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## **Wisdom Grafting Faith And Reason**

### **An Observation Paper on the Seminar on Faith, Reason and Wisdom**

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My observation would consist of two parts. I would like to first highlight the key points that emerged in the presentation of the papers and discussion from different perspectives followed by theorizing those points from philosophical perspectives. One of the major strengths of this seminar is to have an open and genuine dialogue on Faith, Reason and Wisdom cutting across different disciplines paving way for multiple perspectives on the topic of the seminar. This becomes for me the important hermeneutical key to ascertain that no one discipline can have a monopoly on faith, reason, or wisdom. This seems to be a very humble recognition of the limit of privileging of one epistemology or one meaning system within which the richness of the subject matter can be contained. This does not mean that each of these perspectives are totally disconnected from one another, as if each were a complete whole without having to be complemented by another perspective, though we may like to maintain the uniqueness and the autonomy of each discipline. Each discipline or each perspective therefore is already and always inhabited by other perspectives. This immediately presents us with a creative tension between wholeness and particularity of perspectives, integration and difference. We cannot choose one pole over the other, as doing so would lead us back to the metaphysical language of the binaries which would undercut the very purpose of this seminar not only by making faith and reason as binary opposites but also paving way for many set of binary opposites like faith and unfaith, reason and unreason and the like. So our approach cannot be one of either... or, but should be of both... and.

The idea of moving beyond binary opposites in dealing with faith, reason and wisdom was emphasized by many speakers because such binaries have far reaching consequences in the existential dimension of our life. The binary masculine/feminine has been instrumental in begetting violence against women, the binary purity/pollution (or sacred/profane) has led to the oppression of Dalits for many centuries, the binary primitive/civilized has deprived the tribals of their human dignity, the binary scientific/unscientific has marginalized the folk from main narratives. While most of us will agree that faith and reason are not opposite poles, they are nevertheless not the same. While acknowledging their intersecting and interacting spaces, we need also to maintain the difference between them, retaining their individual spaces, thus affirming and even celebrating the healthy tension between the two. Perhaps it is the space in between, the *Khora* – to use the Platonic image – the space between the world of ideas and the real world that can be the locus of wisdom. Wisdom, therefore, is the dynamics of interplay between faith and reason, the very flow that cannot be interrupted. Along with the image of *sophia*, I would also like to bring in the Indian image of *Sarasvati*, the personification of wisdom. *Saravasti* is also the name of the river that flows underground. The flow of the river reminds us of the dynamic nature of life. Wisdom is precisely the reminder that neither faith nor reason is a static aspect of human life but is always evolving in as much as we humans evolve.

This brings me back to the idea that emerged during our discussion, namely, faith and reason are born out of concrete human experience. They are part of the human growth process taking into account the embodied existence of human life in flesh and blood which would account both for the suffering and the exuberance of the folk, the Dalits, the Tribals and women. Though faith and reason emerge within individual consciousness, they have a community dimension as we humans are social beings and we have shared existential concerns. We need to guard ourselves at once against overstating the role of the community at the expense of individual search, individual flowering which may sometimes call for a transgression of a particular community experience or that of a tradition. Otherwise prophetic faith and prophetic reason will have no place in our deliberations. Again, we need to guard ourselves

against privileging one community experience over another. The faith experience and even knowledge production of each community may be different; each one creates different mythos and logos (different ways of meaning making); each creates a different world-view. They can be different but can be complemented by other world-views. One of the positive traits of multicultural societies like ours is having multiple affiliations and therefore, creatively appropriating different world-views. Wisdom invites us to a humbling process of opening our faith and reason to other paradigms of faith and reason. This calls for a dialogue between faith and reason, but also among different faith traditions and among intellectual traditions in a true spirit of public discourse advocated by Habermas, lest our faith boils down to fundamentalism or our reason to ideology. It is through this humbling experience we can let the subalterns speak; allow the mini-narratives to occupy centre stage.

This takes me to the second part of the reflection from philosophical perspectives. For philosophizing this interplay between faith, reason and wisdom, we also need to take dialogue with atheists seriously. I begin with an analysis of the post-religious faith of Ricœur who remained faithful to his religious tradition and Derrida's Faith and Reason, who became a declared atheist for cause.

## **Ricœur's Post-religious Faith and De-absolutization of Reason**

In a lecture delivered at Columbia University in 1966 entitled "The Religious Significance of Atheism," Ricœur highlights some key aspects of post-religious faith. He says that 'atheism' occupies "an intermediary position, both as a division and as a link between religion and faith." Ricœur holds that there are two main functions of traditional religion: "accusation" and "consolation." By accusation, he means taboos imposed by religion along with the fear of punishment for breaking the taboos and by consolation he means the desire for protection. The primitive human person was attracted to religion precisely because of this two-fold function of religion. He defines religion, as a "primitive structure of life which must always be overcome by faith and which is grounded in the fear of punishment and the desire for protection."<sup>1</sup> Atheism, he says, is useful

in that it destroys the shelter offered by traditional religion and liberates men from taboos imposed by religion. In this sense, says Ricœur, “atheism opens up the way to a faith situated beyond accusation and protection.”<sup>2</sup> Ricœur thus speaks of the “religious meaning of atheism,” suggesting that oppressive and life-denying components of faith challenged by atheism must be done away with so that a genuine form of faith can emerge.

Ricœur’s thought illustrates the double rejection of a spiritual harmonization and destruction of philosophy. The reciprocal challenge then is a mutual acknowledgment of faith of reason in fraternal tension that continues to maintain the difference between both. In one of his works, while commenting on a protestant philosopher Pierre Thevenaz, Ricœur contrasts religious philosophy with a philosophy responsible before God, a philosophy where God is no longer the supreme object of philosophy, but where he is implied in the call and response of the philosophical act itself. This is what is meant by the striking word responsibility. Thus Ricœur brings to closure a false problem generally raised by the antithesis of reason and faith.<sup>3</sup> Hence the modest simplicity and this “asceticism of the argument” that Ricœur never parted with – as he says in his preface to *Oneself as Another* in which he makes a distinction between argument and conviction to explain how the theological question is held “in suspense [so] that one can call [my philosophy] agnostic.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly we will also notice in Ricœur, a refusal to represent the beyond. In this regard, Ricœur is rather Kantian and it is on the reflection of the limits that he sets out to meet the theological figures of hope.

Ricœur repeatedly evokes the idea that this limit is precisely not the boundary of the inaccessible beyond. It is like a constitutive limit in reverse, which brings us back to ourselves, by a sort of a descending movement. The end, in the sense of finitude, sends us back to our world. By this change of direction, this limit makes us descend again, renounce metaphysics, meta-language and meta-human. The collapse of theological philosophy gives way to a modest philosophy and theology in time, where reason is inscribed as part only of human history of questions. While affirming that a believer confesses his/her responsibility of a philosopher before God, Ricœur asks if the philosopher knows that he is before God. The human

person is indeed put in his/her place by the “de-absolutization” of reason and the recognition of human finitude before infinity.

Faith, for Ricoeur, is not immediate but always mediated by language, history, among others, and this is the hermeneutic condition. Faith is mediated by canonical texts, always already interpreted and received in a given tradition. Thus, it is as a philosopher that Ricoeur reads the biblical texts in the same way as he reads Greek tragedy or Shakespeare or Proust. This use of non-philosophical sources such as myths and stories is part of his philosophical approach. However, the biblical texts have a canonical status for Christianity. That is why philosophers, like contemporary theologians and exegetes, must take into account the depth of the written traditions and their crystallization in various forms: exegesis “invites us not to separate the figures of God from the forms of discourse in which these figures occur. By form of discourse I understand the narrative or the ‘saga,’ the myth, the prophecy, the hymn and psalm, wisdom literature, etc.”<sup>5</sup> This literary polymorphism of biblical literature opens up a fruitful intertextuality that makes apparent this irreducible plurality of voices and modes of expression. And “the referent ‘God’ is not just the index of the mutual belonging together (*appartenance*) of the originary forms of the discourse of faith. It is also the index of their incompleteness. It is their common goal, which escapes each of them.”<sup>6</sup>

Ricoeur identifies philosophical discourse with “critique” and the religious with “conviction” while admitting that philosophical discourse also has some elements of conviction and the religious discourse involves critique. “I shall say that critique is no longer on one side and conviction on the other; in each of the fields that are traversed or touched upon I shall attempt to show that there is, to different degrees, a subtle blending of conviction and critique.”<sup>7</sup> However, by placing conviction in polarity with the critique, Ricoeur introduces what he calls “a twofold reference, which is absolutely primary for me (...) But this is only one manner of expressing the polarity of conviction and critique, for philosophy is not simply critical, it too belonging to the order of conviction. And religious conviction itself possesses an internal, critical dimension.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Habermas who contrasts argument with conviction, Ricoeur prefers “substituting for it a subtle dialectic between

argumentation and conviction (...) In real discussions, argumentation in its codified, stylized, even institutionalized form is but an abstract segment in a language process that involves a great number of language games.”<sup>9</sup>

## Derrida: Khoratic Space

Derrida has made an important analysis on the Platonic notion of *Khora* in his book *Timaeus*. This term is described by Plato by means of metaphors like mother and receptacle. The *Khora* is impossible to define, it escapes logical discourse and it seems that only metaphors can express it. Plato speaks of it as a third genre distinct from two other genres: the intelligible and sensible. The third genre escapes both intelligible and sensible, so metaphors come into play. A metaphor is an image: for example, sun is metaphorically referred to a “ball of fire” or truth designated as light. In both these examples, metaphor presupposes the distinction between literal and figurative meanings. While the literal meaning is “real,” the figurative meaning designates the figure, so something of the face value, the appearance. Figurative meaning hides in as much as it reveals.<sup>10</sup> Metaphor presupposes the existence of the literal and the figurative thus taking us to the difference between the intelligible and the sensible.

But if *Khora* is neither intelligible nor sensible, it means it is not a reality, neither essence nor appearance; it has no specific meaning. *Khora* falls short of all distinctions that found knowledge according to Plato and is on the threshold of thinking. The etymology of Greek *Khora* is χώρα that has at least three meanings in reference to space: to, withdraw, to change place and to make place. In the nominal form, *Khora* refers to a space occupied by something, country, territory, region, an area of land between two things and a place for something. It would be wrong to understand that this “place” as space, because space is a geometric representation that belongs to the intelligible and whose image is mapped only as a sensible projection of the intelligible. But *Khora*, as we know, is neither sensible nor intelligible. Plato gives the metaphor of the “receptacle” to indicate that *Khora* rests between the intelligible and the sensible. We cannot define it without contradiction. According to Plato *Khora* leads to all determinations, but it is not itself a determination or a cause or origin

of anything and it is not determined; it is deprived of meaning, but it is as much a place as a non-place. *Khora* escapes literal discourse, logic and rhetoric.

The status *Khora* in Plato's philosophy is remarkable because everything happens as if *Khora* were indispensable for knowledge to take place but it escapes this very knowledge. *Khora* is the threshold of everything; essential but unthinkable condition of thought and the world. That is why every metaphor used by Plato to designate it immediately destroys itself by another that contradicts it. For example, *Khora* is compared to a womb, but immediately acknowledged as a virgin. *Khora* is metaphorically a virgin mother: she gives birth without losing her hymen, having never been united to a man (see *Timaeus* 50c-e).<sup>11</sup> Plato also says that *Khora* is like fragrant ointment, but he immediately adds that it should have no odour itself, which implies another metaphor logically impossible: an odorless oil, neutral, not a neutrality resulting from the mixture of all possible flavors and odors blurring the difference between odors, but a neutrality in which what blurs is the possibility of distinguishing the odor of the odorless, that is the impossibility of representing logically this neutrality. We understand as to why Plato says that *Khora* is a third genre, difficult to understand: *Khora* defies epistemology or logic.<sup>12</sup> Yet we must not forget that without *Khora*, no epistemology would be possible.

Can we not then recognize in *Khora* a realm that does not obey any determination of logic and philosophy, that which also escapes religion; that which is not allowed to sanctify, purify, indemnify? Does not *Khora* show a new way out of religious war and violence? In his essay "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida opens up this discussion. Thanks to *Khora*, we must be able to get out of the death of religion as we know it today. A new anchorite mode (note this term derived from *Khora*) is ready to take over. As Derrida notes, "*It is neither Being nor God, neither God nor Man, nor History. It always resists them.*"<sup>13</sup> The redoubled formula "the desert in the desert" is an abstraction made of withdrawal and subtraction of all institutional mediations. Is *Khora* a place of resistance to faith?

The answer cannot be simple because the challenge is immense. On the one hand, it seems that *Khora* escapes determinations of the

content of faith, but on the other, is it not impossible to think of *Khora* without falling into these determinations? So when we speak of “resistance” and “new way,” are we not, without however realizing, using a religious language that we would like to avoid? Are we not confronting an undecidable oscillating abyssal? We should not begin to believe in *Khora* as is if it were a new goddess but should be aware of the fact that the logic of religion though it passes through everything is not founded on anything; it is a bottomless bottom.

It is then not surprising that Derrida deconstructs traditional religions and messianisms and ultimately calls for a “religion beyond religion” that can scarcely give a name to God. However, while Derrida renounces all content of religions and messianisms, he does not abandon the form of faith, messianicity with messiansim as he calls. His notion of messianicity goes beyond concrete historical messianisms of the Abrahamic religions and presents us with a structure of religion as an endless waiting for the arrival of the Messiah without however determining the figure of Messiah in advance.

Faith in messianicity, for Derrida, seems at times to mean a radical absence of any historical instantiation of the divine – no epiphanies, songs, testimonies, no sacred embodiments or liturgies. In the name of a universal openness to any other at all (*tout autre est tout autre*), Derrida’s “religion without religion” seems to have no visage to speak of, no embodied presence in space and time. “Ascesis strips the messianic hope of all biblical forms,” as he says, “and even all determinable figures of the wait or expectation; it thus denudes itself in view of responding to that which must be absolute hospitality, the ‘yes’ to the ‘arrivant(c)’”, the ‘come’ to the future that cannot be anticipated – which must not be the “anything whatsoever” that harbours behind it those too familiar ghosts, the very ones we must practice recognising. Open, waiting for the event as justice, this hospitality is absolute only if its [sic] keeps watch over its own universality.”<sup>14</sup>

Faith, therefore, is a complete openness to transcendence. But this should not be understood as opposed to immanence. It is going beyond oneself to the other – exteriority (the wholly other) and interiority (the other in me). Hence it is a journey though a desertified land, an arid space – a weak messianism as Walter Benjamin the



Jewish Philosopher would say. Derrida characterizes this as messianic without messianism or messianicity without messianism, arrival of the future with the incantation 'come' (*Maranatha*) but without any determinant identification of the Messiah, a future that is unforeseeable and unprogrammable. It is within this structure of faith and reason, we can invent the other, the totally other – the stranger, orphan and the widow to use Indian image, the Dalit, tribal, Woman any situation – whose face calls me into question. Wisdom is that Khoratic space of Faith and reason from where can emerge a possible Ethics of Responsibility, Aesthetics of Gift and Politics of Hospitality.

### Notes

1. Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (London: The Athlone Press, 2004), 437.
2. Ibid.
3. See Paul Ricœur, "Un philosophe protestant: Pierre Thévenaz," *Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 246-247.
4. Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24.
5. Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 482.
6. Paul Ricœur, "Naming God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979): 222.
7. Paul Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with Francois Azouvi and Marc de Launay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 10.
8. Ibid., 149.
9. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 287-288.
10. ὄνυξ in Greek means both face and mask evoking thus the idea both of letting known and be hidden.
11. see Timaeus 50c-e of *Plato, Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929).
12. This, of course, raises the question as to how Plato knows about Khora. But that is another matter!
13. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 59.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.