

professors, authors, teachers, lecturers, international travelers, and co-parents, there really is no credible, compelling, or consistent theological excuse for assuming that the "man" has to do such and such because he is a "man". Therefore, when we discuss the five categories from our class room teachings, we resume this dialogue on the other side of the threshold of the academic space. In fact, in a very real sense, the title of this course could be called "Black Theology and Womanist Theology: from the kitchen to the classroom." The African American male has to learn a gender which opens itself to challenges and transformation in all areas of what it means to be loved by a God who wants liberation for the poor. Some of these inclusive and holistic areas are vulnerability, protection, intimacy, political protest, self-critique, new forms of leadership both in the home, church, and broader civic society, and other frontiers. My learning on this matter is a result of the creative intellectual challenges posed to me by my wife, a womanist scholar who draws her suggestions, wisdom, and criticisms from the areas of theology and anthropology, as well as from her life experiences.

The question of the creation of a new heterosexual black male gender, from the perspective of black theology, flows like a weaving process. It never progresses in a straight line. Like all scientific discoveries, quality relationships, and the implementation of the finest visions, becoming something new unleashes a quilting and layering process. Sometimes, the newness reveals itself as bright as the morning sun or as clear as the brilliance of a black summer night. Other times the struggle falters and goes backwards, gripped in the old hand of male privilege. But what has to be the foundation of this crucial effort is an openness to what black theology claims so adamantly. That is to say, God loves the poor and those who work on justice for the least in society. Here marks the purpose for the revelation of Jesus the anointed one on earth. Male chauvinism, which is the attitude of superiority, male privilege, which is the practice of this attitude, and patriarchy — the system which exists in spite of how nice individual men are — cut against everything that God, Jesus, and West African ancestors have called black men to be, say, and do. The good news is that African American men will be fully human when black women achieve their full humanity. I am because we are. And we are part of a faith and a tradition that says, "God may not come when you call God, but God is always right on time."

It is the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. that challenges all of us to go beyond our comfort zones and to pursue our vocations — to be and do what God has called us to be and do.²²

²²I thank my research assistant, Kurt Buhring, for reorganizing the content of this essay.

PAGANISM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

By Martin Kessler

Few of us give much thought to the subject of paganism. In its many forms it remains beyond detection to many, since it often remains in the shadows, only manifesting itself when a vacuum seems to invite it back. Our present progressive secularization seems to create new space for paganism to reoccupy and to some extent regain its former dominance.

Quite concisely, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th edition) defines paganism as "pagan beliefs or practices, a pagan religion, or, the quality or state of being a pagan." It further defines "pagan" as "heathen, especially a follower of a polytheistic religion...[and]...one who has little or no religion and who delights in sensual pleasures and material goods: an irreligious or hedonistic person." Though this definition more or less reflects popular usage, it hardly suffices as a working definition in this paper which takes its cues mostly from Kornelis Miskotte (1894-1976), a gifted Dutch pastor, literatus and theologian. He was also a remarkably creative biblical scholar, though he would not want to make that claim; he would prefer the label of a historian of modern European (literary) culture with an eye on theology and the Bible. As to religion, he saw the world in which he lived as composed of three groups: Pagans, Jews and Christians. These were the forms [Gestalten] of a simplified morphology of the history of thought. For him, the Bible was central in this definition; it is both Israelite and anti-pagan. An "Israelite" has been described (by another writer) as one who is addressed by the God of Israel; for Christians we would add, "and who in Jesus the Messiah has established his throne in history."² On the other hand, paganism stands apart from Judaism and Christianity; it finds its security in an eternally fixed, cosmic totality.³

Miskotte borrowed his definition of paganism from Franz Rosenzweig⁴ (1886-1929) and used it to characterize the language and structure of Scripture as anti-pagan.⁵ Paganism is

¹This paper is offered with the hope that it might generate some interest in the work of a great Dutch theologian who deserves to be better known in this country, Kornelis Miskotte.

²J. Muis, *Openbaring en Interpretatie. Het verstaan van de Heilige Schrift volgens K. Barth en K. H. Miskotte* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1989), 420.

³Muis, 421.

⁴Rosenzweig was a very influential Jewish thinker, best known as the author of *Der Stern der Erlösung* [*The Star of Redemption*] and as co-worker, until his untimely death, with Martin Buber on a German translation of the Hebrew Bible.

⁵Muis, 419.

the mythos of the "All," but for Judaism the key motif is "prophecy of the expectation," whereas for Christianity it is "witness of fulfilled expectation." Miskotte, who viewed Judaism more favorably than Christian theology has usually done, insisted that Judaism must not be regarded as a preparatory stage [Vorstufe] to Christianity, but as a religion that deserves to be considered independently. After World War II, when the Dutch Reformed Church wrote a new confessional statement, Miskotte published his own commentary on it. One of its chapters, "The Election of Israel," is now in English translation.⁶ This chapter illustrates how he, though he felt free to critique Judaism on certain points, also sought rapprochement with this religion. In fact, his phenomenological approach made for sympathetic exposition, not only of Judaism but also of paganism. Miskotte therefore rejected the usual pejorative labels Christians often attach to paganism. He proposed to honor paganism and claimed that we are all pagans, and that, in fact, we cannot be anything else!

The German Background

Before we go any further in trying to describe Miskotte's exposition of paganism, we should pay some attention to the historical life setting of his work, to help clarify his thought. Gradually, Miskotte became aware that what was going on in turbulent Europe of that decade (in 1933 Adolf Hitler had become the Reich's Chancellor of Germany, and Europe, step by step, moved toward World War II) was a revival of an earlier form of Germanic paganism. In historical retrospect, Miskotte asserted that paganism had never been fully overcome by Christendom. Though Christian preaching had had a significant impact on Europe, the continent was never fully Christianized. Miskotte explained that only exceptionally were Germanic tribes converted without the use of force and mass conversion.⁷ This was no surprise to him. Preaching, he said, comes from the outside. Faith is a choice, but "blood" is a fact. As an old saying puts it: "grace is not a heritage."⁸ Thus, there never was a parting of the ways between Christianity and paganism, since mutual tolerance was almost consistently advocated as it is today.⁹ The result was that Christian communities were hardly ever aware of the fact that their faith had a syncretistic flavor. A significant change, however, took place in Hitler's Germany: a surprising "acceleration of thought," where intolerance replaced tolerance and a dictatorial system prescribed the "Germanization" of Christendom. The Nazi state demanded that its ideology take precedence over the traditional belief system of the church. Miskotte commented: "The old gods are called back." Moreover, concomitant anti-Semitism, Miskotte felt, was not a tragic aberration but an alarm signal, to be explained as an explosion of postponed apostasy, the suffering from the division in many hearts, and the aftereffects of syncretism. All of this he saw

⁶Martin Kessler, *Kornelis Miskotte. A Biblical Theology* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1997), 114-121.

⁷Kornelis Miskotte, *Edda en Tora, Verzameld Werk 7* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1983), 340.

⁸Miskotte, 341.

⁹In Old Norse and Anglo Saxon literature (e.g., *Beowulf*) there is a frequent mixing of pagan and Christian motifs.

illustrated in the brand of paganism promoted by the Nazis and the overwhelming support it enjoyed in Germany.

As a child of his time and a student of culture, he expressed himself as a deeply frustrated "Germanophile," as a Dutch citizen who was fully aware that Dutch and German cultures were founded on similar traditions; their countries had shared a stable border for three centuries; before that they were joined in the German Empire. But he was convinced that the Nazis had created an enormous disconnect and were a profound disappointment to the Dutch, both in their virulent anti-Semitism and their belligerence which engulfed the entire European continent.

As early as 1934, Miskotte foresaw the gathering storm of Nazism over Europe. At this time, while he still served as a pastor, he began giving lectures on the material which he eventually collected in the book entitled, *Edda en Tora*.¹⁰ He claimed that he had written in a "generally intelligible" style, to promote communication. But nothing that Miskotte wrote is simple, in substance or style.¹¹ The comments made in this paper are largely based on Miskotte's *Edda en Tora*, in hopes that some may feel prompted to study the subject further and let Miskotte's voice speak more eloquently in our own time. This is not intended as anything like an exposition of the *Edda*, or even an outline of it, but as an illustration of certain motifs suggesting the contrast between Germanic paganism and biblical faith.¹²

Miskotte's Response: *Edda en Torah*

In his work *Edda en Tora*, Miskotte launched a detailed comparison between ancient Germanic myth and the Israelite Torah, so that burgeoning German paganism might be recognized for what it was. It ultimately led him to call for a separation between the modern offspring of the *Edda* and biblical faith, which he labeled, by way of shorthand, *Torah*. Note, he did not use Christianity for his comparison with revived Germanic paganism; he considered it too ambivalent, it had surrendered too much to various kinds of syncretism; neither did he use Judaism, probably for roughly the same reason. He chose the *Torah*, thus focusing on two sets of texts representing the two sides he wished to contrast.

Miskotte wrote both critically and sympathetically about paganism. His acuity, however, was not affected by the shocking historical developments he witnessed. We are all by nature pagans, he wrote; paganism is therefore not a German invention, but the religion of the human heart, always and everywhere. It seeks safety in what exists, which it always

¹⁰"The Edda" is an old Germanic (Norse) collection of epics and myths, dating perhaps from the 13th century. "Torah" as used by Miskotte stands for Scripture, and the Old Testament in particular.

¹¹For additional background, see the translation of the introductory chapter to this work in Kessler, 94-104.

¹²For a detailed survey of the field, see E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North. The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975). This work was found helpful in supplementing some of Miskotte's information.

sanctions. Since it lacks the prophetic critique we find in the Bible, it accepts the rule of chaos. It does not mind speaking about a god (or many gods), but it has no use for any commandments which god may have given — as opposed to Judaism, where the commandments are central.

Miskotte shares with Karl Barth the conviction that Israel's religion is anti-pagan. They were of a similar temperament on such issues, as both were in their principled opposition to Nazism. But whereas Barth fled Germany, finding refuge in Basel,¹³ Miskotte was able to fight the battle against totalitarian ideology in his own (German-occupied) country. Since Miskotte's time the religious scene has become more complex, and for this reason some of his proposals may appear somewhat outdated and not fully relevant to our world. But the case can be made that many of Miskotte's fundamental insights transcend his own historical context.

As indicated above, *Edda en Tora* was not so much a Christian critique of Nazism as it was a discussion of (one kind of) paganism — the kind illustrated by the mythology of the naturalistic religion of pre-war Germanic Nazi thought. This is what Miskotte had in mind when he discussed some ancient Nordic poems, which, he was convinced, inspired Nazi culture. Emotionally aided by the music of Richard Wagner, which Hitler so much enjoyed and which the Nazis enthusiastically promoted at their cultural center in Bayreuth, Germanic paganism entered the hearts and minds of the German people during the Nazi era; it contributed to their servility to Hitler's demonic agenda.

The *Torah* section of *Edda en Tora* discusses biblical teaching in contrast to the *Edda*. In eight chapters the author discusses eight topics and juxtaposes the views of Germanic mythology as reflected in the *Edda*, followed by his interpretation of the *Torah* on the same topic, as follows:

1. In the Beginning (Chaos and the Creator)
2. Becoming (Cosmology and History)
3. Fate (Fate and Divine Council)
4. Virtue (Paganism and Righteousness)
5. Resistance (Loki and Satan)
6. The Hereafter (Walhalla and Paradise)
7. Consummation (Fate of the Gods and Messianic Kingdom)
8. Discord and Apostasy

¹³At Miskotte's suggestion, Karl Barth gave a series of lectures in The Netherlands, in hopes that he might be offered a chair in that country, but Barth preferred German-speaking Basel.

In The Beginning: Chaos and Tradition¹⁴

The *Edda* speaks of many gods and god-like figures. It does not present them in a strict order, though there is a common origin and a common end; it moves between "eternal" birth and "eternal" death: countless births and innumerable ruins. Unlike the *Torah*, however, there was not a single God who brought the created world (as the biblical text puts it: "heaven and earth") into being. Essentially, the world was formed by primeval elements: wind and flame, wave and earth. *Ymir* was both the father and the mother of the *Giants*, the original generation of gods, which would live to threaten the world until the *Ragnarök* [Doom of the gods]. During a deep sleep he gained a son and a daughter. To feed them, milk flowed from *Audunla*, the cow. Unlike the Genesis narrative, all beings were self-originated and what they were, they remained.

The *Giants* lived by violence, but the other generation of gods, (strictly speaking, they were wizards) *Æsir* (Miskotte calls them *Asen*), resisted violence and promoted order. *Buri* was their father; one of his sons was *Odinn*, who lifted the earth to the sun, which produced *Midgard* (*Midhgardh*, the inhabited earth),¹⁵ which was surrounded by *Utgard* (the realm of the dead).

Even from these sketchy remarks about "creation" according to Germanic pagan mythology, we see a picture that differs radically from the *Torah*. In the *Torah*, "beginning" is understood analogically with history. It is therefore not surprising that Genesis 1 is often interpreted as history, since it opens with a temporal clause ("in the beginning," or, "when God began to create") and presents us with a series of subsequent acts. Such a sequence suggests to many readers a chronological order, so that it is understood as a historical account of the acts of *Elohim* (= YHWH, the LORD, the God of Israel), the God who made himself known later in theophanies to patriarchs and prophets. God created by his breath; God acted decisively to undo chaos and to replace it with an orderly creation. Unlike the myths, which proclaim the results of a marriage between heaven and earth, the *Torah* emphasizes the words and acts of the Creator. Chaotic powers are humbled so that they might serve their Creator in other ways as directed.

Germanic paganism blends God and the world. The world is not seen as a mechanism, or a creation, or a work of art, but as a power-laden organism. Chaos as freedom and coercion (as in the *Edda*) is opposed to order and obedience in the *Torah*. *Midgard* cannot be safe against the contiguous *Utgard* since chaos can never be conquered. This is in contradiction to the *Torah*, which insists that the Creator overcame chaos; in fact, several

¹⁴Miskotte, 53-82.

¹⁵The British film version of J. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, now showing in theaters, has revived this name as "Middle Earth," which is described as "the land where the epic journeys of the Lord of the Rings take place." It appears highly dubious that moviegoers are aware of the historical association of the name.

chaotic "factors" (such as Leviathan and Rahab) are presented as creatures and rendered harmless in the created world.

In Miskotte's opinion, *Elohim* [God] goes against the Arian instinct. The god of myth can be accepted by all, since this god is undeniable truth (reality), but the God of the *Torah* may be rejected. For Miskotte, the choice is between the All and YHWH [the LORD]. The comments in Miskotte's chapter on Creation juxtapose paganism and *Torah* in an incisive manner. He shows that paganism is always associated with chaos, from which it can never free itself, whereas according to the *Torah*, the Creator, as Lord, overcame chaos and is the ultimate Guarantor of order.

Becoming: Cosmology and History¹⁶

This topic links up with the discussion on Creation. Miskotte claimed that according to paganism the essence of the world is eternal becoming; being is becoming. In the cosmic becoming, the notion of history does not arise. Instead, Germanic mythology emphasizes the coming and going of generations of gods; it describes an unfolding theogony.

Ymir, father/mother of the *Giants*, the first order of gods, was killed by the sons of *Buri*, the ancestor of the *Æsir*; all of the *Giants* except one (who escaped mysteriously with his family to continue his evil race)¹⁷ were drowned by the blood of the killing. The *Æsir* which succeeded the *Giants* were more thoughtful, less driven and better armed. *Odhinn* and his brothers used the corpses of the *Giants* as building material for their new order: *Ymir's* skull became the firmament, his flesh became earth, his hairs forests, his veins rivers, and his brains clouds, with a dwarf supporting each of the four corners. We have noted above that the *Æsir* formed the *Midgard*, a "middle earth" between a world above and a world below, the world of humanity, fortified with a fence made of *Ymir's* eyelashes.¹⁸ *Yggdrasill*, the ever bright, holy tree, the tree of fate, on which the welfare of the world depended, was raised from unknown roots. It is, as Northrop Frye writes, a "world tree," sometimes identified with the tree of life, a kind of *axis mundi*, the vertical perspective of the mythical universe.¹⁹ It stands "somewhere," meaning "everywhere." It represents changing reality, a consideration of the dark side of things. It carries "power." From two trunks, which they found on the seashore, the *Æsir* created *Askr* and *Embla*, man and woman. They endowed them with breath, wit, hearing, vision and other qualities of life.²⁰ Gradually, the myth introduces the concept of "separation" (as in Genesis 1), representing a truce. Fixed rules were made for humans and families, tribes and nations. Names received sharp

contours, and there is a government.²¹ While form on one level appears to ban fear, its protection is minimal; it only functions as a boundary, temporarily keeping chaos at bay.

Odhinn was in charge of the gods. His name, also called *Woden* or *Wodan*, is related to the German verb "wüten" [rage, wreak havoc]. *Odhinn's* traditional companions were a stallion named *Sleipnir* (who galloped through the air and over sea, whose speed is suggested by the fact that he is portrayed with eight legs), two ravens (perched on his shoulders after reporting all that they had seen and heard during their travels while devouring the dead who had fallen in battle), two wolves, an eagle, and a serpent. He also carried a spear (his favorite weapon) and a waving banner. He became the guarantor of justice and the avenger of injustice, the god of the dead and the gallows. From the *Giants*, he acquired mead (a common fermented drink) and the art of poetry. The mythos of *Odhinn* is not pure paganism, however; a fair amount of Christian elements appears to be mixed with it. He hung on the tree for nine nights and rose from the dead.²²

As we learn in other mythologies (such as the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*), the gods' role is never static. *Odhinn*, the god of poetry, princes, and warriors, was the chief of the gods, the *Alfadir* [Father of all], but *Thor* [the thunderer], beloved by the peasants, eclipsed him in popularity (as Marduk of Babylon did the older gods of the pantheon). To many of the ancient Norse he was the noblest and most powerful of the gods. Daily he would wade through rivers and sit in judgment beneath the *Yggdrasill*. Many stories are told about his enmity toward the serpent, which may have been influenced by the biblical references to Leviathan or the dragon of Revelation.²³ As god of war, *Thor* used his hammer, which is sometimes symbolized by a swastika, found on rock-carvings.

Miskotte saw both chaos and order in the Germanic mythos, a world that was both habitable and inhospitable. He keeps emphasizing that chaos was never controlled or conquered in paganism. The *Æsir* remained threatened. All the while, the serpent *Nidhög* kept gnawing at the roots of the *Yggdrasill*, the "world tree," while its trunk was rotting. Clearly, such a world contains the forces for its own dissolution. Turville-Petre writes: "As the cosmos had a beginning, so it will have an end, which hangs over gods and men as a permanent threat."²⁴ Note that the gods go under as well. This is a world out of control: all of the gods are fighting. This is part of the *Æsir's* total mobilization, with *Thor* in the forefront, though *Odhinn* is also a war god and a promoter of strife. "All is struggle, because originally all was chaos. A higher authority, a norm, the possibility of a higher appeal is necessarily lacking...It appears that paganism never died...[it] could not die, and will never die as long as this earth is seen as '*Midgard*,' raised from chaos on the

¹⁶Miskotte, 81-141.

¹⁷Turville-Petre, 275.

¹⁸Turville-Petre, 276.

¹⁹Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 149.

²⁰Turville-Petre, 276.

²¹This is the type of data which prevents us from simply "demonizing" paganism.

²²Turville-Petre, 49.

²³Turville-Petre, 76.

²⁴Turville-Petre, 280.

back of the powers, who themselves originated from chaos, and who image an unending becoming."²⁵

The God of the *Torah*, Miskotte writes, is not a "becoming" God, an "incomplete" God. Neither do we think of the earth as becoming.²⁶ God created the earth as it is, readying it for the habitation of humanity.²⁷ Heaven and earth do not change; the births are over. The essential becoming is earthly: humanity continues in its earthly setting. What happens is history. But history in its decisive sense arises by the word and command of YHWH. Historiography is a prophetic task, and prophetic judgments are made on the basis of what is good in the eyes of YHWH, regardless of worldly success.

When the *Torah* refers to mythology (e.g. Genesis 6; the stars in the Song of Deborah [Judges 6]; Rahab and Leviathan), it does so creatively; the primeval powers are bereft of their divinity; they are used as toys for God, or put in a procession in God's honor (Pss 148:7), etc. In the *Torah*, the "original," the "primeval," is formally arranged as part of Israel's history. After all, history is about "the works of YHWH," for and through humans. In the Creator lies the continuity of creation and history (Jer 27:5; cf. Psalm 92). While the theater of YHWH's history appears small,²⁸ its horizon is wide, as the story moves from the creation of Adam [humankind] via the promise to Abraham to include the *goyim* [the nations of the world]. This is where the *Torah* directly confronts paganism, the common religion of humanity.

Miskotte concludes this chapter with a discussion of the Word. Instead of the "becoming" of mythology, the *Torah* emphasizes the historical character of becoming, which includes the Word.²⁹ Instead of archetypal powers moving spontaneously and unpredictably, Miskotte points to prophetic proclamation: "Thus says YHWH..." That is when the new is happening. The Word "happens" (Hebrew *hayah*) to and for humanity. It is broad but never loses its character as address. The Word is not a cause, it is not a thing (object) at all; the Word is not, it comes (Isa 55:8-11).

The Consummation

The gods are privileged in the sacred "board game," they have a "judge's chair," they are the "councillors," Miskotte writes. When the End is in sight, the *Fimbul* winter rules the earth:

²⁵Miskotte, 93.

²⁶Actually, "becoming" seems a rather tame term for use in Germanic myth, suggesting a more or less orderly evolution, whereas this myth is about a world that never rids itself of chaos, where the chief god is described as "raging."

²⁷This is not to say that the earth is not subject to change. But the world of the *Edda* looks like the world of the apocalyptic sections of the gospels.

²⁸See Nico T. Bakker, *History as a Theological Issue*, Translated by Martin Kessler (Leiden: Deo, 2000), especially Chapter 2: "The Minor Course of Events. The Bible as Micro-Story." This work expounds the Barthian/Miskottean view of history.

²⁹See Bakker.

three years without summer. The boundaries set by the *Æsir* to promote the well being of humans are violently demolished, and wickedness increases to the point that one's neighbor is one's deadly enemy. Chaos is taking over.

Ragnarök [fate of the gods], commonly rendered *Götterdämmerung* [twilight of the gods], is characterized by the return to chaos. All of the gods, including *Odinn*, engaged in a frantic killing party, and they all died. Turville-Petre describes the scene in horrific terms — though the element of decay seems to have been present almost since the beginning of time. One fearful scene succeeds another: murderers and seducers are wading through the swift venomous streams, while the cruel serpent, *Nidhög*, is sucking the corpses of the dead.³⁰ Three roosters crowed, presaging doom: one in the gallows tree, the second awakening *Odinn's* warriors in *Walhalla*, and the third, a red rooster, crowing beneath the earth in the world of death. *Loki*³¹ was in his element, manning the ship of the fire-demons. "Meanwhile, the whole of the giant world groans and the dwarfs sob before the doors of their rocky dwellings. The mountains crash and men tread the world of death. The sky is rent."³² *Odinn*, "father of the gods," is overcome by the *Fenrir* wolf, a most vicious wolf, who was ready to destroy everything before him. All the gods' raging was in vain. In the "fate of the gods" all was ruined, even *Loki*. *Thor* frightened the fire and poison spitting *Midgard* dragon and killed him, but *Thor* himself was then killed by the poison. Though labeled "fate of the gods," humanity is included in this scenario as well.

In the beginning was chaos, the eternal law pervading the Germanic myth. All of these epics are characterized by grim despair, transported ruin, and occasionally by acquiescence. The doom of the magic chasm rests on all beings, including the fate of the gods. The essential nothingness of life is not part of the proclamation of creation and of "God's way" but the imaging of eternal becoming and mute fate; only by way of exception, a beautiful flowering of peace of mind may occur, in which the wisdom of *Odinn* manifests itself.

Again, this topic is set forth in radically different fashion in the *Torah*, where the consummation takes place in time and in glory. God is king and God's dominion is never set aside. God is Lord of his people and is with them (Immanuel) to bless them; that is why prophetic theophanies are often introduced by the word: "Do not fear!" God's mercy and compassion overwhelm God's wrath. The Aaronic blessing (Num 6:24-26) is symptomatic of God's benevolence toward Israel. Miskotte, writing during the thirties, uses the word *Führer* for God as a deliberate contrast to Hitler, who, as a dictator, appeared more

³⁰Turville-Petre, 280.

³¹Loki is the subject of many divergent myths, presenting a puzzling deity. He is described as a great liar, a perjurer and a faithless friend of Thor, bisexual, and the parent of monsters. He felt free to abuse the gods at will (Turville-Petre, Chapter 5).

³²Turville-Petre, 281.

powerful than the old Germanic gods; but, as a human being, he increasingly showed his profound flaws (as did the pagan gods).

The God of Israel is confessed as King of the world. The church prays that God's kingship may come, that it may be fully manifest in the world. God's kingship is not an independent force, subject to becoming, but is inherent in God. Therefore, the manifestation of kingship is theophanic in nature. When God appears, there is God's kingship.

In his exposition, Miskotte borrows generously from the Psalter, Israel's song book. "Praise the Lord, for he is good, and his covenant faithfulness [*chesed*] is forever." That call strikes at the heart of paganism. In the chaos and confusion of paganism, there is no covenant and therefore no (reliable) faithfulness, only fate. But the *chesed* of the Lord is a basic motif ringing through the Bible. Miskotte writes:

Here is no more the indicative of the fact of creation, no longer the imperative of a salvific command, but the cohortative: 'Let us give thanks, let us praise (Halleluyah).' This is the biblical response of the people of faith. Moreover, praise points toward the consummation; the kingdom of this world is not (yet) identical with the Kingdom of God; neither are they competitors or rivals. God's way [*derek*] is in the world, through the world, but not of the world."³³

Miskotte cites Daniel 7 and the appearance on the clouds of heaven of a "son of man" (a human being) who came to the Ancient of Days and to whom was given eternal dominion. The consummation (the *eschaton*) mirrors the creation. As in Genesis dominion was granted to Adam the human, so in the consummation it is given to the Son of Man, the "second Adam." The victory of creation over chaos is re-enacted and completed in the consummation.

The eschatological disasters that Jesus speaks about in the Gospels are not "nature run amuck," as in the mythical *Fimbul* winter and other events of the *Ragnarök*, but are presented as eschatological events, acts of God. In the ominous scenario painted by the apocalyptic sections in the Gospels (as in Daniel), the reader is reassured that God is (and remains) in charge of the creation, the very creation in which God overcame chaos once and for all, as the psalmist testifies: "Before the mountains were brought forth and you formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Pss 90:2). Again, God makes this guarantee because of his covenant faithfulness [*chesed*]. The order that God created is directly related to the kingdom about which Jesus spoke constantly, and for the coming of which in its fullness we pray.

³³Miskotte, 324.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of *Edda en Tora* Miskotte calls syncretism "the perpetual plague of a half-hearted Christianity," a Christianity that needs to unravel itself from various forms of paganism. *Edda en Tora* is addressed to those who seem to act as if they were participating in a perpetual religious smorgasbord, ever feeling free to "pick and choose" but also to change their minds at will, fully convinced that they need not make anything resembling the commitment that biblical faith represents. This fits with a second aim of his book: not only to expose the revival of Germanic paganism, but also to issue a clarion call to Christianity to return to the *Torah*, the structures of which are shared with the Christian gospel of the New Testament. Miskotte insisted that the opposition between Germanic paganism (as inspired by the mythos of the *Edda*) and the *Torah* is irreconcilable and can only be overcome by a parting of the ways. Christianity must therefore make a clean break. Though he deftly sidestepped contemporary political questions — the likely reason why the Nazis did not persecute him! — careful Dutch readers knew very well that this book was about Nazism which it (obliquely) condemned in strong but reasoned terms. Fortunately (or unfortunately!) few, if any, Germans ever saw his book.

After World War II, the fall of Nazism changed the European cultural scene dramatically. Hitler's hard-driving ideology that ended in total defeat for his Nazi regime, was replaced by democracy and by prosperity such as Europe had never seen, with its attendant secularism, de-Christianizing and growing nihilism. In his magnum opus, *When the Gods are Silent*,³⁴ which Miskotte wrote in the 1960's, he described the nihilism of his time and confronted it with the Old Testament. Unlike *Edda en Tora*, his later book received ample attention; it saw three German editions as well as an English translation.

Unfortunately, we may fairly conclude that the calls by Miskotte and others like him did not gain sufficient converts to reverse Western Christian/pagan syncretism and undermine the nihilism of which he wrote so eloquently in his later work. Christian faith has been so thoroughly mixed with un-Christian "chaos-motifs" that we might well ask ourselves whether we are still Christians. In Chapter 12 of *Edda en Tora* Miskotte pleaded, quite a propos, for a division of the house, a parting of the ways. There he sounded a call to heed the *Torah*, which is directly related to prayers for the coming of God's kingdom and the church's living by hope.

In our world of "wars and rumors of wars" we are fully aware of the important role of chaos: the world where sin dominates. Paganism, as modeled by the Germanic mythos, revived with a vengeance during the 1930's, keeps repackaging itself in a variety of ways. On the other hand, people of faith rejoice at the experiencing of signs of the kingdom which are present everywhere and at all times, emboldening our continuing prayers. People of faith are invited to heed the message of the Word, which ties "beginning" and "end" together

³⁴Kornelis Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*. Translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

under the Lordship of YHWH, the God of Israel, and God's Son, Jesus the Messiah, whose Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection Christians celebrate. The New Testament emphasis on the "already" and the "not yet" of the coming of the kingdom puts a firm eschatological stamp on the way we face the future. The most important prayer of the church is the one our Lord taught us: "Thy kingdom come!" God's kingdom will ultimately establish in its fullness the order that God created, demolishing the remnants of chaos — the grand and ultimate mopping up operation. We cannot make peace or be reconciled with pagan myth that exalts chaos. Even though the powers of chaos do their best, God's work in Creation will not be undone by a skewed world that tries to undermine or deny God's Lordship. Ultimately, at the *eschaton*, God's Word will be established, our prayers will be heard, and the kingdom will come in fullness (Rev 22:20).

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL MINISTRY ORGANIZATIONS

By Lisa M. Leber

(These remarks were delivered at the Lutheran Services in America Annual Conference, April 11, 2002, Washington, D.C.)

Good morning. It is such a pleasure to be with all of you today. I want to begin by bringing you greetings from your brothers and sisters at Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries and particularly from our president, Daun McKee. Every day, together across the country, so many people in so many different places are touching the lives of those in need, and it is a great honor to look out at your faces and see the good work and the faithful service you represent. This morning, it is my task to do some theological reflection on social ministry. I probably should warn you now that I may raise more questions than I answer. That is okay, I think (and hope), as the work of theological reflection is not work that often leads to definitive guidelines or black and white rules. Each of us, and our organizations and boards, are charged with the on-going task of struggling with the question of how to faithfully do what we believe God in Christ calls us to do.

Our context for obeying God's call is continually changing: societal needs shift; our relationship with the government is evolving, as we contemplate programs such as President Bush's Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives; our resources are becoming constrained, as reimbursement systems become more and more complicated and as relationships with congregations and other donors are affected by the economy and many congregations' own struggles to maintain and grow their ministries. As we do the work of social ministry, we are engaged in the process of discernment — discernment of needs, discernment of opportunities, discernment of gifts, of economic and labor market realities, of leadership issues, of countless other particularities. We do that discernment as "social ministry organizations", a special sort of animal, with special sorts of characteristics. Today I want to look a bit at social ministry organizations and their role and identity in the Church, as I believe that examination can help us name some of the challenges we face as we struggle to live out our *institutional* calls to do God's work in the world.

I started out in what perhaps might be called the "traditional" model of ordained ministry. I graduated from seminary and served a large parish as an associate pastor for four and a half years. I also happen to be a lawyer and a little over two years ago, accepted a position as corporate compliance officer for Diakon. Although I received a call through my synod council to this position, more than a few times in the past two years, people — fellow Lutherans, I should add — have asked me the following: "Gee, how do you feel now that you're not a pastor anymore?" Or, "Lisa, what's it like now that you're no longer in the ministry?" When I have mentioned those questions to some of my ordained social ministry