

Care for the Earth as Our Mission: Interpreting Eco-narratives

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ABSTRACT

As a religious missionary society, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) helps the Catholic Church fulfill its missionary task in various ways, responding to the signs of the times and the needs of each place the mission is stationed. However, until recently, we have not sufficiently committed to environmental protection in our missionary endeavors. We must slowly prioritize care for the earth as an essential dimension of our mission today.

In the postmodern world, (mini) narratives play a central role. Hence interpreting the eco-narratives of various religious traditions becomes crucial for the 'care for the earth' mission. Today, many consider environmental protection an interreligious project because no one religious tradition has a privileged ecological perspective. Eco-narratives of different religious and spiritual traditions need to interact and engage dialogue to make lasting contributions to environmental protection. We must find appropriate tools to interpret the eco-narratives. This paper suggests that the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur can be one of the best tools to do so.

Keywords: Eco-narratives, Environmental protection, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Hermeneutic arc, Interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

As a religious missionary community, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) helps the Church fulfill its missionary tasks, making the goodness and kindness of God visible in and through the life and service of its members in diverse ways. Participation in God's mission requires a continuous and deep discernment of God at work in the world today. The SVD does that discernment in various ways: General Chapter discussions, conferences, events and initiatives, both at an institutional and personal level. The 15th SVD General Chapter provided a conceptual framework to identify our vocation and mission today, which consists of "witnessing to the universality of the Reign of God, our commitment to a fourfold prophetic dialogue in frontier situations, and the characteristic dimensions of our charism" (*In Dialogue with the Word* 2000, §47). The fourfold prophetic dialogue involves dialogue with people who have no faith community, as well as faith-seekers, people who are poor and marginalized, people of different cultures, and people of different religious traditions and secular ideologies (*In Dialogue with the Word* 2000, §52-71). The 16th SVD General Chapter uses the concept

of prophetic dialogue “as a *lens* to focus some aspects of *our life* as Divine Word Missionaries’ ‘ (*In Dialogue with the Word* 2006, §2). We make binding commitments according to the five aspects of our life: spirituality, community, leadership, finances and formation. (*In Dialogue with the Word* 2006, §7-8), which are evaluated and articulated to shape a common vision. The following SVD General Chapter provided our society with an action plan/congregational direction. The 2018 General Chapter mobilized us “into rediscovering the spiritual foundations that nourish and sustain our life and mission as individuals, as communities, and as a Society, [which]needs a commitment to ongoing discernment, drawing inspiration from the Word of God and the spirituality of our Founding Generation” (*In Word and Deed* 2018, §3).

This brief history of the last few SVD General Chapters shows us how our congregation has responded to the signs of the times. Nevertheless, I feel that we have neglected environmental protection in our missionary endeavors. Many other religious congregations and faith-based organizations have gone far ahead, knowing that environmental injustices are deeply connected to social issues. I am hopeful that, sooner or later, SVDs too will take this aspect of their mission more seriously. We must begin by interpreting eco-narratives in the scriptures of various religious traditions as a good starting point for caring for the earth.

ECO-NARRATIVES OF FAITH AND THEIR INTERPRETATIONS

Narratives/stories play an important role in religious and spiritual traditions. “Without stories there is no knowledge of the world, of ourselves, of others, and of God” (Navone 1977, 18). Narratives of faith have contributed much to the formation of our understanding of the ultimate, humans, and nature (Walters 2018). Religious narratives have been very influential throughout human history, and have proven both constructive and destructive.

We now live in a period of ‘postmodernism’. Discussions on postmodernism are often narrative-centered. In his book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the exponents of postmodernism, defines postmodernism “as incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard 1979: xxiv). Postmodernism debunks overarching metanarratives (also called grand narratives or master narratives). Rejection of the totalizing nature of metanarratives in favor of ‘small narratives’ (also called mini-narratives or micro-narratives) is a quintessential feature of postmodernism. Mini narratives are stories that communities tell themselves to explain small practices and local events, rather than large scale universal or global concepts. Mini narratives are localized and contextualized and do not claim universality, absolute truth, reason, or stability.

When we speak about care for the earth, we need to consider the mini eco-narratives of different religious and spiritual traditions. As Paul Ricoeur observes, it is worthwhile to analyze religious narratives because “it is meaningful at least for the community of faith which uses it either for the sake of self-understanding or for the sake

of communication with others exterior to the faith community” (Ricoeur 1974a: 71). More importantly, we need to find appropriate tools to understand and interpret these mini eco-narratives. Specific modes of religious language articulate religious experience. “Whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression” (Ricoeur 1974a: 71). This paper suggests that the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur can be one of the best tools to do so.

CARE FOR THE EARTH – AN INTERFAITH PROJECT

Today, many have told us that environmental deterioration has reached the point of no return and this necessitates urgent enquiries into the reasons for the present environmental crisis. All must collaborate in the search for solutions that will help us to protect our planet. Materials that deal with the academic inquiry into the root causes of the environmental crisis has escalated in recent years. People who care about the planet have suggested different philosophical, political, scientific, technological, and theological methods to address the issue. There is no doubt that all these methods have contributed much to environmental protection. However, we all agree that one particular method alone cannot solve environmental problems. Environmental crisis demands greater cooperation between science and religion because environmentalists and many scientists agree that the environmental crisis is not only a scientific, cultural and political crisis but “also a moral and spiritual crisis which, in order to be addressed, will require broader philosophical and religious understandings of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems” (Tucker and Williams 1997: xvi).

The environmental crisis also demands greater cooperation among various religious and spiritual traditions because diverse forms of spirituality continue to influence our worldviews. This poses a challenge because, in the postmodern scenario, “[no] one religious tradition has a privileged ecological perspective. Rather, multiple perspectives may be the most helpful in identifying the contributions of the world’s religions to the flourishing of life for future generations. This is an interreligious project.” (Tucker and Grim 2001: 3)

HERMENEUTICS, PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

Hermeneutics is the “art and science of interpretation” (Ezzy 2002: 24). It is the philosophy of understanding and the science of textual interpretation. Interpretation has a long history. It dates back to the ancient Greek philosophers who used to interpret scriptures and other difficult passages (Rutt 2006: 1), even though no one called it by the name ‘hermeneutics’. It was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who coined the term “hermeneutics” (Abulad 2007: 15). Prior to Schleiermacher, theories of

interpretation remained “a variety of specialized hermeneutics” (Mueller-Vollmer 1985: 73), and was limited mainly to scientific and philological hermeneutics. Hermeneutics was “occupied with decoding a given meaning or with the clearing away of obstacles in the way of proper understanding” (Mueller-Vollmer 1985: 9). Hermeneutics was treated as an appendix to Logic (Mueller-Vollmer 1985: 74). Dissatisfied with these narrow approaches to hermeneutics, Schleiermacher took upon himself the task of laying the foundations for a universal/general method of hermeneutics. He defined hermeneutics as the art of understanding (Mueller-Vollmer 1985: 73) and thus made understanding the cornerstone of the comprehensive hermeneutical method (Mueller-Vollmer 1985: 9).

The 19th and 20th centuries emphasize the priority of experience over dry abstractions. The emergence of phenomenology both as a disciplinary field and as a movement in philosophy was one of the results of such emphasis. Phenomenology is generally understood as the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience. It focuses on the essence of a phenomenon as it presents itself in our lived experience in the world (Crotty 1998). Both hermeneutics and phenomenology have influenced the study of religious narratives. Today, religious narratives are studied and interpreted more and more in existential and experiential dimensions.

THE HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY OF PAUL RICOEUR

Paul Ricoeur is one of the most enduring thinkers of the 20th century. He has addressed almost every philosophical specialization in his intellectual career and has exerted a growing influence on various academic disciplines. However, in this paper, we will limit ourselves to a truncated engagement of his theory of interpretation.

Paul Ricoeur developed a theory of interpretation that took into account self, language, reflection and understanding. Self-understanding is the subject of all operations (Ricoeur 1991a: 12). The self, for Ricoeur, is not an abstract concept. Ricoeur criticizes the idealist understanding of self as self-asserting, self-founding, self-knowing and self-positing. For him, the self is a situated and embodied being living in time and space. The self is neither immediately transparent to nor fully the master of itself. “There is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts” (Ricoeur 1991a: 15), and so he rejects “the irrationalism of immediate understanding” (Ricoeur 1991a: 18).

Human subjectivity is primarily linguistically designated. Humans reveal their experiences and self-understanding through narratives, both oral and written. Humans, in and through storytelling (the linguistic mediations of symbols, myth, dream, image, text, narrative and ideology) mark, organize and clarify their temporal experiences (Ricoeur 1991a: 3). The stories of our life tell who we are. “A life *examined*...is a life *narrated*” (Valdés 1991: 435). “It is *language* that is the primary condition of all human experience” (Ricoeur 1991a: 16). “Language is that through which, by means of which, we express ourselves and express things” (Ricoeur 1974b: 85). Our existence cannot be

separated from our narratives. Speaking about narrative identity, Paul Ricoeur makes a few bold assertions: “(a) knowledge of the self is an interpretation; (b) the interpretation of the self, in turn, finds narrative among other signs and symbols, to be a privileged mediation; (c) this mediation borrows from history as much as fiction making the life story a fictive history” (1991c: 73). Against the commonly held notion ‘stories are told, life is lived’, Ricoeur believes that stories are both told and lived (Valdés 1991: 432).

For Paul Ricoeur, self-understanding and narratives are closely related. Whatever is intelligible is accessible to us in and through language, and all deployments of language call for interpretation. Self-understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms. Textual interpretation is the primary aim of hermeneutics. The purpose of interpretation is to achieve a new and deeper understanding of being-in-the-world. “By exposing myself to the textual horizons of ‘other’ meanings, I transcend the familiar limits of subjective consciousness and open myself to possible new worlds” (Kearney 2004: 5). The human subject interprets itself only by interpreting the signs of an external world, not its own. For Ricoeur, the “hermeneutic selfhood is not that which initiates understanding but that which terminates it. It exists at the end, not the beginning” (Kearney 2004, 5). Interpreting narrative becomes a model for understanding self.

LANGUAGE AS DISCOURSE

Paul Ricoeur’s interest in the philosophy of language was partially due to the challenge posed by the rise of structuralism with its semiological theory, not only as a linguistic method but also as a philosophy (Ricoeur 1973b). In the semiological theory, linguistic codes are virtual and outside of time. Language is treated not “as a mediation between minds and things... but as a self-sufficient system of inner relationships” (Ricoeur 1976: 6). Structuralism views language as a closed system and does not refer to anything outside of itself. It “excludes the claim of hermeneutics to reach beyond the ‘sense’ – as the immanent content of the text – to its ‘reference,’ i.e. to what it says *about* the world” (Ricoeur 1973b: 93). “The primacy of subjectivity which was so strongly emphasized by existentialism is overthrown by this displacement of analysis from the level of the subject’s intentions to the level of linguistic and semiotic structures” (Ricoeur 1973b, 92-3).

In his hermeneutic model, Ricoeur challenged the semiological theory of language with the semantic theory of discourse (Ricoeur 1986, 66f). Ricoeur speaks of language/speech as discourse (Ricoeur 1976: 1-23). “It is as a discourse that language is either spoken or written... Discourse is the counterpart of what linguists call language systems or linguistic codes. Discourse is language-event or linguistic usage” (Ricoeur 1991a: 145). For Ricoeur, discourse occurs when someone points out certain things to certain people in certain ways for a certain purpose. The semantic theory of discourse is temporal, and its approach to language is diachronistic. “If the sign (phonological or lexical) is the basic unit of language, the sentence is the basic unit of discourse.

Therefore it is the linguistics of the sentence which supports the theory of speech as an event” (Ricoeur 1971: 530). Language as discourse mediates man to the world, man to man, and self to self. “Whereas semiotic units are systems of inner dependencies, and for that reason constitute closed and finite sets, the sentence, as the first semantic unit, is related to extra-linguistic reality. It is open to the world” (Ricoeur 1973a: 99-100).

Discourse refers to *a world/situation/context*. “By context we mean not only the linguistic environment of the actual words, but the speaker’s and hearer’s behavior, the situation common to both, and finally the horizon of reality surrounding the speech situation” (Ricoeur 1973a: 101). “In spoken discourse this means that what the dialogue ultimately refers to is the *situation* common to the interlocutors. This situation in a way surrounds the dialogue, and its landmarks can all be shown by a gesture, or by pointing a finger, or designated in an ostensive manner by the discourse itself through the oblique reference of those other indicators which are the demonstratives, the adverbs of time and place, and the tense of the verb” (Ricoeur 1971: 535). Both the speaker and the listener share a common etiquette. Reference to the world and self-reference, which is excluded by the semiological theory as not constitutive of the system, becomes very important for Paul Ricoeur. “Discourse in action and in use refers backwards and forwards, to a speaker and a world” (Ricoeur 1976: 22). Discourse is always addressed to someone. “Only discourse, not language, is addressed to someone. This is the foundation of communication” (Ricoeur 1971: 536).

Language as discourse has two constitutive poles: the event and the meaning. “Discourse is the *event* of language” (Ricoeur 1976: 9). “Discourse is given as an event: something happens when someone speaks” (Ricoeur 1991a: 77). “Just as language, by being actualized in discourse, surpasses itself as system and realizes itself as event, so too discourse, by entering the process of understanding, surpasses itself as event and becomes meaning” (Ricoeur 1991a: 78). Ricoeur introduces the dialectic between the event and meaning as “if all discourse is realized as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning” (Ricoeur 1991a: 78).

Ricoeur speaks of meaning as ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ (1976: 19f). Meaning has the ‘subjective’ side (the utterer’s meaning) and the ‘objective’ side (the utterance meaning). The objective side of the meaning has ‘sense’ (‘what’ of the discourse) and ‘reference’ (‘about what’ of the discourse). “The sense is the ideal object that the proposition intends and hence is purely immanent in discourse. The reference is the truth value of the proposition, its claim to reach reality” (Ricoeur 1991a: 85).

DISCOURSE AS TEXT AND THE NEED FOR INTERPRETATION

When fixed in writing, discourse becomes a text (Ricoeur 1991a: 106). When discourse becomes a text, the text escapes or is permanently distanced/separated from the initial context and the author. Through distanciation, the text “acquires a threefold semantic autonomy: in relation to the speaker’s intention, to its reception

by its original audience, and to the economic, social, and cultural circumstances of its production” (Ricoeur 1991a: 17). Distanciation does not inherently diminish the voice of a text; instead, it is a necessary and unavoidable transformation in the birth of the text.

The objectivity of the text is constituted by “(1) the fixation of the meaning, (2) its dissociation from the mental intention of the author, (3) the display of non ostensive references, and (4) the universal range of its addressees” (Ricoeur 1991a: 157).

Meaning is detached from the event (Ricoeur 1976: 25) and becomes more important than the actual words. “What we write, what we inscribe, is the *noema* of the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event” (Ricoeur 1971: 532). Distanciation objectifies the text by liberating it from the author’s intention and gives the text a life of its own. “The author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide” (Ricoeur 1971: 534). The meaning survives the absence of the original speaker, audience and circumstances. “Henceforth, only the meaning ‘rescues’ the meaning, without the contribution of the physical and psychological presence of the author” (Ricoeur 1971: 535).

In spoken discourse, the reference is ostensive because the speaker and the listener have a shared environment. But a text leaves behind those ostensive references and develops a deeper reference that offers the reader new possibilities of being-in-the-world. The separation of the speaker’s meaning and that of the text leads to the text becoming productive of new meanings. “The sense or the significance of a narrative stems from *the intersection of the world of text and the world of the reader*” (Ricoeur 1991b: 26). “A text is not something closed in upon itself, it is the projection of a new universe distinct from that in which we live... It is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself; the mediation between man and the world is what we call *referentiality*; the mediation between men, *communicability*, the mediation between man and himself, *self-understanding*” (Ricoeur 1991b: 26-7).

The meaning of a text is addressed to an indefinite range of possible readers. The text becomes public (Ricoeur 1976: 31), enters into relation with all the other texts (Ricoeur 1991a: 109) and is open to many interpretations (Ricoeur 1991a: 32). For Paul Ricoeur, “discourse is infinite because sentences are events, because they have a speaker and a hearer, because they have meaning, and because they have a reference. Each of these traits has an infinite character. With the event comes the openness of temporality, with the speaker and hearer the depth of individual fields of experience, with meaning the limitlessness of the thinkable, and with reference the inexhaustibility of the world itself” (1973a: 100).

As mentioned already, the text is the main object of Paul Ricoeur’s interpretation theory, so the textual interpretation is the primary aim of hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur explains his interpretation model as follows: “The kind of hermeneutics which I now

favor starts from the recognition of the objective meaning of the text as distinct from the subjective intention of the author. This objective meaning is not something hidden behind the text. Rather it is a requirement addressed to the reader. The interpretation, accordingly, is a kind of obedience to this injunction starting from the text" (1973b: 93).

Since words have double/multiple meanings (polysemy), Ricoeur describes interpretation as "*the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning*" (Ricoeur 1974b: 13). "Interpretation is a particular case of understanding. It is an understanding applied to the written expressions of life" (Ricoeur 1976: 73). "The dialectic of the event and meaning in discourse and the dialectic of sense and reference in meaning itself" (Ricoeur 1976: 23) become crucial in Ricoeur's hermeneutics.

There are many ways to interpret a text because of discourse's 'ambiguity or equivocity'. "Ambiguity or equivocity is not the same thing as polysemy. Polysemy is a feature of words, several senses for one name. Ambiguity is a feature of discourse. Ambiguity or equivocity means that for one string of words we have more than one way of interpreting it." (Ricoeur 1973a: 102). Not all interpretations are equal. This leads to an unending conflict of interpretations. "It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them, and to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our reach" (Ricoeur 1991a: 160).

Ricoeur clarifies that interpreting the written discourse is a game of guesses and validation because of the disjunction of the meaning and intention. We have to guess the meaning of the text because the text does not disclose the author's original intention anymore. In other words, the concern of interpretation is not the utterer's meaning but the utterance's meaning. While there are no rules for making guesses, there are methods for validating guesses (Ricoeur 1971: 329). The validation procedures are guided by a logic of probability rather than a logic of empirical verification (Ricoeur 1971: 330).

LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION: THE HERMENEUTIC ARC

The process of interpretation takes place at three levels – explanation/initial reading, understanding (comprehension)/critical reading and appropriation – which is called the 'hermeneutic arc'.

The explanation is directed toward the analysis of the internal nature of the text (the parts). Here, the text is authorless, has no context, no external world, and no transcendent aim (Ricoeur 1991a: 113). At this level, understanding is relatively superficial/immature because it is about our initial guess of the meaning of the text, which might not be the exact meaning intended by the author.

The second level of understanding requires the search for in-depth meanings in the text (the whole in relation to its parts). Here we fulfill the text through a living

communication with it (Ricoeur 1991a: 113). The world of the text combines with the reader's world to create something new. We move from what the text says (sense) to what the text talks about (reference) (Ricoeur 1976, 88). "To interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text... what must be interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own most possibilities" (Ricoeur 1991a: 86). Interpretation is not a question of imposing our finite capacity for understanding upon the text but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving an enlarged self from it (Ricoeur 1991a: 88). "In explanation we explicate or unfold the range of propositions and meanings, whereas in understanding we comprehend or grasp as a whole the chain of partial meanings in one act of synthesis" (Ricoeur 1976: 72). However, there is no dichotomy between explanation and understanding. They are dialectic.

However, interpretation is incomplete without appropriation. We, as interpreters, are distanced from these texts, not only in the temporal and spatial sense but distanced with respect to their meanings. It is only in appropriation that this distance is overcome.

Appropriation and distancing provide a dialectic of interpretation between the near and far, the familiar and unfamiliar, and the known and foreign. "To 'make one's own' what was previously 'foreign' remains the ultimate aim of all hermeneutics" (Ricoeur 1976: 91). Methodologically, interpretation allows the actualization of the meanings of a text, and for Ricoeur, this occurs through appropriation "What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text. In other words, what has to be appropriated is nothing other than the power of disclosing a world that constitutes the reference of the text" (Ricoeur 1976: 92). We appropriate the *proposed world* that lies *in front of* the text, not *behind*. Interpretive understanding opens up the possibility of seeing things differently and of orienting oneself in other ways in the world. In appropriation, "the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself" (Ricoeur 1991a: 118). In other words, "for Ricoeur, the act of appropriating a text should be a process of disappropriating one's habitual identity as it is transformed imaginatively and non-coercively by its participation in the world of the text" (Schwartz 1983: 296). "The *self* is constituted by the 'matter' of the text" (Ricoeur 1991a: 88).

The interconnection between experience, understanding and self-understanding grounds Ricoeur's theory of interpretation in existence. It takes account of being and the relation of being with others so that every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.

CONCLUSION

All spiritual traditions have texts that speak of human-nature relationships. Texts are discourses fixed in writing. As a written text, they are alienated/distanced from its

original speaker, audience and context. They do not communicate the experience as experience but its meaning. This meaning is made intelligible and accessible to us in and through language, hence the necessity of interpretation. Since the text escapes the limit horizon of the speaker, the purpose of interpretation is not to understand the speaker's intention. The interpreter must focus not so much on the world of the text or the world behind the text but instead on the world in front of the text.

Since religious narratives influence our understanding of nature, interpreting them correctly can contribute to our care for the earth. Applying the hermeneutic phenomenological method of Paul Ricoeur can help us in three ways: first, this method helps us to analyze the internal relations of the eco-narratives (the first level of the hermeneutic arc) that helps us to rediscover the vital role nature played in religious traditions and thus counter those scholarly opinions that hold religions responsible for the environmental deterioration. Secondly, semantic autonomy allows us to dialogue with eco-narratives from our existential context. Through such living communication, we will be able to interpret these eco-narratives to address the present environmental crisis constructively.

Thirdly, hermeneutic phenomenology considers every text as an inter-text. There are no pure or stable texts. The distancing makes texts communicate in dialogue with other texts. This is an important aspect of eco-narratives in the post-modern world. No one eco-narrative has a privileged ecological perspective. They interact, and they engage in continual dialogue. In that process, eco-narratives open before the adherents of various spiritual traditions a new world where similarities outnumber differences. This will further enhance care for the earth as an interreligious project. These methodological considerations can help us as we begin to incorporate care for the earth into our mission.

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