

# Peace and Understanding: A Ricœurian Perspective

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Persistent and newly emerging conflicts around the world have made the search for successful conflict resolution imperative. We need insights into how to prevent violent clashes, and how to find ways to peace and reconciliation. Since the 1970s, an increasing number of institutions have started to work on topics such as “peace studies”, “conflict resolution/transformation”, “transitional justice”, and “reconciliation”.

WE ARE ON THE GLOBAL scale experiencing huge political, historical, and social changes, and we need policies that can prevent further polarization and instead help sustain democracy, dialogue and international cooperation. To take just one example, the Russia–Ukraine war threatens not only Eastern Europe and the future of Europe itself, but the whole effort to build global peace through the international rule of law.

The articles published in this issue are based on keynote lectures and presentations held at the workshop “Peace and Understanding: A Ricœurian View” that took place at Åbo Akademi University in Finland in September 2023. The workshop focused on the French philosopher Paul Ricœur’s contribution to the questions of war, power, violence, social justice, inter-religious understanding and peace and

reconciliation. As scholars coming from various disciplines and different parts of the world, we explored in particular the notion of peace in Ricœur’s works from his early essays on Christian socialism to his last published work on recognition. Peace was approached not merely as a social, political, ethical, or cultural concept but also as an existential and hermeneutical challenge and possibility.

Despite the rapidly growing body of secondary literature on Ricœur, there is much more work to be done on his concept of peace and on the application of his reflections on the multiple meanings of this notion to other fields. Ricœur’s understanding of peace is not limited to its theoretical discussion. On a personal level, he lived through the two World Wars, his father was killed in the first and he himself was a prisoner of war during the second. After the wars, Ricœur defended the independence of Algeria from France, and condemned the Vietnam and, much later, the Gulf Wars. These events indelibly marked his life, leading him to contemplate the occurrences of violence in societies and to support the search for peace with the hope that it might be achieved on a global scale.

Reconciliation, dialogue, and policy-making presuppose the possibility of communicating across cultural, linguistic, ideological, and religious borders. For Ricœur, this trust in communication was a fundamental conviction. He defended strongly the possibility of translation and dialogue, even though they may require arduous work. Every translation and every interpretation remains open for contestation and criticism, but to deny the possibility of communication between human beings would, according to Ricœur, betray a fundamental dimension of human existence.

The topic of conflict was always intrinsic to Ricœur's work. This applies both to epistemology, as the expression of the hermeneutic method of Ricœurian philosophy (i.e., the conflict of interpretations) shows, and to the understanding of human behaviour, which is challenged by the complexity of human action. In these two domains, the theoretical and the practical, it is thus a matter of thinking both about and through conflicts. Ricœur's explicit goal was to find fragile and provisional mediations between rival interpretations.

Ricœur also explored the tensional relationship between ideologies and utopias. The conviction that this world could be otherwise than it is opens up both a tragic and a hopeful interpretation. It is tragic in the sense that it witnesses to the fact that the world is far from perfect and that many individuals and social groups are suffering from injustices and violence. It is, however, also hopeful in the sense that it highlights the possibility for change, for both individuals and societies. This direction of movement towards the future is a characteristic trait of Ricœur's thinking, as expressed for example in his ethics, where the aim

is "a good life with and for others in just institutions".

To engage with Ricœur's thought and his extensive production is anything but an easy task. The appropriation of his work is not made any easier by his philosophical style, which often leaves his readers puzzled by his persistent aim of drawing new interlocutors into his reflections. During his early career, he declared that, as a Christian, he is above all a listener to the Word. As a philosopher, he has in a similar way listened attentively through his whole life to the voices of others, whose thinking he has received and applied with an open and yet both critical and constructive attitude.

The contributors to this issue have not only tried to listen to Ricœur with the same kind of attitude; they (we) have also listened to the contexts where we are living today and the challenges that they pose for us.

**Marianne Moyaert** reflects in her article critically upon Ricœur's philosophical contributions to inter-religious dialogue. She admits that these contributions have been influential, for example his elaborations of religious violence and his comprehension of a post-religious faith. However, she argues that Ricœur's conceptual understanding of religion is firmly rooted in a modern Western tradition. Therefore, he neglects critical perspectives from scholars who wish to include understandings of religion from other cultural and religious traditions. By uncritically adopting this concept, Ricœur's approach may be blind to the hierarchical structures that marginalize non-Western religious traditions and neglect histories of violence against religious minorities. Moyaert refers to scholars that claim that some contemporary expressions of inter-religious dialogue can be seen as a

continuation of colonial politics aimed at disciplining Muslims until they conform to a secularized (liberal Protestant) version of Christianity. Moyaert argues that Ricœur is actually able to provide resources for a more critical attitude towards colonialist reminiscences in inter-religious dialogues: she suggests that participants in such encounters should listen to post-colonial and decolonial masters of suspicion and how they relate to the violent history of religion.

What makes it possible to talk of peace in a world filled with violence and oppression? **Brian Gregor** contributes to this issue with two articles in which he develops an ontology of peace by drawing from Paul Ricœur's thought. In the first article, Gregor argues, on the basis of three texts from three periods of Ricœur's work, that Ricœur's hermeneutics of creation in combination with his insistence on the goodness of created beings provide a good starting point for understanding his ontology of peace. Gregor finds support in Ricœur's writings for the conviction that peace rather than violence is most fundamental to creation. The confidence in the priority of goodness and peace needs, however, to be balanced by the undeniable fact that human existence is constantly threatened by violence, chaos, and fragility.

In his second article, Gregor argues, with the support of Augustine, Dionysius, and Aquinas, that peace is not contrary to our human nature but rather one of our natural desires. This conclusion is, however, complicated by what Ricœur calls a fundamental conflict at the heart of the human being, namely the category of the irascible. This appetite for the difficult as well as for conflict suggests that the human desire for peace is not directly derived from a simple

animal desire for rest and repose. This reflection on the irascible brings Gregor to the Thumotic element of peace: peace requires an active ordering of things, which sometimes also includes violence and the use of power. Peace can be expressed as a finely tuned affective tension, held in balance by the simultaneous pressure from the human desire for both pleasure and happiness. Peace is therefore dependent upon this "ordered disproportion" between finite and infinite goals.

Ricœur underscores the importance of sharing experiences and dreams with representatives of other cultures, religions and ideologies. Story-telling plays a fundamental role in this interchange. In her article, **Terhi Törmä** examines the narrative possibility of peace and understanding with the help of Ricœur's narrative theory. She focuses on the requirements needed for a peaceful coexistence in ordinary life, characterized by peaceful relationships. She points out that Ricœur's theory of narrative reveals how narrating may help individuals and groups to order and structure their sometimes chaotic experiences and memories into a meaningful story. Narratology is in addition important as a means to handle conflicts and traumatic memories of the past: by listening to the stories of others we may realize that we have to reshape the stories we have told about ourselves, and the roles we have given to others in these stories. Törmä emphasizes that narratives need to be interpreted critically: some narratives can prevent us from living together in peace, while other narratives may provide us with visions of a reconciled, just and peaceful future.

Many of the articles that Ricœur wrote specifically on peace were related to brutal

acts of violence at the time in question: the Algerian war, the violent suppression of the uprisings in Budapest and in Prague, the Vietnam war, the civil wars in the Balkans and so on. In his article, **Michael Funk Deckard** draws on his own experiences of taking part in peace- and community-building efforts in Armenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the aid of Ricœur, he reflects on the stories told to uphold a national identity. Deckard stresses that telling such a story is a highly selective process, intended to create a coherent identity by tying together disparate moments of a country's history. He argues that the notion of nation-state needs to be re-imagined and given new life in terms of both senses of narrative identity provided by Ricœur, namely *idem* (to preserve your characteristics over time) and *ipse* (to remain the same in spite of going through changes). The latter dimension makes it possible to include change in the story of the nation, which may make it possible to avoid a destructive repetition of experienced injustices in the past.

In his many books and articles dealing with narrating and remembering, Ricœur often returns to a paradox: on the one hand, telling about horrible deeds can be criticized for unintentionally making these events appear as understandable, even though they are to be condemned. On the other hand, the decision not to speak about tragic events implies a betrayal of the victims, whose stories are thereby left untold. In his article, **Marco Franceschina** starts from the discovery that Ricœur proposes that the memorial writing of the Holocaust does not necessarily follow the same terms as historiography. Franceschina explores this aspect of Ricœur's thinking by analysing

a contemporary author, W. G. Sebald, who intentionally creates a hybrid between history and fiction. Sebald's fragmentary style of writing explicitly addresses the challenge of representing trauma, particularly in relation to the Holocaust. This article highlights Ricœur's understanding of the function of the productive imagination and the active role of the reader in shaping our understanding of the past. Memory in the face of horror and trauma is not seen as something merely representational, but as a dynamic process we actively engage in.

**Timo Helenius** applies the tension between peace and non-peace to one of Ricœur's most frequent occupations: the aim of understanding human beings in their ambiguous state between freedom and nature. The common human experience of not being at one with oneself creates a state of internal non-peace. Helenius argues that self-affirmation requires an objectification that, subsequently, makes it seem as if the self could possess itself as an object. This "having of the self" creates, according to Helenius, a kind of "occupied spatiality". The article proposes a patient waiting for peace, with a reference to Augustine and his "unfinished state" of needing to wait and hope for "that utter peace".

**Björn Vikström** discusses in his article how Ricœur is able to uphold a tension between the undeniable presence of violence and his trust in a primordial goodness of existence. In his early writings Ricœur describes the human predicament as a position torn between freedom and nature, as well as between the voluntary and involuntary dimensions of human action. Vikström analyses some of Ricœur's early articles, focusing on his discussion of prophetic trouble-making through

non-violence, voluntary poverty, and art. Vikström compares these with some of Ricœur's later writings, and critically discusses the preference Ricœur assigns to a kind of non-intentional social activism. This non-intentional element is important in Ricœur's view, because intentional acts of resistance run a greater risk of merely turning persistent, unequal power relations upside down. Vikström argues, however, that the non-intentional and intentional dimensions of human action in Ricœur's thinking need to be kept in a fruitful critical tension with each other, to prevent an understanding of human existence as primarily tragic and passive.

As guest editors, we wish to express our sincere and warm gratefulness to the journal *Approaching Religion* for accepting this special issue on peace and understanding in a Ricœurian perspective, and for the efficient and professional cooperation during the editing process. ■

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