

Paul Ricoeur's Work as it Relates to Spiritual Development Theory

Paul Ricoeur was more of a philosopher, but his work also crossed over into religion. His ideas on religion do relate to spiritual development, although Ricoeur did not use that exact term. Most of Ricoeur's writings about religion dealt with the way a person would interpret scripture. But what they also definitely have bearing on religious belief as well.

Paul Ricoeur and the First Naïveté

Though he mentioned the first naïveté only in passing, and as it relates to what happens after it, we can deduce that the first naïveté refers to the interpretation of scripture (or religious belief) where everything is taken at face value. This is the same as saying that the person in the first naïveté believes everything about his religion literally. This "first naïveté" is also the equivalent of the [Faithful](#) level of spiritual development, as described on this site.

Paul Ricoeur and the Critical Distance

According to Ricoeur, the rational forces brought to our civilization through modernity have made it difficult to accept religion or scripture in the "first naïveté" sense. Once subjected to rational inspection, the literal meanings of religion really do not hold up. Once a person allows himself to take a step back from religious belief, and examine it critically, he really cannot believe the simple, naïve, concepts his religion teaches at face value. This "critical distance" is the equivalent of the [Rational](#) level of spiritual development, as described on this site.

Paul Ricoeur and the Second Naïveté

After the critical distance phase, Ricoeur suggested, there is a way to engage faith in what he called a "second naïveté" way. *"Beyond the desert (Rational stage) of criticism, we wish to be called again."* (SE, p. 349)

In this second naïveté, scripture and religious concepts are seen as symbols, (i.e. metaphorical constructs) that we now interpret *"in the full responsibility of autonomous thought."* (SE, p. 350)

This means we accept that the myths we held as truth in the first naïveté (or [Faithful stage](#)) are in fact myths, but having passed through the critical distance (or [Rational stage](#),) we begin to reengage these concepts at a different level. We no longer accept them at face value, as presented by religious authorities, but rather interpret them for ourselves, in the light of having assumed personal responsibility for our beliefs. We choose move toward our own interpretation that recognizes these concepts as symbols of something greater than that which the words or teachings imply in their

literal sense. This "second naïveté is roughly equivalent to the [Mystic](#) stage of spiritual development as referred to on this site.

Religion, Atheism and Faith

In a lecture delivered at Columbia University in 1966 entitled "The Religious Significance of Atheism" Paul Ricoeur applied this scenario more directly to religious belief. He said:

"I have placed "atheism" in an intermediary position: for I wish to consider it as both a break and a link between religion (as in the Faithful stage) and faith (as in the Mystic stage.)

Ricoeur goes on to explain that the two main functions of traditional religion (which he seems to be putting down here in this lecture) are "accusation" (Ricoeur does use some odd terminology, but by "accusation" he means the taboos imposed by religion and the fear of punishment) and "consolation" (which means the desire for protection or shelter.)

These, according to Ricoeur are what attract what he calls "primitive man" to religion. He writes

"I take religion (of the Faithful) to be this archaic system which faith (as in the faith of the Mystic) must always overcome. (RSA, p. 60)

Accusation and consolation are considered "rotten points" of religion by Ricoeur. 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 Ricoeur, "atheism clears the ground for a faith beyond accusation and consolation." (RSA, p. 60) This is the faith of what we are calling the [Mystic](#) on this site.

Note from Margaret Placentra Johnston:

I find this last part particularly important. So very many people in my Rational stories describe a feeling of newfound freedom at the point at which they "decide" they no longer accept the traditional religion they were brought up with. Many of the fears and taboos were causing them a lot of trouble and they feel "liberated" to be free of them.

Of course, if Ricoeur is to be believed, these Rational level people still have more work to do if they are going to continue along the path of growth. That second naïveté sounds like quite the challenge!

References

-Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967. (SE)

-Macintyre, Alasdair and Paul Ricoeur. *The Religious Significance of Atheism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969. (RSA)