

## The Ethical Dimension of Liturgy according to Paul Ricœur: A Liturgical Reading of “*Amour et justice*”

*La dimension éthique de la liturgie selon Paul Ricœur: Une lecture liturgique de «Amour et justice»*

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### Abstract

In a community of faith called Church, liturgy supposes sacred times and spaces where people of God celebrate the mystery of Christ. But more than a celebration, liturgy is an ethical configuration of the person, who listens the words narratively and perceives the symbols esthetically, with the mystery of Christ's life that reveals God and man at the same time. In order to understand liturgy, according to this central subject that is accepted academically in systematic theology and liturgical studies, we propose to consider the ethical dimension of faith as an anthropological mediation of the mystery celebrated in the worship. At the same time, to develop our research, we analyze in liturgical terms the book titled *Amour et justice* written by Paul Ricœur, considering the place of the Holy Scripture, especially the meaning of narratives of prophetic vocations in the configuration of the person, taking up his previous book *Soi-meme comme un autre* as a hermeneutical reference to understand the testimony and affirmation of the person, who goes from narratives to action in the praxis, that is to say to “the ontology of action”.

### Keywords

Anthropology.  
Golden Rule.  
Conscience.  
Bible.  
Practical wisdom.

## Resumé

Dans une communauté de foi appelée Église, la liturgie suppose des temps et des espaces où le peuple de Dieu célèbre le mystère sacré du Christ. Mais plus qu'une simple célébration, la liturgie est une configuration éthique de la personne qui écoute les mots narrativement et perçoit les symboles esthétiquement, avec le mystère de la vie du Christ qui révèle Dieu et l'homme en même temps. Afin de bien comprendre la liturgie, selon ce sujet central qui est accepté académiquement dans la théologie systématique et dans les études liturgiques, nous proposons de considérer la dimension éthique de la foi comme une médiation anthropologique du mystère célébré dans le culte. En même temps, pour développer notre recherche, nous analysons du point de vue liturgique le livre intitulé *Amour et la Justice* écrit par Paul Ricœur, en soulignant la place de la sainte Écriture, en particulier les récits de vocations prophétiques, concernant la configuration de la personne, et en prenant son précédent livre, *Soi-même comme un autre*, en tant que référence herméneutique pour comprendre le témoignage et l'affirmation de la personne, qui passe des récits à l'action dans la praxis, c'est-à-dire « l'ontologie de l'agir ».

## Mots-clé

Anthropologie.  
Règle d'Or.  
Conscience.  
Bible.  
Sagesse  
pratique.

## Introduction

Since the etymological meaning of the term λειτουργία is a “public service”, or literally, a “work of people” (λαός-έργον) in political life and in favor of the citizens, liturgy had a social impact in the Hellenic world. In the New Testament we can also find in many places the use of the term λειτουργία in that political sense, but also with civil, ritual and spiritual significance in the churches, especially it is related to services for poor people, preaching and the assembly of the congregation to celebrate their faith in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:23; 2 Corinthians 9:12, Philippians 2:17; 2:30; Hebrews 8:6; 9:21).

## Liturgy and Ethics

In general we can say that Christian life in the first centuries is a liturgical sacrifice in honor of Jesus Christ and the people of God: “in view of

God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1)<sup>1</sup>. In the Second Vatican Council, liturgy has a more profound purpose in the Church: the sanctification of man. In fact, this sanctification is realized in union with Christ in a "public worship" through the liturgical action: "In the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7). In this way liturgy is not only a public action of Christians, but a celebration of the whole community of faith called Church.

Even if liturgy is not in itself a moral instruction of the people of God in performance with Christ, it is an ethical configuration of the person in anthropological terms. Certainly liturgy does not have a moral plan to follow during and after the celebration of mysteries, such as commandments or rules stipulated in a deontological code, but it presupposes a "structuration of the conscience" of the believer according to their own Christian being, to their community of faith and to personal convictions through the rituals and especially according to the Word of God<sup>2</sup>. In spite of the liturgical rubrics, the believers who participate in the liturgical celebration can configure their life with Christ freely.

Nevertheless it is necessary to recognize, historically speaking, that in the Church there was a separation between ethics and faith, especially because Christians usually blindly obeyed a moral code or law established by the authority in terms of moral "heteronomy" in order not to commit iniquities; they just wanted to obtain the salvation of the sins. Currently, since the people of God can participate in the liturgical celebration, they can also think about the implications of the Word of God in their lives, families and the community. This means that the Bible now plays an ethical role in the life of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, « "Que l'Esprit Saint fasse de nous une éternelle offrande à ta gloire". L'accomplissement éthique de la liturgie », in Luc Dubrulle et Catherine Fino (éd.), *Habiter le monde selon le désir de Dieu. Mélanges Médevielle*, (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 2015)196-205.

<sup>2</sup> René Simon, *Éthique de la responsabilité* (Paris : Cerf, 1993) 313.

In fact, here we understand by ethics an autonomous reflection of a person about the practical implications of the Word of God on human life. In this article we don't want to reduce ethics to liturgy nor liturgy to ethics. In doing so, it is important to remember the difference between theology and philosophy made by Paul Ricœur with the terms “crypto-théologie” and “crypto-philosophique”<sup>3</sup>. Here we follow this distinction in methodological sense in order to not confuse liturgy and ethics, especially in our liturgical reading of *Amour et justice*. We just want to rediscover the ethical dimension of liturgy as an anthropological mediation to understand, theologically, the configuration and affirmation of believers with the mystery of Christian faith.

In this sense, we find that the hermeneutics of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) can offer some insight to understand the mediation of liturgy between the Bible and human life. Ricœur was a predominately a philosopher and a Christian who actively participated in ecumenical liturgical celebrations in *La communauté de Taizé*: “For fifty years, he came to Taizé on many occasions; we have so enjoyed his broad culture, his ability to express the Gospel values “in nowadays situations”<sup>4</sup>. Precisely, in his book called *Amour et justice*, he discovered in the prophetic narratives of the Bible the process in which a person can affirm their life *vis-à-vis* the Word of God thanks to the protestation against the nihilism of human life.

## The Ethical Dimension of Liturgy

Since the Revelation of God is an event in history, the *anamnesis* made in every liturgical celebration brings the divine action up to date in the community of faith which is temporalized in the present time by the reading of the Bible's narratives and by rituals that express the essence of that Revelation. Here the *anamnesis* does not mean a simple memorization of a

<sup>3</sup> “If I defend my philosophical writings against the accusation of crypto-theology, I also refrain, with equal vigilance, from assigning to biblical faith a cryptophilosophical function...” - Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 24; Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris : Seuil, 1990) 37.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of Frère Roger to Ricœur's family on the occasion of his death: Paul Ricœur, «*Libérer le fond de bonté*», Taizé, le 21 mai 2005 : [http://www.taize.fr/fr\\_article879.html](http://www.taize.fr/fr_article879.html)

past historical event. On the contrary, it is a *mémoire* which persists throughout history in an active process of remembering by people who constantly update it in the present, precisely in a community that celebrates the faith; in this sense is better to express this *aggiornamento* by the word *commemoration*. In this manner, by the process of remembering, this commemoration is extended into the future in an eschatological sense. As such, the Revelation of God is always temporalized in history thanks to the liturgy.

In the process of remembering, the commemoration of the Revelation supposes a personal internalization of the message expressed in the narratives of the Bible, especially by the mediation of the language of rituals and sacraments. Thus the active participation in liturgical celebrations is an act of interpretation of the Scripture according to the existence of human being in which the subject experiences a call that imputes a responsibility: “The liturgical actant is thus rendered species of what Ricœur’s ‘summoned subject’ (...) This subject imputes to him- or herself a personal responsibility for what is attested in common - a responsibility that is at once as directed to others as to the Other inasmuch as to take onto one’s lips and into one’s hands the words and gestures of the rite is subtly pass through the veil from observer to witness”<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, the body is also a mediation to receive the liturgical language of the Revelation expressed by rituals and sacraments. But it is especially in the existence of men and women that the biblical message takes its real meaning; in others words: “The place of God’s revelation is the existence of humankind...”<sup>6</sup>. In fact, he is the only one who can receive it as a listener to the Word.

In liturgy, we emphasize, the transmission of the biblical message is always mediated by words. But at the same time it supposes a response from man, who listens carefully, not only by rituals and symbols in a specific

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<sup>5</sup> Brian A. Butcher, “We do not conceal your benevolence”. *The Course of Liturgical Recognition*, in Joseph Verheyden - Theo L. Hettema - Pieter Vandecasteele, *Paul Ricœur: Poetics and Religion*, (Leuven/Paris: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2011) 279-293, pp. 287-288.

<sup>6</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1995) 264. «Le lieu de la Révélation de Dieu, c’est l’existence même de l’homme...» - Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbole et Sacrement. Une lecture sacramentelle de l’existence chrétienne* (Paris : Cerf, 1987) 270.

liturgical act, but also from the very existence of a human being in every moment of life. If liturgy is really to be understood as a dialogue between God and man, this communication must transform the human existence in a certain way. Basically, *la raison d'être* of the Revelation of God for men and women is, in liturgical terms, to give different sense to human existence according to Christian values.

As a result, the Christian life could be understood in an ethical sense, as a transformation of values and actions, not as an imperative or external imposition, but as a consequence of the free acceptance of the biblical Christian message. When men and women accept this message, he/she must be responsible for his/her actions *vis-à-vis* God. Let's put it in other words: "The ethical responsibility of the Christian and his community, conceived as a response to the call of God of Jesus Christ, passes through the union of symbolism and realism of action"<sup>7</sup>.

## The Mediation of the Scripture

According to Paul Ricœur in "The Self in the Mirror of Scriptures", what really happened with men and women is firstly an affirmation and secondly a configuration of human existence with the Word of God. That is to say that the biblical message does not reduce humanity to the recipient of a communication. On the contrary, in the "mirror of the Scriptures" we find an anthropological exaltation of the human condition that prepares man to be capable of naming God ("nommer Dieu"). In other words, this *Homo capax Dei* is able to understand the language of the Bible, and God is also able to understand human language in exchange.

The biblical texts are just an invitation to name God. As a word addressed to men and women, the Scripture invites him/her to respond by naming God because the text precedes the existence: "The self, informed by

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<sup>7</sup> «La responsabilité éthique du chrétien et de sa communauté, conçue comme réponse à l'appel du Dieu de Jésus-Christ, passe par l'union de la symbolique et du réalisme de l'agir» - René Simon, *Éthique de la responsabilité*, 316.

Scripture, may be, as we say, a responding self, because in a certain way, the text precedes life. If I can name God, however imperfectly, it is because the texts preached to me already had named Him”<sup>8</sup>. In this case, the Bible not only transmits an experience of faith by human language that is, in a Christian sense, a “kerygmatic language”, but also it transmits in the “polyphony of texts” the essence of the Revelation which is God himself, for example in *Exodus* 3:3-15 in which Moses received the name of God and then he transmitted it prophetically to the Jewish people.

In “The Commissioned Self: Oh my Prophetic Soul! *Le soi mandaté*”, Ricœur developed a process from the prophetic call, transforming Christological images into the significance for human existence, especially the effect in men and women that is the transformation of the conscience in an ethical sense. According to the exegetes, there is a *Gattungstruktur* in the prophetic narratives established in texts of six episodes, from the confrontation with God, words of introduction, the presentation of the mission, some objections from the person sent, a reassuring of the prophetic vocation, down to the donation of signs by God. Actually, it is a dialogue made by words and symbols between the prophet and God, as we can also see it in the celebration of the sacraments during the liturgies.

Even if today the *Sitz in Leben* is very different from the historical context of the prophet, the biblical narration reproduced in liturgy gives a new understanding which metaphorically transcends the historical interpretation in order to reproduce a Christological image of the call and then the prophetic commission. At this moment, Ricœur presents in the scenario the Augustinian character or “figure” of the inner teacher to guide one’s existence by learning. This interior teacher is related with the Greek term *συνείδησις* (“a knowing with”) that Saint Paul in *Romans* 13:5 used to express the co-knowledge with oneself and the kerygma; it is a kind of

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<sup>8</sup> «Le soi, informé par les Écritures, pourra être, comme on dira, un soi répondant, parce que, d’une certain façon, les textes précèdent la vie. Si je puis nommer Dieu, aussi imparfaitement que ce soit, c’est parce que les textes qui m’ont été prêchés l’ont déjà nommé» - Paul Ricœur, *Amour et justice* (Paris : Seuil, 2008) 54.

conscience. According to Ricœur, in other words, it is the “organ of the reception of the kerygma”<sup>9</sup>.

However, this knowledge between God and humans is not completely closed within the conscience, but it is open to the world, following the interpretation of the German protestant theologian Gerhard Ebeling: “Only where God is encountered as a question of conscience are man and the world perceived to be a question of conscience”<sup>10</sup>. In this way, when God is encountered in this world questions of the conscience become an imperative for men and women.

### “La Règle d’Or” - “The Golden Rule”

*Amour et justice*, the book we follow here mainly, is a continuation of his previous book called *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990). The articulation between the two books is the “ontology of action” (“ontologie de l’agir”) that Ricœur established first in the context of his “little ethics” (“petite éthique”)<sup>11</sup>. Then he developed this ethical project related to the analysis of the subject thanks to the mediation of the Scriptures<sup>12</sup>. Basically, this “ontology of action” developed in *Amour et justice* is focused precisely on human action and the affirmation of the subject *vis-à-vis* the narratives of the prophetic call and the response by naming God. We follow here the French original editions as a whole in order to show the articulation which is not evident in English translations.

In his “little ethics”, what Ricœur put together was a hermeneutics of two irreconcilable traditions in the field of ethics: heteronomy and autonomy. The result of this analysis is “practical wisdom”, that is to say the capacity to make wise decisions after a previous reflection, not only from a personal

<sup>9</sup> «L’organe de la réception du kérygme» - Ibid. 94.

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 412. Quoted by Ricœur, *Amour et justice*, 96-97.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 199-344.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricœur, «Expérience et langage dans le discours religieux», in Jean Greisch, *L’herméneutique à l’école de la phénoménologie* (Paris : Beauchesne, 1995) 159-179, p. 179.

outlook on oneself, but considering the faces of others in communities or institutions. After all, the book *Soi-même comme un autre* allows a self-attestation and recognition of the ethical identity of the subject<sup>13</sup>.

This “practical wisdom” finds a special place and time to be accomplished in liturgy because one can be reconciled with others through the mediation of the Scriptures. At the heart of the Bible, Ricœur introduces the analysis of the “Golden Rule” of the Old Testament and the “Commandment of Love” in the New Testament, and then he discovered similitudes and differences. On the one hand, the “Golden Rule” asks for *justice* in terms of equivalence and reciprocity between people, like the *lex talionis*. On the other hand, the “Commandment of Love” (Luke 6:27-31) asks for *love* in terms of self-sacrifice and benevolence between enemies. The “Golden Rule” means here: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” or “Doing unto others” “as oneself”. But the “Commandment of Love” is a self-demand that calls for new relationships of generosity and mercy for those who can harm themselves and others.

However the question is how the Christian could integrate both paradoxical elements of justice and love in our current circumstances. According to Ricœur, it is possible to think that the “Commandment of Love” reinterprets the “Golden Rule” in terms of generosity, like Saint Francis of Assisi, Gandhi or Martin Luther King. In this way of life, the Commandment can transcend the social utilitarian sense of the Rule because it changes the reciprocity for benevolence, saving the Rule from a perverted interpretation against human life. Actually “Ricœur argues that posing the Golden Rule and love command along the lines of dynamic encounter, rather than static opposition, offers a profound solution to these dual tendencies”<sup>14</sup>. Love

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<sup>13</sup> Philippe Bordeyne, “L’horizon éthique de la liturgie”, in Philippe Bordeyne et Bruce T. Morril (éd.), *Les sacraments révélation de l’humanité de Dieu. Volume offert à Louis-Marie Chauvet* (Paris : Cerf, 2008) p. 182-183; Philippe Bordeyne, “The Ethical Horizon of Liturgy”, in Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morril (ed.) *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God. Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008), p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> W. David Hall, “The Site of Christian Ethics. Love and Justice in the Work of Paul Ricœur”, in John Wall - William Schweiker, *Paul Ricœur and Contemporary Moral Thought* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002) 143-163, p. 158.

corrects justice from an excess of strictness and justice puts love in the right place in human relationships.

## Final considerations

Paul Ricœur received an award from the Catholic Church thanks to his hermeneutics and his ecumenical collaboration in understanding the Bible philosophically and theologically at the same time, in our contemporary culture<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, throughout his philosophical itinerary, many of the sources he used to elaborate his hermeneutics have a Christian foundation in theologians like Augustin, Luther, Barth, Tillich, Bultmann, Pannenberg, Ebeling, Moltmann, Jüngel and Rahner. Contrary to the theologians who use philosophy to elaborate systematic theology - more than the Scripture - Ricœur used to read the Bible and this generation of theologians as mediation for philosophy, but at the same time he gave back to theology a hermeneutical theory of actions capable of understanding the Bible nowadays in a different way. In this sense, the philosophy of Paul Ricœur is not only a constant detour though the mediations in the field of theology, but it also takes into account philosophical mediations for theology, especially concerning the theology of liturgy<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, “the work of Paul Ricœur is a call for modernizing many forms of expounding Christian theology”<sup>17</sup>.

Even though Ricœur finished his book *Soi-même comme un autre* with an agnostic approach<sup>18</sup>, *Amour et justice* is a counterpart that takes seriously

<sup>15</sup> “He is also known for his generous contribution to ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and the Reformed Churches. His research shows how fruitful the relationship between philosophy and theology, between faith and culture, can be” - John Paul II, *Address to the Participants of the International Paul VI Award Ceremony*, Saturday, 5 July 2003.

<sup>16</sup> «L’effet sans doute le plus déterminant de la pensée de Ricœur sur la théologie en général, et la nôtre en particulier, réside sûrement dans cette prise en compte positive des médiations» - Louis-Marie Chauvet, «Incidences de la pensée philosophique de P. Ricœur sur la théologie contemporaine», in *Le Portique*, 26, 2011, p. 9. Document 6, mis en ligne le 11 février 2013, consulté le 14 novembre 2013 dans le site <http://leportique.revues.org/index2512.html>

<sup>17</sup> Vicente Balaguer, “Paul Ricœur, Premio Internacional Pablo VI de 2003. Una teoría de la Historia”, in *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia (AHlg)*, 13, 2004, 257-282, p. 257.

<sup>18</sup> «Peut-être le philosophe, en tant que philosophe, doit-il avouer qu’il ne *sait* pas et ne *peut* pas dire si cet Autre, source de l’injonction, est un autrui que je puisse envisager ou qui

the place of religions (Judaism and Christianity) in the ethical theories, as I showed in a previous article<sup>19</sup>. Thus theology can use his hermeneutics as an instrument in the context of liturgy because it offers a way to understand the Bible as mediation in everyday circumstances. Firstly, the affirmation of the subject and the configuration of his life *vis-à-vis* the Word of God gives some identity to the Christians in order to make good decisions. Secondly, the “practical wisdom” of Ricœur, nourished by the message of the Scripture, is more than just knowledge of ethical theories; it supposes a self-reflection considering the others as oneself, in the Christian community or in public life. However, liturgically speaking, the point is how to integrate the “Golden Rule” and the “Commandment of Love” not only as reflection of the conscience, but as a real experience of God<sup>20</sup>.

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puisse me dévisager, ou mes ancêtres dont il n'y a point de représentation, tant ma dette à leur égard est constitutive de moi-même, ou Dieu - Dieu vivant - Dieu absent - ou une place vide. Sur cette aporie de l'Autre, le discours philosophique s'arrête» - Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 409.

<sup>19</sup> Francisco Quesada-Rodríguez, « La rationalité théologique chez Paul Ricœur », *Revista de Teologia da UNICAP : Fronteiras*, Vol. 1, Num. 1, 2018, pp. 147-158.

<sup>20</sup> Christoph Theobald, *La règle d'or chez Paul Ricœur. Une interrogation théologique*, in Jean Greisch, *L'herméneutique à l'école de la phénoménologie*, 139-158, p. 158.

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