

Presentation dr. Eleonora Hof, International Conference PThU, Groningen, April 24, 2017,

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Today I want with you to reflect on the meaning of K.H. Miskotte for the praxis of **resistance** within public theology. Since this is an international conference, I do not expect that many of the international guests are familiar with his life and work. In order to get a quick impression, who is knowledgeable about Miskotte? And who has read some works from him? I am quite curious to know more about the reception history of Miskotte abroad, and would like to discuss this afterwards, if possible.

[Time for quick responses]

In this presentation, I will start with a short biographical overview, in order to situate Miskotte in his time. Secondly, I will offer some notes on the translatability of Miskotte. The final and largest part of this presentation is devoted to the theological significance of Miskotte as a theologian of *resistance*.

Short biography

A good friend of mine and fellow theologian asked, when I was telling him about this project: “how do you know that resistance for Miskotte is indeed mainly anchored theologically, and did not mainly depend on his personality?” I answered him that it is most certainly the case that his personality played an important role in his resistance, but that this doesn’t make his example any less prominent. After all, the theological is biographical, and the biographical is theological. In this section, I present therefore a biographical overview, which is mainly based upon the work on the 2016 biography of Miskotte by Herman de Liagre Böhl.¹

¹ Herman de Liagre Böhl, *Miskotte: theoloog in de branding, 1894-1976*, 2016.

Miskotte was raised in a Christian family that was deeply influenced by both Abraham Kuyper and Herman Friedrich Kohlbrugge. The influence of Kohlbrugge, with his emphasis on the justification of the sinner, stayed with him through his entire life. The influence of Kuyper waned, because after World War II, he became a strong proponent of the *Doorbraak* movement. In this movement, various Protestant ministers became members of the PvdA, the Dutch socialist party. Miskotte, having been a socialist since becoming acquainted with the work of socialist poet Henriëtte Roland Holst, has had a lifelong appreciation for the plight of the working class. However, as a minister in various provincial towns, he struggles tremendously to actually connect on a personal level to the people that he supported in his theological work. His sermons were thought to be too difficult, too alienating, a bit too much in general. His character had a strong mystical bent, apt to discover the divine in the wondrous works of nature. This mystical attraction to nature remained a struggle during his life, and became a source for theologizing in order to retain the primacy of revelation.

After having studied theology, reading extensively, but not always the requirements for his study, he became a minister in Kortgene, a small town in the province of Zeeland. He did not feel at home here, he complained about the complacency of the people, while they complained about his sermons. Essentially the same was the case in his next congregation, in Meppel, a small provincial town in the East of the Netherlands. In Haarlem, close to Amsterdam, he felt more at home, because of the proximity to the cultural life of Amsterdam. Finally, he became a minister in Amsterdam, and was charged with the duty to minister to those who were becoming unchurched. This task suited both his personality and theology and led to a successful ministry. During the war-years he played a pivotal role in the resistance of the *Hervormde Kerk*, the Dutch Reformed Church, to which we will pay more attention later. After the war, he became professor of theology in Leiden, where he retired early due to health problems.

Major Works and Translating Miskotte

The major works by Miskotte are his *Biblical Miskotte*² proves notoriously difficult to translate because his evocative language loses its poignant meaning in translation. Moreover, Miskotte never was oriented primarily towards the Anglo-Saxon world. He was fluent in German and through his friendship with Barth and his appreciation for his theology he was more oriented toward the German speaking world, as was the custom in theology during that time.

Furthermore, Miskotte was never so much as an academic theologian as a prophetic and artistic voice. For this reason, he did not always feel at home in the liberal theological tradition in Leiden during the time of his professorship. The entry into his work therefore cannot only be gained from his major works, but should be supplemented through consulting his sermons as well.

After his early retirement, Miskotte did not have the mental and physical energy to embark on a new theological project, but instead spend much time on editing various collections of sermons and speeches, which were well-read at that time. Devotional language and academic language are seamlessly merging into each other, both a feature of his personal character as well as his theological emphasis on the unity of spheres of life. Since I am a Dutch native language speaker, I have made use of the works of Miskotte in Dutch and the translation offered is my own.

[Show: various books]

Next to his *Biblical ABC*, on which I will base this lecture for a large part, his other major works were: *Het wezen der Joodse religie* (the essence of the Jewish religion), *Als de goden zwijgen* (when the gods are silent) and *Edda en Thora: een vergelijking van Germaanse en Israëlische religie* (a comparison of the Jewish and Germanic religion.)

² See for the reception of Miskotte in the English language: Martin Kessler, *Kornelis Miskotte: A Biblical Theology* (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1997).

Pre-war resistance - Amsterdam

On 27 February 1939, Miskotte engaged in a debate with another minister of the *Hervormde Kerk* in Amsterdam, who was a member of the NSB, The national-socialist movement. The NSB was established already in 1931 and gained 8 percent of the votes in 1935 and 4 percent in 1937. The other minister, Ekering, advocated a Dutch national-socialism which would put up a front against both capitalism and democracy. Miskotte's response made clear that he interpreted Nazism in terms of heathendom and that he did not believe in the possibility of a unified nation-state that would confess for any good outcome:

“Woe us if the nation-state will “confess”. Because it is impossible, that it will confess the Lord of Revelation. The only religion that we have in common as a Volk, would be the noble heathendom.”³

Although pressed by Miskotte, the Amsterdam presbytery refused to take a clear standpoint on the matter. This meant that there was no preparatory theological groundwork in place on the eve of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

Pre-war resistance – Dutch East Indies

In 1937, Miskotte was invited to Indonesia in order to give theological education to the Protestant Churches. In 1935, these churches had become formally independent from the Dutch government, but were in practice still very much caught up with the colonial sphere of life. Miskotte's fame as a theologian in the Netherlands had dissipated to the Dutch East Indies, leading to his invitation. Indeed, he gave the assembled ministers a full tour of the developments of continental theology, which were for many too hard to follow.

Miskotte traveled extensively within what is current-day Indonesia, including Bandung, Batavia [current day Jakarta] ⁴ Djokja (Jogjakarta) Medan (on Sumatra) and the island of Bali.

³ Liagre Böhl, *Miskotte*, 193.

[show pictures]

These pictures are taken from the Dutch national archive, and show the extent of colonial presence in the Dutch colony. Many churches were happy to cooperate with the colonial regime, shown by the lavishly decorated churches.

When he returned to the Netherlands, he spoke with concern about the entanglement between church and state in Indonesia. I find it especially interesting that this resistance was articulated before the second world war, and was therefore not mediated by the atrocities of war and the new spirit of independence that arose after the second world war. Unfortunately, little in-depth research exists regarding his early stance regarding independence of Miskotte.

Resistance during the war

The Miskotte family provided during the war a hiding place for various persons. Unfortunately, Miskotte biographer de Liagre Böhl only spends one sentence to this fact, so little is known about the amount of people in hiding, the way they came into contact with the Miskotte family and how they kept them safe.

The pre-war resistance seamlessly led to resistance during the war. Already at the end of August 1940, only a couple of months after the German occupation, a group of protestant ministers gathered together in order to discuss the challenge of responding to the occupation, even the more because the Reformed Synod remained indecisive on the issue. Most of the ministers present were knowledgeable about the *bekennende Kirche* in Germany and with the thought of Karl Barth.

⁴ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938).

Miskotte right after the war

Perhaps his most significant act as a public theologian was the sermon he preached right after the liberation of the Netherlands in May 1945. The sermon was entitled: God's enemies perish, following Psalm 92.⁵ He preached in the *Nieuwe Kerk* at Dam Square, where one day ago a terrible shooting took place, killing 32 people while leaving around 100 injured.

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A Theology of Resistance

Miskotte is generally known as the one who has introduced Barth and Barthian theology in the Netherlands. Barth and Miskotte remained close friends till the death of Barth.

[Show picture]

Central in the thought of Miskotte is the espousal of the concreteness of God's dealings with Israel over against the abstract idea of what the godhead should look like. Said differently, Miskotte does not a priori ascribes the classic attributes of a godhead to the God of Israel. In his own words: "the abstract omnipotence does not rule". The NAME, the God of Israel, is qualitatively different from all the others that are called god. It is therefore in the qualitative priority of His mercy, His patience, His faithfulness, that we discover the character of this God. The God of Israel is the concrete God, who we can know through his liberative deeds in history.

By following this God, we experience the joy that we don't have to be gentiles any more. We have been delivered from the servitude of the demons. It is only because of our faith in these unique power, identical with love and faithfulness, we can persist in this afflicted life.

⁵ Liagre Böhl, *Miskotte*, 208–10.

Miskotte is a theologian of the prolegomena, of the first things first. He always attempted to discover the ground structure, the fundamental foundation of the Biblical texts. In his Biblical ABC, he pays particular attention to this ground structure [grondstructuur] by exploring the Name, the Virtues and the Deeds of the God of Israel. The right order of these virtues is based upon Exodus 34:6. God is a Person. An Actor. An Author. A Speaker. Because we know God through his deeds, he is not a power in general. He is a 'human' God, because God attached himself to the human nature in the incarnation of Christ.

God can therefore never be equated with human nature. He also cannot be known through studying nature, only through revelation. God is not a power in abstract, but in the concrete. He can therefore never be equated with the gods of nature, with the absolute, with the all-encompassing ideologies that claim to envelop the principles of the universe. The mere existence of God is not good news, it is not gospel. The existence of a godhead can still be demonic in its evil. It is only truly good news, truly evangelical, is this God is God. The God who reveals himself to be love. If this God is love, then it follows that not everything that happens in the world is part of the deeds Gods. This God can never be equated with nature or with providence.

In this arguably too short overview of some highlights of his theology, the contours of resistance for Miskotte are starting to become clear. He was the theologian of the '**anti-heidens getuigenis**', the anti-gentile testimony. His theology was stamped indelible by the ground words of the testimony of the God of Israel, by his love, his faithfulness, his Word and his deeds. He lived in this world, he had thoroughly made it his own through his study of Jewish theologians, his study of the structure of Germanic lore and his familiarity with the writings of Barth. This means, in the context of resistance, that any given government can never be the primary way of structuring reality. Since absolutizing a regime is bordering on the sacrilegious, the way opens up to chart one's own course, independent of any absolutized form of governing. The same holds true to the ways of the church.

Although I can't say I am an expert on Tolstoy's anarchism, at a first glance there are some similarities between their ways of thinking. For Tolstoy, loyalty to the state was irreconcilable at odds with the loyalty to Christ. For Miskotte, the issue was not necessarily framed in terms of loyalty; the revelatory power of the words and deeds of the NAME are so real as to eclipse any other possibility of allegiance.

Resistance for Miskotte also meant to have a keen eye for contingency: the world did not have to be necessarily the way it turned out now. Another world is thinkable. This means that emphasis can become placed upon the human responsibility. Authority can never have the last word, because authority once again is part of those totalizing, all-encompassing gentile ideas.

Resistance for Miskotte was a labor of love, grounded in the particularity of the God who is love. Resistance thereby became a labor of love regarding the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk*. Here again, the existing church structures did not have the final word: Miskotte considered it as his duty to sincerely warn the church leadership and urge them to be more outspoken about the danger of National Socialism. Resistance was therefore very much situated in the public domain: Miskotte's influence in the *Doorbraak* movement right after the war, urged church ministers to let go of the pre-war *verzuiling* [pillarization] but instead to be a witness in the public domain.