
PAUL RICOEUR'S PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS SYMBOL – CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Abstract: Considering Paul Ricoeur's theory of symbol, and particularly of religious symbol, my goal here is to summarize the contributions which the French philosopher has to a cultural rehabilitation of symbol as a theoretical instrument in psychology of religion. My assumption is that psychology of religion could be usefully approached as a new, under construction discipline, but also as a cultural domain, having less from the scientific spirit claimed in the 20th century. Hermeneutics and phenomenology remain, as I believe, two philosophical disciplines which bring a lot of relevance in this new cultural field. And Paul Ricoeur's work is one of the most relevant in this respect, as it has also fertile influences in interpretive anthropology and phenomenological theology.

Keywords: *symbol, symbolic function, interpretation, phenomenology of religion, psychology of religion.*

Introduction

The epoch in which Paul Ricoeur has developed his philosophical work – the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century – was characterized by relativism, and thus by a sort of relaxation of the scientific rigorous claims in many social sciences. As it seems, the first science to assume the relativity of its descriptions and data interpretations was cultural anthropology. To affirm this I rely on the fact that there appeared even a new approach, a new branch called interpretive anthropology. Its founder was the field anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who draws the attention on the fact that *meaning* is deeply subjective. And that it remains so; it is “in the head”, “incapable of being firmly grasped, much less analyzed” (Geertz, ed., 1974, 5-6). Despite this, a lot of social scientists have been trying hard to grasp it into concepts and methods, from modern logic and phenomenological criticism, to language philosophy and psycho-history, as the American anthropologist says. «Indeed, constructing concepts and methods to deal with them and to produce generalizations about them is the primary intellectual task now facing those humanists and social scientists not content merely to exercise habitual skills. The surge of interest in “myth”, “fiction”, “archetype”, “semantics”, “systems of relevance”, “language games”, and so on is but the symptom that this transformation in viewpoint has in fact taken place, and – from the very multiplicity of the terms – that it has taken place in intellectual contexts much more isolated from one another than the commonality of their concerns would warrant.» (*Ibidem*).

As I believe, it is also the case of psychology of religion. Its traditional approach was settled by William James in a previous epoch, when the general confidence in science and in man's ability to clearly discover the irreducible “Truth” in the unique “Reality” was still untamed by the postmodern approach of our days. But the present has developed a more profound understanding of the amount of subjectivity in the field of this science. That's why, in order to keep the relevance of the assertions concerning religious beliefs, rituals, attitudes and behaviors, it is important to understand their cultural contexts, but also the human mind

patterns of thinking. And for doing this we need to rely on the philosophical discourse offered by hermeneutics, phenomenology, and interpretive anthropology.

In this respect, Paul Ricoeur's considerations on symbol, symbolic function, interpretation, meaning etc. will be most useful. That is because, as the Romanian scholar Adrian Marino considered, Ricoeur is one of the authors who rejected the 20th century trend in treating symbol only as a linguistic reality; he treated it extensively as a spiritual, religious, metaphysical, or literary reality as well. (Marino, 1980, 182).

Elements of Ricoeur's Hermeneutics

Ricoeur's philosophical views reveal an interdisciplinary study basis. His considerations on psychoanalysis and theology contribute altogether to constructing a perspective on human existence, on man's self-knowledge. The presupposition of this approach is that meaning could not be grasped directly, nor our self-knowledge could be achieved directly (in a Cartesian way), but only by mediations which involve the knowledge of the world, and the interpretation of these mediations.

All these mediations and their interpretation require language, so that's why the French philosopher talks about the theoretical context of all these as "the grand philosophy of language" (Ricoeur, 1998, 12). So Ricoeur regards *symbol* from the perspective of hermeneutics, philosophy of language and phenomenology of religion, but he does it unitarily.

His description of symbol is that of a carrier of two meanings: an immediate meaning and a hidden meaning, "where the latter meaning reveals itself and hides at the same time." (*Ibidem*, 15). The revelation/concealment relation between the two kinds of meanings shall be the symbol's characteristic. Ricoeur's claim is that this very issue creates the hermeneutic problem: «As I see it, the problem of the unity of language cannot validly be posed until a fixed status has been assigned to a group of expressions that share the peculiarity of designating an indirect meaning in and through a direct meaning and thus call for something like a deciphering, i.e. an interpretation, in the precise sense of the word. To mean something other than what is said – this is the symbolic function.» (*Ibidem*, 19).

At this stage of his work that I take into account here, namely, in his book on Freud's psychoanalysis, Ricoeur is aware of the fact that his method in studying the religious symbolism can be improved. Nevertheless, his considerations and especially his critics concerning Freudian psychoanalysis as regards religion allows him – he says – to cast a "side look" (*Ibidem*, 553). But this side look proves to be particularly accurate and seems to foreshadow his phenomenological and hermeneutical approach applied to the religious phenomenon in subsequent works.¹

The hermeneutical circle described by Ricoeur is this: to believe means to listen to the interpellation, which first and foremost implies interpreting the message. We must believe in order to understand and understand in order to believe. (*Ibidem*, 554).

¹ Such as: "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", in J.-L. Chrétien, M. Henry, J.-L. Marion & P. Ricoeur, (1996), *Phenomenology and Theology*, Iassi: Polirom. See also P. Ricoeur & A. Lacocque, (2002), *How to Understand the Bible*, Iassi: Polirom.

Elements of Ricoeur's phenomenology of the sacred

The phenomenology of the sacred is made possible by the phenomenology of the spirit (in a Hegelian way). In fact, by passing from the latter to the first, we become aware not only of the limits of rational knowledge, but also of the irreducible character of symbols in terms of rational knowledge. Symbolic thinking and rational, positive thinking are irreducible to one another, but they are both perennial and contributing to the humanity's unity of thought. "While it is true that symbols give rise to thought, the symbols of evil show that there is always more in the myth and in the symbols than in all our philosophy; and that even philosophical interpretations of symbols will never become absolute knowledge. Thus the symbols of evil attest that the *symbolique* is insurmountable; at the same time that it speaks to us of the check on our existence and on our power to exist, they declare a check on the systems of thought which would shallow the symbols in an absolute knowledge." (*Ibidem*, 556).

The thesis of the unity of human reason, regardless the epoch or cultures, is also considered in Sergiu Al-George's book, *Language and Thought in Indian Culture*. The author says that this unity is illustrated in Indian cultural context, and especially in the passage area from mythical-ritual speculation to the linguistic one, in which the entire positivity of the former is gradually objectified. "Now wherever this Speech was, there everything was done, everything was known; but wherever Mind was, there nothing whatever was done, nothing was known, for no one knows (understands) those who think in their mind". (*Apud* Al-George, 1976, 17). And the Romanian scholar expresses his surprise that such a refined confrontation of thought with language, albeit subtly nuanced, to which every thinker of our times could adhere, has been formulated in *Satapatha Brahmana* (I, 5, 2, 15), the oldest texts of Indian ritualism. (*Ibidem*).

Therefore, it could be reasonable to suppose that this thinking, be it called "symbolic" or "mythical", or "anarchical", is irreducible and at the same time perennial, precisely because it stems from man's communication with sacredness. It seems to be a totally different communication than the inter-human one. As I believe, it most probably inspired Ricoeur in his view on the sacred as sign of something that does not belong to us, the sign of Wholly Other. (Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, 560).

The symbol can act out as a denied, overcome but never abolished fantasy: "The symbolic meanings closest to theological and philosophical speculation are always involved with some trace of an archaic myth. This close alliance of archaism and prophecy constitutes the richness of religious symbolism; it also constitutes its ambiguity; the symbol gives rise to thought..." (*Ibidem*, 573).

Elements of Ricoeur's psychology of religion

For the French philosopher, a new intentionality is instituted in the area in which the symbol translates a primal phantasm; meaning a phantasm that speaks of a lost origin or of a lost archaic object, whose loss is felt as a lack inscribed in desire; but what stimulates interpretation in its never-ending movements is not the fullness of remembering but its

emptiness. Domains such as ethnology, comparative mythology or biblical exegesis – argues Ricoeur – confirm that each myth is in fact the interpretation of an earlier story. (*Ibidem*, 570).

The religious symbol acquires force by this very rendering of the primal phantasm, converted into instrument of discovery and exploration of origins. By means of these representations of detection, of discovery, man *tells* the origin of his humanity. As such, the heroic accounts of Hesiod and Babylonian literature, the stories of fall in the Orphic literature, the accounts of primal guilt and exile in the Hebraic literature, may be treated – argues the author – as collective oneirism. But this collective oneirism, however, is not a recording of pre-history; the symbol has a vestigial function: it does not show towards the origins but rather towards an imagination of origins. Such an imagination may be said to be historical, for it tells an advent, a coming into being, but not historical, since it has no chronological significance.” (*Ibidem*, 569-570).

It seems that the symbol already represents an interpretation of the phantasm before it makes the object of interpretation: before speech itself is interpreted by the exegete, speech represents the instrument of the interpretation of the phantasm through symbol. (*Ibidem*, 573).

As regards the psychology that operates in the subtle area of religious feeling of man, Ricoeur rebukes Freud for excluding, without invoking theoretical grounds, the possibility that this feeling be a form of participation to the source of Eros, that it represents *man's power to love*, and not an infantile consolation. (*Ibidem*, 565). In other works, Ricoeur would highlight the social relevance of this love, by naming it “the guardian of justice” (Ricoeur, 1996, 36), thus increasing the difference between his philosophical approach and Freud's mere psychological approach of this religious feeling.

I believe that these few considerations of Ricoeur's philosophical thinking could offer enough arguments to suggest that only by a philosophical approach the psychology of religion could be relevant to our understanding of *human nature*. Without this wide, universal view, the psychological approach of this profound area could be sterile, or petty.

As a methodological aspect, the distinction which the French philosopher made in another book could be useful; the distinction between being rational and being reasonable (Ricoeur, 1995, 291-292); despite the fact that man's religious feelings and behaviors are not rational, still they are reasonable, as long as they are to be found in each and every cultural context in the world. As the Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade said, “the forms and manifestations of the sacred vary from one people to another, from one civilization to another. And yet the same paradoxical – that is, unintelligible – fact remains always: that the sacred manifests itself. (...) there is no essential gap in humanity's religious life.” (Eliade, 1998, 135). Here begin the limits of study in psychology of religion: where the paradox, the unintelligible begin as well.

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