

# A Dutch Response to Nihilism: an Evaluation of K.H. Miskotte's Interaction with Nietzsche

**Ad Prosman**

Minister; Protestant Church in the Netherlands

E-mail: [adprosman@solcon.nl](mailto:adprosman@solcon.nl) [adprosman@gmail.com](mailto:adprosman@gmail.com)

---

## Abstract

This article discusses the way in which the Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte interpreted the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche. It will be pointed out that religion is the central notion of Miskotte's approach of Nietzsche. Discussing this theme, it will be necessary to pay attention to the concept of Nietzsche's nihilism. From there we receive a clearer insight in the interaction between Miskotte and Nietzsche. It is expected that examining nihilism and the interaction with nihilism will be helpful to contextualize theology. The method of Miskotte is attractive because he does not evaluate nihilism in a philosophical manner, but he counters it by the Thora. Belief stands against belief. Nevertheless we can ask whether Miskotte's concept of religion is adequate enough to tackle the problems we have to deal with in our nihilistic culture. Is Miskotte right when he connects nihilism and religion, and what kind of religion is he connecting with nihilism?

## Keywords

Nietzsche, Miskotte, nihilism, theology, Western culture

When we discuss nihilism, we must realize that Nietzsche offered his profile of nihilism as a worldview in opposition to Christianity. Nihilism is not a mere negative notion that covers all forms of discontent or evil. Since Nietzsche, nihilism is recognized as a counterforce, particularly in the West-European culture. This paper discusses how the Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte interacted with the nihilism of Nietzsche.

## The Death of God and Nihilism

In order to understand the argumentation between Miskotte and Nietzsche, we must first establish what Nietzsche's philosophy of nihilism entailed. We will begin by recognizing that Nietzsche's nihilism is closely connected with

the death of God. Nietzsche's proclamation that God is murdered is embedded in his nihilism. That is to say: we cannot understand the death of God without Nietzsche's concept of nihilism. His nihilism has inevitably the outcome that God has to die. And when Nietzsche is questioned about what nihilism is, we discover that the essence of his nihilism is the death of God. The one is linked with the other. To clarify his philosophy, we will briefly consider this intertwining of the death of God and nihilism. After that, we will discuss Nietzsche's concept in more detail.

Nietzsche's case against God, Christ, and the church is not a peripheral critique that is isolated from the heart of his philosophy. We must stress that Nietzsche's view on God, the cross of Christ, and Christianity form an integrated part of his overall vision of history, culture, and science. Nietzsche's significance lies within this point. In spite of his hard words directed to the Christian faith—and especially to Paul—Nietzsche's attack on Christianity was intended to be positive. In his view, it is necessary to overcome Christian faith and the belief in God, as well as the influences of Christianity, in order to clear the way for an alternative concept for West-European culture. Europe must cut itself off from both its Jewish-Christian and Platonic-Christian roots. Only then will Europe have a future. Christianity is, in Nietzsche's opinion, a decrepit concept that no longer meets the needs of our culture. On the contrary, Christianity has undermined and hollowed out the vitality of our culture. Moreover, Christianity can be seen as the instigator of wars such as the world never has seen.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche follows this development with disgust.

In Nietzsche's eyes, Christianity is a nihilistic religion—a religion that lives in war with this earthly reality. Nietzsche states that the cause of this lies in the Christian idea of a perfect, transcendent world that entirely subjugates earthly reality by its standard. The transcendent world—ideas, heaven, God—injects people with resentment and rancour. People know that they do not live up to the demands of this transcendent reality. Jealousy, dissatisfaction, anger, and hatred originate from the demands of that perfection. In the end, this development of progressing resentment results in violence because it will be proved that earthly reality is stronger. Nietzsche declares that there is an immense struggle going on between the truth and the lie—the lie being Christianity that is thousands of years old.<sup>2</sup> The nearer that Christianity comes to its end, the more the tensions in the world will mount until they reach a moment of

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, eds. Vol. 1-15 (München: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988) 6, 366; abbreviated as KSA.

<sup>2</sup> KSA 6, 366.

discharge. Nietzsche does not claim these things by means of a merely intuitive forecast, but as the outcome of his analysis. According to Nietzsche, a culture that is impregnated by Christian and Platonic standards and values must follow this path.

### K.H. Miskotte

Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte (1894-1976) was initially a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, and in 1945 became a lecturer in systematic theology at the University of Leiden. During the period that he was active as a pastor, he was increasingly interested in the cultural situation of his time. He was anxious about the rise of Nazism in Germany. Miskotte was convinced that it was a revival of paganism. These developments challenged him to study Judaism, which resulted in his dissertation—*Het wezen van de Joodsche religie* (The Essence of the Jewish Religion). In his study *Edda en Thora*, he opposed Thora and Edda and compared the roots of biblical faith and pagan religion. His influential book, *Als de goden zwijgen*, must be mentioned here.<sup>3</sup> He discussed Nietzsche's nihilism in both works. Miskotte's theological oeuvre is marked by an intensive debate with modern West-European culture. His Nietzsche interpretation can help us discover the threat of Nietzsche's nihilism for the present situation of church and theology.

Few theologians have seen the importance of Nietzsche for the cultural situation of the 20th and 21st century.<sup>4</sup> A glance at the Nietzsche reception by theology shows that it is difficult for theology to deal with both Nietzsche's attack on Christianity and his nihilism. This is especially true for Reformed theology. Only a few names can be mentioned here, such as the Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte and the Dutch theologian and philosopher of culture F. de Graaff.<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth was not especially interested in Nietzsche.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> K.H. Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen. Over de zin van het Oude Testament* (Haarlem: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1966). American edition: *When the Gods are Silent* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> See, for the theological Nietzsche reception in the 20th century: A.A.A. Prozman, *Geloven na Nietzsche. Nietzsches nihilisme in de spiegel van de theologie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007). Chapter 8 deals with Miskotte's reaction to nihilism.

<sup>5</sup> F. de Graaff, *Het Europese Nihilisme. Over de achtergronden van de westerse cultuurcrisis* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1956); F. de Graaff, *Nietzsche* (Den Haag: Voorhoeve, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Only in an excursus in *KD III/2*, 276-290, Barth pays explicit attention to Nietzsche, when he discusses essential aspects of Nietzsche's morality of the *Übermensch*. Barth paid no special

Lutheran theologian Eberhard Jüngel provided a penetrating examination of Nietzsche's nihilism.<sup>7</sup> In his study, *Existiert Gott?*, the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng presented a good summary of Nietzsche's nihilism.<sup>8</sup> When we look at radical theology, its major representatives, such as J.A.T. Robinson and Dorothee Sölle, scarcely cite Nietzsche. The only adherent of radical theology who really deals with Nietzsche's nihilism is Thomas Altizer.<sup>9</sup> The theologian-philosopher Jean-Luc Marion devoted penetrating studies about Nietzsche and the divine.<sup>10</sup> The limited attention that theologians have had for Nietzsche contrasts with the state of affairs in philosophy. Even before Heidegger, but especially after the publication of his two volumes on Nietzsche,<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche's influence has grown extremely in philosophy.<sup>12</sup> When we leave the analyses of Miskotte, Jüngel, and Marion out of consideration, it is fair to say that theologians have passed over Nietzsche and his nihilism.<sup>13</sup> This situation is not satisfying because Nietzsche's philosophy and nihilism have set the trend for present Western-European culture.

The importance of Miskotte's Nietzsche interpretation can be given more weight when we realize that the inclination to limit the problems that were brought up by Nietzsche exists in the reception of his work. Nearly everyone who discusses him chooses his own target: for example, Nietzsche's morality

---

attention to Nietzsche in his history of the theology of the 18th and 19th century: *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1946; Siebenstern-Taschenbuch 177 and 178, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Eberhard Jüngel's debate with Nietzsche can be read in his *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt. Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 2001,) 167-203.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Küng, *Existiert Gott? Antwort auf die Gottesfrage der Neuzeit* (München/Zürich: Piper Verlag, 1978), 383-440.

<sup>9</sup> See for Thomas J.J. Altizer, especially the book published together with William Hamilton: *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis/New York/Kansas City: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966). More fundamental are his books: *The Genesis of God. A Theological Genealogy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) and *Godhead and the Nothing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance. Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press 2001). See especially, 27-78.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche I, II* (Stuttgart: Verlag Günther Neske, 1961).

<sup>12</sup> The following series can be mentioned: *Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschung* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1972). *Beiträge zu Friedrich Nietzsche. Quellen, Studien und Texte zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung Friedrich Nietzsches* (Basel: Schwabe, 1999). *Nietzsche Studien. Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche Forschung* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1972). *Nietzsche in der Diskussion* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Marion is more active as a philosopher of religion than as a (systematic) theologian.

(Barth), Nietzsche's concept of God (Jüngel), Nietzsche's concept of reality (Küng), Nietzsche and the ontotheological framework (Marion)—or there was only attention for the fact that Nietzsche abolished the 'metaphysical God' (radical theology). Theologians have insufficiently recognized that Nietzsche's thinking covers a very broad spectrum. Moreover, his nihilism cannot be considered only as a philosophy; it has to be characterized as a pseudo-religion.<sup>14</sup> Miskotte has recognized this point, and, for this reason, his Nietzsche reception has importance.

### Miskotte, Religion, and Nihilism

Within this section, we will discuss how Miskotte has reacted to Nietzsche. Throughout his life, Miskotte was intensively occupied with Nietzsche.<sup>15</sup> Miskotte calls him the wonderful Nietzsche whom he wants to honor as one of the most noble people that humanity has brought forth.<sup>16</sup> Especially in *Edda en*

---

<sup>14</sup> Pseudo-religion when judged from the Christian view. In a letter to his editor, Nietzsche speaks of his book, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*) as 'a poem or a fifth gospel'. He calls it also a new holy book. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Über die Verbesserung der guten Nachricht. Nietzsches fünftes 'Evangelium'. Rede zum 100. Todestag von Friedrich Nietzsche gehalten in Weimar am. 25. August 2000* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 2001), 25. Nietzsche did not give a definition of religion. I will make some remarks concerning Nietzsche's notion of religion. Leppers defines the essence of Nietzsche's concept of religion as a myth building power, Philippe Leppers, *Genie vs. God. Religie en Christendom in het vroege werk van Friedrich Nietzsche in de context van zijn 'kosmodicee'* (Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2004), 203. This aspect shows considerable similarity with Miskotte's description of religion. Other aspects of Nietzsche's notion of religion: the important role of the Dionysus cult. Nietzsche's theory and practice of religion is inspired by the Dionysus cult. See, for the connection between the Dionysus cult and the Ass Festival in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 114-117. The Dionysus cult is the celebration of life, and life is the earthly life with pain and death. Against this background, we understand that religion must reconcile life with suffering. He not only considers Nietzsche's religion as a valuable aspect of human existence, but he also relates it to the will to power. As opposed to Christianity, which weakens man, Nietzsche's religion emancipates man. Here we collide with Miskotte's notion of religion. In Miskotte's concept it is impossible that religion emancipates because religion is static, unmoving, and timeless. I will further elaborate on this in *Miskotte's Definition of Religion and Nihilism, Religion and Biblical Faith*.

<sup>15</sup> From his early period, we have the lectures in the Dutch Indies in 1934 and 1937 with many references to Nietzsche, and from his last period the article "God voor en na zijn dood" in K.H. Miskotte, *Verzameld Werk*, Vol. 9 (Kampen: Kok, 1990), 285-292.

<sup>16</sup> Miskotte, "God voor en na zijn dood," 286.

*Thora*,<sup>17</sup> but also in *Als de goden zwijgen*, Nietzsche is present in the foreground as well as the background. Miskotte did not write a monograph about Nietzsche, but was in discussion with him throughout his works.<sup>18</sup> Miskotte points out, better than other theologians, that Nietzsche did not speak of the death of God, but of the murder of God. Miskotte strongly emphasizes that, in agreement with Nietzsche (aphorism 125 of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*), there is blood on our knives because God has been murdered.<sup>19</sup> Miskotte has a deeper insight than other theologians in what it meant for Nietzsche to proclaim the death of God. God did not die as the other gods. In fact, gods never die, they always return.<sup>20</sup> After his violent death, God did the same.

## Religion

Inspired by Barth's theology, Miskotte contrasts religion and biblical faith. Religion is the experience of a cosmic balance by means of ritual practice. The outcome is an affirmation of the spiritual life. Biblical faith is aimed at the word; it disturbs and interrupts.<sup>21</sup> Miskotte quotes Barth, who says that religion is the affair of ungodly people.<sup>22</sup> Because religion has its source in human experience, it has nothing to do with biblical faith. Thus, Barth opposes revelation and experience. Miskotte's theology is similar to Barth's position, but has his own accents. Miskotte's is less dogmatic and has a less argumentative

<sup>17</sup> K.H. Miskotte, *Edda en Thora, Verzameld Werk*, vol. 7 (Kampen: Kok, 1983). The *Edda* contains mythical poems from Iceland and collected in the Codex Regius. In his original study, *Edda en Thora*, Miskotte wants to show that the Thora is the unique unmasking of Germanic paganism.

<sup>18</sup> See, for an extensive analysis of Miskotte's relation to Nietzsche, the study of K. IJkema, *Nietzsche in de hermeneutiek van K.H. Miskotte* (1999). I disagree with IJkema when he thinks that the death of God is to put out of action a framework of sense and meaning in the philosophy of Nietzsche (IJkema, *Nietzsche*, 138). Nietzsche's nihilism does more; it is directed at the heart of Christian faith—salvation.

<sup>19</sup> "God is niet, zoals de goden der oudheid, een natuurlijke dood gestorven, maar hij is vermoord (...) [God did not die a natural death as did the gods of antiquity, but he is murdered], Miskotte, "God voor en na zijn dood," 290. Aphorism 125 can be found in: *KSA3*, 480-482.

<sup>20</sup> "... wij zeggen nl. niet: de goden sterven of de goden zijn dood" [we don't say: the gods die or the gods are dead], Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> "Religie duidt op het beleven en 'begehen' van het kosmisch evenwicht door middel van de *ritus*; geloof heeft betrekking op het *woord*; het eerste werkt *bevestigend* op de bewegingen van het geestelijk leven, het tweede veel meer *storend*," (Religion points to the experience and 'doing' of the cosmic balance by means of *ritual practice*; Faith is aimed at the *word*; the first *affirms* the movements of spiritual life, the latter rather disturbs) Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 62.

character. His theological attitude is more receptive to culture. In this way, Miskotte is able to give room to the many voices that can be heard in literature and philosophy. In many ways, it makes his theology more attractive.<sup>23</sup>

With regard to religion, Miskotte shares Karl Barth's conviction that revelation is the crisis of all forms of religion.<sup>24</sup> Miskotte, exploring the preaching of the Old Testament, explains that Yahweh undermines the feeling of a cosmic safety. The one who believes in the God of Israel lives without a cosmic safety. He/she needs courage to be.<sup>25</sup>

When Miskotte actualizes the name of God in the interaction with religion, he does not use dogmatic notions, but utilizes the fundamental words of the Thora. His theology is not a dogmatic theology, but a biblical theology. In this way Miskotte develops a living theology, and he is able to actualize the struggle of the God of Israel with the gods in our time and culture. Miskotte teaches us to read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, with new eyes. That is the 'credit' (*het tegoed*) of Miskotte's theology. The God of the Bible is actual, and so are the gods. We meet them in our society; we see their pale faces in modern philosophies, i.e., in nihilism. The negative approach of religion makes it possible for Miskotte to connect religion with nihilism. In an unexpected way, he actualizes religion. A further consequence is that we—thanks to this approach—see that nihilism is almost omnipresent in our culture. The debate about nihilism is not an academic discussion. The one who speaks about nihilism is speaking about the real and daily life of people.

## Religion and Nihilism

To understand Miskotte is to understand his concept of religion. For Miskotte, it is a foregone conclusion that people are incurably religious. People can change in many ways in the course of centuries, but what does not change is the need for religion. As Miskotte says again and again, paganism is *the* religion of *the* human nature always and everywhere.<sup>26</sup> Religion is, so to say, an existential—it defines the human being.

<sup>23</sup> G.G. de Kruijf writes that the solidarity with modern man, with the nihilist, is characteristic for Miskotte. G.G. de Kruijf, *Heiden, Jood en christen. Een studie over de theologie van K.H. Miskotte* (Baarn: Ten Have 1981), 22. This is a remarkable difference with Karl Barth.

<sup>24</sup> Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 62.

<sup>25</sup> Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 76-77.

<sup>26</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 29. Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 15.

What is remarkable for Miskotte's position is that religion and nihilism are not opposites. At this point we especially see the relevance of Miskotte's contribution to the interpretation of Nietzsche's nihilism. Nihilism is not a break with religion, but is the outcome and fruit of religion. This point must be underscored because it is insufficient to say that the *roots* of nihilism lie in religion. Religion *itself* is nihilism.<sup>27</sup> Usually nihilism is considered as a rejection of every form of religion. That is why it can often be observed that nihilism and atheism are considered as synonyms. The popular opinion is inclined to regard the nihilist as a non-religious person. However, Miskotte underscores that religion is nihilism and vice-versa. What is the background of this provocative thesis?

### **Paganism and Nihilism: What is the Relation between the Two?**

Miskotte develops the thesis on nihilism and religion in relation to fascism. In the period preceding World War II, fascism gained more and more influence. For Miskotte, fascism and national-socialism are new forms of paganism. This paganism created a new type of man: the fourth man—the man that comes after the heathen, Jew, and Christian.<sup>28</sup> It is the nihilist that emerges in the new totalitarian regimes. Miskotte already identified the new type of man in *Edda en Thora*. In *Edda en Thora* he writes that it is our task to recognize the new type of man as a variant of the old, the 'eternal' human being—the pagan.<sup>29</sup>

The question that will also occupy us at the end of this article is: is Miskotte correct when he declares that the man of the 20th century is the same man as the pagan of the *Edda*? Asking this, we primarily have to pay attention to Miskotte's method. Miskotte uses the method of phenomenology.<sup>30</sup> I think what De Kruijf writes about Miskotte's phenomenology is true. De Kruijf accentuates the argument that the method of phenomenology shows the willingness of Miskotte to be receptive to culture,<sup>31</sup> but the question can be asked whether this method also has a shady side. When Miskotte aims at the essence

<sup>27</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 10-14.

<sup>29</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 48. See IJkema, *Nietzsche*, 36-38. "Het gaat er Miskotte om eenvoud te scheppen in de verwarrende veelheid" [What matters for Miskotte is to create unity in the confusing multiplicity], IJkema, *Nietzsche*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> De Kruijf, *Heiden, Jood en Christen*, 98.



of religion, he risks the danger of an a-historical approach.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that Miskotte is intensively engaged with the actual, historical reality, his method is contrary to this involvement.

A second and more important aspect of Miskotte's analysis is his definition of religion. I referred to that earlier and more will be said concerning this subject in *Miskotte's Definition of Religion*. Miskotte asserts that this era no longer builds philosophical systems. The 20th century has taken leave of idealism. Philosophical systems can no longer hide the lack of sense. That is why this era returns to the old gods,<sup>33</sup> and—in the wake of the old gods—the old religion returns.<sup>34</sup> Miskotte is impressed by the vitality of paganism. This old religion that has returned is not a religion of personal salvation, but a nation-building power—a demonic theocracy.<sup>35</sup> The times when paganism was considered an empty and pale notion have passed. Miskotte writes that what we read in the Germanic *Edda* is “flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood.”<sup>36</sup> Paganism belongs to human nature. It is *the* religion of *the* human nature, we hear Miskotte say. Paganism is not atheism, but a very robust and self-satisfied belief.<sup>37</sup> It is typical for the myths of pagan religion that there is no reality other than the reality of the myths, and this reality is god. The reality is plural, endless in motion, and never has a solid form. Reality is chaos, and therefore there cannot be monotheism, but only polytheism. The core of this reality is an eternal becoming. In short: paganism is the religion of becoming.

Here we arrive at a crucial feature of Miskotte's analysis of Western culture. Chaos is simultaneously the unity of life because all things are related in one complex and moving All. No matter how different things are, or how diverse the powers are, it is a coherent totality. Miskotte directs his critique against this chaotic, yet coherent, absolute totality. In his opinion only the Thora is able to unmask this myth of the All. It is the Thora that, by means of the notion of creation, declares that this reality is a limited reality. In this manner, Miskotte shows the actuality of the biblical testimony in the confrontation with paganism and nihilism. However, there is another question that will be

<sup>32</sup> Miskotte defines his method as a deduction of all things that can be left out so that elements are left which cannot be reduced, Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> “Die alten Götter werden zwar zurückkehren, aber *mit neuem Antlitz*” [The old gods will return, but with a new face], Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 24, and *Als de goden zwijgen*, 15 (quotation of Janko Janoff).

<sup>34</sup> Miskotte speaks of a crusade against the strange God of Israel, Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 29, and *Als de goden zwijgen*, 15.

discussed further on—the question of whether Miskotte’s attempt in *Edda en Thora* to show that pagan Germanic religion is immediately connected with the 20th century ideology of national-socialism is successful. In his *Als de goden zwijgen*, written in 1956, Miskotte analyzes post-war nihilism. The post-war situation has changed. Fascism and national-socialism disappeared, but nihilism did not. Can we speak of a shift, or must we agree with Miskotte’s analysis that there is no break but only continuity?

Miskotte’s connection of post-war nihilism with the old religion of the Edda is thrilling. The identification of mythical Nazi ideology of *Blut und Boden* with Germanic mythology may have an intuitive plausibility. But is the relation between paganism and the Western-European situation of the 1960s and 70s equally convincing?<sup>38</sup> Miskotte never revoked his definition: paganism is the religion of human nature. It seems to me that this definition is inadequate. At the end of this article (in *Miskotte’s Definition of Religion and Nihilism, Religion, and Biblical Faith*), some questions in relation to Miskotte’s definition will be discussed. For this moment, we pay attention to another subject: Nietzsche’s approach to religion and biblical faith. In that way the positions of Nietzsche and Miskotte will become more appropriate for an evaluation.

### The Core of Nietzsche’s Nihilism

Nietzsche’s nihilism cannot sufficiently be described when religion is discarded. Nietzsche was not an atheist; he was a nihilist. Nietzsche was anti-Platonist, anti-idealist, anti-transcendentalist, and anti-Christian, but he was not anti-religion. Julian Young calls him a religious reformer, and Miskotte appreciates Nietzsche as a seer of world-governing gods.<sup>39</sup> For Nietzsche, Greek religion is an abundant source of religious experiences. All that Nietzsche needs and what he is looking for is given in Greek religion. Greek religion does not originate from human shortcoming as Christian religion does. The Greek gods originate from the superfluous richness of this reality.

In his first and crucially important publication, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*,<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche clarifies that his choice is the choice of Dionysus. He shows that his nihilism is not a negative choice, but a choice for life because Dionysus is the

<sup>38</sup> I refer to the hesitating position Miskotte shows when he discusses humanism. He appreciates humanism as a reduced Christianity, for which he is grateful, Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Young, *Nietzsche’s philosophy of religion*, 2. Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> *KSA* 1, 11-156.

god of the affirmation of life. To some degree, Nietzsche's concept of religion is in line with Miskotte's concept. Philippe Lepers pointed out that for Nietzsche religion is "a myth-building power."<sup>41</sup> In a comparable manner, Miskotte assessed the pagan religion of the *Edda*.

Nietzsche's nihilism is a complex concept. It deals with power (the will to power) as well as with the eternal recurrence of the same, and with the *Übermensch* (the Superman).<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche sees nihilism as a liberating power. In opposition to this liberating power stands the Christian faith and Christianity as repressive powers because they judge this life by means of standards that are hostile to this life and to this earth. Christianity is a negative, nihilistic power. It does not affirm our life as it is—with illness, suffering, and death. On the contrary, Christianity denies suffering because it proclaims a message of salvation instead. For Nietzsche the good tidings of the gospel are not good. The core of this good news is, in his opinion, resentment. This argument leads Nietzsche to reject Christian faith.

Nonetheless, religion remains an important part of Nietzsche's nihilism. When God is dead and the Christian faith has been overcome, the path is free for religion, and free for the experience of the depth, power, and joy of religion. For Nietzsche, religion is functional. Religion is able to accelerate the emancipation of man. The precondition for this emancipator role is that religion is a creative power. We understand his complaint when he writes: "nearly two thousand years and not one new god."<sup>43</sup> Christianity is repressive, not creative.<sup>44</sup>

Nietzsche sees Christianity as a power enabling people to manage their vulnerable position in this world, not by a cosmic balance as paganism does, but by a transcendental world. Dionysian religion, on the other hand, enables them to overcome the dangers and suffering that is experienced in life. It does not overcome this predicament by salvation, but by affirmation. Dionysian religion

<sup>41</sup> Lepers, *Genie vs. God*, 203. See Also sprach Zarathustra: "Auf den glückseligen Inseln" (On the blessed Islands). In that chapter Nietzsche stresses that we must do a godly work, i.e., to create. We do not need to create gods (there are no gods), but we have to do the work of God (just because there are no gods): to create. See also note 14.

<sup>42</sup> My own (abridged) definition of Nietzsche's nihilism is as follows: "it is a power, which arrives with historic necessity (the will to power), by which the Christian values (...) will be unmasked, with the effect that that there will be a real acceptance of reality (that is the meaning of the eternal recurrence), with the consequence that the human being is at last able to emancipate himself and religion can play a creative role instead of a repressive role," Prosman, *Geloven*, 151, 206.

<sup>43</sup> KSA 6, 185.

<sup>44</sup> The human being has to be a creator. To create is the great suffering, but in order to be a creator much sorrow and many changes of our nature are absolutely necessary, KSA 4, 110.

is able to bring people into a position to become *Übermensche*. The *Übermensch* does not resist this reality and suffering nor accept it in a tragic way, but s/he affirms it. It is clear that Nietzsche was not a rationalist.

Openness for the irrational is present on almost every page of his books. It would be a mistake to see the *Übermensch* as a person who represses everything. For example, s/he does not repress irrationality or suffering. It is the *Übermensch* who makes room for the irrational character of nature and reality. The greatness of the *Übermensch* is that s/he affirms and accepts this irrationality without reservation.

### A Confrontation: Miskotte and Nietzsche

We can say that there are many similarities between the views of Nietzsche and Miskotte concerning religion. But in addition to these similarities, there is also a big difference—in the pagan religion of the *Edda*, religion is the awareness of a solid connection between sense and being. Nietzsche is also convinced of this connection, but for Nietzsche, it does not have the character of unity. The difference between Nietzsche and Miskotte is that, according to Miskotte, paganism finds safety in the experience of unity or of cosmic balance. For Nietzsche, religion should not have the function of making people feel safe in life. He argues for the opposite. Dionysian religion is a way to prevent irrational reality from being frozen in doctrines, rituals, and formulas. Any religion that does so follows in the path of Apollinic ideas, and that would make religion an instrument used to manage unsafety.

Again, we must stress Nietzsche's choice for Dionysus. In his philosophy, religion functions as an alarm for people. Nietzsche's Dionysian religion disorients.<sup>45</sup> His approach to religion is marked by the crisis of West-European culture. His concept of religion is inspired by the old Greek religion, but it is not a simple duplicate of that. Nietzsche's concept bears the mark of the failure of the Enlightenment program. For him, religion is a postmodern religion—a religion that knows no continuity. In that respect, there is a significant disagreement with the definition of religion that Miskotte presented, i.e., paganism is *the* religion of *the* human nature.

---

<sup>45</sup> Religion is the instrument to confront us with and to experience the infinity (there is no horizon, there is no orientation), the eternity (the eternal recurrence), and the unexpected powers and mysteries of reality. Because reality will return infinitely, reality, in fact, is god. Experiencing reality is experiencing 'god.'

For Nietzsche, pre-Socratic antiquity was an important source of inspiration. At the same time, Nietzsche lived in the modern, post-Enlightenment era. Nietzsche forcefully rejected the totalizing concepts of antiquity, and the great narratives that have been developed in modernity. The latter formed a Christian pseudo-religion, which gave people certainty and presented them with the possibility of orientating themselves to this world, as well as allowing them to dominate this world. For Nietzsche, reality is mysterious, and it is his conviction that we cannot dominate this world—either by science or religion. That we are not able to dominate the world by religion, and that religion is not able to give us security, is the difference between Germanic religion and the situation of the 20th and the 21st century.

Miskotte insufficiently recognizes that Nietzsche's view differs from his own view. Nihilistic people live differently and stand in this world differently as do pre-postmodernists. Nihilists live and stand in a world without a horizon. Nietzsche has expressed this feeling of disorientation in the aphorism of the madman. A fragment of this aphorism follows here. The madman is on a marketplace and cries to the astonished and laughing people that God is murdered:

But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? (...)<sup>46</sup>

The death of God is the inauguration of a new era—from this moment, we live in a world without orientation and without a feeling of security. In aphorism 124, Nietzsche describes the same feeling of disorientation as in 125. Aphorism 124 is named *In the horizon of infinity*. Nietzsche compares the new era with passengers who sail on an endless sea. They have left the land, and more than that, the land they left has been destroyed. There is no possibility to return. They will be homesick, but they have to realize that there is no turning back, and there is no harbor in order to moor the ship. Nietzsche warns that there will be times when you recognize that nothing is more horrible than the infinite.

<sup>46</sup> This English version is from Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche. Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-christ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 97. KSA3, 480-482.

But, unexpectedly, Nietzsche uses the metaphor of birds in a cage. Similar to birds in a cage, people who experience the new infinity now experience this infinity as a prison. “O, the poor birds, who were feeling free and now they collide with the walls of this cage.”<sup>47</sup> Just like the birds, people experience despair instead of a feeling of security. With these metaphors, Nietzsche expresses the feelings and emotions of people in this post-Copernican world. The naivety and optimism of earlier times is over.

The total character of the world is, on the contrary, in all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity, but (in the sense) of a lack of order, articulation, form, beauty, and how all these anthropomorphisms may be mentioned. (...) It (the world, AP) is absolutely invulnerable for all our esthetical and moral judgements. Neither it has an instinct to self-preservation, not at all it has passions; it does not know laws.<sup>48</sup>

In the worldview, Nietzsche observes that this world is a coherent world, regulated by physical laws that seem to give us certainty and feelings of security—a form of anthropomorphism. It has nothing to do with reality ‘as it is.’

## Evaluation and Conclusion

In respect to evaluation and conclusion, we must return to Miskotte’s definition of religion. Some questions must be clarified. A consequence of Miskotte’s stress on continuity is not only that religion is a timeless notion, but also nihilism. This point will be elaborated in *Nihilism, Religion, and Biblical Faith* where we shall try to show that Nietzsche’s nihilism is more complex than in Miskotte’s analysis. By clarifying the similarities and differences between Nietzsche and Miskotte, we have a better view of what is occurring in our Western culture.

## Miskotte’s Definition of Religion

When we face Miskotte’s definition of religion, we can ask two questions. First, did Miskotte stress the continuity of religion too strongly? By doing so, he maneuvered himself into a difficult position. In his definition of religion, the stress on the continuity of religion made religion timeless. Is Miskotte

<sup>47</sup> KSA 3, 480.

<sup>48</sup> KSA 3, 468.

sufficiently able to discern between different periods of culture and is he able to perceive the shifts in history? In other words, is Miskotte able to obtain an adequate understanding of the post-modern predicament?<sup>49</sup>

Second, it is remarkable that in *Edda en Thora* Miskotte is permanently speaking about the myth of the All, but in *Als de goden zwijgen* he tacitly changed this term into 'the nothing.' We get the impression that the place of the All is now occupied by the nothing.<sup>50</sup> For the pagan, the All is the frame of reference; for modern, secularized people, the frame of reference is no longer the myth of the All, but the nothing. What does that mean?

We must observe that Miskotte understands the myth of the All as the myth of the Whole. By the All, he means that God and earth, God and landscape, and doctrine and way of life are one; this applies to all forms of paganism.<sup>51</sup> Despite chaos and despite the experience of an endless struggle (inherent in infinity), the Germanic belief knows the unity of life,<sup>52</sup> but this infinity differs from Nietzsche's infinity. Miskotte speaks of the happiness of infinity.<sup>53</sup> As for Nietzsche, infinity is dreadful. It is only the *Übermensch* who experience the overwhelming joy of the infinite. The man or woman who does not become an *Übermensch* will perish.

Miskotte speaks of a dialectic between the All/Whole and the nothing. This dialectic is the dialectic of the nihilist. By that term, Miskotte means that the nihilist is repeatedly returning to the Whole—the unity of life. He confesses the nothing (he cannot believe the myths), but he is also unable to live without a constant appeal to the Whole. The (not authentic) nihilist continuously

---

<sup>49</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson is correct when he points out that there is not a sharp borderline between modernity and postmodernity. He agrees with publications of Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, who have the opinion that the term 'postmodern' "should be taken to signify neither a new historical epoch nor a fundamental rupture with Modernity, but rather a particular and peculiar way of experiencing ourselves as 'Modern'," "Nietzsche's Post-Modern Identity: From epoch to Ethos," *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 20, (1995), 120. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche has been an engine that has accelerated the process of postmodernity. Yet there is much in his philosophy that can be marked as premodern rather than as postmodern—for instance, his plea for *Vornehmheit* (nobility). For this subject, also see Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche's Postmodern Identity," 117.

<sup>50</sup> "Nihilisme is het geloof, dat achter alle gelóófs-, maar teven achter alle kennisinhouden, en evenzeer achter alle 'waarden', *niets* bestaat, dat daaraan beantwoordt," (nihilism is the belief, that behind all kinds of belief-questions, but as well behind all knowledge-contents and just as much behind all 'values', *nothing* exists, that is responding to that), Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 79.

<sup>52</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 81.

<sup>53</sup> Miskotte, *Edda en Thora*, 80-81.

commutes between the Whole and the nothing.<sup>54</sup> He never becomes a legitimate nihilist, and therefore, he remains a half-hearted person.

If it is true that religion is always and everywhere the same, as defined by Miskotte, then religion can be observed as the link with *Edda*, national-socialism, and nihilism. But this **essentialist concept of religion** might also frustrate a more penetrating analysis of the particular situation of West-European culture. Is religion in the postmodernist era equal to religion in the *Edda*? Is the nihilism of the Nazi's equal to the nihilism of 2008?<sup>55</sup>

After reading and studying Nietzsche's nihilism, the question can be stated as follows, "Can Western nihilism be adequately understood as the recurrence of pre-Christian paganism, or is it, in a more complex way, related to Christianity?" In other words, **must Miskotte's analysis be completed?**

### Nihilism, Religion, and Biblical Faith

Miskotte takes the position that religion does not move forward. Religion is a collection of timeless myths that give timeless answers about the question of the origin and destination of human life and this world. The origin and the end of this world are connected. Is Nietzsche's nihilism in line with this concept of religion?

Nietzsche's philosophy is the philosophy of the eternal recurrence. But that does not mean that it is static. His philosophy is not a *circulus vitiosus*. Nihilism, as it is present in our culture, is a force that presses all developments in a certain direction.<sup>56</sup> It is a process that cannot be stopped. Nietzsche stresses again and again that this culture must come to an end because **the natural values are the wall that Christian and Platonic values will collide with, and they will break down.**<sup>57</sup>

The important point is that we should not, as Miskotte does, connect nihilism only with the religion of the *Edda*. In that case, a timeless concept is made out of nihilism. **Nihilism is also a force—a motion, a movement forward.**

<sup>54</sup> Miskotte discerns between the authentic and the not authentic nihilist. See below.

<sup>55</sup> According to Miskotte, modern paganism is restrained in its vitality by the Thora. The Thora has made it ill. Ijkema says the Thora has damaged the original pagan security, Ijkema, *Nietzsche*, 77. In this context, it can be referred to as humanism. Miskotte calls humanism a reduced Christianity. Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 29. Paganism has a more human character. Nietzsche claims the opposite. Nihilism achieves itself with the dynamics of a necessary process.

<sup>56</sup> For the different forms of nihilism, see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London/New York: Continuum, 2002), 52-55; 171-175.

<sup>57</sup> KSA 13, 189.



Nietzsche's nihilism is a mixture of Greek religion and biblical faith. It is a pagan 'concept' in so far as it will destroy Christianity and biblical belief. But this nihilism also has a clear Christian hallmark in so far as it is a power that is moving forward (in Nietzsche's terminology, Christianity is a negative will to power).

Nietzsche's nihilism absorbs a biblical, Jewish, and Christian element; namely, that it is a historical movement. We have to conclude that there is a strong connection between nihilism and religion.<sup>58</sup> That is the important point of Miskotte. However, we also have to conclude that Nietzsche's religion and nihilism are mutated because they now have the biblical gene of historical dynamics.

From *Edda en Thora* we became acquainted with the vitality of paganism. But the vitality of Nietzsche's nihilism is a different kind because it is an exponent of the will to power. Nihilism is not only vital; it is also a physical and historical power.

This nihilism has not been domesticated by Christian belief, and it is not made ill by Christianity—as Miskotte thinks—but, on the contrary, Christian belief has made it strong and powerful. Nietzsche's nihilism is a by-product of the Christian culture. It is a typical Western phenomenon. Nietzsche shows the unveiled face of nihilism—it opposes Christianity by using it as an instrument.

Facing the problems of our culture and the processes that are occurring, theology must counter a nihilism that is hard to tackle. It is a power that has grown stronger, and not weaker, by the confrontation with the Thora and the gospel.

---

<sup>58</sup> Miskotte's view on nihilism is sometimes confused when he connects not only religion, but also biblical belief with nihilism because both are able to unmask the gods. Miskotte judges faith in Yahweh as a form of nihilism. Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 153. In the Old Testament, faith has the feature of courage to be. Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen*, 77, 79. Because Yahweh removes man from cosmic safety, the biblical faith has much common with Nietzsche's religion and nihilism. Miskotte departs from his own definition of nihilism as paganism, which is *the* religion of *the* human nature. Here he defines nihilism as a 'religion,' that dethrones the gods and removes cosmic safety.