

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogue: From the Perspectives of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur

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A. Introduction:

Since the mid- twentieth century, interreligious dialogue has become increasingly common and necessary for strengthening mutual understanding between different world religions, as well as for enhancing community and social cohesion. More and more organisations of different faiths have joined together to collaborate in projects so as to solve issues in local communities and to exchange views on diverse religious topics. The noted Christian theologian Hans Küng once stated that: “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions, no peace among religions without dialogue between religions, and no dialogue between religions without accurate knowledge of one another.” Reflecting on his view, interreligious dialogue seems to play a significant role in peace building, and great importance is attached to the proper understanding and interpretation across religious traditions, in both theory and practice.

Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, has become a valuable and convenient tool in facilitating interreligious comprehension, especially in the reading of texts under the interfaith context. The particular category of ‘interreligious hermeneutics’ has gained increased application in recent years. According to Catherine Cornille, the interreligious hermeneutical approach can be classified into four major approaches: 1. ‘retrieval of internal resources for dialogue within one’s own religion while relating to the other’; 2. ‘possibility of understanding the religious other’; 3. ‘appropriation and reinterpretation of the other within one’s own religious context’; 4. ‘the exchange of hermeneutical principles.’ (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 1) It is believed that philosophical hermeneutical approaches, proposed by figures such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, George Lindbeck and many others, can be appropriated in the interreligious context and thereby benefit interreligious dialogue. This paper will endeavour to examine the philosophical hermeneutical approaches by two leading philosophers in this field – Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, and assess the level of positive impact their work have brought to interreligious understanding and dialogue.

B. Gadamer's Hermeneutical Model and its Appropriation in Interreligious Understanding and Dialogue

Hans-Georg Gadamer was a prominent German scholar of the continental tradition, his work were notably influenced by his teacher, Martin Heidegger. Gadamer is considered the most influential hermeneutical theorist of the twentieth century and his magnum opus *Wahrheit und Methode* ('*Truth and Method*'), published in 1960, has gained significant recognition in this field. Hermeneutics is traditionally used for the correct reading and interpreting of ancient texts, particularly the Bible. Gadamer's approach on this subject, termed as philosophical hermeneutics, placed much emphasis on 'understanding' itself and the concept of a hermeneutical circle, which was developed by his teacher Heidegger, was reinforced. In relation to written text, the idea of the circle refers to the on-going turning movement between the meaning of one part of a text and its totality, in other words, when one is interpreting a fragment of the text, s(he) is subconsciously giving meaning to the whole at the same time (Lawn 2006, 2). For Gadamer, proper interpretation relies on 'understanding', and understanding is a procedure guided by 'a fusion of horizons', this concept will be explained in greater detail later. So whether it is a text, possibly from another religious tradition or an event, such as interreligious dialogue, each holds its own horizon of meaning and interpretation lies within the mutual understanding between the interpreter and the text or the situation to be interpreted. Gadamer has really extended the position of hermeneutics by delving into the reasoning behind interpretation, and this movement offers a more objective view towards understanding the things within the world.

Gadamer's *Truth and Method* examines the experiences of truth from the perspectives of art, historical understanding and language. Gadamer would not define truth as theories, but rather as encounters, for truth is ought to be participated, not just deliberated. The experience of truth is hermeneutical as it is gained when one's existing understanding meets and hopefully fuses with the alien other, and Gadamer encourages experiences to be based on openness to new possibilities (Lawn 2006, 62). Experience should not be derived from knowledge but from insight, especially the insight of human limitations, as stated in his book that 'experience is no more than experience of human finitude (Gadamer 2004, 357).' This idea coincides with the critical conditions required for successful interreligious dialogue proposed by Catherine Cornille. Each religions has a complex belief system with profound history and philosophy, one should accept the limitation in one's understanding of the other and embrace an attitude of openness to learn from the other (Cornille 2008, p.177). The practice of

openness seems especially important for religions whose teachings and practices are dissimilar if fruitful interreligious dialogue were to be achieved, as it inspires possibilities for mutual learning and growth. For the reason that truth is a kind of openness to new experiences, Gadamer rejects the modernist ideas that truth can be controlled by particular methodology as Enlightenment thought claims that tradition and reason can hardly be separated. Gadamer believes that we are inherently embedded in language and culture, so truth cannot be detached from one's historical and cultural perspectives; method cannot master truth as if truth were a passive object, the ever-growing encounter with truth can be lost if it depends on method (Lawn 2006, 1-2).

The experiences of truth require proper understanding and interpretation, Gadamer proposes understanding as a historically effected event that is never free of subjectivity (Gadamer 2004, 300). Gadamer's theory of *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (historically effected consciousness) is in all hermeneutical and dialogical understanding (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 5). This means that when understanding takes place, we need to be aware of the historical effects of our tradition that constitute prior interpretation. There is no neutral and fixed position for the interpreter as his/her understanding is the result of the past upon the present. Such prior interpretation is termed by Gadamer as 'prejudice' or pre-judgement that establishes the historical effectiveness of a man's being. Prejudices are pre-understandings rooted in one's culture and language and individual judgement is often influenced by one's pre-judgement. The term 'prejudice' often appears to carry a negative connotation, however, under the hermeneutical context, Gadamer suggests that prejudices may be classified as either "good" or "bad" (Hedges 2016, 5). It is "bad" when it limits our vision and stops us to learn from the other; it is "good" if it challenges us to question our pre-understanding and work to surpass any preconceptions about the other. In order to not become trapped in our engagement with the world by prejudices, Gadamer introduces the concept of 'the fusion of horizons.'

Gadamer adopted the term 'horizon' from the work of Nietzsche and Husserl and describes it as 'the breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have' (Gadamer 2004, 305). As our worldview is shaped by a set of pre-understandings affected by tradition, one's present horizon is inevitably interconnected with the past, and past does not necessarily indicate the distant antiquity, it can be from just a moment passed; hence any understanding in the present naturally fuse with the past. As Gadamer states in his book that:

‘In fact, the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather understanding is always a fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves (Gadamer 2004, 306).’

This aspect of ‘the fusion of horizons’ takes place within one’s own horizon of understanding, another aspect of ‘the fusion of horizons’ is the reconciliation between one’s own situated vision and the situated vision of another, whether it is a text or a conversation. Complete understanding of the other is not achievable as the horizon of interpretation is continually changing; Gadamer recognises this matter and points out that ‘the fusion of the horizons’ is an on-going event as our horizon is never fixed and does modify over time, just as our visual horizon that moves with every step we take (Lawn 2006, 66). In this regard, language is a significant tool that allows us to expand our horizons (to go beyond our limit). Gadamer suggests that there is an infinity of meaning to be interpreted in the finitude of all human speaking, implying an infinity of possibilities through the finitude of our thoughts and words during ‘the fusion of horizons (Hedges 2017, 18).’

In the engagement of a dialogue, participants’ initial horizons are tested and refined when interfaced with horizons from the other; Gadamer thinks that whatever arises in a dialogue transcends the interlocutors’ subjective opinions (Gadamer 2004, 368). Hence a constructive dialogue should open up new horizons for the participants and guide them to see things in a new perspective. The same idea applies to interreligious dialogue and it may come in forms of the reading of sacred text from religions other than one’s own and the social and personal interactions, possibly through a conversation, with adherents from the religious other. The reading of text shall be examined first.

When reading a text, our understanding should not be restricted to its literal words; the reader should allow his/her horizon to fuse with the horizon of the text, and in doing so, the effect of the text will change or disrupt the reader’s pre-understandings. On the other hand, the reader’s interpretation may go beyond the author’s intentions. Tracy states that the recent development in hermeneutic theory allows the understanding of a written text to be distanced both from the original intention of the author and from its original audience (Hedges 2016, 5).

Unfruitful passages can turn out to be very fruitful for the readers, as they inspire new ideas. Gadamer thinks that men cannot be aware of everything in their speech and writing, they may later discover new insight which they did not originally intend to say or write (Hedges 2016, 8). Hermeneutically speaking, texts cannot be reduced to one message; its meaning is not attributed to either writer or reader but a shared view of a subject matter (Warnke 1987, 48). To appropriate this concept in the context of interreligious dialogue, it would mean that participants have more freedom to extend and develop new insights on the meaning of sacred texts within their own religious tradition and with traditions other than their own, given that the original meanings carried down throughout history are not ignored. The Gadamerian hermeneutical model seems to justify and facilitate interreligious dialogue in the sense that differences in understanding should not be treated as absolute alterity but opportunities for new insights, the viewpoints of dialogue partners from the religious other should also be considered as plausible. This approach has received criticisms from the religious particularists who argue that each religion is of an entirely distinctive worldview, religions cannot be compared and their differences are irreconcilable. Sometimes, the fear for interreligious understanding comes from strong religious commitment, concerns lie in the misinterpretation that the recognition of truth in other religions may lead to the perception that all religions are the same and even encourage faith conversion (Cornille 2008, p.84). But such mentality of strong religious commitment could lead to religious intolerance and incompatibility. Gadamer once stated that we should not set a limit on the 'breadth of our horizon', but rather let it expand and strive to move beyond our prejudices, 'a person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him (Gadamer 2004, 269).' In terms of interreligious association, one who only appreciates one's own religious belief is highly likely to overvalue and claim uniqueness of their religion. Fortunately, interreligious practices such as comparative theology and scriptural reasoning are taking place and implementing the concept of 'the fusion of horizons.' These practices aim to explore differences and stretch open-mindedness towards interpretations across various faith boundaries, participants are not to hold ownership of their scriptures or claim final meanings of the texts, as such interactions encourage the continual fusion of horizons, locating final meanings is not the purpose (Ochs 2012, 3). As a result of the questions and reflections derived from the dialogue, knowledge on other faith traditions is deepened, and at the same time, participants' understanding of their own scripture is enriched by studying the text through different lenses. In addition to the hermeneutical emphasis on original religious texts, translation is also an important tool in interreligious dialogue. Tracy draws upon

Gadamerian ideas to suggest that each translation should be recognised as a valid interpretation, although it includes many pre-conscious, conscious and unconscious realities. For both the translator and reader, early influences of their native language, consciously and unconsciously, affect the way they translate and read the translations (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 4).

Another specific form of dialogue mainly involves conversational communication between people. Tracy recognizes the Gadamerian hermeneutical model of conversation as the most convincing model for interpretation in contemporary Western philosophy (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 1). The Gadamerian philosophical analysis of dialogue proposes that dialogical understanding happens through the logic of questioning and answer in a to-and-fro movement between conversation partners (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 9). It is to be noted that the conversation is not ruled by the consciousness of anyone, but by being immersed in exposing oneself to the other. True conversation is achieved when each participant opens himself to the other, transposes himself into the thoughts and experiences of the other and truly accepts their viewpoints as valid interpretation (Cornille 2008, p.145). Only in doing so, can one fully enter into dialogue. This Gadamerian model has already been adopted in interreligious dialogue in the event of theological and spiritual encounter and exchange; Paul Hedges finds it particularly helpful for building a philosophical rationale for Comparative Theology (Hedges 2016, 1-20). Comparative Theology begins within the Christian tradition as its basis (oneself) from which the horizon of interpretation moves to the religious other (transposing into the other), the purpose of this practice is for uncovering new insights for Christian theology by engaging with other religious traditions. Positive outcomes could also be achieved for the religious other as their own religions may be enriched by understanding Christianity. As Hedges claims that, in the context of this particular practice, religious differences should not be negated as identical belief systems or complete assimilation into one's own system cannot engender new insights (Hedges 2016, 8).

The Gadamerian hermeneutical concept of play could also be considered a useful tool for exploring interreligious dialogue. It is not surprising that human interaction can be likened to a form of play with its particular rules and etiquette. Gadamer says that 'all playing is a being-played' (Gadamer 2004, 95) as the play itself can become a self-contained world and the players enwrapped within; its purpose is only fulfilled when the player loses himself in the new world created by the play (Gadamer 2004, 92). This is true if any form of interreligious dialogue wishes to be fruitful, dialogue partners as players must enter into a

world of new rules and logic and become immersed within it, letting go of any prejudices and open up to new interpretations. Within this concept, Gadamer's notion of the medial nature of play is repeatedly mentioned in his work. He says that play naturally follows a to-and-fro motion from which the play is co-created by both the player and the play (and other players) (Gadamer 2004, 94). It is known as 'medial', without putting any party on an active or passive side. Players and the play depend on each other, no one is in control of the play as they are themselves within the rules, at the same time, the pure existence of the play is only possible because players are willing to participate. Hermeneutically speaking, the notion of mediality can be applied to understanding as any interpreter is always simultaneously receiving information and creating an understanding. Interreligious dialogue such as Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning certainly fit into this model, as their purpose is not to reach one final meaning but to further develop mutual understanding, so they are most likened to the concept of play where re-creation and tradition coexist.

Although a considerable number of well-known theologians have recognised the relevance and value in the appropriation of Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy in interreligious interpretation and dialogue, however, voice of criticism is still present. It is understood that Gadamer perceives Christianity as a *sui generis* field and insisted that hermeneutics cannot be applied to Christian theology, despite having encouraged East-West interreligious dialogue in his later work (Hedges 2017, 7-8). Regardless of his claim of Christianity's resistance to hermeneutical philosophy, a plethora of cases have proven the Gadamerian model to be exceptionally applicable and supportive for interreligious studies, Comparative Theology is a very good example as it employs Christian theology as its base. Moreover, other legitimate criticisms of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics denote that his overemphasis on the historical effectiveness of 'tradition' appears to have an androcentric bias, neglecting that tradition could also have an oppressive effect. Prejudice is also thought to have been given too much weight as a basis for where we begin with interpretation, it may discourage our willingness to transcend them, thereby lowering dialogue enthusiasm (Hedges 2016, 6). Another problem seems to relate to Gadamer's use of the term 'fusion' in the concept of 'the fusion of horizons.' Hedges recognised limitation in the use of this term in interreligious dialogue; he proposes to have it termed as an 'opening of horizons.' The main reason for this is that the term 'fusion' seems to imply that two ideas have come to merge as one new thing, but this is not applicable to interreligious dialogue as it is impossible to grasp the fullness of the dialogue partner's worldview for two interpretations to completely fuse (Hedges 2017,

19). Achieving new perspectives on one's own religious tradition and on the religious other is intended, interreligious dialogue does not aim for complete agreement or to establish universal views. Therefore, Hedges contends for the use of 'opening of horizons' to better fit the subject matter of interreligious understanding.

Having discussed some characteristics of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutical model and its appropriation in interfaith dialogue, now this paper will progress to examine the work of another influential hermeneutical theorist, Paul Ricoeur.

C. Paul Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) was a distinguished French philosopher, his work ranges from philosophical and moral anthropology, existentialism to biblical hermeneutics. This paper will focus on his hermeneutical openness and linguistic hospitality model for interreligious dialogue.

The basis of Ricoeur's hermeneutics is built upon his desire to move beyond ethnocentrism and tribalism to a dialogue on 'identity and otherness'. It was Ricoeur's ethical concern that inspired him to incorporate the idea of hospitality into a model for integrating identity and otherness, as hospitality implies the acknowledgement of all belonging to one human family in that the strange other's alterity is welcomed in one's home space rather than rejected (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 83). This approach and mindset certainly provide some support and confirmation for the positivity of interreligious dialogue.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical concept also relates to the notion of the hermeneutical circle. With a focus on the interpretation of texts, Ricoeur's theory suggests the motion of moving back and forth between one's own familiar point of view and the strange (the other). Three phases are involved and Ricoeur names the whole process a hermeneutical arc. A first reading needs to be taken and it is called the 'first naïve' in which initial understanding of the other tradition is shaped by the reader; the effect of culture and context in the reader's own tradition will inevitably be manifested in one's interpretation, so the first 'first naïve' needs to undergo a phase of critical analysis to ensure that the reader's own presuppositions from her own cultural, religious and historical background are precluded; then lastly, a phase of appropriation known as the 'second naïve' aiming to explain the text in a more scientific way will take place (Moyaert 2012, 43). Comparative theology seems to follow the model of the hermeneutical arc, commitment in one's own tradition while learning and analysing the other

in an objective way, for the purpose of engendering new insights. Contrary to Gadamer, Ricoeur appreciates the position of explanation alongside understanding, but he recognizes and concurs with Gadamer's concept of prejudices. As he once stated: "Prejudice is not the opposite pole of a reason without presupposition; it is a component of understanding, linked to the finite historical character of the human being (Moyaert 2012, 42)."

In the context of interreligious dialogue, Ricoeur proposes the attitude of "linguistic hospitality" toward the religious other. "Linguistic hospitality" is often specifically linked with the work of translation. As he says: "Translation is the mediation between the plurality of cultures and the unity of humankind...Translation constitutes the reply of the indisputable phenomenon of human plurality with its aspects of dispersion and confusion (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 84)." Translation is used in the transferences of meaning between languages, traditions and people, it is perceived as a priori of communication. Linguistic hospitality becomes effective when the untranslatable is being translated and the incomparable is being compared. Untranslatability is understood by Ricoeur as an expression of self-sufficiency, implying refusal to recognise the 'strange other' as a source of possible inspiration or new insight for one's own religious identity. Danger lies in the sense of self-sufficiency as Ricoeur believes it has nourished numerous ethnocentrisms (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 84).

Ricoeur's hermeneutical model places an emphasis on the intertwinement of self and other, encouraging the correlation between the strange and the familiar. This can be appropriated as reinforcement for interreligious dialogue. In the event of encountering the religious other, differences are welcomed and appreciated as it is the purpose of "linguistic hospitality" to decipher the meaning of 'strangeness'. Participants in interreligious dialogue wish to be understood in their otherness and hope for their dialogue partner to have the willingness to be challenged by the 'strangeness' (Moyaert 2008, 359). The receptive nature of "hospitality" implies the acceptance of the "strangeness"; it draws oneself away from what is familiar and offers opportunities to explore the unknown. So on the whole, "linguistic hospitality" is 'the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home (Cornille & Conway eds. 2010, 85)'. However, in terms of language itself, one must realise that complete understanding of the religious language of the other is not possible; it is considered a challenge for the receiving language. In the process of exchange, neither language remains the same.

D. Conclusion

Fruitful dialogue means the possibility of change, and the notion of change appears to pose risk on one's traditional self-understanding in the event of interreligious dialogue. So often finding a balance between one's openness for the religious other and the conservation of identity is suggested. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur are distinguished theorists in dialogue studies and their hermeneutical models have proven to be useful in the context of interreligious dialogue and can address this problem of balance.

Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons justifies the possibility of interreligious dialogue. It acknowledges the existence of an original worldview in participants when they first enter into dialogue; this confirms the validity and preservation of one's own identity; then by allowing dialogue partners' worldviews to interact and fuse, they begin to learn from each other and possibly create new and profound interpretation. The linguistically constructed nature of all experience and understanding enables us to extend our horizon and have it challenged.

Both Gadamer and Ricoeur's hermeneutics invite us to embrace an attitude of openness in dialogue, whether it is with texts or with people, because our interpretations are only partial and having a closed understanding is not ideal for communication between different religions. This idea certainly is in support of interreligious association and is contrary to what is considered a particularist view of religion in which different religions are perceived as distinct and incommensurable worldviews.

The practice of Comparative Theology seems to have actively and successfully appropriated Gadamer and Ricoeur's hermeneutical models. This form of interreligious dialogue has been strengthened by the support of hermeneutical philosophy. The models are very helpful in encouraging dynamic learning with the religious other. A successful dialogue does not aim for full fusion of horizons or complete mutual understanding with the Other, any new insight established during interreligious communication is very meaningful and significant.

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