Miskotte on God

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J. Muis

1. The cultural context of the Christian faith

According to Charles Taylor, in the Western world, we live in a secular age. This means, among other things, that to believe in the Christian God is just one of the many options. In our culture many different and contradictory perspectives and views co-exist, none of which can claim to be absolutely true. For people who are deeply influenced by a modern philosophy and postmodern culture the option of the Christian faith seems rather uncertain, if not illusionary. The explanation of the genesis of our postmodern condition is a difficult and controversial matter. For Kornelis Heiko Miskotte (1894-1976)[1], understanding the cultural context of our Christian belief in God was both a philosophical and a theological enterprise. He did not only describe, as Taylor does, the cultural developments and shifts of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that resulted in our pluralistic and relativistic culture. In a phenomenological approach, Miskotte tried to reduce the many different tendencies in our culture to two basic forms, radically opposed to each other and yet connected with each other under the surface: nihilism and natural religion, that is, the religious attitude of all people of all times of all places. Nihilism proclaims: God is dead, there is no truth. Nothing has an eternal value. History has no goal, our life makes no sense. The classical expression of nihilism can be found in Nietzsche. Natural religion, as Miskotte understands it, proclaims quite the opposite: God is alive as the force of life, an absolute power in nature and history. Submitting yourself to this power makes your life full of meaning and purpose. Religion connects us with an all encompassing totality in which we participate and that we can feel deep within ourselves. Nihilism criticizes religion as an illusionary fulfillment of life; there is literally nothing to believe in or to live for. Miskotte asks whether an absolute nihilism can be maintained, and argues it cannot. You simply cannot live without believing something which fills your emptiness. That is why nihilism can turn to a new … religion in which a part or aspect of reality such as life, the human mind, your own nation, or your own race is given absolute

[1] A fine introduction to Miskotte is: Martin Kessler, *Kornelis Miskotte. A Biblical Theology*, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press 1997.

value, and becomes your god. In a nihilist era, the gods of the world may seem dead, but they are only silent and can return and speak to us again whenever the silence of the nothingness of the world becomes unbearable.[2]

This is a brief summary of Miskotte's phenomenological analysis of modern culture. It appears that both nihilism and religion are deeply ambivalent. Religious people do not really believe that the totality of all that exists and all that happens is really trustworthy; therefore natural religion is not immune to nihilistic criticism. Nihilists cannot really live with nothing to trust; therefore nihilism is not immune to religious idolatry. It is this analysis that helped Miskotte and many Dutchmen to understand and to respond to the rise of national-socialism en anti-Semitism in the thirties and in the Second World War. It could be asked, whether it might be helpful as well for the understanding and theological response to our cultural situation, which is marked by tension and conflict between the nihilism of the elites and the fear and hatred of strangers among parts of the population. Can this conflict be understood as an opposition between an empty universality and an idolatrous particularity?

Miskotte does not only offer an analysis. He also theologically evaluates the ambivalence of both religion and nihilism. In his view, both are, although in different ways, a revolt against and a rejection of the strange God of the bible, the God of Israel, the God of the Jews. More specifically, natural religion rejects Gods special revelation in his Name and in Jesus Christ; nihilism rejects the good Creator of heaven and earth, who gives us a good life on earth. Seen this way, natural religion denies the particularity of the God of Israel, nihilism his universality.

2. Traditional Christian God-talk as part of the problem

Now, the question is how church and theology can articulate their belief in God in the context of this cultural constellation. Before we look at this question more closely, we should ask what role the church itself has played in the developments which led to this situation. Has the church really proclaimed the biblical God who is particular and general in his own way, or has it proclaimed the God of natural religion, which has been exposed by nihilism as a human projection and illusion? Of course, there is no easy answer to this question. Undoubtedly, the church has intended and attempted to proclaim the biblical God. In Miskotte's view, however, this proclamation was often a mixture of biblical notions and religious and philosophical elements

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[2] Kornelis H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, New York: Harper and Row 1967 [1956].

from other sources and traditions, a mixture that could easily be construed as a form of natural religion, to the totalizing tendencies of which the revolt of nihilism was all too justified.

I will illustrate Miskotte's claim that traditional Christian talk about God is an amalgam of biblical and pagan notions with a brief sketch of the development of the doctrine of God. Christian theology traditionally departs from a general notion of God. This notion is general in two respects. First, all people sense in one way or another that a God exists and they know approximately what is meant by the word 'God'. How differently this notion may be spelled out in different religious traditions, the notion of God itself is universal. The Christian tradition has accepted this general notion as point of departure because of its belief in God the Creator. As their Creator, God is the God of all creatures and all people. As creatures all people sense somehow that they originate in God. This notion of God is not only general in the sense that it is shared by all people. Second, it is also general in the sense that God is primarily conceived of as the God of all reality. God is somehow present and somehow experienced in all that exists and in all that happens. In addition, God is strongly associated with reality as a whole, that is, with the totality of being.

As such, this general notion of God is rather vague. Therefore, this God had to be further qualified. This was done by predicating certain attributes of him. Of course, in the practices of the Christian faith, many predicates were taken from the bible, such as loving, caring, graceful, merciful, faithful, and so on. But in theological reflection on the concept of God, other terms seemed more appropriate. Many of these terms were philosophical in origin; they had been coined in philosophical reflection on reality and had acquired their conceptual content in different philosophical systems. Greek philosophy asked for the ground and origin of reality as a whole. For most Christians and Church fathers, this cause, the first cause, seemed to be identical with the Creator-God of the bible. The philosophers also asked for the unity of all things and found it in the underlying 'being' in which all existent things participated. It was claimed that this underlying being was unchangeable and eternal. To Christian theologians, terms such as 'cause', 'being' and 'eternal' seemed very useful to further qualify the general notion of God. As a consequence, they described God in terms that had been constructed for the metaphysical understanding of reality as a whole. By doing so they risked describing the God of the bible in the framework of a metaphysical system which itself did not originate in the bible. This use of philosophical terms in the Christian doctrine of God poses two questions. First, how are these philosophical notions and concepts related to the biblical ones? Second, can the divinity of the

biblical God adequately be described in terms that originate in metaphysical reflection on the ground and unity of being as such and as a whole?

All this may seem rather theoretical. Let me give you a concrete example of this in the Reformed tradition. The *Confessio Belgica* (1561) states in its first article:

> We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God -- eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good.

In this statement the question what kind of being God is, is answered by the description 'a single and simple spiritual being'. That this being is a person is not explicitly stated. Instead, the notion of simplicity in the sense of 'being without any composition', which is borrowed from Plato and Plotinus, plays a dominant role. This single and simple being is further qualified by a series of attributes. When we look at this series, three points are striking. First, the philosophical attributes such as eternal, unchangeable, infinite come first; attributes as wise, just and good which can be found in de bible follow them. Second, these philosophical predicates have been acquired by denying something, *via negativa* that is: eternal (not in time), incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable and infinite. In the reformed tradition they are called incommunicable attributes because God and creatures cannot have them in common. Third, the positive, biblical attributes, wise, just, and good are not very specific; they can also be predicated of the virtuous man of Aristotelian ethics. Specific biblical predicates such as graceful, merciful, loving, faithful are not mentioned. In this approach, the divine mode of being of God is articulated by means of the incommunicable attributes, that is, be denying characteristic features of created being. In addition, these incommunicable attributes come first, which might suggest that they are more divine than the positive, communicable ones. Thus, God is distinguished from the world by separating him from the world.

Miskotte argues that this is not the biblical way to talk and think about God for two reasons. The first reason is that in art. 1 of the *Belgica* God is not referred to by his proper name, but by a general concept. However, in the bible, God is primarily referred to by his proper name YHWH and by uniquely identifying descriptions such as 'the Father of Jesus Christ our Lord'. In the biblical witness it is not presupposed that the particular God to which these definite expressions refer is identical with the entity all religious people refer to when they speak about

'God'. The main theological issue of the Old Testament is not whether there is one God, but whether this God is our God. As Miskotte puts it in a telling phrase, 'Monotheism is not particular.' Therefore, theology which follows the biblical way of speaking about God should not take as its starting point that the Christian God is identical with the God to which the general notion of God refers, the God of natural religion. But the *Belgica* seems to be doing just this when it defines God as 'a single and simple spiritual being'.

Second, in the bible, God is primarily characterized by the attributes he displays in specific actions to and concrete encounters with particular human beings. It is in and by these actions and encounters that God's divine attributes and his divinity are revealed by God and discovered by men, not apart from them in an abstract philosophical reflection. As Miskotte puts is: God distinguishes himself from the world *in the world*. It is here, where we live and die that we meet with the living God who is in our life, and above all living and dying. This means that God shares our life and our time in order to meet with us. God displays his divinity in the way in which he interacts with human beings. And this particular God who can meet with us here and now is at the same time the God who lives in eternity. To think biblically about God's attributes is to start from the biblical witness about God's specific actions and encounters in human life and history. It is from these actions that we get to know God's attributes or virtues, as Miskotte calls them with Calvin.

When Miskotte wrote *Biblical ABC* in 1941, his method of analyzing biblical texts about God's actions and attributes and his proposal to understand God's attributes from his actions was highly original. A similar approach can be found in Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* (1997).[3] Brueggemann starts his description of the core testimony of the Old Testament with verbal sentences about God's actions, and then discusses adjectives which characteristically mark YHWH. However, there is a major difference between Miskotte and Brueggemann. Brueggeman describes the bearer of the divine attributes by exploring the various noun metaphors for YHWH. In Miskotte's view, all adjectives which denote God's attributes are related to the one Name. This has far reaching consequences for the way in which Miskotte and Brueggemann understand the tension and the coherence between the divine attributes. Focusing on the Name, Miskotte argues for a biblical notion of divine simplicity in order to avoid the idea that the God of the Old Testament is ambiguous and cannot really be trusted.

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[3] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1997.

When we draw the systematic-theological consequence of Miskotte's hermeneutical and biblical-theological analysis of the biblical talk about God's attributes, we should start the doctrine of God with his communicable, positive attributes, not with the incommunicable, negative ones. The consequence is not that we have to leave aside the incommunicable attributes altogether. God is indeed eternal, to mention just one fundamental incommunicable attribute, but his eternity is not a platonic eternity beyond time, but an eternity which allows him to be both above time and in time. This means that the concept of the eternity of God cannot be merely a negative one; it has to be positive as well because his eternity enables God to interact and communicate with people who live in time.

When we start our theological reflection on God with his particular name and with the attributes which are revealed and discovered in specific actions and encounters, we think from the particular to the general, not from the general to the particular.

3. Four implications of the 'Name' for reflection on God

Now I would like to further illustrate the systematic relevance of Miskotte's analysis of the vocabulary and theological grammar of the biblical witness by an example. This example is the Old Testament notion of the name of God. In Miskotte's view, the name of God is important to understand adequately the identification, the presence, the revelation, and the universality of the God of Israel.

1. (Identification). According to the Old Testament, God appears in the history of Israel as a God among other gods and among other powers who try to rule the lives of human beings. According to the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3, God himself has made known his proper name YHWH to Moses. By giving his proper name God himself has identified himself as a particular God. By identifying himself God at the same time distinguishes himself from other gods. He says who he is, amidst and against other beings and powers who claim to be god. To believe in this God demands from pagans a conversion from their own gods.[4] God's divinity should therefore be understood from the particular way in which he is God; not from a general notion of divine being.

Moreover, by his name God has identified himself as a personal being. God gives his name in order to enable his people to address him. This God wants to be addressed by people and

[4] Cf. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology. I The Triune God*, New York: Oxford University Press 2001, 50-53.

he is willing to answer them. Because only personal beings can answer when they have been addressed, this God is a personal being. Therefore, his divine mode of being cannot be understood in such a way that his personal being is denied. The being of God is not beyond personal being. We should not oppose divine being and personal being, as is often done in philosophical theology, but instead draw a distinction between divine personality and created personality.

By giving his proper name God has established and confirmed a specific personal relationship with his people, a covenant. That God does not hide his proper name from people indicates that he is not intending to remain an ineffable mystery for human beings. On the contrary, he wants a relationship with them, and in this personal relationship he is completely God and completely himself. It is essential for this God to be in a covenantal relationship. Thus, for this God, relationality is not accidental, as Aristotle says, but essential. This brings us to the second point.

2. (Presence). Generally, proper names need not to have a meaning in order to identify particular beings. This does not exclude that proper names *can* have a meaning. When proper names do have a meaning, they can not only be used in order to identify, but also in order to describe. In the story of Exodus 3, YHWH has a meaning that be paraphrased as: 'I will be with you in the way in which I will be with you.'[5] So, this name means a promise of new, surprising divine presence in the future. This is a specific kind of presence. It is not an impersonal, general cosmic presence under and in all that exists and all that happens, such as the presence of being in existent beings. The being of this God is 'being-with', being-with other persons that is, relational being. Therefore, we cannot speculate about divine being apart from the 'being-with-us' of this God.

But not only does the name YHWH describe God's mode of being. The name YHWH can also be used as a sign of God's actual presence. Instead of YWHW, Miskotte often speaks of 'the Name' just like the rabbinic tradition speaks about *Hashem* in order to indicate the presence of this particular God. When we use the expression 'the Name' to indicate God's presence among us, we use it as a deictic term or indexical. An indexical is a word that refers to something or someone which is present in the situation of the speaker. So, instead of 'the Name', we could also say: 'He', 'You or 'Him'. This is the reason why Buber and Rosenzweig have translated the

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[5] According to Jenson, 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' is both a proper name and a description as well; Jenson, *Systematic Theology I*, 46.

proper name YHWH in the Old Testament by ‘HE’, ‘YOU’ or ‘HIM’ in the different situations in which the name YHWH is mentioned by speakers. To pronounce this name is to be aware of the actual, personal presence of this God.

3. (Revelation). When Miskotte talks about ‘the Name’ in the absolute (without a genitive, that is) he not only uses it as an indexical, a sign for God’s presence, but also as a synonym for ‘revelation’. This is because a particular God can only be known in particular events in history in which he acts and reveals himself to particular people.[6] Therefore, Miskotte argues, revelation of this particular God can only be special revelation. A general revelation in all that exists and in all that happens can only produce a general notion of God, but it cannot reveal this particular God. If we cannot presuppose an identity between the God of natural religion and the God of Israel, the particular God of Israel cannot be known from a general revelation in nature and history. All that exists and happens in the world does not reveal this God. On the contrary, it often hides God and his grace, his mercy, his faithfulness. Particular revelations are needed to interrupt situations in which God is hidden.

4. (Universality) All this could easily lead us to the conclusion that the biblical God is not the general God of all people. But this would be wrong. This God, who identifies, presents and reveals himself in particular events in particular times and places tot particular people, is the Creator, the God of all times and places and of all people. According to Miskotte, the biblical narrative shows us that this particular God of Israel himself is on the move from Israel to the gentiles in order to become known by them as their King and their Creator. His name will be revealed to all people in the course of history, and in his coming Kingdom all people will praise him as the only true God. So, the Name does not deny the universality of God, but it does imply that the full revelation of this universality is eschatological.

4. Theology in a modern and postmodern context

Let me conclude my introduction to Miskotte’s reflection on God by returning to our cultural context. The theological implications of the biblical notion of the name of God can also help us to assess the western cultural context of church and theology. I shall try to point this out briefly and roughly. The classical, pre-modern theological tradition assumed that God is in some way present in all that exists and happens and therefore in some way revealed to and known by all

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[6] For an explanation of why and how the attributes of God can be known from his revealing actions see J. Muis, 'Can Christian talk about God be literal?', *Modern Theology* 27, 4 (2011), 593-600.

people. God is just as present and revealed to us as the world. This means that God cannot be hidden. However, the biblical God can hide himself from the world and from us. He is free to reveal himself and free to hide himself. The classical, pre-modern sense of God's presence can insufficiently take into account that God can be hidden. This is, at least in part, because it presupposes a Greek notion of general being in all existent beings, in terms of which divine being was explained. Modernity destroyed this classical world-view. Instead, it took the knowing human subject as starting point and considered the world as object of human knowledge. Kant's epistemology is a paradigm. In this approach, God no longer belongs to the things we can know and a particular revelation cannot be accepted because it is not general and rational. The worldview of modern philosophy excludes the possibility of special revelation. Therefore, Christian theology can accept modern criticism of classical ontology, but it must also reject the worldview of modern epistemology itself. Modern epistemology is also rejected by postmodern philosophy. Is there some affinity here between Christian theology and postmodern philosophy? Postmodern philosophy deconstructs the rationality of the knowing subject and the objectivity of the world as an illusion. As a result, postmodern philosophy can accept many perspectives and many particular gods, but only for particular groups of people. No perspective and no god can be claimed to be true and universal. In a sense, this reminds us of the polytheistic situation of the Old Testament. Postmodernism can help us to describe our present situation in the west. But it can not offer a theological solution because it denies that a particular God can be the true and only God of all. An interesting theological response to both modernity and post-modernity is the school of Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank, Hart). This school develops a theological meta-narrative or worldview as an alternative for both the meta-narrative of modernity and the many small stories of postmodernism. However, Radical Orthodoxy seems to advocate a return to a neo-platonic, pre-modern ontology of participation in order to make Christian talk about God plausible again. Its criticism of modern philosophy is refreshing. But the question must be asked whether a neo-platonic ontology is compatible with the Name. Answering this question, however, would require a different lecture. So, I have to stop here.