_____

Ricoeur and the Atheist Other

Majid Amini

Abstract

In his Bampton Lectures at Columbia University under the title of 'Religion, Atheism, and Faith', Paul Ricoeur offers an interpretation of atheism somewhat reminiscent of the Hegelian dialectical approach whereby atheism as an antithesis to religion paves the way for a *paradoxical* synthesis: namely, a new articulation of faith. Other than the viability or otherwise of this Ricoeurian reading of atheism, what is very interesting and significant is the underlying intellectual under-evaluation, or even devaluation, of atheism and the cursory and perfunctory dismissal of the atheist or irreligious other by Ricoeur. Effectively, in Ricoeur's understanding, the atheist other does not possess any value in his or her own right other than serving as a dispensable handmaiden in the birth of a postreligious faith. The purpose of this paper is therefore to appraise Ricoeur's rendition of the religious significance of atheism against his *problematic* concepts of religion and atheism and thereby to show the *sui generis* and intrinsic, as opposed to instrumental and subservient, role and existence of the irreligious or atheist other.

_____

I. Setting the Scene

Traditionally atheism has been conceived and construed as a rejection of religion and religious faith. The Greek word *atheos* as the lexical stem source of atheism in English signifies disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of any deity – whether singular or plural – and it thereby seems an oxymoron to see atheism as a means of acquiring religious belief and faith in the existence of some sort of divine being. But Paul Ricoeur attempts to refashion an account of atheism, somewhat in the spirit and manner of Hegelian dialectics, whereby atheism as an antithesis to religion culminates in a *paradoxical* synthesis: namely, a new articulation of faith. According to Ricoeur, there is a 'dialectic between religion, atheism, and faith' (Ricoeur 1969: 60) in which atheism acts as an 'intermediary' position clearing the ground for a new faith – 'a faith for a postreligious age.' (1969: 59) In this dialectical trinity,

_____

Ricoeur reads religion in its 'most archaic form' as a system fomented from and formulated in terms of 'the fear of punishment and the desire for protection.' (1969: 60) Consequently, in his discussion of atheism, he finds the atheistic 'tradition of British empiricism or of French positivism' irrelevant and devotes his discourse to 'the atheism of Nietzsche and Freud' which in his view created a new kind of reductive hermeneutic of religion as a symptom of disguised wishes and fears. (1969: 61) By embracing this Nietzschean and Freudian critique of religion, Ricoeur suggests that we are only then in a position to reorient faith to its 'real focus'. (1969: 62) Thus, on the basis of this outlook, the intention of this essay is to revisit Ricoeur's rendition of the religious significance of atheism against the backdrop of his *problematic* concepts of religion and atheism. Specifically, it will be argued that Ricoeur's reading of religion is guilty of the genetic fallacy and because of this he fails to appreciate the force of the atheism of 'British empiricism or of French positivism' variety. In fact, it will be shown that by restricting his focus to a genetic account of religion *à la* Nietzsche and Freud, Ricoeur unwittingly falls into the classic snare of atheism that religion is nothing other than a cluster of propositional attitudes devoid of any possible intentional object, and thus any faith based on such attitudes is no more than a phantom of fuzzy feelings. The contention here is that the significance of atheism lies not so much in its *genealogical* critique but in its *propositional* criticism of religion, and thereby atheism does not have any significance for faith except for *proclaiming* it to be conceptually inadequate and experientially illusory.

II. Ricoeur's Reading of Religion and Faith

From the outset in the Bampton Lectures, without much argument and evidence, Ricoeur takes a historical or genealogical attitude towards the phenomenon of religion by focusing on what he calls the archaic form of religion in terms of the fear of punishment and the desire for protection on the part of humans. What is important to note here is that this historical or genealogical attitude towards religion need not be interpreted *chronologically* from past generations to the future ones only, since the attitude in question can be readily read *developmentally* within the same generation and individuals. So, the concept of time inherent

Majid Amini

_____

in Ricoeur's conception of religion can be understood *inter-* as well as *intra*-generationally or at the level of a person individually. From this perspective, in Ricoeur's view, religion thus plays two paradigmatic functions for humans: 'taboo and shelter' or, in his grander terminology, 'accusation and consolation'. (1969: 60) On this view, the divine being is nothing other than a 'primitive god' that oversees or regulates the activities of humans by both threatening and comforting the 'primitive man.' (1969: 60) But, in Ricoeur's reckoning, faith must overcome these twin 'rotten points of religion', and this can be done dialectically only under the aegis of atheism whereby a faith will be achieved that is not only 'beyond accusation and consolation' but also 'beyond the ordeal of religious doubt.' (1969: 59-60) Atheism as faith's *aide de camp* liberates the primitive man of the ancient as well as the present time from the taboos imposed by religion and destroys the shelters set up by religion in order to achieve a state beyond the ordeal of doubt. However, even at this early stage of enquiry and delineation, one faces the difficulty of grasping what exactly Ricoeur's faith is as atheism is dispatched to clear the grounds in order for faith to reach 'beyond the ordeal of religious doubt.' Specifically, does this mean that, contrary to the common conception, faith is a *non-epistemic* state of mind? In that case, what is a non-epistemic faith? But, if this is too much of a radical departure from standard and traditional understanding of faith and faith is still epistemic in some form or fashion, how can it ever be beyond doubt in any meaningful and non-metaphorical manner? In this respect, René Descartes' sceptical arguments in his *First Meditation* are always a salutary reminder of the indispensability of doubt to the epistemic fabric of human existence and cognitive states of mind. Generally, given Ricoeur's account of faith thus far, one is still none the wiser about what faith actually is.

III. Ricoeur's Taxonomy of Atheism

For Ricoeur, atheism is not just one type and, furthermore, not all types of atheism are capable of facilitating the dialectical transition from religion to faith. He divides all types of atheism into two broad categories: atheism of Nietzsche and Freud which may be conveniently dubbed *cultural atheism* and atheism of British Empiricism and French

Majid Amini

_____

Positivism which may, again for the sake of convenience, be baptized as *conceptual atheism*, and predictably Ricoeur has a particular predilection for one of these types of atheism as a means of arriving at faith. In Ricoeur's reworking of atheism, cultural atheism is fundamentally 'a mode of critique in which cultural representations and creeds are considered as symptoms of disguised wishes and fears.' (1969: 61) In his view, this type of Nietzschean and Freudian atheism is predicated on the underlying thought that the cultural dimension of human existence 'has a hidden meaning which requires a specific mode of decipherment' where the method of decipherment is 'reductive hermeneutics' through which one attempts to reveal and clarify 'the primary, underlying text.' (1969: 61-2) By applying such a reductive hermeneutics to the cultural dimension of human existence in the forms of religion and ethics we realize that 'the belief in an absolute origin of good and evil originated in a situation of weakness and dependence.' (1969: 65) On this account of cultural atheism, in Ricoeur's synopsis, religion is basically an *illusion*. However, in contrast with cultural atheism of Nietzsche and Freud, conceptual atheism of British Empiricism and French Positivism attempts to dispute 'the so-called proofs of the existence of God' and to argue 'that the concept of God is meaningless.' (1969: 61) Thus, in Ricoeur's synopsis of conceptual atheism, the intent and function of the atheism of British Empiricism and French Positivism is only to establish the idea that religion is an *error*.

Prima facie, one may not see much difference between the claims that religion is an *illusion* as opposed to being an *error*. After all, an illusion is an error. But, Ricoeur seizes on an apparent difference between the two claims and dismisses conceptual atheism in favour of the cultural variety by arguing that in calling religion an illusion one is being alerted to the realization that 'the true meaning of religion' has been kept away from 'the observer'. (1969: 61) So, unlike conceptual atheism that completely undermines the concept of religion, cultural atheism leaves room for observers to discover 'the true meaning of religion'. The archaic form of religion is intent on instilling fear of taboos and cultivating desire for shelter, and thereby the function of cultural atheism is to dismantle the shelter and free man from taboos by destroying the idea of God as the ultimate source of accusation and consolation.

Majid Amini

_____

Unravelling the human fear of punishment and desire for protection would dispel the illusion of God as the ultimate danger and shield. However, whether Nietzsche and Freud were in fact pursuing such doctrinal cleansing and in search of the restoration of 'true religion', it will become clear that Ricoeur is too hasty in his dismissal of the profound adverse impact of conceptual atheism on the *intellectual* foundations and future of faith.

IV. Cultural Atheism and Ricoeur's Response

Although Ricoeur finds cultural atheism of Nietzsche and Freud congenial in his pursuit of a new articulation of faith, the efforts of Nietzsche and Freud in exposing the illusory origin of religious and ethical values by declaring that 'God is dead' and that the social institution of law is the primitive drama of 'the murder of the father', Ricoeur recognizes that he cannot reconcile himself with their ultimate worldviews. Thus, in order to ascertain the *theological* significance of this kind of atheism, Ricoeur raises three questions by which he attempts to demarcate his Hegelian dialectical project of transition from religion to faith through atheism from cultural atheism of Nietzsche and Freud. Ricoeur thinks that a clear response to the following questions should pave the way for the uncovering of 'the true meaning of religion' from the *illusion* of 'archaic form of religion': (1) which god is dead?, (2) who killed him?, and (3) what kind of authority belongs to the word which proclaims his death? (1969: 65)

Ricoeur's response to the first question is thus: what Nietzsche and Freud showed was the demise of 'the God of metaphysics' or, in Heideggerian terminology, 'ontotheology': God 'of a first cause, of a necessary being, of a prime mover which is absolute goodness and the origin of values.' (1969: 65-6) However, to say the least, this is very surprising, if not completely contradictory, in view of the fact that Ricoeur readily rejects conceptual atheism as irrelevant to his project of a new articulation of faith where in reality the aim of conceptual atheism is nothing other than debunking the very metaphysical or ontotheological conception of Deity that he refers to in his answer to the first question. Moreover, in Ricoeur's account of Nietzsche and Freud, they are presented as being engaged in a process of *regressive*

Majid Amini

_____

analysis to show how *primitive* emotional states of fear and desire led to the emergence of the God of accusation and consolation in the archaic form of religion, whereas the definition of the demised God that Ricoeur presents is couched in terms that bear the least connection to various human emotional states of mind. The descriptions can stand or fall in the absence of the existence of any sentient and intelligent beings including humans. By the same extension, Ricoeur's response to the second question that it was the cultural process ushered in by Nietzsche and Freud that killed the God by showing 'the very nothingness which dwell in the Ideal [and] the lack of absoluteness of the surperego' (1969: 67), fails short of capturing how conceptual atheists of British Empiricism and French Positivism have deconstructed the classical conception of God, as presented in Ricoeur's definition in response to the first question, to the point of being an empty and vacuous conception.

However, what is more controversial, if not disastrously damaging, is Ricoeur's answer to the third question: namely, 'everything becomes dubious as soon as we ask *who* says that.' (1969: 67; my emphasis) Thus, though Ricoeur is content with the target and the process of arriving at the death of the God through cultural atheism, 'everything suddenly becomes problematic' when we look for *who* proclaim the demise of the divinity. (1969: 67) Notwithstanding the *ad hominem fallacy* that Ricoeur is clearly committing here,[1] one may ask why we should distrust the message of these proclaimers if the target and the process are presented and purchased unhesitatingly. Ricoeur feels the urgency of this question and attempts to tackle it by claiming that what the proclaimers of cultural atheism are offering 'is not a demonstrative way of thinking' and 'nothing proves that [their] message is correct'. (1969: 67-8) But, if we were looking for 'a demonstrative way of thinking' and 'proof', should not have we stayed with conceptual atheism of British Empiricism and French Positivism whose proclamations are intended as 'demonstrations' and 'proofs'? Ironically, Ricoeur goes further in dismantling his own project by dismissing a Nietzschean or Freudian cultural atheist proclaimer on the grounds of being just a rebel where the 'rebel is not, and cannot be, worth the prophet.' (1969: 68) But, if one needs a prophet to attain 'the true meaning of religion', what business does atheism have in the dialectical process of moving

Majid Amini

_____

from religion to faith? To put the matter conversely, it might be rhetorically asked: are prophets in the business of 'demonstrative way of thinking' and 'proof' in the sense that they are usually understood and practiced? Nonetheless, Ricoeur compounds the inconsistencies in his account by making the following *question begging* pontification on the role of philosophers in the attainment of faith: it is the responsibility of the philosopher to find 'the level of questioning which makes possible a mediation between religion and faith through atheism.' (1969: 70) But, is not the very possibility and existence of such 'a mediation' a notoriously contentious philosophical issue in its own right as evidently evinced by the proclamations of the practitioners of conceptual atheism?

V. Review of Ricoeur's Rendition of Religion and Atheism

In charting out the course of ideas put forward by Ricoeur for the process of attaining faith through the dialectics of religion and atheism, only intermittently a number of concerns and criticisms were raised. However, this concluding section is principally focused on a number of larger objections to the Ricoeurian project of rearticulating faith for a postreligious age.

(i) One of the most glaring problems of Ricoeur's treatment of religion through his elucidation and elaboration of that concept is that he appears to be guilty of the *genetic fallacy*. Even if one grants the genetic account of religion *à la* Nietzsche and Freud, it does not mean that the idea itself is irredeemably irrational. There is a difference between why something is *true* and why it is *believed to be true*. By limiting his reading of religion to a genetic account, Ricoeur inadvertently traps himself in the classic snare of atheism that religion is nothing other than a cluster of propositional attitudes devoid of any possible intentional object, and thus any faith based on such attitudes is no more than a phantasm of shadowy shenanigans of the human mind. However, although in a later writing Ricoeur admits that his account of religion in 'Religion, Atheism, and Faith' was 'tainted with the genetic fallacy' (Ricoeur 1995: 496), he still fails to see the greater consequence of his concession: namely, his failure to accord and appreciate the *priority* of conceptual atheism

31

Majid Amini

_____

over cultural atheism. This consequential result of his admission effectively throws the whole project of a new articulation of faith into disarray as the focal point of conceptual atheism is to demonstrate the impossibility of any coherent conceptual infrastructure for a religious faith. This in fact highlights another attendant mistake of Ricoeur in his misreading and misinterpretation of Nietzsche and Freud. Both Nietzsche and Freud were conscientiously cognizant of the distinction between the questions about the evidence or justification of a religious claim and the questions about the psychological factors underlying an individual's religious claims. Freud, for example, prefaces his analysis of religion by stating that religious doctrines 'do not admit of proof' and they are 'incompatible with everything we have laboriously discovered about the reality of the world' (Freud 1955: 55), and that is why he is thrust into a search for a *psychological story* of human religious phenomenon with its multifarious manifestations. Thus, conceptual atheism always takes *precedence* over cultural atheism which, in turn, has the crucial corollary that no amount of cultural theism can lend any support to conceptual theism.

(ii) The second substantial problem that Ricoeur's reliance on cultural atheism faces is that his recounting of the objective of cultural atheism is guilty of the *fallacy of non sequitur*. In answering the question, 'Which god is dead?', in Ricoeur's reading of cultural atheism, the answer is: 'the God of metaphysics … the metaphysics of a first cause, of a necessary being, of a prime mover which is absolute goodness and the origin of values.' (1969: 65-6) But, as indicated albeit briefly earlier, even if Nietzsche and Freud are right in their genetic account of religious and moral values that they stem from human fear of punishment and human relish in shelter and protection, thus *impugning* God as the ultimate source of norms, it does *not* follow that there cannot be a first cause, a prime mover, a necessary being, or even a being capable of omnibenevolence. Such concepts may have been conjured up by humans in states of existential desperation or adulation, yet that would not have any material impact on the intellectual integrity or otherwise of such concepts in their own rights.

(iii) In his discussion and use of cultural atheism of Nietzsche and Freud, Ricoeur's central

Majid Amini

_____

concern and problem with the classical conception of religion is the issue of the *origin of ethical or moral normativity*: that is, he is criticizing a type of *divine command theory* of ethics according to which God is 'the origin of values.' (1969: 66) Crucially, the main motif of cultural atheism for Ricoeur is its attempt to lay bare the bones of a moribund body of morality rooted in divine accusation and consolation. Yet, in his zeal to debunk the religious account of moral normativity in the manner of Nietzsche and Freud, Ricoeur becomes guilty of a grave *historical neglect*. One of the earliest extant philosophical texts that explicitly attempts to sabotage the idea of God or gods as the source of ethical norms is Plato's dialogue, *Euthyphro*. Although Socrates does not appear in the guise of an atheist in the dialogue, and if anything at all he is charged *inter alia* for 'making new gods' (2b), his famous *Euthyphro Dilemma* that, 'Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?' (10a), was designed to bring to light the untenability of the idea of divinity as the origin of morality. Thus, for more than two millennia before the rise of the reductive or regressive hermeneutics of Nietzsche and Freud of the archaic form of religion, Socrates had already subverted the contentious conception of morality founded on God's commands. Indeed, this is one of the classical devices of conceptual atheism to divest morality from religion altogether, thus depriving theism of one of its most important intellectual crutches, without indulging in any Nietzschean or Freudian atheistic reexamination of the underlying subtexts of cultural codes of morality and values.

(iv) Finally, recall that in Ricoeur's rereading of atheism, cultural atheism is presented to maintain that religion is an *illusion* in contrast to conceptual atheism that is portrayed to maintain that religion is an *error*, and, further, Ricoeur himself opts for the illusion theory of religion as articulated through the works of Nietzsche and Freud. However, it appears that in his deference towards the illusion theory of religion Ricoeur seriously *underestimates the perilous implications* of an illusion interpretation of religion as opposed to an error interpretation for theistic beliefs in general. The problems arise from the *nature* of illusions. Illusions are broadly divided into two general categories of *perceptual*, like the visual illusion of Müller-Lyer Figure, or *cognitive*, like probability illusion of Conjunction Effect. But, what

Majid Amini

_____

is common to both types of illusion is their cardinal characteristic of being *incorrigible* in the sense that they *cannot* be corrected and are effectively *implasticities* of the various states of mind that cannot be changed despite knowing otherwise.[2] A clear case for perceptual illusion is the example of mirage: no matter how hard we try, we cannot stop seeing remote objects inverted as if mirrored in water or suspended in midair in deserts or over hot pavements. But, if religion is an illusion of 'our consciousness' (1969: 62), as Ricoeur's puts it, and illusions are by nature incorrigible, then Ricoeur is facing the self-defeating consequence of the *impossibility of transcending religion to attain faith*. In the case of illusions, there is no possibility of transcending the states of mind underpinning them, let alone attaining a new state of mind. Obviously, there is a way out of this quandary for Ricoeur which is to abandon the illusion theory of religion and opt for the error theory of religion. However, this change of tack comes with a heavy un-Recoeurian price tag: namely, recognition of the propriety and primacy of conceptual atheism. But, Ricoeur has every reason to resist such a move as it verily vindicates the claim of conceptual atheism that the significance of atheism lie not in its *genealogical* critique of religious faith but in its *propositional* criticism of it. The *kerygma* of atheism is not so much the inadequacy of religion in particular but the conceptual and experiential vacuity of faith in general. Thus, if this conclusion holds, the existence of atheism cannot be sublimated into non-existence through a Hegelian dialectics and the *atheist other* cannot be *synthesised* into a *faithful* follower.

Majid Amini

_____

REFERENCES

Fodor, J. (1983), *The Modularity of Mind,* Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Freud, S. (1955), *The Future of an Illusion,* trans. W.D. Robson-Scott, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Pylyshyn, Z. (1986), *Computation and Cognition,* Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1969), 'Religion, Atheism, and Faith', in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 57-98.

Ricoeur, P. (1995), 'Reply to David Detmer', in L. E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 494-497.

_____

NOTES

[1] In detail, the question here is not and should not be about what authority Nietzsche and Freud have or may have in their cultural diagnosis of the archaic form of religion. Instead, the question should be about what evidence or justification Nietzsche and Freud could muster to support such a genetic account of religion. The personal authority of either of them is absolutely irrelevant here.

[2] Other theoretically cognate terms for incorrigibility and implasticity are Jerry Fodor's *informational encapsulation* (*The Modularity of Mind*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983) and Zenon Pylyshyn's *cognitive impenetrability* (*Computation and Cognition*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

Majid Amini

_____

_____

_____

Dr Majid Amini is Professor of Philosophy at the Virginia State University and has previously taught at the Universities of London and Manchester in Britain and the University of the West Indies in Barbados.

Email: MAmini@vsu.edu

Majid Amini