# AMOR DEI

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*Reflections about God, language and meaning on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the first printing of Thomas More's 'Utopia' in Leuven*

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**shiftⁿ**
clarity in complexity

# GOD AS UTOPIA FOR HUMANITY, OR HUMANITY AS GOD'S UTOPIA?

*'And God said, Let **us make** man in **our** image, after **our** likeness… So God created man in **his** own image, in the image of God created he **him;** male and female created he **them.** (Genesis 1:26-27)*

Hebrew does not have a majestic plural. Who then, is this 'our' from verse 26? Cannot God alone create humanity? Does He need humanity itself for this? Is humanity part of this 'we'? Is that why He **created** man incomplete in verse 27: incomplete, because not in 'our likeness', only in his image. And as verse 26 indicates the plurality 'us', so the end of verse 27 points to the plurality 'them'. Strange monotheism!

**Is humanity God's utopia, and is the likeness to God utopia for humanity? A reading of the two verses of Genesis points in this direction. And does the 'u' in utopia then stand for the Greek eu 'good' or ou 'not'?'**

# GOD AS
# THE WORD

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)*

Is this expression by John not a reflection about language, more a grammatical statement than a theological proposition? Especially because John keeps with the Hebrew tradition: a tradition that from 'the beginning' and to this day addresses the tension between spoken and written language, and between language and experience.

I make a distinction between Jewish and Hebrew tradition. As a non-Jew, I cannot call upon the Jewish tradition, which is much richer than dealing with the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew name for what is the Jewish biblical canon) and the ever-growing number of commentaries about it, which I have been initiated in and that I call Hebrew tradition.

This tradition maintains that all of creation was created with the 22 consonants of the Hebrew alphabet! Rabbi David Cooper wrote a book about this tradition entitled God Is a Verb.

But Hebrew also lacks a word for 'being' and the discussion about the 'existence' of god is meaningless. The Hebrew tradition attaches very little importance to the 'representative' function of language: as if language indicates something from the reality, gives a depiction of the reality. Nor does the term 'reality' exist in Hebrew. The tradition refers to multiple realities, one of which is called the world of action, of work. This is the *mundus* in which we feel at home, where our experience of time and space has a place. In English, the word 'actuality' still has this root.

God is therefore a word that takes on a different meaning for everyone who hears or reads this word. In this way, the word itself points to a 'personal' god. For militant atheists, this meaning is negative: their obsession with god is to convince others that he does not exist. But from the moment they speak to someone and use the word god, they achieve the very opposite of their aim. For such a person, god begins to exist as soon as he has been named. This perspective on language, called the performative character, the language that creates 'actualities', is the perspective from which the Hebrew tradition approaches language. Hebrew is made up of verbs!

# MEANING: A TENSION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCE

Hebrew is a consonantal language: the original Biblical text consists of an unbroken series of consonants. It was only in the second and third centuries of our era that the Masoretes added a standard vocalisation. The text itself therefore remains incomprehensible without a reader: a reader who by his reading, his addition of vowels, makes it into something comprehensible. In Hebrew, reading, calling and naming are translated with the same word. Literally, the Biblical text is a dead text: a reader reading aloud is the one who brings the text to life by his personal reading. Every reading is therefore an interpretation of the consonants. Text fundamentalism is therefore completely alien to the Hebrew tradition: the text has no meaning of itself; meaning is ascribed to the text by the reader.

How is it possible to handle this complete freedom of interpretation? Reading, which of course means reading aloud, is always done in a group. This group must be large enough to avoid group thinking: traditionally a minimum of 10 people. The word calls for a reply. It is therefore not the text that gives a decisive answer about what is true: the members of the 'reading group' are called upon to test the truth of the reader. And the only test they have is their own life experience, how the reader can bring the text alive from their own life experience. No other authority is needed.

The idea behind this is that the only source of meaning is one's own life experience, and that this life experience forms the link between language and meaning. In fact, the Biblical text is like life itself: just as incomprehensible, just as chaotic, just as abundant and rich. This life, like this text, can only be transmitted and understood by way of the shared word, by reading what we experience, by reading life like a text. Life like a text to be interpreted by means of shared creative use of language. Every reading can therefore be nothing but a witness of an experience: the truth of the witness can only be ensured by other witnesses, which may also give their reading. Different readings then enrich what emerges as shared meaning. And this meaning develops according to the changing conditions of life: there is therefore never a definitive meaning.

**THE ONLY SOURCE OF MEANING IS ONE'S OWN LIFE EXPERIENCE.**

That is why the Hebrew tradition is primarily a narrative tradition. Stories are testimonies. Logical argumentation has a secondary role. In this tradition, 'rational' proofs of the existence or nonexistence of god are therefore irrelevant.

# EXPERIENCING GOD: THE FIRST 'WORD'

***I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.*** *(Exodus 20:2)*

What we usually refer to as the ten 'commandments' are called the ten 'words' in the Hebrew tradition. And *Exodus 20:2* is the first 'word'. You will note that this is by no means a commandment or prohibition! In fact, this word conveys how in the Hebrew tradition, the fundamental experience of god is a life experience. It is a liberating experience, out of bondage, out of slavery, which is symbolised by Egypt. Egypt, Mizraim in Hebrew, literally means the land where everything is measured, but also the land that holds you by the neck, ending up in narrow straits.'

You could say that this first 'word' is an impulse toward atheism. After all, when the meaning of the word God does not have the effect of liberating me, then I am faced with a 'different' god, an idol, for which the second 'word' shows a profound aversion. ***Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*** *(Exodus 20:3)*

This is not the place to go into the consonantal wealth of this first 'word'. But, despite its limitations, the classic King James Version we are using here still enables us to explain the subject of *Amor Dei*. The Hebrew very clearly uses the second person singular. This second person singular can even be found in the Hebrew in the word 'I', which is used in this verse. An experience of god is therefore a personal experience of liberation which one cannot bring about on one's own, a liberation from the determinisms that have one live as a slave: genetic, cultural, familial, gender determinisms. It is therefore an experience of a meaningful relationship, a liberating relationship. For instance, I could tell the story of five meaningful relationships in my life, which fulfil this experience of god and give meaning to the first 'word' for me.

Liberation is usually a positive experience and freedom is described as a positive characteristic. The Biblical narrative makes it clear that it is not necessarily experienced this way. Erich Fromm writes about 'Fear of Freedom'. The Israelites are sent into the desert from Egypt and within the shortest time, they express their desire for the 'fleshpots of Egypt'. In Hebrew, desert, *midbar,* literally means 'the place from which the word arises'. Indeed, one can go in any direction in the desert, one is therefore fully free in the choice of destination: but precisely this causes the fear of freedom. Freedom of choice is a difficult problem: the absence of determinisms comes with great uncertainty. Why then this yearning for freedom?

# AMOR DEI: LOVE *FROM,* LOVE *FOR?*

*Certainly I will be with thee...* (Exodus 3:12)
*I Am That I Am...* (Exodus 3:14)

As the quote in the introduction reads: even the creator of 'a human' declined the freedom to create him alone. 'Let us make...'. It seems freedom in solitude is not desirable for the creator. Both creator and the creation 'human' are connected by this shared search for the 'likeness'. In each of us, there is a fundamental yearning for creation. And this creation can only occur in freedom, removed from what holds us in slavery and measurability, removed from Egypt. This is the risk that even the creator has taken: allowing an open end to his relationship with his creation, the human. We could call this God's utopia: the human who grows into his likeness, a likeness which is not predetermined, but that suggests a shared relationship to develop this likeness. God is steadfast in this adventure, but leaves man completely free in his quest for the power to create. I would call this the love of God for man: despite all the inhumanities, which man discovers in a way that is painful to him, still continuing to believe in the great adventure of reaching likeness. The creator accepts self discovery through the creative power of humanity. In this way they continue to create together!

**GOD'S UTOPIA: THE HUMAN WHO GROWS INTO HIS LIKENESS, A LIKENESS WHICH IS NOT PREDETERMINED.**

Being able to develop the same love with regard to his own creations is what brings humanity to likeness. This is the other side of Amor Dei, the love of God. The divine experiences that I mentioned are nothing else but the experience of this relationship: in his freedom the other also allows my creative power to be discovered. We call this *amor,* love. Whether this is *amor sui,* or *amor mundi* or *amor Dei:* the core remains the other who liberates me to create, and thereby also liberates his own creative power.

**... THE CORE REMAINS THE OTHER WHO LIBERATES ME TO CREATE, AND THEREBY ALSO LIBERATES HIS OWN CREATIVE POWER.**

This relationship is illustrated by the quotes from Exodus that I have mentioned. Verse 3:12 is God's answer to Moses, who asks him: 'Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? I will be with thee...' In verse 13, Moses asks further: what name should I use for you in this process of liberation from slavery? Then follows the second quote. Not the haughty mainstream theological translation: 'I am that I am, rather I will be that I will be.' The same word as the beginning of verse 12: 'I will be with you, whatever becomes of it!'

And as I began with a grammatical quote, I would like to end with the delicate humour of the Hebrew language. The name of God in the Hebrew tradition is YHWH, four unutterable consonants. But these consonants are precisely those that support certain vowels! YHWH are the famous four consonants that, as long as the likeness is not reached, and this will of course never be reached, remain unutterable.

*This speech was offered during an event organised by shiftN to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the first printing of Thomas More's Utopia in Leuven. Three philosophers — Tinneke Beeckman, Peter Venmans and Luc Hoebeke — explored three forms of love: self-love (Amor sui), love for the world (Amor mundi) and love for/of God (Amor Dei).*

# BIO

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(°1941) is a consultant, author and lecturer in the field of organisational development, innovation processes and systems practice. In 1994 he published a seminal book *Making Work Systems Better: A Practitioner's Reflections* (Wiley, now freely available online). Luc has for many years been an important mentor and sounding board for shiftN professionals.