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PAUL RICOEUR IN THE CLASSROOM: HERMENEUTICS AND THE TEACHING OF RELIGION

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Amidst the ongoing fragmentation of western culture, the call today is for religious studies to continue the "interpretive turn" in the teaching of its subject matter, with the resources within the related disciplines of hermeneutics, critical theory, and post-structuralism providing the intellectual foundation for making this turn possible. With these resources, the teaching of religious studies is understood as a fundamentally *hermeneutical* enterprise concerned with the discourse of the religions. This model envisions the task of teaching religious studies as one where the instructor and students are critical of the sources and traditions within the religions; as interdisciplinary in its curricular organization; as sensitive to the ways in which language constructs and subverts meaning in the myths and symbols of religious communities; and as potentially transformative of individuals and societies as it retrieves from the past and projects for the future, healthy visions of social renewal.

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy is especially well-suited to the task of explicating this pedagogical approach. While positivist science devalues the web of myths and stories that form our social worlds, Ricoeur observes that "there is more in myth than in reflection: myth has more potential even if it is less determinate and rigorous."¹ His recognition of the surplus of meaning in myth, symbol, and narrative allows his interpretation theory to be aware of the liberating potential, and systematic distortions, within particular religious texts and communities. In his work on the debate between Gadamer and Habermas, Ricoeur notes that all understanding is a dialectic

between the rich experience of participation *in* tradition and the exigency for systematic critique *of* tradition.² His mediation of this hermeneutics/critical theory controversy suggests that classroom teaching about the religions begins with the recognition that the authoritative traditions of our cultural and religious past alternately have the power of renewal and the power of domination.

More recently, this insight has been deepened by his post-structuralist concern for the playful and unnerving polysemy and ambiguity characteristic of all cultural traditions, religious or otherwise. In his study of scriptural narratives, for example, Ricoeur argues that the Bible is not a stable book with a central message but, rather, a complicated intertext constituted by a variety of genres and themes and devoid of any stable center.³ While influenced by the deconstructionist exposé of the troubled nature of our western heritage, Ricoeur does not use deconstruction as the "new hermeneutic of the death of God."⁴ Instead, his concern is to allow religious symbols and stories to mean as much as they possibly can mean. In the classroom, this understanding would entail the affirmation of a genuine pluralism in the interpretive process by not absolutizing one "new" or "old" hermeneutic as the final arbiter of a text's meaning.

In this brief essay I will examine Ricoeur's thought as a resource for the praxis of religious studies; to this end I will consider three themes in his work: the laboratory, refiguration, and the second naiveté. Before I start, however, two qualifications are in order. First, my point here is not to suggest that Ricoeur himself would own these three themes as his own vis-à-vis the topic of teaching, or that the French philosopher, in his own teaching, embodies the suggestions I will make below (for example, while I envision religious studies indebted to Ricoeur as best occurring within a conversational, seminar format, Ricoeur traditionally uses a lecture style in his own teaching). Second, the pragmatic suggestions I will make here are just that—suggestions—and do not imply that all or even most faculty who use Ricoeur's hermeneutic of religions should follow the same teaching methods as those proposed in this essay. My hope, rather, is that as we have all become acutely aware today of the situation-specific location of religion in structures of discourse, history, culture, class, and gender. Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory can provide dialogical coherence to a way of teaching that claims diversity and plurality as its distinctive strengths.

The Laboratory

In a provocative aside to his study of theories of action, Ricoeur observes that an ethically neutral art-for-art's-sake mentality "suppresses one of the oldest functions of art, that [art]

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constitutes an ethical laboratory where the artist pursues through the mode of fiction experimentation of values."⁵ The relevance of this comment to religious studies pedagogy is apparent in Ricoeur's notion that all aesthetic production occurs within an "ethical laboratory" in which "experimentation of values" takes place. Assuming that religious studies is concerned with the forms and images of creative expression and not with a list of neutral facts, then its medium for study, the classroom, is aptly described as an experience-rich laboratory where the creative, destabilizing, and often meaningful exploration and of values and ideas occurs.

For me, this has had the consequence of a self-conscious attempt to create open and free space in the classroom for the exploration and testing of the life-options and ideas that emerge from a conversation with the primary sources of the world's religions. In this way, the classroom becomes less a place where students are tested for their knowledge of the religions and more an environment where a collective thought-experiment about the transformative possibilities of religious symbols can happen. I have found that structural changes follow when the classroom is viewed as an ethical laboratory: the instructor sits with class members in a common space; time is spent thinking through good lead-in questions for discussion; and, finally, all writing and testing requirements are set up so that they encourage experimental and imaginative thought, not simply the regurgitation of names, dates, and ideas.

Refiguration

If the medium for religious studies is the classroom as testing-ground for intellectual and ethical experimentation, then the subject matter for religious studies is the fictive representations of reality incarnated in the lives and texts and images of the world's religions. We study the imaginative variations on the world, what Ricoeur calls the "not less real but more real augmentations of reality" that project ontologically rich and full models of another way of being, another form of life for ourselves and the planet, that liberates what is essential to us by suggesting what is possible for us.⁶ The visions of the Plains Indians, the parables of Jesus, the poetry of the Gita, the lyrics of American slave religion, all these texts create new mythoi that creatively and expansively reconstruct reality, not simply replicate it or ignore it altogether.

Ricoeur often speaks of the correlation between seeing-as and being-as as the key to a sympathetic understanding of texts, religious or otherwise. When the student ventures *seeing* the environment around her as the religious world portrays it, she discovers this environment to *be* as something strangely different than what she had originally thought it to be. The text adumbrates what is by enticing us to see things as it projects possibilities. Reality actually can be remade and augmented by the increase in being that the text or image displays in front of itself. In this way, the religious text's ontological surplus fundamentally challenges our Enlightenment habits of relying on technical, nonfigurative language to describe everything, a habit of mind and heart that has left most of our experiences thin and brittle and devoid of a discourse by which they can be made meaningful. Today, as Ricoeur often notes, our individual and everyday worlds remain underdeveloped and impoverished because we no longer have a public language that speaks to the dimensions of ultimacy in the world. The pathos of our time is that we no longer have access to the language of

religious thought and experience for the interpretation of the manifold of experience.

Taking my cues from Ricoeur's notion of religion and art as refigurations of reality, I like to tell students, at the outset of every class, that I want them to risk inhabiting the imaginative thought-worlds of the religion or religions that we study for that particular term. I do not mean by this that I desire that they attempt (à la Romanticism) to step back into the minds of the figures under study, but rather that they engage, as Coleridge put it, in a willing suspension of disbelief to the end that they learn to occupy the imaginative space of the poet, seer, or preacher that we are investigating. On a practical basis, this means that I consistently use the primary texts of the religions (with all their vertiginous diversity, anachronistic oddities, and mix of genres and subject matters) for the class bibliography because I would rather have a student chew away at the meaty matter of a particular tradition that can truly challenge her than receive an oftentimes sanitized and watered-down version of that tradition in a textbook. It also means that I use video (especially the *Long Search* series), other images, and occasionally sacred music in order to "trope" the students' conventional reality-perceptions.

The Second Naiveté

For the student to risk an imaginary absorption into the thought-world of the religions is, in effect, to experience what Ricoeur refers to as the second naiveté. This is the objective of studying religion in a college or university environment: to pass through the first naiveté of literal-minded and uncritical religious belief, and through the second stage of positivist criticism of religion as illusory and irrational, to the third step of a critical and thoughtful openness to the transformation and enlightening possibilities of religious belief. This posture is an outworking of the imagination's capacity to reconstruct what is by reflecting on what is not, to think seriously, and not simply literally, about the sometimes explicit and sometimes latent utopian possibilities of religious ideas and symbols. Ricoeur writes that the "best function of utopia is the exploration of the possible. . . . This function of utopia is finally the function of the nowhere."⁷ Humanistic inquiry is singularly poised to foster conversational forums in which the study of texts and symbols that speak from the nowhere of the imagination is possible. It is here that the study of religion, the study of the world's real and imagined utopias, comes into play, with the result that the goal of this study is not the acquisition of information, nor the endless free-play of interpretation, but, finally, the arrival at a less-than-secure place in the conversation where the student can wager on a certain set of values and ideas that she can rely upon (however provisional and open to revision this reliance may be) as worthy of her time and effort—and even her devotion, perhaps her life-long devotion.

The second naiveté in religious studies is the moment of approbation in the interpretive process, the moment where the horizon of the student and the horizon of the religious subject matter begin to merge. It is at this point that the transfer takes place from text to life, from meaning to significance, as Ricoeur puts it. This is the moment of conversion in the study of religion, not the proselytizing conversion of a student to an historical religion (though that, of course, may occur), but the conversion of a student's whole person to a new way of being

in and thinking about the world offered by the heritage of "great" and "little" religious traditions.

I have tried in different ways to enhance the ethos of the second naiveté in my classes, but two small changes in the manner that I teach come to mind in this context. As a requirement for most in-class discussion and writing assignments, I ask students to make some sort of connection between what we are investigating and how this particular subject-matter might apply to our lives today. How would Black Elk's treatment of the earth as sacred mother impact our own environmental discussions? How would the prophets' and Jesus' rejection of sacrificial violence influence our contemporary quest for scapegoats among victims of disease, homelessness, and urban crime? The other helpful pedagogical tool I use is to allow students to satisfy a course's final requirement by doing something other than a final term paper or exam. In this way, students can demonstrate their ownership in and involvement with the class's subject-matter in a way that is creative and expansive and meaningful for them. For the course's final project, then, I have had students submit to me (and sometimes to the whole class) poetry, plays, dialogues, artistic creations, and religious rituals (in one case a student celebrated a feminist/New Age liturgy replete with music, symbols, and sacred foods).

To be a part of a one-time community in this appropriation process, to sense that I am contributing to the identity-forma-

tion, intellectual growth, and developing spirituality of a student is to me the greatest reward of being a college teacher. It is a reward that on good days can compensate for the sometimes limiting working conditions, salaries, and promotion requirements that constitute the bureaucratic system of modern academic existence. Paul Ricoeur's richly suggestive oeuvre is a helpful resource for the academic who wants to foster learning environments where the study of religion is undertaken in a fashion that is experimental, playful, and, for many of us, publicly and personally liberating.

NOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, tr. Charles A. Kelbley (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), 18.
2. Idem, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and tr. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 131-44.
3. Idem, "Le récit interprétatif," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 73 (1985): 17-38.
4. The phrase belongs to Mark C. Taylor in his *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), 6.
5. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., tr. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985-1988), 1.59.
6. Idem, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," *Man and World* 12 (1979): 136.
7. Idem, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (Columbia: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 310.

INTRODUCING RELIGION WITH VIDEO MODELS

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If there has ever been a nearly universal question in the field of Religious Studies it is "What do you do in your undergraduate introductory course?" Judging from the variety of texts available for a first course, there is clearly no single-minded approach to the problem. My own experience which has over the years been reinforced by conversations with colleagues, suggests that teaching such a course is usually an unsatisfying struggle. Because hard things clamor for attention, I came to realize that Marshal McLuhan was right, but might not have known it when he said "the medium is the message." Teaching and learning are the same thing! If learning is thinking, and thinking is struggling with problems, then teaching (which is showing someone how to think) is also a contest of some sort. Teaching is wrestling with ideas in public.¹

Problem 1

The problem is that professors and students alike have taken the process of education for granted! Students seem not to have a technical understanding of scholarship and find themselves in a situation in which they have no clear model for imitation. But even less obvious is the fact that the students themselves do not realize that they don't know what thinking is! This is partly the teacher's fault (because he/she assumes the student knows), and partly the fault of the student's experience of "education" prior to coming to college.

It is important to consider what this prior experience is and what sort of "definition of learning" it provides for the college student. Let me clarify what I mean by making a gross over-

statement. We send our children to kindergarten where they are trained to behave, trained to play with others, trained to function according to the regimen of class; and this "training" model is used appropriately through grade four. Now we begin to train them to think, to spell, to use math formulas, to exercise in gym, and still to "behave." By the time they reach high school, the only model of education they have to imitate is the "training model" where conformity to a system spells success. In high school, it is assumed that the student knows what thinking is, and those who do not respond appropriately "simply don't want to," or "have a problem." When the student who has been successful in conforming to this "training model" comes to college, it is taken for granted that they know what constitutes education—thinking and learning—when in their reality, education means "telling me what to do so I can conform."

Emphasis upon educational achievement measured by test scores has further reduced the learning experience to a national program of "Trivial Pursuit." My students are able to follow the most complex set of directives to perfection; without directions, they have no idea of what to do: they simply don't know how to think.

Analysis

It would be all too easy to argue that we should change this system. I do not want to do that. I want to suggest that we need to do more—to require "facts" and "content" as substance for thought, but then demonstrate to our students how to think about the "facts." It seems to me that our students need to be