

A Response to Werner G. Jeanrond

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Björn Vikström arbetar som kaplan i Kimito församling, Finland. Hans avhandlingsarbete vid Åbo akademi som resulterade i disputation 2000 diskuterade synen på läsning och uppenbarelse i Paul Ricoeurs bibelhermeneutik. För närvarande sysslar han med två olika projekt som rör texttolkning respektive folkkyrka.

I am very happy to have been given this opportunity to take part in the reception of professor Jeanrond's thought-provoking lecture. Of the many interesting questions that he awoke I have chosen to focus on four topics:

1. Does Ricoeur's hermeneutics in the end actually provide a critical text-hermeneutics?
2. Is it possible to do justice to the mysteries of human existence at the level of theological discourse?
3. What is «the long route of interpretation», this «messy and pluralistic approach»?
4. If revelation occurs through manifestation *and* proclamation, and faith is seen as the reception of revelation, how could we then describe this «hermeneutical faith»?

1. Ricoeur's hermeneutics should in my opinion be interpreted in the light of his dynamic understanding of reality.¹ According to him, there is no objectively given reality; instead, reality is something that reveals itself through signs, symbols, texts and actions. Since the deeper layers of reality and human existence, in Ricoeur's view, are manifested in poetic and religious language, the decisive question for him is how the encounter between this revelation and the reader is constituted.

This means that the main purpose of Ricoeur's hermeneutics is *not* to formulate rules

¹ I have tried to show this in my doctoral dissertation *Verkligheten öppnar sig. Läsning och uppenbarelse i Paul Ricoeurs bibelhermeneutik*. Åbo (Turku) 2000.

for the interpreting of texts, but to develop tools for a deeper understanding of mankind and the world that we men and women inhabit. Ricoeur strives to understand man as a living being, incarnated in a body and surrounded by a reality, which he or she can neither control nor fully understand.

Since we have no direct access neither to ontology nor to self-understanding, we need to take the indirect road of interpretation. Symbols and texts are the meeting-places for two movements: the revelation of transcendent reality and the individual's reading of these signs or «ciphers».

What I would like to ask is this: Does not Ricoeur's strong focus on manifestation and on the ability of the texts to open up new possibilities for a better self-understanding alienate his hermeneutics from the question of interpretation of texts in general? Is his critical text-hermeneutics weakened or maybe even swallowed up by his idea of a universal manifestation through texts? I find these questions important not only for the understanding of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, but also for the understanding of the theologically central question concerning the relation between revelation and interpretation.

This problem is linked to Ricoeur's insistent critique of everything that sounds like subjective self-creation or self-constitution. This kind of subjectivity is in Ricoeur's opinion «the arch-enemy of the idea of manifestation», as professor Jeanrond pointed out. But is the reader's readiness to let himself or herself be transformed by the text possibly to combine with a critical text-interpretation?

2. Professor Jeanrond gave some critical remarks concerning Ricoeur's notion of theo-

logy. Even though I find his arguments fully convincing, I still think that the positive goal of Ricoeur's critique of theology deserves to be mentioned. The kind of systematic theology that Ricoeur wants to challenge is a theology that pretends to have an answer to every question; a theology that is constructed like a closed system, without gaps; a theology that has lost its dynamic relationship to the world, to history and thereby to the suffering and joy of individual human beings.

Ricoeur wants to get behind the theological discourse to more original expressions of religious faith. Even though I agree with professor Jeanron that it is problematic to call these genuine forms of religious discourse «pre-theological», I do find Ricoeur's argumentation important. He wants to defend the ambiguities of life against too simplified rational or theological explanations. Through his production Ricoeur again and again returns to a basic question: is it possible to do justice to the mysteries of human existence at the level of philosophical or theological discourse?

This would mean that we theologians should be aware of the fact that theological discourse and theological concepts have their roots in ambiguous religious experiences and opaque symbolical expressions.

3. It is not difficult to see the connection between Ricoeur's above-mentioned critique of systematic theology and his comprehension of a polyphonic revelation. I would, however, like to stress the distinction between ambiguity and polysemy more than Ricoeur seems to do.

My point is that we will not, necessarily, find pluralism or polysemy in the individual forms of discourse that Ricoeur wants to identify in the Bible. The pluralistic approach is not to be found in these singular texts, because these texts are originally bound to a specific social context and situation. Take for example the words of the prophets: the prophets are not proposing one of many possible interpretations of God's will. They are proclaiming what they understood as the will of God in a given situation, even when they do it with the help of narratives and symbolic language. The polyphonic resources of their texts are opened at a later stage in history,

when the text of the prophet is read and interpreted in a new situation — be it among the first Christians or in the later history of the church.

The expressions and the symbolic language at the level that Ricoeur calls the primary level of religious discourse might be ambiguous — and often are — but ambiguity is not yet the same as polyphony. We don't gain anything by looking for an originally intended polysemy instead of — for example — the original intention of the author.

With the help of Ricoeur's later production² I would like to suggest that the «long route of biblical interpretation», this «messy and pluralistic approach», that professor Jeanron mentioned, is the history of reception that starts already in the redactional layers in the biblical texts and continues through history into our time. Ricoeur has developed his comprehension of a polyphonic revelation in articles where he points out an intertextual naming of God through the interplay between different forms of discourse in the Bible.³ This naming is polyphonic and filled with inner tensions, but my point is that this polyphony is not found in any singular text. The recognition of this intertextuality requires that we take a step back and look at the Bible and its reception as a whole. And counter to Ricoeur I dare to assert, that this is clearly a theological activity, not just a biblical hermeneutics.

4. Our comprehension of revelation is more or less directly connected with our understanding of faith, because faith very often is considered as the reception of revelation. If revelation is seen as the transmitting of divine information, then faith is mainly an intellectual appropriation of this information. If, on the other hand, revelation is understood in terms of manifestation of divine presence, then faith, accordingly, is understood as a relation to this divine presence — as for example Karl Rahner argues.

² See for example *Penser la Bible*. Editions du Seuil, Paris 1998, written together with the biblical scholar Andre Lacocque.

³ «Nommer Dieu» *Etudes theologiques et religieuses* 52 4/1977, and «Temps biblique» *Archivio di Filosofia* 53 1/1985.

But how would we describe the kind of faith that corresponds to a polysemic and polyphonic understanding of revelation? How is our understanding of faith affected if we do not want to restrict revelation to the Bible?

Ricoeur's comprehension of revelation is centred around a dialectical interaction between revelation as manifestation and revelation as proclamation — this later aspect was lacking in professor Jeanrond's otherwise excellent treatment of the role of revelation in Ricoeur's thinking.⁴ Accordingly Ricoeur's comprehension of faith involves both an interpretation of the signs in the world around us and a listening to the Word of God.

Revelation cannot, in Ricoeur's mind, be restricted just to the Bible since all language can function as a self-manifestation of existence. This manifestation can, however, only be observed from the reader's viewpoint. It is only within the framework of a community sharing the belief that God will reveal himself, that reading strategies designed to recognise God's actions in society can be developed. The task of biblical interpretation is thus not to locate God in the biblical text but to identify God's actions in the world around us with the aid of the biblical texts. These signs of God's actions are accessible for everybody, but the specific contribution of the Bible is that the power that underlies these signs can be identified — or named — as the personal power that the Bible refers to as God.

The Bible is therefore not just a mediator of revelation but just as much a deciphering tool by which we are able to identify and interpret the ongoing revelation in the world around us. Consequently, it is in the reading and interpretation of the Bible that the two basic dimensions of revelation, i.e. proclamation and manifestation, come together.

The other pole of revelation is its reception in the community of faith. The biblical revelation is a continuous growing that is nourished by the readings and re-readings of the Bible in new situations. In this perspective Christian faith can be seen as an awareness of the fact that we as Christians belong to the history of the reception of the Bible.

As professor Jeanrond said: «All talk of revelation occurs in certain contexts.» This contextuality of all «God-talk» does not, however, imply that communication between different perspectives should be impossible. The claim of contextual relevance is no excuse for neglecting other possible interpretations. We should always get cautious when the meaning of a single text or the Bible as a whole is reduced to «nothing but» this or that, because then the process of revelation is considered closed. We need to take the long route, that professor Jeanrond mentioned at the end of his lecture: even though it is «... a messy and pluralistic approach».

⁴ «Manifestation et Proclamation», *Archivio di Filosofia* 44 2-3/1974 .

