

SACRED COMMITMENTS AND THE LIMITS OF HISTORY

Although the main object of this paper is to consider some of the interdisciplinary implications between post-modern theology and the notion of history, particularly from Ricoeur and Foucault's point of view, we need to say that this kind of approach is only possible due to nineteenth-century study of the Bible and Its relationship with literature and history.

Looking back on it from our present distance in time, we can see that the nineteenth-century was an age of faith. Knowledge, through the disciplines of science and history, had flowed into it in abundance, but the result of such knowledge, in Western Europe at any rate, included a growing fear that the spiritual bond which unites man's understanding of things with his sense of moral vocation, might succumb to the strain and break. Then, in spite of nineteenth-century developments of biblical criticism, evident in the amount of intellectual prophets, assessments of the sacred in post-modern theology are still in their initial stages. Among other reasons, and in a very broad sense, it is because it points to limits, that the sacred occupies, in a secular world, a space beyond or outside history. In her book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva talks about the sacred as being divided, a 'two-sided formation':

one aspect is defensive and socializing, the other shows fear and
indifferentiation¹

One could say therefore that, being drawn to the boundaries of meaning, the sacred places both subject and language at risk. In very simple terms, this is to say that the words of God are not like any other text. Although they have to be printed

¹ KRISTEVA, Julia – *Powers of Horror*, Columbia, Columbia University Press, 1982, p.58.

and reviewed like any other text, they represent both the transcendental and the mundane, the universal and the particular, the timeless and the transient.

Different disciplines try to understand those which are supposed to be God's written down. Theology examines the earliest versions of the Text in order to find the truth about God – the Text becomes the basic object of analysis. Archaeology, anthropology, sociology and other social sciences usually inquire into the social relations of production which lie behind the Text and give rise to various transformations. This has to do with a broader analysis of the role of religion in the world and leads to the study of the hegemonic ideologies which determine the process of economic transformations.

Today, sacred texts operate within cultural systems, constantly enacting processes of myth-making. People construct their own versions of the sacred in order to make sense of the worlds they live in. War, death, poverty constitute the experiences of us all, whether directly or indirectly. So, the sacralizations of the past no longer suffice, either as words, authority or as liturgy. In spite of this, sacred texts accommodate themselves to the world and so have an important social function. For instance, American positivism and the capitalism's successes function as antidotes to religious teachings – all over the world, reality points out to crime, poverty and city violence. Business elites lack an ethic of communal sense of responsibility, proving individualism to be their prime value.

In this way, the whole function and social location of text-creating and text-sacralizing has to be rethought. Humanity needs to see herself in history and sacred texts can no longer be presented as finished canon because history is too painful to be so expressed and interpretations in the contemporary world are undergoing transformation. Variables of gender, class, race and age cut into what we could call the world hegemonic system and its interventionist and influential powers. Finding a definition for 'sacred text' or discussing processes of sacralization goes far beyond the argument about the variety of editions of a book or the etymologies of a word. Because social change is great and human beings are endlessly resacralizing the world and their place in it, the sacred has to be re-enacted in history. Traditions will then be called and opened up to the world, as a transformational process rather than closing off and protecting an ancient canon which is moving away from reality.

From a theological view, human history takes place within a certain concept of time and creation. In spite of this, human beings and particularly historians perceive a chain of events and progress and know that they are the history makers. These two opposite notions of history deal with the complexity of both time and eternity. In order to evaluate the importance of history for the study of the sacred, one has to understand how the recent critical theorists challenge the notion of 'history'.

Although scholars disagree about the accuracy of historical events, the fact is that Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths are profoundly rooted in history. For theologians it is important to determine the nature of the events in the most exact way possible. In Germany, in the early part of the nineteenth century, a new historical consciousness was awaking with historians like Leopold von Ranke, Johann Gustav Droysen and Wilhelm Dilthey.² David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1836) also raised crucial questions about the relationship between historical event, its representation and myth in the New Testament. Strauss was then concerned about the difference between historical reference and historical writing. The question was basically this: Where did the facts end and their representation begin? Strauss was then introducing the question about the relationship between reality and its representation into German idealism.

The reason why Christian religion still remains relevant and effective in today's hostile environment is also rooted in history - a history of changes and transformations but also of dissemination of traditions. Besides, the founding historical events for Jewish, Christian or Islamic theology require the need for a theology of history: Historical religions are therefore by their very nature prophetic-messianic.

They look forward at the first to a point in history and originally towards an *eschaton* (end) which is also the end of history, where the full meaning of life and history will be disclosed and fulfilled.³

To be a self is to have a god; to have a god is to have a history, that is, events connected by a meaningful pattern; to have one god is to have one history.⁴

Scientific paradigms of evolution, in the nineteenth century, reinforced the concern with history as progress. History was growing as a cultural science, with its methods of proof and by the early twentieth century had led to an interest in the problem of time.⁵

In order to understand the relationship between theology and history, one has to consider three different aspects with which contemporary critical theory is usually concerned. The first is the investigation into the nature of time. The classical

² GADAMER, Hans-Georg - *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1975, pp. 153-214.

³ NIEBUHR, Reinhold - *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, London, Nisbet & Co., 1943, p. 4.

⁴ *Idem*, 80.

⁵ BULTMANN, Rudolf - *Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1961, p.94.

perspective, starting with Aristotle and more recently in Hegel, pictured time as circular, but time need not be circular. It could be linear or simply something man brings to his comprehension of the world. Time consciousness makes God enter our temporality – for Christian experience, the present is then caught between a time of expectation (the future) and a time of recollection (the past).

Secondly, one has to investigate what can be defined as an ‘event’, that is, how an object becomes meaningful to the observer. In this respect either the event is evaluated as pure event or it is made meaningful by being witnessed and reported. Finally, hermeneutical questions have to be asked – how does the record of the event connect with the event itself? One thing is certain, in order to examine theology’s relationship with representation, we must recognize that the way in which an event is reported will depend upon the conventions of the historical reportage and also upon one’s world-picture and conception of time. So, we return to the starting point: we begin with the exegesis of the Scriptural text, with the configuration of time and event. But, any reflections upon time and event become inseparable from the examination of language, representation or narrative. This is probably one of the reasons why recent philosophers of discourse, from Heidegger and Ricoeur to Derrida, have written about time and its representation.

When it reflects upon its own historical roots and concerns, theology leans upon secular historical methods. Therefore, there are other philosophical and doctrinal questions which stand often presupposed by theology’s concern with the techniques of historiography. If we want to bring out some of these questions we have to consider the way in which recent critical theorists re-evaluate historical methodology.

At the centre of existentialism and phenomenology is the human condition and its relation and construction of the world. Following the tradition of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Ricoeur has been exploring and developing a philosophy of the will.⁶ That is, his concern with notions of ‘intention’, ‘action’ and ‘personal identity’ has taken him into the realm of representation, particularly symbolism, metaphor and narrative. Central to his work on the will has been the analysis and interdependence of time, event and history. So, in *History and Truth* (1965), Ricoeur tells us that history cannot be divorced from anthropology, that is from the finite nature of humanity. Therefore, questions of objectivity and scientific method in historiography have to include the fact that we are, each one of

⁶ RICOEUR, Paul – *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965; *Fallible Man*, trans. C.A. Kelbley, New York, Fordham University Press, 1986; *Time and Narrative*, vols. I, II, III, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago Univ. Press, 1988.

us, experiencing and making history: 'the object of history is the human subject itself.'⁷

First, Ricoeur considers that the historian's task is to reconstruct events from traces left in documents. In this way, he establishes historical facts – he not only returns the past to us, but is involved in explaining it, that is in bringing us to a certain historical understanding. Therefore, history is faithful to its etymology: it is 'research', *istoria*. Finally, the objectivity of history assumes a totality within which each moment or part relates to a whole. History is made of a constant dialogue between the universal and the particular – nevertheless there remains an end of history within which historical objectivity and unities of truth become a possibility. However, acts and events only constitute a body of knowledge through representation, through being traced in texts. As it is a process of explanation and understanding, the historian's task is viewed by Ricoeur as a hermeneutical enterprise. The objectivity of history then is not based on positivism but upon texts and their interpretation within the horizon of 'ultimate meaning'. Since we only have access to this through faith, it remains a hope, an utopia. So, in *History and Truth*, Ricoeur concludes that questions of history and theology always turn upon the nature and interpretation of language and discourse. The truth of history is an endless question because there only exist fragmentary and ephemeral histories.

Ricoeur's views on history were deeply influenced by the approach of the Annales School. This was founded, just before the opening of the Second World War, by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch (*Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*) and, though reacting against the excessive positivism of earlier French historiography, it emphasized the complex factuality of history, rejecting the Hegelian view with its great men like Napoleon bringing about events within the whole pattern of history. On the other hand, the German philosophical, epistemological, ontological and therefore hermeneutical tradition affects Ricoeur's thinking profoundly. Standing fully in the hermeneutical tradition, Ricoeur demands that history, historical knowledge and historiography be grounded in the more primordial category of narrative understanding. Following Hegel or Marx's views of history, this is a universal narrative which claims to explain the real meaning of small narrative practices. This dialectic between existential ambivalence and the horizon of an ultimate meaning constitutes the main problematic argument in Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*.

It is the epistemological and ontological status of the historical, in terms of both the temporal condition of being human and as a form of discourse, which

⁷ *Idem*, 1965, p.40.

concerns Ricoeur's return to the problematic of history and truth in *Time and Narrative*. Along with the discussion of time, examined through Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger, is the investigation into the nature of mimesis or representation. In fact, these constitute two foundational themes of Western metaphysics and are related through narrative which configures the two antithetical forms of time: world time and human time. That is, history, both in the sense of an historical science and the actions of human beings in the world, cannot be divorced from philosophical reflections upon time and its configuration. This is why narrative is both the condition of our temporal existence and the expression of all historical consciousness.⁸ If the writing of history is governed by the illusion of truth, then the search of time is open to ideological manipulations. It is at this point that Michel Foucault's work on history enters the argument.

First, we must say that Ricoeur's problematic of history and truth was never Foucault's because for Foucault historiography was not concerned with any ultimate truth, any eschatological horizon of meaning. He will rather speak of 'the games of truth' (*jeux de vérités*) and histories.⁹ Truth as knowledge is connected to discourse and social disciplines, discourse is wedded to power relations as they emerge and operate within society. The objects of Foucault's histories are specific practices and the power-knowledge discourses which maintained them. This understanding of truth has its roots in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. When he announces that all historians speak of things which have never existed except in imagination, Nietzsche stands in a tradition opposed to the explanation/understanding of a general hermeneutics which informs Ricoeur's approach to history and truth. Following Nietzsche, we face with Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* the epistemological mutation of history.¹⁰

Therefore, Foucault is more interested in specific practices rather than causation, tradition, influence, development and evolution. He is more interested in 'games of truth' rather than attempting to reconstruct the event and the situation as accurately as possible. We can grasp the nature of Foucault's historical project and its implications with three different terms: archaeology, genealogy and *évènementialiser*.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he states that 'History is that which

⁸ *Idem*, 1988, p.52.

⁹ FOUCAULT, Michel – *History of Sexuality*, vols. I, II e III, trans. Robert Hurley, London, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Idem* – *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, London, Tavistock, 1972, p.11.

transformed documents into monuments'.¹¹ Archaeology then is concerned with the relationships between such documents as monuments and how they constitute a distinctive series which are juxtaposed with each other. They overlap and intersect, and cannot be reduced to a linear scheme. He then takes up a series – psychopathology, for example, in *Madness and Civilization* or codes of correction and punishment in *Discipline and Punish*. So, Foucault's 'archaeology' explores and affirms the notion of discontinuity. This notion was the enemy of philosophies of universal history which tried to establish patterns of homogeneous relations and dissolve differences. Allowing the discontinuities to emerge in any series and between any series, Foucault problematizes the object (whether it be madness, the clinic or the penitentiary) which seem to unify all the discourses that make up this series.

This mode of analysing objects can also be employed in analysing the formation of concepts and, what applies to this applies also to the human subject. The primacy of the subject or consciousness is axiomatic to Foucault's project and, as we can see in Jean François Lyotard's Introduction to his *The Inhuman*, the collapse of the subject required the end of humanism. For Foucault, the self refers to a certain infrastructure of discourses – it is therefore both created and able to create itself. He will later develop his thinking beyond the archaeology of discourses into nondiscursive 'games of truth' which provide the self with forms of creation and recreation. For the moment, we will state Foucault's definition of the function of archaeology:

To define objects (concepts, subjects) without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of the historical appearance¹².

In his later work, Foucault's archaeology becomes complemented by 'genealogy': this new emphasis was a clear rejection of the reality of rules or orders for historical appearance. The task of 'genealogy' was then to reveal that things 'have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms'.¹³ The emphasis is not upon structures and discourses but upon

¹¹ *Idem*, p.7.

¹² *Idem*, pp. 47-8.

¹³ *Idem – Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Oxford, Blackwell, 1977, p.142.

nondiscursive power relations which play in certain ‘games of truth’. Foucault is now concerned with the relation of power to knowledge. In *The History of Sexuality* he is questioning the common assumptions about knowledge: we are called to abandon a whole tradition that has conceived knowledge and truth as objective and outside historical, geographical, personal and social interests. For Foucault then, power is universal and immanent; it is part of the very nature of society and determines focuses for attention and therefore creates the objects of knowledge that emerge in discourses; it creates forms of rationalization.

We can see that Foucault’s work is not concerned with the history of the past in terms of the present, but as an ‘excavation’ revealing various levels or transformations within which the phenomena were made significant or disappeared altogether. In the sense that no accurate picture of the past can ever be given, that no reconstruction of all the possible relations constituting an object of knowledge is possible, *there is no true history*. Foucault terms *evenementialiser* the specific practices which are found inscribed by specific rationales and constituted by specific sets or power relations. And, because it redirects us towards nondiscursive practices rather than simply the archaeology of discourses, this task is a product of genealogy.

However, each practice evidences its own logic, its own rationality: there can be no hierarchy of logics and truth is a product of the practice itself. Foucault’s analytics of power is therefore anchored in the concrete and historically particular. Thus, he attempts to deduce universal and ahistorical principles for the operation of power.

For Foucault as for Ricoeur, the ‘event’ is a crucial element. But for Foucault, it cannot give us access to a deeper truth. Suspicious of narrative, without denying the existence of temporal succession, Foucault views it as reducing complexity to continuity, neutralizing and dissolving the event’s singularity. Because of this, narrative cannot recognize the power relations and the logic located in the event itself. Therefore, Foucault focuses upon events that resist continuity: the articulation of the insane or the silence of the imprisoned.

On the other hand, in terms of theology’s concern with history, Ricoeur offers the possibility of a hermeneutics of revelation and testimony. In his interpretation theory, where language operates at the boundary of a transcendental horizon, he offers a detailed analysis of the relationship between the Word of God and the words of human beings. For interpreting the Bible as a text, Ricoeur’s work emphasizes a reader-response strategy and develops therefore a phenomenology of religious experience. Like Ricoeur, Foucault’s work calls attention to the fact that history is written upon specific rhetorical strategies. So, in this way, both act as a check against historical positivism. However, his historical tools – archaeology and genealogy – have not yet been applied to Biblical narratives.

Foucault frequently employs the image of the tide along the shoreline to describe the transgressive action of language. In fact, to discuss beginnings and endings, birth, death, the sacred or the secular is to venture into interdisciplinary studies and to question the cultural politics which separate philosophy from literature, sociology from anthropology, theology from critical theory. Theology's discourse has always required other discourses – so it has always dealt with the transgression of boundaries. Interdisciplinary encounter is always problematic. Any attempt to create a place in which theology meets literature, philosophy, social anthropology and historiography is a dangerous task. We have just attempted to map an interdisciplinary realm – as the argument here proves, there is debate on re-interpretation.

Rooted in biblical notions of meaning and significance, history is a relational existential communication. Time, change, interpretation, past and future confound all the certainties valued by classical philosophical models and conceptions of modern science. A distinction must be made between the notion of a past and a conception of history. Every person and every culture has a past. A post-modern theology must encompass the deconstructionist critique but also try to transcend it through a biblically grounded concept of history, and its related concepts of consciousness and freedom. History is then the critical liberating appropriation of the past into the present with an eye to the future.

Maria João Pires