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... For Ye Have not Spoken of Me Right

– about the notorious violation of the Second Commandment –

The Absoluteness of God and The Second Commandment

In the monotheistic religions, phrases are circulating like "God is absolute", "God is inconceivable", "the Kingdom of God is not of this world". They represent a common, while low-key, primal religious knowledge. Equally common however is the fact that the consequences are practically never being drawn.

If God is absolute, then he is detached from everything, that is, not in relation to anything; and then no assertion whatsoever can be made about him, as it would inevitably relate him to something. Every attempted assertion about God relativizes God. If God cannot be conceptualized, and if he is not of this world and therefore separate from all concepts of this world, then "God" is, in short, not a concept, and thus cannot be placed in assertions.

To come directly to the point: This is the very meaning of the Second – in other counts, Third –, Commandment: "thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain". It says that an assertion carrying the name of God is always in vain, void, a misuse. This can be seen without any exegetic efforts, just with a little insight in our own being, notably: Whatever we encounter in the world, we understand it, and our understanding is immediate and conceptual. Which means, our world is just the structure of all our concepts.

Usually, we understand the Second Commandment differently: We shall not put God in a negative connection, not utter something negative about him, not caricature him, not denigrate him, etc. And, by and large, we abide by this rule.

What could raise our suspicion, is, that the original of the Second Commandment from the Second Book of Moses (Exodus), Chapter 20, Verse 7, has been translated in very different ways:

Luther formulates: Thou shalt not *misuse* the name of the LORD thy God ("Du sollst den Namen des HERRN, deines Gottes, nicht missbrauchen"). The German Catholic Catechism has the verb (to)"misuse" replaced by (to) *dishonour* ("verunehren"). Buber and Rosenzweig translate as follows: Thou shalt not carry HIS, thy God's name *in an illusionary manner* ("Trage nicht SEINEN, deines Gottes Namen auf das Wahnhafte").

And the King James Bible, as cited above, says: "Thou shalt not *take* the name of the LORD thy God *in vain*".

"Misuse", "carry in an illusionary manner", "dishonour" and "take ... in vain" are so obviously different interpretations that one may get the impression that none of the respective translators seems to be in possession of the proper understanding. At least, a little help can be found in the immediate context. Only a few lines later, there is the Fourth Commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother ...". Thus, the same author cannot have in mind that, with regard to God, it might be sufficient, just not to dishonour or misuse HIS name. It would have been easy to write: "Thou shalt honour the name of God" or even "Thou shalt honour God". As the author does not write this, his point is not about the honour of God or His name, and thus the interpretations "misuse" and "dishonour" can obviously be discarded.

Still there remain the two other, rather more puzzling versions: "carry in an illusionary manner" and "take ... in vain". They point to some kind of erroneous and unavailing use of God's name, based on an illusion, and avoidable without such illusion. But the author does not write which error and which illusion he has in mind.

Anyway, we already know which erroneous use is meant. But it would not be bad if the same understanding could be found somewhere in the bible. Indeed a corresponding consideration exists in the Fall of Man tale in the First Book of Moses (Genesis).

The "Zeroth" Commandment

There, God commands Adam: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die". That is, so to speak, the "Zeroth" Commandment. Its content forthrightly describes the existence of man after the fall: he has the ability of gaining knowledge, he can distinguish between good and bad, and he is mortal.

This reads like the little child saying: "Oh, these beautiful berries!" and Mom warns: "They are poisonous. You must not eat them, or else you will die". Our existence is as it is: unavoidable, without alternative, absolute. The serpent, however, re-qualifies God's words: "Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil". Hence God's words can be taken quite differently: not as a communication of knowledge about our existence, but as a commandment that is motivated by some hidden agenda, that is authoritarian, furnished with an arbitrary threat of punishment, and, for all that, open to violation. That man adopts this view: that exactly is the Fall, man's turn towards not seeing the absolute. All further extensions of this tale are just implementation and consequences.

Every human has the existence as described in the Fall of Man tale. We all have, so to speak, the Fall behind us and are now fixated on God's commandments. We would, however, be well advised to consider, whether what we airily take as God's commandments would not more tellingly and with greater benefit be understood as descriptions of our existence. In any case, the Ten Commandments are not particularly good as a list of commandments but pretty good as a lesson about human existence.

The "Normal" Misuse

How would the Second Commandment be read as a description of human existence? Our existence is such that we can take the name of God in vain, misuse it, dishonour it, carry it in an illusionary manner, and, possibly, do this most of the time. Before quickly dismissing this, we better realize that this is about our existence, and that we should rather not be mistaken about it. Let us therefore continue to look into this diagnosis.

Common uses of the name of God are, for example: *God is the highest*, *God saves man*, *God is love*, *God is full of grace*. They are meant as positive as imaginable, more than compliant with the Second Commandment. In the sense of the Second Commandment as a description of existence they are plain misuses of the name of God.

What is their common denominator? They are – attempted – assertions about God. If we said: *God is relative*, then probably all believers would protest. But the assertion: *God is the highest* clearly presents God as relative, specifically in a height-relation to other objects. The assertion: *God saves man* positions God relative to the concepts *save* and *man*. *God is love* relates God to the concept of *love*. *God is full of grace* puts God in relation to the concept of *grace*. As said before, every attempted assertion about God relativizes God. And as God is absolute, every assertion about God is void.

For the sake of conciseness, the preceding paragraph is imprecise, still with the hope to be well understood in spite. Strictly speaking, there cannot be any assertions at all about God. Even the preceding sentence cannot be an assertion about God. The sentence: *Every assertion about God is void*, taken as an assertion, declares itself to be void. What can correctly be said, however, is the following: In every assertion with the name "God", the entity denoted with this name can only be an inner-worldly – *relative* – object. And should somebody believe, it could, in an assertion, be possible to refer with the name "God" to the thus named absolute, extra-worldly, unconceivable God, then this belief is an illusion. –

As a result, we note: The true meaning of the Second Commandment can also be detected with the help of the bible. To those who may still not be satisfied with the preceding derivation, the Book of Job can be recommended. There, his friends are, throughout 34 chapters, formulating assertions about God, and finally God says that they have not spoken of him right.

At this point we are back to the question of the consequences: what follows from the Second Commandment, as it points out that assertions about "God" are void?

Obviously, all tellings about God and all thinking and teachings based on assertions about "God" must be revised and, much of it, given up and discarded. This is the business of the institutions owning such thinking and teachings.

The Approximately Pointing Telling

On the other hand, the impression cannot simply be dismissed that, in certain cases, speaking about God has been, and continues to be, a somehow successful practice. Let us therefore address the question whether, and if so, how it is possible to speak about God without using assertions.

In order to answer this question it is best to take one step back and ask why one should speak about God at all. It appears that, for some people, speaking about God is relevant to our existence, while for others it is irrelevant. If only to settle the question of relevance it is therefore necessary to speak about God.

Let us try this. In order to see the relevance for our existence, one has to focus on this existence. This is easier said than done. It is not about that which all the time occupies us most: the contents of our individual world, but about that which belongs to our existence beyond this world.

Now, many people hold that the world is all that is. How should anybody under this restriction focus on existential aspects outside the world! On the other hand, people have little difficulty, for example, to speak of a virtual reality. After all, this means: the virtual reality that, say, a computer game offers us by means of its devices – its computer, screen, speakers, joysticks and others –, is in some way similar to the reality proper that the world is offering us. Let us look a bit closer. The virtual reality has some presentation context, not only devices but also designers, programmers, players. They are outside the virtual reality. – What corresponds to this in the proper reality? Devices we do not need, we perceive directly, and we act directly. But the contents of the world occur to us as if produced and presented "live" from outside the world. And, in facing them, we find ourselves vis-à-vis to them, we play our life from outside the real world.

When we play a computer game, our focus is in the virtual reality, we can get carried away with it, and even completely fall for it to such a degree that it will not easily relinquish its hold on us. But we can also back out of the game, for example, in case we fail to a greater extent, and then we see the devices again. Is there something similar in the real world, too? Most of the time, we are completely absorbed in the world, but also in the real world we may loose so fiercely, that we will be thrown back upon ourselves.

Already from these few paragraphs, one can see how descriptions of our existence can be successful. Using normal words – others are not available – one has to point somehow "near" that aspect of our existence, that is meant to be brought in sight. The means for describing human existence is *the approximately pointing telling*. Actually, one

should always think it with the prefix "It is as if ..." and then try to see – with the "inner eye" – the "It" that is aimed at.

The truth criterion of approximately pointing tellings is, whether one does, or does not, see that which is pointed to. What is being seen, cannot be argued away or confirmed by arguments, and therefore approximately pointing tellings cannot be proven or disproven. But they can be objective, because it is possible for everybody to agree, or disagree, about the sight.

Entering the space of approximately pointing tellings opens up the whole domain of descriptions of existence and thus a comprehensive view of human existence. At the same time it becomes visible, that and how God is relevant to us: our existence is, as if the Absolute, Extra-worldly, God is playing a role in it.

Looking more closely, one notices that the meaning of our existence is to develop world, put in another way: to expand life and possibilities of life. Furthermore, from what occurs to us in the world, we are being coached and grow correspondingly, which is like as if it came from good, but extra-worldly parents. It turns out that our existence has dimensions, that offer various lines of sight to the Extra-worldly, among others trinity. It becomes visible how guilt, absolution, salvation, beatitude are functioning, and that they are impossible without the Extra-worldly. The fundamentals of science and organized religion become clear, and how they can cleanly be delineated. Finally, the overview shows how rich religious texts – in spite of their superficial challenges of reason – are in open and veiled descriptions of human existence. The Ten Commandments and the tale of the Fall of Man are just two examples of many, a good number thereof much more enlightening.

All this is commonly missed out by taking approximately pointing tellings about human existence as conceptual assertions; by applying arguments instead of looking.

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