

## ***Moreel Esperanto* by Paul Cliteur**

*Floris van den Berg* takes a course in **Paul Cliteur's** moral *Esperanto*.

Philosopher, humanist and public intellectual Paul Cliteur's latest book *Moreel Esperanto* (which translates as *Moral Esperanto*) is written as a philosophical reaction to the murder of Theo van Gogh [Dutch critic of religion and provocative film-maker] on November 2nd 2004, and other manifestations of religious terrorism, such as the murder of Rabin, the murder of William of Orange, and more. Now, three years after the murder of van Gogh, Cliteur makes this political, philosophical and meta-ethical statement. Instead of directly criticizing Islam or religion in general, he asks the fundamental political question, how can people live together peacefully, especially in a multicultural, multi-religious society? What is implicit is the assumption that religious fanatics who base their morality on divine command *cannot* fit in with an open liberal society such as the Netherlands, although other religious positions that do not take religion as the *starting point* for ethics may be compatible with liberal democracy.

During the past few decades there has been a continuous influx of immigrants to the Netherlands, of whom the majority are Muslim. Because of the pluralist model of the separation of church and state in the Netherlands, the state finances religious education and cultural organizations of all religious denominations equally. For a long time, until the murder of van Gogh, left-wing ideology had been multiculturalist. This hindered the assimilation and integration of immigrants by maintaining that they could and should hold onto their religious and cultural identity. Ayaan Hirsi Ali was one of the first to question the validity of this multiculturalist ideology in the Dutch political arena. She argued that multiculturalism turns a blind eye to oppression and subjection within subcultures, for instance in the Muslim community in the Netherlands, where many women suffer from domestic violence, suppression and forced arranged marriages. In short, *multiculturalism tolerates intolerance* by giving priority to groups instead of individuals. In two of his previous books, *Moderne Papoea's* and *Tegen de Decadentie*, Cliteur has analyzed and denounced cultural relativism and protested against left-wing politicians and intellectuals who disregard this in-group intolerance.

The new book has two main dimensions. In the first place, it is an academic treatise on the necessity of nonreligious ethics and secularism in politics. Secondly, the book shows Cliteur's personal involvement with and concern for an open society in the Netherlands, especially after the murder of Theo van Gogh.

*Moreel Esperanto* stands out among the plethora of books published about the murder of van Gogh. Cliteur goes much deeper into the fundamentals of ethics and politics. This book will be read differently now than in fifty year's time, but I do think it will still be worth reading fifty years from now.

*Moreel Esperanto* is a fascinating multidisciplinary book. It combines ethics (an in-depth analysis of the fundamental difference between religious and non-religious ethics); political philosophy (a philosophy of secularism); a critique of contemporary politics (*Kulturphilosophie*); and a crusade against postmodern relativists and the fellow travellers of fundamentalism. A motley crew of well-known (Kant) and less well-known philosophers (Schulz) are blended in with Dutch journalists, writers and politicians.

In *Moreel Esperanto* Cliteur tries to find the minimum level of consensus which is needed to live peacefully together when people do not agree about what the good life is. The problem is how to cope with intolerance without becoming intolerant oneself. On the *political* level, Cliteur argues, the state should be neutral: this means that the state

should not in any way support religion. Cliteur pleads for the French model of secularism (*laïcité*), instead of the Dutch model of pluralism. Religion should not be privileged. On the *moral* level, Cliteur argues that morality cannot and should not be grounded in religion. The essence of religious ethics, according to Cliteur, is Divine Command Theory: God commands you to do something, and your duty is to obey unquestioningly. The story of Abraham, who nearly slaughters his son Isaac on God's command, is the *locus classicus* of this theory. Cliteur abhors this ethic because it lacks morality: morality is about what is good and just, not about blindly obeying orders, even Divine ones. But Divine Command theory is based on obeying orders from higher up the social hierarchy, with God at the top, assisted by his translators, exegetes and executioners.

Though Cliteur emphasizes that he does not directly criticize religion (he does claim the importance of the *right* to criticize religion), by cutting morality loose from religion, religion becomes an empty shell. What remains of religion as a non-moral phenomenon is a set of personal beliefs and perhaps some social rituals and decorum. Religious people who follow the way Cliteur leads them will soon find themselves empty handed; as empty handed as the 'God-is-dead' theologian Kuitert, or a theologian like Paul Tillich, for whom God is merely 'ultimate concern'.

Cliteur argues that people cannot reach agreement in a multi-religious society when using idiosyncratic religious arguments. In order to reach common ground therefore, religious arguments should not be used in public debate about politics and morals. This is indeed the social praxis of Christian politicians: they usually do *not* use religious arguments to make a point, except concerning some well-defined issues like abortion. As a humanist, I do hope believers will follow Cliteur's advice and embrace secular ethics as a kind of moral Esperanto of secularism with which they can reach consensus on practical issues with members of other religions and none. He hopes they will work towards a complete separation of church and state, as well as a separation of religion and morality. But I am skeptical about this happening, especially among Muslims and other immigrant communities whose faith is strong.

For whom is this book written? I suppose Cliteur has written this book to convince two kinds of opponents. Firstly, Dutch Muslims of a liberal inclination; and secondly, intellectuals and politicians who have fundamentally different views to him about the role of religion. Members of the second group may be nonbelievers, but they say things like:

(a) "We cannot force people to accept our moral standards, and different cultures have different moral standards and religious beliefs."

At first sight this sounds nice and tolerant. But it is not. If people have to live together in one country (on one planet, I would like to add), then they have to have consensus about some fundamental issues.

(b) "Religion is needed for social cohesion." They say that even if religion is not true, without religion society would atomize.

Cliteur shows that consensus in a multi-religious society is extremely unlikely, and that we will all instead have to learn to speak a moral Esperanto. Human Rights are the universal moral Esperanto of our times. Yet the fate of Universal Human Rights can be compared to that of (linguistic) Esperanto: everybody thinks it's a good idea, but not many care to take it seriously.

*Moreel Esperanto* is about meta-ethics. Cliteur does not give content to the moral Esperanto – what it specifically means that you should do. He only outlines the 'grammar'

of a moral Esperanto – what your attitude should be to morality. In Part Two of the book, 'Autonomous Ethics', Cliteur reviews two schools of autonomous ethics: utilitarianism and Kantianism. He remarks that these philosophies have flaws, but that these flaws are less harmful than the Big Flaw of heteronomous religious ethics. In Part Three, about political philosophy, Cliteur outlines the political framework in which moral problems can be solved, by using rational arguments which he hopes will appeal to all participants.

The largest part of the book is devoted to problems with religious ethics. His argument reminds me of the often-quoted words from Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*:

"Belief in God, or in many gods, prevented the free development of moral reasoning. Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-religious Ethics is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will reach agreement. Since we cannot know how Ethics will develop, it is not irrational to have high hopes."

Cliteur mentions Parfit on page 291. But I think there is a difference between Cliteur's argument and Parfit's. Cliteur pleads for secularism – the idea of keeping religion out of ethics and politics. In theory these sorts of secularists can still be religious. Parfit instead has high hopes for atheism: the idea that there is no God and that values cannot be derived from a transcendent cause. All atheists I presume are secularists, although it is imaginable, by some twist of mind, that atheists vote for a Christian democratic party; perhaps out of a fear of nihilism or, as mentioned above, fear of the atomization of society. But not all secularists are atheists. Secularism can include liberal believers.

Reading Cliteur's book one gets the impression that Cliteur is a Nietzschean prophet shouting in a desert of Dutch secular ignorance. Well, indeed, there is an urgent need for a philosophy of secularism. But he is not alone in his moral quest. Many, if not most, Anglo-Saxon political philosophers use a secular concept of government. The free thought and humanist traditions, which have been organized in the Western world since the 19th century, have always been critical of religious involvement in morality and politics. Organized humanism is an alternative to established religions. And the main focus of Dutch free thought organization *De Vrije Gedachte* – of which Cliteur is a member – is secularist and atheist. However, the Free Thought movement is very small and seems invisible in public discourse.

*Moreel Esperanto* appears at a time (Feb. 2007) when the Dutch cabinet contains two Christian parties. It is to be hoped that their members will read this book, although I am pretty sure that even if they did it would not convince them: religious believers are usually immune to arguments contrary to what they already believe. What I do hope is that, due partly to this book, the cultural climate will change, and gradually more people will understand that religion is bogus and that it is dangerous to rely upon it morally.

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*Floris van den Berg is a philosopher, member of the Dutch Free Thought Association and Executive Director of the Center for Inquiry Low Countries. [florisvandenbergh@dds.nl](mailto:florisvandenbergh@dds.nl).*

• Paul Cliteur, *Moreel Esperanto*. [currently only available in Dutch], De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 2007, 428 pp.

