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Rund Welten

Radical Transcendence: Lacan on the Sinai

Abstract: Jacques Lacan recognizes in the Jewish tradition an early manifestation of a discourse that gives due of the alterity of language. The central thesis of Lacan's thought is that language itself is of the order of the Other. What does this imply for our thinking on God? God is not the One you think He is. This is not a very new, postmodern view on religion. It is the purpose of this contribution to make such a claim valuable and plausible by relying on the thought of Jacques Lacan alongside some Talmudic reflections of Emmanuel Levinas.

Key words: Lacan, Levinas, Sinaitic revelation, trauma, symbolic order

Povzetek: **Radikalna transcendenca: Lacan na Sinaju**

Jacques Lacan v judovski tradiciji prepozna zgodnjo obliko diskurza, ki priznava drugost jezika. Osrednja Lacanova teza je, da jezik pripada redu Drugega. Kaj to pomeni za naše razmišljanje o Bogu? Bog ni Tisti, za katerega mislimo, da je. To ni ravno nov, postmoderni pogled na religijo. Namen tega prispevka je pokazati upravičenost in sprejemljivost takšne zahteve, pri čemer se naslanjamo na misel Jacquesa Lacana in jo postavljamo skupaj s talmudskim razmišljanjem Emmanuela Levinasa.

Ključne besede: Lacan, Levinas, sinajsko razodetje, travma, simbolni red

1. Radical transcendence and language

Religion is not what you think it is. Notwithstanding all the declarations of the death of God since the nineteenth century, religion still persists in our world and it doesn't look like that it will make any motion of withdrawal. As long as we conceive of religion as »belief«, or more precisely, an intentional belief of a subject that knows what it does and think, in short, the modern, »disenchanted« subject, we are missing the point of what religion is. Religion does not find a firm basis in the Self, nor in its confident beliefs. But it doesn't find a firm basis in the existence of God either. God is not the One you think He is. This is not that much a new, postmodern view on religion. It is the purpose of this contribution to make this plausible, by relying on the thought of Jacques Lacan alongside some Talmudic thoughts of Emmanuel Levinas.

Lacan recognizes in the Jewish tradition an early manifestation of a discourse that gives due of the alterity of language. However, this does not imply that we at any rate can identify the Other with God. The central thesis of Lacan's thought is that language itself is of the order of the Other. The Other, written with a capital, is not a human being as such, but the symbolic order. The Other, then, is an echo of Freud's superego, that resonates in the ego. In spite of its alleged self-knowledge, the Self is already governed by alterity, a voice that sounds from elsewhere. The Other presents itself as the locus of this voice. But what this voice exactly says, is already beyond the symbolic order of language itself. The voice does not coincide with the A (*L'Autre*, The Other), the symbolic order, but it appears as an »object« of desire, which is marked by Lacan as *a*, or *l'objet petit a*. As Lacan states, the Freudian superego takes its authority only from its loudness, not from its content:

»It also makes us discover that the superego, in its intimate imperative, is indeed »the voice of conscience«, that is, a voice first and foremost, a vocal one at that, and without any authority other than that of being a loud voice: the voice that at least one text in the Bible tells us was heard by the people parked around Mount Sinai. This artifice even suggests that its enunciation echoed back to them their own murmur, the Tables of the Law being nonetheless necessary in order for them to know what it enunciated.« (1966, 684)

This quote does defend neither atheism nor belief. What it tells is the primacy of language as the Other. To Lacan, language does never start within the Self, but is always already heard from the other side. It does not start in the ego. Consequently, consciousness, to put it in terms of *Moby Dick*, is not the steersman of the ship, but rather the waves on which the ship is floating. Who or what speaks there? Language, that enables everything that might be said. Take a small child, who doesn't that much learn to master language, but rather listens to the words of his father, who, at his turn, cannot do otherwise than to speak out loud the law of the symbolic order. So, law is not first something in order to be molded in words; it is language. The father is not a biological entity in the world; it is the voice of the law. In French, the Name-of-the-father (*Nom-du-Père*) sounds like the No-of-the-father (*le Non-du-Père*). It is the father who commands. No need to argue that we are very close to mount Sinai here.

It is not surprising that Lacan on many occasions in his seminars speaks of the Sinai (2005, 78). Already in the seminar of 1954–1955 the Sinai stands for the resistance of idolatry. The Sinai is the metaphor for the resistance of idolatry because it is Moses who ascends the holy mountain, and not Aron, the brother that promises idols to the people. To Lacan, the Sinai implies foremost the resistance of idolatry understood as the ego that thinks of itself as its own autonomous master. The subject that sees itself as a unity disregards its primal fragmentation in order to replace it by an idol of the Self. Said in unmistakable psychoanalytic words, God the father is phallic, because as signifier, He takes the place of the highest signifier. Yet, this phallus is always already castrated. Hence the necessity of religion.

Religion does not refer to a so-called »religious experience«, but to the lack of it, to the loss of the highest signifier. As such, the death of God is not something outside of religion, but of religious nature *par excellence*.

We are constantly confronted with meaning, but the exact basis of meaning – the *arche* that will seal the meaning of meaning at last – is lacking. Still, as speaking beings we cannot do otherwise than to assume that language is referring to something at least. Religion, in a Lacanian outlook, is a discourse that speaks out, not that much the content of this »something«, but gives due to the lack of it. More than any other discourse, religion is well aware of this primordial castration. Yes: religion is about castration, about the original lack. Religion does not rest on God, but it gazes into the gap in language where God eventually takes shelter without ever seeing him. He is exactly the One, the only One, that becomes »visible« in a symbolic order.

Now, what is a symbolic order? A symbolic order makes the unbearable bearable. It is the scene, the stage so to say, of religion. Take Abraham in Genesis 22, ready to sacrifice Isaac. There is no need to argue that for Abraham, this command is traumatic. From a Lacanian view, the point of the passage is not that much Abraham's allegiance towards God, but the substitution of the sacrifice: at the end, not the beloved son, but a ram is sacrificed. This is the birth of the symbol and consequently of religion. The symbol substitutes the unbearable sacrifice. This is why it is right to say that the symbol refers to something which isn't there. Or let's take a look at Sinai. At least it is clear that on the Sinai, the Other speaks and commands. It is a saying that will be inscribed in the Law. What does this imply? Do we hear a God speaking? Or does the people of Israel hear an inner voice speaking? The meaning has to be taken psychoanalytically: the subject is nothing else than the bearer of all the phantasies it makes of the Other. Now, this Judaic Law has nothing in common with any kind of »spirituality« in an »inner« sense of the word. On the Sinai, there is no intimacy, but a radical extimacy. The Ego – read: Israel – hears something that is radically extraneous. The God that speaks to Moses is exactly not a God of intimacy.

No wonder that on the Sinai a voice is heard that the subject doesn't want to hear. It desires to listen to Aaron, not to Moses. Aaron is the bringer of rest, Moses of trauma.¹ The Hebrew Bible gives evidence to a total drama, a failure of being faithful to God. The people of Israel are disobedient, and God incessantly gives it a beating, a thunder so to say. »And all the people saw the thunder [*ha-qolot*] and the flames« (Exod. 20:18). Now notice that the Hebrew word for »thunder«, *qol* (plural *qulot*), can also mean »voice«. At the same time, it is written that the people »saw« the thunder (Zetterholm 2012, 19).² The symbolic order is the thundering beating, the wrath, the menace and the people of Israel is a subject that

¹ Exodus 32:1: »When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, »Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.«

² Compare with thunder and voice in Psalm 29.

doesn't want to obey. Abraham Heschel famously stated (2001) that the prophets are men able to identify themselves with fury of God. Truth is there to be denied, exactly in the manner Freud (1925) thought of it. Freudian psychoanalysis makes a voice heard that is originally repressed by the subject.

On its turn, the analyst is the one that learns to listen beyond the claims of his patient, beyond the censorship of his speaking. The subject is not what it thinks it is. A Lacanian psychoanalytical view of religion doesn't that much consist of a description of religion as a compulsive order, but gives due to the other voice that is speaking, in short, the Other. Religion does not start in a discourse about claims of an existing God, nor about a subject that claims to »believe« in God. God is unconscious, says Lacan famously, because He is nothing else than the speaking of unconsciousness. (1973, 58; 119) An unconsciousness of which we know that it is structured like a language.

Let us take a closer look at the speaking on the Sinai. In his 1968–1969 seminar, Lacan says: »Not ›I‹ is speaking the truth, but the truth speaks with ›I‹. /... / What interests me and what is scarcely touched elsewhere, only on the Sinai, is that there is a speaking of ›I‹.« (2005, 70)

This »I« Lacan is referring to, is nothing else than the »I« that governs the ego. In other words, my »I« is not fully intended and articulated by me, but by a truth of which I am alienated. Truth is not something that I discover and communicate, but »I« am an effect of the truth of the Other, of which we already know that it is nothing but language. This does imply that this »I« is personal, in other words, monotheistic. In the Torah, the people of Israel doesn't simply hear an abstract God, but a God that is addressing in language. Think of Emmanuel Levinas' famous appeal to the Hebrew *hineini* – »here I am« (*me voici*). The speaking of God is not a speaking in general, everybody who wants to hear, but it is a personal speaking. This is why the patriarchs in the Torah always answer with *hineini*. It is like a confirmation, »yes, I hear you«, »it is me who is listening to you«, »talk to me«. Language is personal. God appeals. God is there to be heard, not be seen. The passage of Lacan is of importance, because it learns that the Sinai reveals first and foremost a personal bond between God and man. Yet, this bond is nothing else than language itself. Like in Levinas' thought, in Lacan's thought the subject is not that much the speaker, but the receiver of the »I«. It is the effect of language.

Does this all mean that *there is a God*? Well, at least not ontologically. It means that there is speaking, that there is language and that language speaks »I«. The speaking on the Sinai is a personal speaking, not because there is a God that subsequently speaks, but that speaking speaks in a personal form. God talks, and to talk is to make use of the shifter »I«. The speaking on the Sinai says »I«. We are far off any anonymous nature religion or any *Deus sive natura*, which, consequently unavoidably would lead religion without language. Monotheism is religion as language.

The speaking on the Sinai is the speaking of an »I« that remains absent. God is a *Deus absconditus*. But not because He remains hidden behind language, as if

He remains hidden »behind« a burning bush. Take the Talmud, in which we will find the interpretation of the Tora as God. God is in language (to say it in Christian terms, in the beginning was the Word) and not outside language. God is not an actor first and a speaker secondly, so that we human beings can say something about this saying, as if it was an object of discourse. He is the text. Lacan is very close to the Talmudic interpretation: »La Bible, c'est tout de même la parole de Dieu« (»The Bible is the very same as the word of God«), states Lacan (2004, 95). This means nothing else than language is the Other. Again, in this respect Lacan is not that far from Levinas and reminds his readers of writer Zvi Kolitz in the heading of an article: Loving the Torah more than God (Levinas 1997, 142–145). Levinas interprets this as persistence against idolatry: not to create a God in order to let Him speak (and wanting Him to say what you desire). It is a command to avoid a direct contact with God, without language and reason. Monotheism conceives of truth as »I«, waiting to be answered. To do so, the subject cannot do otherwise than step into language, the Other.

But still, who is this »I«? And moreover, what does He want of me? (Lacan 2004, 97) Well, this is exactly the question of Moses. What does he have to tell his people?

»Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ›The God of your fathers has sent me to you‹, and they ask me, ›What is his name?‹ Then what shall I tell them?« (Exod. 3:13)

Who spoke there high on the mountain? This answer to »who« or »what is said« on the Sinai is one and the same: »I am who I am« (אהיה אשר אהיה, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*) (Exod. 3:13). But who speaks like that, rather seems to veil than to reveal his name. It is like saying: »et allez vous faire foutre«, freely translated as, »now fuck off«, and Lacan continues to say: »and this is exactly what the Jewish people did since then« (2005, 70). But what is heard here is nothing else than the name of the father, the highest signifier, whose name cannot be pronounced. It is the *Tetragrammaton*, the Greek word for the Hebrew name that counts four silent letters (יהוה).

Exactly at the moment we are expecting an answer to what or who, nothing is revealed that can be said, and it is this that is said. The »fuck off« means something like: »Go off, there is nothing that I can tell you that you ever will understand.« What is revealed? Not an image or visual countenance, but a voice. The voice commands to be integrated into the symbolic order:

God said to Moses,

»I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ›I am has sent me to you.‹« God also said to Moses: »Say to the Israelites, ›The Lord, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.‹ /... / This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.« (Exod. 3:14-15)

The »I« orders that we will speak about Him.³

Yet, this does not imply that there is a hidden theology behind Lacan's thought. A »theology« would imply that there is a God of whom we speak. God, so to say, is the object of knowledge. This is not the thrust of Lacan's argument, but not for plane atheistic reasons. The fact that there is speaking about God, doesn't mean that there is a God first, in order to be an object of speaking, nor that there is a God that speaks. There is speaking. That's all. Lacan is interested in this speaking because it reveals the alterity of language. God is the ultimate absence. He reveals himself by his desire, which means: desire is the desire of the Other. (2004, 32)

2. A touch of the real

How to understand this Lacanian phrase? Who speaks on the Sinai and what is said is the speaking of the Other. Yet, this speaking is not simply a speaking of an anonymous Other. Not because it bears a Name, but because it speaks »I«. It is not language as an *automaton*, a speaking that is lost in the anonymity of the Other as language.

To understand this, we have to focus on the separation that Lacan makes between *automaton* and *tuché*, words borrowed from Aristotle. To Aristotle, both the words stand for »chance«. The first pertaining to physical events, whereas the second pertains to human actions. Lacan lays stress on *tuché* as interruption, in French, like in English, it sounds not only like a sneeze, but also like the word »touch«. *Tuché* is not understood like a signifier, but in the loss of it, a wound in the chain of signifiers. In short, *tuché* is trauma. (1973, 53–62) *Automaton* means pretty well what you think it is: a machine, an automatic chain of words. The result of it is a desire that doesn't originate in a feeling or experience, nor a need. It is like the wish of the toddler that every evening, before sleep, wants to hear the same story. The bed time story offers an illusionary grasp on the flew of time, full of uncertainties. But at the end of the day, there is something that didn't change. That's the truth about telling stories: to foster the illusion of stability. The disturbance of such an automatic flew of signifiers would be a trauma. To Freud, religion is of the kind of the automaton. It is nothing but an obsessive neurosis, an illusionary grip. Still, it remains highly questionable whether Lacan shares this view.

To Freud, religion is of an infantile order, it is immature. Now let us for a moment rely on a more Talmudic point a view. Remember Levinas' description of Judaism as a religion for adults (1997, 11–23). Or, with the example of the bed time story in mind that is read by the mother, a phrase from the Talmud, commented upon by the French rabbi and philosopher Marc-Alain Ouaknin (influenced by both Lacan and Levinas): »What does ›They departed from the mount of the Lord, three days' journey‹ (Num. 10:33) mean? That means that the children of

³ Compare with Psalm 33:9: »For He spoke, and it was; He commanded, and it endured.«

Israel fled from Mount Sinai like a child who flees school after having learned too much.« (Ouaknin 1998, 182) »To run from«, isn't this, in a more psychoanalytic jargon, exactly what the subject is doing with a trauma? In other words, what he has heard on the Sinai is of the order of the trauma, not of the *automaton*. Revelation is not the presentation of meaning, but the traumatization of the order on which meaning is build. Here, again, Lacan and Levinas meet. Isn't this exactly the way Levinas is using the word trauma, speaking of the subject? (1974)

For Levinas, trauma is the vulnerability of the subject, which means: the ability to be wounded, to be touched by otherness. This is why Levinas speaks of the trauma in terms of passivity. To Lacan, *tuché* is what resists integration into the automaton. »Le réel se soit présenté sous la forme de ce qu'il y a en lui d'*inassimilable* – sous la forme du trauma.« (1973, 55) It eludes every kind of representation whatsoever. It can't be imagined nor symbolized. As a result of that (not as a cause) it is real. The order of the real appears only as an effect of the lack of imagination or representation. It's a remainder. »Le réel est au-delà de l'*automaton*.« (53) As such, there is a touch by the real, a being »touched« by something which resists to be assimilated by the subject, something that appears only as a wound, a gap, a lack. This has nothing in common with so called »negative theology«. The point is not that it can't be said, but that it touches. It leaves us upset. The speaking of the Sinai is, still before it becomes clear as the Law, is a disturbance, accompanied by fear and thunder.

This is a compromise an all too naive image of a God who communicates the Law, in order to be followed by His pious believers. This is exactly not what happens on the Sinai. Let us not forget that the people of Israel prefer the golden calf instead of a vague murmur. A murmur by a God who doesn't show himself. The speaking on the Sinai is not the Word of a God that is already a God with believers, speaking the words that the believers want to hear. The symbolic order: that is Aron's contribution to the story, not Moses's. The speaking on the Sinai is a traumatic speaking.

»The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.« (Exod. 21:19).

God's Law is not communicated by transference of knowledge. Rather, it wounds knowledge. It traumatizes. »Knowledge« would suppose that a subject – the people of Israel – learns something of the will of God. The science of this knowledge would be »theology«. Following this route, the subject could vote before or against the Law of God. Yet, religion is not democratic, because in religion, the ground of the subject is not to be found within the self, rather as said before, in radical alterity. If we want to face religion, without immediately reducing it to sociology, democracy or economy, we have to face the trauma. This is the religious demand. The desire is the desire of the Other.

3. The blare of the horn: Lacan on Anxiety

Let us listen closer to this blare of the horn that accompanies the voice on the Sinai, without entering the symbolic order. On the one hand, we have heard the voice thundering, on the other, we have seen that this voice, just like Freud's superego, is a voice that is heard in silence. »It's only in your head«, so to say. Yet, it has nothing in common with »interiority«. Why not? Because, if Freud is right, what is heard, is exterior, not interior. It is a voice coming from elsewhere. For Freud it consists of education, norms and values, society, etc. It is a voice that is heard, even if one covers the ears with one's hands. In short, it is an inaudible voice. A voice that is omnipresent in silence. To Lacan, the voice is an object, but it is a non-material object, denoted a (*L'objet petit a*).

L'objet petit a is an object that eludes the grip by the subject, but that it nevertheless considers as the cause of its desire (rather than being an object of desire). It is the other as imagined by the ego, of which we have already said that it is constituted by the Other. This does not mean that the ego knows what it exactly hears of who is speaking. But what it knows, is that an unsolicited desire is poured out to it. The ego is located between the A (the signifiers of what the other is demanding) and a (the question of the subject: »what do you want from me?«). The a is not an existing, knowable object, but a leftover, marked by an irreducible lack. The voice is exactly the thing that can't be said.

The first quote we used, about »the voice of conscience«, suggests already a voice as a phantasma. But nonetheless, it »sounds« inaudible but obsessive. It won't let you go. From a clinical point of view this sounds familiar. Now, the atheist declares delighted: »See, religion is nothing but »hearing voices«!« In a way, yes, but the point is that this doesn't refute religion. Against the illusion of religion, another illusion is posed: that of a Self that perfectly knows itself. To Lacan, the voice is never heard as the voice of the Self, be it religious or our fiercely atheistic.

Lacan discusses – again by way of the Jewish tradition – the voice that presents itself as the blow on the ram's horn, the shofar, in his seminar on anxiety (2004, 281–296). He comments with reference to a study on the rite of the shofar, written by the Jewish psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, who was a direct associate to Freud. This voice sounds indeed. It is the horn that sounds to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the new year, and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. Now Reik understands in the blow of the shofar the origin of music, but Lacan doesn't follow Reik in this interpretation. After all, it is not the sonorous flourishing of trumpets that is at stake, but the non-sonorous voice of Freud's super-ego.

To situate Lacan's interpretation, it is important to know that he is commenting upon Reik in his seminar that deals with the psychoanalytical problem of anxiety. The reader of this seminar is struck by the many references to the Hebrew Bible. In a short seminar that follows directly after the tenth seminar on anxiety, *The Names-of-the-Father*, Lacan says:

»God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scientists, writes Pascal at the head of the manuscript of his *Pensées*. Con-

cerning which may be said what I have gradually accustomed you to understand: that a God is some-thing one encounters in the real, inaccessible. It is indicated by what doesn't deceive-anxiety«. (1987, 90)

What is anxiety to Lacan? At least, Lacan is clear about what anxiety is not: it is not an »emotion«. It is nothing that bubbles up from the depths of the soul. Nor is anxiety, as it is to Freud, a strategy of the ego to fly from danger. Moreover – this is the central thought of the seminar – it is »not without object«. (2004, 187)

This sounds somewhat strange, because it suggests that there is reason to believe that it has an object. This indeed is how existentialist philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre understand anxiety. Fear, then, has an object whereas anxiety remains without an object. Well, if this is right, what then is the problem with anxiety, if there's no object at all? We have to understand Lacan here literally: saying that anxiety is not without an object is not the same with saying that it has an object; at least, an object that we know. Lacan's formula has the structure of a Freudian negation. The negation as such tells something beyond the speaking of the ego, but what? It takes the place of the lack of the object *a*. It is there. It »does not deceive« says Lacan in a Cartesian language, but now, it is not the ego, but anxiety that does not deceive. It cannot be eluded by phantasy. In anxiety, the subject is touched by the desire of the Other, of which we already know that it's meaning is kept away from the subject.⁴ Lacan:

»In anxiety, the subject is affected by the desire of the Other. He is affected by it in a non-dialectizable manner, and it is for that reason that anxiety, within the affectivity of the subject, is what does not deceive.« (1987, 82)

Anxiety happens, when the strategies of the symbolic or imaginary order fail. Something remains. Not nothing. Anxiety is an experience that introduces me in the world of the Other. But note: it is not a Husserlian »experience«, constituted by intentionality, nor is it a relation to the Other as intended by the subject. It is the other that disintegrates the subject. It is an encounter of the order of the *tuché*. Lacan (2005, 92) describes it as an encounter with God – *El shaddai* (אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי). It is a personal encounter for reasons discussed above. Hence the foundation of monotheism. But it is, unlike Martin Buber's famous presentation, an encounter without face, which means, without image:

»You cannot see my face, for man may not see Me and live.« (Exod. 33:20)

This God is associated primary with fear. It is a God that presents Himself but remains invisible. This is exactly the Lacanian sketch of the God of the Hebrew Bible. »Who's speaking?« »What do you want of me?« »Who is it that trembles me and terrifies me in anxiety?« Salvation comes after anxiety. He is a traumatic appeal of the order of the *tuché*.

⁴ In the Lacanian grammar noted as *d(A)* (2004, 34).

From this viewpoint, there is something in religion that is beyond the symbolic order. The symbolic order pacifies the unbearable fear, but in order to do so, a voice is heard, one is touched by an appeal. Language as symbolic order says: »do not fear«, but as we know, these words in the Bible follow on revelation. This revelation is not already part of the symbolic order. It is trauma. Religion as revelation doesn't start in the symbolic order, but as the place where we are being touched by the real. And of course, the real doesn't precede revelation, nor is the cement of any proof of God's existence. It is without any language. We do not have words for it, even not a theology. The symbolic order is a language that gives due to the lack of the real, not the description of it. The Law takes the place of the lack: here, language begins. The Law is the codification of what the Other wants of me. I do not »know«, but I have to follow the Law. This Law is not the result of any human deliberation of the outcome of a democratic process. As mentioned before, Aron's golden calf is directly opposed to Moses' stone tablets.

Anxiety occurs in the confrontation with the real. Lacan associates anxiety with the first, toneless letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the de Aleph (א), the letter that in the Talmud stands for God. It is the toneless letter for an unspeakable name, which is in the Jewish tradition represented as the blew of the shofar. Together with the smoking Sinai, it breaths awe and respect. It touches (*toucher – touché*) and disturbs. It »is« God as the emptiness and radical absence that nevertheless is being heard, but without transferring any fixed meaning.⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, the shofar sounds at any moment where a covenant is made between God and the people of Israel (2004, 286).⁶ Besides, in Jewish tradition the shofar sounds when somebody gets excommunicated due to treason of the tradition, as was the case with Spinoza.

Without doubt, Lacan must have thought of his own excommunication (*L'excommunication*) as described in the first pages of seminar XI (1973, 9). The sound of the shofar is not reserved to feast-days, but it is heard on events that strike terror into the people. The shofar, so to say, is the thundering voice that isn't »understood«, but that precedes every understanding. Arnold Schoenberg famously made it sound at the moment that Moses receives the Ten Commandments in his masterpiece *Moses und Aron*.

The shofar is the fullness of the object a – or should we write the object א' – of which we have seen that the meaning remains absent. It is the lack of meaning that obsesses, that push itself forward. It is like a foghorn that is heard in the endless emptiness of the ocean. Not because it represents the lack, for that is exactly what remains impossible. Religion is not what you think it is.

⁵ For Lacan »meaning« is only a phantasmatic result of signifiers.

⁶ Compare with 2 Sam 6:15 and Exod 19:16.

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