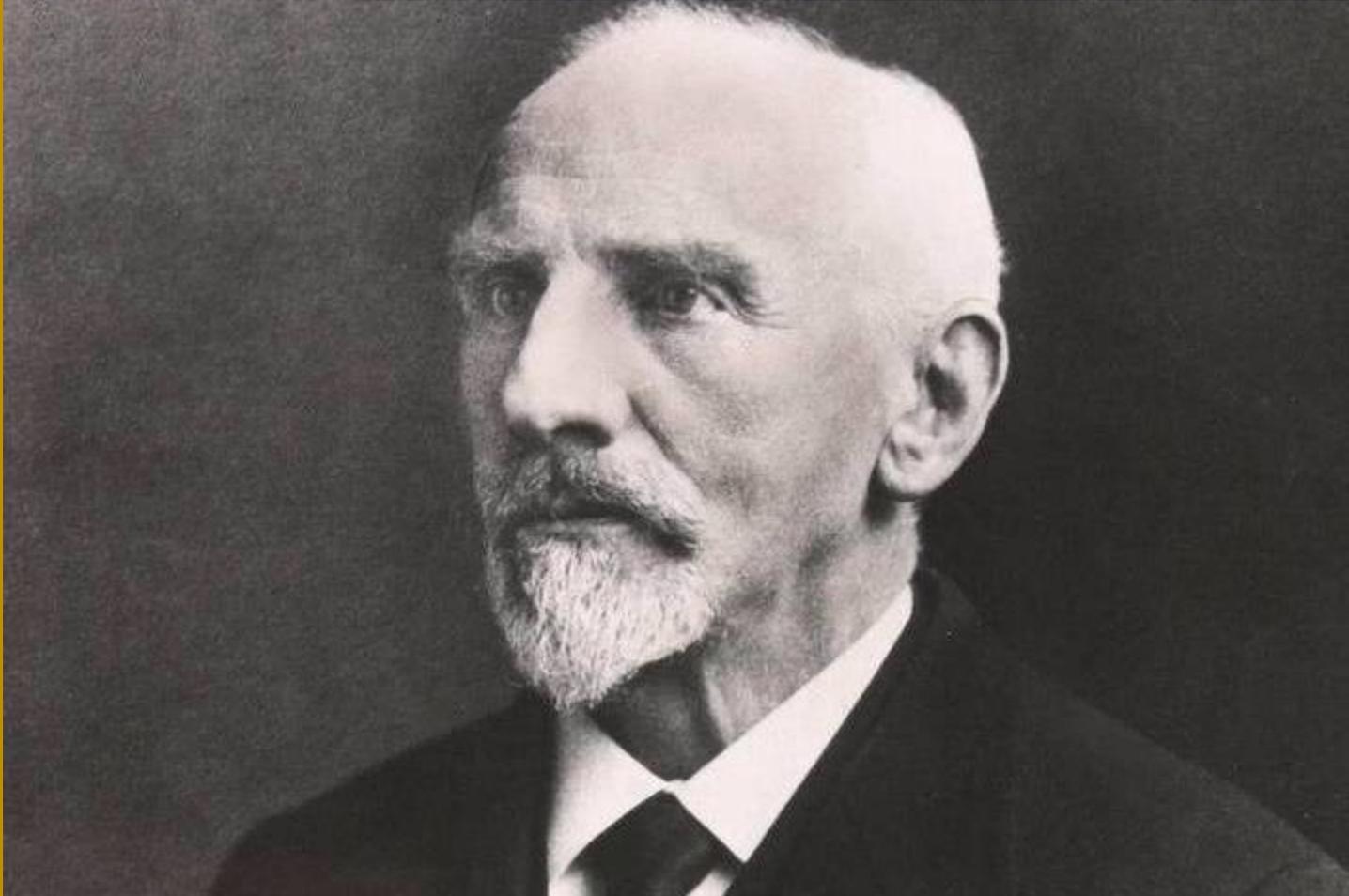


**Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936):
Expert in Arab and Islam¹**



¹Enne Koops, trans. Jan H. Boer, review of *Pelgrim: Leven en reizen van Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje*, by Philip Droge, in *Historiek*, November 28, 2017. The reason for including this review on this page is the special and remarkable friendship that existed between the two unlikely bed partners Hurgronje and Herman Bavinck as referenced frequently in A. B. W. M. Kok, trans. Jan H. Boer, *Herman Bavinck: Profile of a Reformational Pioneer*, www.SocialTheology.com/GuestArticles.htm. Koop's review does not belong on this page except for that relationship. Note that it follows directly in indented form below Kok's book on Bavinck.

Recently the Dutch publisher Unieboek / Het Spectrum published a book about the life of the first Dutch specialist in Islam, Christiaan Snouck his time as professor at Leiden University. All in all, Droge's biography is a readable description of a man who deserves to be rescued from oblivion Hurgronje (1857-1936). This very readable book is written by journalist Philip Droge who has proven himself a top author in recent years.

PICTURE OF HURGRONJE Snouck Hurgronje at an early age

Droge describes the scholar Hurgronje as an adventurous, complex and ambiguous person, for whom travel was not a problem. As undercover agent, Hurgronje visited Mekka, the holy city of Islam; later, he spent a long time in Atjeh, Indonesia, and visited a diverse number of countries, including the United States, where he gave guest lectures during his professorship at Leiden. All in all, Droge's biography is a highly readable description of a man who deserves to be pulled back into the limelight because of his contribution to Islamic studies in The Netherlands

Hurgronje's Youth

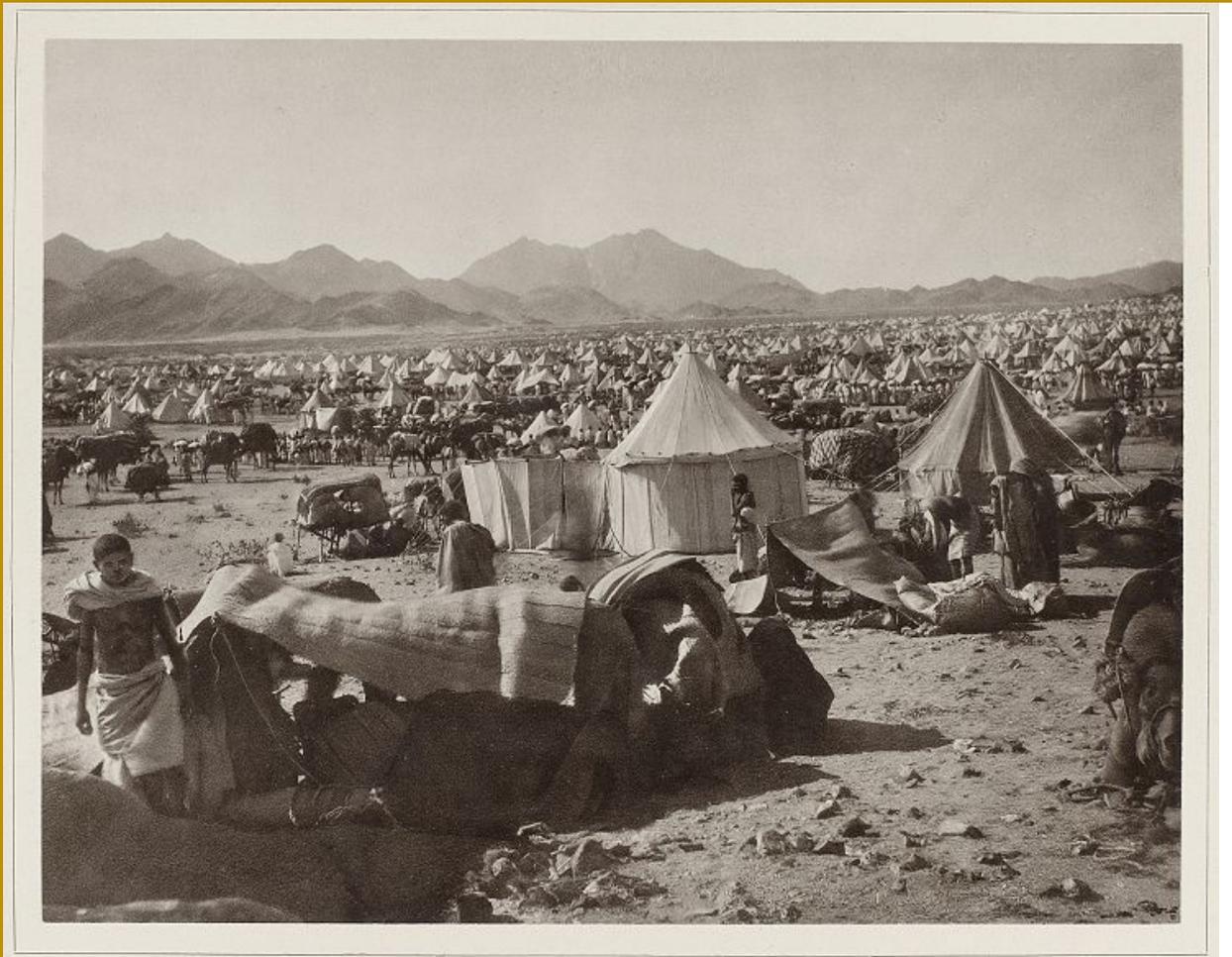
Hurgronje was born on January 8, 1857, in Oosterhout, The Netherlands, to a family that had produced preachers for generations. His father, Jacob Snouck Hurgronje, was married to a rich lady Adriana van Adrichem, of noble birth, with whom he had five children. During his pastorate at the Netherlands Reformed Church of Colijnsplaats in the province of Zeeland, Jacob fell in love with Anne Maria de Visser, the daughter of a colleague. Since divorce was illegal in the nineteenth century, Jacob and Anna Maria decided to elope.

He forsook his wife, who in the meantime was pregnant with number six. It caused such a great scandal that the two had to go into exile. They took a boat to England, where they lived common law. But after some time, they returned to The Netherlands, and settled in Rotterdam. Because Adriana died after a few years, the couple could marry. After the customary confession of sin, they were again accepted into the church and moved to Oosterhout. It was there that the couple had three children, including Christiaan.

When Christiaan was thirteen years old, his father died at age 57. On his seventeenth, Christiaan graduated from high school in Breda and enrolled at

the University of Leiden. There he studied theology for two years after which he moved over to studying Arabic, with Islam as specialization. Christiaan became so absorbed in his study and, later in his undercover work as Muslim, that years later he called himself “anti-Christian.”

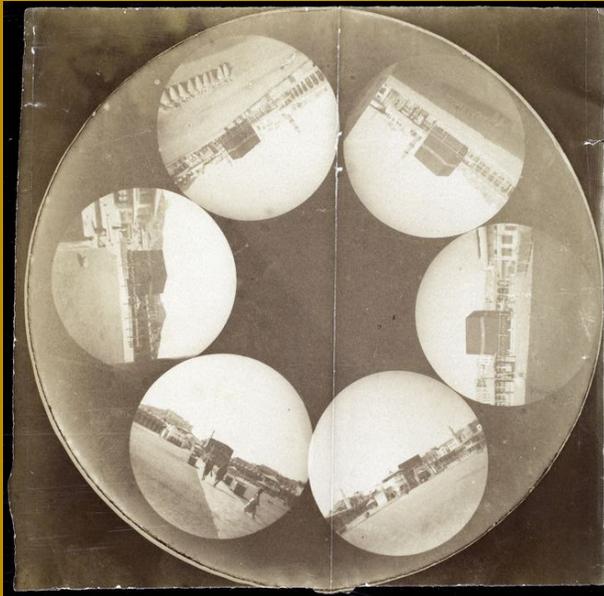
From where his interest in Islam? Most likely this was aroused during his theological study. However, the fact that his maternal grandfather, Jan Scharp, also had deeply immersed himself in Islamic studies probably also played a role. Scharp was one of the first Dutch scholars to have published an extensive study of Islam. Scharp wanted to combat Islam with his research and to Christianize Dutch East Indies, where Islam was very influential, with the motto, “If you know your enemy, you can defeat him.”



The Western side of Mount Arafat, near Mekka during the annual pilgrimage, about 1888-1889 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

Spy in Mekka

While he was writing his dissertation, Christiaan made plans to visit Mekka as a Christian. But how to accomplish that? He had the good fortune that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was looking for someone to travel as spy to the Ottoman Empire to carry out a secret mandate. This was in connection with the explosion of the volcano Krakatau in Indonesia during 1883, which led the Dutch colonial authorities to fear that the population would revolt at the initiative of the Muslims, who were considered a serious threat to peace.



Secret photos taken by Snouck in Mekka with a tiny camera that fit in a button hole. With this camera he took six pictures of the Ka'aba, the central holy place of Islam in the Grand Mosque in Mekka.

It was the idea of Johan Kruyt, the Dutch consul and diplomat in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to send someone undercover to Mekka to investigate what kind of plans Muslims were concocting during the pilgrimage. Among those pilgrims there would be thousands of Indonesian Muslims who, according to the reasoning of the authorities, were likely to stir the population to resistance to the colonial government. Kruyt came across an article by Hurgronje in the *Javabode* in which the latter wrote among other things,

For the adherents of Islam, the Qur'an is the only law they acknowledge, more important than any other. Moderate Islam, in which some authorities believe, does not exist. You only have rigid Muslim and extremely rigid, according to Hurgronje.

It was in the summer of 1884 that Hurgronje left on his expedition to Jeddah. He began there with establishing contacts with the locals.

Drinking tea. Exchanging gifts. Adhering to etiquette. Using the correct words. It appeared to him as if there were no end to all the courtesy visits and social obligations that are part of urban life in an Arabian city. He would almost forget what brought him to this city, namely to do research into the radicalization of Indonesian pilgrims.

To escape being noticed, Hurgronje took on an Arab pseudonym in January, 1885—Abd al-Ghaffar al-Leydini, which means “Servant of the All-forgiving from Leiden.” He also had himself circumcised, for occasionally when pilgrims entered Mekka they had to raise their robes to determine whether they were really Muslim. In addition, again in order to escape attention and to merge with the crowd, he bought a female slave. Droge wrote correctly, “It is striking how easy it was for him to adjust himself to the local mores.”

In great detail and with a sharp eye, Droge pulls his reader along on Hurgronje’s journey to Mekka. Of course, he includes Hurgronje’s travel account, which he simply named *Mekka* (1888). This book made Hurgronje a world-renowned writer.

To the East: Another Spy Assignment

After his undercover operation in Mekka, Hurgronje went further East with the assignment to serve as advisor to help modernize the Government of the Indonesian colony on basis of his findings in Mekka. In 1891-1892 he traversed Atjeh as a spy. He could handle himself very easily, for he spoke at least fifteen languages and dialects, including Arabic, Malay, Javanese and the language of Atjeh. Because of his linguistic skills and knowledge of Islam, he soon gained the confidence of the people.

He wrote secret reports and forwarded them to the Dutch Government. He wrote about the religious and political situation in the country and pleaded for the modernization of the colony not through violence but via espionage.

In 1898, Hurgronje, who married twice in Indonesia, was appointed colleague to Colonel Johannes Benedictus van Heutsz (1851-1924), who later became the country’s Governor General and was well known for his harsh measures.

Back to The Netherlands: Professor and an Islamic Funeral



Snouck Hurgronje with Prince Saud in Leiden in 1936, his last year (by Laurens Westhoff)

In 1906, Hurgronje returned to The Netherlands an embittered man. He left his wife and children behind in Indonesia. We read, “Just before his return to The Netherlands, he pushed the young mother aside according to shari’a. That meant she was free to look for another husband.”

Subsequently, Hurgronje was appointed Professor of Arabic Studies at Leiden. At 53 years of age, via a colleague, he met a 36-year old woman named Ida Maria Oort, with whom he married in 1910—his third marriage. In 1914, the year of World War I, they gave birth to a daughter, Christien.

On June 26, 1936, at four o’clock in the afternoon, he died. He was buried in the Groenesteeg Cemetery in Leiden, next to his mother.

Droge concluded:

There are strong indications that Christiaan had an Islamic funeral. He was buried within 24 hours of his death as is customary in the Muslim world. Only his personal doctor and friend, Van Calcar, accompanied the casket as he had promised his friend prior to his death. Not his wife

or daughter. In Muslim cultures women are usually not allowed to attend funerals.