



ARTICLE

Received 18 Jun 2015 | Accepted 3 Aug 2015 | Published 13 Oct 2015

DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2015.25

OPEN

“In spite of the death of God”: Gabriel Vahanian’s secular theology

Mike Grimshaw¹

ABSTRACT What if secularity is a theological condition? What if secularity is the theological and societal experience of both biblical religion and the death of God? Beginning with *The Death of God* (1961), for half a century Gabriel Vahanian (1927–2012) developed a theory of secularity expressed as a distinctly theological saeculum: the shared world of human experience. Vahanian’s saeculum was positioned against what he identified as an “idolatrous concern about secular matters” (196) that resulted in “the idolization of religion” (196) expressed in technological religiosity representing “an unmistakable abdication of faith to reason—or unreason” (197). As outlined in *No Other God* (1966), Vahanian’s concern was with atheistic theologies that took the death of God and in his view denied it, “by sublimating it into a newfangled soeteriological concept” (4). Vahanian’s theological saeculum gives rise to a radical secular theology that begins in an iconoclasm of the self, includes an iconoclasm of the culture in which one finds oneself, and continually seeks a way to restate the biblical tradition into a post-Christian world. In his last book, *Theopoetics of the Word* (2014), Vahanian wrote, “You do theology not against the background of the death of God but in spite of it” (121). I have taken this as the epigraph for the discussion that follows. In this I write a radical secular theology via Vahanian’s *Praise of the Secular*, guided by my approach I term an annotative hermeneutics that arises from an engagement with the weak thought of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. The radical, secular theology that follows occurs against the background of the death of God, the death of God announced by Nietzsche and the death of God so thoughtfully, so faithfully, traversed by Vahanian. It is a secular theology of annotative hermeneutics that arises from Vahanian but is not Vahanian’s. Rather it is where Vahanian’s secular theology may lead us. This paper is published as part of a thematic collection dedicated to radical theologies.

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand (email: michael.grimshaw@canterbury.ac.nz)

A preface of no other God ...

What if secularity is a theological condition? What if secularity is the theological and societal experience of both biblical religion and the death of God? Beginning with *The Death of God* (1961), for half a century Gabriel Vahanian (1927–2012) developed a theory of secularity expressed as a distinctly theological *saeculum*: the shared world of human experience. Vahanian's (1961) *saeculum* was positioned against what he identified as an "idolatrous concern about secular matters" (196) that resulted in "the idolization of religion" (196) expressed in technological religiosity representing "an unmistakable abdication of faith to reason—or unreason" (197). As outlined in *No Other God* (1966), Vahanian's concern was with atheistic theologies that took the death of God and in his view denied it, "by sublimating it into a newfangled soeteriological concept" (4). Vahanian identified the problem as that of the Christosophy (the attempt to turn theology into philosophy) of atheistic theologies confusing secularity with secularism, seeking to become a theology of secularism rather than a genuinely secular theology. For "Faith calls for secularity; secularism is the condition that dissolves faith" (Vahanian, 1966: 8), and the challenge is to be able "to write a new gospel, not to patch up the old one" (8).

Vahanian's theological *saeculum* gives rise to a radical secular theology that begins in an iconoclasm of the self, includes an iconoclasm of the culture in which one finds oneself, and continually seeks a way to restate the biblical tradition into a post-Christian world. As Vahanian (1966) emphasizes, this means "any speech about God is also an iconoclastic speech about man, about his secularism as well as his religiosity. Indeed, human speech calls for just that iconoclastic understanding of the human experience" (34). For in speaking about God we expose our self-idolatry as humans, a self-idolatry in turn shattered by the iconoclasm of speech concerning God who is radical other.

What we are left with is an iconoclastic faith that "has no other proper sphere of action other than secularity" (Vahanian, 1966: 47). This secularity is the world we exist within, and what is this world? "The world is what takes place in and through the word" (Vahanian, 1966: 56) which occurs via the word expressing the verbal nature of the reality of the world. It is the word that enables the world to be, that enables us to be humans in the world. And so what is God? "God is a word, the word that our words do not speak of unless they are shocked both out of their literal and out of their symbolic meaning" (Vahanian, 1966: 61).

In his last book, *Theopoetics of the Word* (2014), Vahanian wrote, "You do theology not against the background of the death of God but in spite of it"¹ (Vahanian, 2014b: 121). I have taken this as the epigraph for the discussion that follows. In this I write a radical secular theology² via one of Vahanian's texts that I did not discuss in my introduction to *Theopoetics of the Word*, guided by my approach I term an annotative hermeneutics that arises from an engagement with the weak thought of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (Grimshaw, 2014). In this undertaking I reconfigure late modern thought, after the end of metaphysics in the wake of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, as not strong statements of truth, but rather as annotative hermeneutics that, in the manner of weak thought are provisional and never closed, occurring via annotative marginalia as a type of critical counter-reading arising from our reading of texts. It acknowledges that both philosophy and theology are constructive events and, moreover, are both secular events that occur in and in reference to the *saeculum*. The radical, secular theology that follows occurs against the background of the death of God, the death of God announced by Nietzsche and the death of God so thoughtfully, so faithfully, traversed by Vahanian. It is a secular theology of annotative hermeneutics that arises from Vahanian

but is not Vahanian's. Rather it is where Vahanian's secular theology may lead us.

In what follows a couple of definitional and contextual positions need to be clarified. In my approach there is a difference between religion and what I term theology: religion comprises the material actions and things that humans do in the *saeculum*. It comprises technologies, things we as humans create: rituals, music, buildings, physical journeyings, physical texts and objects, and various meditative and prayerful practices. Religion occurs as both *religare*—that (and those things) that binds us together—and *relegere*—that (and those things) that enables us to participate in a rereading of our condition as humans.

Theology can occur from within religion and is often linked to and within a religion that has a God or Gods. Theology is, however, in my approach, also a technology, a human creation and action that occurs within language as a language. While religion occurs as things and actions, theology is language and thought concerning and arising from the word God, expressed as a way of writing and thinking that is a hermeneutic, a hermeneutic of self, tradition, context, and positioned as a type of critical hope.

What do I mean by the word God? Arising from the biblical tradition, God is the word of the claim that holds within it both the excess and limit of possibility. Theology is the response to this word of claim and claim of word. Theology is a language that posits a claim of an alternative in relation to a particular religious tradition and practice. Theology is a call upon us from both within and in relation to a particular tradition and practice as to how we may express and action the claim of an alternative.

However, there is often a wide gulf between the theology that arises from within—and often in prophetic mode against—a religious tradition and the everyday practice and beliefs of a religion. Arising from the work of Vahanian I would argue that theology is created and exists as the claim against the tendency of religion to slide into idolatry that acts to reify a particular group, person or place over others and thus theology is as much a claim of an alternative against its own religion and tradition as it is a claim of an alternative within the *saeculum* we all exist within.

Therefore, in what follows, via Vahanian, a significant difference is positioned between religion constructed (or rather often re-aligned or re-constructed) in relation to those constructions termed sacred and profane and religion constructed in reference to the biblical notion of the holy and the not yet holy (acknowledging of course that this too is construction within language). So yes this is a constructionist secular theology and more so a constructionist approach. Religion, theology, this world as society, community, traditions and history are all human constructions—and yet, as Vahanian will argue, this is central to the biblical claim. In short, the religion and theology arising from the biblical tradition is secular all the way down. In my expression, it is a hermeneutics undertaken from within and in response to the *saeculum*—and references, in the end, nothing outside of itself.

An annotative hermeneutics of Praise of the Secular

The text I want to read annotatively, Vahanian's *Praise of the Secular* (2008), begins with a statement in memoriam of the American postmodern theologian Charles Winquist (1944–2002), who set out his own secular theology most concisely in an essay entitled "Postmodern Secular Theology" (2001).

Our starting point, arising from Vahanian's reading of Winquist, is the comingling of the secular and the theological, a comingling that occurs, as ever and as only could, in the *saeculum*, in the world, in this world, of shared human experience. This comingling occurs as a language in which

theology and secular are inseparable terms, “different by conniving corrugations on the surface of a language” (Vahanian, 2008: vi), in the depth of which the real occurs, Vahanian reminds us, as grace that “calls for radical secularity” (viii). Language is the real in which we swim, we float—and in which we can sink if we seek a solidity that is more than a symbol. For “God is a symbol of God” (Vahanian, 2008: viii), or we could expand to God is nothing but; nothing more than; a symbol of God, a symbol encountered and expressed only ever and ever only in the radical secularity of the *saeculum*. This is a radical secularity that we are not to be saved from; rather it is in this radical secularity that the kingdom is to be proclaimed, a kingdom that is itself nothing but and nothing more than a symbol of the kingdom: “a kingdom that is neither here nor there” (Vahanian, 2008: viii). The kingdom is therefore not “about us” or “about me” but rather *about all*, a liminal becoming that in its secularity is linked for us to the project of modernity, a liminal becoming of the secular that the project of modernity participates in. This is a secular expression of grace with no Temple, just as in the kingdom of God there is no Temple. This is a language of grace spoken into and out of, lived and experienced, in the everyday world: a text of life that is spoken not for us or for me but about all.

Vahanian (2008) begins his Preface with the statement: “Rather than viscerating religion, the secular, has played a major role in prodding religion to overcome itself. Instead of the religious showing the way to the secular, the secular is now showing the way to religion, whether in the sense of each pointing to, or of each giving way to, the other” (xi). What arises, in my annotative reading, is the possibility (for theology is always only ever a possibility in that theology as language in itself is never predetermined and predefined) of and for a theology of overcoming whereby it is in and by the secular that the response to theology, to the event of theology, occurs. In this the event of theology is the statement of theology that is spoken within the secular: the event of language, the language that “is ultimately what the religious and the secular have in common” (Vahanian, 2008: xi). Therefore, the event of theology is a secular theology that is the language in and of the secular allowing us to see that theology, all theology (for there is no theology that is not secular unless it is to become idolatrous), is a language, a way of speaking and writing, a proclamation and event that is of and in response to the secular. This is theology that is language transformed and transforming, a wording of the world arising from a worlding of the word as Vahanian is apt to put it, whereby the event of the Word of God is worded in the world as expressed in the Prologue of John’s gospel: the where and how of the event of the Word occurs through language (words). If we wish to speak of the event of the Word worlded, we must do so though language, using words that “sustain the paradox of language: they mean nothing of themselves ... [and this is] the parabolic role of language in depicting and enacting fictions of the real” (Vahanian, 2008: xii). So what of what is taken to the foundation of theology, the God of God talk? Of God we cannot say *what* God is or is not, for God is not an object of language for Vahanian. All we can say is *that* God is. Our language of God is but talk of an idol if we presume, as so much theology—and indeed philosophy—does, to talk of God as outside of language, a language is only ever of the secular.

What of secular itself for Vahanian (2008), a word he notes has “paradoxical impact” (xii), a word that forms an other with its antonym “religious”, a word that affects not only what is meant by religious but also by religion? To clarify, I would wish to argue that without “secular” there is no religion – and vice versa – but that theology—and this will be surprising to many—is that of the secular *expressed against* religion. That is, *theology occurs from within the secular as a part of the secular against religion and the religious*.

To understand this expansion on from Vahanian, we need to engage with what can be termed Vahanian’s genealogy of the secular. First secular, deriving from *saeculum*, has a temporal quality: originally that of a generation and then extended to that of a century (Vahanian, 2008: xiii). *Saeculum* also (by AD 815 via Tacitus and Vigil) “designated this word, this life, the present order, the present world” (Vahanian, 2008: xiii). Hence, secular, via *saeculum*, means a temporal experience of the human condition within a given space. Secular theology is therefore the hermeneutic, in relation to a tradition, of this temporal experience of being human in our here and now of time and space. Concerned with the here and now, concerned with a shared human experience, the secular, as with its becoming as cultural and societal focus that we term secularization, is that which gives the world its intrinsic worth for it arises and is expressed as an engagement with *this* world and *this* life. In this it is an expression of faith and hope and therefore opposed to the nihilistic, world-denying position of secularity that all too often proceeds against any expression of faith and hope in and of this word and our life. In contrast to such nihilistic secularity, the secular is a statement of the intrinsic worth of the world as the stage “on which the dignity of the human person could be played out” (Vahanian, 2008: xiv). Therefore, in what follows it is important to emphasize that secularization is not to be confused with what can be labelled the socio-cultural marginalization of Christianity in modern, western society; in fact it is argued that such marginalization occurs because of the failure of Christianity to secularize.

What does this secularization mean? It needs to be understood as that which occurs as part of “the critical and self-critical or iconoclastic and prophetic dialectic of the religious and the secular” (Vahanian, 2008: xv). Unlike what is called “the hierarchical dialectic of sacred and profane” (Vahanian, 2008: xv), which always seeks to privilege sacred over and against profane and most often seeks to negate the world, the dialectic of the religious and the secular proceeds as world-affirming secularization. We affirm this world and our shared human experience and therefore the aim is not to change words but to change this world, an action of faith and hope in which the new takes primacy over antiquity and the future takes primacy over the past. In this religion and the secular stand against the modern conservative coupling of religion and the sacred in which the rise of a sacred God and sacred religion is a cheap substitute for what can be termed the failure of nerve within modernity to wrestle with the claim of the holiness of God, a claim of holiness that in the biblical tradition only exists in a dialectic of the holy (God) and the not yet holy. For if only God is holy and this only occurs in relation to the not yet holy there exists a faith and hope of future change and possibility. In this exists a central theological politics that rejects the privileging and power contained in claims of identifying, locating, claiming and controlling access to the sacred.

So how do we proceed?

Vahanian (2008) introduces his approach with two statements whereby today “it is the secular that shows the way to the religious” and “through the word become flesh, the religious is likewise inscribed in the secular” (1). Furthermore, arising from this, Vahanian discards any claim that either secular or religious is threatened by the other, or faith by science or the rational, or theism by atheism or vice versa. How so we understand it? In my reading there can be no victory of one over the other for that would put us in a Manichean dualism that in too many ways is analogous with what becomes the dualism of sacred and profane. Rather, there is no victory because we exist in the milieu of

language, a milieu that in its provisionality reminds us that we are always in the not yet.

It is this centrality, this forgotten central milieu of language, that, from the biblical tradition, makes atheism something that is not a threat to what Vahanian labels God. Rather the threat is the idol that is worshipped as that which we mistake—perhaps deliberately—for God: “We forget not only that, from a biblical standpoint, such a God 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” (Vahanian, 2008: 2). To worship God is therefore to turn God into an idol, the politics of this being a God that is “only for *us*, not for *them*” (Vahanian, 2008: 2) and the attempt to create and perpetuate a sacred language for the believer over and against the unbeliever. The central issue is therefore that of language, a language that in seeking literal meaning and therefore sacral power forever link the fundamentalist and the secularist in an inverse mirror of Manichean dualism.

The overcoming of dualism occurs for Vahanian and for the theology that derives from his work in the Worliding of the Word, that is, in more traditional language, of the Word made flesh, or as he puts it “the secular theme par excellence” (Vahanian, 2008: 2). This is, as I would express it, the claim of *the ever now* of the incarnation that has no past and no future because it occurs in the milieu of language—a milieu that sees no distinction between the human and divine, between the religious and the secular. It is *the ever now* of the language event claim of the incarnation, of the Word Worlded, of the Word made flesh, that gives rise to faith, faith as “what confronts the human being with the task of being human [for] the human being is not only a speaking animal but also is spoken for” (Vahanian, 2008: 3).

From this proclamation of hope by Vahanian we can state that secular theology is whereby and how we attempt to respond to this task in response to *the ever now*. This response occurs in response to words and occurs as words; *theo-logy*, words of God, is perhaps how we can express it – words of God that point to nothing that lies outside language, language that is cultural and not natural, language that is where religious and secular exist and proceed from, not the anti-human dualism of a sacred and profane awaiting discovery in nature. Yet even within language, the shared world of experience that is the secular “ultimately challenges every preconception of one’s commitment to being human” (Vahanian, 2008: 4). This challenge operates on an individual level as what can be termed self iconoclasm; that is an iconoclasm of what I might wish “being human” could be for me. This iconoclasm is what secular theology does.

This iconoclasm occurs as a theology against what can be termed the idol theology of the idol Jesus, the idol theology “of an ideology of salvation in an afterlife, as though this life were not worth living here and now, once and for all” (Vahanian, 2008: 5). Secular theology stands against such an idol theology, against such an ideology of salvation, and does so as theology grounded in the language of Word made flesh, of Word Worlded as it is embodied, a body that dies in the *saeculum*, a word made flesh in the *saeculum* so as to change the world. The biblical God is not a God that dies and is born again, or is the Jew who dies a God who dies and is born again. The Jew who dies is the embodiment of the faithful who seek to change this word and this life, a proclamation of the kingdom of a changed world, a new Jerusalem with no temple. The language of the event of *the ever now* is wherein God dwells, a language expressed in and of the secular, for this language speaks of that which is of and for the world of shared human experience, the secular. The language of the event of *the ever now* is a language of the faith of changing this world, an event wherein none is excluded, from which none is excluded.

Therefore, secular theology exists as inclusive language. This is not a language for one and not of another; this is the universal

language of the holy and the not yet holy. We are all included in the language of the not yet holy, an inclusion that in its radicality speaks in and of the secular. For it is in and of the secular that we, as the not yet holy, exist, and it is into this secular that it is claimed *the ever now* of the holy encounters us in language, in language that is neither sacred nor profane, but language that is the language of the secular.

Should this be a radical claim? Well yes and no. In many ways it should not because this is a theology that arises from the biblical tradition and thus is a type of return to the radix, the root of the biblical tradition. But it is societally radical today because it is the language of iconoclasm, an iconoclasm that frees us from both the claim of God’s presence that is theism and the claim of God’s absence that is atheism (Vahanian, 2008: 6). A radical secular theology is therefore a theology of God who is radically other, but a radical other that needs the not yet holy; for without the not yet holy there is no God, and a language that cannot speak of holy and not yet holy is the language of the idol. This language of holy and not yet holy is therefore an iconoclastic language, a language of creation positioned against the idol of nature, a language of Word made flesh. This is the language of *the ever now* against the idol of history, a language that is the language of a universal ethic, of a faith and hope “that consists in changing the world rather than changing worlds, of this world as arena of faith rather than object of its contempt” (Vahanian, 2008: 6).

A secular theology of the death of God?

What then of the death of God? This needs to be seen in the light of Vahanian’s (2008) central, biblical insight “that no sooner is God worshipped than even God becomes an idol” (11). The death of God, or as Vahanian (2008: 11) terms it “the so called death of God”, is the death of a God taken for granted in the idolatrous dialectic of sacred and profane, an idolatrous dialectic whereby the equilibrium of religion and culture is supplanted by the sacred and profane that takes God, any God, for granted. The self-inflicted intrusion of sacred and profane into the language of Christianity and into the culture of religious and secular that existed forced an ever-widening gap between religion and culture that saw the demise of the secular and the attempted supplanting of it by secularism. Against this lies secular theology, secular theology that as the response to and of *the ever now* in the word of shared human experience holds together the secular, which is threatened by the future and not the past, and the religious, which is threatened by the past and not the future. For God is neither future nor past, neither absent from the secular present nor a memory preserved in religion. Rather a secular theology is symmetrical with a religious theology, that which from within the biblical tradition “holds precisely that true religion has no future and none certainly from beyond this word- the *saeculum*” (Vahanian, 2008: 14). Therefore, for a secular theology, a theology of and from the *saeculum*, there is no future and no past in a way that undercuts the present of *the ever now*. Secular theology is hostage neither to a future nor to a past; rather it is iconoclastic of both when they seek to act to exchange past or future as more real, as more meaningful than the present. This iconoclasm occurs via their commonality of language, a commonality of language as iconoclasm whereby “the religious is iconoclastic of the secular and the secular is iconoclastic of the religious” (Vahanian, 2008: 15). This iconoclasm occurs because the holy is not of the future or of the past for the holy is tied to the not yet holy of the now; the death of God in the now is when we seek to exchange the not yet holy for claims of sacred and profane, and in so dismissing the not yet holy also dismiss the holy to which it is ever tied. For the death of God is also the death of that which is not yet holy, which is the *saeculum*. Sacred and profane is

therefore an idol of double death, death of the holy and death of the not yet holy; a double death that seeks an ideology of the particular by the particular and in doing so seeks to negate the universal *saeculum* of the not yet holy. For the holy and the not yet holy is the radical claim that sits at the heart of secular theology, radical in the sense of *radix*, the recovery of the root that the idol seeks to supplant and radical in its central other claim that “the religious or holy and the secular belong together” (Vahanian, 2008: 17) and thus stands against a modern secularization derived from the idols of sacred and profane. For in the dialectic of the holy and the secular, or in the biblical *radix* of the holy and the not yet holy, the secular includes us all: no one, no thing, no place is holy and therefore cannot be privileged; correspondingly, no one, no thing, no place is less holy and therefore cannot be dismissed.

The secular is the not yet holy and its commonality occurs as “one world as worlding of the word made flesh” (Vahanian, 2008: 18). And what does this mean? The worlding of the word made flesh is the claim that what is called for is not changing worlds but changing the world; the word comes to this world and is encountered in and as a language event in this world; the kingdom proclaimed is not an escape from this world, not to be sought or experienced in a realm separate from this world. Rather it is political theology of the most radical kind: we are called upon to change this world in the name of faith for this world, a secular political theology that seeks change in the name of what we have in common, this world. As Vahanian (2008) reminds us, the entrusting of creation to Adam by God in the Genesis mythic narrative of origin is a narrative that desacralizes nature and defatalizes history: biblical religion is secular religion from the start and is a secular religion of language not of place, and thus “God is language rather than this or that. God need not be deified: the word becomes flesh” (19).

Yet we also exist; we also live “in a word in which God can no longer be taken for granted” (Vahanian, 2008: 25) and this is most so for the language of God, of God as language that rather than being able to display “a concern that is secular enough to be common to all of us” (25) becomes a language of the dualism of privileging and dismissal of sacred and profane and therefore an idol. It is also the language and politics of idolatry. Sacred and profane, religions of sacred and profane, operate and exist as politics of exclusion and privilege and power and oppression, of a Manichean dualism that turns life and the world into an inverted *saeculum* where the only thing held in common is violence and inequality.

So what may the true *saeculum* hold within it? At its core are, as Vahanian (2008) emphasizes, human beings to which being human becomes natural (28), an overcoming of our desire for and proclamation of difference from each other, which can be expressed as the idolatry of self-sacralization and the associated profanation of the other. Yet the worlding of the word, *the ever now* event of the word made flesh, made flesh in this world, reminds us that central to a secular theology is the claim of recognition that as human beings we are to *be human*—and human in and of *this* world. *Everything* occurs within *this* world, the world of the universal *saeculum*, “a world for which God is no stopgap” (Vahanian, 2008: 29).

This is what is meant by the death of God, the death of God that “is the secret of religion ... the secret of biblical religion” (Vahanian, 2008: 29). But in biblical religion God does not die in order to be born again; rather God dies so that *we* can be reborn; God speaks but if worshipped is turned into an idol—and so dies, for “no God is God, let alone the world” (29). Our condition is therefore as Vahanian (2008) names it *post mortem dei* (30), a culturally biblical if post-Christian condition, that in its post-modern expression has “affinities with the iconoclasm of biblical discourse and, somehow, even depends on it” (30).

Therefore, a secular theology is also a post-Christian theology, but it is also a biblical theology in being secular and iconoclastic. It resists all attempts in our post-Christian, post-modern culture to have a religion of the idol or any religion of the sacred and it resists also the negation of sacralization. Secular theology is therefore centrally a theology of resistance that proclaims “what we all have in common is the secular” (Vahanian, 2008: 30). It is therefore also a theology that centres on faith and is positioned against the sacralization of salvation, for “faith lies in being released from the very obsession of salvation” (Vahanian, 2008: 34). Because it is about changing the world, not fleeing from it or being saved from it, secular theology is also a political theology, a theology of language, a theology as language, a language of faith as “faith is what religion and the secular have in common, regardless of the respective metamorphoses they undergo” (Vahanian, 2008: 37).

A secular theology of the incarnation

Vahanian’s secular theology may be post-Christian in that it arises in and for a post-Christian culture, but it is very much a theology of the incarnation, the incarnation expressed as word made flesh, of the worlding of the word. He is very clear in stating that it is not God made flesh “but the word becomes flesh and is worlded. It lies in the secular” (Vahanian, 2008: 38). That this occurs as secularization is crucial as “the necessary yet seldom acknowledged alternative to the mystical interpretation of the body of Christ” (Vahanian, 2008: 38). Therefore, we proceed whereby secular theology is posited versus a mystical theology because secular theology is inclusive whereas mystical theology excludes. A mystical theology is far closer to the idol of sacred and profane. The incarnation is also the deterrent against a theology that reduces itself to either dualism or monism, and for Vahanian (2008) the necessity is that it is word, not God, made flesh for it is necessary to maintain “the very notion of God’s radical otherness” (39); otherwise we fall into the God worshipped, which is the idol. Instead, what needs to be recovered is that “like creation, incarnation is a matter of language” (Vahanian, 2008: 40).

What Vahanian argues for is word made flesh, a binding of one with the other. How might we understand it? Perhaps by acknowledging that this expression, this claim of language, is the claim that a secular theology is a theology of secular flesh—not of body, but of flesh – not of *a* body or bodies, but of flesh. For word made flesh is different from word made body or embodied; for flesh is a condition not a thing, flesh is an event not a being. *Flesh is theological. Flesh is secular.* Through my body I share in the word made flesh but my body is not the flesh of the word, for flesh is language in the way we particularize bodies, and therefore flesh is secular while we all too often attempt to sacralize bodies. Therefore, being human is whereby spirit and flesh are mutually embodied, and is “a timing of the self” (Vahanian, 2008: 41) occurring in the body that “incarnates time” (41). The human being occurs within the human body, but this body cannot, in the biblical tradition, reveal God, nor can it be sacralized for that turns the body, turns the human being of that body, into an idol.

The incarnation is not an incarnation of God into a body, but rather of the secularization of the word, a breaking in of the eternal into the secular and into time whereby via flesh it is expressed as *the ever now*, not as too often and too easily occurs in the idolatry of bodily specific incarnation, as the particular body of God. Therefore, the incarnation, as event of word, as word event, is the language of the event of *the ever now* in this world, a secularization that includes us all within it.

Flesh and body cannot and do not point to God for God is language and therefore our bodies are not created in the image of

God, nor do our bodies allow God to speak through us. God is imageless and the incarnation is not the image of God, not God embodied, not the image of God in bodily, human form. God is radical other, God is wholly other in Vahanian's biblical theology, and thus a secular theology arising is therefore a theology of mutual otherness—an otherness of us and God, of created and creator—a mutual otherness that is not bondage.

The new covenant of the worlding of the word is the return to mutual otherness from the decline into and demand of mutual bondage, a demand of bondage initiated from the human. The incarnation is that which acts to restore the mutual otherness from the condition and limitation of mutual bondage.

For God to be made flesh is to continue the demand of mutual bondage. the God made flesh is not, cannot be, God; rather God made flesh is but an idol of human longing for self-divinization. For if God is made flesh why is flesh not made God and the body the expression and representation of God? This would be nothing but a sacralization of humanity, a sacralization of particular humanity over and against all others and is but yet another expression of idolatry. There is therefore in such a scheme no secularization but only rather sacred and profane; there is no *saeculum*, for there is no shared world of human experience; rather such claims seek and privilege the particular.

In a secular theology of mutual otherness there is also therefore no sacrifice because the sacrifice is a bondage of God and human – a binding of God to human action and desire, to human want and need. The sacrifice is an attempted limitation on both God who is not God and humanity. In contrast, secular theology, that which occurs with the death of the word, ends the sacrificial apparatus of religion. The sacrifice is overcome because the sacrifice limits us and attempts to limit God. If Jesus had been saved because of the cry from the cross nothing would have changed. The cry from the cross, the death of Jesus, breaks the mutual bondage and restores the mutual otherness—and this mutual otherness is what ends the sacrificial apparatus of religion.

The resurrection, as Vahanian (2008) proclaims, is whereby “Jesus is returned to his people, to those for whom God is not God for the dead but for the living” (44). After the death of Jesus we do not sacrifice to God to ensure God will act as we want God to. It is not God who will intervene out of mutual bondage to change the world, to change our lives, to change our condition. The word made flesh died and in its dying our claims and desire for mutual bondage died. It is we who are responsible for changing the world, we who are responsible for changing our lives, we who are responsible for the injustice, the hunger, the inequality, the hatred, the fear, the suffering that exists in our *saeculum*.

So to ask a question bluntly, what is the role of God in this?

Vahanian's answer is to state, “the God of the Bible is a God who feels and contends for us. Instead, we make God out to be a Saviour, not to say a lifesaver. The God of grace is God freely available” (Vahanian, 2008: 44). Therefore, the incarnation is the word of God made freely available in the *saeculum*, the word of God as *the ever now* who feels and contends for us and in response we feel and contend for others. Secular theology is therefore a response to grace, a response of changing the world rather than seeking salvation in changing worlds; for it is in our living out such change of the world, such change of the secular word, that the worlding of the word occurs as *the ever now*. In this secular theology is also eschatological, not sacrificial or soteriological: “the eschatism of the word become flesh” (Vahanian, 2008: 48) results in an eschaton of *the ever now* in and for the secular. What does this claim of word become flesh mean? It is the radical event of the word become flesh: not the

word embodied, not a word for us but word with us. Nor is Jesus the man for others but rather a human like us, a human who is not God. Central therefore is the statement, “Christ is no God written in small caps. Nor is he ‘man’ written in capital letters. Christ is word become flesh who is between all, is centre of all, the ‘ever now’ in the between of everything and in doing so is word worlded as changing the world. This is the faith of secular theology, faith celebrated through the very secularity of the world” (Vahanian, 2008: 52).

In Vahanian's theology, in comparison to other death of God theologies, the death of Christ is not the death of God. For in biblical theology the God that dies is but an idol. Rather the death of Christ is the death of Jesus the man, the Jew who dies, the death that liberates God and humanity, that ends any bondage of God and humanity, restores the freedom of God and the freedom of humanity. The man Jesus who dies is no substitute for God; he is neither a God that dies nor a substitute for an idol who does not die. Rather Jesus the man dies having been the witness to both God and humanity of *the ever now* of the incarnation, the worlding of the word that reaffirms and restores the independence of God and humanity made independent, in that neither God nor humanity saves him from death. The world of shared experience is now therefore the world of the shared experience of the independence of God and humanity, a world come of age in which God does not save us. What does come of age mean? It is the *kairos* time of *the ever now*, word become flesh in incarnation and flesh becoming word: a *kairos* dialectic of *the ever now*. For word of God secularized is not and cannot be undone, is not and cannot be ended.

Death is not a necessity; rather the event of the death does not void the incarnation and, importantly, incarnation does not require death; rather death occurs. Yet word made flesh would die as flesh dies, so death is what flesh involves for flesh is not God, flesh is not divine and therefore the manner of the death is not the necessity. This is a death not in Christianity or for Christianity for there was no Christianity; rather the death of the man Jesus, the death of the Jew Jesus, the death that involves the death of word become flesh *occurs within Judaism*, the death of a human being that is the Christ *in spite of* being crucified or abandoned by God. It is the word made flesh that heralds the kingdom, not the claim of an empty tomb. The resurrection is the new life that all humanity share in not the necessary resuscitation of an idol that dies to be reborn, for that narrative just turns Jesus, just turns Christ, into another dying yet reborn idol God. What we have is word made flesh that inaugurates a new language, the language of the kingdom, the kingdom that is of this world of shared human experience: the *saeculum* that inaugurates the overcoming of all exclusionisms of religions, the world to be changed by us for us all in response to *the ever now* of grace. What is inaugurated is a secular theology that is against injustice—and theology that has no care for or language of salvation. For this is an eschatological theology focused on changing the world as the performance of faith: faith in the new creation, faith in the new being, not faith in God but faith in response to God who is no God, whereby no God is God, faith of the worlding of the word.

This is faith that is a language, for “faith is a passion” (Vahanian, 2008: 65), a language whereby I am called by others and in this my self is relational, a relational self of faith wherein between myself and others is always the worlding of the word that is the new relation of the new creation. The worlding of the word speaks for us: we are spoken for – an ever new that is the response of faith, a response that makes the secular the realm of faith, the realm of the performance of faith, the realm that the performance of faith *can only be* performed within. Word worlded is what we perform faith in response to, because “an ethic of faith is an ethic

of language” (Vahanian, 2008: 69), and thus an ethic of the worlding of the word is the ethic of the word that changes the world, but a world only changed by our performance of faith.

In doing so we must remember that God is wording, God is a word, God is language and so God being no God becomes the nameless God of the faith we live by, not a faith inherited. This is a faith that does not segregate into believers and unbelievers unless we wish to privilege ourselves and make an idol of faith. For in faith we are spoken for and this results in a faith that affirms the world and performs as an ethic that affirms the world and seeks to change it by honouring the secular. This occurs always with language, a theology of and by language, of worlding the word that in turn is performed as the wording the world in the world as the secular theology of what we have, what we hold, in common—which is the *saeculum*. This is faith performed therefore against the division of sacred and profane, a faith performed as the secular that is the not yet holy, a faith that is faith of and in the secular against any attempt to reduce the holy to the sacred and the secular to the profane, faith performed against the fact “that, in a pluralistic world, what separates us is religion” (Vahanian, 2008: 84). And we could also state that what separates us and seeks to continue to separate us is the dualism of the idolatry of sacred and profane.

What occurs is therefore the event of *the ever now*, the event that is the eschaton of the end of religion and the event of the secular as the secular, the event of *the ever now* as the ever new, the language of the event of the new creation and the new Adam, the language of the kingdom. This is the overcoming of religion, the overcoming of sacred and profane, the freeing of us as much from the profane as from the sacred, a promise to all not just to some, the promise of the word who comes, who is worlded whereby the kingdom is inaugurated not as a place but rather as what we seek to do: a word come of age, “a world restored to its worldhood, its secularity” (Vahanian, 2008: 97). The secular is whereby the world is restored as the place whereby the human being enacts the human, where the change sought is the change that can occur: change that is ever mindful that “there is no sacred enclosure in the Garden of Eden; there is no temple in the New Jerusalem, either; so also is the tomb is empty. Summed up in one, they read: religion has no future except through the secular” (Vahanian, 2008: 99). Our task is therefore an unfinished task of *being human* in the secular, a task we are called upon by the worlding of the word, expressed through the autonomy of theology that belongs to the sphere of language, theology of “the God who speaks and the thing happens, the word becomes flesh and is worlded once and for all” (Vahanian, 2008: 103). Because *the ever now* is also, as I would expand it, *the ever new*, this is the secular theology of the present, a secular theology of time not space, a secular theology that is proclaimed, that is spoken to us and in turn spoken by us because “unlike space that is seen, time is heard ... time delimits and deterritorializes ... time relates ... time secularizes what space sacralizes” (Vahanian, 2008: 107).

But God is not a God of time, not a God of any time, for God is totally other. In the incarnation, the word of God enters into human time as *the ever now* and in the process secularizes it as the time of *the ever now* and *the ever new*, the time whereby God is “a God revealed as radically other” (Vahanian, 2008: 108), the radical other experienced as absent as much as it is experienced as presence, for presence is absence and absence is presence in the radical other, for God is radical other to us, radical other to our time, radical other to any concept or expectation of time that we may have. Therefore, a secular theology is a theology in which God is radical other in every sense of other. Central therefore is a theology of time, time as “metaphor of language” (Vahanian,

2008: 110). A theology of secular time revealed as *the only* time we have, the *only time* there is: a *secular time of the escahton*. All other time is the time of the language of the idol, whereas secular time, in contrast, desacralizes and defatalizes; it is the time of the word come of age, the time of secular as that of the event of being human in the world, the event of which is revealed by the word becoming flesh whereby the human being has revealed to it the event of being human.

Yet also, without the word and humans, God is not God for “God is God only by reason of being contemporaneous with humans even as with the world” (Vahanian, 2008: 117), a “God woven into words” (116), God that is wholly other. Therefore, a secular theology is not a theology of God as may have been expected but a theology of word and human, a theology of language in which “God has no name but is a word among the words of a language through which the world breaks into words” (Vahanian, 2008: 117) in which, in faith of words, in word made flesh, the human being encounters being human in and for others in the world. The event of *the ever now* is the event of *the ever new*, a secular theology that is not one of the death of God who rises, but a theology of God secularized through Christ. The death of God is a cultural event of the idol God taken to be able to die and rise. Nor does the Christ die and rise like the idol God. Jesus dies and the world comes of age.

Conclusion

In a radical secular theology, God is radically other and the world is all we share—and what we all share responsibility for. A risen Christ is a fiction of the language of hope, a risen Christ as word in language, a word that does not end with the death of Jesus, a word in and for the secular, a word that will not save us but rather turn us to help one another in the name of the word, the word made flesh in the *saeculum*. To return to our starting point: The death of God is a cultural fiction that seeks to and makes both God and God’s death an idol. It is a cultural fiction of the dualism of sacred and profane. Yet in spite of this cultural fiction, in spite of the death of God, we do theology, the theology of *the ever now*, the theology of *the ever new* that reconciles us to being human in the world, not to seek to flee from it, but rather to change it.

Notes

- 1 Vahanian’s phrase first appears in Vahanian (2007).
- 2 This essay occurs as part of an ongoing engagement with secular theology and how it might be undertaken. For an earlier discussion and *radix* of my approach, see Grimshaw (2010).

References

- Grimshaw M (2010) Secular theology? antipodean annotations. *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*; 39 (3)September 29–35.
- Grimshaw M (2014) Flaneuring with Vattimo: The annotative hermeneutics of weak thought. *Critical Research on Religion*; 2 (3): 265–279.
- Vahanian G (1961) *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*. George Braziller: New York.
- Vahanian G (1966) *No Other God*. George Braziller: New York.
- Vahanian G (2007) The death of God. An afterword In: Robbins JW (ed) *After the Death of God. John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo*. Columbia University Press: New York, p 172.
- Vahanian G (2008) *Praise of the Secular*. University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville and London.
- Vahanian G (2014a) *Theopoetics of the Word*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, pp 1–24.
- Vahanian G (2014b) *Theopoetics of the Word*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York.
- Winquist C.E. (2001) Postmodern secular theology In: Crockett C. (ed) *Secular Theology. American Radical Theological Thought*. Routledge: London and New York, pp 26–36.

Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Acknowledgements

This essay should be read as a companion piece to my introductory essay “Gabriel Vahanian: From the Death of God to Wording and Worlding” in Vahanian (2014a). In this essay I discuss Vahanian’s work in an assessment that covers the years 1957–2002.

Additional Information

Competing interests: The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Reprints and permission information is available at http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pal/authors/rights_and_permissions.html

How to cite this article: Grimshaw M (2015) “In spite of the death of God”: Gabriel Vahanian’s secular theology. *Palgrave Communications*. 1:15025 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2015.25.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 International License. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in the credit line; if the material is not included under the Creative Commons license, users will need to obtain permission from the license holder to reproduce the material. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>