

Paul Ricœur on Theology

His Legacy from Karl Jaspers

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Taking into account that Ricœur took distance from most theology and preferred to focus on “biblical thinking” and biblical exegesis, he was an anti-theologian. But he was also a philosopher of religious language, and I think the best in his century. Therefore I consider that his opposition to theology has to do with his impression that most theologians do not reflect on their own language as theologians and thus do not take distance from their own work so that they could be aware of what they are doing. Distance would not mean denial but self-understanding.

For the same reason he could not accept religious rhetoric as more than a source for philosophy. He could admire this rhetoric in Pascal and Kierkegaard, but he would not repeat it as thinking. In the same way he could admire the language of Karl Barth, but as far as I know he never used Barth in his religious thinking. He could better accept Bultmann because he was an exegete, but he never took over Bultmann’s use of Heidegger in his interpretation of the Bible.

His distance to theology was a legacy from Jaspers. And I agree with what Bengt Kristensson Uggla said already in his dissertation from 1994 *Kommunikation på bristningsgränsen* (*Communication at the bursting point*) that the reception of Ricœur has neglected to consider his early writings and in particular the influence from Jaspers in order to understand him.¹ He not only took over Jaspers’ view of communication but also his distrust of theology. And this distrust was not only a distrust of liberal theology but also of the theology of Kierkegaard, which claimed that logical paradox was the object of faith and that faith was only an inward act which for Kierkegaard in the end signified negative decisions about marriage and profession and a demand for a life as a martyr. Jaspers assumed nearly all the existential concepts of Kierkegaard

such as the instant, the individual, choice, subjectivity and the concept of existence itself. But he did not assume his Christianity.

Ricœur did the same. However he did not assume the philosophical faith of Jaspers. But as some notes in the book *Karl Jaspers et la Philosophie de l’existence* (*Karl Jaspers and the Philosophy of Existence*) show, he became fascinated by the Kierkegaardian idea of repetition in the sense of the reaffirmation of existence.² But he also thought that Kierkegaard gave up this idea, and he believed that he already did that after *Gjentagelsen* (*Repetition*) and *Frygt og Bæven* (*Fear and Trembling*) in 1843, although as shown by new Kierkegaard research this change in Kierkegaard’s thinking only happened in the last period of his life, after *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* (*Works of Love*) in 1847.³ But this view on Kierkegaard as a theologian who gave up his best idea convinced him that Kierkegaard could only serve as poetic rhetoric and later he found Jean Nabert who developed much more philosophically the idea of original affirmation based on the thought of Maine de Biran and Immanuel Kant.

I presume that this rejection of Kierkegaard’s thinking founded the mistrust of theology in Ricœur. And this mistrust also brought him to avoid nearly any use of Kierkegaard after his lectures in 1963 on “Kierkegaard and evil” and “Philosophy after Kierkegaard”.⁴ Only at the end

¹ Bengt Kristensson Uggla, *Kommunikation på Bristningsgränsen* (Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 1994/1999).

² Mikel Dufrenne et Paul Ricœur, *Karl Jaspers et la Philosophie de l’existence*, (Paris: Seuil), 179, note 18 a.o.

³ Pia Søltoft, “*Kærlighedens Kende. En undersøgelse af kærlighedens skikkelser og kendetegn, sådan som de beskrives i Søren Kierkegaards forfatterskab* (København, unpublished draft, 2013). Cf. Søltoft; “Kierkegaard and the Sheer Phenomenon of Love”, 289-306 in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2013* (eds. H. Schultz, J. Stewart & K. Verstrynge; New York/Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

⁴ Cf. Peter Kemp, “Ricœur’s silence about Kierkegaard”, paper for the International Conference on the

of *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (*Memory History, and Forgetting*) would he quote Kierkegaard's praise of forgetting as the liberation of care from "What we learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air",⁵ but this text expressed a contentment about being a human and does not have the misanthropic tone that Ricœur earlier found in other writings of Kierkegaard.

It is through this that Ricœur stressed the Yes of creation, not only against existentialistic negativism, but according to Boyd Blundell also against Christocentric theology that has claimed as Karl Barth, that the study of the *real* human can be done only by taking the man Jesus as its starting point.⁶ The question is what Ricœur saw in Barth since his thought is not Christocentrism. I think we can find an answer in the interview he gave to François Azouvi and Marc de Launay in the book *La critique et la conviction* (*Critique and Conviction*). There he claims two things: firstly, that Barth has taught him that

what theologians call "dogmatic" consists in a conceptual and discursive arrangement of the sermon that connects a word considered as fundamental with a circumstantial judgment focusing on the present and the future of confessional communities.⁷

And secondly, that at a certain moment in his life he had, under the influence of Karl Barth,

driven the dualism [between theology and philosophy] very far, to claim a kind of prohibition of talk about God in philosophy.⁸ But he recognizes that later he has talked about the difference between "the philosophical argument [...] and the deep motivation of my philosophical engagement".⁹ And he adds that by motivation he understands "sources" in the sense of "something that I do not master".¹⁰ And amongst "sources of philosophy" he counts exactly what in his lecture on "Philosopher après Kierkegaard" he calls "the rhetorical-religious genius" of Kierkegaard.¹¹

One can argue, as does for instance Bengt Kristensson Uggla, that Ricœur's work on the Bible was an integral part of broader hermeneutical ambition to rehabilitate a poetic discourse. But since Ricœur has always wanted to show that "the symbol gives rise to thought",¹² I consider that his ambition, the promised land, was to reinvent theology, not as a semi-philosophy or as a new philosophy, but as a thinking in its own right, a reasonable poetics of existence recognized as a way of understanding of life and world, a theology not only in ceasefire with philosophy but in peace because it is a thinking on a different level than philosophy, a poetic level different from any other level of thinking.

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⁵ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 655; *Memory, History and Forgetting* / translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 505.

⁶ Cf. Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricœur between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 154.

⁷ Paul Ricœur, *La critique et la conviction, Entretiens avec François Azouvi et Marc de Launay* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), 216; Ricœur, *La critique*, 226.

⁸ Ricœur, *La critique*, 226.

⁹ Ricœur, *La critique*, 227.

¹⁰ Ricœur, *La critique*, 227.

¹¹ Paul Ricœur, *Lectures 2, La contrée des philosophes* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 34.

¹² Paul Ricœur: *Finitude et culpabilité, II La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 323-332; *The Symbolism of Evil* (translated by Emerson Buchanan; Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 347-357