

D. Britz

Prof. D. Britz, Department
of Philosophy and Classics,
University of the Free State.
E-mail: britz.dolf@gmail.com
ORCID: [http://orcid.org/
0000-0003-1732-5752](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1732-5752)

DOI: [http://dx.doi.
org/10.18820/23099089/actat.
v41i2.14](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v41i2.14)

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2021
41(2):218-221

Date received:
26 July 2021

Date published:
15 December 2021

BOOK REVIEW

On the conversion of Indians and Heathens

Ineke Loots – Joke Spaans (eds.), Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617-1666), *On the conversion of Indians and Heathens. An annotated translation of De conversione Indorum et gentilium (1669)*, [Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 290/21], (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2018), *Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617-1666), On the conversion of Indians and Heathens*, ISBN: 978-90-04-25544-9, List price: Euro 129 / US\$ 149

Hoornbeeck's *On the conversion of Indians and Heathens* is of decisive significance for the history of theology of southern Africa. It is pre-eminently a primary source that offers direct access to 17th-century reformed thought and consideration regarding the proclamation of the Christian faith. *On the conversion of Indians and Heathens* is the product of Hoornbeeck's academic teaching between 1662 and 1664 at the University of Leiden. Under his supervision, 23 students published 31 disputations (in brochure format) on the subject of the conversion of non-Christians. Ultimately, these disputations formed part of the final text of the book, published in 1669. One single volume containing the 31 student disputations is extant in die Old Library of the Magdalen College, Oxford.

Several of Hoornbeeck's students signed up for service in the overseas trading areas. Since the beginning of the century, the Dutch merchant companies (West-India and East-India Companies) established ventures and posts in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Hoornbeeck's teaching thus informed and shaped the ministry of his students far beyond the borders of The Netherlands and the



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<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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Dutch Reformed Church in The Netherlands. *Cabo de bona Esperança* (Cape of Good Hope) was not excluded. Most of the ministers who served at the Cape between 1662 and 1680 were contemporaries and even classmates, who sat at the feet of Hoornbeek. Two distinguished themselves by publishing disputations *On the conversion of Indians and Heathens*. Pierre Casier was responsible for the third and Joan van Arckel for the 31st, both incorporated in Hoornbeek's book.

Characteristic of Hoornbeek's *On the conversion of Indians and Heathens* is the participation in an international network of scholarship, including such authors as Jacob van Gool, Johann Heinrich Hottinger, Marcus Zuerius van Boxhorn, Georg Horn, Gerardus Vossius, David Blondel, Hugo Grotius, and Abraham Rogerius. The latter was part of the return fleet of Wollebrant Gelynsen de Jong that anchored in Table Bay in 1648 to salvage cargo and men from the *Haerlem* that stranded there in 1647. *De open-Deure tot het Verborgene Heydendom ofte Waerachtigh vertoogh van het Leven ende Zeden, mitsgaders de Religie ende Gods-dienst der bramines, op de Cust Choromandel ende der Landen daar ontrent* (Leiden: François Hackes, 1651), comprises his views on the proclamation of the Christian Gospel within the contexts of different belief systems.

For Hoornbeek, the heinous atrocities of Christian European seafarers in overseas territories form an important theme in 16th- and 17th-century theological history. Naval forces from Catholic countries (Spain and Portugal) became notorious for this. Hoornbeek does not hesitate to trust the protest of Roman Catholic missionaries and theologians in this regard. With a view to the *Conversion of Indians and Heathens*, the professor intentionally sensitised his students to be mindful of exploitation and injustice. Righteousness is fundamental to the Christian faith. It may not be compromised.

It is not easy to explain or to find enough tears to deplore how much wrong was done among the Indians by the sometimes shameful and improper life of people who went out to them. Their way of life was a blemish on Christ and the name of Christian and brought irreparable damage to the Christian cause, in particular the disgraceful and cruel way of life of the Spaniards in America (pp. 352, 371).

According to him, at the root of such conduct,

greed does even prevent a human being to be who he is, but it makes him into someone completely unworthy of his status (p. 359).

Hoornbeek equipped his students not only to present the gospel in an accountable manner, but also to be prepared to engage with injustices of the world of the Dutch trading companies.

On the conversion of Indians and Heathens comprises two books. Book 1 offers a general overview of “heathenism” (*gentilismus*) in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, explicated in nine chapters. The editors acknowledge that the term “heathens” (*gentilium*) has a pejorative connotation. They opted for “heathens” as a technical term, which was preferred to “pagans” and “gentiles” (p. 33). The second book of 15 chapters can be regarded as Hoornbeeck’s intellectual foundation to persuade the “Indians and heathen”. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss classical Christian scholarship, as well as recent and modern authors of works against the heathens. Encountering “heathenism” is a trajectory in Christian thinking. Chapter 5 critically explicates the influential Sibylline Books. The next three chapters cover the content of what should be determined in the discourse with heathens: God, the world and the human being, its immortality, the state of the soul after death, and the resurrection of the dead. Chapters 7 and 8 explore the sins of Indians and heathens with respect to the worship of God and against a decent way of life. The next cluster of chapters shifts the exposition to practical aspects. Chapter 9 deals with the question as to how to convince people of the Christian religion. Chapter 10 focuses on the authority of Christ and the truth of the Christian religion, based on Scriptures (Chapter 11). The next chapter explains how the heathens should be converted and what should be taken care of and effected by churches, universities, and politicians.

Chapter 13 portrays what kind of clergymen should be sent to convert Indians and heathens. Chapter 14 elucidates the manner and means to be used by ministers to advance the work of conversion. The last chapter is devoted to the conversion of Indians and heathens in America (among the Algonquin Native Americans) by contemporary reformed and pious Englishman, John Elliot (1604-1690). This is intended as an inspirational example, presented for imitation. Rev. Joan van Arckel compiled his disputation on the work of John Elliot.

On the conversion of Indians and Heathens is outstandingly translated – largely literal – by Ineke Loots, who specialises in early modern Neo-Latin scholarly publications. Joke Spaans provided the introduction and annotations. She has distinguished herself as a scholar of early Dutch religious cultures. In all respects, this is an excellent academic book that lives up to standards and expectations carried by Brill’s *Studies in intellectual history*. It is not without reason that the editors observe that Hoornbeeck’s book is a

key text for understanding the exchanges between the Dutch Republic and the culture and religions of Asia, Africa and the Americas, as well as for studying the origins of comparative religion (p. 1).

On the same level, it also represents a fundamental text that substantially informs about the history of the church and theology that emerged in the VOC world during the second half of the 17th century. It is, therefore, a source that should also be consulted in understanding and interpreting the intellectual history of South Africa. It is essential in the commitment to “decolonise” our church and theological history.