

THINKING AND SPEAKING ABOUT GOD

1. Thinking and speaking about God are always secondary. The existential experience, an experience which concerns the totality of our existence (in fact our being or not being) is primary. In this experience we meet God and hence it is possible to know about Him, to think and to speak about Him.

All thinking about God is always a thinking out of and in the context of this experience. It is a thinking which arises out of an experience about the totality of our being, meeting an all-encompassing totality which proves itself to be bigger, more overwhelming, than anything experienced before or after. Because of this it is a thinking with its own "weight", its own existentially final truth. This is not to say that all thinking which arises out of other experiences or which does not fit into this existential experience is of second order. When it is incompatible with the existential experience, or seems to be, it is a challenge to our thinking. But even where the apparent incompatibility remains unsolved, it does not affect the existential experience of the meeting with God. No experience, in the end, impinges on the final existential one. (see paper on 'The experience of the reality of God').

2. Ultimately the experience of the meeting with God, of His appearance, is always an experience of deliverance, of salvation out of an obviously hopeless situation, a situation in which we can't help ourselves.

3. All the thinking about God through the ages, the result of which we see in the Old Testament, always began with his experience. It is the experience of the people who were totally lost, who did not see any possibility of finding a way out and who nevertheless were saved and set free. It is thinking which does not fit in with the experiences of culture but rather with the experiences of those who didn't belong to culture, which were driven out, who are driven out.

It is the thinking from the other side of culture, the dark side. It is the thinking from the side of culture which culture can't see. The remarkable thing is that precisely this dark side of culture proves to be the light side. It is fundamental to this reality that all cultural realities are turned upside down. Put another way, it is the thinking of the scapegoats who were driven out to save culture, daily life.

4. This kind of thinking is strange, even intolerable, for the world of culture. Indeed it weakens the very foundations of it. At the same time the Hebrews and later the Christians lived amidst culture. They came into mimesis with culture. For a variety of reasons they tried to use the knowledge of culture and its ways of thinking to strengthen their own position. They did it to protect themselves against persecution.

Just like everybody else, they began power-fights. As a result they stayed deeply 'religious' although they knew about 'the experience'. The consequences of this were enormous. It would require another paper to expand on this. Suffice to say that the whole Old Testament and most of church history can be read as a constant struggle against this syncretism, a struggle to find a way back to the original experience and the knowledge flowing from it.

We can give a very early example of religious knowledge flowing into the experience of God, the experience of salvation in a hopeless situation. As long as people stay within the reality of the experience of God, they don't condemn the Egyptians who pursued the Hebrews. They too were ultimately victims, exactly the same as the Hebrews were before they were saved. In religious categories, although not in the reality of faith, they were bad. Precisely this is taught in our Sunday schools to this day.

5. All thinking which originates in the experience of God's reality is the experience of the excluded, the scapegoats. Such thinking is moving around within the totality of all experiences. It can try to order these thoughts in order to understand. Such thinking cannot make a system in which everything has its clear place as culture always did or tried to do. An all-encompassing system can only be constructed by excluding, by scapegoating aspects of reality, even if this is only done because we don't see these aspects. Thinking which originates in the experience of God does not need to exclude. It is at peace with itself out of this relationship with God. It does not need to scapegoat at all. As a consequence, this thinking can never achieve an all-encompassing system of known reality and does not even try to construct one. For all religious thinking, however, secularized, this is ultimately unacceptable. For thinking, which originates in the experience of God, the system will always be fundamentally wrong. Once more everything is reversed.

6. In practice, for the Hebrews, the thinking began very slowly. The first major task was not to forget the experience. In order to achieve that too old and accepted means were used, but they were turned upside down.

6.1 In religion, the laws prescribed what you have to do. If you don't obey the laws, you will be scapegoated by the people around you, by society. Laws are fundamentally a threat. The Ten Commandments on the other hand are a promise. First they proclaim once more the great deed of God: He delivered and delivers. And because you belong to Him you will (using the future tense not the imperative), out of gratitude, do everything to prevent difficulties which mean scapegoating.

6.2 In relation, ritual is a repetition in the present of an event, which once happened; the sacrifice of a scapegoat to restore peace. The Hebrews made out of this ritual a feast of memory, of gratitude in which the deliverance given by YAHWEH was remembered and so came alive. There were no scapegoats and no violence. There was gratitude. Church services are structurally the same: gratitude for what God did. They look forward to the future as well. The trans-substantiation and so much of what happens in churches are tragic misunderstandings.

7. Through the centuries the thinking went step by step. The first step in all thinking, and the point to which all the thinking had to return after all the various detours, was always the basic fact that in the time of deepest distress, when everything and life itself seemed lost, salvation was there and that this salvation was not a matter of chance, as so much in this life is, but rather was the doing of a once unknown power, a power who very clearly was and is. The doings of YAHWEH, who later, when all the gods had been dethroned, was given the name of God.

8. The results of this thinking were very important.

8.1 Time and again the truth, that YAHWEH is, was clear. Time and again, He was forgotten by the Hebrews, the Israelites. But in the end they did not see any other way to save themselves and they remembered Him. He again showed that He is, and He saved. It became clear that he really was a totally other God compared to all the other gods. As a result of centuries of experience and thinking, the gods were more and more marginalized, done away with as irrelevant. First in their own country, then in the surrounding countries and finally in the whole earth there is only one real God, YAHWEH.

8.2 It became more and more clear that it was and is not possible to know about Him in the manner of the myths of the surrounding peoples. It was very clear that he exists, that he saves. That through this saving He is the Lord of the world, more powerful than any god or anyone else was also clear. But this sort of power is beyond description. The central confession was, is and remains HE IS, (as Jesus says about himself, EGO EIMI, I am).

Compare the first commandments of the Ten Commandments about making pictures of God. It could be, that all of Christian theology about God, in which theologians often appear to know so much about God, the locus de deo, however useful it may be in the cultural context, was and is a trespassing of the Ten Commandments.

8.3 It also became ever clearer that the cultural division between good and bad is not the real one. In this cultural division, the haves are the good ones and the have-nots are the bad ones, the scapegoats. The real division is between those who know about YAHWEH and those who do not, between knowing about the work of God YAHWEH, and not knowing, between knowing existentially and rejecting. And those who reject are not bad. They are the real poor, lost in this world.

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The theme of the Old and new Testaments is not 'become a better woman or a better man'. It is always: Go back, to the origin of life, to God. What you did and who you are does not matter. The only thing that matters is if you are too proud to go, and good people are often more proud than the so-called bad ones.

8.4 From the very beginning it was clear that YAHWEH is not a God who defends and helps the powerful. He is the God for the powerless, for the poor, the derelict. Once again, everything is turned upside down. Kings are not close to Him, but beggars, the scapegoats of society and all the hopeless and futureless are. As a result of this reality it became more and more clear that God is there where the absolutely lost are, the absolutely poor are. Therefore the absolutely lost ones, the scapegoats of everybody bring God close to everybody else when they are looking for Him. In this way, the EBED-YAHWEH thinking came to the surface, the thinking that the man, misused, ill-treated and despised by everybody, is the real servant of God and brings God into the midst of the people. Hence he is their Saviour. From here there is a direct line to the new Testament, to Jesus. The poor one, the hopeless person in our midst, is our hope and the sign of our coming salvation. Again, everything is turned upside down.

8.5 In another line of thinking it became clear that YAHWEH who is thus mightier than anybody or anything else must be the origin of everything. He is the creator. This was

one of the later discoveries. In a sense it was one of the last conclusions. It remained a very precarious one. For the thinking it was an inescapable fact and yet at the same time the manner in which world lived was one big enigma, if not a nightmare. In the thinking they knew that humans are probably responsible but that was a nightmare too.

8.6 The world exists because YAHWEH, God wished it to exist. Probably this was an unavoidable conclusion and nevertheless it remains an enigma. And so does god. It is clear that He always chooses the powerless. In a very deep sense He himself must be powerless because He has nothing to do with violence and the power built on it (see 1 Kings 19, 9ff). In His powerlessness He has the power (comp. 2 Cor. 12, 9 about Paul). And He remains an enigma.

9. To be honest, most of our experienced reality remains an enigma. To give some examples.

9.1 We can't explain what is happening, 'even' when we know about God. There are no explanations either for the good thing which happen to us (which we can only receive as gifts, undeserved and unexplained) or for the bad ones. No question about 'why' ever gets an answer. Sciences never find the real answer to why. They never find the 'cause prima', if this exists at all from a scientific point of view. The bad things, the difficult things we experience can give the possibility of finding the way back to Him. It is possible, but it certainly doesn't always happen. It can happen when we 'open our hands', when we stop the fighting and become humble. In so doing, we in fact become helpless, so waiting for Him in expectation. And even when we go that way, what happens to us can never be explained. Around us are all the enigmas; the beautiful ones, the sad ones, the exasperating ones and they will stay so. We ourselves included (see 1 Cor. 13, 13). It is for this reason that we can only tell about God, about Jesus or about our experiences in stories, not in 'theories'.

9.2 Another insoluble problem is that of freewill. When people are free and when God lets himself be known, why do people do bad things? The conclusion of all the thinking in the Old Testament is that we, all people, are seduced (Gen. 3, 1ff). This is certainly true, but again the question is 'why?', why are we made that we can be seduced? Or perhaps we are not made in this way. Was there another power, in fact the opportunity, who or which made people seducible? We are going round in circles. Very clearly, we have the possibility to make the central choice – to belong to God or not to belong. Or is it already a gift to have this possibility and don't we have it if it is not given? Much thinking was done about this in the time of the Old Testament. Theologians had endless rows about it. Probably in the context of the knowledge of the real God, the problem of freewill is not a real problem. In his presence all human problems disappear. He is there and says: Choose! If you don't choose, probably I, God, am not even there. It stays the same as it always was – I am power in powerlessness. I am not almighty in the mythical sense.