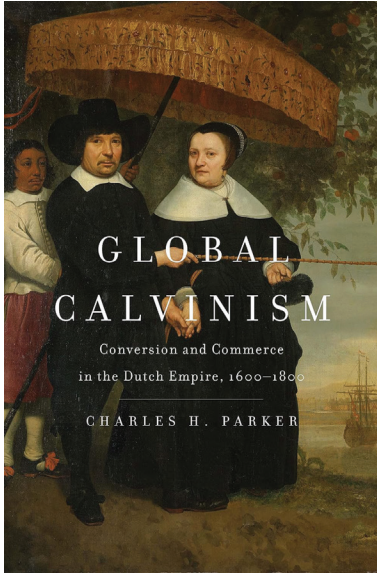


Review

Charles H. Parker, *Global Calvinism. Conversion and Commerce in the Dutch Empire, 1600-1800*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2022, 390 pp. ISBN 9780300236057.



When historians write about the Dutch empire, whether in the East or West Indies, they tend to begin the story at the end of the sixteenth century, positioning it as a surprise that the small Dutch Republic should so quickly – though in some cases briefly – come to control vast, far-flung areas around the world. After all, the northern part of the Low Countries, which would become the United Provinces, had been a backwater of the Habsburg empire and was far less engaged with international trade than the southern part of the Low Countries, not to mention many other parts of Western Europe.

Charles H. Parker's excellent *Global Calvinism* instead takes the Reformation as its starting point and argues that it was intertwined with global expansion. If the Dutch Republic's salient feature in many histories is its status as a scrappy underdog making inroads into Iberian-dominated waters,

Parker turns this picture upside down by focusing on the Republic as a well-recognised, privileged centre of Calvinist theology and intellectual culture in Europe. In making this shift, Parker breathes welcome, new life into the venerable question of whether religion and trade were compatible in the Dutch empire, and answers it with a resounding yes.

Global Calvinism is particularly preoccupied with the Dutch encounter(s) with non-Christians across the globe, an area in which much of the historiography – even that which sees the Reformed Church as powerful and relevant in colonial settings – still thinks of the Dutch as ineffective. Here Parker is concerned both with Dutch missionizing on the ground in Asia and the Americas and with the effects that this global mission had on Calvinism back in the Dutch Republic.

In terms of Calvinism's mission in the Dutch empire, Parker compellingly shows that again and again over two centuries and across the globe, Calvinist ministers engaged in

ambitious projects to make Calvinism accessible and appealing. While conversions to Calvinism were admittedly limited, Christian education and church social welfare programs were broad. One of the particular strengths of *Global Calvinism*'s relatively long chronology and its extremely ambitious geographical span is how clearly it shows that translation efforts in different colonies at different times were not simply random but were products of the Reformed Church's intent to engage with the world.

The missionary work of the Reformed Church did not stay abroad, Parker is intent on showing; it also had an effect on Calvinism in the Dutch Republic. Within consistories and synods in the Dutch Republic, mission was always a topic of conversation and letters from across the globe were read and digested. Ministers also wrote books about the religious traditions that they encountered, and around 1650, due to their writing, the idea that all non-Abrahamic religions could be grouped together under the heading of paganism began to recede. At the same time that the Dutch became more pessimistic about their ability to convert people around the world quickly, they also began to be able to read in print about the actual texture of religious belief of different groups.

For some Orthodox Calvinists, the idea of paganism retained power as a tool to critique contemporaries and to express anxiety over the incomplete Reformation in the Dutch Republic. Catholics and Mennonites remained in great numbers in the United Provinces, as did Jews, libertines, and atheists, as well as followers of new ideas represented by Spinoza and Descartes, and Calvinists might lump them all together as 'pagans'. At the same time, liberal thinkers like Pierre Bayle might draw the opposite conclusion from their exposure to new religions: that there was a universal character to all religious belief. In all cases, it was clear that reading books about other religions written in Dutch by ministers (mostly operating in the Dutch East Indies) with personal observational experience of other religions gave people in the Dutch Republic new tools to see their own world.

Parker's close reading of books printed in the Dutch Republic about overseas missions and the discourse this engendered is particularly impressive. Calvinism was global in the sense that its ministers were at work around the world, and it was also global in the sense that its adherents – and non-adherents – in the Dutch Republic grappled with an influx of new information about religious belief and practice and incorporated that new information into their worldviews in a variety of ways.

Global Calvinism is a remarkably ambitious book. The records of the Dutch Reformed Church are vast and scattered across the world, and Parker ably takes us to Batavia, Amboina, Formosa, India, Brazil, New Netherland, and the Dutch Republic, among other places, performing the rare feat of putting the Dutch East and West Indies in the same frame. A book like this must rely both on the digitisation of primary source material and on secondary literature, as no one person can travel to as many places as there are Reformed Church archives or read through as many records as survive. It is also, therefore, a call to action for what remains to be done by others. Surinam and Curaçao appear here, but remain less explored than the East Indies. More work on Surinam would be particularly welcome as there were, of course, both large numbers of enslaved Africans, Maroons, and Indigenous people, and we need more work on how their religious beliefs and practices effected Calvinism. And no place proves Parker's point about Calvinism's global reach as ably as New Netherland/New York, where the Dutch Reformed Church engaged in its

most extensive conversion efforts with the Mohawk after it was no longer a Dutch colony. *Global Calvinism* is an important book that changes the way we think about Calvinism in the Dutch empire, and it is to be hoped that it leads to renewed interest in the records of the Reformed Church, one of the best documented institutions in the Dutch world.

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