

## **Spirituality and Biblical Hermeneutics**

### **The Challenge of Ricoeur's Philosophy**

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The congress theme of poetics and religion in Ricoeur leads me to the aim of exploring some possibilities of a spiritual hermeneutic, fed by Ricoeur's philosophy. This aim implies more than an interpretation of Ricoeur's philosophy, for I state from the start that such a spiritual hermeneutic has not been the aim of Ricoeur himself. I must admit that there is no direct road from Ricoeur to such a hermeneutic. However, there are some elements in Ricoeur's thinking that may guide us in the adventure of such a spiritual hermeneutic. Moreover, it has always been Ricoeur's intention to arrive at a deeper understanding by making detours through related phenomena and expressions. It is in line with this intention that we turn to the field of spirituality. When we do so, we do not operate from an alleged 'Christian philosophy' of Ricoeur's, and we can even leave aside the discussion of the relation between Ricoeur's philosophy and Christian philosophy and theology. We simply conduct our search for a spiritual hermeneutic by taking some elements of Ricoeur's thinking, applied to our aim.

In doing so, we should first explain what we understand by the term spirituality (I). After this clarification, we turn to the elements in Ricoeur's hermeneutics that we consider as a problem to developing a spiritual hermeneutic (II). As a third step in our exposition, we turn to the possibilities of a spiritual hermeneutic in line with Ricoeur's philosophy (III). Finally, I will present a spiritual hermeneutic interpretation of a psalm (IV), inspired by elements of Ricoeur's thinking.

#### I SPIRITUALITY

The word spirituality has until now been used without being specified, so we should have a closer look at the notion of spirituality. A dictionary like Merriam-Webster's mentions the following definition of the word:

1. something that in ecclesiastical law belongs to the church or to a cleric as such
2. CLERGY
3. sensitivity or attachment to religious values
4. the quality or state of being spiritual.

This description provides us with a wide range of meanings. The first meaning presented by the dictionary makes a difference between clerical goods and lay goods. Spiritual is then a synonym for what belongs to the church as an institute. As a *pars pro toto*, the word, thereupon, becomes to denote the clergy as a group, over against the laity. A third meaning denotes spirituality as a religious attitude, while the fourth meaning turns to spirituality as a certain quality. The meanings of spirituality as presented are full of opposites. The first two senses of the word make an opposition between clergy and laity. The third and fourth meaning suggest that there is a specific religious domain, opposite to other domains. In tradition these other domains have been filled in as material values, 'the flesh' as contrasted with the spirit. I am intrigued by the way in which the dictionary denotes the kind of attitude of the religious values in its third meaning, namely as 'sensitivity' and as 'attachment'. The word sensitivity suggests a specific attitude, which is not specified as innate or acquired. The

word attachment has the connotations of an enduring attitude, and of an emotional one, not determined by ratio alone. The final denotation of the word that is mentioned specifies this attitude as a quality or state of being spiritual. Thus, within a range of four lines we move from a juridical concept to a personal quality of mind, an attitudinal stance of living and acting.

Now I make a clear cut into these materials that the dictionary has exposed. I leave aside the range of meaning regarding the juridical status of ecclesiastical goods and persons, and I concentrate upon spirituality as a certain state or quality, directed towards, or even dedicated to, religious values or matters. Once this intention has been declared, we may feel the need of a more systematic definition of spirituality, which fits the reflective exigencies that we require for our aim. I will put forward a definition as given by Ewert Cousins in the general preface to the series *World Spirituality*:

The series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions "the spirit". This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. The series explores the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal. It deals with prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey, and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent.<sup>1</sup>

This description of spirituality asks for further exploration. The editor does not view this description as an actual definition of the word. It would not be possible to create a single definition that would cover all spiritual traditions. However, the project needed some common base, which could be specified and clarified in the volumes devoted to the diverse traditions. This need has led the editorial board to the formulation of a 'working hypothesis', which is given in the paragraph quoted. The working hypothesis starts with the introduction of the term 'spirit'. We have mentioned above that this word denotes an opposition to the material, and that is an aspect that is not given in every spiritual tradition. Our description offers an alternative notion, right away by circumscribing 'spirit' as an 'inner dimension of the person', and, in the next sentence, as the 'deepest center of the person'. In other words, we could describe spirituality as the personal, inner side of religion or deepest life convictions.

However, even this description is not as neutral as it seems, for it focuses on individual personality. This seems to me a clear Western point of departure. Why should spirituality not be described as the common spirit of a group, from a collective point of view? The very word 'spirit' leaves the possibility of a 'team spirit' or a 'communal spirit' in English. There are no reasons beforehand why one should start with the personal. Social psychology has taught us how the inner core of people has a social construction, and is influenced by group behaviour. At least the interference between person and group should be remarked.

Another decision is made in the description. Psychology has taught us that the inner self is determined by subconscious and unconscious forces. Speaking about a spiritual inner core, should these forces be object of study? Clearly, it is not enough to speak of an inner core. The working hypothesis of spirituality also has to determine which aspect of the inner self is taken into account. This is done by the notions of 'openness to a transcendent dimension' and 'the experience of an ultimate reality'. It appears that the inner self forms the platform of a perception of a reality that is higher than the inner self, as a transcendent dimension. Again, it is impossible to denote that aspect in neutral terms. I need metaphorical

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<sup>1</sup> E. COUSINS, *Preface to the Series*, in *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, New York, Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1986ff. The Preface is added to each volume of the series. In its most extensive form it is given in: B. MACGINN (ed.), *Christian Spirituality. Origins to the Twelfth Century* (Word Spirituality Vol. 16), Crossroad, New York, 1986, p. xv.

aspects as well (e.g., ‘higher’) in offering synonyms of the word ‘transcendent’. Similarly, a notion like ‘ultimate reality’ is not a neutral term. At least, we receive some clue to the area of spirituality, though it remains an impossible task to express this field in neutral, academic terms.

An important addition to the notion of spirituality is made in the next sentences. Spirituality is not concerned with just the transcendent dimension in the inner self. Its focus is upon the opening that dimension and the process of opening up to that dimension. This openness is not self-evident, as materials from spiritual traditions will show indeed. That the human inner core has a sensibility to a transcendent dimension is an insight that has to be discovered. The openness to a transcendent dimension can be discovered, it can be developed, it has a dynamics of its own, it can be expressed as a journey, an advancement or a matter of ascent. The development of this openness is the core of spirituality.

I cannot conceive of any spiritual tradition in which notions like inner development, growing insight, and ascent do not appear.<sup>2</sup> This is an aspect that I want to retain for a reformulation of the notion of spirituality in our cultural context. It is indeed from our own cultural context that we have to reason. Therefore, I present a definition of spirituality that is related to the Western, modern context. For this aim, I bring together the aspects of approach and of transcendence. After the considerations as presented above, I define spirituality in a modern context as follows:

Spirituality is an approach and appropriation of the experience of presence of transcendence in culture. In spirituality, this experience is thought to be enabled through growing sensibility and methodical exercise, which makes for a wide range of reflection, forms of expression, and meditative means of approaching.

What I intend to express in this definition is, that spirituality is a continuing process of opening up to the transcendent. Spirituality is an epistemic act of approaching, with a wide range for possibilities of expression and reflection. What is vital for spirituality is its epistemic act of opening up and approaching that is evoked by an experience of transcendence. This transcendence becomes present in all kinds of facets in our culture: in religious contexts, liturgy, in the experience of beauty, in social bonds, in awe, in exaltation (bodily or mentally), or in the experience of nature. (Mind that I conceive the experience of nature as a cultural condition.)

This definition makes me speak of a spiritual hermeneutic. One might go back to the origin of the word hermeneutic, given in the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and, while a messenger is always on the road, the god of the roads. Hermeneutic has to do with guidance, guidance on a route of understanding. Spiritual hermeneutic, in its turn, has to do with guidance on the way of understanding the presence of transcendence. This guidance can take many forms: it may be conceived as given by God (the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; the appearance of Mary in a place like Lourdes), or laid down in personal insights and shared convictions.

## II RICOEUR’S HERMENEUTICS

Now we bring forward the philosophy of Ricoeur. Given our definition of spirituality as an approach that has to do with a wide range of experiences and means of reflection and

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<sup>2</sup> I do not observe much of the worldwide intentions of the editor in the volumes of the series, treating the diverse spiritual traditions, while I do notice the notions mentioned here.

expression, we may assume a natural link between spirituality and Ricoeur's philosophy, as Ricoeur has been sensitive to forms of expression, to the poetics of language and action, also in its religious dimensions. However, there are all kind of reasons not to connect Ricoeur's philosophy to a spiritual hermeneutic and we should give serious attention to these reasons. I distinguish at least four points of consideration.

First of all, I notice that Ricoeur has a religious background, though he is cautious to mention this. There is a small passage in *Critique et conviction* on Ricoeur's religious education, in which he talks about his protestant grandparents (who raised him), the practice of bible reading and prayer, and an environment that shaped his thinking between two poles: the bible and critical thinking<sup>3</sup>. This formulation of a thinking between two poles shows that, for Ricoeur, there is more to say on philosophy and religion than a narrative of biographical circumstances. The same volume of *Critique et conviction* offers a more fundamental reflection on the relation between philosophy and the religious, expressed by Ricoeur as "phenomena of osmosis"<sup>4</sup>. Such an expression is rather drastic, for we may remember Ricoeur's words from *Soi-même comme un autre*, in which Ricoeur defends his philosophy against the accusation of being a Christian philosophy or, even worse, being a crypto-theology.<sup>5</sup> We may understand this cautiousness from the French academic background. But there is more than a personal choice for cautiousness in this matter.

For at the same place, and that is my second point, Ricoeur adds a more systematic point, namely that philosophy forms an autonomous discourse, which acts independent from the discourse of Biblical hermeneutics and theology.<sup>6</sup> Biblical hermeneutics does not add anything substantial to the philosophical argument, though it may offer the materials that give rise to thought. This consideration has made Ricoeur decide to exclude the two lectures on 'The self in the mirror of the Scriptures' and 'The Summoned Subject in ... prophetic vocation', which were part of the original Gifford Lectures, but do not feature in the elaboration of these lectures in *Soi-même comme un autre*.<sup>7</sup>

All this concerns a rather formal distinction between the discourses of philosophy and theology. There is, however, a third element, that goes a step further than a formal delineation of discourses. Philosophy, at least Ricoeur's philosophy is directed to developing *L'homme capable*, capable man. This philosophical intention comes from the Kantian tradition, in which the question 'What is human being?' is considered as a recapitulation of the three fundamental philosophical questions (What can I know? What ought I to do? For what may I hope?). Knowing human being in his capacities for thinking, acting, and believing is the aim of philosophy. However, the aim of spirituality is different: knowing God or the transcendent. Of course, human capacities are developed within this spiritual scope, but they do not form the goal of the epistemological trajectory. There may even be a form of self-effacement that contributes to the spiritual goal.<sup>8</sup> It is not that philosophical or spiritual interpretation leads to a different self, but the place of the self with the interpretive path is a different one. And Ricoeur had definitely decided to devote his efforts to the philosophical route of developing human capacity in understanding, not to a spiritual or theological route.

Moreover, we notice as a fourth point in the contents of Ricoeur's hermeneutics a fundamental role given to the interpretive facet of distanciation. This distanciation goes further than the internal critical role that we may conceive in the spiritual path. In spirituality,

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<sup>3</sup> *Critique et conviction*, 15/16.

<sup>4</sup> *Critique et conviction*, 245.

<sup>5</sup> P. RICOEUR, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> RICOEUR, *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P. RICOEUR, *The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation*, in M.I. WALLACE (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, pp. 262-275.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ricoeur's remarks in *Critique et conviction*, 235-237.

the self is transformed, but this transformation is created as an impulse from the spiritual goal, which attracts the believer and changes him or her on the road towards that goal. The transformation of the self in spirituality is an inner transformation, a growing sense of intimacy, while the hermeneutics of Ricoeur gives an explicit place to external criticism. The three masters of suspicion can never play the role in spirituality that they play in Ricoeur's philosophy. Spirituality creates meaningfulness by internal persuasion, by the fulfillment of inner voids and needs in religious experiences, through growing congeniality. Ricoeur creates meaning by a hermeneutical arc of *critique et conviction*. The dialectical tension of this pair remains a decisive factor in his hermeneutic. In a certain sense, this dialectic also exists in spirituality, but with another conception of critique. Clearly, Ricoeur's hermeneutics is not automatically equal to spirituality, though adjacent fields may be discerned.

### III ELEMENTS FOR A SPIRITUAL HERMENEUTIC IN RICOEUR

This distinction between philosophy and theology (at least spiritual theology) does not create a full barrier. For at the same place in the preface of *Soi-même comme un autre* in which he expresses his philosophy not to be a 'Christian philosophy', Ricoeur speaks of an attitude of belief, as created within philosophical discourse, namely as a *créance sans garantie*<sup>9</sup>, a certain *confiance* established after the act of suspicion, but seriously affected by the acts of criticism. The act of interpretation leads to a certain attitude of belief, weak and without metaphysical fundament, but strong enough to awaken attestations. This attitude of belief may be fed by a similar *foi sans garantie*, as it is developed in the theological tradition. Ricoeur mentions the theology of Eberhard Jüngel as such a theology. Theology, in this view, does not provide a metaphysical answer or support to the philosophical questions, but it adds its own logic to the arguments of philosophical discourse. Ricoeur describes this logic as a logic of superabundance<sup>10</sup>, or as an economy of the gift, or as a poetics of agape<sup>11</sup>. Thus, there is certainly a place for Bible, belief, and theology, next to a philosophy of the self, presenting a poetical displacement of philosophical aporias into a meta-level and there is a kind of spiritual hermeneutic given in this displacement created by the poetical response of belief to philosophy. This is what makes Ricoeur's philosophy so fascinating.

We need, however, more than only the expression of a fascination. We should search for the specific value of Ricoeur's position in the field of spirituality. We may determine the meaning by juxtaposing Ricoeur to Jean Nabert.

For a long time, I have thought that Ricoeur's position was equal to that of Jean Nabert. Jean Nabert has been a French philosopher in the Kantian tradition, living in the first half of the twentieth century. He did not pursue a standard academic career, but in between his activities as teacher and librarian he developed a fine oeuvre and a small circle of devoted readers. His attention goes to the boundaries of consciousness. Thus, he published a dissertation on the experience of liberty within a transcendental conception of the self, a monograph on *Elements for an Ethic*, and a fine *Essay on*. After his death appeared a reconstruction of his draft of a monograph on *Longing for God*.<sup>12</sup> His work is extremely dense and hard to read. Yet, it exhibits an attraction that binds the reader. His work fascinates me for

<sup>9</sup> RICOEUR, *Soi-même*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. RICOEUR, *The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God*, in *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 279-283.

<sup>11</sup> RICOEUR, *Soi-même*, p. 37. Cf. the excellent treatise on the relation between philosophy and religion in Ricoeur in Jean GREISCH, *Paul. Ricoeur. L'itinérance du sens*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 2001, ch. XIII, pp. 397-434.

<sup>12</sup> The editions I used were: J. NABERT, *Éléments pour une éthique*, Paris, Aubier, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1962; *Essai sur le mal*, Paris, Cerf, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2001 ; *Le désir de Dieu*, Paris, Aubier – Montaigne, 1966.

some years, because I encounter in his thinking exactly a struggle between consciousness and world.

The realization of the human self through self-reflection is a real struggle for Nabert. He does not choose the Kantian conception of a formal, transcendental self. His notion of the human self starts at a reality that is full of feelings, notably the feelings of fault, failure, and solitude. Nabert's task is a reflective philosophy, but it is a reflection that, from the start has to deal with a self that is hindered in its self-realization. Reflection on the self is not a distanced activity. It is a necessary step of human being, in ordering his confused feelings that ask for understanding. Reflection is an utterance of a desire for understanding, even more: a desire to be. This brings Nabert's *Elements for an Ethic* near to Spinoza's conception of a *conatus essendi*.

For Nabert, ethics implies the narrative 'history of desire constitutive of our being'<sup>13</sup>. The human self displays a history of becoming a full human being. Initial, confused feelings of fault, failure, and solitude lead through a reflective insight into a fundamental affirmation, an insight of *I am*. This affirmation does not fill the desire to be, for this fundamental certitude asks for perpetuation and realization in human existence. This is the point where human values come up. The human narrative of self-reflection ends in a feeling, but not the confused initial feeling of fault, failure, and solitude. It is a feeling without distanciation; it is a feeling that expresses the presence of the certitude of existential affirmation. It is a feeling that expresses an enjoyment of being. For such enjoyment, reflective philosophy does not offer the tools. At this point, Nabert changes his description to another range of words, speaking of veneration and of spiritual forms and virtues<sup>14</sup>. At the end of the reflective movement of the self, we enter a range of absoluteness. However, that range does not imply an absoluteness with a transcendent dimension. It means an absolute transparency of human action upon the roots of human being. This direction towards the absolute deserves for Nabert the word spirituality.

So, for Nabert spirituality forms the culmination of a long reflective story of the human self. It presents a kind of bliss, given in absolute, transparent certitude of what being is about. The spiritual forms an expression of the aim of a long story of the human spirit. But still, this conception of spirituality does not offer the means to grasp any interaction with or relation to the transcendent.

Ricoeur's philosophy owes much to Nabert<sup>15</sup>. Still, I observe a slightly different approach. He acknowledges a stretch to the absolute, laid down in human action and language, similar to Nabert. But he is also aware that an experience of the Absolute is an experience that is realised through a semantic operation of displacement. I refer to the final chapter of *The Rule of Metaphor*, where we can see how the poetical displacement of metaphor leads to a kind of 'metaphysical bliss', i.e., a view on the ontology in metaphorical reality. The same applies to the course of argument in *Oneself as Another*. There are several levels of poetical, formative displacement exposed in this book. All these displacements are signified in different positioning towards the indicators of *ipse* and *idem*, which form the extremes of an arc, upon which the self receives its formation. The first displacement takes place on the level of acting and speaking; the second concerns the narrative formation of the self as a discordant concordance of a life story; the third is created in the appeal to the self from the other, from outside. Now, all these displacements lead the reader towards a concluding chapter, in which an ontological direction is shown. These insights into the Ultimate are not the result of an order of self reflection, as in Nabert, but a result of dialectical influences from outside the self. A philosophy that reckons with religious expressions and experience, needs other tools than

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<sup>13</sup> Nabert, *Éléments*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Nabert, *Éléments*, ch. X-XI.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. his remarks in *Critique et conviction*, 45, 237, 241.

pure reflexive philosophy offers. Ricoeur's hermeneutics, by concentrating on the creative and poetic forces in language and action, has elaborated these tools.

As a philosopher, Ricoeur does not strictly *need* the bible and Christian theology. But once the treasure chambers of biblical poetics are opened, he uses the wealth of their creative figurations for his philosophical reflection. When Ricoeur is interested in poetical displacements that open us up for ultimate reality or ontology, he makes room for the texts from the biblical tradition. The biblical tradition has a major expression for the openness to the Ultimate, as it is created through poetical displacements: the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is related to two other words in the biblical vocabulary: love and hope. These are the notions that Ricoeur applies to his philosophy, in return for his philosophical exploration of the potential of biblical poetics. Especially his later works like *Love and Justice*, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, and *The Course of Recognition* express how the grammar of love and hope is applied to the language of philosophical reflection.

I want to pay attention to a small text, in which Ricoeur expresses some of these notions. The text that I refer to is the text of a conversation that Ricoeur had during a visit to the Taizé community in the Holy week before Easter in 2000<sup>16</sup>. I quote some passages from this conversation:

What do I come looking for in Taizé? I would say to experience in some way what I believe most deeply, namely that what is generally called "religion" has to do with goodness ... What I need to verify is that, however radical evil may be, it is not as deep as goodness. And if religion, if religions have a meaning, it is to liberate that core of goodness in human beings, to go looking for it where it has been completely buried. Now here in Taizé I see goodness breaking through, in the community life of the brothers, in their calm and discreet hospitality, and in the prayer ...

Goodness is deeper than the deepest evil. We have to liberate that certainty, give it a language. And the language given here in Taizé is not the language of philosophy, not even of theology, but the language of the liturgy. And for me, the liturgy is not simply action, it is a form of thought. There is a hidden, discrete theology in the liturgy that can be summed up in the idea that "the law of prayer is the law of faith" ...

At Taizé there is the road from protesting to attesting and this road passes by the law of prayer, the law of faith ...

I think that acclaiming goodness is really the most basic hymn ...

And there I function both as a philosopher, rooted in the Greeks, and as a reader of the Bible and the Gospel where you can follow the trajectory of the word happiness.

Here we meet some of Ricoeur's most personal convictions and we share something of his thoughts at this place of inspiration. Ricoeur's statement is spiritual in the third sense of Merriam-Webster: as an expression of his attachment to religious values. It is also spiritual in the sense of a deliberate search for the experience of presence of transcendence, here experienced in the communal prayer that unrolls a trajectory of fundamental goodness, a figuration of happiness.

As such, Ricoeur's convictions as expressed in this Taizé conversation are not revolutionary. We recognize Kant in his words, with the stress on radical evil, together with the force of primary goodness. But there is more than a moral attitude in Ricoeur's stance.<sup>17</sup> There is a definite 'law of prayer' that unfolds a trajectory and an attestation of goodness. This is more than Kant would ascribe to the biblical stories and notions.

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<sup>16</sup> See the text on the Taizé website [www.taize.fr-en\\_article102.html](http://www.taize.fr-en_article102.html) (5 Sep. 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 211f.

Now we have come close to Ricoeur's personal spirituality. But is this enough to speak of a 'spiritual hermeneutic'? I suppose that Ricoeur himself would hesitate to use that word. Still, there is at least one passage in Ricoeur in which I trace an outline of a spiritual hermeneutic.

I mean the final passage of Ricoeur's essay on *Evil: a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*. In the final section of this essay, Ricoeur reflects upon "Thinking, Acting, and Feeling with Regard to Evil". In the preceding sections of the article, Ricoeur has set out that, for him, theoretical reflection on evil leads to a certain failure of pure speculation. This aporia cannot be solved by more models of thinking, but needs the transformation of evil into a task, where evil becomes something one has to struggle against.

This transformation of the problem of evil cannot solve the persistent questions for all who suffer. Their cries and calls of "Why?" lead to an emotional response to evil, where the lament of the sufferers is transformed into a complaint. In the French edition of the essay, Ricoeur describes this work of transformation as a "spiritualisation du lament", a spiritualization of the complaint.<sup>18</sup> This is one out of little occasions where Ricoeur uses the word spiritualization, though we must be cautious for claiming the word as an operative notion for Ricoeur, because the English version of the text simply states a neutral "transmutation of the lament". Ricoeur makes use of Freud's concept of the work of mourning, for expressing how this spiritual transformation of a dumb lament into a complaint with an addressee develops<sup>19</sup>.

I will not expand upon that point, and only point out how Ricoeur writes about a necessary "wisdom, with its philosophical and theological prolongations, as a spiritual help in this work of mourning, aimed at a qualitative change in the lament and the complaint"<sup>20</sup>. So, the attitude that comes after thinking and acting, struggling with the problem of evil is called 'wisdom'. That reminds us of the Aristotelian phronesis, and of the wisdom that occupies such a large place in the ethics of *Oneself as Another*.

It is interesting that both philosophy and theology are described as 'prolongations' of this wisdom. In the exposition of Ricoeur on evil, wisdom is treated in the last resort, but, fundamentally, it is prior to philosophy and theology. Now, it is tempting to conclude that this wisdom is equal to spirituality and unfolds a spiritual hermeneutic, i.e., a trajectory along the aporias of evil. Spirituality would then lie at the fundament of philosophy and theology. However, that is perhaps slightly too triumphant, and I hesitate to bring forward the notion of spirituality at such a fundamental place, when Ricoeur himself has been reluctant to do so. That restrictiveness does not obstruct us to make of free use of the idea of spiritualization. In this respect, we may interpret Ricoeur's reluctance as an invitation to think more and further.

There is another observation that I want to make regarding this section in Ricoeur's essay on evil. The essay ends with a combination of the individual experiences of wisdom with the ethical struggle against evil. Ricoeur concludes his essay as follows:

... these experiences are, like all acts of nonviolent resistance, anticipations in the form of parables of a human condition where, such violence having been suppressed, the enigma of real violence will be revealed.

The idea that parables are anticipations of and references to an ultimate state of existence, expressed in the symbol of the Kingdom of God, may be familiar to us. But what does this wisdom reveal to us, when all moral evil should be swept away? We do not simply read of any blessed state of living. However, there will be a situation in which "the enigma of real violence" will appear even more clearly.

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<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures 3*, 231.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also *Critique et conviction*, 236 for the spiritual value of Freud's *Trauerarbeit*.

<sup>20</sup> *Figuring*, p. 260.

Here we encounter the bankruptcy of all human optimism. The struggle against evil does not enlarge our human capacities. There is, for Ricoeur, no triumphant capable man in the end. The capability of man only points at the immeasurable harshness of reality. Nevertheless, there is a priority of goodness – at least expressed in the belief that we are able to reveal this enigma of evil, though we cannot conquer it.

The idea of an ultimate reality, as something that exceeds and confronts the question of human capacity – that comes near to our conception of spirituality, stripped off from anything like cheap comfort and superficial inspiration. Interpreted in this way, Ricoeur can certainly contribute to a spiritual hermeneutic.

#### IV SUBMISSION AND DEDICATION: PSALM 131

As an epilogue to my exposition, I turn to a little psalm, Psalm 131, which I present in the translation of the New International Version.

A song of ascents. Of David.

<sup>1</sup> My heart is not proud, O LORD,  
my eyes are not haughty;  
I do not concern myself with great matters  
or things too wonderful for me.

<sup>2</sup> But I have stilled and quieted my soul;  
like a weaned child with its mother,  
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

<sup>3</sup> O Israel, put your hope in the LORD  
both now and forevermore.

A spiritual theology could claim this psalm as an example of submission. The believer surrenders to God, and confesses that he puts away all feelings of pride and haughtiness. The rest of this spiritual surrender is expressed by the image of a little child in the lap of its mother. The final verse is an appeal to Israel to accept the same attitude. The spiritual lesson might be that we receive a similar attitude.

An exegete will perceive a totally different story. The exegete will note that the psalm is part of a series of pilgrimage psalms (Pss. 120-134), while the psalm originally must have had its setting in a collection of hymns from the Davidian court. The exegetical reader may notice the change of addressee in the psalm. While vv. 1-2 address God, v. 3 is directed to the people of Israel. This forms a peculiar turn, which might suggest that v. 3 is a liturgical addition to the psalm. The function of the psalm might be given in a ritual act of confession, once the pilgrim has reached the temple in Jerusalem.

Can we also conceive of a spiritual interpretation of the psalm, in which we bring forward some of the insights that we formulated above in exploring Ricoeur? In other words, does the psalm lead us to a way of better understanding ultimate reality, through a transformative experience of God and the self?

Perhaps we should start by simply asking: what does the psalm say about the self? The person of the author is alluded to as someone with a heart (v. 1a) and eyes (v. 1b). He is rendered in the first person singular, and v. 2 mentions his (or her) 'soul'. The perception of this self starts with the heart, which is a denotation for the inner feelings of the self. The come

the eyes, which I interpret as the outer senses with a formative influence. What we hear, see, smell, taste and feel contributes to our identity. Inner feelings and outer senses are combined into a parallelistic, poetical unity. Together, they make for an 'I' that can conclude that he or she is not haughty, and does not make claims that are too large.

Heart and senses come together into an 'I'-person, but there is still a distinctive soul (v. 2). The Hebrew soul is the *nefesh*, the stroke of breath that is the fundament of existence, the ultimate affirmation of human being: I breathe, therefore I am. Once the heart and the sense are balanced, the soul can be quieted as well.

The I-figure makes his or her soul as quiet as a little child on the lap of its mother. It seems the ultimate picture of intimacy and of submission. But we should not forget the peculiar Hebrew word for child, used in this place, *gāmūl*, which does not simply denote a little child, but more specifically that just has been weaned from the breast of its mother. This weaning must have been quite a struggle, but, once weaned, the child can sit down quietly, without constantly searching for being nursed. The child is at rest, a rest that announces his growth and increasing independence.

The soul, as the fundamental expression of life-force and as an affirmation of being, is not submitted, but is set free, after struggling. Once set free, it evolves to a dedicated intimacy with the I figure, together with, but distinct from the conscious, acting identity of the 'I'. That is, in short, how a spiritual transformation of the self is rendered in these two verses.

What about God? Where is 'God' in this psalm? He is the addressee of v. 1-2, and he is spoken of in v. 3. The poet is assured that it is possible to put one's hope in God. I would nearly write: the poet has good reasons to say that it is possible to put one's hope in God. But are there 'reasons'? The only assurance comes from his own experience, his own struggle with his soul that has come to a rest. We do not read of any revelatory power, nor of any reliance upon the history of Israel, nor of any personal experience with God's power in times of disease, violence or war. The psalm only exposes the reasons for hoping by attestation.

The poet's hope is without fundament, yet not without ground. Its ground is given in its wondrous intimacy. This is perhaps strange in our perception. On the one hand, we do not expect such an intimacy in a hymn that must keep up the spirits of the pilgrims towards Jerusalem. On the other hand, we may confuse intimacy with passivity and subordination, while this intimacy is established in a poetic act of or self-transformation. When heart (=inner feelings) and eyes (=sensual stimuli) have received their proper place, the poet can give the proper worth to his soul, set free from infantile bindings, yet made into an intimate rest. There is no fundament of ultimate reality to be referred to outside the ground that is developed in the experience of the soul that comes to rest. The divine referent in this psalm is only manifested in the spiritual experience of a soul that comes to rest.

The soul's rest becomes the ground for sharing one's hope with other people. This is perhaps the most surprising turn of the psalm. A spiritual insight does not lead to a movement of further introspection and further personal, individual development, as we would expect. Rather, it gives way to a new form of communication, directed towards the psalmist's community, the people of Israel. In this communication, the experience of the ultimate, as manifested in the soul's rest, is transformed to a hope that can be shared with others. For exegetes, the third verse of the psalm is a strange addition, only to be explained as a later, liturgical supplement. Viewed as a whole, this addition becomes an essential part in the poetical, spiritual transformation of the self towards God, which the psalm unfolds. We are familiar of the Kantian connection between religion and hope, which has Ricoeur's interest. In this psalm, we do not only see how such a religious hope receives a form of expression, but also observe how this expression of hope comes at the end of a poetical and spiritual trajectory of a self. The invocation of a communal hope, achieved by a process of spiritual

introspection – that is the specific poetic spirituality of this psalm that ‘gives rise to thought’ for philosophy.

In conclusion, Psalm 131 shows a fascinating poetic of a self that attests his *foi sans garantie*. It is the value of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics that we become sensitive to such processes, and it is the value of his hermeneutics that we may develop the tools to analyze such spiritual poetics. In this way, though he has not elaborated the field, Ricoeur offers a valuable contribution to the wide range of reflection that colours the discipline of spirituality.

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