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Echoes of the Religious in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Revelation

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Overview and a Word of Gratitude

Even though Paul Ricoeur was always careful to distinguish between philosophical and religious thought, striving never to confuse them, we may say that he has paid a considerable attention to the religious phenomenon in his work. As such, the horizon of faith appears as the main theme of his concerns regarding the hermeneutics of the religious. To this philosopher, the problem of interpreting the religious language cannot vanish from the philosophical horizon, even if philosophical discourse has to maintain its own autonomy. We can therefore identify, in the context of a philosophical investigation, the specific character of religious language. Considering that every religious experience is articulated in a given language, it is the poetic and narrative dimension of the Christian religion that Ricoeur chooses to analyse, namely from the angle of the truth-revelation problem.

I receive the distinction of Professor *Honoris Causa* of the International Institute for Hermeneutics (IIH) with deep recognition and enormous gratitude. As I reach the end of my university career, dedicated to teaching, researching and promoting the field of hermeneutical studies, this distinction deeply honors me, and I will cherish it with sincere and heartfelt joy. Allow me, as a token of my gratitude, to dedicate the work that I present below to the IIH.

Autonomy and Revelation

Nowadays, the religious is taking up an increasingly important place in the intellectual debate of the West, a debate that had been previously dominated by the topics of criticism and revolution. Several are the origins of this transformation: the development of fundamentalisms and of a politicized version of Islam; the fall of the Berlin wall, and the phenomena of extreme terrorist violence that have occurred since 9/11. The historical effect of these events on Western rationality demands that philosophy seriously consider the problem of religious and cultural differences, an effort Ricoeur had already set out to make in his hermeneutical reflection. But how shall we then situate the meditation on the religious in the context of a reflective philosophy we have grown accustomed to and which Ricoeur never ceased to undertake? In other words, is the philosophical approach to religion, as it was traditionally thought, located at the ethical or at the ontological level?

This is the fundamental question Paul Ricoeur seeks to address in some of his texts on the hermeneutics of the religious, namely in his "The recipient of religion: the capable man."[1] A capable man is portrayed as being capable of speaking, capable of "initiating a line of events by his physical intervention in the course of things, capable of (re)collecting the story of his life in a coherent and acceptable narrative,"[2] and also capable of being imputable or autonomous. But our philosopher also recalls that in the long explanation of this capable man, developed in the book *Soi-même comme un autre*, he had always stressed his fragile nature–despite his abilities–which means that to each capacity (of saying, doing, narrating, being imputable) corresponds a certain type of incapacity that denotes precisely what the traditional *Cogito* forgot to pinpoint–the vulnerability of the human being.

In the text that we have just mentioned, but that we are not going to explore here in detail, Ricoeur is still trying to determine in which sense is religion able to address the capable man. Following Kant, he answers by considering three dimensions: a) religion touches man at one of his levels of specific incapacity, the one that has to do with evil, fault, or sin; b) religion serves the purpose of helping man, unveiling the hidden depths of his original capability and goodness; and c) religion operates this regeneration through the specific symbolic means that awaken those fundamental moral abilities that demand man's entry in a symbolic order.[3] Implicit in

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[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 3, Anthropologie Philosophique* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 415 ss.
[2] Ibid, 417.
[3] Ibid, 424-425.

Ricoeur's answer is the context of the Kantian "Essay on radical evil," in which the human propensity for evil "coming from unknown sources for reasons unknown (without us knowing from where or how it happened), remains a determination of free will, thus being the subjective basis of man's possibility of deviating from moral norms."[4]

It is in fact with this primitive situation of the servant will of man that the religious has been dealing with, at least in the Jewish/Christian tradition. That is why, Ricoeur continues, the place of the religious is neither ethical nor ontological, which means that it is outside the traditional onto-theology and also beyond the morality of duty, if we consider that religion does not add anything to what this type of moral enjoins us to do. Questioning the position of the philosophy of religion that resulted from the Enlightenment, and which moved the place of religion from ontology (onto-theology) to the foundation of ethics, Ricoeur appeals once more to Kant, and notably to *Religion Within the Limits of Reason*, to show us that after all, and according to the philosopher of Königsberg, morality does not need religion: it is self-sufficient due to pure practical reason.[5]

Religion belongs rather to the category of hope and revelation, whose limitation to propositional discourse is utterly contested by the philosopher as being derivative and subordinate.[6] The analysis of religious speech must not be reduced to the propositional statements that are already second-degree discourses, made by resorting to the use of concepts of speculative philosophy.[7] It must rather reflect on the earliest means of expression of the communities of faith. As we know, those means of expression appear under a variety of forms such as narratives, prophecies, legislative texts, wise sayings, hymns, pleadings, and thanksgiving actions.[8]

The word *God*, says the philosopher, belongs to another domain: "Primarily, to a level of discourse that I will call original in relation to statements of a speculative, philosophical or theological nature, such as "God exists."[9] For Ricoeur, to hear the Christian preaching means, above all, to strip oneself of all traditional onto-theological knowledge. The identification between God and Being is the most subtle temptation

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[4] Ibid, 428.
[5] Ibid, 426.
[6] Ibid, 201.
[7] Paul Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 2, Herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 224.
[8] Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 3,* 226.
[9] Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures,* 3. *Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 289.

that we must avoid. Neither an object nor, even less, an absolute object, "God is an integral part of the new world that the biblical texts reveal to their readers."[10]

The horizon within which Ricoeur tries to think the religious is thus the horizon of Poetics, the horizon of the poetic function of discourse that, from a philosophical point of view and, in order to be understood, demands a return to the Heideggerian primacy of truth as disclosure or unconcealment over the traditional concept of truth as adequacy/certainty. As we know since Heidegger, that which is unconcealed, i.e., which reveals itself, at the same time withdraws itself. Hence Ricoeur's view that truth as a unity is a horizon that man can never reach; a horizon that can only be revealed and resumed in a symbolic language that attempts precisely to say how the last things are by using analogies instead of descriptions. We can then understand this crucial assertion made by Ricoeur:

> The question of revelation is, in the proper sense of the word, a prodigious question (…). I received it today as a challenge that had to be faced so as not to fail the virtue of *Redlichkeit*, the intellectual honesty that Nietzsche denied to the Christians.[11]

It is then the non-theological frame of revelation, as well as the symbolic nature of its manifestation of meaning, that enable Ricoeur to assert that the religious texts belong to the domain of poetic speech in general and to its fundamental metaphoric power. The philosopher explains why this theme of revelation is important today and to what thought it can philosophically give rise. It is in this theme of revelation that the first and the last question of the religious find their closure; it is a huge task for our contemporary world, which, ever since the nominalism of modern times, has grown accustomed to the pure autonomy of a reason that creates everything out of itself.

The concept of the religious thus raises some very important questions: is revelation the absolute opposite of the autonomy we have grown accustomed to in the Western world? Is iconic discourse representative of another kind of rationality that, despite being unscientific, is nevertheless also legitimate? Is it that for us meaning can only come from the logical inference of causality, as science has claimed since the beginning of western modernity? Is not the logic of the lived world marked by

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[10] Daniel Frey, "En marge de l'onto-théologie. Lectures ricoeuriennes de l'Exode", in P. Bühler, D. Frey (Eds.,), *P. Ricoeur, un philosophe lit la Bible. A l'entrecroisement des herméneutiques philosophique et théologique* (Paris: Labor et Fides, 2011), 51.

[11] Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 2,* 197.

symbols, metaphors, hymns, and prophecies that organize praxis in a different way, a way that we should eventually come to respect?

The West, in fact, has been living under the sign of science and of the "wall effect" that the scientific discourse and its illusion of generating autonomy have produced on other forms of organizing the world and the relations that men establish with the gods, with heaven and earth. However, western peoples are discovering today, quite dramatically, that there are other cultures with their own lively and strong core of values that represent "a creative power linked to a tradition, a memory and an archaic embedment"[12] and which, for that very reason, resist to every project of massification.

We understand, at last, that the humankind cannot be reduced to a single cultural style, but rather presents itself under many different closed forms: cultures. We need therefore to accept that our European symbols, utterly secular, do not exhaust the resources of symbolization of what is fundamental–and this is why we absolutely need to open ourselves up to other cultures and religions, and try and translate what appears as plausible from the layer of images and symbols that make up the basic representations of a given people. There's nothing creative about syncretism. Only the hermeneutic effort of translation and dialogue, Ricoeur thinks, can prepare a productive path towards that common ground underlying each culture, each language, or each religion.

In our time, this work is absolutely necessary, given the encounter between Europe with other cultural traditions.[13] That encounter, in fact, has not been in the least pacific, for now "we discover that there is not one culture but cultures, at the very moment we confess the end of a kind of cultural monopoly, illusory or real, we are threatened with destruction by our discovery. Suddenly, it becomes possible that there are only *others*, and that we, ourselves, are just another one among those others.[14] Now, in order to mitigate this situation, one must know how to preserve oneself, i.e., one's own self, and Ricoeur here reminds us \ "only a living culture, faithful to its origins and, at the same time, in a state of creativity at the level of art, of literature, of philosophy, of spirituality, is able to withstand the encounter with other cultures–and not only able to withstand, but also to give a sense to that encounter."[15]

Hermeneutics, insofar as it implies an awareness of our own prejudices and the ethical hospitality of translation, is a good way of learning that we cannot always

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[12] Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures 1. Autour du politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 246.
[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 299-300.
[14] Ibid, 293-294.
[15] Ibid, 298.

be right, without having to relinquish our own culture. It also reminds us that we need to think on symbols and metaphors, that symbols give rise to thought, and that the reflection that has suffered the wall effect of scientific language needs to recharge the direction. We need to return to our Hebraic origin, to our Christian origin, in order to become a valid interlocutor in the great debate of cultures.[16]

In his analysis of the Christian religious that marked the Western world, Ricoeur shows us what we need, above all, is to recover the original concept of revelation, considering that–in spite of Heidegger–it has also been obscured by false debates and by a whole lot of authoritarian rubbish that opposes a dogmatic concept of revelation to a concept of a supposedly self-transparent reason, purportedly master/mistress of itself.

Hermeneutic philosophy seeks precisely to overcome this opposition, in to conquer a concept of revelation and a concept of reason that, without coinciding with one another, are "capable of entering a lively dialectic and of generating together a comprehension of faith."[17] Thus, the first task that Ricoeur's meditation on revelation proposes to undertake is to uncover, behind the doctrines imposed by the religious orthodoxy of a historical community, the original concept of revelation. We may say that, because of these doctrines, the confessional community has been losing the historical dimension of its interpretations and has progressively placed itself under the "tutelage of the fixed statements of the *magisterium*."[18] But this is already a derivative level, which means that we need–especially in our days, marked by the sometimes-heavy shadows of the religious–to go back to the most primary experiences that underlie every theological articulation. The true partner of the philosophy of revelation is not the theologian, says Ricoeur, but rather the believer enlightened by the hermeneutics of the text.

To follow this path, the philosopher warns us, we need to look into philosophy for a concept of autonomy stripped of the arrogance of the traditional conscience. Attaining this new model of truth-revelation demands in fact the recognition of the real dependency of man, of a dependency that does not amount, in any way, to heteronomy.[19] The idea of a conscience that asserts itself, producing its own contents from a zero grade is undeniably the strongest resistance to any idea of revelation. To this idea, the appeal of the text is always seen as an "improper and unacceptable

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16 Ibid, 292-293.
17 Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 3,* 197.
18 Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 2,* 200.
19 Ibid, 238.

claim"[20] that, once accepted, will be a sign of minority, not only in the religious sense but in the general sense of the poetic function of the word.

Only the wager on the anthropology of a cogito mediated by a universe of signs, present in Ricoeur's philosophy since *The Symbolism of Evil*, enables us to understand the constitutional frailty of the *Cogito* devised in Cartesian philosophy and attacked by the hermeneutics of suspicion, namely by Freud. Man does not actually have an immediate awareness of himself. Freud, in his critique of the delusions of consciousness, had already shown that it needs to be "'mediated' by the representations, actions, works and institutions that objectify it."[21]

It is therefore in the context of a philosophy of reflection that is no longer a philosophy of an immediate self-awareness but rather, as Ricoeur proposes, following the footsteps of J. Nabert, an appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be, by means of the works that bear witness on them,[22] that we can understand the meaning of a self-learning process through a universe of signs.

What is the real advantage of this type of approach? According to Ricoeur, it allows us to keep the space in which things manifest themselves, previous to the emergence of the thinking consciousness. We must not forget that Heidegger had already criticized the primacy of the apophantic language and had spoken of language as a space of revelation, in the original sense. The important question that Ricoeur posed both in *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative*, books dedicated to the problem of semantic innovation and to its ontological and ethical consequences, is the following: what type of revelation can be related to those forms of writing we call Poetics? And how does the religious revelation fall within Poetics?

Ricoeur asserts that we know that the concept of revelation, specific to the faith of Israel and, afterwards, to the primitive church, is expressed in a wide variety of forms of discourse, as was already mentioned. The concept of revelation is therefore plural, polysemic, and analogical, which means that it can only be truly attained if we avoid the classical transference of all its contents to the level of enunciation and proposition.[23] The same happens with the appointment of God, which must not be seen as the result of a divine inspiration of the Scriptures, resulting from the sole prominence given to the prophetic genre over the other genres that make up the biblical polyphony.[24]

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[20] Ibid, 233.
[21] Ibid, 250.
[22] Ibid, 251.
[23] Ibid, 229.
[24] Frey, "En marge de l'onto-théologie" 32.

What this emphasis on prophecy produced was the construction of "one uniform theology of the double author, divine and human, in which God is regarded as the main cause and the writer as a (mere) instrumental cause."[25] In this case, there is no respect for the traits of revelation that cannot be reduced to the double voice of the prophet. For this reason, Ricoeur favors the narrative genre, insofar as it does not collide with an autonomy that recognizes the human capacity for letting oneself be called upon, for assembling the story of one's life into a narrative, and it is even less subjective than the inspiration genre. Moreover, the narrative genre shifts the light of revelation from the (inspired) author to the importance of the narrated events. In narrative, as we are told today by linguists and theorists of the narrative speech, the author disappears as if the events were narrating themselves.

All of Ricoeur's endeavors will then develop at the intersection of this hermeneutics of narrative and text, oriented to the space in which things display themselves, as well as to the new self-understanding that man acquires through this revelation. Philosophy can thus see the appeal as non-constraining or as an invitation to heteronomy, for it will be "in the experiences which are more fundamental than all theological articulation" that the French philosopher will seek, at the same time "the traces of a truth capable of expressing itself in terms of manifestation and not of verification,"[26] and the signs "of a self-understanding in which the subject would be divested of the arrogance of consciousness."[27] The aim is to look, in the interpretation of the human experience, for elements that will allow us to understand revelation in the non-religious sense of the word, and this from a double perspective: a) one focused on the space of manifestation of the revealed things; b) and another in the self-understanding attained by man when he lets himself be regulated by the things manifested and said. In fact, since the wall effect of the scientific language of the West, and according to the first angle, "every idea of a revealed word disrupts the idea of an objective truth that is measured by the criteria of empirical verification and falsification;" and, according to the second angle, "the idea of revelation is an attack on the autonomy of the subject."[28]

We must, therefore, give room for things to manifest themselves before we turn to the thinking and talking consciousness, so as to discern a dependency of man that is not a sign of heteronomy. This is what Ricoeur does with his hermeneutic treatment of the space of manifestation of the text. The philosopher warns us that he

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[25] Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 2,* 229.
[26] Ibid, 235.
[27] Ibid, 235.
[28] Ibid, 238.

is neither starting from a phenomenology of perception, as Merleau-Ponty did, nor from the Heideggerian phenomenology of care or concern. Ricoeur starts from the phenomenon of the manifestation of the world through writing or text, restricting himself, in a way, to the world of books, which he does not consider at all a limitation, given the enlargement of our usual nominalistic experience of the world by the book cultures.[29]

Towards a New Dimension of Truth and Meaning

With Ricoeur and in this strand of contemporary philosophy, the notions of meaning and truth are given a new dimension, which, after Heidegger and the determination of *Dasein* as a possible being, breaks with the primacy of the subject, as well as with the primacy of the contingent, the palpable and the positive of singular things, introducing a distance vis-à-vis immediate and daily life, from then on regarded as a symptom of inauthenticity. The main presupposition, since then, is that the meaning of thought or the meaning of life goes far beyond what appears or what the subject reduces to himself. The phenomenological *epochê* had already shown us that the positive, the reign of naturalism, of objectivism and subjectivism, that has marked philosophy since the nominalistic Modernity, has in no way reached the essential.

Given then the separation of the essential meaning of life from the primacy of the referential, descriptive and verifying function of judgement, i.e., from the sentence as a place of truth (S is P), it is the very poetic dimension of language that begins to be valued, after Heidegger, as a discourse that, although not devoid of the referential function, addresses itself to a dimension of reality that is more fundamental than the one regulated by the nominalism of daily language. In fact, the historical and fictional narrative operates in what Ricoeur calls, recapping an expression from Husserl, the imaginative variations.[30] They represent the creative and critical dimension of language that enables the emergence of new possible worlds in this world. Imagination is the key for this function of language; hence the interest of 20th century philosophy for literature, poetics, historical and fictional narrative, as well as for the interpretation of the possible universal represented in them. Narrative really accomplishes what Ricoeur calls the imaginative variations of acting. Nevertheless–and Ricoeur stresses this

[29] Ibid, 239.

[30] Alain Thommasset, "L'imagination dans la pensée de Paul Ricoeur. Fonction poétique du langage et transformation du sujet", *Études théologiques et religieuses*, 80 (2005/4), 532.

point–the mimetic function of the literary can only be achieved through the productive imagination of the reader, which means that we can in this way surpass the traditional thesis according to which revelation violates the objective truth and is an attack on autonomy.

Truth as disclosure and *presupposition*, which Heidegger finds at the root of the traditional concept of truth as adequacy, becomes consistent with the plausible truth–and this is how poetics becomes the place in which a new way of seeing the truth emerges. Poetics expresses the verisimilar universals of the human condition: "We have shown above that the world of the 'poetic' text is a projected world, poetically distanced from the world of everyday reality."[31] Now, isn't the new being, the one that the Bible tells us about, one of these cases of distance, and perhaps its most notable case? Doesn't this new being cut a way through everyday experience, in spite of the apparent closure of the latter? Isn't the force of this new world project a disruptive and breaking force? Shouldn't we say, then, that the reality opened by poetics at the heart of everyday life is another kind of reality, that is, the reality of the possible?

Thus, in theological language, Ricoeur tells us, the expression "the Kingdom of God is approaching" is addressed to our most intimate possibilities, but these are possibilities whose meaning is not immediately at our disposal: Of all the modalities of poetic nature, Ricoeur says, fiction is precisely the privileged instrument of a new description of reality. Poetic language is the one which, more than all the other languages, contributes to what Aristotle, in his considerations on tragedy, called the *mimesis* of praxis. Why? Because the poetic function of language suspends the descriptive function of judgement. In this sense, Aristotle had already shown us that tragedy imitates reality, to the precise extent that it recreates reality through a *mythos (plot)*. Its mimesis is done by means of a *plot* that plays with imagination, i.e., with the place in which man is formed from images that give shape to his desire to be.

The more language proceeds in fiction–for instance, when the poet forges a fable proper to tragedy–the more it says the truth, for it is describing a reality that in a way is too familiar, but under the new traits of fable.[32] The poetic function, by virtue of its unfolded reference, brings about the emergence of an "Atlantis swallowed up by our nets of objects submitted to the sphere of our concern."[33] In this sense, integrated into the whole of a work, the poetic function is revealing, for it preserves the primordial soil of our existence, underlying the world of instrumental concern.

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[31] Paul Ricoeur, "Il y a de vérité en dehors de chez soi". Interview by Frédéric Lenoir, in *L'Express* (23.07.1998).

[32] Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 2,* 243-244.

[33] Ibid, 244.

As such, narrative imagination enlarges the domain of individual capabilities, thus reconfiguring human action in the world. In other words, the effect it has of revealing meaning is precisely at play in the field of human action and its temporal values. As Ricoeur puts it, "we can speak, in this respect, of an ethical imagination that is nourished by narrative imagination."[34] Furthermore, it is by becoming acquainted with narratives that I realize how my actions are connected to others and that I learn to consider myself hypothetically as a suffering being.

Let us now apply the concept of textual world to the biblical texts. "In my view," Ricoeur says, "the religious texts constitute, for a philosophical hermeneutic, a category of poetic texts. They attempt to rewrite the existence in various ways."[35] And Ricoeur adds: "It is, in fact, under the category of *Poetics* that the philosophical analysis finds traces of revelation that can respond or correspond to the non-constraining appeal of the biblical revelation.[36]

Ricoeur explains us, once more, what poetic-narrative means for him: poetry, he says, is the suspension of the descriptive function. And he adds: there are many people, of course, who think that language has no exterior and that it exists only to celebrate itself. But saying this, he remarks, is already yielding to the nominalist and, ultimately, positivist prejudice, according to which only empirical knowledge is objective, because verifiable. "We don't even notice that, by doing this, we are ratifying in an uncritical manner a certain concept of truth defined by the adequacy to a reality of objects subject to the criterion of empirical verification."[37]

It is obvious that language, in its poetic function, suppresses the descriptive reference and, with it, the power of describing the familiar objects of perception, or those which science determines as facts with their norms of truth [as] adequacy. Poetry, therefore, does not increase our operative knowledge; it has, on the contrary, a revealing nature, insofar as it embodies a concept of truth that escapes definition by adequacy, as well as the criteria of falsification and verification.

Thus, "the whole question is in knowing whether this suppression of the first-degree referential function isn't precisely the negative condition for liberating a more primitive and original referential function that should only be said to be of second degree because the speech with a *descriptive* function has usurped the first-degree level of everyday life, and science with it"[38]. And Ricoeur continues: "I am deeply convinced

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[34] Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris, Seuil, 1990), 195.
[35] Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris : Seuil, 1975), 6.
[36] Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 2,* 247.
[37] Ibid, 243.
[38] Ibid, 243.

that poetic language is the original language; "only poetic language can bring back the *belongingness* to an order of things that precedes our ability to oppose those things as subjects in face of objects"[39].

The poetic function doesn't increase then our objective knowledge. It is rather connected to the possibility of emergence of this depth of primordial belongingness, a possibility that can only appear among the ruins of literal meaning. Ricoeur calls this process the living metaphor of poetic speech. The poetic, metaphorical function of the text, as a work, is a revealing one, i.e., it allows us "to see 'as if'." It is revealing because "it lets us see what appears [or what shows itself]. And what is shown is always a practical proposal of a world that I can inhabit."[40] Ricoeur starts, thus, from the poetic function of language to sustain the "revealing scope of the textual world." The power of projection of this world is a power of rupture and of openness–rupture of the everydayness of labor and its trails, and openness to new dimensions, in which the subject is no longer the center, but instead receives his self-understanding from the text.

The Poetic Dimension of Religious Language

To further this thinking about religious language, Ricoeur writes:

> It is then in the poetics of text that the philosophical discourse can find traces of revelation that respond to the non-constricting appeal of the biblical text. Poetic discourse is neither argumentative nor prescriptive, as it often happens with philosophical discourse; it acts instead as a stimulus to the sources of creativity and regeneration of our deepest being.[41]

Furthermore, Ricoeur stresses that the type of poetic discourse that the discourse of faith represents is specified by the "naming of God." It does not add anything to the obligations and interdictions that concern our moral being; it relates rather to the original ability that man was endowed with for entering the domain of moral problems.

As it was already stated, for Ricoeur the biblical message lies at the heart of what we might call, in a broad sense, poetic discourse. The challenge of the religious

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[39] Ibid, 243.

[40] Ibid, 243.

[41] Paul Ricoeur, Ricoeur, "La philosophie et la spécificité du langage religieux", texte on line at www.fondsricoeur.fr

is, above all, poetic, and only after that ethical-hermeneutic. Thus, we must understand that the word *God* is not to be perceived as a philosophical concept, neither in the sense of being, as it was conceived by mediaeval philosophy, nor in the sense given to it by Heidegger. The word *God* says more than the word *being* because it implies the whole context of narratives, prophecies, laws, psalms, etc. To understand the word "God" is to follow its meaning orientation: "By meaning orientation I understand its capacity to reunite the partial significations inscribed in the various partial speeches and to open up a horizon that cannot be limited by the closure of any speech."[42]

It is therefore a regime of extravagance in what concerns the world of facts that the biblical text invites us to follow. Religious language is metaphorical, which means that it serves the purpose of disorienting us vis-à-vis our empirically organized praxis. But it demands a reorientation that implies an interpretation, in order to demand a practical response,[43] built on hope, in spite of our human misery. Hope for what? A hope nourished by "the belief in…" or by trust in the witnesses that have presumably believed in the liberating power exercised by the symbol of Christ–i.e., a power that, according to Ricoeur, appeals to the "courage to be" and to love, christologically understood as the superabundance of the gift vis-à-vis our hosting ability. In this way, Ricoeur distinguishes hosting from a religious symbolism of adherence to a crystallized set of contents and definitions. Rather than adhering to dogmatic contents, we must confide in the beneficial power of the Christological symbols, that is to say, confide in the ability of man to do good, in order to liberate that deeply buried kindness inside of man that evil could not erase.

For Ricoeur, then, one must give up the dream of a super-religion and prevent the violence generated by the fixation on particularities. Religions are like languages: there is a multiplicity of them, but they can, and they should, communicate. In any case, Ricoeur prefers to speak of the different forms of the religious and of a *God with no name* with suspension points. And he adds: "And then, we would have to write *there are countless names for God*, for I think that it is between the unnameable and the profusion of names that the religious, the philosophical, as well as the criticism of the religious by the philosophical and the criticism of the philosophical by the religious, simultaneously work[44].

From the point of view of each believer, it is clear that their belief corresponds to their personal inscription and to an involvement, sometimes intense, in a symbolic

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[42] See Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive.*

[43] Gilbert Vincent, *La religion de Ricoeur* (Paris: Atelier, 2008), 134.

[44] Paul Ricoeur, *L'Unique et le Singulier* (Paris: Alice, 1999), 19.

tradition and in a community practice. Therefore, the decisive question here can only be the one of translating into a particular context, an ability that improves with its exercise as a practical remedy for the non-communication of languages and cultures. Being a man, Ricoeur reminds us, is precisely being able to make this transference to another point of view.

Only translation can prepare the ground for a productive discussion leading to an encounter, for there is no universal language anywhere. We cannot help living in this multiplicity of languages: "The history of humankind will increasingly be a wide explanation in which each civilization will develop its perception of the world in a confrontation with all the other civilizations. Such is, probably, the great task of future generations. No one can really tell what will happen to our civilization once it meets with other civilizations in a way different from the one that is typical to the shock of conquest and domination. But we must admit that this encounter has not yet taken place at the level of a real dialogue."[45]

Ricoeur also thinks that the post-modern religious can play a relevant role in our societies, that is, the role of founding a symbolic system, no longer on the basis of power but of a properly ordered imagination as a source of meaning, that is to say, in a sort of re-enchantment of the world that will enable democracy to extract the symbolic of the religious communities: "Religious people, agnostics, atheists, we can, all together and joining forces, be the co-founders of a modern democracy that, in order to be strong, needs a common system of symbols."[46] But how can this be done? By fostering civic dialogue. And, when asked whether, despite criticizing the theological-political, he thinks that the religious should not abandon the public sphere, Ricoeur answers as follows:

> Exactly. I would also add that one of the aspects of contemporary democracy–besides the symbolic poverty of the tie between the community members–is also the poverty of public debate. What we need, not only in France but in other countries, to strengthen democracy and citizenship, is an enlightening discussion. Every person has not only the right to speak, but also the duty to present the best argument, to listen to the arguments of others, and to look for consensus. We must learn to distinguish what is plausible and what we may consider true. What is plausible is that which can be defended. We must admit that there is plausibility in our contradictor–that he is not a fool. This is what we are learning with Islam. There is one Islam

[45] Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité,* 300.

[46] Ricoeur, "Il y a de vérité en dehors de chez soi", 2.

> of those who kill and here we can do nothing about that. But there is also an enlightened Islam–still a minority–with people that accept the democratic game of discussion. Islam is on the way that Christianity has already made, willingly or not. What it still must achieve in its own tradition is then the end of the theological-political regime.[47]

[47] Ricoeur, "Il y a de vérité en dehors de chez soi", 4.