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ESCHATIZING THE SOTERIOLOGICAL: WORLDS THE WORD

Language is ultimately what the religious
and the secular have in common. (xi)

God, and for the same reason faith,
has no other milieu than language. (1-2)

Nothing happens except through language. (6)

God is language. (19)

A review of Gabriel Vahanian, *Praise of the Secular*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008.

These statements, and the perspective to which they point and upon which Gabriel Vahanian insists, place the author in an illustrious company: Martin Heidegger ("Language is the house of being"); Jacques Derrida ("Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"); Jacques Lacan ("The order of the world is a word-order"); and Richard Rorty ("Philosophy has made a linguistic turn"). Because of this lineage, to take the author at his word about words implies that one ought to give careful attention to the language of the book in which such words are written.

The book contains six chapters, with an introduction and epilogue. These are a revised version of presentations given in Belgium, France, Italy, Korea and the United States from 1993 to 2001. But in the re-visioning, there is what may be an important shift precisely in the language. The title of two of the original oral presentations differs from the title of the present book. At Syracuse University and at Montclair State University in 1995, Vahanian called his lectures "In Praise of the Secular." Presumably the change to *Praise of the Secular*, dropping the preposition "in," is intentional on the part of the author. But if so, it signals a move. The book title is closer to a French version of the American presentations given in Strasbourg under the heading *Eloge du séculier*, and it opens an ambiguity. By dropping the word "in" from the 1995 English versions, a question is implicitly raised concerning the genitive "of." Does the phrase "*praise of the secular*" contain a subjective genitive? Is this a book about the author praising the secular? Or does the phrase "*praise of the secular*" contain an objective genitive? Is it a book about the presumably theological praise that the secular gives, perhaps ironically, to a technological world? This ambiguity does

not exist in the earlier title, "In Praise of the Secular." In a way, the double possibility of the present title is precisely the question that the book addresses centrally. But this grammatical and rhetorical conundrum is not the only matter indicated by linguistic attention.

Vahanian is an extraordinary stylist, which means that a good deal of the book's elegant argument is achieved in the twists and turns of the writing, in the grace of the language. The book, which is truly an *essai*, is notably linked by italicized paragraphs at the beginning and the end of each chapter. These paragraphs may be read sequentially, and they function as segues for the thematic of the book's argument. Further, many of the individual sentences read like an *aperçu*, the sort of insights-in-writing that one might expect from Heraclitus, Montaigne or Pascal. Here are a few examples that will, I think, make the point that it is the language that speaks in this book.

- "A reinvigorating of the secular works against a fundamentalism, which makes the relative absolute, and against an ideology of a kind of atheism ("secularism"), which makes the absolute relative" (book jacket).
- "Rather than eviscerating religion, the secular has played a major role in prodding religion into overcoming itself. Instead of the religious showing the way to the secular, the secular is now what is showing the way to religion" (xi).
- "We move from being to language as the prism through which yearns to be grasped a self that would lack nothing if, *verbum caro* (like the word become flesh), it only could lack itself" (xvii).
- "We forget not only that from a biblical standpoint, such a God [a God worshipped as an idol] is no God, but also, conversely, that no God is God—not so much because God is beyond God as because no God is beyond language" (2).
- "No God is God that can be turned into an idol" (46).
- "God has no etymology. God takes root in words, which have no roots" (47).
- "There is no greater simulator of itself than the self" (65).
- "Faith consists in religion overcoming religion" (93).
- "It takes God to debunk religion" (103).
- "Words never have the last word" (109).

The insights gleaned from this sort of writing make the book a delight to read. But the delight of the stylistic does not detract from the serious purpose, nor from a theological argument radically aimed.

Vahanian has been leading the charge for nearly half a century on behalf of the iconoclastic dimension of biblical faith, which means a charge against idolatrous theologizing and the anthropologization of religious discourse and understanding. At the same time, this has put him on the side of the secular, especially in the context of a technological civilization, both of which — the secular and technology — have often been mistaken for secularism. Vahanian's

ground-breaking book on this topic, *The Death of God*, was published in 1961, and it was followed by *Wait Without Idols* in 1964, *No Other God* in 1966, and *God and Utopia* in 1977. In France he published *L'Utopie chrétienne, La Foi, un fois pour toutes*, and *Dieu anonym*. Many articles accompanied these books, and, in my judgment, one of these is extremely important for an understanding of Vahanian's program: namely, "Religion and Technology," published in *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, edited by T. William Hall (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

In all of these, Vahanian refocuses the logic of theology, not on nature (as in mythic or cosmological perspectives) and not on history (as in the soteriological perspectives of *Heilsgeschichte* that were current when Vahanian emerged on the theological scene), i.e., not upon the God of nature and cosmos and not on the Jesus of history, but upon what he calls the eschatic or utopic. This refocusing introduces centrally the figure of Spirit or Kingdom into theo-logic and, in my view, overcomes a binitarianism that had, unwittingly and somewhat witlessly, plagued Christian theology for centuries by centering on God or Jesus, and not really being syntactically trinitarian. It perhaps goes without saying that Vahanian's trinitarian correction is not spiritualist in a heterodox manner of, say, Joachim of Fiore or the so-called "New Age" and "third kingdom" movements. It is, rather, iconoclastic, especially since it intends a re-valencing of the secular against conventional understandings.

The current book continues this thematic but in an amplified and insistent form. The thesis of the book is summed by the author late in the work. Here it is in the book's own words.

- "Desacralization and secularization are the twin aspects of one and the same process stemming from the biblical option for the primacy of language over nature and history as receptacle of faith — a purely nominal receptacle, given the thoroughgoing metaphoricity of language. Speaking is believing" (95).
- "Most emblematic of the eschatic dimension of faith and the tropological use of language by which it is tested and attested is a triptych running through the biblical tradition. It consists of three propositions: there is no sacred enclosure in the Garden of Eden; there is no temple in the New Jerusalem, either, so also is the tomb empty. Summed up in one, they read: religion has no future except through the secular" (99).
- "The issue? Call it secularization, a short-cut term whose connotations have mostly been negative. But the process of which this term is characteristic is no more a secret to the biblical tradition of hallowing than creation or the incarnation is to its understanding of faith as eschatic existence. In other words, 'worlding the word' is what biblically lies at the root of what we, even derogatorily, call secularization. God speaks and things happen" (127).

One can see how this makes sense. First, Vahanian focuses on the theological axiom that only God is holy, i.e., that there is no God but God (Vahanian says: "No God is God," which means that God is no God!). In the biblical account of creation "God speaks and things happen." Further, creation is not only pronounced; it is also pronounced to be good. Vahanian refers to this as a "worlding of the word." This results in an affirmation of the secular, without implying that the secular is divine. Similarly, the incarnation ("Word made flesh") announces the positive valence of history, body, flesh, which are also not divine in themselves, even if they body forth the word of God. In such fashion the secular is affirmed — not idolatrously, but iconoclastically — against the tirades against secularism by fundamentalist theologies, where the secular is evil, and against the atheistic affirmation of anti-religious secularists, for whom there is a potential idolatry of the secular as being "good" because it is all that there is.

So if "the secular is the horizon of the incarnation and the word become flesh is the worlding of the word in view of a utopic or eschatic (rather than merely soteriological) understanding of the Kingdom of God" (3), then "the incarnation consists, not in the enshrining of the word, but in its worlding, its secularization" (42). This means that, "the secular rightfully belongs to the sphere of faith" (11). Or, put forthrightly, "the idea of the secular as an inherent dimension of faith could and should have been perceived as the cultural hallmark of the biblical tradition" (xiv).

This has enormous perspectival consequences. For example, it implies that to attempt to make peace among religions in a world of difference, diversity, and global pluralism is wrong-headed on the face of it. It is clear from religious violence and hatred that any attempt to fall back on a notion of the sacred as common to religious traditions is bound to fail. Religions cannot work together. They have nothing in common, especially nothing imagined under the aegis of the notion of the sacred. Rather, as Vahanian puts it, "what we all have in common is the secular" (30). It is here that the locus of transformation in the world resides. But even more is implied by this, and radically so.

This focus on there being no other God but God also takes the emphasis off soteriology, which would save the human from the secular, committing an anthropologization of religious discourse. Vahanian is clear about this. Here are six examples of his insistence.

- "Talk about God must remain unspoken, not only because it will turn God into an idol, and not only because the experience of the holy is ecstatic, but principally because language about the biblical God is eschatic. Jesus comes, not so much to 'save' us as to proclaim the kingdom of God, the antidote to our obsession with salvation" (viii).
- "Religion, having long since turned into an obsession with salvation, must finally come to grips with the mandates of its charter. It must

switch (back) to the recovery of the utopic streak of its grammar and rhetoric (...) Jesus proclaims the kingdom rather than salvation" (7).

- " 'What must I do to be saved' gives way to 'Who or what kind of God is this God who saves me.' This insight [from Luther] amounts to a virtual shaking of the foundations of traditional religion (...) Faith lies in being released from the very obsession with salvation" (34).
- "The God of the Bible is a God who feels and contends for us. Instead, we make God out to be a Savior, not to say a lifesaver. The God of grace is God freely available; we make of God a God of 'grace and favours,' like those granted by the princes of this world. Failing to be able to save the world, which God loves so much, we seek, instead of changing it, to be saved from it" (44-45).
- "Jesus is not obsessed with salvation; he is concerned with the Kingdom of God, with the worlding of the word" (80).
- "Call him [Jesus] Savior if we will, but the salvation he ushers in consists rather in freeing us from our obsession with salvation" (62).

Not only have the people, when religious, been obsessed with salvation and with being saved, but, as Vahanian argues, theological discourse has in the main been, one might say, a salvation army, a militia whose logic has been basically soteriological instead of being appropriately eschatological, i.e., iconoclastic with regard to all notions of salvation. An " ideology of salvation (...) still holds. (...) It continues to control the texture of the good life and its ramifications into the various goals of human existence, whether ultimate or penultimate, individual or social, spiritual or temporal" (32). But it is suspect. It is suspect because "a God, used as a crutch, is a God who, instead of dwelling in our flesh, obsesses us with our salvation" (64). That is, it turns theology into sociology and, bluntly put, into idolatry. "The soteriological overtones of the incarnation muffle the eschatological design of its inner-most intention. (...) The eschatological is shortchanged by the soteriological." (79)

So, to return to the question of the ambiguous genitive in the book's title with which I began this review, it would seem that the answer is clear. Vahanian (this reviewer imagines) changed the title so as to open the possibility of an objective genitive. The book then does not remain simply a matter of an author praising the secular against the fundamentalist and atheistic *faux pas* confusing secular with secularism. It is, also, a matter of allowing the language of the secular and the secularity of language to speak the worlded word. As Heidegger had said: "Man does not speak; speech speaks." I think of this move in and by Vahanian to be, felicitously, an eschatizing of the soteriological, or an iconoclasm of theology's own self-idolatry. And, more than felicitous, in my view such a perspective is needed even more today than in the death-of-god days of half a century ago when Vahanian first gave birth to these insights that have now come of age.

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