PAUL RICOEUR AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE: FROM *LEBENSFORM* TO WORK OF DISCOURSE

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Linguistic analysis has revolutionized the philosophy of religion in the past twenty years, but like many revolutions it has tended to dissipate its energy and over time congeal what was once a procedural breakthrough into a methodolatry. It was Wittgenstein, of course, who apprised philosophers that traditional "conceptual problems" are problems of language, and who gave impetus to the now epochal "linguistic turn," as it has been called, in philosophical inquiry and reflection. Linguistic analysis, or what has been alternately termed "ordinary language philosophy," offered an alternative to the semantics of positivism, which had sought to construct a purely formalist organon of meaning and truth against which all samples of discourse could be measured or tested. Linguistic analysis ruled out the possibility of making semantic judgements independently of the "grammatical" criteria supplied by natural languages themselves. Natural languages are not bereft of semantic importance because they somehow lack a clear and consistent structure of reference made intelligible by a self-correcting logic. Instead, the opposite is the case. Natural languages belong within different horizons of human engagement with the world, and it is these modes of engagement which make the question of meaning and truth possible in the first place.

> So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? — It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life [*Lebensform.*] (*PI*, p. 241)

The impasse for linguistic analysis, however, has been the failure to establish the genuine character of the *Lebensform,* especially in the case of religious language.

The methodolatry that has vitiated the philosophy of religious language in the post-Wittgensteinian era is evidenced, on the main, in the preoccupation with finding particular rules of inference and standards of verification supposedly peculiar to the "language game." Religious language is putatively one species of "language game" (or what Friedrich Waismann has dubbed a "language stratum") among others. Religious language, therefore, is alleged to have its own logic or "grammar" distinguishing it from other instances of natural language.

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The body of literature in the last twenty years that has proffered numerous and sundry descriptions of religious language games is too extensive for even cursory review. Nonetheless, each consideration of the semantic function that religious language performs constitutes an implicit statement about the *Lebensform* oriented to a unique dimension of experience. Even those familiar, reductionistic accounts which construe religious language as, for example, morality lessons cloaked in stories (Braithwaite) or performative ("self-involving") vows of commitment to a style of conduct (Evans) acknowledge that the form of life appropriate to *homo religiosus* differs appreciably from that of everyday human dealings. But the congenital shortcoming of linguistic analysis has been its dogged refusal to treat the *Lebensform* of religious language in terms of anything other than a "game" of quasi-theoretical claims and assertions, or its failure to realize that religious language is *not* a "natural language." This obsession with the "logic" of religious statements (indeed, a pre-occupation not with religion per se, but with theology, with *theo-logic*) has amounted to its methodolatry, and it is increasingly becoming the task of the philosophy of religion to discover a fresher and less restrictive approach to the problem of the *Lebensform*. Theological language is not operative religious language; it is only a second-order language of reflection on active symbols. Hence, theological language tends toward creedal formulations or *assertions* in the sense of dogmatic representations. Theological language is often distinguishable from primary religious language, insofar as the latter constitutes the active or contextual appropriation of symbols for worship or confession. Its "criteria" of use are governed by what Donald Evans has called the circumstances of "self-involvement" in the believer's dealings with the sacred. Such criteria are neither self-conscious nor self-reflective. The philosophical separation of theology from self-involving religious language, however, is an artificial one which ignores the full continuum of use and interpretation of symbols at different levels. Philosophy of religion fails to grasp how the criteria of truth and meaning at these various levels are dialectically related to each other. It stumbles when it comes to the challenge of viewing the emergence of religious language from natural language as a process of interpretation which develops its own criteria in accordanace with the changing semantic conditions of the words themselves.

Paul Ricoeur endeavors to break the broad-ranging impasse in the controversy over the religious *Lebensform* by adding the perspective of textual interpretation. The persistent confusion over the nature of religious language grows out of a fundamental misunderstanding

about the difference between original religious utterances (which are fugitive and semantically inconsequential) and textual inscriptions. The key to clarifying the "grammar" of religious discourse is a hermeneutical one. Religious "utterances" always occur as modes of articulation within a "confessing" community, and these modes of articulation do not represent personal encounters with the numinous so much as metaphrases of the language of sacred texts. For a Buddhist to declare, "I take refuge in the *samgha,*" or a Christian to aver that Jesus' death has rescued him from his sinful ways, is not semantically the same as to complain: "I am suffering from psoriasis." The latter type of affirmation can only be made as a first-hand report of an individual predicament in which one finds himself. The former kind of religious saying depends for its meaning on a corpus of *tradition,* a set of sentence protocols which derive from Scriptural testimonies and which are contingently interpreted by the devotee as having some general bearing on his own life situation. One should not ask straightaway: "What does the religious proclamation or faith-statement mean for the person who utters it?" Instead, one must inquire: "How does the faith statement function as part of the tradition, and how does the tradition affect those who speak from inside it?" The *Lebensform* of the religious locution is not merely a complex of *credo*-assertions or speculations authorized by ecclesiastical councils, such as the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. Nor is it strictly the context of personal religious response, in the sense of either apostolic acquaintance with the original revelation or a latter-day individual's appropriation of an envangelical message, as when a modern convert "realizes" the truth for himself. The *Lebensform* is *constantly* transformed as part of the kinetics of the tradition as a whole, and the scaffolding for the tradition is the text.

The philosophy of religious language, for Ricoeur, is thus preeminently a hermeneutics that seeks not to edify, but to help us understand the semantic process by which the tradition crystallizes. Religious language is "discourse," which encompasses both primary utterances and the rhetoric of tradition. The latter, however, is actually the material for interpretation, inasmuch as it provides the enduring system of semantic markers by which "faith" in any given epoch can be indicated. The rhetoric of tradition secures its phraseology from the text itself. From the text the tradition generates certain "modes of discourse," such as "narratives, proverbs, legislation texts, hymns, prayers," all of which compose the setting for "the event of meaning" wherein faith is actualized. Ricoeur insists that it is the aim of hermeneutics to identify these "originary modes of discourse

through which the religious faith of a community comes to language" (*PRL*, p. 73) and which by the same token constitute the language whereby faith can be promulgated.

The "mode of discourse" is also a "work." And "a work of discourse, as a work of art, is an autonomous object at a distance from the authorial intention." (*PRL*, p. 75). Its language "has a world now and not just a situation." (*IT*, p. 80). The "world" of the work of discourse is not prior to the text, but is created by it. Because the work stands at a "distance" from the immediate linguistic situation out of which it evolved (e.g., the actual speaking of the "parable of the sower" by Jesus), it no longer sustains the simple referents of that situation, but now possesses a "surplus of meaning," whereby it has the capacity for an open expansion of its acts of signification. In other words, it is susceptible to constant interpretation, and this process of interpretation counts for the enlargement of its "world." Tradition itself is the career of textual interpretation; it is the liberation of the sacred word from its fleeting kerygmatic moment. The *Lebensform* of which Wittgenstein speaks, therefore, pertains not to the primordial moment of locutional intention, but to the unfolding tradition of exegesis and the usage of its semantic determinations. The *Lebensform* is the "transcendental" (in Kant's sense of the term) condition of the possibility of recurring interpretation. The *Lebensform* is the unity of re-presentations of meaning in and through the text which has an open, historical career of significant applications.

In three important essays published in the Biblical journal *Semeia*, Ricoeur exhibits in detail how the religious "work of discourse" achieves its semantic effects. Ricoeur focuses on Biblical literary forms as the underpinnings of the Christian heritage, but his examples have parallel applications in other traditions. The critical Biblical mode of discourse is the parable. The parable is encased in a "narrative structure," but it violates the narrative structure sufficiently so as to deepen the ordinary sense of world that is suggested in any superficial reading of the story itself. The parable, in short, is consistently more than a story contextualized by everyday experience of the world. It discloses the "kingdom of God."

The parable dilates or opens up our sense of world through "the metaphoric process." As Ricoeur notes in *Interpretation Theory*, the metaphor "tells us something new about reality." (*IT*, p. 53). The metaphor accomplishes this end insofar as it is a "semantic innovation" that contains "the power of *redefining reality.*" (MP, p. 75). Every redefinition hinges on a redescription. The parable is the subversive agent within the frame of common signification and understanding.

It works within the language of the "myth," but *against* the myth. It exposes the inconsequence of its literal rendering while at the same time uncovering a more profound (in Medieval parlance we might say "spiritual") significance to the language. Thus the parable, as a work of discourse, not only has autonomy but also a built-in hermeneutical movement. It shows that the expression "Kingdom of God" has to be interpreted in a dramatic new fashion that is latent but not necessarily manifest within the familiar manner of talking about God's sovereignty. The parable is not a language game, but a disruption which alters the rules of the game.

In this connection Ricoeur cites the discussions of Ian Ramsey, who sees religious language as essentially the product of a tension between "models and qualifiers," or between a given, stenotypical grammar and an unorthodox extension of its sentence tokens. The model, as Ramsey points out, gives us the general "situation" that is characterized in discourse; the qualifier helps us to become "aware of something more than the spatio-temporal features of a particular situation." (*RL*, p. 56). The development of the model reaches a point at which its very meaning-structure is shattered, and the new language of faith occasions an "odd discernment." This kind of semantic breakthrough, according to Ricoeur, eventuates from "the revelatory power of the qualifier." (*SL*, p. 124). The revelatory act of language is at the same time a "limit-expression" whose referent is a "limit-experience." (*SL*, p. 122). The parable, as qualifier of the narrative, transcends the semantic limits of the conventional story genre while preserving its syntactical regularity. It points up the hermeneutical moment of the work of discourse, which sublates one set of references within itself by taking them up into a greater expanse of signification. It lays bare the Kingdom of God as in the world but not of it. Or to put it less theologically, the Kingdom is not in itself but in the language. The parable works to "qualify" the narrative, inasmuch as it urgently exposes the boundaries and limitations of the story in its "ordinary" mode of interpretation. It makes transparent the shortcomings of "natural" language as a vehicle of hieratic communication. The "limit-experience" that arrives with the parable thus depends on the self-disclosure of the finite range of signification ingredient in natural language, which the parable accomplishes antecedently to the breakthrough beyond conventional forms of meaning.

Linguistic analysis, Ricoeur intimates, can never hope to reconstruct the religious "language game," because the religious movement is always against any formal constraints on meaning and truth, against the game itself. This movement is an interpretative movement. The

parable does not "mean" what it "says." It means more. The work of discourse is not bound to the *Lebensform;* it serves to recreate and revise the *Lebensform* through the self-unfolding of tradition. The Kingdom, which is in itself a vanishing point of transcendence, perpetually moves in advance of this self-unfolding. The Kingdom is the "referent" of faith, which is at once "the limit of all hermeneutics and the non-hermeneutical origin of all interpretation." (*PRL*, p. 85). One can argue, of course, that Ricoeur has reached a climactic point in the philosophy of religious language where his admitted "Kantian" metaphysic of the inarticulable "limit" (one which talks in a peculiar manner about faith having a "reference") serves his purpose less well than a new Hegelian hermeneutic of self-reflection. But that is a topic for another essay. Ricoeur's premier contribution is his recognition of the dynamic and tensive properties of religious language, which cannot be assimilated to any preconceived semantic tests, whether they be those of ideal or conventional languages. For religious language has its meaning in the overcoming of routinized meanings. The Word lives on because it is more than the "word." Or, as Ricoeur puts it, "the world of religion is the everlasting process of giving forms and abolishing forms." (*SL*, p. 140).

The *Lebensform* is not merely one form among many in the religious process of semantic innovation, but the essence of forms. It is the "world" of the text, it is the horizon of possible interpretations that widens with the "lived" realization of each semantic moment in the ongoing interplay between the inscriptions of the text and their opportunities for grammatical expression in the evolving "work of discourse."

KEY TO CITATIONS

IT Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

MP Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process," *Semeia:* 75-106 (1975).

PI Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1958).

PRL Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *The Journal of Religion:* 71-85 (1974).

RL Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957).

SL Paul Ricoeur, "The Specificity of Religious Language," *Semeia:* 107-145 (1975).