

Paul Ricoeur's Literary Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis

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Abstract:

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur is one of the most important philosophers of hermeneutics from outside Germany, which is the birthplace of philosophical hermeneutics. The roots of philosophical hermeneutics go back to medieval religious hermeneutics that was devised to systemize the interpretation of the Holy Bible. This religious hermeneutics revolves around what is known as the fourfold senses of the texts of the Scriptures. This means that the text has more than one sense: the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical. In addition, according to this hermeneutics, each reader can come out with a meaning of the text which s/he can relate to her/his here and now. The hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur is greatly influenced by medieval religious hermeneutics as it also revolves around texts with multiple meanings, i.e. symbolic texts. In his theory, Ricoeur concentrates on the ontological dimension of language which turns the text into a mirror in which the reader can see her/himself and understand her/his being and world. Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, which can be applied to literary texts,

can be described as a reader-oriented critical theory. It is the reader who creates the meaning of the text after freeing it from its author and all that in view of which it was written. It is also the reader who understands her/himself and her/his world while trying to understand the text.

Keywords:

Paul Ricoeur – Hermeneutics – Biblical Exegesis – Ontology – Reader-oriented theory

المُلخَص،

الفيلسوف الفرنسي بول ريكور (Paul Ricoeur) هو أحد أهم فلاسفة الهرمينوطيقا من خارج مدرسة فرانكفورت (The Frankfurt School) في ألمانيا التي هي منشأ الهرمينوطيقا الفلسفية. تطورت الهرمينوطيقا الفلسفية عن الهرمينوطيقا الدينية للعصور الوسطى والتي وُضعت خصيصاً لتقنين كيفية تفسير الكتاب المقدس. تتمحور هذه الهرمينوطيقا حول ما يُعرف بأربعة مستويات المعنى للنص أي إمكانية إفصاح النص الواحد عن أكثر من معنى على أربعة مستويات هي المستوي الحرفي والروحي والأخلاقي والأخروي. كما تسمح هذه الهرمينوطيقا الدينية بوجود أكثر من معنى للنص ينشئه القارئ عندما يحاول فهم النص بالارتباط بحاضره وزمانه. ترتبط هرمينوطيقا ريكور ارتباطاً وثيقاً بهذه الهرمينوطيقا الدينية حيث تتمحور بالمثل حول النصوص متعددة المعاني أي النصوص الرمزية. يُعرف ريكور الهرمينوطيقا بأنها فهم للرموز، كما يركز باعتباره فيلسوفاً على البعد الانطولوجي للغة والذي يجعل من النص المكتوب مرآة يري القارئ فيها نفسه ويفهم طبيعة وجوده وطبيعة عالمه. يمكن القول بأن نظرية الهرمينوطيقا عند ريكور – والتي يمكن تطبيقها كنظرية نقدية لفهم النصوص الأدبية – هي نظرية تتمحور حول قارئ النص، فهو الذي ينشئ معنى النص بعد أن تحرر من كاتبه ومن كل ما أحاط بكتابته من ملابسات، وهو الذي يفهم ذاته وعالمه عندما يتصدى لفهم النص.

الكلمات الدالة:

بول ريكور - الهرمينوطيقا - تفسير الكتاب المقدس - الأنطولوجيا - نظرية استجابة وتلقي القارئ

Introduction

The theory of hermeneutics was born in the cradle of the sacred as it was originally devised to systemize the interpretation of the Holy Bible. It then traveled a long philosophical route at the hands of a group of German Philosophers in which the sacred disappeared into the philosophical. At the hands of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), however, the sacred is brought once more to the heart of the scene and is engrafted onto the philosophical. This engrafting sprouted a textual hermeneutics that is relevant to literary criticism. What is more, Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, which can also be textually applied to works of literature, especially those believed to be symbolic, is built on his analysis of the critique of religion proposed by Freud, Nietzsche and Marx whom he calls the "masters of suspicion" (Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* 33). This paper attempts to show that Ricoeur's theory of interpretation owes a lot to medieval exegesis of the Scriptures. It sheds light first on the meaning of hermeneutics and its roots. It then explains the hermeneutic question in Christianity and the rules devised to answer that question. Finally, it explains the different aspects of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory.

The Meaning of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is defined as both the rules of understanding texts and the science of understanding in and of itself. As to the first meaning, Paul Ricoeur defines it as "the rules that preside over an exegesis, that is, over the interpretation of a particular text" (*Freud and Philosophy* 8). As to the second, Wilhelm Dilthey argues in his essay "The Rise of Hermeneutics" that the codification of such rules "was discovered in the analysis of Understanding itself" (234). In other words, the study – or rather the philosophical study – of the nature and the mechanism of "Understanding" *per se* helped producing a theoretical basis for interpreting texts. Hermeneutics then is both practice and methodology. In his colossal work *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Milton Terry terms practical hermeneutics "special" and methodical hermeneutics "general."

Special Hermeneutics ... is a science practical and almost empirical, and searches after rules and solutions; while General Hermeneutics is methodical and philosophical, and searches for principles and methods (17).

Hermeneutics then is an applied science/art that provides us with the how-tools of 'Understanding.' It is a handbook that needs to be followed when setting about to understand a text. At the same time, it explains the nature of understanding, showing how it takes place.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889- 1976), one of the key figures in the field of hermeneutics, notices in his *On the Way to Language* that "The noun *hermeneus* is referable to the name of the god Hermes by a playful thinking that is more persuasive than the rigor of science" (29). Heidegger believes that there is a relation between the Greek word for "interpretation" and the Greek god Hermes, if not etymologically, then functionally. In Greek mythology, Hermes is the messenger of the gods. He works between two worlds, that of the gods and that of the humans. His function is to "transmute" the words of the gods which are above human understanding and foreign to them "into a form that human intelligence can grasp" (Palmer 13). In doing so, he performs a three-dimensional operation. First, he announces the message or *says* it aloud. Second, he *explains* the message and thus he is finally able to *translate* the foreign words of the gods into the intelligible language of humans. What Richard Palmer terms as the "Hermes process" of mediating and message bringing (14) reflects – as he also explains – the three different old meanings or usages of the words "*herméneuein*" and "*herméneia*" in Greek. These are "to say," "to explain" and "to translate." In these three cases "something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensible ... brought to understanding ... is interpreted" (Palmer 14).

Explanation and translation can be grasped as acts of interpretation. However, does the "saying" of something imply the same act? Palmer

points out that the reading aloud of written words is not a passive process "like a phonograph playing a record" (16), but rather a creative process, "a performance like that of a pianist interpreting a piece of music" (16). In other words, one puts her/his understanding of a given text in the way s/he reads it aloud. The enunciation and the intonation of reading tell how the reader understands the text.

Based on the above, the word "hermeneutics," in both its old and modern philosophical sense, revolves around understanding and interpretation. Understanding that once took place as a matter of course has been philosophically scrutinized to show how it occurs and accordingly what rules to follow in order to ensure right understanding. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), one of the early German philosophers of hermeneutics, was of the opinion that it is misunderstanding rather than understanding that "occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point" (109-110). Other German philosophers, such as, Dilthey, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) presented different theories of the nature of understanding, showing that it is both an epistemological and ontological process. Each of them proposed a method of interpretation to ensure right understanding of both written texts and man's being in the world.

The Roots of Hermeneutics:

As hermeneutics "the word" is traced back to the Greek messenger-god Hermes, hermeneutics "the theory" is traced back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle and his *Peri Hermêneias* (*On Hermeneutics* or *On Interpretation*). This is because in this treatise, Aristotle touches upon the notions of meaning and understanding by discussing how the meaning of a statement can be logically understood. Since a statement is made through language, he proceeds when nouns and verbs are combined they produce sentences that can be either true or false. For him, the sentence in the totality of its grammatical elements [the subject, the copula and the predicate] is the locus of meaning. However, it is important to understand that "meaning" for Aristotle is limited to the notion of truth and falsity. He defines truth and falsity as follows: "to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true"; and "to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false" (Ross 2288). In other words, if what is said confirms to the reality of the thing spoken of, it is true, otherwise, it is false. Accordingly, Aristotle confines his study to declarative propositions because they are the only type of sentence that have in them either truth or falsity:

Every sentence has meaning ... Yet every sentence is not a proposition; only such are propositions as have in them either truth or falsity. Thus a prayer is a sentence, but is neither true nor false. Let us therefore dismiss all other types of sentence but the proposition, for this last concerns our present inquiry, whereas the investigation of

the others belongs rather to the study of rhetoric or of poetry (Ross50).

Some scholars and researchers, however, refuse to incorporate Aristotle's *Peri Hermêneias* in the hermeneutic lineage. Palmer argues that hermeneutics in the Aristotelian sense is the "operation of the mind in making statements which have to do with the truth and falsity of a thing" (21). Jean Grondin notices that this is hardly interpretation as we understand it and that Aristotle's study simply deals with "the basic elements that constitute a sentence" (21). Ricoeur proposes a rather lengthy refutation of Aristotle's treatise as one of the historical roots of hermeneutics in his *Freud and Philosophy*. He argues that:

The connection with the Aristotelian interpretation seems purely verbal: the word itself figures only in the title; what is more, it designates not a science dealing with signification but signification itself, that of nouns, verbs, propositions and discourse in general (21).

Ricoeur, as mentioned earlier, defines hermeneutics as the rules that preside over the exegesis of a text. The notion of signification as proposed by Aristotle "requires univocity of meaning ... Not to have one meaning is to have no meaning ... communication between men is possible only if words have a meaning, i.e. one meaning" (Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* 23). For Aristotle, to signify is "to say something of something" and the proposition should indicate a single fact. This univocity, according to Ricoeur, blocks the way to a hermeneutics of

double-meaning, i.e. it blocks the way to his version of hermeneutics, which revolves, primarily, around the notion of symbolism.

As opposed to the conflicting opinions concerning the relation between Aristotle and hermeneutics, there seems to be an agreement that hermeneutics, in its sense as rules devised for the interpretation of texts, started with attempts to systemize the interpretation of the Holy Bible. Ricoeur argues that: "the problem of hermeneutics has to a great extent been constituted within the boundaries of the interpretation of Holy Scripture" (*Freud and Philosophy* 24). Palmer, too, is of the same mind:

The oldest and probably still the most widespread understanding of the word "hermeneutics" refers to the principles of Biblical interpretation. There is historical justification for this definition, since the word came into modern use precisely as the need arose for books setting forth the rules for proper exegesis for Scripture (34).

This means that hermeneutics did not start as a philosophical theory but rather as a group of rules that preside over the exegesis of texts. It started at the hands of early and medieval church fathers as rules devised especially for the understanding of the Scriptures.

The Hermeneutic Problem in Christianity:

The question now is: what gave rise to a hermeneutic problem in Christianity? According to Ricoeur, when there is a detour of understanding and exegesis, there is a hermeneutic problem. In

Christianity, there are two detours. The first has to do with the relationship between the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). The second has to do with the relationship between the NT and the question of existence. He observes that:

The hermeneutic problem first arose from a question which occupied the first Christian generations and which held the fore even to the time of the Reformation. This question: what is the relation between the two Testaments or between the two Covenants? Here the problem of allegory in the Christian sense was constituted. Indeed, the Christ-event is hermeneutically related to all of Judaic Scripture in the sense that it interprets this Scripture. Hence, before it can be interpreted itself — and there is our hermeneutic problem — the Christ-event is already an interpretation of a preexisting Scripture (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 382).

The Christian Bible consists of the OT (which is the sacred scripture of the Jews) and the NT (which consists of the Gospels, the Acts of the apostles, the epistles of Paul and other disciples, and the Book of Revelation). The latter proclaims Jesus Christ as the Messiah around whom the prophecies of the OT revolve. In this sense, it is understood as a fulfillment and thus as an interpretation of the OT. In other words, the kerygma of the NT, i.e. the message it proclaims, led to a rereading of the OT and this rereading is the NT itself. Hence, in the words of Ricoeur, "there is hermeneutics in the Christian order because the kerygma is the rereading of an ancient Scripture" (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 383)

This is the first detour. The OT is not directly understood in its literal – historical sense. Rather, it is spiritually interpreted and reread in the light of the NT.

This rereading gave rise to the concept of allegory and that of the fourfold senses of the Bible. The literal historical meaning of the OT is spiritually understood in the light of the NT. The first example of such understanding can be found in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, chapter 4, verses 21-26⁽¹⁾. In these verses, Paul speaks of Abraham's two wives, Hagar and Sarah as follows:

These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai ... this is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem ... But the Jerusalem that is above ... is our mother.

The OT historical fact that Abraham was married to Hagar and Sarah is interpreted here spiritually or figuratively. Hagar represents the old covenant and the earthly Jerusalem (which stands for the earthly blessings God endowed the Hebrews with, according to His covenant with them), and Sarah represents the new covenant and the heavenly Jerusalem (that is all heavenly and spiritual blessings those who believe in Christ will enjoy). This spiritual or allegorical understanding was later developed by medieval church fathers into what is known as the fourfold senses of the Bible: historical, allegorical, moral and anagogical. Each

text has a literal or historical meaning beneath which an allegorical or a spiritual meaning is hidden. This allegorical meaning can be applied to the morals of the reader as it is relevant to her/his "here and now." The text may also have a future sense by telling us something about end times. This is the anagogic sense. For example, commenting on Psalm 114: 2, which reads: "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his domination," Dante writes:

If we consider the letter alone, the departure of the children of Israel in the time of Moses is signified; if the allegory, our redemption accomplished in Christ is signified; if the moral meaning, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of the sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the departure of the sanctified soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified (qtd. in Wimsatt 24).

Dante terms the fourfold senses of the Bible "the allegory of theologians." Interestingly enough, he wanted his *Divine Comedy* to be understood in the same fourfold manner. In other words, he wanted his work of literature to be interpreted in the light of Biblical hermeneutics:

When Beatrice appears to Dante in Purgatory, one may find that she has a fourfold meaning. She is first of all literally herself, sent by the Virgin to assist her servant Dante to his salvation. Beyond that, one may say that on the allegorical level, she represents Christ incarnate

come to save mankind; that tropologically or morally she is Revelation offering enlightenment to Christian man; and that anagogically ... she stands for the risen Christ who delivered the just from Hell (Wimsatt 24).

Ricoeur makes an interesting comment on the moral sense where he speaks of the text as a mirror in front of which one understands her/himself. With this concept of the text, he introduces a new definition of hermeneutics as "the very deciphering of life in the mirror of the text." His words are worthy of being quoted at length for the significance it has for Ricoeur's interpretation theory:

Now among the "four meanings" of Scripture, the Middle Ages made a place for the "moral meaning," which marks the application of the allegorical meaning to ourselves and our morals. The "moral meaning" shows that hermeneutics is much more than exegesis in the narrow sense. Hermeneutics is the very deciphering of life in the mirror of the text. Although the function of allegory is to manifest the newness of the Gospel in the oldness of the letter, this newness vanishes if it is not a daily newness, if it is not new *hic et nunc*. Actually, the function of the moral sense is not to draw morals from Scripture at all, to moralize history, but to assure the correspondence between the Christ-event and the inner man. It is a matter of interiorizing the spiritual meaning, of actualizing it, as Saint Bernard says, of showing that it extends *hodie usque ad nos*, "even to us today." That is why the true role of moral meaning comes after

allegory. This correspondence between allegorical meaning and our existence is well expressed by the metaphor of the mirror. It is a matter of deciphering our existence according to its conformity with Christ. We can still speak of interpretation because, on the one hand, the mystery contained in the book is made explicit in our experience and its actuality is confirmed here, and because, on the other hand, we understand ourselves in the mirror of the word. The relation between the text and the mirror — *liber et speculum* — is basic to hermeneutics (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 385-386).

The moral sense of a scriptural text does not mean to extract moral lessons from the text. It rather means to relate the ancient text of the Scripture, which is historically separated from the reader, to her/his here and now. The text is not simply a written document. It is also a mirror. Accordingly, hermeneutics is not simply exegesis. It is also seeing one's self in a mirror. In other words, the reader does not simply try to understand what the text says, s/he rather makes it speak to her/him personally and tries to understand her/his existence through understanding the text. S/he actualizes the spiritual meaning of the text by interiorizing it, i.e. by making it speak to her/his inner self. This is the "mutual interpretation of Scripture and existence" (Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* 384).

Relating the text to one's own existence is the core of the second aspect of the hermeneutic question in Christianity or the second detour of

understanding. This detour concerns the interpretation of the NT. The NT is not simply a reinterpretation of the OT. It is in itself a text to be interpreted. Yet again, it is not directly interpreted. It is rather understood through the detour of human existence. Ricoeur argues that Saint Paul, in his epistle to the Romans 6: 6- 11⁽²⁾:

invites the hearer of the word to decipher the movement of his own existence in the light of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. Hence, the death of the old man and the birth of the new creature are understood under the sign of the Cross and the Paschal victory. But their hermeneutic relation has double meaning. Death and resurrection receive a new interpretation through the detour of this exegesis of human existence. The "hermeneutic circle" is already there, between the meaning of Christ and the meaning of existence which mutually decipher each other (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 384).

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not simply understood as part of the Christ-event. They are rather understood as the death of the "old man" i.e. the body of sin and the resurrection of the "new creature" i.e. the new nature that the one who believes in Christ acquires. In other words, the death and resurrection of Jesus are understood through the existence of the believer. Still, this existence is understood through them as fact, hence the hermeneutic circle and the mutual deciphering.

These two hermeneutic questions were dealt with in the writings of medieval and patristic Church Fathers. However, Saint Augustine of Hippo can be said to be the first one to produce a handbook on hermeneutics to systematize the interpretation of the Scriptures. He felt the need for devising clear rules for such a process, especially that "in his time, divergent interpretations of difficult scriptural passages fragmented the Church into competing sects" (Morton 3). There were two competing schools of interpretation in the patristic age: the school of Antioch in Syria, and the school of Alexandria in Egypt. The former, led by Diodore of Tarsus encouraged literal-historical interpretation of the Bible while the latter, led by Origen of Alexandria, favored allegorical-spiritual interpretation.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine shows that both methods of interpretation are needed. The decisive factor is to be able to decide whether the text in question is literal or figurative. Therefore, he laid down rules that may help the reader of the Holy Bible to distinguish between literal and figurative passages. He also warned the reader not to interpret the literal figuratively or the figurative literally:

In the first place, we must beware of taking a figurative expression literally. For the saying of the apostle applies in this case too: "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." For when what is said figuratively is taken as if it were said literally, it is understood in a

carnal manner ... we must also pay heed ... not to take a literal form of speech as if it were figurative (85-86).

However, there is more to Augustine's hermeneutics than this language-related factor. This can be traced in his *Confessions* and it has to do with his distinction between the meaning that the author intends and that which the reader can discover in the text apart from its author. In his commentary on the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, Augustine wrote:

Let me hear and understand the meaning of the words: In the Beginning you made heaven and earth. Moses wrote these words. He wrote them and passed on into your presence ... if he were here, I would lay hold of him and in your name I would beg and beseech him to explain these words to me (256).

Augustine laments the death of the author of Genesis for if he had been there, he would have asked him to explain the meaning he intended by the words he wrote. How easier it would be to understand the text in that case! However, the death of the author opened up a new possibility – that of various interpretations:

Although I hear people say "Moses meant this" or "Moses meant that," I think it more truly religious to say "Why should he not have had both meanings in mind, if both are true? And if others see in the same words a third, or a fourth, or any number of true meanings, why

should we not believe that Moses saw them all? There is only one God, who caused Moses to write the Holy Scriptures in the way best suited to the minds of great numbers of men who would all see truths in them, though not the same truths in each case" (308).

It is true that the author is dead and that the reader cannot delve deep into his mind to understand his intention. Still, he has the text that speaks to her/him. Accordingly, each reader can come up with his own interpretation.

Ricoeur's Interpretation Theory:

Ricoeur did not incorporate his theory in just one work. It is rather to be sought and traced in many of his books and essays. In doing so, his reader will come across a vast diversity of disciplines. This makes reading Ricoeur a difficult task. A reader – interested in literary criticism but – with no or little background on philosophy will have a hard time understanding him. Lewis S. Mudge forcefully observes in his introduction to Ricoeur's *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*: "Woe to the reader who does not at first recognize the set of concerns packed into such a phrase as a post-Hegelian interpretation of Kant" (3).

To make the task of reading Ricoeur an easy one, his hermeneutics is to be traced in his concepts of language, text, symbol, and ideology. Only the thread that leads to the hermeneutics of suspicion, which is the essence of his theory, will be followed. Out of Ricoeur's concept of

language emerges a theory of text. This theory poses "a question of the plurivocity belonging to full works of discourse, such as poems, narratives, and essays" (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* xi). Here, the symbol appears in the horizon as the carrier of this multiplicity of meaning. The attitude of the interpreter towards the symbolic is either one of faith or suspicion. The object of faith and suspicion here is not religion – despite the fact that the whole theory of suspicion is based on a critique of religion – but rather language itself. It is important at this point to distinguish between the language of an ideological discourse and a literary one to see whether the interpreter walks straightforward towards rendering the text ideologically or move in the circle of "believe to understand, understand to believe" (Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* 28).

The Ontological Dimension of Language:

As a philosopher, Ricoeur starts his theory of hermeneutics with a philosophical question *par excellence* concerning human existence. The notion of human existence occupies a central place in the philosophical tradition. Many philosophers attempted to enter the domain of human existence to explain and analyze its essence and nature through different perspectives. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* lists many names who ventured into this subject, such as Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Gottlob Frege, and Bertrand Russell. Descartes, for example, proposed the *Cogito*: "I think, therefore I am." The perspective that Ricoeur selected, however, is that of interpretation. His

maxim here may be formulated as: I interpret, therefore I am. As a matter of course, our whole life is a continuous process of interpretation. We exist "by the grace of interpretation" (Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* 27). As a philosopher, once more, Ricoeur theorizes how this natural process takes place to show that interpretation is not simply an epistemological process but rather an ontological one. In other words, it is not simply a mode of knowledge but rather a mode of being. It is not simply about reconstructing the meaning of a text, but rather about understanding one's self and figuring out one's own existence through the interpretation of texts.

Ricoeur starts his hermeneutical analysis of existence, or his ontology of understanding, with an analysis of language. If the question is how man exists through understanding, then language, which is the "level on which understanding takes place" (Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations* 10), should be the point of departure. Coupled with this is the fact that man "is no more than language" (Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations* 265) and that "it is first of all and always in language that all ontic or ontological understanding arrives at its expression" (Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations* 11). The whole world came into being by a word: "God said: let there be" and there was the heaven and the earth and all things in them (the *Book of Genesis*). Language is also the medium we use to proclaim our existence. We bring our mute being with all its experiences into language to give it flesh. Ricoeur stresses this ontological dimension of language in both his *Freud and Philosophy* and *Interpretation Theory*

where he speaks of "the relation between language and the ontological condition of being in the world" (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 20). In the former, he writes:

To be sure, the Psalm says: "The heavens tell the glory of God." But the heavens do not speak; or rather they speak through the prophets ... There must always be a word to take up the world and turn it into hierophany (16).

As much as the sacred needs language to be proclaimed and thus become part of "being in the world," our earthly being needs it. According to Ricoeur in *Interpretation Theory*:

Language is not a world of its own. It is not even a world. But because we are in the world, because we are affected by situations . . . we have something to say, we have experience to bring to language. This notion of bringing experience to language is the ontological condition of reference (20–21).

We see here a reciprocal relationship between language and our being in the world. Without our experiences, language has nothing to say and without language, our existence is not concrete. It is as if we resurrect language to concretize and solidify our existence. The referential function of language – the fact that it refers back to us, our world and our being in the world – is its ontological condition.

Ricoeur stresses here his stance against the structuralist concept of language. Unlike the advocates of structuralism, he does not believe in language as "a self-sufficient system of inner relationships" but rather as discourse that opens up language to external realities and turns it into a form of life. He believes that structuralism sent language into an "exile" as it concentrates on it as structure and system. As a result, language no longer appears as a mediation between minds and things. It constitutes a world of its own, within which each item only refers to other items of the same system ... In a word, language is no longer treated as "a form of life" ... but as a self-sufficient system of inner relationships (*Interpretation Theory* 6).

Ricoeur sees language as a "form of life," as it always refers to something out there in the world, and not as a dead self-enclosed structure that has no relation to external realities. He is mainly concerned with its use and function rather than with its system and structure. He is of the opinion that structural linguistics which gives priority to the general collective system or code of language ("*langue*") over the individual message produced according to this code ("*parole*") causes the death of language as discourse:

With the word "structure" and "system" a new problematic emerges which tends, at least initially, to postpone, if not cancel, the problem of discourse, which is condemned to recede from the forefront of concern and become a residual problem. If discourse remains

problematic for us today, it is because the main achievements of linguistics concern language as structure and system and not as used. Our task therefore will be to rescue discourse from its marginal and precarious exile (*Interpretation Theory* 2).

If language as discourse is dead, then the “acting speaking” subject – whose existence is the philosophical-hermeneutical question to be answered – is read out of the field of language. In an article entitled “From Existentialism to the Philosophy of Language,” Ricoeur writes that “The primacy of subjectivity which was so strongly emphasized by existentialism is overthrown by this displacement of analysis from the level of the subject's intentions to the level of linguistic and semiotic structures” (93). Structuralism, in addition, does not recognize language as “a mediation through which, and by means of which, we are directed toward reality” (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 251) – which means that it does away with the referential function of language outside itself, that is, its ontological dimension.

Ricoeur's Concept of Text:

Ricoeur defines hermeneutics as “the rules that preside over an exegesis, that is, over the interpretation of a particular text.” In this definition, exegesis or interpretation is limited to texts. Therefore, in order to understand the rules Ricoeur proposes for understanding, his concept of a text should be highlighted. Texts or “any discourse fixed by writing” (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 145) are what

Ricoeur focuses on in his interpretation theory, which gives primacy to the ontological function of language. There are two important elements in Ricoeur's definition of a text; namely, discourse and fixation by writing. As for the first element, Ricoeur proposes a theory of language as discourse through which he attempts to resurrect language from its structural death. In this theory, he argues that discourse is the event of language, and differentiates between utterer's and utterance meaning: "noetic and noematic." He describes what he calls the world of the text, and explains how one can understand her/himself in front of the text.

Ricoeur's theory of language as discourse can be summarized in his two maxims: "discourse is the event of language" and "if all discourse is actualized as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning" (*Interpretation Theory* 12). According to Ricoeur, it is true that the code is universal and that the message is individual and temporal, yet it is the message that gives actuality to the code:

If it is true that only the message has a temporal existence, an existence in duration and succession, the synchronistic aspect of the code putting the system outside of successive time, then the temporal existence of the message testifies to its actuality. The system in fact does not exist. It only has a virtual existence. Only the message gives actuality to language, and discourse grounds the very existence of language since only the discrete and each time unique acts of discourse actualize the code (*Interpretation Theory* 9).

The existence of the system or the code is not real because it is an existence outside time. The system does not take place in time and so its existence is virtual. The existence of the message, however, is real because the message is produced in time. This real, yet temporal, existence actualizes the code. In other words, it is the message produced in time that makes us realize the existence of the system or the code. It is the message that gives life to the system. Thus, the message is in fact much more important than the code. The temporality of message is the first aspect that makes of it an event. "What are we to understand by event?" asks Ricoeur in *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*. His answer comes as follows:

To say that discourse is an event is to say, first, that discourse is realized temporally and in the present, whereas the system of language is virtual and outside time ... Moreover, whereas language has no subject insofar as the question 'who speaks?' does not apply at this level, discourse refers back to the speaker by means of a complex set of indicators, such as personal pronouns The event consists in the fact that someone speaks, someone expresses himself in taking up speech. Discourse is an event in yet a third way: the signs of language refer only to other signs in the interior of the same system so that language no more has a world than it has a time and a subject, whereas discourse is always about something. Discourse refers to a world which it claims to describe, express or represent (133).

Discourse is an event as far as it has a temporal existence that actualizes the code, has a speaker, refers to something, and is addressed to someone. Ricoeur wants to resurrect language from its structural death by turning the virtual, abstract existence of *langue* into a real existence of a living *event* of communication where someone says something about something to someone else.

When discourse is thus actualized as an event, it gives rise to another problem that is of meaning; what do we to understand: the meaning of the utterance or the meaning intended by the utterer? Ricoeur offers the following answer:

The concept of meaning allows two interpretations which reflect the main dialectic between event and meaning. To mean is both what the speaker means, i.e. what he intends to say, and what the sentence means, i.e. what the conjunction between the identification function and the predicative function yields. Meaning, in other words, is both noetic and noematic. The event is somebody speaking. In this sense, the system or code is anonymous to the extent that it is merely virtual. Languages do not speak, people do. But the propositional side of the self reference of discourse must not be overlooked if the utterer's meaning is not to be reduced to a mere psychological intention (*Interpretation Theory* 12).

Based on his rejection of the structural model, Ricoeur argues that: "languages do not speak, people do." Nevertheless, if we concentrate on the "noetic" function of the discourse, that is, on the utterer's intention, or on the event itself, we will reduce the process of understanding to a mere psychological examination of the mind of the utterer. The solution is to look for the meaning of the utterance because by paying attention to the grammatical devices of self-reference "no mental entity is to be hypothesized or hypostasized. The utterance meaning points back to its utterer's meaning thanks to the self-reference of discourse to itself as an event" (*Interpretation Theory* 13).

Based on the above, it is noticed that Ricoeur first gives priority to message over code. Then he replaces the duality of *langue* and *parole* with that of event and meaning, giving priority to meaning, that is the utterance meaning. In effect, it is this new duality or dialectic that forms the starting point of the second element of his definition of a text, that is the fixation by writing. It is important to realize first that what is fixed by writing is not the fleeting event but rather the meaning. He then proceeds to connect the written and the spoken:

Is this to say that discourse has to be pronounced initially in a physical or mental form? That all writing was initially, at least in a potential way, speaking? In short what is the relation of text to speech? (*Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 145).

What is written needs not to be said first. It is written because it cannot be said in the first place and so instead of a dialogue taking place between a speaker and a listener who share a common situation, there is the act of reading in which the text and the reader are the only sides of the equation. The fixation by writing freed the text from its author, its psycho-sociological condition of production, and from all that in view of which the text was written:

Writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author. What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies ... Thanks to writing the world of the text may explode the world of the author (*Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 139).

Thus emancipated from its author and from all that in view of which it was produced, the written text:

opens itself up to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different socio-cultural conditions. In short, the text must be able from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view to "decontextualise" itself in such a way that it can be "recontextualised" in a new situation as accomplished precisely by the act of reading (*Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 139).

If we are content that the text becomes open to an unlimited interpretations, Ricoeur still asks:

If we can no longer define hermeneutics in terms of the search of the psychological intentions of another person which are concealed behind the text, and if we do not want to reduce interpretation to the dismantling of structures, then what remains to be interpreted? I shall say: to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text (*Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 141).

The World in front of the Text: Self-Understanding:

Ricoeur here takes us back to his ontology of language and brings with it his second definition of hermeneutics, which he introduced in his above-mentioned comment on the moral sense of the Scriptures, namely, "the very deciphering of life in the mirror of the text." There are two recurrent terms in Ricoeur's interpretation theory that should be understood in this regard, namely, distanciation and appropriation. The fixation of discourse by writing created a distance between the meaning indented by the author and that of the text. This distanciation gave birth to the world of the text in which readers search for meaning. Readers depart from the world behind the text – that is the intention of the author and all that in view of which the text was produced – to dwell in the world of the text. This world, however, is not the reality they live. It is true that it refers back to this reality. Still, there is a distance between the real world and the world proposed by the text. This is the second type of

distanciation. In addition, there is a third distance between the reader and the meaning of the text. The reader can overcome this distance through appropriation, by making this meaning her/his own. However, this does not mean to abolish all distances by imposing her/his understanding on the text. It rather means to understand the text "at and through distance" and receive from it what Ricoeur calls an "enlarged self."

What I appropriate is a proposed world. The latter is not behind the text, as a hidden intention would be, but in front of it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is to understand oneself in front of the text. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed (*Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 143).

As a philosopher of detours (Blundell 61), Ricoeur argues that we do not understand ourselves directly, through intuitive knowledge, but only through the "long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works" (*Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 143). Literary texts bring to language proposed experiences, feelings and selves in front of which we can understand our own beings by interiorizing them, by making them speak to our inner selves. We expose ourselves to the text and the text itself exposes to us its proposed world from which we receive an

enlarged self. This is very much like the "mutual interpretation of Scripture and existence" (Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* 384).

The words of C. S. Lewis in his *An Experiment in Criticism*, about the experience of reading great literature, may express well what Ricoeur means by receiving an enlarged self from the text:

In reading great literature, I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself, and am never more myself than when I do (141).

The proposed world of the text presents to the reader proposed selves and experiences which the reader appropriates and makes her/his own. Through appropriation, the reader adds these textual selves and experiences to her/his own self and experience. The result is an enlarged self that combines her/his real self in addition to the proposed ones. At the hermeneutical moment of appropriation that expresses, reflects and interprets the reader's inner existence and existence in the world, s/he is truly her/himself despite the fact that s/he transcends her/himself to achieve this moment.

The Hermeneutics of Symbols: Suspicion and Faith:

What has been discussed so far of Ricoeur's interpretation theory can be considered as an introduction to the core of his hermeneutics, namely,

symbolism. Symbols, for Ricoeur are "the privileged theme of the hermeneutic field" (*Freud and Philosophy* 8). They represent the fullness of language with its ontological aspect and they are the widest gateway to self-understanding. In his essay "Hermeneutics and Existence," he interrelates symbolism and hermeneutics as follows:

I define "symbol" as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first ... Interpretation, we will say, is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning of the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal sense...Symbol and interpretation thus become correlative concepts; there is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that the plurality of meanings is made manifest (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 12-13).

Symbols require hermeneutics because they are not directly understood and because they mean more than what they say. Their surplus of meaning needs to be interpreted. Interpretation in relation to symbols is to dig deep beneath the surface literal meaning to discover the indirect hidden meaning. "To interpret is to understand double meaning" (*Freud and Philosophy* 8).

The question now is how the indirect, secondary and figurative meaning of the symbol is understood? Ricoeur makes it clear that as far as the interpretation of symbols is concerned: "there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories" (*Freud and Philosophy* 26-27). This is because it is "still undecided whether double meaning is dissimulation or revelation" (*Freud and Philosophy* 26). A symbol with a double meaning is believed to be either a dissimulation of meaning or a gateway to a sacred meaning. These two attitudes or two understandings of the function of the symbol created two hermeneutics: "according to the one pole, hermeneutics is understood as manifestation and restoration of meaning ... according to the other pole, it is understood as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion" (*Freud and Philosophy* 27). The hermeneutics of manifestation and that of demystification are in effect the hermeneutics of faith and suspicion. The first is practiced by the phenomenology of religion and the second by psychoanalysis.

When approaching a symbol, the phenomenology of religion does not worry itself about the intentions behind creating that symbol. It rather sets its eyes on the object contained or hidden within the symbol, believing that this object wants to be revealed. However, its faith in language is not a blind or a naïve faith but "a rational faith, for it interprets" (*Freud and Philosophy* 28). And when it interprets, it travels the hermeneutic circle of "believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe" (*Freud and Philosophy* 28). It believes that there is a

"truth" in symbols and that the analogy between the apparent primary meaning of the symbol and its latent deeper meaning is an "innocent analogical relationship" (*Freud and Philosophy* 17).

The hermeneutics of suspicion, however, reduces symbols by explaining their function rather than describing their object as it shows itself. Ricoeur notices that: "one reduces by explaining through causes (psychological, social, etc.), through genesis (individual, historical, etc.), through function (affective, ideological, etc.)" (*Freud and Philosophy* 28). It is this mechanism of reduction which Freud, Nietzsche and Marx, the three masters of suspicion as Ricoeur calls them, adopted in their critique of religion, each from the point of view of his field of study. In this critique, which is founded upon the concept of "false consciousness," they do not attack the object or the beliefs of religion but rather its motives or function. With them, as Ricoeur explains: "Religion has a meaning that remains unknown to the believer by virtue of a specific act of dissimulation which conceals its true origin from the investigation of consciousness" (*Conflict of Interpretations* 442).

Despite the differences between the two hermeneutics, Ricoeur believes that they can actually be combined:

Whether I understand the relation of showing-hiding as a psychoanalyst or as a phenomenologist of religion (and I think that today these two possibilities must be assumed together), the

understanding is in each case like a force which discovers, which manifests, which brings to light, a force which language utilizes and becomes itself (*Conflict of Interpretations* 67).

The hermeneutics of suspicion, which deconstructs the meaning of a symbol, should be accompanied by a hermeneutics of faith, which reconstructs the meaning of the same symbol. It does not suffice to reveal the illusions of false consciousness. It is necessary to reconstruct the meaning of the symbol while aware of the failings the hermeneutics of suspicion revealed.

Conclusion

Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory does owe a lot to medieval Biblical hermeneutics. His interpretation theory can be described as philosophical Biblical hermeneutics. This is because the rules that were devised to ensure right understanding of the Scriptures are given a philosophical dimension in his work. In effect, the basic elements of his theory are based on these rules. The fourfold senses of the Bible become a hermeneutics of double meaning or a hermeneutics of symbols. The notion of the moral sense of the Bible is philosophically dyed with the concept of understanding one's self and one's being in the world in front of written texts. The simple invitation of relating the Biblical text to one's here and now turns into a philosophical invitation to the reader to interpret the text s/he reads through trying "to explicate the type of being-

in-the-world unfolded in front of the text" (*Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* 141). Finally, St. Augustine's thoughts concerning the difference between the meaning of the text and the intention of the author sprouted a reader-oriented theory of criticism in which Ricoeur frees the text of its author and of all that in view of which it was written, declaring it open to an unlimited number of interpretations.

Notes:

1. All Biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version.
2. The verses, according to KJV, read as follows: "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

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