
Truths & Texts: “Dead or Alive! —Only (a) Text?”

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Ce qui est simple est toujours faux,
ce qui est compliqué est inutile (Paul Valéry)

While you are reading/listening to what I have to say about the statement, “There are no truths, only texts,” I would like you to keep in mind French poet Paul Valéry’s words: “What is simple is always false, what is complicated is useless.”

I dedicate this paper to Gabriel Vahanian who celebrated his 75th birthday last Thursday, on January 24. Vahanian is the main representative of the “Theology After the Death of God” in the second half of the 20th century. He is also the most radical critic of this recent trend in Christian theology. Praised as the most challenging book in theology published in the 1950s and early 1960s whose relevance Rudolf Bultmann in 1963, compared to Karl Barth’s *Römerbrief* (Bultmann 1975, 111; Vahanian 1973, 155-60), particularly the second edition published in 1922, Vahanian’s book *The Death of God* (1961) provides one of the most novel approaches to a classical issue in Christian theology for at least the last 150 years: the question of the “essence of Christianity.” Instead of talking about a “new” essence of Christianity, as William H. Hamilton did the same year Vahanian’s book was published; instead of working out what Paul M. Van Buren called in 1963 *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, Based on an Analysis of Its Language*, instead of proclaiming *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, as Thomas J. J. Altizer did in 1966, the same year he co-

authored with Hamilton the book *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Vahanian indicated in publications like *Wait Without Idols* (1964) and *No Other God* (1966) how what had by then become a slogan should be understood, instead of the rather simplistic version of it allegedly intended to make it easier to understand, and presented by the media.

The book *Anonymous God* by Vahanian is now being published as volume 3 of the series “Contemporary Religious Thought.” It is a new amended augmented version of his *Dieu anonyme, ou la peur des mots* published in 1989.

Anonymous God is a topic that has given rise to a variety of texts in a particular religion and culture over the years, namely Western Christianity. As each undergraduate student in Christian theology and in religious studies knows—or should know—*Anonymous God* is in fact a rather old idea in Christianity. It is as old as Justin Martyr who lived in the second century. Justin borrowed the idea from Middle Platonism of his time, possibly from the Platonist philosopher Albinus (Grant 1966, 26-29), in order to state that for Christians also God has no name, that the truth that is being thought of as God—one could say: God thought of as truth—cannot be identified, i.e. defined and determined, by a name. In chapter six of his *Second Apology* (Osborn 1973, 22-25), Justin says: “The Creator of the universe has no name, because he is unbegotten. To receive a name requires someone older than the person who is named.” Yet, there can be no one and nothing older than the Creator of the universe, a topic often dealt with by the Greek Fathers of the Church. If this is the case, then what of a word like the word “God,” or of the various titles given to “God” like Father, Creator, Lord, or Master? Are they names? Justin says no. These words are not names; they are “forms of address” (*prosrêseis*), they do not contain in themselves a known or an unknown meaning. For Justin, Osborn says, “the word ‘god’ is a vague and obscure, even if universal, idea” (1973, 23), and Justin himself says that “God” “is not a name, but an opinion (*doxa*) of something hard to explain, and this opinion is innate in the nature of human beings.” One can also find such an attitude among Platonist philosophers who were Justin’s contemporaries. In his work *Didaskalikos* (VI, 10-11) for instance, Albi-

nus employs an argumentation similar to Justin's when he speaks about the impossibility to use names with regard to the One. For Justin, God can be talked to, not talked about. God is a Thou, not a He—or a She, as some would prefer today. The second-person category, not the third-person category, is the appropriate one here.

For sure, "anonymous God" as a truth for today's Western religion and culture entails aspects and dimensions different from those of Justin and his contemporaries, Christian or otherwise. Such an issue may indeed offer an opportunity to debate truths and texts, and it can spur a highly interesting analysis of the many intricacies to be found in Justin's writings accessible to us with reference, for instance, to his use of Hebrew and Jewish texts. In chapter 9 on "Text and Testimonial"—in particular "the Qumran discovery of Jewish testimonia," Eric F. Osborn (1973, 111-19) concludes his survey of how Justin employs these various documents as follows:

For the uncertainty and confusion which have surrounded this problem there is a further explanation. The transmission of these documents was largely oral. Oral transmission of written documents is the most important single factor in the whole complex of varying issues. Justin is here, as ever, the apologist. He has collections of texts which he knows or believes to be genuine citations and these are his weapons. But the use of these collections, apart from his few treatises, is entirely oral. They are used in argument and in instruction which was always a preparation for argument. The dominant oral transmission of written sources helps to produce the variations which have baffled investigators of this problem. (1973, 118-19)

Osborn observes in a footnote: "Oral transmission of written sources is again the chief cause of confusion in Justin's Gospel citations" (1973, 119 n. 57). According to Osborn,

The most hardly won conclusion concerning Justin's testimonies cannot claim certainty. His citations are so variable and his adaptations are so frequent. In whatever form they were placed before Justin they must have been used haphazardly to produce the results we see. This haphazard use is important for it meant that, once he is within scripture, Justin does not bother about minutiae of text and authorship.

Scripture is a unity. It does not matter which prophet spoke the prophecy so long as it has come true. (1973, 119)

Justin knew very well that one can address God in different ways. In Western culture, but elsewhere as well, God as truth has generated a vast array of texts one could call: traditions, schools of thought, trends of many kinds including theism and atheism. For example, some have known Justin's "anonymous God" as the "hidden God"—the *lateens deitas* of medieval piety and thinking and Martin Luther's *Deus absconditus*—and also, of course, the "revealed God." Over the centuries, texts referring to "anonymous God" as truth aimed at making reference to God each time relevant in specific situations and contexts. Again, this may well prove a good approach to today's debate on truths and texts. However, I do not intend to proceed in this way.

Attempts at making one and the same truth available—better, commendable as it were—in other circumstances recently came to the fore when George W. Bush, a few days after the events of September 11, recalled—as he said—an old motto common in the American Far West: "Dead or alive!" thereby inviting his fellow Americans, and others also, to consider the whole world as the new American Far West in which the same old truth was to be applied: "Dead or alive!" Is this only "text"?

II.

One can readily put texts in opposition to truths, as in the statement: "There are no truths, only texts" (indicated further below as: *our statement*). This opposition finds expression in our statement with reference to "being" in terms of "there are no." If the existence of truths is thus denied, the denial does indeed take place on the basis of a reference to being—albeit a negative one. There is/there is no—this is a givenness in terms of *es gibt* and its denial: if truths are not—given, texts on the contrary are—or should be—given! The shift of emphasis from truths to texts does take place on the basis of a "there are" that remains unaffected and unchallenged. If truth constitutes one of the basic terms of Western metaphysics, being also—one might

even say: in the first place and all the more—stands as a basic concern for Western metaphysics. Our statement therefore also represents a metaphysical statement and the reversal of emphasis from truths to texts does not mean at all a departure from such. If one wants to get rid of Western metaphysics, such an enterprise will not prove successful on the basis of a statement like our statement that does not cast new ground either for thinking, or experience, and even feelings.

And yet, one should listen to the *formal* radicality of our statement aimed at negating any attempt at isolating “the true”—i.e. not only truths in the plural, but also truth in the singular—in order to make out of “the true” something absolute, i.e. set apart from anything else than itself. A truth that there is, there is not—*eine Wahrheit, die es gibt, gibt es nicht!* One might well oppose texts to truths, as in our statement; but texts cannot remain in isolation from anything else, if some significant change should take place compared to truths considered in isolation from anything else. No text opens itself immediately to anybody.

We have to consider the following hypothesis: “only texts,” this calls for more than texts. Texts in the plural refer to a diversity of texts *somehow possibly* related to one another. Such a plurality of texts does not merely represent a kind of external aspect; there is also an internal dimension to such plurality/diversity/variety of texts. This pertains to the reception as well as the production of texts; this pertains to reading—not only to writing, and therefore it pertains to the mental representations as well as the verbal/linguistic status of texts. In other words, texts in the plural are not possible without reference to intertextuality already called for by the plurality of texts.

Our statement should be taken not as a conclusion, but instead as a point of departure. It is not an answer—possibly a relativizing one at that!—or even a solution one needs simply to apply to various kinds of problems. Although the first step from truths to texts is negatively put in terms of distinction or opposition, and ultimately perhaps also in terms of exclusivity and even exclusion, it opens itself to other steps with a positive—or better: cooperative—matrix. One can identify these other steps as follows: texts and intertextuality, intertextuality and communication, communication and language, language and rele-

vance. All this makes us aware of contexts, including style, rhythm, syntactic movement and the space in which the heterogeneous side of texts and the irreversible plurality of their meanings are at stake (Lévesque 1978, 22).

Context can be understood as the linguistic environment of an expression, as the statement in which the expression takes place, and also as the other statements of one and the same speaker or as the statements of the one who responds to the former. According to Oswald Ducrot and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1995, 458), a discourse situation comprises the totality of non-linguistic circumstances including the spatio-temporal location of an utterance, the identity of speakers, the amount of knowledge they do have in common. Circulation is essential to texts as contexts. Texts can be decontextualized and recontextualized. Our statement gives this clearly to understand: decontextualizing is formally achieved through negation (for instance: there are no truths); recontextualizing is formally achieved through affirmation (for instance: [there are] only texts). One may ask: what kind of insight does such a possibility open up to? Our statement remains silent here. Put in a more positive way: our statement stands open for such a question and does in no way escape from the necessity of posing it (Lévesque 1978, 113-17).

III.

In his study on the dogmatic space of modern industry with the title *The Empire of Truth* (1983), the French historian and philosopher of law, Pierre Legendre, indicates the following four basic questions as prerequisites for understanding the empire of truth today. First, how organizations put forward the question of truth; second, how overall knowledge and overall speech are industrialized; then how comment is the means to conquer the world; and also what concept is most appropriate to deal with the question of truth today. This concept is, according to Legendre, what he calls “le texte sans sujet” (Legendre 1983, 35-39).

According to Legendre, the very idea of text in Western culture remains much more vague than numerous studies lead to believe when

they take such a more or less magic signifier as their proper subject matter. One must deal with poetry and the arts as texts within “text without subject,” i.e. as representing the reference to the sovereignty of fiction. This is most thoroughly expressed by those who were still close to the scholastic innocence, for instance by Petrarch (1304-1374) and by what he characterized as *officium poetae*—the function of the poet, a function quite different in Petrarch’s mind from the understanding of the function of the poets in Platos’s *Republic*.

“Text without subject” helps to differentiate texts within an encompassing whole. With regard to Roman law and its transmission in Western culture through what is called the canon law of the Latin church, “text without subject” specifies nothing more and nothing less than the principle of paternity. This has decisive consequences for the reproduction of the industrial system as a conquering system. Legendre specifically refers to our casual treatment of the relationship between writing and what he calls “l’éphémère” (1983, 36). According to him, it is in fact very difficult to acknowledge that the transmission to which institutions refer to not the conveying of material objects, not even of discourse insofar as discourse means the content of a message. Although pertaining to real facts that can be subject to historical investigations and scholarship, such a transmission, as historical as it may be, is not the conveying of a content that would attract our attention; it becomes indeed most interesting when its conditions, circumstances, historical justifications are no more and are disqualified. For the most important are the remains, the cast-off dress, i.e. truth not as discourse about a so-called content, but as function (1983, 36). “Text without subject” means that the history of institutions depends on the logic of symbolic, and essentially juridical, transmission. The operative character of the notion of “text without subject” refers to the fact that each and every organization system develops a discourse through dogmatic sleights of hand, and that such a discourse functions as if it would be the discourse of the system in which, and inside of which, we believe. Such a text is not produced by any subject. An example of that is provided by a particular area of study all too often ignored in Western law researches and law schools as well: the domain of the heraldry. The proper task of heraldry lies in

explaining the genealogical principle by means of emblems that tell what truth consists of for heirs. Such truth is protected juridically through the penal rule of so-called *crimen falsi*—the crime of falsification. Heraldic knowledge was organized in the West during the Middle Ages and is still in force today. Legendre refers to the coat of arms of one of the branches of the Borromeo family, Borromeo Arese. That coat of arms is a multilayered composition: on top there is the word “HUMILITAS”—humility—with a crown above it, and under that motto a complex layout is to be found whose best known part is the famous trefoil knot, also known as the Borromean knot, referred to by mathematicians and (since the end of the 1970s) also psychoanalysts under the influence of Jacques Lacan (Legendre 1983, 38, 88-89). In fact, Legendre recalls, the trefoil knot goes back to an ancient mystical discourse and it figures out the close tying of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary, and its eventual and necessary dissolution; it is, therefore, a metaphor for death.

French authors prior to the French Revolution, such as M. de Vulson de la Colombière (1644), referred to heraldic knowledge as “the heroic science”. It is a knowledge that consists in showing the truth, in making truth function as an organization principle. Thus, truth can be shown, and also seen. In this regard Soviet aesthetics was particularly interesting on account of its academism geared towards the repetition of the eponymous discourse based on emblems. On the coat of arms of the Borromeo family one can see Humility crowned; in the Soviet Union the *Pravda*—i.e. the Truth—received the Lenin Order and the Order of the October Revolution, and each reader of this Party newspaper could see this every day when he or she read the *Pravda*. The same logic operates in marketing and the advertising business of the capitalist West, and this logic has been analyzed in a book published recently and based on a survey over the last two and a half years by Florence Abado, a journalist of the daily Paris newspaper *Le Monde* and a specialist of advertising techniques. Abado’s book, *Le livre noir de la pub*, analyzes in particular the advertising techniques of drug companies. Truths and texts are intrinsically interwoven; any attempt at separating—let alone opposing—truths and texts can but be detrimental not only to truths but also to texts.

IV.

The same tradition that considered truth a fundamental dimension also remained convinced “that being is said in many different ways”—*einai pollachôs legetai*. In this tradition no opposition, much less exclusion, exists between being and the diversity in which being is expressed. There are many different ways to refer to being, i.e. many different texts, and this is not a reason to dismiss any reference to truths—let alone truth in the singular. Such a dismissal constitutes a rather poor understanding of Western culture and would easily lend itself to a caricature lacking sufficient basis for argumentation. And yet, it is necessary, Georges Bataille said, “to break with the ties of common truth in order to ‘exist’” (Lévesque 1978, 11). According to Maurice Blanchot,

There is an active, productive way of reading which produces text and reader and thus transports us. Then there is a passive kind of reading which betrays the text while appearing to submit to it, by giving the illusion that the text exists objectively, fully, sovereignly: as one whole. Finally, there is the reading that is no longer passive, but is passivity’s reading. It is without pleasure, without joy; it escapes both comprehension and desire. It is like the nocturnal vigil, that “inspiring” insomnia when, all having been said, “Saying” is heard, and the testimony of the last witness pronounced. (Blanchot 1986, 101)

With respect to the features of textuality the main task of textual analysis lies not in the reduction of texts to the linguistic realization, but in the questioning of such a realization as to the elements responsible for the “coming-to-be” of texts. If criteria for textuality do exist, these criteria are at best criteria of acceptability and they are determined to a great extent by the contexts provided by both the production and the reception of texts. Our statement puts the emphasis on a workable theory of texts whose main aspects are the following five as suggested by Ducrot and Schaeffer (1995, 501-04): cohesion, coherence, intentionality/acceptability, differentiation, and creativity in terms of both production and reception. A creatively produced text calls for creative reception. This creative character is traditionally

called inspiration (Lévesque 1978, 111-12). Creative production takes place above and beyond answers. In such a case, reception is creative so long as it does not purport to answer that which has taken place above and beyond any answer. Answers go by, questioning remains.

Our statement is programmatic as to the approach—not the subject matter—of what it calls texts. The French historian, Paul Veyne, recalls in 1986 a conversation with his friend and colleague at Collège de France, Michel Foucault, shortly before Foucault's death on 25 June 1984 (Veyne 1986, 940 n. 1). Foucault suggested that the central concern for Heidegger was to know about the ground—the abyssal ground—for truth, for Wittgenstein, to know what we are talking about when we tell the truth, and for me, Foucault added, to know how to deal with the following question: why is it that truth is so little and so seldom true? Foucault's project, which he was unable to realize, was to write what he called an "archaeology of hermeneutics" which would be a major part of his study of truth. One may have a certain idea about this project in Foucault's course on "The Hermeneutics of the Subject" (Foucault 2001) he gave at Collège de France in the Winter of 1982, and also in the conversation of 20 January 1984, between him, H. Becker, R. Fornet-Betancourt, and A. Gomez-Müller, published in the journal *Concordia* in 1984 with the title: "The Ethics of Selfcare as Practice of Freedom" (Foucault 1994, 708-29).

Our statement is a purposeful one. As such it calls for a decision regarding its proper relevance or its very effectuations, its "effect of meaning" (Lévesque 1978, 101; Ducrot & Schaeffer 1995, 541). Far from expressing some underlying scheme to which truth and truths are often reduced, texts result from a complex human activity in which interpretations are developed about texts and occasioned, as it were, by them. Texts in the plural refer not only to the high diversity of subject matters dealt with in texts. Such a plurality refers also—and most importantly—to the unique place of texts within human activity, particularly with reference to speaking, writing, and reading, as the meeting point (Lévesque 1978, 121, 123) between these activities. This is perhaps the main reason why one can talk of "the strangeness of text" (Lévesque 1978, 91-125). According to the German literary critic Au-

gust Wilhelm von Schlegel, “The word was first a cult, before it became a trade and a job.” As to reading, Vahanian begins his book *Anonymous God* by talking of the Bible as text:

Neither a written work so much as ever “a-writing,” nor a story so much as a scenario, the Bible is not a book to be read but to read through (just as spectacles, Calvin would say, are not worn to be looked at but to look through). Not a book to be read as though it were a document still in use despite the toll of time and of beliefs and the manifold lore of culture, despite the gods that fail, even the God that dies; nor again a book to be read, but a book that reads, and reads through words that aim at nothing less than screening God as well as the world.... (Vahanian 2001, xv)

Only that worthy of truth reaches the diversity of texts; only that worthy of the diversity of texts reaches what one can call truth. Truth is not to be looked at apart and in isolation from anything else; truth is to be looked through.

And writing? What would it be? According to Maurice Blanchot in his book, *The Writing of the Disaster*,

To write is to be absolutely distrustful of writing, while entrusting oneself to it entirely. Whatever basis one may assign to this double movement—which is not as contradictory as its excessively concise formulation makes it seem—it is still the rule of every writing practice: “give withholding” has, in writing’s double imperative, I won’t say its application, or its illustration, for these are scarcely adequate terms, but—through the dialectic and also without regard to it at all—that which justifies itself simply by letting itself be said right from the moment that there is saying—and by virtue of which there is saying. (1986, 110-11)

“There are no truths, only texts,” our statement says. If it is true that optimists, Paul Valéry once said, “write badly,” let us not forget that pessimists, Blanchot adds, “do not write”—at all (Blanchot 1986, 113).

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