

Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and the Dutch (1955-1973)

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Abstract

Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy was born in Germany and lived there until 1933 and thereafter in the United States until his death in 1973. In both countries he had a large number of friends, colleagues, students etc. It sometimes surprises both Germans and Americans that there is one other nation with a large and active group of people who knew Rosenstock-Huessy personally and studied his work. This group has been in existence since the mid-1950s. These people took the initiative to get in touch with Rosenstock and some of them became really close friends with him. The foundation of the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis in Haarlem in 1972 was a unique event. For the first time after the Silesian work camps of the 1920s and Camp William James now the ideas of Rosenstock-Huessy were put to practice. An earlier paper (2010) discussed the history of the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis. This paper seeks to identify the first people who were interested in Rosenstock-Huessy and his work in the Netherlands and follows some of their traces until Rosenstock's death in 1973. It is definitely not exhaustive. By far not all sources and archives have been investigated yet, some names are still missing and many questions remain open.

The 'footnote'

'We found his name for the first time in a footnote', was the usual answer by the first generation of people in the Netherlands who knew Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and his work to the question when they first heard about him.¹ The footnote was under an article of Cornelius Johannes Dippel, a physicist working for the electronics supplier Philips and deeply interested in theology and society. In December 1956, Dippel published an article about voluntary service in a cultural perspective, including the famous footnote.²

The footnote was definitely not the first time Rosenstock-Huessy was mentioned in a Dutch publication. The well-known Dutch theologian Kornelis Heiko Miskotte had written extensively about Rosenstock in a book published in the spring of the same year 1956, *When the gods are*

¹ See e.g.: Wim Leenman, 'In memoriam Bas Leenman', in: *Mitteilungsblätter 2006 / Stimmstein 11*, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy Gesellschaft, Argo Books, 2006, pp. 115-120.

² Dr. C.J. Dippel (1923-1971): 'Dienstbaarheid in cultureel perspectief', In het 'Dienst'nummer van *Wending 11* [1956-57] nr 10-11, december 1956/januari 1957, pp. 703-751.

silent.³ The book treats modern trends like nihilism and atheism and places these into the perspective of the Old Testament. Miskotte is searching for new visions on post-war problems and authors who introduce innovative ideas:

“When I speak of shifts in emphasis which seek to get beyond the modern problems, however, I am thinking more of individuals, pioneers, spies, minds with a special kind of radar to discern what is [coming].” (p. 29)

The first representative of this new thinking is the Catholic priest, author, and academic Romano Guardini (1885-1968). The second is the philosopher Ernst Jünger (1895-1998). Both are granted one or two book pages. The third is Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. Some four pages are dedicated to *Die europäischen Revolutionen* (1931) and to recent German publications, *Atem des Geistes* (1951, by the English translator referred to as *Breath of the Spirit*) and *Heilkraft und Wahrheit* (1952, by the English translator referred to as *Healing Power and Truth*). His name is mentioned quite a few times in the book, also in connection to Franz Rosenzweig, whose *Star of Redemption* is not surprisingly quite extensively referred to.

Miskotte writes about Rosenstock:

“As a Christian, Rosenstock-Huessy remained Jewish in his whole habitude of mind. And from precisely this point of view he has been able to do much to make clear to us how radically differently the silence of the gods is experienced and interpreted when the Word becomes an event, takes on form and makes history.” (P. 34)

Interestingly enough, the chapter in which Miskotte mentions ERH for the first time has exactly the same title as the periodical in which Dippels footnote is to be found, ‘Wending’ (though in plural where the magazine’s name is in singular), a Dutch word meaning ‘turn’ or ‘twist’. This is of course pure coincidence, but it brings us to the readers of these texts, the first generation of Dutch Rosenstock scholars. They were looking for such turns in their personal lives and in society. As Ko Vos wrote:

Before the war I worked as a analytical chemist in a hospital; the war changed my life and I came to the new institute “Church and World” in order to become a social worker related to the church.⁴

Young students who, very much in line with what ERH had experienced during the First World War, saw the Second World War as a token of the necessity of change. The Institute Kerk en

³ Dr. K.H. (Kornelis Heiko) Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen, over de zin van het Oude Testament*, Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, Amsterdam, voorjaar 1956, in: *Verzameld Werk* 8, 4e druk, p. 32 e.v.; German: *Wenn die Götter schweigen. Vom Sinn des Alten Testaments*, übersetzt von Hinrich Stoevesandt, München 1963; English: *When the gods are silent*. By Kornelis H. Miskotte, translated with an Introduction by John W. Doberstein. Collins, London, 1967; New York/ Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967. At certain points, the English translation deviates a bit from the original Dutch version.

⁴ Ko Vos, ‘The influence of Rosenstock-Huessy on my life and work’, paper for the conference *Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy: Studies in His Life and Thought*, Renison College, Waterloo, Canada, 1982.

Wereld (*Church and World*) in the town of Driebergen, not far from Utrecht, offered a four-year course in which social sciences and theology were combined. After having completed their studies, the students would be so-called Wika's, a Dutch abbreviation for workers within the field of the church and labor.

In 1995, Maarten van der Linde, a specialist in the field of social work, published his dissertation about these Wika's.⁵ His book offers a treasure of information about the lives and aspirations of these young and ambitious students. According to the study of Van der Linden it was Bas Leenman who presented a paper inspired by Rosenstock-Huessy as early as December 1955.⁶

If the date is correct, the Dippel footnote story is doubtful or maybe only partly true, because Leenman's paper would have been at least a full year earlier than the footnote and half a year earlier than Miskotte's book. Moreover, it can almost be taken for granted that that the students at Kerk en Wereld at least were aware of the publication of *When the gods are silent*, because Miskotte at that time was known as a fervent supporter of renewal of the church, i.c. the Nederlands Hervormde Kerk, the Dutch Reformed Church which was one the heirs of the Dutch Calvinist tradition in The Netherlands.

So, it is possible that Bas Leenman c.s. had found the name of Rosenstock-Huessy as early as 1955, probably through Dippel, though not necessarily through the footnote of December 1956. Reading Miskotte may have strengthened their interest, but at that time they already may have been in possession of works by Rosenstock-Huessy himself. It will be necessary to study archives more carefully in order to find out the exact date when Bas Leenman learned about Rosenstock for the first time.

The conflict at Kerk en Wereld

Here are some names of students at Kerk en Wereld who would remain dedicated to the study of Rosenstock-Huessy the rest of their lives.⁷

Name

⁵ Maarten van der Linde, *Werkelijk, ik kan alles. Werkers in kerkelijke arbeid in de Nederlands Hervormde Kerk 1945-1966*, doctoral dissertation, Utrecht University, uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1995.

⁶ Bas Leenman, 'De plaats van de aarde in het heilsgebeuren', 1955 (or December 1956?), in the archive of Kerk en Wereld. It seems somewhat uncertain whether Leenman already knew Rosenstock-Huessy at that time.

⁷ Names and dates from Maarten van der Linde, 1995. The list is not complete. The birthdate of Ko Vos was corrected after information by Wilmy Verhage.