

Paul Ricœur and the Language of the Church Community

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Introduction: Thinking the Church

Rare are the philosophers who are interested in the idea of the church, in the church as idea. But it is the case, for example, for Kant in *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (*Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*), 1793, when he speaks of “ethical community”. My purpose in the present study is to show that Paul Ricœur developed very original reflections on this subject, reflections that can be considered both as witness to a pivotal period and as testing ground or as a laboratory of philosophical themes developed elsewhere or further. What is a *philosopher*, on the eve of May 1968, thinking about the “meaning and function of the church community”? This is, in fact, the title of a collection of three unpublished texts taken from copied lecture notes¹ in “Cahiers d’étude du Centre protestant de recherches et de rencontres du Nord” (n°26-1968) from a colloquium on this theme in Amiens in 1967.² It is around these

¹ Throughout this study, the citations identified with a Roman numeral and a letter come from three original texts recovered from recordings and copied lecture notes in “Cahiers d’étude du Centre protestant de recherches et de rencontres du Nord” (n°26-1968). These three texts are entitled “Being Protestant Today” (which dates from 1965 and seems to have been distributed in advance to the participants), “Presence of the Church in the World” (a title which evokes the books of Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 1948, and *False Presence in the Modern World*, 1963), and “Sense and Language.” The reader will find a detailed outline of these unpublished texts in the appendix 2. Paul Ricœur, to whom I had asked in the early 1990s if he would authorize their publication in the formation of a small book by Labor et Fides, never went over them for correction in the end.

² Protestant France of the 1960s saw the emergence, alongside traditional parishes, of research centers which represented precisely another form of church: le Centre protestant de recherche de rencontres du

core texts and others around this same period that I try to reconstruct the idea of “confessing community”, which interested Ricœur then.

My starting hypothesis, which I only sketch here, is that religion is both a language among others, separated, and a fusion of different languages, the point where the same language speaks to all before settling into separate and autonomous languages.³ It seems to me that Ricœur himself alternates between an acute sense of the separation of genres of language and an intimate sense of the fusion of these languages. In any case, it is certain that the question of faith and religion is profoundly linked, for him, with the word [*parole*] and language [*langage*], so that religion is for him a language into which one is born, and he operated a dual and careful work of translation for a long time according to the audience to which he addressed himself – to his activist Protestant “friends” or to his philosopher colleagues.

In the examined texts, which are addressed to the first of these audiences, one will see three major themes successively approached which allow to outline what a “church community” is. First, we see how Ricœur proposes a *rapprochement between the function of this community and that of utopia*. Here, utopia is not an es-

Nord, le Centre protestant de l'Ouest, le Centre de Vilemétrerie, le Centre protestant d'études et de documentation, etc. These centers gathered Protestants among which certain ones no longer attended parishes and also there mixed in a number of Marxists. They and the circles which gathered them disappeared in the wake of May 1968. It is thus in this context that one must place the proposal of Paul Ricœur, then president of the Mouvement du christianisme social and of the Fédération protestante de l'enseignement.

³ I propose three states of language: a state of fusion where everything blends in a dramatic or hymnal way, a state of separation of genres which marks the effort of classicism, a state of translation which proposes of mixed genres of judicious or amorous crossings.

cape from the world, but a limit horizon which demands us to return to the world otherwise. We perhaps have a similar utopia when Pierre Bayle, chased from the Catholic France of Louis XIV, but disappointed by the fanaticism of the Protestant churches of refuge, publishes the periodical *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* in the 1680s: the free republic appears as a figure of the invisible church, and thus utopic. According to Paul Ricœur, perhaps also in connection with a disappointment or a sense of crisis, we sometimes have to make something like a *fictional ecclesiology*. The dramatic figure of the church community that he proposes searches for a passage between imagination and institution – a difficult road, which will also be his as dean at Nanterre. Yet this imagined community responds to a call; it is provoked by a word, which presupposes a framework, a linguistic theatre.

Next we will see exactly how for him the element of this confessing community *par excellence* is language. Ricœur, perhaps to balance what was then the apotheosis of the notion of work, shows language [*le langage*] and word [*la parole*] as the major site or major battlefield of his time. To the extent where language is, as he will say later, the institution of institutions, and to the extent where linguistic trust, restored in spite of and through suspicion, will seem to him later the element of all human attestation, it is clear that this is a fundamental issue. *The constitution of the church community is firstly language*; that is its function. I will search in the dialectic not of writing and orality, but of language and the word, the philosophical equivalent of the intimate dialectic in the confessing community between religion and faith.

Finally, we will try to find in the linguistic turn of Ricœur's philosophy one of the reasons for him turning away from the purely speculatively dialogue between philosophy and theology and to search within the diversity of *expressions* of the confessing community the opening of a relation to a possible world. This interpretive opening is inseparable from this plurality itself. My hypothesis is that the plurality of linguistic genres entails a *plurality of forms of the church community*. The diversity of literary genres in the collection of biblical texts raises not only a plurality in relation to the world, to time, to God,

but the possibility of a diversity of forms of community. Ricœur refers to the inexhaustible inventiveness of reception which continues a tradition of reading in constantly making it branch off by original translations, but also the *canonical* formation of the community as it overcomes and accepts discordance.

To conclude, we return to ourselves in a context that has changed in many ways, but where the perspective of the meaning and function of the church community remains a topic of reflection perhaps more urgent than ever, both as space of deconstruction and as horizon of fiction and exploration of possibilities.

A Utopic Community

The utopic function of the church community appears as a counterpoint to an analysis of modern society described as a technical world. It is a society that accumulates the means and eliminates the question of ends. It is also a society founded on rapid growth, but which fails to give meaning and significance to this growth, which thereby becomes a false infinite. Ricœur writes that this society

is characterized by a growing mastery of man over the means and an effacement of his ends, as if the increasing rationality of means gradually reveals the absence of meaning. This is particularly true in capitalist societies where man is handed over to the pressure of advertising and credit institutions, to the incessant pressure of lust. In this way, the pathetic motive of a society of production is rendered manifest: desire without end. Another vain dream animates the man of consumer society: the augmentation of his power. At its limit, it cancels time, space, the destiny of birth and death. But in such a project, all becomes instrumental, useful, in the universal reign of the manipulable and available. (I a)

It is within this context that Ricœur calls for utopia:

In the face of this, the task is not of recrimination and regret, but to witness to a fundamental meaning. How? Even if the word was suspicious or ambiguous, I would say advocate for utopia. I call utopia this vision of a fulfilled humanity both as

totality of men and as the singular destiny of each person. It is the aim that can give meaning: to desire that humanity is one is to desire that it is realized in each person. We are thus responsible for the pressure and the thought of a double destiny. The first, that of totality, is the issue of all debates on decolonization, on research of a generalized economy, on nationalism. It is a matter that prevails on particularisms and egoisms; the needs of humanity taken as a whole. But there is another side, that of the anonymity and inhumanity of industrial society, which requires that we personalize to the maximum relations increasingly more and more abstract. I say, like Spinoza, “the more we know singular things, the more we know God”. This recourse to utopia gives me the opportunity to clarify in which manner I see the relationship between ethics and politics. I believe neither in the dissolution of ethics into politics under pain of Machiavellianism nor in the direct intervention of ethics into politics under pain of moralism. What I am searching for is the articulation of two levels of morality: the level of moral conviction and the level of moral responsibility of power. (I a)

The function of the church community would be to exert a constant “utopic” pressure on the inclinations of our society, to resist its abuses, but also to give to it a horizon, an aim, a point that introduces a tension with instrumental rationality where it is not a question of efficient management blind to the pathology of desire that it arouses. This slight pressure, this inclination or disinclination introduced in the figures of the hopeful, but also in the small choices, concrete habits and maxims of action, can seem pathetic, but it weighs like a small rudder that can change the interior orientation of the entire ship in the end.⁴ I would like to insist here on two lines of argument outlined in this text: the first, on the difference between ethical conviction and ethical responsibility, and the second indicating the breadth of the utopic horizon between the task of regrouping dislocated humanity and the task of singling out personal destinies.

⁴ This is the image of the language which governs the body given by John in his epistle (John 3:5) and commented by Louis Simon, then Ricœur’s pastor at Palaiseau, in his work *Une éthique de la sagesse. Commentaire de l’Épître de Jacques* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1961).

On the first line of argument, one sees how old and radical, according to Ricœur, is the affirmation of an irrepressible ethical plurality:

My deep conviction is that we cannot have a unified conception of morals; we cannot unify us ourselves morally because we pursue incompatible things; on the one hand a certain purity of goals and intentions, on the other, a certain efficacy of means. These two words – purity, efficacy – can also deteriorate into each other: purity-purism, efficacy-Machiavellianism. But the moral life precisely rests on a dialectic of the desirable absolute and the realizable optimum. (II b)

Depending on Weber, as we know,⁵ Ricœur insists on the work of mutual correction between the two ethics. One will find this tension again later between love and justice (see *Amour et justice*, Tübingen: Mohr AJ, 1990). On the one hand, there is the Gospel ideal, which is not very far from the Kantian ideal.⁶ But on the other hand, everything is not possible at the same time in a given period (here he gives the example of our societies, which do not know how to be both egalitarian and productive). The ethical paradox of responsible conviction is that it is not limited to an external accusation, but that it must not cease to implicate oneself. And to not too quickly resign, because it is this resignation of our intelligence and our will which makes the bed of Machiavellianism.

The danger of technocracy, of bureaucracy, is clear. It is always possible that the incompetent people that we all are will be eliminated by those who know, and that there is a seizure of decision by the competent ones. But it must be said that this seizure feeds our resignation. It is because we are not informed enough and do not take the trou-

⁵ In his lecture in 1920 on this theme, Max Weber had anticipated with lucidity what for Paul Ricœur was the consequence of his own “blunder” as a pacifist youth. Ricœur had great admiration for this lecture.

⁶ “We can present it as a sort of ideal, of idealism, of absolute respect of the human person, in Kantian language, or according the Gospel perspective of perfection: ‘Be perfect as your Holy Father is perfect.’ That is moral conviction. In Kantian language, ‘Treat always the other man not only as a means, but also as an end.’” (II b)

ble to learn elementary things that we are put out of the game. (II a)

It is plausible to place in the wake of this tension an alternative dialectic of the social imaginary proposed by Ricœur between utopia and ideology:

On the one hand, we must resist the seduction of pure utopic expectations; they can only despair action. Because of a lack of anchorage in ongoing experience, they are incapable of formulating a practical path towards the ideas which are situated elsewhere. The expectations must be determinate, thus finite and relatively modest if they are to be able to arouse responsible engagement. Yes, one must avoid the horizon of expectation of escape. We must bring the present closer by a staggering of intermediate projects in relation to action. [...] We must, on the other hand, resist shrinking the space of experience. For that, we must struggle against the tendency to consider only the past from the standpoint of the achieved, unchangeable, passed. We must reopen the past, rekindle in it unfulfilled potentialities, that were prevented or massacred. In short, against the adage that wants the future to be open and contingent, and the past unequivocally closed and necessary, we must render our expectations more determinate and our experiences more indeterminate.⁷

This does not prevent that

utopia is what prevents the horizon of expectation from fusing with the field of experience. It is what maintains the gap between hope and tradition. (II a)

The second line of argument is also largely documented by Ricœur and contributes to give precision to the utopic horizon. It was already claimed that modern society, in its technical and instrumental aspect, determines a pathology of desire which affects both interpersonal bonds and collective solidarities.

I think that in this absence of meaning, we experience not only the alteration of our relations with

others, but also the absence of collective projects [...] We are looking for an inclusive rationality, which would give both individual meaning and collective meaning, which would allow us to understand all the meanings of the word “to understand” – that is to say, that we would be included in it. (II a)

Only such a “comprehensive” rationality (hermeneutics in a broad or radical sense of the term) would allow to gather together the sections of an objective rationality and an irrational subjectivity.

the human subject becomes pure violence at the moment where all objects become objects of calculation. (II a)

And he continues:

Thus, on the one hand, we must gather together humanity, which is dislocated, and on the other hand, individualize the destinies which are uniform. Two fronts to hold together. (II a)

This broad dialectic is evoked when one comes across “Le socius et le prochain”, when Ricœur indicates that:

The theme of the neighbor operates, therefore, as permanent critique of the social bond. With respect to the love of neighbor, the social bond is never intimate enough and never broad enough. It is never intimate enough since social mediation will never become the equivalent of the encounter, of immediate presence. It is never broad enough since the group only affirms itself against another group and closes in on itself. The neighbor is the double existence of the close and the far.⁸

One cannot separate the demand of human community in its reiterative universality from that of human personality in its deep singularity. I would like to add that it is on both sides that language plays with metaphor. It is to this language, both dramatic and metaphorical, that I would like to attribute the character of language in a state of fusion. We will see later how this

⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, Tome III* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 312-313; [*Time and Narrative III* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1990), 228].

⁸ Paul Ricœur, “Le socius et le prochain,” 113-127 in *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), 125; [*History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1965), 108].

language is changed into separate and clearly distinct genres, but also is made available for translation, for linguistic hospitality.

A Confessing Community

We now come to the central point of this study: the linguistic character of this community aroused by a word [*parole*]. The language of church community is not an instrument of “com,” a means, a technique of communication.

I hasten to say that when I speak here of language, I do not think only of words that must change, but also the meaning of the message. (III)

Ricœur seeks in the word [*parole*], to the contrary, what would counteract the excesses of merely instrumental communication where the logic of efficacy, productivity, consummability, and of communicational performance, so to speak, prevails. All the problems of our society can be considered as problems of signification and illnesses of language.

Language is the battlefield, the place of all our combats. Because it is in language itself which is the place of forgetfulness: [...] the power of language to interrogate man and to open possibilities is forgotten. To open possibilities: possibility to exist as man, to tell a story. It is the struggle against this central forgetfulness, which requires me to preserve, on the side of logical and technical language that is objective, a language which understands, on the side of technical language by which I dispose of all things, the language which awakens possibilities. (I b)

The function of preaching is therefore in each case first to

restore the space of interrogation in which the question can take on meaning. (I b)

And this space is common to those who are raised by this interrogation, question or call. The confessing community is *first* constituted by this space of possible interrogation.

It is the basis of the message to understand this community, not as an addition of “I” nor

even as a “third” institution, but as the always difficult possibility of a “we.”

I do not think that the subject of faith can be an individual; the subject of faith is not an “I”, but “we” [...] Interpretation can only be a segment of tradition, that is to say, in the transmission of the message in the history of a community. The word [*parole*] only arouses man if it continues to be transmitted. That is why preaching can only be heard by the many. (I c)

Ricœur resists, then, the ironic temptation to abandon the community, the church, the parish. He believes that outside of a confessing community, critical work is nothing more than painstaking, scholarly exegesis that is empty.

What is central is the possibility to speak of the first person plural, the possibility to say *we*. And this “we” only has internal meaning for the community if it speaks to all outside of the community.

So even if I now speak inside of a Christian community, I speak for all, and I would like to hold onto a language which is comprehensible by all. (II c)

This is precisely why we need a linguistic community capable of generating and supporting this word [*parole*].

If a confessing community does not bear the work of interpretation, the first dialectic that we described in the first part also dies. The dialectic of conviction and responsibility demands to be supported by the concrete dialectic of the ecclesial and the social. The idea that the Church should lose itself in the world until it disappears seems to me stripped of meaning because if it loses itself, there is no longer anything that is lost. It is the function, no longer of preaching, but of worship to maintain an internal milieu whereby there may also be an external relation of church-world. It is here, as in language: if the tension between poetry and prose disappears from our language, our language would be destroyed. (I c)

Ricœur outlines here the idea that the poetry of worship responds to the prose of the modern world:

the religious community must not have two languages, but two levels of language; one which will be like a liturgy that will be the gift of the internal function of the organism, the other, a prose, a profane language that takes from the concepts and practices of all men. And it is the art of holding together the poetry of the internal life and the prose of the relation to the world of a community, which will determine its survival. All the tensions that I stated earlier - reason-understanding or meaning and calculating intelligence, conviction and responsibility, perspective and prospective - I would say that the church community must be the place where all these tensions are lived to the most extreme point of brightness and intensity. (II c)

But to fully understand the situation of the language of the confessing community, it is necessary to call on another tension, still more intimate. Ricœur writes:

the confessing community is this place where the problem of the word is lived, thought, and announced as the conflict of religion and faith. (III c)

On the one hand, faith continues to deconstruct religion.

The problem of demythologization is born there. It is born from our cultural distance with respect to the credible that is available from the apostolic period. It is therefore necessary to make us contemporaries of Christ, to appropriate the essential message, to carry out the destruction of the letter (I use destruction in the Heideggerian sense: deconstruction). I do not wish by it to remove the true scandal; the task to the contrary is to eliminate the false scandal to restore the original scandal. (I b)

But on the other hand, this deconstruction cannot go far if it is not done within a tradition. It takes the existence of a confessing community to live the struggle of religion and faith.

I do not think that faith can exist outside of a recovery and indefinite correction of the religious vehicle. (I c)

Since Kierkegaard, if not Calvin, until Karl Barth, this critique of religion by faith is a classic theme in Protestant theology. But in revers-

ing the critical front to show that there is no living faith without a religious element already deposited, Ricœur proposes an original approach for his time. Later in the examined text, he will propose the convergence between external critique, which uses the demystification of the masters of suspicion in the wake of Feuerbach, and the internal critique used by demythologization in the wake of Bultmann, which is a deconstruction of secondary rationalizations and alternative theological elaborations:

We must never forget from the view of the first Christian generation, there was a writing [*écriture*]. This writing was the Bible, that is to say the Old Testament. Before this writing, there was living preaching. But to the extent that writings issued from this preaching that were deposited and sedimented, they become a second writing in their turn, what we call the New Testament. [...] [t]he first preaching represented a deconstruction of the letter of the Old Testament. [...] [i]t is the Gospel which wants to be demythologized. (III b)

It is interesting to note that these texts by Ricœur are indeed contemporary to those by which Jacques Derrida introduced *deconstruction* with the idea of textual difference [*différance*]. Rather Ricœur speaks of the gap and tension as seen with the living metaphor [*la métaphore vive*] where he *retains* the semantic differences, sensitive to that which is already sedimented and the original gaps. But it is not a question, according to Ricœur, of opposing the word to writing. And if writing is the paradigm of distanciation in community - we know how this autonomisation of the written in relation to the intentions of the author is for him a major and positive phenomenon - it is one of the points on which he distances himself perhaps from Gadamer. It seems to me that the dialectic of religion and faith is informed here by language and the word (or of writing as it operates in semantic differences); constantly the word must deconstruct language to spawn a new way. But this word is based on linguistic traces of previous words. In place of resolving the opposition between structure and event, language and the word, Ricœur builds on this dialectic of sedimentation and innovation which will take on its full deployment in *La métaphore vive* (*The Rule of Metaphor*),

1975, and *Temps et récit I-III (Time and Narrative I-III)*, 1983-85.

He writes again:

Ebeling states that the bent of religion is the relic. The relic is a remnant of the primitive object, which traverses time without being used and without being destroyed, which traverses history such that it was at the origin and comes to us. The word [*parole*] cannot become a relic because it survives by interpretation, constant reinterpretation. I call interpretation not only what we can do intellectually, but also practically, socially to render current a word that continues to be word when it is constantly converted again into an event, which becomes again constantly itself an event. Consequently, the word is always an event dying and disappearing [...] it arises and disappears. The word is fleeting, opposed to structures, which remain. (III c)

But language would die without its permanent recovery by words pulling the old instruments by new interpretations; the word would be insignificant if it distanced itself from significations already deposited, not only available, but also that became reserve provisions.

This is where we can rejoin the much later proposals of Paul Ricœur comparing the irreducible plurality of religions to those of languages, and opening up the question of linguistic hospitality to other languages, to other traditions, to other cultures, to other religions than those in which one grew up. It is under the auspices of this hospitality that religious dialogue will be treated through the paradigm of translation. In *La critique et la conviction (Critique and Conviction)*, he speaks precisely of his Protestant conviction as a

random fate transformed into a continuous choice [...] a religion is like a language in which one is born or where one was transferred by exile or by hospitality. In any case, it is in oneself; what is implied is to recognize that there are other languages spoken by other people.⁹

⁹ Paul Ricœur, *La critique et la conviction* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1995), 219; [*Critique and Conviction* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 117], .

A Plural Constitution

Briefly leaving the core texts of the years 1967-68, I would now like to build a bridge to subsequent texts which open up, in my view, a third component of reflection on the language of church community. In 1975, in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse*, Ricœur addresses "La philosophie et la spécificité du langage religieux," and he begins in these terms:

it is possible, in the framework of a philosophical investigation, to identify a religious faith on the basis of its language, or, more precisely, as a *particular modality of discourse*. [...] The most appropriate way to interpret this language according to its internal nature consists in an analysis of its modes of expression. [...] [i]t is worthwhile to examine it because in it, something is said which is not said in other modalities of discourse.¹⁰

Better, it is a modality of discourse, which carries a specific *truth*, a specific relation to the world. He continues:

These witnesses of faith do not carry a primary basis of theological statements in a metaphysical, speculative sense of theology, but expressions which raise forms of discourse as diverse as narrations, prophecies, laws, proverbs, hymns, prayers, liturgical formulas, wise sayings, etc. [...] The "confession of faith" that is expressed in the biblical documents cannot be nor must not be separated from the *particular* forms of discourse which distinguish the Pentateuch, Psalms, Prophets, etc. Not only does each form of discourse refer to a particular style of confession of faith, but the juxtaposition of forms of discourse produce a tension, a contrast to the very heart of the confession of faith.¹¹

One notices in the passage here how the linguistic turn in Ricœur's philosophy, understood both as deconstruction and as enlargement of the modes of language, was for him one of the grounds for turning away from a purely speculative dialogue between philosophy and theology

¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, "La philosophie et la spécificité du langage religieux", 13-26 in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse* I (1975), 13.

¹¹ Ricœur, "La philosophie et la spécificité du langage religieux", 13.

and to search in the diversity of expressions of the confessing community throughout the centuries the opening to another relation to the world

before any provision of faith or non-faith, a world is proposed. This world in the language of the Bible is called new world, Kingdom of God, new Being.¹²

And Ricœur adds:

a text is revealed to the extent where it is revealing of a world [...] faith is the attitude of one who is ready to let it interpret itself in interpreting the world of the text.¹³

In his epilogue to *Fe y filosofía. Problemas de language religiosa*, he writes:

If there exists something like a religious experience – feeling of absolute dependence, unlimited trust in spite of all reason to despair, opening onto a horizon of unprecedented possibilities, [...] this experience passes through language. A faith which is not said remains not only silent but undefined. Yet, through the language of men, the discourse of faith takes a variety of forms. In many essays gathered here, I underline the importance of literary genres in which biblical discourse is articulated in an original way: narratives, laws, prophecies, hymns, wisdom writings. The reader here is each time a confessing community which understands itself in interpreting the texts which found its identity. A circle, which one can call a hermeneutical circle, is established therefore between the founding texts and the communities of interpretation. [...] For every believer, belonging to a community of listening and interpretation remains a random destiny transformed by a reasoned choice continued throughout a lifetime.¹⁴

This is my thesis: to the extent where language is the institution of institutions and where the confessing community is a community of language

¹² Ricœur, “La philosophie et la spécificité du langage religieux”, 14.

¹³ Ricœur, “La philosophie et la spécificité du langage religieux”, 16.

¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, “El caracter hermeneutica comun a la fe biblica y a la filosofia”, 221-226 in *Fe y filosofía. Problemas de language religiosa* (Buenos Aires: Do-cencia y Almagesto, 1990), 223.

and word, the diversity of genres throughout biblical texts opens not only a plurality in relation to the world, to time, to God, but a plurality articulated in forms of community. I say articulated because the community is the place where all these tensions between the forms of language and the forms of interpretation, under the regime of the conflict of interpretations, are lived to the most extreme point of glowing intensity. The metaphor is that of the merger, but also the gap, of the contrast and the tension between the two poles, which remain distinct. Later the metaphor, for Ricœur, speaking of the great period of religious revival, will be that of the thickness of its channels, dogmas and institutions which had had to master this energy, these fiery streams.

We have already explored one of these tensions. Extending the dialectic of moral responsibility and moral conviction, and of ideology and utopia, we already had the duality between the prose of the social world and the poetry of liturgy (we know the importance of the Song of Songs in the Jewish liturgy). Later, in *Amour et Justice*, the opposition between the argumentative prose of justice and the hymnal poetry of love joined together in an inextricable way in the analysis of the passage of Luke 6 where the two formulations are together, as if they constantly revive one another and improve one another.¹⁵

In several texts, we see the philosopher linger on the fact that the Bible intertwines three genres in its great narrative: the prophetic, the legislative, the sapiential. I tried to link between these genres and the three figures of the ethical aim, forgotten and recalled by the prophet, of the moral norm established by the legislator-narrator, the practical wisdom in response to complaint as well as hymn, and thus extending the initial claim of an irrepressible ethical plurality. In other texts from the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, Ricœur distinguishes five genres in decoupling narrative and in adding the hymnal psalm. Later, *Penser la Bible (Thinking the Bible)*, 1998, proposes a more ample and systematic exploration of each of these literary genres: the narrative of creation (Genesis), loving obedience (Exodus), the watchmen of the

¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Amour et justice* (Tübingen: Mohr AJ, 1990).

imminent (Ezekiel), the complaint as prayer (Psalms), the bridal metaphor (Song of Songs), to which he adds a study on the question of the naming of God in the burning bush episode: “De l’interprétation à la traduction.” He leaves here to the side the more neo-testamental - dialogues, parables, the passion narratives, letters, apocalypses, etc. - that he sometimes studied elsewhere. Whatever it is, we imagine a plurality of community configurations generated by these diverse “genres” and traditions of reading that we know how language opens the imaginary. And the social imaginary is not an exception to this rule; utopia is first a literary phenomenon.¹⁶

But the constitution of the traditions of reading and interpretation do not remain in a state of lazy juxtaposition. Under the stimulus of the conflict of interpretations that could tear them apart, the historical communities cannot support their own disparity without canonizing together seemingly incompatible textual traditions, and this work of selection, arbitration and compromise generates at the same time a textual canon and community that gathers together plural texts. As Ricœur writes in another unpublished text much later, and which shows how much this subject remains present with him to the end:

the process of canonization accompanies and intensifies the formation of the Church as first worshipping community and cultural by implication. To become Canon and to become Church goes together. These are the needs and constraints of becoming a Church which motivate in depth the process of canonization.¹⁷

So there is both constitutive plurality and conflictual work to compose the whole by the invention of canons.

Ricœur did not stop proposing differentiations in the modalities of discourse, but also he proposed the different functions to which ecclesial community give form. The reader will find in the appendix a typology proposed in 1968 by

Ricœur, drawing on Harvey Cox, to distinguish *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. He returns to it five years later to show how these different functions are in crisis and on the brink of collapse. The process of canonization, of channeling, the work of disagreement, of discordance overcome and accepted, seems no longer in play.

In all these texts, we assess how, at the turn of the 1960s to 1970s, the philosopher is concerned about thinking of the meaning and function of the church community. It is not a question of escaping from the difficulties of the church and society in his time in a utopic or speculative evasion, much less as in a pious sense of retreat from the world. Rather, to the contrary, it is to return otherwise with the force of a transformative fiction. But it is also again the old gesture of his phenomenology: one can understand and analyze perverse pathologies and effects, and one can bear its critique from a legitimate core of meanings which order the phenomenon. What we examined therefore are the imaginative variations around the *eidōs* of church community. This is a philosopher on the one hand and on the other hand as Christian of philosophical expression (as it is of musical or pictorial expression) that he approaches this interrogation both as a problem that he elaborates and as a call that he receives.

Conclusion: And today?

It is time to conclude by returning to ourselves. These texts from 1968 are extremely relevant for us in their proximity as well as in their distance. For example, it is remarkable that Ricœur does not hesitate to speak of humanity as a whole and insists as much on this *totalizing* dimension of utopia as on its singularizing dimension. Today, totalitarianism is suspected everywhere; we fear to use such terms, and we even lack this semantic desire to denounce the totalitarian imposture of false totalizations.¹⁸

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, “De l’interprétation à la traduction”, 335-371 in *Penser la bible* (eds André Lacocque & Paul Ricœur; Paris: Seuil, 1998).

¹⁷ This text, entitled “Le Canon entre le texte et la communauté,” was given in a lecture at the Fonds Ricœur in February 2002.

¹⁸ On the other hand, we no longer dare to speak of Machiavellianism in a bad sense, as Ricœur does here, since Machiavelli became to an excess the “normal” for political thought, as if politics was only that.

We are no longer in a society of growth, but curiously we are not able to overcome this problem of growth from the accumulation of means and the elimination of “ends”. We would like growth, but we do not know why. We suppose that that would resolve everything. The paradox is that our societal model of growth is in full *collapse* for reasons of the depletion of natural resources, the inability to manage our waste, the mental inability to support an overly complex world, and the political incapacity to share knowledge and governance. Our best projects are returned against their intentions; we cannot and do not want more, but we still do not know what is the engine of our society.

As for the church community, for its part, it has failed. The lines of dislocation that he foresaw worsened, and few intellectuals of his generation or of the generation which followed searched to maintain this “internal milieu of language”, of shared convictions, of critical demands, of interpretation by many. The internal dialectic of two ethics was not held to the point of incandescence. The confessing community replied to the pious needs of the faithful whose peace was covered over with proud hearts, who lost the dramatic sense of this great humanity as well as the existential meaning of the living singularity of each existence.

What Ricœur brings here is more radical. It is precisely the idea that everything starts by random birth: “A religion is like a language in which one is born,” or where “it was transferred by exile or hospitality,” a kind of second birth that does not erase the first, but adds and reinterprets it. All Ricœur’s work is destined to think this enigma of birth, to accept finitude and narrowness, but also the gift and possibilities. The church community is a community that recognizes this condition with gratitude. It does not recruit the “best”, but makes it better for everyone, *anyone*, and presupposes a radical *fiction* of redistribution of births.

What is the engine of our society? This question can be retranslated into a call for the redistribution of all opportunities to the widest possible share. But it also translates as the call that throws us to every newcomer to the world: “Who do you say that I am?” To each, the fictional church community we seek offers a

chance to appear to be “otherwise”. It gives him the chance again to “seventy times seven” (Mt 18: 21). That may be precisely what is most lacking in a world where humans feel increasingly unemployable, useless, unnecessary, good to be discarded without ever being able to show “who” they are. But from the same movement, the fictional church community we seek also allows us to give way to others, to place itself to other than itself, for unawareness of itself, to return to the world. What is also lacking in our society is that it values everything that grows and never which diminishes to give way. This double movement, the fictional church community that we seek is not proposed on a single scene, but on the contrary, its whole effort is focused on the invention and the formation of a plurality of these scenes of appearance and effacement in a way to what there are for all *genres*. Ricœur continued to support this invention and to provide figures in it.

Appendix 1: Urbanization, Secularization, Ecclesiology

Here is a text from the same period as our document, and provides further analysis of the three functions of the church community. This report is presented in May 1968 in Valencia by Ricœur, then president of the movement, the Congress of Social Christianity, under the title “Urbanisation et sécularisation”.¹⁹ In a last point on “ecclesiology”, he believes that “before thinking about the organization and the organizations of the Church, we must think about its *function*.” He mentions three functions suggested by the American theologian:

Taking the leading idea that the Church is “the *vanguard* of God”, Harvey Cox organizes its present task around three departments, three ser-

¹⁹ In this text, Ricœur combines his reflections on his reading of the famous work of Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, Macmillan, 1965). Initially released in the fall 1967 in the *Revue du christianisme social*, we have included it in the special issue of *Autres temps* No. 76-77, dedicated to “Paul Ricœur, histoire et civilisation, neuf jalons pour un christianisme social.”

vices : to proclaim, to care, to render visible hope in the community signs. Drawing from three corresponding Greek words - *kerygma* or announcement, *diakonia* or therapeutic through reconciliation, *koinonia* or eschatological community - he speaks of the triple kerygmatic, diaconal and communitarian function of the Church. I gladly adopt this framework of analysis.²⁰

These three functions correspond to different linguistic and communicational modalities.

According to the *kerygmatic* function, Ricœur writes:

It is the function of the Church to discern the surplus meaning of the non-sense, even in the face of the deteriorating process of the modern city. Let us always put at the responsibility of man what seems to come from foreign forces, inhuman powers. This is the crux of what we might call the preaching in the world; preaching to the faithful must remain a simple relay.²¹

According to the *diaconal* function, he writes:

diakonia is not restricted to these functions of substitute; it applies to the centers of decision, to the major points of the functioning of the city where processes of integration and disintegration intersect. This is a theology of the itinerant and of responsible control finding their points of application. How will the Church be at the vanguard of God, if the individual Christian is at the rear of the historical development, if all sensibility and all reactions are turned towards paradise lost and not to the kingdom which comes?²²

Finally, according to the *koinonial* function, properly communitarian, he writes:

Once again, the words of Paul - neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female - do not constitute a secondary application among others of the unity in Christ. It refers to the focus itself on anthropology and ecclesiology, the very place of their origin. Man, not such and such a man. It's the humanity of man. And the huma-

nity of man is marching when the Greek, the Jew and the Barbarian are involved in a process of reconciliation. Then man happens. At the same time by the same operation itself of the gesture of reconciliation, a community is possible.²³

And he concludes his text by these words:

I would think that the traditional parish will find its chance when it will be one church modality among others. The non-parish will save the parish. We must learn to discern the figure of the Church wherever the ministry of the announcement that the diakonia of the concrete community has vis-à-vis the whole city, such that the modern world made it, that is to say, the secular city.²⁴

On 19 July 1973, a few years later, the newspaper *Le Monde* published an excerpt from a response by Ricœur in the journal *La vie nouvelle* (Bruxelles), under the title, "Paul Ricœur distingue trois lignes de rupture dans la crise du christianisme."²⁵ Ricœur begins by saying:

The challenge now, in all Christian churches, seems to me triple and corresponds to three ruptures which pass across all confessions and not just between Roman Catholicism and others.²⁶ A first break threatens to separate established religion and spontaneous communities.

Parenthetically, it is a crisis in the *koinonia* function.

In this form, the churches live in a particularly virulent way a drama that affects all institutions experiencing the same crisis between organizations and wild expressions of freedom. It is natural that

²⁰ Paul Ricœur, "Urbanisation et sécularisation", 113-126 in *Autres Temps. Cahiers d'éthique sociale et politique* 76-77 (2003), 124.

²¹ Ricœur, "Urbanisation et sécularisation", 124.

²² Ricœur, "Urbanisation et sécularisation", 125.

²³ Ricœur, "Urbanisation et sécularisation", 125.

²⁴ Ricœur, "Urbanisation et sécularisation", 126.

²⁵ In the subsequent quotations, I give the integral text as published in *Le Monde*, 19 July 1973.

²⁶ In the text, "Présence des églises au monde" (1967), we see how often his church utopia traverses churches. Ricœur writes: the issues that we are discussing today are to such a degree of radicality, and are so new that they have nothing to see - or little to see - with what divided us between Protestants and Catholics since the 16th century. The churches are faced with such a new situation that together they now have to invent new behaviors. I would gladly say that the great church is in front of us rather than behind us. (II)

the same crisis is even more violent than elsewhere because of the exceptional nature of the ecclesial bond. Is it not then the most urgent task for those, whoever they are, who bear the fate of the Christian community, to maintain the same quality of this vital life and to ensure to all the circulation of life between the institution and the non-institution? For the church today is on both sides. To recognize and to live is the first duty.

Ricœur continues with a crisis of the *diaconal* function:

a second break passes between two functions of the institution itself, concern for its internal cohesion and the service of the world. The first, reduced to itself, leads to turn all activities toward what I would call grossly internal consumption. The second, separated from the first, dissolves the church in the world, which is one of the ways the salt loses its savor. Is it not then a specific task for the Church today to preserve the tension between these two directions of its concern: for why preserve the internal link, if not for the service of others? And what service would it be if we were no more distinct?

And Ricœur concludes with a crisis of the *kerygmatic* function:

I am concerned, in a more personal way, by another divorce that I observe in all the churches, and which, though not as deadly in appearance than the previous two, has no less weight for future disasters. I see diverge further serious, competent, scientific theological work (especially when it is well articulated on exegesis, discourse theory, hermeneutics, fundamental philosophy) and a concrete commitment, usually political or simply social and educational. The disaster would be that theological work is isolated and turns to pure research, while political commitment would only be gauged as light and fragile improvisations. One of the most disturbing signs that reinforce these three breaks, is that they lead the entire body to rupture. Is it not a call to fight on three fronts simultaneously and stand as a mediator of these three lines of rupture?

Appendix 2: Summary of “Meaning and Function of an Ecclesial Community” (Centre protestant du Nord, Amiens 1967)

I. “Being Protestant Today” [“Être protestant aujourd’hui”] (Background Paper on an oral text and without correction of the author, 1965):

- a) The Confessing Community in the Technical World (developed in II a, b);
- b) The Language of the Confessing Community (developed in III a, b);
- c) Pleading for a Confessing Community (developed in II c and III c).

II. “Presence of the Church in the World” [“Présence de l’Église au monde”] (first group of reflections):

- a) Points of Insertion;
- b) Types of Presence and Pressure of the Confessing Community;
 - 1. The Distinction between the Two Morals: Moral Conviction and Moral Responsibility;
 - 2. The Role of Utopia.
- c) The Specific Function of the Christian Community.

III. “Sense and Language” [“Sens et langage”] (second group of reflections):

- a) External Critique of Religion: Demystification;
- b) Internal Critique of Religion: Demythologizing;
- c) Faith and Religion: The Authentic Word.

Translation: Michael Sohn, including all quotations.