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ANONYMOUS GOD

A review of Gabriel Vahanian, *Anonymous God*, The Davies Group, Publishers, 2001. 182 pp. \$18.

FROM HIS EARLIEST BEST SELLER at the beginning of the 1960s, *The Death of God*, through *God and Utopia* (1977) to his most recent *Anonymous God* (2001), to name three of his many books over the last forty years, Gabriel Vahanian's message has become consistently clearer, more forceful and more poetic. In the first, we learned of our "cultural incapacity for God" in a scientific and technological civilization. In the second, we learned that biblical faith is capable of migrating from one cultural world to another in its journey toward a new heaven and a new earth. This journey of faith can carry us beyond the death of God through its utopian capacity to transform human self-understanding, whether that understanding is in terms of nature (ancient & medieval), history (modern) or technology (postmodern).

Now, in *Anonymous God*, Vahanian teaches us how to be poets, speaking a new language of faith, a technological utopianism. *Anonymous God* is both a translation and a revision of Vahanian's 1989 book *Dieu anonyme, ou la peur des mots* (Desclee de Brouwer, Paris 1989). It is a fearless poetic exploration of the utopianism of our humanity in trinitarian terms, unfolding in four densely-packed stanzas (or chapters) over one hundred and fifty-five pages. Chapter One explores the iconoclasm of language in relation to technology and the utopianism of faith. Chapters Two, Three and Four show how this iconoclasm of the word—in which we live, move and have our becoming—is one yet three as we move from "Language and Utopia: God" to "Salvation and Utopia: The Christ" to "Utopianism of the Body and the Social Order: The Spirit."

"The Bible," says Vahanian, "is not a book to be read but to read through" like a pair of glasses (xv). The task is not to accommodate ourselves to some foreign and long-gone cosmology that asks us to choose the past over the future, but to see our present world in a new way, in an iconoclastic way that will allow us to invent our humanity anew. Whether we are speaking of the ancient, medieval,

modern or post-modern worlds—the world is always in danger of becoming our fate—a prison from which we can escape only by changing worlds. The task today is to do for our technological civilization what those of the first century’s eschatologically oriented biblical communities did for theirs, open our world to an “other” world, a new world rather than “another” world. In any age, Vahanian seems to say, we can only be human when we have the imagination, courage, ingenuity and grace to invent ourselves anew and so end up changing the world to facilitate our humanity rather than giving up and seeking to change worlds. This biblical eschatological task is the utopian heritage of the West—“eschatology prevails over cosmogony, even over cosmology. And, in short, utopia prevails over the sacred” (xviii).

As human beings, our capacity for technology is given without capacity for language, which is to say, for God. Faith has no language of its own (27), and so in every age it must iconoclastically appropriate what is available, whether it be the medieval language of metaphysics, the modern language of history or the postmodern language of technique. Vahanian suggests that there are important ways in which the advent of technological civilization makes this task easier rather than more difficult. Far from being totally alien to the eschatic orientation of Christian faith, technological civilization has a greater affinity with it than either the medieval language of metaphysics or the modern language of history, because technology, like eschatology, shares the utopian orientation toward making all things new. And utopia is not some impossible ideal, but the iconoclastic possibility of realizing the impossible, of reinventing one’s humanity in any world, especially a technological one.

This utopianism is predicated on an understanding that always and everywhere in the beginning is the word and the word is God. God is given with our capacity for language. God is the God who speaks. We do not claim language, language claims us. “We do not speak for God but are spoken for” (2). Metaphor is not one type of language, language is metaphor—using and yet contesting established meanings to invent the new, and so giving birth to a language without precedent. Such language unleashes the utopian possibilities of the human body forth into culture, making all things new.

Prophecy, *poesis*, and *techne* are but three faces of the same capacity, a capacity to invent our humanity and in the process reinvent the world as a new creation—the word made flesh. Being “spoken for,” Vahanian tells us, we must “speak up.” We must speak up prophetically to change the world, and yet must do this poetically. The poet, as the ancient Greek language testifies, is a wordsmith, someone who has the *techne* (technique or skill) “to make or do.” Our humanity comes to expression in and through the word, and is not so much natural or historical, or even technological, as it is utopian—a new beginning

encouraging us not to change worlds but to change the world.

This “good news” is not news reserved for some sacred saving remnant, but rather given once for all. It is good news for the whole human race. All language, says Vahanian, presupposes otherness. The appeal to any god who excludes others is an appeal to an idol. Whenever and wherever language is iconoclastic, there is no other God than the God of others. Indeed, being “in Christ” is just having this God in common so that Christ “is the designation of our common denominator instead of only the Christian’s mere Jesus” (91).

For Vahanian, the God of the biblical tradition is a God who can neither be named or imaged, and so remains always “anonymous” – the God of others and the God for others. And so for him, “Christ is much less a believer’s Christ than he is a Christ for the unbeliever” (82), for every person whose flesh is claimed by the iconoclasm of the word makes the invention of our humanity ever and again possible as the “worlding” of the word – the Word made flesh in the structures of our world (87). When the word is made flesh the kingdom of God draws near and God reigns, all in all.

Vahanian eschatology prevails not only over cosmogony, cosmology, and the sacred but also over soteriology. Far from being a religion of salvation, he argues, Christian faith liberates us from obsession with salvation, to embrace our new humanity and new creation, here and now. Christ cannot be reduced to Jesus any more than Jesus can be identified with God. For Vahanian, Jesus is no half-god-half-man but rather, as the Council of Chalcedon insisted (without confusion or mixture) Christ is where the radical alterity of God and humanity meet, giving both the words “God” and “human” their authentic meaning (97). “God is the measure of humanity even as our humanity is the measure of God” (96).

When the Church assumes its iconoclastic and utopian vocation as body of Christ, it becomes the “the laboratory for the kingdom of God,” desacralizing the world and religion. As such, its liturgy or “public work” invites both believer and unbeliever to bring to this new world their talents. The public work of the Church is to create jobs that hallow and therefore desacralize the social order, and so further social justice by making the invention of our humanity once more possible. Even as the Church once created monasteries, hospitals, and universities that transformed the human landscape, so today, far from being asked to reject or escape our technological civilization, the Church is called to embrace those “skills and crafts through which the human being is being human” (134) and so demonstrate that even (or especially) in a technological civilization our humanity can be reinvented. The biological process of evolutionary hominization, says Vahanian, should not be confused with the utopian project of humanization. Indeed, only by continual reinvention, he

suggests, can we really be human.

This is not a book for the theologically timid who only want to think “orthodox” thoughts and so betray the tradition by repeating it instead of continuing it. To repeat the tradition is to bring it to an end and make it seem as if our only option is to “change worlds.” But Abrahamic faith is, after all, a setting out on a journey without knowing where we are going (Hebrews 11: 8). Vahanian’s iconoclasm overturns everything in such a way as to make possible the tradition’s continuance and in the process encourages us to change the world instead of abandoning it.

The theologically adventurous will find this book rich with insight. From this perspective, I have only one quibble with Vahanian’s poetic adventure—he is more convincing in what he affirms than in what he sometimes denies. His occasional comparative reflections are not nearly as nuanced as those aimed at Christianity. He tells us, for instance, that “the Western tradition is beckoned by the utopian paradigm of religion, in its Greek as well as in its Hebrew (Judeo-Christian) version. While for Eastern religions the spiritual life aims at exchanging worlds, the West, for its part, came and still comes under the preview of a diametrically opposed approach which aims at changing the world” (xvii-xviii).

Later in his argument, he makes this observation specifically with reference to Buddhism. Such large contrasts ignore the profound shift from an “otherworldly” to a “this worldly” orientation that came fairly early in the shift from Theravada to Mahayana Buddhism, and that is also typical of Neo-Confucianism in China. To make his claim work, even for Western religion, Vahanian has had to elevate the eschatological strand and reject the soteriological within Christianity, but he does not seem to see similar strategies at work in other traditions. For example, I think one could argue that in its own way Thich Nhat Hanh’s “socially engaged Buddhism” does for Buddhism what Vahanian does for Christianity.

Anonymous God is an extraordinary poetic work of metaphorical transformation. The words are all familiar and yet what is said is quite unfamiliar, new, and unprecedented. In a typical book, one might expect the author to offer one, two or possibly three new insights per chapter. In this book one finds one, two or three per paragraph. The poetic density therefore is at times overwhelming. One feels the need to stop frequently and come up for air, lest one get dizzy from an overload of insight. It is a book best read slowly and then revisited if you wish to avoid the vertigo coming with having everything that seems so familiar rendered unfamiliar too suddenly. The final outcome of that patience—startlingly illumination of the new world that surrounds us—makes it all worth while.

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