Biblical Hermeneutics and the Word about the Ineffable

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Abstract

Paul Ricoeur's engagement with biblical hermeneutics and his critique of Rudolf Bultmann's existential hermeneutics shed light on the complex relationship between language, meaning, and religious experience. Following Ricoeur, it is necessary to distinguish two layers of understanding: the ideal layer of the text and the layer of signification, which is the moment when meaning is resumed for the reader and becomes effective in existence. The semantic moment must precede the objective and

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existential understanding, as well as action. Exegesis, therefore, involves two moments of understanding. If the text lacks objective meaning, it says nothing, and without existential appropriation, the Word is dead.

Keywords: hermeneutics, ineffable, sacred, *Bible*, revelation.

Biblična hermenevtika in beseda o neizgovorljivem

Povzetek

Spoprijem Paula Ricoeurja z biblično hermenevtiko in njegova kritika eksistencialne hermenevtike pri Rudolfu Bultmannu osvetljujeta kompleksno razmerje med govorico, pomenom in religioznim izkustvom. Po Ricoeurjevem mnenju je potrebno razlikovati med dvema ravnema razumevanja: idealno plastjo teksta in plastjo opomenjanja, ki predstavlja trenutek, ko se pomen znova utelesi za bralca in učinkuje v eksistenci. Semantični moment je predhoden tako objektivnemu kot eksistencialnemu razumevanju in tudi delovanju. Eksegeza potemtakem vključuje dva momenta razumevanja. Če tekst nima objektivnega pomena, ne pove ničesar, toda brez eksistencialne prisvojitve je Beseda mrtva.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, neizgovorljivo, sveto, *Biblija*, razodetje.

Introduction

Paul Ricoeur's engagement with biblical hermeneutics and his critique of Rudolf Bultmann's existential hermeneutics shed light on the complex relationship between language, meaning, and religious experience.

From the perspective of the text-world, the existential truth is shown to be secondary and even marginal. It is only when a method reveals the truth of the text that it implies the truth of God and its specific possibilities. In other words, God's imagination is grounded in the truth of being, and it possesses the power, according to Ricoeur, to manifest God's existence. Ricoeur draws on Bultmann's reading of the concept of *syneisis* in St. Paul, where Bultmann places Pauline consciousness among anthropological concepts that are a part of the formal structure of humanity before the intervention of faith. In the text referred to by Ricoeur, Bultmann defines *syneisis* as "man's phenomenon in general" and "man's knowledge of his own conduct" (Bultmann 2007, 217–218).

In his exploration, Ricoeur emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to biblical interpretation that encompasses both objective meaning and existential components. He highlights the importance of maintaining the distance between the text, the author, and the reader, challenging the idea of a direct and unmediated religious experience. Additionally, Ricoeur's analysis of parables as poetry and metaphorical processes reveals their capacity to convey profound meanings and redescribe existence. His insights invite scholars, theologians, and readers to engage with the biblical text in a way that embraces its multi-layered meanings and fosters a dialogue between faith and reason.

1. The anthropological path

An important passage by Ricoeur, extracted from the preface to the French edition of Bultmann's book *Jesus*, illustrates the point made earlier:

> The third root of the hermeneutic problem in Christianity was not fully recognized and understood until the moderns—until the critical methods borrowed from the secular sciences of history and philology had been applied to the Bible as a whole. […] The kerygma is not first of

all the interpretation of a text; it is the announcement of a person. In this sense, the word of God is, not the Bible, but Jesus Christ. But a problem arises continually from the fact that this kerygma is itself expressed in a witness, in the stories, and soon after in the texts that contain the very first confession of faith of the community. These texts conceal a first level of interpretation. (Ricoeur 2004, 381–382.)

Ricoeur's statement marks the beginning of exegesis, highlighting the distance arising from the polarity between sense and signification. It is true, Ricoeur writes, that:

> […] the text accomplishes its meaning only in personal appropriation, in the "historical" decision (and this I believe strongly with Bultmann against all the current philosophies of a discourse without subject), this appropriation is only the final stage, the last threshold of an understanding which has first been uprooted and moved into another meaning. The moment of exegesis is not that of existential decision but that of "meaning," which, as Frege and Husserl have said, is an objective and even an "ideal" moment (ideal in that meaning has no place in reality, not even in psychic reality). (Ibid., 392.)

In this way, it is necessary to distinguish, following Ricoeur, two layers in understanding: that of the text, which is ideal, and that of meaning, which is the instant of resumption of meaning for the reader, of its effectiveness in existence. In other words, there exists the need for the semantic moment to precede that of the objective and existential understanding, as well as of action. Thus, exegesis necessarily has two moments of understanding, if the text has no objective meaning, it says nothing, and without existential appropriation the Word is dead.

When Bultmann delivered his radical critique of research regarding the historical Jesus and emphasized the significance of the Church's proclamation of faith as the primary statement about him, it caused a considerable shock in biblical studies. How can one refer to the gospels in a different way than as accounts of Jesus's life? It is true that Bultmann was constrained by a certain

historical positivism that prevented him from finding an alternative approach. While the gospels had long been regarded as "true" narratives of Jesus, Bultmann's demythologization of the Scriptures revealed that the elaboration of sacred texts involved elements beyond strict historicity (cf. Manzatto 2016, 19–20).

Nonetheless, Bultmann maintains that the faith of the Church is established upon the affirmation of the Risen Christ. In this regard, we encounter a foundational principle of Protestant theology, which also resonates with Ricoeur's thinking: the crucial aspect is for every Christian to personally define their relationship with the crucified one, professing Jesus as their Savior. As stated in the *Bible*: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom. 10:9.)

When the French philosopher presents his critique considering Bultmann's theology in the late 1960s, he does so from two distinct perspectives. Firstly, in terms of exegesis, Bultmann would benefit from a more robust integration between explanation and understanding. The gap between the text and the method of textual analysis becomes relevant in the process of existential appropriation. Hence, it becomes necessary for the semantic moment—that of objective meaning—to precede the existential moment—that of personal decision—: "In this respect the problem Bultmann posed is the exact inverse of the problem which contemporary structuralist theories pose." (Ricoeur 2004, 393.)

2. Metaphor and the unconditioned

Secondly, Ricoeur warns that for something to have a subsequent effect on humanity, it must be radically extrinsic to humanity itself. It is the ideal meaning of the text that determines its effectiveness, without being consumed by it. Within this primacy of the ideal sense, the essence of the text, the truth of being, and the gift of God are situated. Ricoeur argues that neither Bultmann nor Ebeling have fully done justice to this aspect. According to Ricoeur, Bultmann did not satisfactorily follow Heidegger's path, focusing solely on the existential question, without delving into the question of being.

The primacy of the non-existential referent appears to be a consistent theme in Ricoeur's thought. This primacy is evident in his early philosophy of symbols as well as in his later explorations of the logic of superabundance that governs the economy of the gift. However, during the period of his extensive examination of the paths of meaning, this primacy becomes less evident due to the necessary emphasis on structural analysis. Nevertheless, even during this period, the truth of "the essence of the text" underlies the existential reference.

Moreover, it is the role of theology to align the experience articulated by the biblical text with human experience on a larger scale and as a whole. The key argument is that the former cannot disregard the latter, because it is not sufficient for the outsider. This polarity is required by the very nature of religious experience and discourse, as it aims to describe or redescribe all human experiences of every individual.

Bultmann, through his project of demythologizing the *Bible*, attempts to clarify the *kerygma* hidden by mythological language. In a subsequent phase, he utilizes existentialist thought to convey this message to the modern human being. Behind the mythological perspective of the New Testament, there are existential viewpoints that require elucidation. Thus, religious language serves as an allegorical form that the early Christians used to comprehend existence and the *kerygma*.

The term "*kerygma*" originates from the Greek verb "*kerysso*," meaning "to proclaim by a herald," and refers to a decree authorized by the sovereign that demands to be carried out. The Word of God, also referred to as the Word of Christ, the Word of the Lord, or simply the Word, is *kerygma*. It is a word that challenges and addresses not curiosity or interest but the conscience of individuals, silencing their own questions. It is a pure appeal that does not offer justification, convey a theory, or communicate timeless truths about God and humanity, but rather places individuals in a state of decision. It is a decisive appeal, and those who hear it arrive at the truth of their existence (cf. Gibellini 2002, 40).

Through the influence of Bultmann's thought, Ricoeur seeks to integrate symbolism into reflective philosophical thought. The central proposal of Ricoeur is to recognize the diverse meanings that mythological language offers, without being limited to a single form of interpretation. In this way, the symbol

can provoke thought. Later, Ricoeur's perspective on symbols underwent an important change, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in his work *The Conflict of Interpretations* (*Le Conflit des interprétations*; 1969). At that point, Ricoeur acknowledges that the strength of symbols lies in their non-semantic aspect. Although they take different paths, Bultmann and Ricoeur arrive at the same destination. In both, the symbol (in the mythological dimension) is understood as referring to existential "truths" that can be deciphered and transformed into important statements. In this sense, Friedrich Schelling is exceptional in pointing out that mythology in general should not be understood allegorically, but symbolically. Thus, mythology requires not that its symbols signify ideas that arouse only our thought, but that they be significant beings in their own right and also address our senses. It is important to emphasize that the allegory is not in opposition to the symbolic, but is incorporated by it. Undoubtedly, the richness of mythology lies in the fact that it also contains allegorical meaning as a possibility, but not as a limit. What differentiates the sign from the symbol is that the latter has the capacity to be and to signify simultaneously. However, the apocalyptic use of symbols and metaphorical language is a strong corrective to all kinds of literary interpretations of the *Bible*. If symbols "give you to think," as Ricoeur claims, then the symbolic language of the apocalyptic literature of the *Bible* is irreducible and so important that it cannot be neglected by theological constructions.

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At this point, Ricoeur distances himself from Bultmann's existential hermeneutics, which he sees as limited to a kerygmatic theology without mythology. Ricoeur criticizes Bultmann's naive distinction between mythical expressions and non-mythical formulations of Christian proclamation. He argues that Bultmann does not present any theory of interpretation, as his approach is based solely on the existential decision. Ricoeur subjects existential language to criticism as an interpretive mode of the speech act itself, precisely because it does not respect the distance between the text, the author, and the reader. According to Ricoeur, the written text stands apart from the author's intention, and what is found in the realm of writing does not necessarily coincide with the author's original meaning. Thus, the text takes on its own trajectory. Understanding, therefore, is not necessarily situated in the author's contemporary context, but rather emerges from a distance. Biblical

interpretation, for instance, goes beyond existential components and aims to communicate something, offering a new horizon of being. It engages the reader in a narrative of desire, narrating the desire itself. Through exegesis, the reader is better equipped to enter the hermeneutic field. In this way, the *Bible* is seen as a collection of "sayings" from the God of Israel to His people over an extended period. The biblical text is not simply a compilation of answers about God, humanity, or the world; rather, it invites the reader to contemplate the mystery and position oneself before it.

Regarding metaphor and the unconditioned, Ricoeur highlights the fundamental conflict between objective and metaphorical interpretations, and maintains a similar conflict in the language of religious advent, specifically between the objective claim to knowledge and the poetic presentation of the unconditioned. This language functions as a limiting concept and a figurative representation of the unconditioned, allowing it to approach even borderline themes.

Ricoeur confesses to deviating not only from the dominant interpretation of narratives related to the resurrection, but also from the remaining consensus, at least among dogmatic theologians. He believes that the sheer narrative weight of stories, describing the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearance of the risen Christ, obscures the theological significance of the resurrection as the victory over death. The proclamation "The Lord has truly been raised" (Luke 24:34) appears to him to affirm this victory with vigor, surpassing the imaginative investment of faith.

However, Ricoeur does not entirely abandon Bultmann's thought, particularly the idea that the *kerygma* must contain the past of Jesus in the present tense of Christ. He warns against the risk of falling into a gnostic interpretation. Religion, in Ricoeur's view, becomes a language that simultaneously offers an opening to the religious and imposes limitations on it. Therefore, no religious tradition can directly capture the religious experience, as mediation always imposes limitations. For example, in approaching death, it is possible to transcend the inherent limitations of religions. The terminally ill, for instance, have an experience that goes beyond confessional particularities and is nevertheless religious.

Furthermore, Ricoeur applies the method of general hermeneutics to biblical hermeneutics, in order to avoid common errors in interpretation and, most importantly, to move away from existential categories of understanding

(a criticism directed at Bultmann). General hermeneutics emphasizes the need to explain the world of the text through a balance of structural explanation and self-understanding. It prioritizes the implicit world within the biblical narrative over interpretations based solely on the reader's subjective feelings and self (cf. Gross 1999, 48).

Ricoeur's philosophy also acknowledges a form of transcendence, but it pertains to the transcendence of symbols and, ultimately, their language— not the transcendence of God. Ricoeur highlights the necessity to reexamine symbols and narratives, clarifying that conscience is no longer tied to the need to listen to the word that comes from God, but rather to the proposal of understanding human reality.

3. Biblical hermeneutics

Biblical hermeneutics can be seen as one of the variations and possibilities within general hermeneutics. However, there exists a strict relationship between the two, as we have previously discussed and demonstrated by accentuating some common issues.

Treating theological hermeneutics as an application of hermeneutics specifically to biblical texts reveals an inverse relationship between the two. Theological hermeneutics possesses unique characteristics that progressively subordinate it to philosophical hermeneutics as its own organon. Despite the reduced presence of theological terms in the evolution of Ricoeur's thought, he never abandons the project of thinking, through language, expressions that reveal human consciousness. Ricoeur does not, however, privilege religious symbols. Hermeneutic philosophy, rooted in language, extends to the realms of action and ethics, as is evident in Ricoeur's work *Oneself as Another* (cf. 1994), which sets the question of religious symbols aside. In Ricoeur's work, biblical hermeneutics constitutes a distinct domain.

The term "God" is employed differently in various narratives, prophecies, prescriptions, wisdom writings, and hymns. It cannot be understood as a philosophical concept, not even as "Being" in the sense of medieval philosophy or Heidegger. The word "God" encompasses more than the word "Being," because it presupposes the entire context of accounts, prophecies, laws,

wisdom writings, etc. Its significance for the problematic of the Self can be understood in two ways. Firstly, the referent "God" is the convergence point of all these partial discourses, expressing the circulation of meaning across all forms of discourse, where God is named. Secondly, the referent "God" signifies the incompleteness of all faith discourses marked by the limits of human understanding. Thus, God is the common target of all these discourses and the external vanishing point for each one of them (cf. Ricoeur 1986, 132).

According to Ricoeur, parables are understood as "poetry," because the entire text reveals itself as a bearer of meaning. Parables function as a process of constructing fictions that carry meaning and redescribe existence.

Ricoeur's interpretation of the meanings and referents of parables, along with his philosophical analysis of metaphor, has attracted the attention of many New Testament scholars and theologians. Ricoeur's complex position regarding the metaphor, as presented in *The Rule of Metaphor* (*La Métaphore vive*; 1975) and specifically applied to parables, represents an emerging consensus in New Testament scholarship. Regardless of the particularities of Ricoeur's position, the exegete must employ a theory of tension or interaction, rather than substitution, in order to fully comprehend what the Kingdom of God is like (cf. Tracy 1994, 102).

In this way, the parable is understood as a synthesis of the narrative form and the metaphorical process that allows for its convergence with other forms of discourse in expressing the "Kingdom of God." Extravagance cannot be understood in isolation, but in relation to the expression, as they both contribute to the common horizon. In other words, the parables must be considered. The inter-signification between this *corpus* and the Word of Jesus leads to a convergence of meaning between the words understood as a greater "corpus" and Jesus's actions. The form of the gospel allows for significant inter-signification among different types of discourse and the harmonization of meaning between Jesus's actions and words.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that Ricoeur's exploration of biblical hermeneutics as well as his engagement with the theological and philosophical

dimensions of interpretation provide valuable insights into understanding the relationship between language, meaning, and religious experience. He recognizes the distinctiveness of theological hermeneutics within the broader field of interpretation, while also emphasizing the need for a robust integration of language, action, and ethics.

Ricoeur's critique of Bultmann's existential hermeneutics reveals the limitations of reducing interpretation solely to existential decision, and highlights the importance of maintaining the distance between the text, the author, and the reader. He advocates for a comprehensive approach to biblical interpretation that goes beyond existential components and encompasses the objective meaning as well as the intention of the text.

Furthermore, Ricoeur's examination of parables as poetry and metaphorical processes demonstrates their capacity to convey profound meanings and redescribe existence. His perspective on the "Kingdom of God" and the interplay between different forms of discourse offers a nuanced understanding of the richness and complexity of biblical texts. Throughout his work, Ricoeur emphasizes the primacy of the ideal sense and the transcendent nature of religious symbols. He challenges the notion of a direct and unmediated religious experience, highlighting the importance of mediation and the limitations imposed by religious traditions.

Overall, Ricoeur's contributions to biblical hermeneutics underscore the intricate relationship between language, interpretation, and religious understanding. His insights invite scholars, theologians, and readers to engage with the biblical text in a way that embraces its multi-layered meanings, acknowledges its historical and cultural contexts, and fosters a dialogue between faith and reason.

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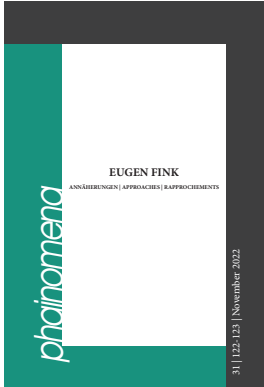---. 1986. *Du texte à l'action.* Paris: Seuil.

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