

**Review**

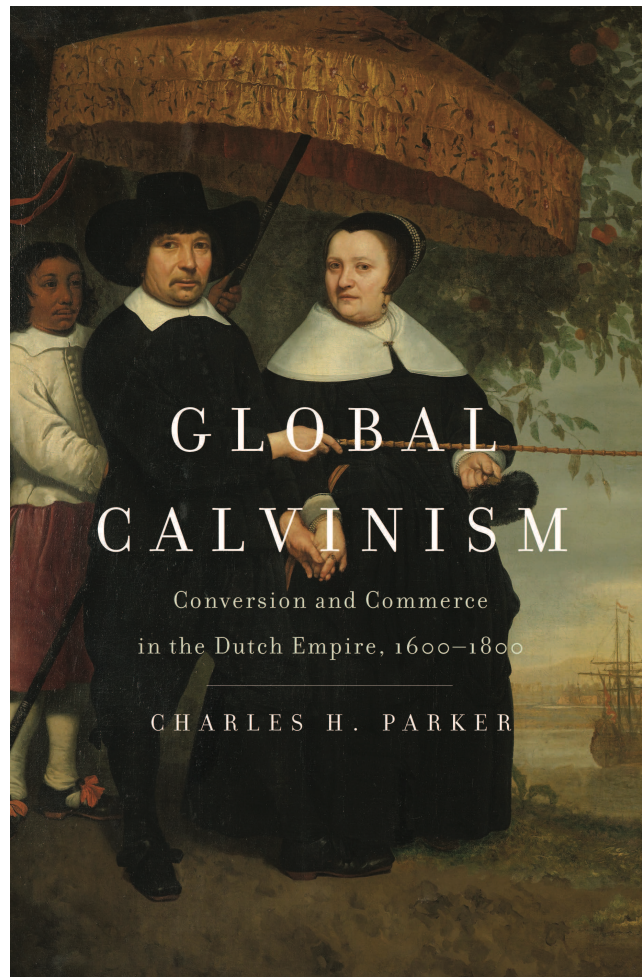
**Charles H. Parker:**

***Global Calvinism: Conversion and commerce in the Dutch  
empire, 1600-1800***

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022. xiii+390 p.

ISBN 9780300236057

*Reviewed by Guido van Meersbergen*



Histories of the early modern Dutch empire have tended to consign religious aims and activities to the margins. Inspired by profit motives and characterized by political pragmatism, the common understanding goes, the Dutch East and West India Companies (VOC and WIC) presided over Reformed Protestant institutions in areas under their direct control yet showed little enthusiasm for proselytization. A recent survey volume captures this view when it concludes that “any spread of the Dutch variant of Protestantism arising from Dutch expansion overseas was purely incidental” (Emmer & Gommans 2021, 100). Charles Parker’s impressive new study challenges and complicates this widely held assumption by offering the first comprehensive overview of Calvinism’s place in early modern Dutch colonialism across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Its main arguments are twofold. First, Calvinism and its missionary aims were firmly embedded into the fabric of Dutch colonial expansion. Second, Calvinist entanglements in empire and global missionary encounters left a decisive mark on Protestantism in the Dutch Republic. Both claims support Parker’s larger historiographical point that a global lens is necessary to appreciate how two of the defining phenomena of early modern Europe, the Reformation and Enlightenment, took shape through interactions with religious cultures from around the globe.

*Global Calvinism’s* focus on reciprocal connections results in an integrated account of Calvinism as it developed in the Dutch Republic and in a diverse range of locations across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. Chapter 1 provides a chronological overview of the Reformation in the Netherlands and the development of a Dutch Calvinist presence outside Europe, introducing readers to VOC expansionism in the Moluccas, Java, Formosa (Taiwan), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), India, and South Africa; and WIC colonization in West Africa (Elmina in Ghana), north-eastern Brazil, New Netherland, and Caribbean islands including Curaçao. This is followed in chapters 2 to 4 by thematic treatments of specific issues as they played out across these various contexts, that is church organization and the relations between colonial governments and Calvinist ministers; Calvinist understandings of conversion and missionary strategies; and the role of language politics and translation projects in the Dutch empire. Chapters 5 and 6 then shift the focus to intellectual developments in the Dutch Republic, mapping out how increased contact with non-Christian traditions gave rise to a comparative outlook on religion and the construction of the universal category of “paganism,” which was mobilized by both orthodox and heterodox Calvinist thinkers in the fierce theological debates of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Parker is at his best when discussing the standpoints of a wide array of Calvinist authors, including well-known advocates of Dutch imperial expansion such as Hugo Grotius, Willem Uselincx, Godefridus Udemans, and Joannes de Laet; the overseas ministers George Candidius, Justus Heurnius, Abraham Rogerius,

Philippus Baldaeus, and François Valentijn; the Calvinist theologians Gisbertus Voetius and Johannes Cocceius; and the heterodox Protestant thinkers Pierre Bayle and Balthasar Bekker. His deep knowledge of the Reformation and Calvinist theology permeates the book and underpins expert analyses of doctrinal disputes and theological debates sparked by the challenges of taking Calvinism beyond Europe. In colonial societies around the world, ministers were faced with practical questions such as: what ought to be the criteria for neophytes to receive baptism and participate in communion? Can and should both sacraments be divided? And what does proper Christian conduct look like in pluralistic cultural settings? The Calvinist approach to conversion that emerged did not focus on quick wins but centred on the more gradual process of community formation, in which prospective converts had to demonstrate basic familiarity with Reformed doctrines and show willingness to commit to standards of Calvinist moral discipline before being baptized. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, the constant stream of information about non-Christian religions led to novel ways of thinking about God, the devil, nature, and religious diversity. Whilst some Calvinists employed the newly emerging transhistorical understanding of paganism to tar all religious rivals with the brush of idolatry and atheism, others were encouraged to take more relativistic positions which served to destabilize Calvinist dogmas. As Parker convincingly shows, the global framework of Dutch colonialism thus figured prominently for Calvinists and Calvinism at home.

Yet how prominently did Calvinism and its missionary aims figure in the policies and practices of the Dutch commercial empire? The answer to that question depends largely on geographical context. It is clear from Parker's analysis that a mutually supportive relationship existed between the Dutch Reformed Church and the VOC and WIC, with the trading companies providing the conditions for Calvinist ministers to propagate their faith and ministers propping up corporate empire building by serving as instruments of colonial governance. Particularly in the provision of schooling, poor relief, and the promotion of a Protestant social order through religious instruction, marriage, and moral disciplining, Calvinist clergymen made vital contributions to civic government in areas under direct Company control. Consequently, their influence was most noticeable in the Moluccas, Batavia, Ceylon, and the short-lived colonies of Formosa and Brazil, whilst leaving little or no mark on VOC activities in the major Asian empires of Persia, Mughal India, China, and Japan. Reformed communities remained small and the number of conversions low in most areas where the Dutch were active. In the Atlantic, Calvinist proselytizing did not take off anywhere outside Brazil; and in Asia, the VOC's concerns about alienating non-Christian rulers and populations limited the scope for missionary activity. As Parker explains, the negative communal consequences of adopting a new religion also

disincentivized Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists against converting. Consequently, the greatest number of conversions took place in areas where a prior Catholic missionary presence had already resulted in a large indigenous Christian population, particularly in Ceylon, which counted nearly 200,000 nominal Christians in the late 18th century. Batavia and Ambon each counted upwards of 10,000 Reformed Christians in the same period, both those of European descent and Asians enticed by the opportunities of marriage with a European, greater access to poor relief, or, in the case of enslaved people, the improved prospects of manumission which conversion offered.

In focusing chiefly on the perspectives of ministers and consistories, *Global Calvinism* is naturally slanted towards the small group of actors for whom “proselytizing among pagans and Moors” (64) was a priority. As such, the book stops short of offering a larger reassessment of the Dutch trading companies and the role of religious motivations in driving their activities, and occasional inaccuracies when referencing names, dates, and places suggests that Parker is on less familiar terrain when discussing the VOC’s presence in Asia. Furthermore, his attempts at placing Calvinist proselytization within a global comparative framework by drawing parallels between European and Asian empires are commendable but remain underdeveloped. These limitations notwithstanding, the book productively situates Calvinism as part of larger global currents of imperial expansion and confessionalization. It amply demonstrates that the spread of Reformed Christianity in the Dutch empire was far from incidental, but rather resulted from sustained efforts by Calvinist ministers working under the aegis of the VOC and WIC. At the same time, the old consensus that missionary activity was limited in scope and impact and held only marginal importance to the overall aims of the trading companies probably still holds. Indeed, Parker confirms as much when concluding that “the most far-reaching effects of overseas missions” (281) were not the establishment of Calvinist enclaves in Asia, but the impact which increased familiarity with global religious beliefs and practices had on Reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands.

### **About the reviewer**

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