

TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICS OF RELIGION(S). A READING OF RICOEUR'S READINGS

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Abstract. The objective of this article is to present and analyze some theses advanced in „Lectures 3”¹ by Paul Ricoeur. The book is devoted to the boundaries of philosophy, to non-philosophical sources of philosophy and finally to the other par excellence of philosophy – to religion. The book is composed of a series of essays divided thematically into three parts. The first part deals with Kant’s and Hegel’s philosophy of religion. Then in the course of the book the author gradually moves away from the philosophical logos (the second part deals with prophets, the problem of evil, the tragic etc) to arrive at a point where recourse to the exegesis of the Bible becomes for him indispensable.

I.

It is quite impossible to cover in a small article the wide range of problems considered by Ricoeur in his book. I will limit myself to the following questions: first I will try to pose (together with Ricoeur) the question concerning the phenomenology of religion in its universal sense; that will lead us to the problem of hermeneutics with regard to particular religions and finally to the hermeneutics of the Bible (together with Ricoeur we will consider Hebraic and Christian scriptures as an example of religious texts). We shall see that the object of study of Ricoeur’s biblical hermeneutics concerns the ways God is named in the Bible. A closer consideration of this subject will show us in what sense religion is the other of philosophy. Finally I shall try to reflect on the kind of inspiration that philosophy can find in religion.

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures 3 – aux frontières de la philosophie*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1994.

Let us begin with the difficulties facing the phenomenology of religion which make it very problematic to develop in the traditional way. Certainly nobody will deny the irreducible character of the religious field. There have been several more or less fortunate attempts to define the feelings and attitudes united under the common name „religious” – as the feeling of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher), the feeling of unreserved confidence (Bart) or ultimate concern (Tillich) etc. These feelings are accompanied by attitudes such as prayer. In theory a phenomenology could describe all these feelings and attitudes that are part of the universal structure of call-response (as distinct from question-answer typical for the domain of knowledge in general) which characterizes the entire religious domain.

But Paul Ricoeur remarks that such a phenomenology could not pass over the fact that all these feelings and attitudes occur in a given milieu which is linguistically, historically and culturally determined. In other words there is no immediate access to religious feelings and attitudes since they are mediated by language, culture and history. Religion as such exists and is realized only in concrete, particular religions. This is why phenomenology is obliged to have recourse to hermeneutics – or, as Ricoeur himself specifies, to textual or scripture hermeneutics. The fragmentation and diversity of texts and of scriptural traditions makes it impossible to assure any universality with regard to the religious phenomenon. The above mentioned fundamental feelings and attitudes do not manifest themselves „in a naked immediacy”, they occupy their place in a given tradition and „they are always interpreted according to some canonical rules of reading and writing”². The fundamental structure of call-response itself is not free from historical determinations – it is always embodied in a given tradition, in a given culture. The „obedience to the Height” (as a characteristic of religion) manifests itself differently depending on whether the Height is immanent or transcendent, personal or not, whether this obedience is passive or active etc.

Therefore we have to renounce the idea of a phenomenology of the universal religious phenomenon and to try to retrace major hermeneutical characteristics of a given particular religion. We shall see below that Ricoeur himself remains in the tradition he knows better – that of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. What in this case is there left of phenomenology? Ricoeur says: „it is not demanded of the audience that they adhere

² „Lectures 3”, p 267. The reference I give here and below is to the French original, the translation is mine.

explicitly to convictions proper to the Jewish or Christian way to use the terms as „Holy scriptures”, it is called to an assumption in imagination and sympathy, compatible with the suspension of the involvement of faith”. It is a mitigated and realist form of the phenomenological „epochè”.

Ricoeur remarks that in order to cover the religious phenomenon in its universality any hermeneutics internal to a given religion should proceed by way of an analogical transfer or extension, step by step, starting from its own place that provides it with a particular perspective. An understanding from a neutral point – from nowhere as it were, a deracinated understanding is not possible. But in order not to impose his own categories the researcher is called to make the same assumption in imagination and sympathy. And the idea of a phenomenology of religion remains a guiding idea – like a horizon which can be pursued but never grasped. This idea motivates researches and stimulates „an interconfessional or interreligious hospitality comparable to a language hospitality that guides the work of translation from one language to another”³.

So much about hermeneutics of religion as a real and realist embodiment of phenomenology. Permit me now to outline briefly some of the main general principles of Ricoeur’s textual hermeneutics which are necessary for us to proceed to the core of the argument. Any discourse (whether oral or written) is held on account of something – here the problem of the reference of discourse arises (that is of its reference to extralinguistic reality, to the world). In the case of an oral discourse the speaker has the possibility to refer to the world which he has in common with his interlocutor or with his audience. A written text addressed to any possible reader can refer to the world proper for the text. It constitutes the object of the text which is studied by hermeneutics. Thus what is to be interpreted in a text is the proposal of a world in which „I could live... and project there my most intimate possibilities”⁴. It is the world of the text, a world developed, discovered or revealed by the text. One of Ricoeur’s principal theses is that texts (literary or historic, texts of tradition etc.) are the medium through which man can obtain knowledge and understanding of himself – that is knowledge of his own self. When appropriating a text we are reading, we can „expose ourselves to the text and receive from it an enlarged self which would be a proposal of existence responding... to the proposal of a world”⁵

³ Ibid, p. 269.

⁴ Ricoeur P, *Du texte a l’action*, Editions du Seuil, 1986, p.128.

⁵ Ibid., p. 130.

(developed by the text). In other words, projecting ourselves into the world proposed by a text, we thereby modify our self since the self and the world are connected with mutual dialectical ties.

Yet speaking about the world of the text does not seem to solve the problem of reference. Clearly enough, descriptive texts refer to some aspects of our world, but what about literary or poetical texts, texts of fiction? According to Roman Jakobson in poetry language is glorified for its own sake so that it is impossible to speak about any reference. Hermeneutics can't accept this thesis. It is true that reference of the first level, reference to aspects and objects of our world, to things in our environment that we can handle, is abolished or suspended in fiction and poetry. But according to Ricoeur it is exactly this abolition that liberates a reference of another kind. Here we are concerned with reference to our being rooted in the world, to the multiple ways of our belonging to the world, reference to our intimate bond with the world. Poetry and fiction point to being not under the modality of being given, but under that of being possible – we can say that they propose a possible world. In this way poetry and fiction disclose the field of non-descriptive or poetical reference to the world. Ricoeur calls poetical all texts that refer to the world in this way, thus uniting under the term poetical both literary fiction and poetry itself. Poetical language shows us that the modalities of our relation to the world are not limited to descriptions of objects. In a sense they constitute a revelation disclosing what was before dissimulated by objects we handle every day – the fact and the ways of our being rooted in the world. In a way it is a revelation in so far as something hidden is now discovered. It is, according to Ricoeur a first approximation of what might signify the Biblical Revelation.

Biblical texts are poetical in this sense – they „develop a world of theirs, when they manifest poetically and thus reveal a world we could live in”⁶. What specifies the religious field inside the category of poetical texts is precisely the reference of the biblical texts. Their object, their „chose du texte” (the „thing” of the text) implied in the world they develop is God Himself. God is the ultimate referent of biblical texts. By developing their world these texts name God, they unfold His Name; in the final analysis biblical texts aim at naming God. We have seen that the „thing of the text”, its reference was the object of hermeneutics. In consequence what interests hermeneutics in biblical texts is the way they refer to God. To resume: biblical texts refer to God by naming Him.

⁶ Lectures 3, p. 289.

Yet before we present the ways in which God is named in the Bible we have to consider two philosophical presuppositions of great importance for Ricoeur's philosophy. Ricoeur speaks about a double asceticism necessary for a philosopher to reach the originary level of speaking about God. The first step demands getting rid of any onto-theological knowledge. Onto-theology is a discourse based on fusing religious terminology with metaphysics based on the Greek ontology, and its most famous example is Thomism. This first step was made by Kant's critical philosophy which set distinct limits to philosophical knowledge by prohibiting reasoning about noumenal reality from the realm of phenomena – that is from our normal objects of knowledge. We can't get any knowledge about God which would be based on objects. This way of proceeding is called by Kant „transcendental illusion" and it is illegitimate though inevitable for human reason.

The second step consists in rejecting the privileged position of the subject of knowledge which the latter occupies in Kant's transcendental philosophy itself. The principle „I think" becomes the foundation of knowledge. The realm of knowledge is now determined not by the objects of knowledge but by subjective conditions of possibility and in this way the subject becomes „the supreme presupposition" of any knowledge. To this philosophical position Ricoeur opposes the attitude of listening that demands assuming an antecedent sense „that has always preceded myself". Listening excludes founding. So if we do want to listen we have to operate a detachment from our own selves – insofar as he who wants to save his life will lose it – a detachment that demands that we reject any desire for mastership, self-sufficiency and autonomy.

The task of hermeneutics is to lead us between the Scilla of the absolute object and the Charybdis of the absolute subject towards the originary modes of language in which, as Ricoeur remarks, members of the community of faith interpreted their experience for themselves and for others. It is in this language that God is named.

We can now outline the hermeneutical problem of reference in biblical texts. I will omit the problem of hermeneutical circles between speech and writing as well as between scripture and community to concentrate on the problem of naming God.

The most striking feature of the language of the Bible is the multiplicity of ways of naming God – Ricoeur speaks here about „polyphony". We can see such a diversity of modes of discourse: narrations, prophecies, legislations, proverbs, prayers, hymns, liturgical texts etc.

The first way of naming God in the Bible is narrative – God is named in such crucial events in the history of deliverance as the vocation of Abraham, Exodus, the anointing of David. . . . The narration of this history constitutes what Ricoeur calls a predicative name of God – His name is unfolded and extended in a series of predicates (e. g. The Lord. . . which hath brought thee out of the land of Egypt – here we deal with a „historical” predicate).

In the story of liberation it seems that nobody speaks, God being named in the third person – whereas in prophecy God is named as the voice of the Other behind the prophet’s own voice. At the same time, in prophecy God is named in and by an event – owing to a dialectical tension between prophecy and narration (the imminence of a predicted threat breaking into the story told, into the remembrance of crucial events).

The prescriptive discourse of Torah names God as the Author of the Law („Thou shalt love. . .”). Yet this prescriptive way of naming God would not be understandable without its dialectical connection with narration – the promulgation of the Law being inseparable from the history of liberation. There is also a dialectical connection between the ethical and the prophetic, the New Law coming to express an ethic according to prophecy.

Another way of naming God is reflected in the sapiential literature. The latter is a meditation on the human condition in general, a struggle for the sake of sense in the face of nonsense. God takes on the mask of the anonymous and inhuman course of things.

Again, in the hymns of praise, supplication and thanksgiving man addresses himself immediately to God, God being named *vis-à-vis* man.

To resume let’s quote Ricoeur: „Thus God is named in different ways in narration which tells Him, in prophecy which speaks in His name, in prescription which designs Him as the source of imperatives, in Wisdom which seeks Him as the sense of sense, in hymns that invoke Him. . .”⁷.

Finally God is named in the Bible by the convergence of all these partial forms of discourse. The referent „God” according to Ricoeur expresses the circulation of sense between them. God is referred to by the convergence of all these genres. No form of discourse about God can exhaust the sense of this Name – it is contained as it were in between, in the dynamic interaction between different ways of speaking about God. That is why in Ricoeur’s opinion the word „God” means incomparably more than the word „being” – the former presupposing the whole richness of the context of narratives, prophecies, laws etc. God is much more than just a philosophical concept.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

The biblical vision of God is radically different from the philosophical one and if we say that religion is the other of philosophy, here we can see an example and an important aspect of this otherness.

II.

We can retrace this idea of otherness with the example of the ontological argument of St. Anselm of Canterbury. The ontological argument in Anselm's version is called to prove God's existence starting from His greatness and supremacy (let me recall that Descartes spoke in this context of God's perfection). In his article „Fides quaerens intellectum: biblical antecedents”⁸ Ricoeur pursues the objective of showing the possible biblical sources both of the ontological argument of St Anselm of Canterbury and of the attitude which the latter was intended to fight against. The consideration of Anselm's argument will help us achieve two objectives: 1) to develop the idea of the nomination of God in the Bible and in so doing to say more about the hermeneutics of religion as applied to the Bible 2) to unfold, as I have just mentioned, some aspects of the difference between religious and philosophical discourses by means of the example of the Bible.

Anselm's argument is onto-theological insofar as it combines terminology borrowed from the Bible with principles of Greek ontology. Onto-theology can, here be representative of philosophy as a whole because it marked philosophical discourse about God for a long time and because it still makes its appearance here and there in philosophical discourse; moreover if we are to believe Kant, it is quite insuperable⁹. Let me outline in a very sketchy way some of the main points of divergence between onto-theological and originary (biblical) discourses: onto-theology considers God in a third person whereas in the Bible God discloses himself (I...) or is invoked (You...); if God is named in the third person, it is mostly to speak in His name. In onto-theology God is considered in Himself whereas in the Bible He is always in relation with man and with the world. In onto-theological discourse God is treated as Perfect Being (Descartes) or Ultimate Good (Anselm of Canterbury) whereas in the Bible God can be contested and even accused of injustice. Below I will explicate these points of divergence and introduce some others as considered by Ricoeur.

⁸ *Lectures 3*, pp 327-355.

⁹ As being a manifestation of the transcendental illusion.

I'll permit myself here to quote Anselm of Canterbury himself (Proslogion, chapter II):

And so, Lord, you who can add understanding to faith, allow me (to the extent that it is good for me) to understand that you exist as I believe you to exist and that you are what I believe you are. I believe you are something than which nothing greater can be thought of [aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit].⁵ Is it possible that nothing like that exists? After all, „the fool has said in his heart ‘there is no God’” (Psalms 14:1 and 53:1). But when this fool hears the words „something than which nothing greater can be thought of,” he must understand what he hears; and what he understands then exists in his mind [in intellectu eius est], even if he doesn't think that such a being exists in fact. For there is a big difference between something existing [as an idea] in someone's mind and . . . that thing's existing in reality. . . . Something than which nothing greater can be thought of cannot exist only [as an idea] in the mind because, in addition to existing [as an idea] in the mind, it can also be thought of as existing in reality [that is, objectively], which is greater [than existing only as an idea in the mind]. . . .

From which it follows that denying the existence of Something than which nothing greater can be thought leads to a contradiction.

In fact Anselm's argument is an answer to the fool who denies God's existence. Ricoeur notices that the whole of the argument can be considered in three aspects: a) The invocation of God – the argument is preceded by a prayer (and so, Lord, you . . . allow me); b) naming God – here we deal with a predicative name: something than which nothing greater can be thought of; c) the assertion of existence

The fool separates a) and b) from c); he understands the sense of b) but denies its reference. Anselm in his turn denies the possibility of separating God invoked in prayer from predicates that constitute His predicative name. In chapter XII he develops the predicative name by stating that God is superior to all things, He is that than which nothing better can be thought of.

Now Ricoeur's question is double: on the one hand, what in the ordinary discourse of the Bible, can be the source of such an onto-theological predicative name; on the other hand, what in this discourse can give credit to the fool's words.

First of all, in the Bible invocation, nomination and assertion of existence are by nature inseparable. God discloses Himself, presents Himself to man, and this self-presentation, self-disclosure embraces invocation, nomination and assertion of existence.

In Ex. 20.2 God says: „I am the Lord Thy God” – God manifests Himself as God of His people and it is the only way of self-disclosure of God

that the Bible knows – there is nothing there about God in Himself; He is always in relation. Invocation (You) is an answer to God's I. But it is not the only possible response. All the range of human responses to God (from invocation to contestation) is expressed in the word Covenant which covers the whole relationship between God and man. In this sense the Covenant is part of God's name when He says „I am the Lord Thy God”.

In the same fragment God says „I am the Lord thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt not have other gods...”. As we have already mentioned above, the whole story of Exodus is thus included in the Name, and the development of the text includes there all the Decalogue. God announces Himself as the source of history and ethics, and then human invocation follows. As we have seen above, the narrative and legislative predicates following the self-presentation of God constitute the heart of God's predicative name. For Anselm this predicative name was *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest*. For the Bible the principal predicative name of God is „One, alone” as in the famous text of Shema („Hear, o Israel”). This name does not so much accentuate the fact of ontological nonexistence of other gods as rather demands exclusive devotion and love for the Lord. Ricoeur remarks that the whole passage of Deut. 6,4-19 constitutes predicative nomination of God (including the words „Thou shalt not forget” and „Thou shalt love thy Lord” that develops the belief in God's unicity. Ricoeur supposes that it is this biblical way of naming God that can be the remote source of Anselm's nomination based on God's preeminence.

How does the Bible speak about the problem of God's existence? It is quite clear that a Jew in the time of the Bible did not pose this ontological question as a Greek might do. The text of Shema that evokes God's deeds of the past and sets ethical principles shows us that God's existence was attested through confidence in His efficacy, both in history and in ethics – we are confronted here with a narrative and ethical efficiency of the Name. This belief was quite enough for a Jew and the explicit ontological question in this context simply did not make sense. Existence meant efficiency and this was certified by the Bible with all its forms of discourse that we have mentioned above.

And yet there is a place in the Bible where God's existence seems to be treated explicitly – that is the story of Moses' vocation. In Exodus 3,14 God present Himself as „I Am Who I Am”, translated into Greek as „Ego eimi ho on”. This translation that hypostatizes the second occurrence of the verb „Am” has determined the history of interpretations of the whole phrase

imposing the Greek ontological way of thinking on the Hebraic source and thus has grounded the onto-theological tradition. In fact we should not overlook the fact that in the biblical text the verb „to be” is put twice in the first person which prevents it from being understood impersonally as „being”. Indeed „I Am” in Hebraic is not the same as *einai* in Greek deprived of any connection with the first person.

How then can hermeneutics interpret this important phrase? – Simply by having recourse to its usual means, namely by replacing it in its context: the story of Moses’ vocation. God calls Moses who answers Him: „I am here” thereby recognizing His presence. *Eyeh asher eyeh* is an answer to Moses’ objection when he asks on exactly whose behalf he should speak to the people. Then the predicative name „Am who I Am” becomes appellative: „I Am has sent me to you” and thus constitutes the ultimate and most sacred Name – YHWH.

If we concentrate on the narrative context of the phrase „*Eyeh asher eyeh*”, then we have to accentuate its ethical rather than ontological dimension and to interpret the phrase as guaranteeing the authenticity of Him who sends Moses: He certifies His existence in the sense of efficiency. In this sense the meaning of the phrase is inseparable from the context of mission.

Another way of interpretation is more speculative: as we can notice the expression „*Eyeh asher eyeh*” may have a surplus of meaning that exceeds the context of a set question-answer. In Ricoeur’s opinion this surplus of meaning creates a specific hermeneutical situation when the verb „to be” is open to a plurality of interpretations. Then the Aristotelian-Thomist interpretation is just one of a set of possible interpretations even if historically it is probably the most influential of them. In fact there have been many attempts to clarify the originary meaning of *eyeh* ranging from „becoming” through „acting, operating” to „being faithful”. Whatever *raison d’être* they may have, the essential thing is not to try to restore a univocity presumably lost – most probably it has never existed. In order to avoid oversimplification we should keep the polysemy of the expression and its indeterminacy hidden within an enigma. Ricoeur says that „not only the Greek word „being” can be expressed in many ways, but there is a „non-Greek” way of expressing it, or even many ways that are to be explored beyond the alleged end of metaphysics”. This can be a very useful indication which could be a source of inspiration for contemporary philosophy.

There is another way of understanding the enigmatic phrase – this answer to Moses is such only seemingly and in fact we deal with a non-answer, when God conceals Himself in His divine incognito.

The three directions of interpretations should not be considered as opposed to one another – in fact they are such only for the occidental mind based exactly on Greek logic and ontology. And yet, however different the biblical discourse can be from the philosophical rationality, it is not incompatible with it: Ricoeur finds a true speculative thought implied in all the phrases and forms of discourse connected with naming God. Permit me to outline it very briefly: 1) the God of Israel is relational – the Bible knows nothing about Him beyond His relation to His people and to the whole of Creation 2) This relation may contain some critical aspect as in the case of Moses who objects to his calling, of Abraham who bargains with God about Sodom and Gomorrah; of Job who complains to God etc. 3) The Bible has its own sui generic ontology mentioned above which can be described as follows: a) The verb „to be” is always pronounced „personally”, in connection with the divine „I” as in His self-disclosure or „You” as in invocation b) This verb retains an insuperable polysemy c) it does not permit us to separate the „ontological” self-disclosure of God from injunction and commandment – that is to separate ontology from ethics.

Let us now dwell on the second point which as we have already said necessarily follows from the first. Indeed, since God is relational and the name of His relation with man is Covenant, since that covenant, however asymmetric it is, is not a mere capitulation on the part of man, it can imply a wide range of reactions of man to God, including contestation, protest and even accusation. This contestation implied in the relation of Covenant is, according to Ricoeur, the remote source of the demand of intelligibility from which Anselm’s argument starts.

One of the most striking forms that objection to God takes is complaint or lamentation. Lamentation and praise constitute the two opposite poles of invocation, and Ricoeur wants to show that in the Bible both of them are dialectically connected with each other.

On the one hand, the first relation of God is to His Creation – indeed the Bible ignores everything before creation. In the book of Genesis we read that God saw that everything He had created was very good. (Gn 1, 31): in Psalms we see that all created things glorify their creator. And yet this idyllic picture is put to question by the fact of the persistence of evil in the created world – that is, of evil not only committed by man and thus imputable to him, but also by evil that he undergoes. If speculative theology which speaks about God in Himself, before or without creation, can omit or postpone the problem of evil, it is quite impossible for the relational biblical approach – it is obliged to consider at the same time and together Creation

and the persistence of evil. The problem of the persistence of evil puts into question the tradition that leads to the ontological argument based on the vision of God which equates Him to a „perfect being” or an „Ultimate Good”. Here the „other” of philosophy becomes its contrary. Ricoeur reminds us that the Bible ignores the conception of *creatio ex nihilo*, elaborated by later theology, the struggle with enemy forces, the forces of chaos is not over – so the Bible does not foster the vision of God as a perfect being or as a focus of preeminent goods. In the face of chaos the created order is still fragile, and „glory of Creation and lamentation in front of the persistence of evil do not cease to go together along the whole of the Hebraic Bible”. The complaint of the creature then is inseparable from the relationship between God and creature. There is a gap between the liturgical affirmation of God’s sovereignty, the celebration of victory, the glorification of Creation, on the one hand, and the daily experience of the persistence of evil, on the other – a gap which according to Ricoeur constitutes a dialectics without resolution between the affirmation of the omnipotence of God and the admission of the existence of evil. This dialectics can’t permit the equating of the God of the Bible with the idea of perfection since such an equation would mean isolating God from the drama of Creation, putting aside His dramatic relationship with man.

Another critical attitude in the relationship between God and man is contestation ranging from Abraham’s bargain with God concerning Sodom and Gomorrah to Job’s trial with God. Man can question God to the point of putting him to question. In the book of Job we deal simultaneously with obedience, critical judgment and God’s sovereignty – the same non-conclusive dialectics that makes it impossible to consider God beyond His relation to mankind and to the whole of Creation. Job discloses the unjust suffering that is part of the relational structure connecting God with man and with the world. The response of God is to place human experience, including protest against suffering, into the story of Creation. God remains the other of a dramatic relation. The Bible does not propose any conceptual solution of the problem of unjust suffering – instead it proposes „a mediation of practical obedience, which itself oscillates between mute submission and open dispute”. We deal here with a non-conclusive dialectics, an alternation of praise and lamentation.

In the article devoted explicitly to the problem of evil¹⁰ Ricoeur notices that all the attempts to solve this problem in theodicies are submitted to the

¹⁰ Lectures 3, pp. 211-233.

demand of logical coherence. The latter implies non-contradiction and the possibility of a systematic totality. The problem in theodicy is formulated as follows: how can we hold at the same time and without contradiction the following propositions a) God is omnipotent b) God is absolutely good c) evil exists. The propositional form and the rule of coherence is not put to question – they are silently presupposed. The Bible shows in fact that our reasoning based on the rule of non-contradiction and the demand for systematic totalization is not the only way to treat the problem and to consider God and the evil in front of Him. In his article Ricoeur enumerates several stages of human thought with regard to the enigma of evil – from myth through wisdom, gnosis, theodicy and dialectics to the stage of „broken” dialectics. We need not here follow this whole range. Let us limit ourselves to a definition of broken dialectics as a dialectics that renounces systematic totalizing and the logic of non-contradiction, it does not aim at conciliating the contradictory propositions. It takes seriously the paradoxical character of the problem, the aporetic status of thought about evil. This dialectic is broken because its terms are not reconcilable, the gap between them accepts no explicit conceptual solution, they do not „pass” one into another as would be normal for dialectics. Again the Bible suggests that the problem of evil is not just a speculative problem – it should engage thought as well as action (both moral and political) and what Ricoeur calls „spiritual transformation of our feelings”¹¹.

¹¹ The problem of evil itself is not the explicit subject of the present article, yet Ricoeur’s suggestions concerning evil are strikingly in line with the biblical vision of man and for this reason they deserve a brief presentation.

As for the aspect of thought, one can call this problem a „challenge” – since it signifies a failure of premature syntheses and a „provocation to think more and to think differently”. The failure of onto-theological theories one after another results in a refinement and enrichment of speculative thought. The speculative work leads from the initial enigma to the final aporia which can be made productive if action and spirituality give it not so much a solution as a response intended to carry on the work of thought in the field of action and feeling. Ricoeur speaks about continuation of the work of thought in the sphere of acts and feelings so that the work of thought which has led to an aporia not only does not turn out to be superfluous but is a necessary stage of the whole process. We can risk comparing the latter with Hegel’s *aufhebung* – in a fruit tree the flower is not abolished by the fruit, in a way it is contained in it. Only the purpose of the flower is to give birth to the fruit so as not to remain sterile.

As for the domain of action, active response replaces the accent from the question of the source of evil to another one: what to do against evil? Response formulates the idea of a task to carry out that replies to the idea of an origin to be discovered (posed by speculative thought). We are concerned here with the immense problem of violence that necessitates

On the intellectual plane we have then to admit the paradoxical character of the assertion of the existence of God combined with the statement of the persistence of evil. In a way paradox is essential for the biblical discourse about God. We have already seen that in the scene of the burning bush (Ex 3, 13-15) God names Himself and at the same time conceals Himself in His incognito. In the New Testament God is often named indirectly in connection with the Kingdom of God which is signified by parables, proverbs and paradoxes. Parable combines a short narrative with a metaphorical shift of sense („The Kingdom of God is like...” – the denouement of the story points obliquely, metaphorically to the Kingdom). In a way parable is a proverb with a narrative plot, a proverb turned into a story – and vice versa, the point of a parable can be expressed in a proverb. Proverb often is submitted „to the law of paradox and hyperbole” (for example: who wants to save his life will lose it – an example of a very fruitful paradox) – likewise parable is submitted to „the law of extravagance” in so far as „it makes appear the extraordinary in the ordinary”: parables introduce into their plot an implausible, disproportional or even scandalous trait, a contrast between the realism of the story and the extravagance of the denouement. Ricoeur attaches a great importance to parable – in his opinion it constitutes an abridgement of the biblical way of naming God and an important modality of expressing faith. Parable combines a narrative structure, metaphorical process and another element that Ricoeur calls „limit expression” – a modification of sense that can affect any form of discourse by a kind of „passage to the limit”. Parable is exemplary in a triple way: its narrative structure reminds of the language of faith being rooted in narration. Its metaphorical process manifests „the poetical character of the language of faith in its whole” – the religious

a political action against evil. And yet this practical response is not sufficient – there are innocent victims as well as non-human sources of suffering such as natural disasters, diseases, senility and death. In this case the question is not just „Why” but „Why me?” An emotional response is needed. In order not to go into unnecessary details, I will limit myself to pointing out that in terms of an emotional response that makes the intellectual aporia productive Ricoeur suggests integrating the ignorance it produces with *grief-work* described by Freud and successive psychoanalysts.

It is essential to understand that the speculative response to the problem of evil in its relation with God – the response proposed by theodicy – is not sufficient. The response should embrace the entire personality and not only its speculative faculty – and this fact is quite consistent with the vision of man developed by the Bible. We dwelt so long on the problem of evil because in the Bible it constitutes an important aspect of the relationship God-man, it is part of the structure of the Covenant and consequently it is a significant dimension of God’s Name

language is poetical. The combination of metaphor with limit expressions furnishes „the very matrix of the theological language conjoining analogy and negation in the way of eminence (God is like... God is not...)¹²”.

Limit expressions express the specific character of the religious language, but they function in the medium of metaphorical and analogical language. The latter is constituted by the narrative, prescriptive, prophetic and finally parabolic ways of naming God. Limit expressions modify this analogical language. Narratives, prophecies, prescriptions etc. are models – that is „rules for producing figures of the divine: models of Judge, Father, Husband, Rabbi, Servant”. These are not concepts – rather they are schemes of concepts, in Kantian language. They do not form a system since they are much too diversified and heterogeneous. Their anthropomorphic character makes them close to the idol and in fact these models constitute a dialectical process between the Name and the idol. To understand each of them in itself, without connection with the others and in a static way means to fall into idolatry. The Name makes these models move, puts them in movement, dynamically turning each image into an opposite one (God can be father, mother, husband, brother and Son of man without our being able to fix and isolate any particular image – otherwise we do not name Him, we rather make of him an idol). Limit expressions are exactly the factor that completes and corrects models – they are modifiers of the latter. Ricoeur says that the poetics of the name of God – which is expressed mainly in the work of models – is not abolished but intensified by paradox, hyperbole and limit expressions.

Let us resume what was mentioned above. Hermeneutics is interested in the subject of a text that is in the world it proposes; in general it is interested also in the way texts refer to the world. Hermeneutics is particularly interested in texts that employ a poetical language. This language a) breaks with everyday language and brings about a semantic innovation b) opens or proposes a new world c) this new world permits the reader to understand himself in front of the text. Biblical texts are poetical, but they stand out in the category of poetical texts owing to the fact that through the world they propose they refer to God. The Bible contains multiple ways to refer to God or to name God and it employs the language of paradox proposing a rationality different from that of Greek philosophy. This rationality is distinguished by its dynamical character – it does not propose any static conceptual scheme but demands moving from one form of discourse to

¹² Ibid., p. 298.

another, from one statement to another one (often opposite). In the Bible there is a dynamic form of holism: any given form of discourse can't be understood in isolation from others, any given image can't be taken away from the context of other images. The meaning referred to in the Bible cannot be grasped in a conceptual way: it is always in movement, it circulates between different forms of discourse, between different images. In rationality of this kind the language of paradox promotes understanding. The Bible is highly dialectical – on the plane of the „form” it contains dialectics between different genres (narrative and prescriptive, narrative and prophetic etc.), on the plane of the „contents” – among others! – it proposes the broken dialectics we have seen when considering the problem of evil. But in the Bible there is no form disconnected from contents, any genre proposing its own style of naming God, the structure of discourse and the kerygma it proclaims being overlapped. There is a dialectics between form and contents themselves which is closely connected with that of the figurative and the speculative.

The objection could be made that it is not correct to attribute to the Bible a form of discourse born in the occident and developed in occidental modernity, to look for Hegel's formulas in a text of a completely different epoch. Sure, it is not – in a way. But we should remember that the sources of Hegel's dialectics itself trace back not only to Socrates' dialectics but to the Bible as well. For example the paradox „he who wants to save his life will lose it” has a dialectical structure. The Bible has its own way of making paradox productive and of reconciling opposites that can by right be called dialectical. But of course the Bible is much more than just dialectical although its „dialectics” is an important trait of the Bible.

III.

Now starting from Ricoeur's meditations let us try to answer the question: what can philosophy draw from the Bible?

First of all the question of compatibility arises – we have said that the Bible represents a different kind of rationality: is it compatible with our occidental rationality inherited from the Greeks? Is the language of the Bible fully compatible with the language of the contemporary Occident?

We can answer this question in two points at least: firstly, let me recall that as Paul Ricoeur remarks there is a truly speculative thought in the Bible (see above). Secondly let me recall a truism which paradoxically is not obvious for everybody: the Bible is one of the sources of our occidental

culture. It is not possible here to retrace the interlacement of biblical and Greek way of thinking in the history of the Occident. I will quote just one example: the Chalcedonian creed. It is composed in a highly speculative form borrowed from Greek thought and at the same time it keeps the biblical language of paradox with its dynamical character. There is a dialectical movement from „truly God” to „truly man”, from „without confusion” to „without separation”. The same could be said about the Trinitarian doctrine: God One and Triune. So historically we can argue for the compatibility of the two discourses to a certain extent.

But is there any important reason why philosophy should draw anything from the Hebraic culture of the Bible¹³? There seems to exist a reason why it should not: as an intellectual activity, praxis, philosophy was born in Greece and its historical background still determines its nature. In this sense it is only analogically that we can call Indian or Chinese thought „philosophy”. Indian and Chinese thoughts are not easily compatible with the western way of thinking. But there is one important difference between these cultures and Hebraic culture: the latter did participate in the making of the occidental civilization¹⁴; it has the privilege of being different and yet compatible – translatable (even if not entirely) one might say. In this sense Hebraic thought is really a privileged partner for philosophy. Besides, since the Hebraic heritage is part of us as well as the Greek, it would be one-sided to disregard it on the grounds of the „Greek” character of philosophy; on the contrary for us to understand ourselves it becomes necessary to take it into account.

What exactly then can inspire philosophy in its possible dialog with the biblical culture? It would be presumptuous of me to propose any syntheses – I’ll just dare make some suggestions.

The first suggestion concerns the „non-Greek” way of understanding being mentioned by Ricoeur. It seems that it could be a fruitful field of research.

The second suggestion concerns the law of non-contradiction. In philosophy it is an important part of the Greek heritage; generally speaking it constitutes the foundation of occidental rationality – our science, our legal system, our whole way of thought is based on it. Renouncing it would lead

¹³ I do not speak here about the rich tradition of Jewish medieval philosophy since it incorporated in itself principles of Greek thought.

¹⁴ Clear enough, Europe would not exist without Christianity, and it has a significant Hebraic heritage.

philosophy to intellectual anarchy and irrationalism. But the biblical way of treating it, rather than abolish it, permits us to introduce nuances into it – there are moments and spheres of life when it can't but be suspended, where totalizing is impossible. Dialectics and paradox show that contradiction may be either solved in a dynamical way (as I tried to demonstrate above) or left unresolved and nevertheless productive.

The last suggestion concerns language itself. Perhaps there are some universal philosophical questions but philosophy is made in a concrete language which, unless it determines it, undoubtedly (negatively) imposes some limits on it and (positively) accounts for many good opportunities for it. For example the English language with its analytical character is predisposed for science and analytical philosophy; it provides the latter with a sort of intellectual honesty and responsibility. The French language with its polar division into masculine and feminine is more sensitive to a dialectical description of reality. In this context it is clear that no true dialog with the Hebraic culture is possible without some knowledge of the language. My thesis is that in this particular case the knowledge of the language can enrich philosophy in so far as the Hebraic language contains a way of describing reality that can enlarge our own way (given what is said above about compatibility). This importance of the language is certainly particularly relevant for hermeneutical philosophy.

I am writing this article in English – the language of the great tradition of analytical philosophy. It is clear that hermeneutics is more inclined to the „liberal” way of treating the principle of non-contradiction than analytical philosophy. Yet it would be oversimplifying to say that analytical philosophy is purely the heir to Greek thought whereas hermeneutics can claim also the Hebraic heritage. Analytical philosophy is a powerful philosophical tradition that undergoes significant changes and it seems to me that at present it is more inclined to accept some of the tendencies of continental philosophy. It seems to me that hermeneutics and analytical philosophy are sentenced to be partners in a dialog profitable to either of them. If we speak about a dialog of philosophy with its other (with religion in this instance), so much more is it inevitable to speak about a dialog inside philosophy itself. The unity of the philosophical project demands that we admit that there is something that the two great traditions have in common, something that permits us to lead a dialog and to exploit differences productively. I think that the relationship between the two traditions could be like that between ruling party and opposition in democracies: the one always balances the other and prevents it from extreme and excessive acts, and when they ex-

change their places the situation repeats. Such a mutual control between analytical and „continental” philosophy could be quite helpful. Analytical philosophy might prevent its „continental” partner from falling into a sort of philosophical mysticism with a hermetical language and serve it as an example of an attentive and responsible way of thinking and speaking: indeed its logical apparatus and its achievements do serve some continental philosophers like Habermas and Ricoeur. Continental philosophy could prevent analytical philosophy from the extremes of some forms of positivism (when what can't be verified does not make sense) and make it more sensitive to historicity and dialectics, to cultural determinations of thought. If we speak about a plurality of descriptions of reality¹⁵, we can also admit a plurality of styles of descriptions inside the philosophical project in its entirety. Inside continental philosophy in its turn it is hermeneutics which is perhaps a privileged partner for analytical philosophy. Its medium is language; it will hopefully exist as long as problems of understanding will and if it has more „ontological” presuppositions than analytical philosophy on the whole it is nevertheless not inclined to dogmas – like analytical philosophy it has instruments for the criticism of its own statements. Finally like analytical philosophy hermeneutics does not use a language intelligible only for a narrow circle of initiates.

Are these philosophical languages translatable into each other's terms? Perhaps not entirely but enough for us to promote a dialog based on the principle of charity.

¹⁵Not an uncontrolled plurality that some contemporary philosophers both in America and in Europe seem to promote.

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