

## Theopoetics of the Word

## Radical Theologies

*Radical Theologies* is a call for transformational theologies that break out of traditional locations and approaches. The rhizomic ethos of radical theologies enable the series to engage with an ever-expanding radical expression and critique of theologies that have entered or seek to enter the public sphere, arising from the continued turn to religion and especially radical theology in politics, social sciences, philosophy, theory, cultural, and literary studies. The post-theistic theology both driving and arising from these intersections is the focus of this series.

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THEOPOETICS OF THE WORD

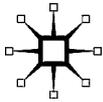
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A NEW BEGINNING OF  
WORD AND WORLD

GABRIEL VAHANIAN

Foreword by  
NOËLLE VAHANIAN

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THEOPOETICS OF THE WORD

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To Maurice Boutin

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## Foreword

Here it would be that I borrow my father's idiom, an idiom I undoubtedly bastardize for lack of mastery and genius, but to speak a common language in my own voice. The beauty of his voice was for me always that common language he could singularly evoke, and whose promise lives in me now, as it once did in him. But it is not by virtue of genealogy that this promise lives on in me, as though genetically passed down, or reared into my marrow from birth, or inculcated through a sacred book. This promise was not transmitted sotto voce; my ears did not burn; there was no epiphany and no sacred ritual to mark my admittance into the circle of the initiated. I was not looking for knowledge or to "better myself."

To the contrary, just as Kierkegaard suggested, no generation inherits the wisdom of its ancestors, but must learn everything anew. But this is precisely the promise of verbal reality: the gift of a new world. Condition of God or human condition, language is the promise of a world common to all and such a world cannot be inherited and transmitted, or enshrined and sacralized, or walled-in. And so, strangely at first, this has to mean that "biblical religion is not the religion of a book. It is a religion of the Word."<sup>1</sup> And religion is as much in the way as it is a way of the Word, for our idioms are as much in the way as they are the way of language.

My father's promise to me was a father's promise to his child: that the father will always be there for the child. All his idiosyncrasies are but flickering memories, even his metaphors and his choice illustrations will sadly erode unless they beg of me to search in me, in my own clumsy vernacular, the promise of his words—a promise beyond either one of us or any one of us. Besides all else, this, too, is also how the father will always be there for the child. Yet, no one has a legitimate right to this promise. It is a gift. No one has an exclusive

hold on this promise. No nation or book, no church or belief. Even so, if it is the father's duty to love the child, and so the child has a right to this love, the promise to do so, like the passion that is faith, transforms the one who gives it, if he gives it once and for all, and the one who receives it is entrusted with its gift. It is by virtue of the promise that dependence becomes trust. And father and daughter share more than blood—a world in common. Writ large, this promise spells a world of solidarity.

Here then, as little more than a ventriloquist, I wager that my father would find no offense with my stammer in his own tongue—a tongue I thought I knew so well, I did not bother to learn.

*Wording the World and Worlding the Word* is this simple, but hard-fought promise that language—not blood, or soil, or religion—allows us to transcend the parochialism of our facticity, the fatalism of history, or the necessitarianism of nature. Language opens up the human being to the “Christ beyond Christ,” and every human being to the “Jew within” herself, because language is the foremost arena of faith as eschatic existence. Thus, it is language maximally defined as an act of promise or a covenantal convention that sets and tries the limits of faith. There is no faith without language and no language without faith, as when even in the deepest recesses of myself, introspection convenes me with myself *tout court*—outside of the nature or the history that could just as well and so easily explain me away, outside of nostalgia or hope deferred that, in bad faith, always tag along. Myself *tout court*, the human being *tout court*, a people *tout court*—bereft of a founding or grounding ideology, whether natural, or historical, or mythological—but, in words, ultimately present to each other, responsible for each other, and entrusted in common with caring for a world from which they must in time depart and leave everything and nothing behind. Language breaks into time, interrupts bliss, lassitude, and wonder alike and begs of me to follow my voice, in my name. God is a nameless God; anonymous, God is the Word; made flesh, God is my vocation, not because I am Christian rather than Pagan, but because I am *tout court*. Not because this is my God and not yours, but because God is language.

If this is accepted, then the only task for religion is its own over-coming, and likewise with identity and history. We are thrown into this or that world, Greek or Jew, Turk or Armenian, male or female,

but in language—“by the grace of language”—we may receive this world as a gift rather than as given. To receive the world as a gift is to be indebted to it as such; it means to “live by faith alone” as opposed to living by the measure of one’s history or mythology. We are each thrown into this world, and that thrown-ness gives a determinacy to our being—a land, a nation, a religion, a history—but to live indebted to the gift of the world is to be thankful not merely for our parcel of happiness and its picket fences, but instead it is to be thankful for a world common to all.

It is “by the grace of language,” because language is utopian and kenotic, that one’s lips turn into words such that one ceases to be in the mode of being thrown into a world and transcends this mode—in words. Transcendence does not belong to another realm beyond this one; transcendence belongs to the kenotic utopianism of language. And if language is utopian, it has no place: no place of origin, and no resting place either. The Word made flesh is another way of saying that language radically alters us, shapes us, because its source is also in us—every time the Word is “outsourced” and “lips turn into words.”

To live by faith alone is to live “once and for all” in this world where people know theirs is a temporary stay, where one does not put down roots other than to stay afloat for a while and sojourn where there is neither Greek, nor Jew, neither God nor human being, and neither homeland and aliens, nor “us versus they.” Whereas identity is that “floating anchor” between the individual and the person behind whom the individual hides her existential finitude, and thus whereas identity alienates the individual from all other individuals as well as from herself, in language, these antagonisms—self and other, God and human—become complementary: in language, even the impossible is possible, such that in language, in wording the world, solidarity extends beyond borders and nationalities, because language—does not make us human or is not the preeminent mark of the human—opens up the human existentially and eschatically. In this, *language allows us to transcend the parochialism of our facticity.*

To receive, by faith alone, the gift of the world, and by the grace of language to be thankful for this gift of a world common to all might define the identity of the Christian priesthood of all believers in one sense—in a literal sense, and in a sense that recognizes that

language, even in making a worldhood, breaks into time factually, but, in a theopoetic sense, it reveals a profound aversion to ostracism. How else but in language might one be at home wherever one is, even as the Jew or the dirty Armenian, or the woman in a man's world?

Recently, Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to the United States stated on a Sunday news show that Jews had a legitimate right to Israel because of the Dead Sea scrolls. The interview was given in the context of President Barack Obama's upcoming visit to Israel, a visit whose ideological symbolism would be hard to misinterpret: the president would tour the grave of the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl; the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum, in which are stored the recovered Dead Sea scrolls; and the Holocaust museum. Jews have a legitimate right to return to their land of origin, and this, independent of the oft-encountered assumption that the modern state of Israel is the West's concocted plan of attrition for its role in the Holocaust. And what is more, this right is sacred, as it is the concrete realization of God's promise to his people, that his people's exile is not forever. The proof is in the scrolls: these give anthropological evidence of ethnic Jews, on the one hand, and on the other, scriptural sanctity to Israel as the Promised Land—a land of origin as sacred ground to a biblical eschatology realized over two thousand years of Diaspora. Discovered on the West Bank, the scrolls would thus give Israel the right to its settlements—those very settlements whose legality is contested under international law.

While this narrative is compelling, its power is derived from an appeal to the authority of the ethnic origins of the historically original people of the Book, an authority that can only make sense in the light of the religious filiation that bind all Jews—converts, Ashkenazi, or Sephardic, practicing or secular—to the Israelites, and vice versa, a religious filiation that is inscribed in the flesh, through circumcision, matrilineal passing down of the faith, and a biblical prohibition of intermarriage. And yet, it is nevertheless a certain leap for a modern nation to claim a sovereign right to land on the back of the geographic discovery of a bounty of sacred texts that found a religion of the Book. Whether these scrolls were composed by Essene sectarian Jews or whether they were hidden away by Jerusalem's citizens during the Jewish revolt against Rome, neither scenario gives Israel

an absolute right to this land. In the first case, we have a sectarian, splintered branch of Judaism that, because of its ascetic practices and beliefs, turned away from city-life. But while we can't say that Jesus was an Essene, we do know that he was of course a Jew. Hence, either only the Essenes have a right to this land, or if Israel does, because the Essenes were Jews, then so do Christians, because Jesus was a Jew. If this Essene thesis has fallen out of favor, given that the scrolls were written over a considerable span of time, and if, instead, these were hidden away to be protected, then, uncomfortably, we are equating all Jews with (historical Semitic) Israelites, such that the Sephardic or Ashkenazi Jew is an ethnic Israelite because he happens to be a biblical Israelite. Modern science makes it easy to identify one's ancestry, and more likely than not, given the Jewish matriarchal passing down of the Jewish faith, most Jews have middle Eastern ancestry whose lineage goes back to a common people some four thousand years ago. While this is undisputable, it erases a history for which Diaspora has religious significance. But it also makes of the Promised Land a natural right of the Chosen People, rather than a covenantal Word given the Chosen People.

Is there not, however, a fundamental difference between this ingenious Enlightenment invention that human beings are endowed by their Creator with certain self-evident inalienable rights and a covenantal promise spoken to Abram, even if on several occasions, that he would be the father of many nations and that his offspring would be given everlasting possession of the land of Canaan, that very land in which he was then a stranger (Gen. 12–17, NIV)? Is not the universalism of the Enlightenment vision, like the Noahic Covenant, what gives the very idea of natural rights its legitimacy? The covenantal promise to Abraham extends only to those who worship no other God but the God of Abraham. The exclusivity of the promise—if it is taken literally, a promise to Jews, but not to the followers of any other of the Abrahamic religions—cannot, by definition, be assimilated into a natural right. There is nothing natural about it, except in the inherited character of the promise such that it is given to any descendant of Abraham. But its general character, such that any convert becomes a son of Abraham, defies nature. And this is true all the more, if the promise is not taken literally, but extends to those who worship the God of Abram, or Abraham,

or Ibraheem. In this sense, the word of promise does not reveal the truth of a natural right in potential. Rather, in this sense, it is a gift beyond blood and borders—a gift that cannot be taken for granted, and whose meaning is in its performance—an utterance that must be heard.

To have legitimate right to a land, a filial right by birth to the land that is the modern state of Israel, because it is written in the Book that God promised this land to the children of Abraham is a conflation of the universal with the individual, of Western Enlightenment secularism and its modern ideas of nation-state and national identity where all peoples have the right to self-determination, as Jew, Armenian, Turk, Assyrian, Arab, or French with the exclusiveness of a covenantal promise between God and the people whose lineage to Abraham is the cornerstone of their identity—and, in this case, an exclusiveness whose legitimacy is verified scientifically, factually, because of archeological discoveries, but the claim to which is the sacralization of its biblical origin: secularism verifies sacrality. Two forms of fundamentalisms, Enlightenment secularism and religious sacralism, in cahoots to produce the “fallacy of identity,” that what people have in common is not the secular world, but blood, soil, history or geography, and religion also.

A stubborn man, my father’s theology may be guilty of the charge that it is “too Christian” in its insistence on the secular. This is the charge levied against the secularization thesis and Death of God or post-Death of God theologies: the world is more Christian now than ever and a world freed of God (Western Enlightenment’s child) is a world whose God dies for his people on the cross (a Christian universalism). But his stubborn insistence belies the facticity of existence: just as we cannot choose the family into which we’re born or thrown, we cannot choose to speak without a borrowed language—in a tongue. If “identity is to the human being in process of being human what a tongue is to language,” then “Christianity is a tongue.” And by my father’s own avowal, this tongue’s contribution may be the secular—to break into time, a word is made flesh, language is made concrete in one’s tongue and thus the word is worlded. If faith is beyond religion, an experience common to both the religious and the secular, it is because faith, in its most basic experience, is the experience of one’s singularity as what is most universal in this

world: here, the secular is that word that insists on existential and eschatological experience as more universal than being born Jew or Greek, or German.

My father's promise to me was exclusive. It was a father's promise to his daughter, a promise of unconditional love: "My daughter, don't worry, I am here." But did he not make the same promise to my brother also? No, to him he said: "My son, don't worry, I am here." If I take this promise for granted, I take it as a right I am owed, so that what is left of it now are mere words, unfulfilled. I had no right to this promise, only a right to the love born of a father's duty to his child. The promise was superfluous, gratuitous, so that I am entrusted with it now, indebted. God's promise to Abraham was exclusive. But these exclusive promises are like "the exception that verifies the rule" that God of all creation is a God who speaks and whose Word is made flesh each time it is outsourced and a father makes a promise to a child, or a man *tout court* gives his word to another.<sup>2</sup>

As Pope Francis pronounced in a homily he delivered on Vatican grounds, "The Lord has redeemed all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists. Everyone. . . . We must meet one another doing good. 'But I don't believe, Father, I am an atheist!' But do good: We will meet one another there."<sup>3</sup>

No sooner was this good news proclaimed across the world that a Vatican spokesman issued a statement not merely to "dampen" the Pope's remarks, but to undermine his solemn word, as though all those in the know understood the esoteric and duplicitous nature of his words, that when it comes to minister the poor, we should all come together, but as for salvation, the door is open to Catholics only.

When God is Word, when God is not the idol that names some essence, Supreme Being or Nature, but when God is anonymous and gratuitous, salvation and Promised Land are synonymous in this, election is no privilege, but a calling to be held by a promise rather than blood, soil, or religion. The Promised Land is a universal right, it is "the right to a place in the sun for anyone born to the world, whether descending from Abraham or some other lineage (Ps 115, 16)."<sup>4</sup> Salvation is this new world where what holds us together is

that we are all unique in our naked singularity. And solidarity is this paradox that in revealing the vulnerability of one's singularity rather than in masking it under the guise of an essential identity we promise to be here both as sojourners and "once and for all."

NOËLLE VAHANIAN

May 2013

## Series Preface

*Radical Theologies* encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death of god theologies, political theologies, continental thought, and contemporary culture.

For too long, radical theology has been wandering in the wilderness, while other forms of theological discourse have been pontificating to increasingly smaller audiences. However, there has been a cross-disciplinary rediscovery and turn to radical theologies as locations from which to engage with the multiplicities of twenty-first-century society, wherein the radical voice is also increasingly a theologically engaged voice with the recovery and rediscovery of radical theology as that which speaks the critique of “truth to power.”

*Radical Theologies* reintroduces radical theological discourse into the public eye, debate, and discussion by covering the engagement of radical theology with culture, society, literature, politics, philosophy, and the discipline of religion.

Providing an outlet for those writing and thinking at the intersections of these areas with radical theology, *Radical Theologies* expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach that was being undertaken without a current series to situate itself within. This series, the first dedicated to radical theology, is also dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice.

Just as rhizomic thought engages with multiplicities and counters dualistic and prescriptive approaches, this series offers a timely outlet for an expanding field of “breakout” radical theologies that seek to redefine the very terms of theology. This includes work on and about the so-labeled death of god theologies and theologians who emerged in the 1960s and those who follow in their wake. Other radical theologies emerge from what can be termed underground theologies and also a/theological foundations. All share the aim and expression of breaking out of walls previously ideologically invisible.

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## Preface: Of Identity of Word and World

*Je m'identifie dans le langage mais seulement à m'y perdre.*

—Lacan

Theology? Once a queen of the sciences and—though no less an invention of Greek scientific knowledge—globally so classic in that unifying role that, today, scarcely anyone would guess it owed the prestige of it all less to its scientific pretensions than to the would-be matter of fact ingenuity of its language. And a language, mind you, not so much of Sundays as of every day: the sun rises and sets every day, unlike even the Son that rises from the dead on Sunday. A language that took shape even as it molded your identity, from birth to death and from baptism to extreme unction. And yet no less mythical for the reality of its concrescence. A myth that lies in being demythologized of its own myth: like hair that needs to be cut only because it will keep growing, and grow from black to gray to white or even “grow” bald. Until caught up by death, life, rather than denied, is *suspended*. And likewise is belief, rather than denied by the myth, held in suspension. A suspension actually more pregnant in fact than could ever pretend its literal rendering through mere words—should they be the official conveyors of most hallowed a theology.

Miss it, or loathe it? Either way, forget it!

As Greek an invention as theology was and as mythical as possible, did it, however, really intend or entail no belief whatsoever (Vernant)? Not even the least need of believing anything, much less in such cultural benchmarks as gods that die and rise again? That it promoted no system of beliefs, is one thing. Another is whether it denied all belief or consisted, instead, in suspending it, as would even attest the very ritualism through which those Greek myths

were enacted. They served, didn't they, only as vehicles of a human being's innate capacity as well as yearning for "convention"—for being brought both together as a self and neither more nor less than together with others whose identity is at once similar to yours and, no less than yours, irreplaceable; in other words, for life together, through which private and public mesh in yet are not identified to one another: a convention is a matter of rite, and yet, as ritualistic as it may be, the less it is stuck in the subversion of the myth in terms of a literalist process of self-identification, individual or collective.

Identity, religious or cultural, forget it, too!

Rather than of Being (Heidegger) or of the power of Being (Tillich), identity is—as etymologically implied in the word "myth"—a matter of words. Of the word. The forgetfulness of which is even more drastically fatal than Heidegger's forgetfulness of Being.

Not a matter of things and beings, nor a matter even of the objective and the subjective or of the literal and the spiritual, theology is a matter of *wording*. Even of doing things with words (Austin). Of wording the world as well as of *worlding* the word. To wit, Judaism, more ritualistic—to a fault—than its offspring, Christianity. To the extent that, by and large, Judaism has to this day shied away from any theological reconstruction of its language. A stubborn resistance put into evidence by phrases such as "you are what you eat" or "once a Jew always a Jew," though no longer a practicing one—and, ironically yet paradoxically, pointing to theology as a matter of words.

But, then, not more despicable, either, than the embargo perpetrated throughout the ages by the Christian tradition on Western culture since its inception in the occasional, that is, *kairotic*, or timely, combination of Athens and Jerusalem. Except that, in the intellectual system that resulted from this combination, the kairotic aspect of faith as a matter of timely words was surrendered to an imperious concatenation of beliefs meant to be timeless. Words, sooner or later, wear out and lose their meaning, unless they are forgotten through more or less automated rituals that linger on as in the case of Abraham, the father of faith, going through the sacrificial steps of his son's holocaust even while all along poor Isaac keeps asking him what the meaning of it all is (Genesis 22).

Failing repristination, rituals and beliefs alike can become outdated. But the secularism that contends to take over is no more than

fundamentalism, a panacea for lacking faith or its loss of nerve, especially in a culture such as ours for which above all faith is ultimately even iconoclastic of itself. There is no sacred precinct in the Garden of Eden. Nor is there a temple in the New Jerusalem. The language that should have issued from the kairotic combination of Athens and Jerusalem is neither theonomous nor heteronomous. It revolves around an event which, in Christ—word become flesh—is neither theomorphic nor anthropomorphic, but *christomorphic*. At once religious and secular. Linked together through a mutual passion of each for the other. A passion the performance of which entails a language through whose reciprocal process, lying in wording the world and worlding the word, faith surrenders neither to metaphysically (or biophysiological) oriented or to spiritualistically (or mystically) oriented pretensions but is therefore all the more pregnant with the contingency that is the kenotic characteristic of the human being in quest of being human.

Kenotic as the word is that empties itself into flesh as even “God” (or “man”) is when “God becomes man in order for man to become God.” The vertical dimension (higher to lower, lower to higher) of this process shares, however, its traditional predominance with its twin, the horizontal (beginning and end). And all the more so does also the spiritual with the literal in a christomorphic understanding of language, here advocated: You cannot see God unless you see him, Jesus, the man, not so deified or even “man for others” as man *tout court*, emptied of all preconceived presuppositions even about faith, if faith must on occasion tell a mountain to move out of its way; that is, if it must *outsource* itself as it once did through the mutual outsourcing of Athens and Jerusalem; in a word, through the Christ, much less man or woman, Greek or Jew, than either God or man—a man *tout court*.

You can only forget what you need to be reminded of. Read what follows in this book. And forget it.

GABRIEL VAHANIAN

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# Acknowledgments

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