

# The Dutch Reformed Church in Colonial Ceylon (18<sup>th</sup> Century)

Minutes of the Consistory of the Dutch Reformed  
Church in Colombo held at the Wolvendaal Church,  
Colombo (1735–1797)

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## Introduction

This volume introduces to the public for the first time the Minutes of the Consistory of the Dutch Reformed Church at the *Wolvendaal Kerk* in Colombo for the years 1735–1797. They are of incalculable significance not only for the history of Christianity in Sri Lanka, the former Ceylon. They also offer valuable insights into the religious, political, social and cultural life of a Dutch Colony in eighteenth century Asia. From about 1656/58 (the year of the capitulation of Colombo and Jaffna) to 1796 the coastal regions of the island were under Dutch rule. Just as in the other Asian possessions of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC), only the “Reformed Christian Religion” – “as it is taught in the public churches of the United Provinces” of the Netherlands – was officially recognized here (according to the charter of 1642). This applied in the first instance to the European settlers and native Christians of the island. This exclusivist claim was directed primarily against the Roman Catholicism of the former Portuguese colonial lords, which was perceived not only as a religious but also as a political threat. The traditional religions of the country – Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam – were much less affected. They enjoyed relative tolerance, in spite of various, and especially in the early period quite remarkable, efforts undertaken by the VOC to spread the reformed faith by peaceful means also among the native people.

The Consistory of the Church in Colombo was the highest executive committee of the Dutch Colonial Church in Ceylon. The island was divided into three ecclesiastical districts, called consistories: Colombo, Jaffna and Galle. The Colombo Consistory was regarded as having primacy over the others. The Church Council (*Kerkraad*) of each consistory was formed by the *predikants* (ordained pastors) and a certain number of elders and deacons. Each meeting was attended also by a political *commissaris* as a representative of the colonial authorities. The members of the Church Council were chosen by vote, the election being subject to the approval of the Government. The Colombo Consistory regulated and coordinated countless church affairs on the island. Simultaneously it was responsible for sending the annual reports “on the progress and state of Christianity in the island” to Batavia (Jakarta) in today’s Indonesia, the administrative centre of the VOC in Asia, and to the various synods (*classes*) and to the board of directors (*Heeren XVII*) in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Special meetings (the so-called *censura morum*) dealt with matters pertaining to church discipline. Manifold problems were discussed here that give us unique insights into the ecclesiastical, religious and social life of a Dutch colony in eighteenth century Asia.

So we get to know of the difficulties in training native teachers and of progress in establishing a Sinhalese and a Tamil printing press. The seemingly unstoppable advance of Catholic underground priests provided reasons for an increasing number of crisis meetings. In spite of severe prohibitions by the government, they unashamedly showed

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1 A detailed description of the functions and duties of the Church Councils in Ceylon can be found in the “Draft of a Church Order for submission to Their Excellencies the Governor General and the Council of the Indies, and for transmission by them to the Governor appointed on their behalf and the Council of Ceylon and its dependencies”, one of the documents attached to the minutes of the meeting of 24.3.1760 (vol. 4A/2 pagina 265–270 / p. 302–311 in this edition).

themselves publicly not only in the countryside, but also in cities such as Negombo. The Consistory sorrowfully commented on the news of the imminent arrival of unauthorized Moravian missionaries (from Herrnhut) and members of other Protestant “sects” on the island. We hear repeated complaints about Dutch *predikants* such as the Rev. Matthias Wermelskircher, who, nine years after his arrival in the island and in spite of repeated warning from the highest authorities, had not yet been able to preach his first sermon in Sinhalese (16.12.1750). We also read about the disciplinary measures undertaken against Dutch settlers who had sexual intercourse with their native maid slaves or, another repeated complaint, were not available during regularly conducted house visits (in order to escape religious control). Tensions between the ecclesiastical and the political members of the consistory were considered, and various aspects of the increasingly critical situation, the final collapse and the replacement of the Dutch rule by the British in the 1790s were discussed. This change was important not only in political terms. It also marked a turning point in the religious policy of the colonial authorities. The Consistory discussed mission strategies and various questions pertaining to dealing with the “converts from heathenism and (Islamic) Turkishness.” Similarly, it also conferred on the “measures for the conversion of (Buddhist and Hindu) heathens.” All these manifold efforts, however, had only partial success. This becomes evident not only if we compare the state of Reformed Christianity in Ceylon with the already mentioned activities of the Catholic underground priests on the island, but also if we look at the early phases of Protestant presence in other Asian regions – such as the work of the Danish-Halle missionaries in neighbouring South Indian Tranquebar. There it quickly led to the establishment of indigenous congregations. South Indian Christians and evangelists coming to the Jaffna region in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were repeatedly mentioned.

These multifaceted developments and debates are documented quite impressively in the Minutes of the Consistory of the Dutch Reformed Church in Colombo. They contain numerous details that are not transmitted to us in any other source. This applies specifically to the helpless reaction of the colonial authorities – both ecclesial and political – with regard to the uninterrupted growth of the Catholic underground congregations in the Dutch territories. The history of Christianity in Sri Lanka deserves special interest, among other reasons, because it offers a counter model to one of the classical paradigms of traditional history of mission – namely the parallelism between European colonial and missionary expansion in overseas. Admittedly, it was only with the Portuguese that Roman Catholicism came into the land (since 1505), Calvinism with the Dutch (since 1640 respectively 1656/58), and the various forms of Anglo-Saxon missionary Protestantism with the British (since 1796). But Catholicism that seemed to have disappeared visibly along with the Portuguese in 1658 and was therefore considered dead for a long time, experienced a remarkable revival under Dutch rule. In spite of severe persecution by the new colonial masters, it developed gradually into the dominant force within the Christian camp, and has remained so even to this day. Indian itinerant preachers from Goa (such as the famous Oratorian priest Joseph Vaz [1651 – 1711]) played an important role in the revitalization of Sri Lankan Catholicism. Dressed like beggars, mastering the local languages and sharing the life of the people, they managed to enter the island since 1687, in spite of the strict controls by the Dutch. They were successful in gathering together scattered groups of former Catholic Christians, and in winning new converts. Soon we hear about Catholic open air worship services, sometimes with many hundreds of participants. When Joseph Vaz died in 1711, the existence of a strong Catholic community on the

island could no longer be disputed. In subsequent years, this development accelerated. Catholics were increasingly able to move freely in public. With growing self-confidence, they began to address the colonial authorities with their demands.

These were developments well documented in the Minutes. The “cancer of the false Romish doctrines spreading in the country” (8.7.1744) and “the daily increase and spread of this baneful doctrine of Popery” in the coastal regions of Ceylon, “in spite of all the wholesome orders and *placcaats* [edicts] issued by the authorities” (2.12.1751), were carefully observed and repeatedly discussed at the meetings of the Colombo Church Council. Correspondingly, the question about appropriate counter measures was raised frequently. We get to know “that the so-called priests and vagabonds ... have no longer any respect or regard, and openly by day practice their seductive religious exercises with the pealing of bells and the exposition of their idolatrous images” (2.12.1751). Indiscriminately they baptize children of Christian and non-Christian parents, and do not care for church discipline. “Without right or permission, (they) dare to go round, not only outside the city and into the countryside, but also in the old city accompanied by their so-called procession” (29.5.1759 p. 208). Catholic believers not only presented themselves with growing self-confidence in public. In addition, their local “chiefs who are Roman Catholics inhumanly oppress those of the Reformed Faith (a) by forbidding their subjects to follow the Reformed Faith either in weal or in woe (b) by making false charges against them” (29.5.1759 p. 208 ). They also “prevent” native Christians “who wish to make their confession of faith in our Church from attending the classes of instruction and going to our Church by threatening and harassing them under various (false) pretences, so that even our Church members haven't the opportunity of coming to us” (29.5.1759 p. 235). Religious protest even turned into open resistance to the colonial authorities. This happened when a group of local women stopped the destruction of a Catholic church ordered by the government, in the region of Korale. Here the police that were charged to execute this work were beaten up “by more than a thousand persons, both fishermen and others unknown to them, from the jungle on both sides of the road” (5.11.1759, pagina 229). Even in the old city of Colombo, the administrative center of Dutch colonial and ecclesial presence on the island, Catholic Christians dared to conduct “public processions with violence”. There the “members of the Reformed Church were harassed and pursued by Roman Catholics” (29.5.1759 p. 201).

Emergency meetings of the committee were called repeatedly, like the great crisis session on 29 May 1759 (Vol. 4A/2, pagina 178a – 204 / p. 201 – 238 in this edition), when the members of the Consistory, one after the other, offered detailed suggestions how to fight against the “false teachings of the Popery”. These suggestions ranged from disciplinary measures and the demand for rigorously keeping the anti-Catholic edicts (*placcaats*) by the colonial government, to the proposal that “the Roman Catholics, like the Muhammedans and the heathens, should in like manner be permitted the free and peaceful exercise of their religion” (p. 229). This, however, was a quite isolated voice. Other members suggested to recognize no longer the baptismal certificates issued by Catholic priests, to appoint only adherents of the “Reformed religion” to government jobs and official positions (like that of an interpreter or native chief), to prevent native “employees and slaves to attend Roman Catholic gatherings” or to prohibit mixed marriages. This applied not only to marriages between Protestants and Roman Catholics, but also between Tamils and Sinhalese – because, quite remarkably, the Tamil Christians were regarded as being “mostly ... Roman Catholics” (p. 209). All these various suggestions were carefully

discussed and classified and either “submitted to the Government for orders” or rejected or passed on to the Consistory “for further attention”.

At the same time, these discussions included many efforts to promote the “advancement and spread of our Reformed religion in this island” and to make Christianity more attractive for the indigenous people. Various measures were suggested. They included increased presence of Reformed ministers and other church personnel in the countryside, better training and careful selection of native schoolmasters and local interpreters, improved language requirements (in Sinhala and Tamil) for the Dutch *predikants*, and stricter control and enforcement of church attendance and discipline. “Forsaking all arrogant self-conceit”, some members demanded a self-critical analysis of the prevailing situation, and advocated manifold reforms and intensified endeavours among “both the Dutch as well as the native Christians”. Simultaneously, however, it became evident – and it indeed highlights the importance of these documents – that these well-meaning recommendations could be realized only to a very limited degree. They were greatly restricted by the church structures imported from Europe. Moreover, their dependence on the Company stifled many well intended initiatives of the *predikants* on the spot. In any case, the goal of eliminating the Roman Catholic rivals was not attained. Their numbers continued to increase, and in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, among the indigenous Christians, the followers of Roman Catholic “Popery” outstripped by far those of the officially recognized Dutch Reformed Church. With the end of Dutch rule in 1796, the whole colonial church system collapsed completely. In 1806, a British visitor to the island – the Chaplain Claudius Buchanan whose name is closely connected with a new phase of Protestant presence in Southern Asia – described Ceylonese Calvinism as dead<sup>2</sup>. Many Dutch pastors had left the country, and native members of the reformed congregations frequently returned to their former – Buddhist or Hindu – religion. At the same time, local Catholics took over many former Reformed churches that now were empty.

These various developments, the debates that are associated with them as well as the multiplicity of other themes discussed here, crucially necessitated this first edition of the Minutes of the Consistory of the Dutch Reformed Church in Colombo. The original Dutch documents are available only in Sri Lanka. For a long time they were kept in the archives of the Dutch Reformed Church at the *Wolvendaal Kerk* in Colombo-Wellawatta in an increasingly deteriorating condition. In the early 1980s they were repaired and rebound, and later transferred to the Sri Lanka National Archives (7 Reid Avenue, Colombo 7) as a permanent loan by the Dutch Reformed Church (Record Group 24). The extant minutes date from the year 1735 only. Originally, according to an old church inventory of 1757, there appears to have been seven earlier volumes containing the minutes from 1657 to April 1735, but they have been marked as ‘defect’ in that inventory. Obviously, these earlier volumes were already lost in the middle of the eighteenth century or they existed then only in a greatly damaged und illegible form.

The English translation that is reproduced in this present edition was made in the 1970s by Samuel Andrew William Mottau (1902–1996), the renowned historian and former archivist of the *Wolvendaal Kerk*. In various functions – among others as Secretary of the Ceylon Historical Commission and Senior Assistant Government Archivist – he contributed significantly to the preservation and development of the ecclesiastical and cultural legacy of the Burghers (Sri Lankans of Dutch descent). For this accomplishment

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2 The Works of the Reverend Claudius Buchanan. Comprising His ‘Christian Researches in Asia’, Albany 1812, 53-61.

he was honored in 1985 by the Queen of the Netherlands with the ‘Order of the Orange Nassau’. The editor got in touch with him first when he served during 1982/83 as a visiting professor at the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa (Kandy). He met him many times later during repeated visits to Sri Lanka. On 24.8.1988 S.A.W. Mottau authorized the editor by letter to publish his translation. He wrote: “I write to inform you that I very gladly give you permission to edit my translation of the Consistory of the Dutch Reformed Church in Ceylon 1735 to 1837, and to furnish it with an introduction and a historical commentary by you.” Only a poor quality carbon copy of Mottau’s typewritten translation was available for that project. During the subsequent years various forms of an edited version were tried. Finally, due to the enormity of the manuscript texts, considerable costs, the complexity of processing the text and unavailability of trained local coworkers, as well as due to other responsibilities, the project had to be shelved. The photo copies of this translation, however, formed the nucleus of the *Church History Documentation Center* at the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa (Kandy) that was initiated by the editor in the 1980s and formally inaugurated in a new building in 2003 by the Bishop of Kurunagala (as chairman of the Board of Governors of the Theological College of Lanka). This centre aims to document the history of Christianity in Sri Lanka in its manifold confessional and cultural variations as an integral part of Sri Lankan religious and social history, and make it accessible to the public. In this capacity it has already gained considerable significance.

The project to edit the minutes was again taken up in a changed form for this current publication. This edition limits itself to the Dutch period. It begins with the year 1735 (the former minutes, as mentioned earlier, are no longer available) and extends to the year 1796 (the end of Dutch rule on the island), resp. to the year 1797 (in order to include also the phase of transition to British rule). The extant minute books of the Colombo Church Consistory (Dutch original text) comprise fourteen volumes (vol.s 4A/1–4A/14) covering the years 1735 to 1927. This current edition is based on the translation of vol. 4A/1 (1735–1744), vol. 4A/2 (1750–1760), vol. 4A/3 (1760–1787), and the first sections of vol. 4A/4 (1787–1797). There exists a lacuna between vol. 4A/1 and vol. 4A/2 because the last pages of vol. 4A/1 (pagina 218 to the end) – containing the minutes of the Extraordinary meetings and the *Censura Morum* meetings of the Consistory between 31 December 1744 and 6 October 1750 – are so badly damaged and altogether unreadable that they have to be regarded as totally lost. Another lacuna exists at the beginning of vol. 4A/4 (pagina 1–2 missing).

This current edition has been published online in 2008 in an earlier version. The digital edition had been prepared according to the standards of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) by Adrian Hermann M. A. and Dr. Ciprian Burlacioiu. The editing of the volumes 4A/3 (1760–1787) and 4A/4 (1787–1797) was sponsored by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung (Cologne, Germany) which has also contributed significantly to the publication of this print version. The assistance of Tanja Posch-Tepelmann M. A. has been indispensable for the editing process. My student assistants, Christoph Burger, Senta-Victoria Hentrich and Kerstin Korpinez, provided important services. My research in Sri Lanka was supported repeatedly by Professor G.V.P. Somaratna (Colombo, Sri Lanka). Prof. Daniel Jeyaraj (Leeds, UK) commented on various aspects. I thank all of them heartily.

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