

Review

D. L. Noorlander:

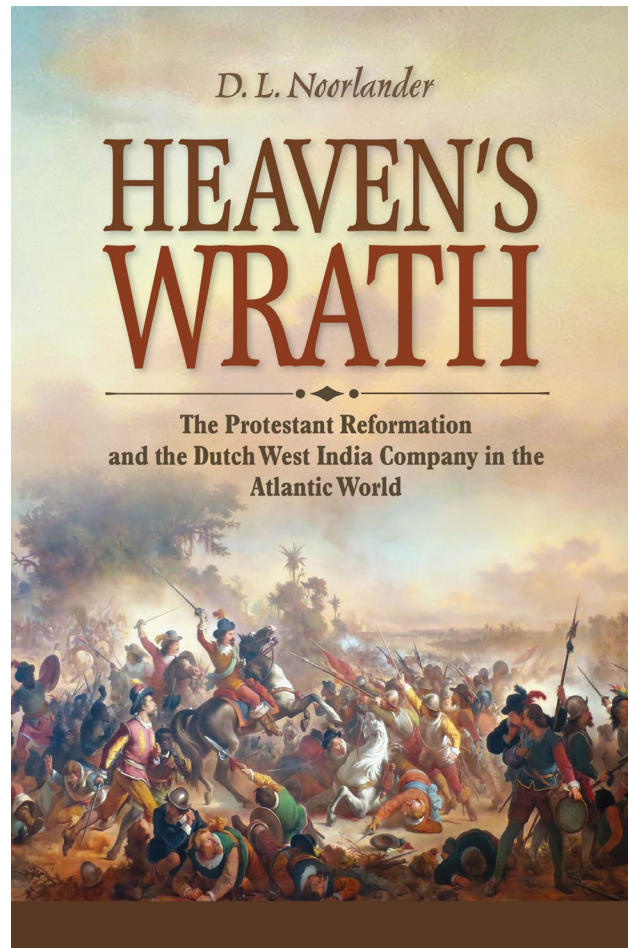
***Heaven's wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch
West India Company in the Atlantic world***

[New Netherland Institute studies]

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Reviewed by Mark Meuwese



While the title of Noorlander's monograph suggests that it is about a very narrow topic, *Heaven's wrath* revisits a number of critical issues in the history of the Dutch in the Atlantic world during the 17th century. One issue concerns the extent to which the Dutch were driven by commerce in their pursuit of overseas expansion. Unlike the Atlantic empires of other European powers, the Dutch colonies and outposts in the Americas and West Africa were governed by the West India Company (WIC), a private corporation chartered by the Dutch state in 1621. Because of the WIC's commercial character as well as due to the general reputation of the Dutch in early modern Europe as being primarily interested in trade, the view in the English-speaking world developed that the Dutch and their trade companies such as the WIC were only concerned about making money. Intent on dismantling this myth, Noorlander argues that the WIC was sincerely committed to building and expanding a godly society based on Calvinist principles in its overseas possessions. Another myth Noorlander challenges is the assertion that since the WIC was supposedly a purely commercial enterprise, the Company was content to dispatch to its colonies poorly motivated and inadequately trained Reformed clergy. Furthermore, Noorlander seeks to revise the common idea that the Dutch were uninterested in converting non-European peoples. Finally, the author challenges the myth of Dutch toleration in its overseas colonies. Noorlander examines these issues in a tightly argued and well-researched book of eight chapters and a conclusion.

Throughout the book, Noorlander details the close relationship between the Reformed Church and the WIC. Both institutions were shaped during a time of great political and religious upheaval in the Dutch Republic. The founding of the WIC in 1621 came in the wake of the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) in which the Reformed Church secured its orthodoxy. Moreover, both the WIC and the Reformed Church were strongly in favour of renewing the war against the Catholic Spanish Habsburg Empire which had been temporarily halted during the Twelve Year Truce (1609-1621). The Reformed Church viewed the WIC as a righteous instrument to strike against the popish Habsburg enemy in the Atlantic world. The close relationship was also revealed by the involvement of many Company directors in the Reformed church councils or consistories of Dutch cities. A substantial number of directors from Amsterdam and Zeeland, the two most dominant WIC Chambers, served as elders and deacons in the consistories of Amsterdam and Middelburg. The pious directors were also actively involved in the selection of lay preachers and ministers that were to be sent to the colonies. Another indication of their strong Calvinist conviction was that the Amsterdam directors donated a portion of their profits to Protestant charity. Noorlander suggests that the yearly financial amount the WIC spent on supporting the Reformed Church through salaries, church buildings, and schools was so sub-

stantial that it contributed to the decline of the West India Company in the third quarter of the 17th century.

The close ties between Reformed clergy and WIC officials also existed in the Dutch Atlantic colonies. Both groups were strongly committed to rooting out sinful behaviour among soldiers, sailors, and settlers. In their struggle against popery and the Habsburg Empire, Reformed ministers and Company officials often likened themselves to ancient Israelites fighting heathen enemies. This idea of a holy struggle against a common enemy was especially evident in northeastern Brazil which the WIC governed from the early 1630s to 1654. Contrary to historians who claim that the WIC was tolerant towards the Portuguese Catholics who formed the majority of the free colonial population, Noorlander argues that the Company authorities worked together closely with Reformed ministers in limiting Catholic rights in Brazil as much as possible. Even Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen, the celebrated enlightened governor-general of Dutch Brazil from 1637 to 1644, is portrayed by Noorlander as a committed Calvinist who was sympathetic to the ministers who were trying to bring about a strict Reformed orthodoxy in Brazil. The outbreak of the popular Portuguese rebellion against Dutch rule in 1645, which eventually resulted in the collapse of the WIC colony, was largely driven by Catholic outrage about the repressive religious policies endorsed by Company officials. A similarly strong commitment to Reformed orthodoxy existed in other WIC colonies. In New Netherland in North America, director-general Petrus Stuyvesant, himself a devout Calvinist, did not hesitate to expel Jews, Quakers, or other religious dissenters, even though the colony was in need of more European settlers.

The attempts by Reformed ministers and lay preachers to bring the gospel to Black Africans and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas is the subject of chapter seven. The attitude of the Reformed Church towards Black Africans was largely determined by the WIC's growing involvement in the Atlantic slave trade during the 1630s. Before the Dutch had acquired any plantation-colonies in the Atlantic world, WIC directors initially hesitated whether to participate in the slave trade. A special committee was formed in the early 1620s to investigate if the WIC should join the nefarious business. Although some of its members were critical of the slave trade, soon after the WIC consolidated its conquest of northeastern Brazil in 1635, the Company fully embraced the slave trade because enslaved Black Africans were viewed as indispensable for the production of sugar. The WIC's decision was justified by the minister Godefridus Udemans who wrote *The spiritual rudder of the merchant ship* in 1638. Udemans argued that, although slavery was unnatural, some people could be justifiably enslaved because of their sinful behavior. As long as slaves were purchased for a fair price and instructed in the principles of Christianity, Dutch Calvinists could participate in the slave trade and

own slaves. Significantly, many of the ministers in Dutch Brazil owned African slaves.

While Reformed ministers in Brazil were not much concerned about the spiritual or physical well-being of African slaves, Dutch clergy did initiate a considerable effort to educate the Tupi-speaking Indigenous people of Brazil. The Tupis, who were important military allies of the Dutch and who had already been introduced to Christianity by Catholic missionaries before the WIC invasion, were viewed by the Calvinist ministers as promising targets of their missionary program. Several ministers prepared a catechism for missionary work among the Tupis which was translated into Portuguese and Tupi. However, the Reformed churches of Amsterdam and Zeeland rejected the Tupi catechism on the basis of faulty theological interpretations. According to Noorlander, a major reason why the missionary program among the Tupis and other non-European peoples proceeded slowly was because of the constant interference by the Reformed churches in the Republic.

In the book's conclusion, Noorlander casts a wider lens by comparing the experience of the Reformed Church in the Atlantic with that of its counterpart in the colonies of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Asia. Like the WIC, the VOC also maintained a close relationship with the Reformed Church. One critical difference between the two trade companies was that of geographic distance. Unlike the nearby Atlantic, where the consistories of Amsterdam and Zeeland maintained close supervision of the churches in the American and West African colonies, the Reformed Church in the Republic was unable to maintain much control over the much more distant Dutch Calvinist churches in Southeast Asia. Noorlander concludes his book by drawing another comparison, this time between the evangelization efforts of the Dutch Reformed Church and those of the Catholic Church. Although the Reformed Church was a much younger religion than the Catholic Church, and even though the Catholic Church had specialized missionary organizations such as the Jesuits, the Reformed Church still managed to dispatch an impressive number of religious personnel to the Dutch colonies. Noorlander calculates that the ratio of ministers to settlers in Dutch colonies was about the same as that of ministers to residents in the Dutch Republic.

One perspective that could have received more attention in the book is that of ordinary people. In the discussion about toleration in Brazil, Noorlander doesn't discuss how ordinary Portuguese or Dutch settlers negotiated the religious regulations imposed on them. Some scholars such as Stuart B. Schwartz have argued that Catholics and Protestants in Dutch Brazil were more tolerant of each other than commonly believed. Similarly, in his analysis of the missions to the Tupis in Brazil, Noorlander doesn't discuss how the Indigenous people interpreted and adopted the Reformed religion. Why and how the Tupis as well as

some Black Africans embraced Dutch Calvinism remains unclear. Despite this criticism, Noorlander clearly demonstrates that religion was not an afterthought for the WIC but instead a central component. Clearly, religion and trade went hand in hand in the Dutch Atlantic Empire.

About the reviewer

Mark Meuwese is professor and chair of the history department at the University of Winnipeg in Winnipeg, Manitoba (Canada), where he has taught since 2004 when he earned his Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame in Notre Dame, Indiana (U.S.). His teaching and research interests are European-Indigenous relations in the Americas. He is the author of *Brothers in arms, partners in trade: Dutch-Indigenous alliances in the Atlantic world, 1595-1674* (Brill, 2011) and *To the shores of Chile: The journal and history of the Brouwer expedition to Valdivia in 1643* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

