

[The following is the authors' original article, published in November 13, 2018 as a contribution to the book review of the Center for Barth Studies in Princeton
<https://barth.ptsem.edu/miskotte-theoloog-in-de-branding/>]

de Liagre Böhl, Herman. Miskotte. Theoloog in de branding, 1894-1976 (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2016), 352 pp. €35,00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Eleonora Hof

Although the work and life of K.H. Miskotte is not yet widely read in the United States, the Dutch theologian, cultural critic, socialist and life-long friend of Karl Barth deserves attention for his existential, literary and creative theological adaptation of Barthian thought. Miskotte introduced, expanded and reworked Barth's thought for a Dutch context.

The commencing of Barth's and Miskotte's story can be traced back to February 1, 1923, the exact day when Miskotte read Barth's Römerbrief. Miskotte was clearly not impressed. In his diary, he audaciously accused Barth of Marcionism, a startling claim which could not be sustained. Yet, his claim reveals how Miskotte initially perceived Barth to be distinguishing between the God of the Old and the New Testament, due to Barth feeling threatened by the apparent severance of the bond between Christ and Christianity.

Consequently, Miskotte considered it his duty to write Barth a letter, insisting that Barth should pay greater attention to the theology of Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrugge. Barth, upon receiving this letter, was clearly not pleased with this intrepid and unsolicited advice, since he was already engaging the work of Kohlbrugge and acknowledging his influence on his own theology.

In 1937, Miskotte heard that Barth had begun the project of writing a systematic theology. Miskotte wrote Barth a letter in which he criticized this endeavor opining that Barth was forsaking his calling as a prophet. According to Miskotte, Christians should instead live in protest against the grounding structures of the current world, mirroring Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's novel. Naturally, Barth disproved of Miskotte's critique. To Barth, Ivan Karamazov's protest on its own was futile: its meaning is directly derived from the fact that his rebellion is embedded in the life of Christ who rightfully authorizes this protest.

Miskotte's reference to The Brothers Karamazov reveals how his reading of literary works informed his theology. Miskotte was deeply impressed by the beauty he found within literature and nature. He was also drawn to mysticism, because he was enticed by the lure of nature in his early life and Miskotte remained a sensitive soul overwrought with the impressions of beauty throughout his life. Miskotte's predisposition to romanticism and mysticism meant that he was not enticed by the dialectics of Barthian theology, hence his initial resistance to Barth's thought. We still do not have a satisfactory account of what ultimately led Miskotte to embrace Barth's theology, but when he did, it was decisive, and Miskotte remained a lifelong admirer and proponent of Barth. Miskotte saw in Barth's dialectics the discovery of the very structure of the biblical testimony itself. This uncovering of a new way to read the Bible led to an intense concentration on exegesis and hermeneutics.

Miskotte's own hermeneutic approach shows his fervent desire to take the foundational structure of the Biblical testimony seriously. He emphasized time and again in his Biblical ABCs that we do not yet know through reason or philosophy who God is – God reveals himself not in philosophical categories such as omnipotence or omniscience, but principally through his actions. Reading the Bible becomes thus an exercise in encountering the actions of God, which teach us the relational and personal character of God.

In the ensuing friendship between Miskotte and Barth, Miskotte's own character and expertise "surplus" of Miskotte remained visible, namely his artistic sensibilities, his knowledge about literature and his sensitivity for nature's wonders. Whenever they met, Barth would receive a "crash course" in recent literary developments. Nevertheless, they would never be complete equals in their friendship. Miskotte remained a pupil of Barth, even though Miskotte was a creative theologian in his own right, and Barth refused to seriously engage with Miskotte's pressing concern regarding Barth's rejection of infant baptism.

When the chair of systematic theology in Utrecht became vacant, efforts were undertaken to appoint Barth to fill this chair, since he was recently forced out of his chair in Bonn. Barth was eventually found to be too leftist—whatever that might have meant exactly in that context, we do not know—and Barth was asked instead to deliver a series of lectures at Utrecht. These lectures consisted of a treatment of the Apostles' Creed, and they were translated and annotated by Miskotte. The publication of these lectures was the very first Dutch translation of Barth's work and they made him accessible beyond the theological guild. Barth's lectures at Utrecht were published in English in 1962 as *Credo*.

In his wartime writing, Biblical ABCs, Miskotte paired his zeal for the foundational words of the biblical testimony with an exposition of the nature of pagan religion. The result was an accessible booklet aimed at congregants and pastors in Amsterdam, helping them to formulate a better resistance against the deadly Nazi-occupation in the Netherlands. A better resistance is a resistance grounded in a theological understanding of the pagan roots of national-socialism. The Biblical ABCs is currently being translated into English by Dr. Collin Cornell and myself, and is under contract with Lexington – Fortress Academic and will be in print in late 2019. .

As I wrote my dissertation on postcolonial missiology, naturally I read the section in the biography that discusses Miskotte's Indonesian travels with great interest. Miskotte was invited in 1937 to give a lecture series in present-day Indonesia, which was under Dutch colonial rule until 1949. The diary entries and letters written to his wife during this trip are preserved, and a selection is published in *K. H. Miskotte. een keuze uit zijn dagboeken en andere teksten* (Baarn: Uitgeverij de Prom, 1994). Miskotte himself spoke in private about the paradigmatic influence that this Indonesian trip had on his thought, but this influence never materialized in his work apart from three lectures he delivered in Haarlem on the topic of the church in the colony. De Liagre Böhl spoke matter-of-factly about the Indonesian trip and he praises Miskotte for his timely critique on the colonial church in Indonesia. However, when reading the diary entries of Miskotte himself, another image emerges, namely, of someone who was not exempt from the pernicious sexualization of indigenous women. Miskotte wrote at astonishing length and detail about the bare breasts of the women he encountered, barely concealing his own arousal. In one telling quote, which is included in De Liagre Böhl's biography, Miskotte fixes his gaze upon a pregnant woman, whom he

considers to be “bursting with life”. This sexualization of these indigenous women was an integral part of the colonial logic since celebration of the fertility of colonized women went hand in hand with the exploitation of their fertile and perceived virginal land. As such, Miskotte’s private remarks are far from innocent, since they lay bare how even well-meaning theologians were not exempt from the poisonous air of colonial rhetoric. The biographer would, therefore, have done well to devote more attention to this troubled dimension of Miskotte’s engagement with colonialism, which would have resulted in a more nuanced treatment. Given Miskotte’s complex personality, he was able to both denounce the colonial church, and still also embody a colonial male gaze at the same time.

For Barth scholars, this biography has much to offer, despite the fact that the book is only available in the Dutch language. The book offers a model for how to write a theological biography due to its accessibility, the seamless merging of the personal and the theological, and its avoidance of hagiography. Perhaps it is a sign of the times that it has become possible to discuss mental ailments and instability openly, and how these mental health issues impacted the work of highly-respected theologians. Miskotte is no different. His life was characterized by profound melancholic periods, interspersed with periods of almost maniacal productivity. Miskotte wrote his dissertation in only half a year. This feat is not simply a manifestation of genius, but it also signals a warning sign about his mental health. With sensitivity and empathy, De Liagre Böhl writes about the great tragedy that struck the Miskotte household in 1946. During this year, the Miskotte family attended a wedding ceremony and ate some contaminated fish. With the exception of Miskotte, everyone in the family fell seriously ill, which resulted in the death of Miskotte’s wife and daughter from a typhus infection. An intense personal and spiritual crisis ensued where Miskotte blamed himself for what happened, citing his occasional egocentric behavior in their marriage as the cause of the tragedy.

De Liagre Böhl’s biography is a helpful resource for both theologians and non-theologians. As the great-grandson of Kohlbrugge, De Liagre Böhl is not a theologian by trade, but rather a historian who has written well-regarded biographies of Dutch literary figures. De Liagre Böhl’s skill as a historian has enabled him to make theological concepts accessible for non-theologians without sacrificing quality.

Hopefully this biography might contribute to a more thorough reflection of the Barth-reception in the Netherlands, not just within historical studies, but also within the field of systematic theology as well. This biography could therefore be read alongside Susanne Hennecke’s monograph *Karl Barth in den Niederlanden Teil. Theologische, kulturelle und politische Rezeption (1919-1960)*. As the reviewer of this study, E.G. Meijering asserts that the waning influence of Barth in the 1960s in the Netherlands could have been related to the growing interest in the work of Martin Buber, of whose work Miskotte was, to put it in contemporary language, an “early adopter.” It remains the case, regretfully, that Barth called Buber disparagingly a “Neuphäsäer.” Since the interest in Jewish-Christian dialogue flourished during that time period, Barth’s unwillingness to engage Buber might have hampered his further reception in the Netherlands. Miskotte’s early dialogue with thinkers such as Buber, Rosenzweig, Ernst Bloch and Max Brod inoculated him against this pernicious sentiment, and this engagement functioned as a trailblazer for Christian-Jewish dialogue in the Netherlands.

Eleonora Hof (BA 2008, cum laude, ETF Leuven; MA 2010 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, cum laude; PhD 2016 Protestant Theological University Amsterdam) is a board member of the Miskotte Foundation and minister-in-training in the United Protestant Church in Belgium