

CRITICAL REASON AND FAITH: THE CONTRIBUTION OF RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICS

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ยุคปัจจุบันของวาทกรรมหลังนวยุคมักจะเกี่ยวข้องกับการวิพากษ์การกดขี่ในรูปแบบต่าง ๆ ซึ่งอาจจะปรากฏในรูปแบบของอภิเรื่องเล่า รากฐานของความคิดและความเชื่อในรูปแบบต่าง ๆ ของความจริงที่ตายตัว ไม่ยืดหยุ่น แต่วาทกรรมตามจารีตทางศาสนา ซึ่งพยายามที่จะเข้าใจศรัทธาและเหตุผลและพึ่งพาความจริงอันโดดเด่นเพียงหนึ่งเดียว อาจนำไปสู่การกล่าวหาว่าเป็นลัทธิประกาศิตนิยมได้ ปัญหาจึงอยู่ที่ว่า ความคิดทางศาสนานั้นพร้อมหรือไม่ที่จะเปิดกว้างให้กับแนวคิดหลังนวยุค ซึ่งมีแนวโน้มในเชิงเปรียบเทียบ มีความยืดหยุ่นและยอมรับ พหุภาพของความหมาย บทความนี้จะใช้ศาสตร์แห่งการตีความเชิงวิพากษ์ของริเคอร์มาช่วยเพื่อแสดงให้เห็นว่าวาทกรรมทางศาสนาตามแนวจารีตนั้นสามารถปรับให้เข้ากับยุคหลังนวยุคได้

Abstract

The current age of Postmodernist discourse involves a critique of various forms of oppression. These can take the form of grand narratives, foundations, and the belief in various forms of inflexible truth. But the traditional religious discourse – with its attempts to understand faith and reason and its reliance on unique singular truths – can easily lead to charges of dogmatism. So the question is whether religion thought is sufficiently well-equipped for opening itself to postmodern thought which tends to be analogous, flexible and tolerant of a plurality of meanings. This paper will enlist the aid of Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics to show how traditional religious discourse can adapt to the postmodern age.

One of the great challenges today is how to respond to the tendency toward skepticism and relativism that dominates these changing times. Such tendencies are engendered by the fact that we have left behind a stable social and cultural order and enter now into circumstances of profound uncertainty. The idea of progress, which has relied on the sciences and technology has been called into question. Rationality once seen as emancipatory has failed to deliver its promise. Modern man has become more and more dependent and impulsive. Postmodernism sees contemporary culture as ephemeral and individualistic, marked by the instability of rationality, and the collapse of the great ideologies (G. Lipovetsky, 2004:69) and Grand Narratives.

Are our religions also vulnerable to the criticisms of postmodern thoughts whose ambition is to deconstruct all kinds of domination, including the methods and rationality of religious doctrine? The effort to understand the relation between faith and reason could be suspected as being an effort to create a *Grand Narrative*. Such a project would have an ambition to lay the ultimate foundation of religious belief drawn from reason. This would then lead to the claim of universality leading it into the trap of dogmatism and of the principles of petition. So the question is whether religion thought is sufficiently well-equipped for opening itself to postmodern thought which tends to be analogous, flexible and tolerant of a plurality of meanings.

The postmodern trend is willing to depart from the exigency of absolute reason to seek the foundation of truth. This course of thought constitutes a real challenge to religion whose claims tend to converge on some form of unique truth. In the postmodern era, all conflicts should be solved through discussions and negotiations. Therefore, one must elaborate on a way to consensus and solidarity. The consensus must be factual, contextual and impermanent. It must not be a form of rational consensus which prevails universally following the illusions and myth of modernism. Critical hermeneutics is considered as one of the postmodern approaches.

Critical Hermeneutics and Faith

A more proper approach will make a stand for a critical rational-

ity in the form of critical hermeneutics which adopts the argument that a thesis is never definitive, but should be criticized, revised and improved. There are two assumptions behind this approach: the first assumption is that a text contains a plurality of meanings; the second assumption is that a text can become autonomously detached from its initial production (i.e., distanciation of the author's intention, the initial context, and the origin of destination). Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics is the most convenient tool for us to use to analyze the relation between faith and reason.

Faith must be understood as "the integral response of the human being to God who reveals himself as Savior. Faith accepts the messages, promises and commandments of God". (R.Latourelle, 1995:309). Faith emphasizes two aspects: aspects of trust and assent to the message. Faith is not an alien phenomenon, it concerns us personally. It must be rooted in ourselves or produced by our powers. At the same time, it has its origin in God Himself. Therefore, in the person as subject and in its structures (mind, psychology, all human capacities) are found the conditions required for the possibility of faith. Its process is not a capitulation of spirit, but a sovereign exercise in which human beings make the thinking of God their own (ibid., 310). Reason requires that if persons are to give their assent, they must have reasons for believing (*Fides quaerens intellectum*).

Reasons alone confront us with only the power of our own mind as Latourelle writes: "The signs and his rational knowledge of them, give man control not of the intrinsic credibility of the divine word but of his own knowledge of the duty to believe and of his own free decision to believe..." (ibid., 312). Every message is a sign. Thus, when we deal with a message we need a tool of analysis which enables us to understand its content. In so doing, we better understand ourselves. Sign, symbol and text are the mediation to a better self-comprehension. Therefore, if faith is well rooted in one's culture, it has a solid base in which critical reason enlightens experience and are not alien to human beings' origin structures. As a tool of analysis, the role of critical hermeneutics is in line with the four tasks of the critical reason which are, firstly, to dismantle the relation of power by which a text is misused to disguise the legitimization of power; secondly, to enable marginalized voices to articulate and be heard; thirdly, to bring about a knowledge which is critical toward the complicity of relation between power-knowledge-truth; and fourthly, to create favor-

able conditions to form a new subjectivity whose traits are marked by openness and tolerance.

The project of history, intended to mobilize our society attracts in fact only a few adherents. Our society is no longer obsessed with its future. It is neither a question of absence of insight nor of vision, but it is proof that consumerism focuses on the now-life. The meaning of time is dominated by the changing and ephemeral situations. The optimism of the progress of history is replaced by the horizon of a shorter time. Today we face the social era where *hic et nunc* (the here and now) are considered pivotal.

How Can Religions Embody Faith in an Era of Uncertainty?

In this era, our society is no longer fooled by the Grand Narrative (Hegel-Marxism, socialism, evolutionism, universalism, patriarchal ideology), but is increasingly determined by life *here and now*. All these Grand Narratives, which have promised to bring humanity to a better future, failed in fulfilling their promise. Finally, the critical discourses manage to unmask the stratagem of the principle of universality. Behind this doctrine is a disguised strategy and desire for power.

The claim of the value-free and disinterestedness of knowledge is precisely what makes us suspect the so-called scientific discourses of disguising the will to power. The deconstruction of the relation of knowledge-power-truth leads us to call into question the claim of scientific objectivity (M. Foucault), behind which is the dissimulated interest in the legitimization of power. In brief, postmodernism enables us to deconstruct all kinds of unjust dominations, including the most disguised and symbolic ones.

One of postmodernism's contributions lies in the structural reorganization of the course of the social and cultural life in the advanced democratic society (G.Lipovetsky, 2004:70). The sophistication of mass communication facilitates exchange among nations so that they enrich one another in the social, economic and cultural domains. But this sophisticated mass media has a two-edged sword. Besides its meaningful side, it has an ambiguous influence due to the fact that it pushes people to con-

sume more and more.

The contemporary main *episteme* or structure of significance of life is focused on economy (money). *Homo oeconomicus* is a fanatical adherent to individualism motivated by his/her own interests in all aspects of life (economy, education, politics, sex). How can such individualistic mode of life's influence leave a religious aspiration remained intact? Two main religious values which consist of altruism and disciplinary norms are called into question. The resistance against the authoritarian and disciplinary norms pushes our society to enter the process of the centralization of the role of the individual glorifying hedonism. The principles and norms which rule social life are emptied of their transcendent dimension. Therefore, religion must face the society's fierce resistance whenever it intervenes too much in the public space. The logic of market prevails more and more over social and religious norms. Hedonistic culture exalting self-fulfillment and the immediate satisfaction of desires is in ascendancy. It incites people to consume more in order to satisfy the urgency of pleasure.

The term "urgency" is the keyword in understanding our contemporary culture in its relation to time. The speed of communication in combination with the logic of financial market forms an arbitrary instance to real time. All things must be met immediately with responses. The culture of urgency prevails in all domains. The slowness of response to professional requests constitutes a threat to the development or even the survival of an institution. Urgency rules over the time schedule. Therefore, the rhythm of time requires high-speed activities and immediate professional responses.

The culture of urgency puts in danger a profound discernment because people find it difficult to distinguish between what is essential and what is merely an accessory. The high-speed rhythm of activities has a perilous impact on people's search for meaning. It empties the question of the meaning of life. People have no time to put distance between themselves and their activities. It is almost impossible to question or to give meaning to these activities, much less to enter into a critical consideration. The response of religions would determine the relevance of their role in this contemporary society.

Hermeneutics: Bridging Faith and Reason

Hermeneutics will be a very helpful method to enable us to understand the complexity of the relation between faith and reason. Hermeneutics is not primarily considered a tool to interpret or rediscover the intention of the author of a text. It is not a question of a reproduction of the author's message inserted into the text, but it must be looked at in Ricoeur's perspective, that is, as an effort to search for the dynamic of the text aimed by the structures of the work (1986). The ultimate objective is to find the capacity of self-projection in the text to bring about a new world which represents the core message.

Using hermeneutics as a method of clarifying the relation between faith and reason, referring to P.Ricoeur, implies accepting three assumptions (1995:35). The first assumption is that a religious faith may be identified through its language as a kind of discourse. Whatever may be the nature of the religious experience, it must be articulated in a language. The second assumption is that this discourse must be understandable and communicable, that it be meaningful at least for the community of faith that uses it. Furthermore, it needs to be communicable for the sake of communication with others outside of the faith community. The third assumption is that reason under the banner of philosophy is implied in this inquiry because this kind of discourse does not merely claim to be meaningful, but also to be true. According to Ricoeur, philosophy is confronted by a mode of discourse that displays claims both to meaningfulness and to fulfillment such that new dimensions of reality and truth are disclosed (1995:36).

The role of hermeneutics is ineluctable in bridging the hiatus between faith and reason. However, it depends on the capacity to explain that an understanding is never an immediate knowledge. In other words, there is no self-transparency. "There is no immediate understanding of oneself" (C.Oliviera 1990:29). Thus, understanding needs mediation. Philosophy has no ambition to be a total mediation, as if reflection were identical to intuition. Therefore, understanding does not consist of the encounter between "being" and "knowing". There is a distance between the subject reflecting and herself/himself. This distance is bridged by the mediation of sign, symbol and text (Ricoeur, 1986).

The mediation through sign indicates that the initial condition of

human experiences is language: perception and desire have to be expressed in words; and beauty needs to be described in a communicable way. Mediation through symbolism means that all expressions could have equivocal meanings in relation to the designation of the elements of cosmos (fire, water, wind); the appellation of dimensions (height, depth); and the terming of aspects (clarity, obscurity). Finally, text is all discourse fixed by writing. According to Ricoeur, discourse must be distinguished from language. There are four conditions for something to be considered a discourse: firstly, there is a subject who affirms; secondly, there is a content of the proposition which describes a world that will be represented; thirdly, a discourse is supposed to have an audience to whom it is addressed; and fourthly, there is an aspect of temporality or the context of proposition.

The mediation through sign and symbol is extended and modified by the mediation through text, but this extension implies that it uproots the text from its initial production of discourse. Consequently, a distancing linked to the initial production of discourse is created: a work of discourse becomes an autonomous object at a distance from the authorial intention, from its initial situation, and from its primitive audience (Ricoeur, 1995:38). That is why a discourse as a work of art is open to an infinite range of interpretations.

The hermeneutic category of “distanciation through writing” in combination with the “objectivation through structures” (Ricoeur, 1986:126) represents the conditions of interpretation in order to enable a text to give meaning. Both categories make up an objective pole of self-comprehension, whereas the hermeneutic category of “self-comprehension” draws an inspiration from the “world of the text”. These last two categories form the subjective pole of comprehension.

These four hermeneutic categories reflect a concern which does not content itself with hermeneutics as a method (epistemology), but through this epistemology, the existence dimension of the interpreter (ontology) will be disclosed. From this point of view, the task of hermeneutics consists in explicating the meaning of all types of imaginable being. From the phenomenological perspective, vision requires the display of the invisible that is not given in the actual experience, but manifests in the form of horizon, which is the cradle where vision is born. There is no vision cre-

ated exterior to the interpretation. Having a vision means penetrating something promising, even if it is still dissimulated. It means that an incisive interpretation will enable us to gain insightful understanding of a text so that it inspires us with creative ideas.

Objectivation through structural analysis is a logical tool for explaining the relations, combinations, contradictions and comparisons of the elements forming the text in order to display its values or richness. The meaning will be discovered through analysis of the relations that are interdependent so that language becomes a system of signs. This third hermeneutics category is not limited only to structural analysis, but is also extended to all forms of explanation of the text. This category includes all scientific explanations which are contributed by psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, archeology, etc. The reason for this is that, in the dialectic of explanation and understanding, those sciences serve as an instrument for the objectivation of text by means of explaining the logical relations of the text. Thus, their contribution is emphasized on the epistemological side. This approach represents the stepping-stone to reach a better self-comprehension (ontological dimension).

The dialectical relation between explanation and understanding in the dynamic of comprehension of the text is considered to be completion of each other. A text has an immanent structures whis is able to be explained by structural analysis or other scientific analysis. At the same time, the text has references to extra-linguistic. Ricoeur calls this reference to the exterior of linguistics the world of the text which stems from neither psychological intentions nor the breath of God, but from the mediation of the structures of the text. It means that God's revelation manifests itself in the contrasts and convergence of different types of discourse such as narration, poem, oracle, metaphor, and exhortation which are forged in the text of the Holy Scripture.

The determining passage between objectivation through structural analysis and "self-comprehension" is the disclosure of the world of text. This phase is pivotal because it forms and transforms the reader or interpreter. In the Bible, this disclosure is called "Good News", or "Kingdom of God" (P.Ricoeur, 1986). All of these epithets represent the objectivity of the new existence projected by the text. This new world does not stem from the author's intention, but it is disclosed through the structures

of the text. The narrative style orientates us to the signification that God is the main actor of the history of man's salvation. The prophetic style expresses either a God who is threatening or presaging but at the same time He is giving a promise in spite of the prominent destruction. Both examples are forms of the Bible's proposal of the world. The capacity of the text for disclosing a revelation derives from the contrasts and convergences of all forms of discourse analyzed together so that hermeneutics leads to the world proposed by the text. This world of the text will make sense only if the reader or interpreter appropriates it.

This "appropriation" or "self-comprehension" marks the fusion between the world proposed by the text and the concrete world of the reader. Gadamer used the term "fusion of horizons" to refer to the encounter between the two worlds that are more than mere worlds. It is called "fusion" because it is impossible for the reader to expropriate the world of the text exhaustively and, at the same time, to leave totally the actual world where he lives. The result is that the reader does not leave the world intact and he does not refuse the world proposed by the text. The world of the reader undergoes a real transformation allowing the reader to transform and understand himself/herself better.

Distanciation: Criticism of Ideology and Deconstruction

In the process of appropriation, the distanciation from her-/himself is required in order to avoid a distorted meaning and as a fair effort to prevent the arbitrariness of interpretation. Contrary to the literal meaning of the word, distanciation is far from the notion of alienation; it suggests a creative resolution due to its merit of enriching and purifying self-comprehension. The distanciation consists in the form of criticism of ideology, deconstruction and analogy of the game.

The criticism of religion launched by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud has a lucid significance for a more purified understanding of faith. It is constructed exterior to the hermeneutic process. It grows as criticism of ideology exercising the criticism of the pre-comprehensions and of the illusions of religion. A religious conviction runs the risk of transforming itself into an illusion if it is uprooted from the reality of life, as it is then

analogous with wishful thinking taken for reality. Linguistically, such wishful thinking is not impossible because language is not only a tool of communication or means of representation. Language as speech-act (performative utterance) is used as an instrument of action or power. On the other hand, the social praxis is discursive in the sense that it is organized discursively by values and representations of human needs. Therefore, it is logical that language could construct reality behind which is exalted the adagio of the idealistic philosophy that “the real is rational, the rational is real”.

Such a conviction or faith needs to be confronted with a critical approach. That is why the thoughts of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud as philosophy of suspicion will be apt to help to dismantle unjust relations of power and the surreptitious manipulations. Michel Foucault affirmed that religious discourse runs a risk of being embedded deep in the relation of power-knowledge-truth (1976).

For a better hermeneutic understanding that focuses on the text, these criticisms are taken as an acknowledgement of the ideological assault which could be destructive, but they can be transformed into a tool of auto-criticism that enables the purification of faith. So, the response to those criticisms is not an apology, but an effort to domesticate or digest the wild assaults, which could be harmful, for a better self-comprehension. This mechanism is a promising exercise because it could pedagogically bring about an attitude of religious maturity that allows our faith to grow up and, at the same time become tough because it could disorientate those who have a limited understanding of faith. In such a mechanism, the adherents of religion could fall into a trap of spiritual aridity if the intellectual exercise empties the spirituality of her/his lived experiences from the horizon of faith.

The criticism of ideology defending secular humanism launches a challenge to religions regarding whether they are able to offer their specificity in the domain of morality. Does religion enrich ethics? The answer is that religion must not be understood in terms of enriching ethics; religion specifies ethical acts because it defends in ethics the uniqueness of individual (H.Cohen, 1990). Religion places ethics in a concrete community with its organization, tradition, rites, institutions, theology and members.

In religious ethics, the beauty tends often to be marginalized or

disregarded in favor of a focus on the question of goodness and truth. The question of aesthetics is not totally ignored, but religion warns not to confuse aesthetical taste with religious awareness. The latter can endure the concrete individual's sufferings, whereas aesthetics deals with some styles that have nothing to do with suffering. Art only knows bad or beautiful faces in their material expressions. In aesthetics, religion manifests itself through its capacity for inciting a specific feeling irreducible to a mere aesthetic feeling because it can transform into empathy, mercy or forgiveness. This religious feeling is immediately connected with the idea of God. It represents an expression of the expectation of liberation or salvation.

Religious feeling and the promise of salvation find their articulation in prayer. Prayer discloses its meaning when it expresses that expectation of liberation. Consequently, the convergence between aesthetics and religion lies in prayer and specifically in mysticism that is desirous of participating in the infiniteness of the transcendent.

A problem arises because concrete religion tends to mark the law of separation which founds the relation between God and man. Its followers will unconsciously unify this separation when they commit unscrupulous violence on behalf of God. From the humanist ethical point of view, such violence which is motivated by the transcendent reason is totally unacceptable, while religion is still tempted to give a compromise by founding the act of violence on the Holy Scripture as symbolical and ideological legitimization. Accordingly, such a transcendent motivation could not be taken for the specificity of the religious ethics; otherwise it will be contemptuous of humanity and incurs indignation.

In order to mark the specificity of religious ethics, religion needs to deal with unique experience of the ethical subject that is recognition of sinfulness, contrary to the secular humanist ethics that insists on freedom and responsibility. This insistence defines the human as being self-confident and tending to be arrogant. The vision of religious ethics enables one to recognize her/his weakness as a human being. Hence, the value of religion lies in community insofar as salvation that does not in the power of the individual but in the power of God which is revealed in His promise. This promise is a guarantee that her/his freedom and her/his respect for human dignity can not be separated from that process of God's liberation. God's promise lays a strong foundation for the religious disciples to act

conforming to moral virtues. That promise will only make sense if it is guaranteed through institutions and laws that are able to organize one's responsibility by imposing sanction. Therefore, authentic religion is required to be able to translate God's promise into a system of action. This system of action must be guaranteed by collectivity because it runs a prominent risk of slipping into pretense of being in a legitimate position to confiscate so-called "God's will". Thus, a path of humility must be taken as contra-measure in which we recognize our weakness.

According to H. Arendt (1958), one of man's weaknesses lies in the fact that man's action is irreversible. When we make an error in typing on computer, the mistake can easily be erased without leaving any trace. But when we hurt someone, this victim will not be left intact. He/she is not protected from an injury that could last a long time. Forgiveness helps the perpetrator to resume a new life. To some extent, forgiveness is an act of forgetting someone's mistake or of overcoming feeling resentful toward perpetrator's for an offense. Forgiveness transcends the rationality of action based on the logic of reciprocity. Rather forgiveness bases on the logic of generosity. For this reason, religion represents a community where forgiveness becomes a source of life renewal. Only religion integrates forgiveness as a mechanism of community renewal guaranteed by collectivity. That collectivity finds its unity by referring to the same Transcendent whose main nature is full of mercy. Only forgiveness can break the vicious cycle of evil and dissuade the ruse of reason from being tempted to manipulate the sacred. In order to prevent manipulation of the sacred in favor of different vested interests, deconstruction as a tool of analysis will play a critical role in the process of interpretation.

Deconstruction is another facet of distanciation. It is, in Ricoeur's point of view, understood as an effort to dismantle the reader's interests and the interpreter's either conscious or unconscious motivations in front of the text. The assumption behind this measure is that all human rational acts are intentional. Consequently, according to the general theory of action, an agent will be pushed by motivations or interests to achieve a goal. The goal determines the choice of means. The means can appear in various forms; they can even be dissimulated behind the sacred. Hence, deconstruction serves to sound the reader out so that all of her/his interested motivations could be disclosed or unmasked.

Such a measure is analogous with Husserl's *epoché* which puts the reader's interpretation into brackets, and suspends the immediate seizure of the text so that an authentic comprehension can be acquired. By deconstruction, the conflict or tension between different religions may be confined within the interested interpretations of all of the protagonists. The conflict of interests (economy or politics) disguised in a polemic of theological understandings is a significant sign indicating the lack of legitimization.

In principle, the relation of power is asymmetric in the sense that there is often a deficit of trust that undermines the authority (politics or religion). The authority requires more than the trust that could be given by the subordinates. To fill a gap in this relation, the authority misuses religion as a system of legitimization. What is interpreted and legitimized by religion is no other pretext than the relation of power because all kinds of power seek always for legitimization. For this reason, deconstruction plays an important role in dismantling all vested interests.

The Analogy of the Game: the Creative Dimension of Distanciation

If the criticism of ideology and deconstruction are the negative faces of distanciation, the analogy of the game is the positive and creative side of distanciation. A game allows people to find out the new possibilities that are imprisoned by rigid, formal and serious thought. It helps people to discover in themselves the possibilities to change the fact that they are restrained by a vision that is merely moral. Thus, a game brings about an atmosphere that makes initiatives and creativities grow because through the game, the subject is set free from social norms, social hierarchy and everyday seriousness.

In an atmosphere of freedom, the essential phenomenon manifests itself; that is the process to give birth to creativities. Ricoeur affirms that it is primarily in the imagination and not in the will that "a new being" is born. The capacity to be seized by new possibilities precedes the capacity for choosing and deciding. The imagination represents the dimension of the subject responding poetically to the text because it creates newness. Accordingly, the primary destination of the text is imagination. To the imagi-

nation, the text has conversation by suggesting new possibilities, and through imagination the text murmurs the delightful ideas holding the images, which will set the subject free.

A subject enjoys freedom if she/he is open to new possibilities and not constrained by the boundaries of doctrine, religion, race or other factors of social segregation. She/he transcends the social determination. Such freedom is not always within reach for all people. Some religious doctrines inculcate in the mind of their followers not to be in communication with the followers of other religions. Such an exclusive doctrine would see the other as a threat. Exclusion is an indicator of being uprooted from the human reality. Even if those doctrines are well-founded scripturally an objection arises from the human ethics criterion. "According to the general ethics standard, a religion would be true and authentic as far as it expresses human dignity. It does not eliminate nor destroy humanity, but preserves and promotes humanity" (H.Küng, 1991:244).

The analogy of the game finds its relevance to the plural society in creating opportunities for informal encounters among religions in the occasion of different events such as sport, theatre, music, camping, festivities, etc. These informal encounters help break the ice between people of different religions who are not well acquainted with each other. Such an encounter will allow people to eliminate the prejudices embedded deep in their respective minds. When this phase of encounter is attained, a rich dialogue of theology has the chance to be launched and organized. All these efforts are to avoid a conflictual relationship among religions and to build a deeper understanding.

The conflicts among the followers of different religions end in violence from a lack of religious tolerance. Even if the cause of conflict did not primarily consist of religious issues, the atmosphere of hatred between Muslims and Christians (the case in Indonesia) did exist, though a lot of the members of both groups still have a good relationship and mutual cooperation. The fundamental problem lies in the difficulty of accepting the difference of the other. The existential question is how Muslims or Christians can pay respect to and accept another religion, while at the same time be convinced of the authenticity of the truth of their own religion.

The acceptance of plurality comes from an attitude of humility

acknowledging the limits of human capacity to seize the perfection of God. The different religious traditions show precisely God's perfection: "God is too rich and unlimited so that a religious tradition, which is of course limited, will not exhaustively be able to dip into the perfection and the fullness of God" (E.Schillebeeckx 1992:225). The fullness of God will be better expressed through the plurality of religions than by only one religion. Behind this statement, a dimension of ethics appears as a common ground to pay respect to human dignity.

An encounter with "the other" represents the moral moment because the other induces me to responsibility. "*L'épiphanie du visage* (the appearance of the face) becomes precisely the expression of the unlimitedness of the other which reminds me of my obligation and judges me" (Levinas, 1971:215). So, Levinas declared lucidly that "a relation does not neutralize the other, but preserves the other. The other is not the object which is part of us nor becomes similar to us, but the other withdraws himself to his mystery" (1982:59). The presence of the other allows me to affirm my uniqueness in which the meaning of life makes sense. So the presence of the other does not threaten me, but invokes me to take on a higher task and a human vocation calling me to take responsibility. The other does not limit my freedom. By invoking my responsibility, the other legitimizes my freedom.

The philosophical rationality of cultural and religious plurality answers to the basic need of identity. This basic need will not be satisfied unless it is translated into a concrete policy that defines clearly the principles of social praxis accommodating cultural plurality. The main concern consists of creating the public space allowing the cultural interaction and a more human communication through which a consensus will be attained. The public space gets its significance from facilitating different cultures to share in a strong position thanks to their dignity and self-confidence. Are all these approaches not to be taken as a trap of relativism? How, then, to define the mission of each religion if proselytism incurs indignation?

Luc Ferry, a French political philosopher, suggests an interesting reflection on the vocation of every human being. The main vocation of the religion's followers is a concrete-universality (L.Ferry, 1998:246). We find the analogy of this concrete-universality in works of art. A successful piece of art is a concrete object which is universally appreciated. This

concrete-universality is defined as the reconciliation between the particular and the universal. One's life which is surrounded by his/her community represents a collective life still a particular life, but it has significance for the whole of humanity.

Religions are called to live a similar vocation in the sense of the invitation to be like an art-work. The vocation to be a work of art means participating in the life of society contributing a significant meaning to the whole society. A life as a work of art means opening the access to the universal precisely through the authentication of the particular. This authentication is a form of freedom which manages to detach itself from particularism. World figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Muhammad Iqbal, and Mother Theresa are works of art representing the concrete-universality. These figures are considered universal because they were accepted and appreciated by all groups of religions, and concrete because their lives were rooted in the particularity of their own religions. They contributed to the development of humanity due to their religious education and they grew up in their own religious environment.

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