

LAMENTATION AND POETIC IMAGINATION OF PSALM 22

A DIALOGUE WITH RICOEUR ON SECULARIZATION AND ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE

René DENTZ

Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC-MINAS), Coração
Eucarístico, Av. Dom José Gaspar, 500, Belo Horizonte – MG 30535-901, Brazil

dentz@hotmail.com

Abstract

Psalm 22, profoundly marked by lamentation and the transition to hope, offers an opportunity to explore the convergence between Paul Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics and contemporary challenges of secularization and the absence of eschatology. The contribution articulates the experience of abandonment described by the psalmist with the need for a poetic imagination capable of re-signifying existence. Ricoeur provides tools to understand the performativity of this psalm, bridging the tensions

between narrative, metaphor, and the dynamic of “the power to be” inherent in biblical language.

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur, biblical hermeneutics, lamentation, hope, secularization.

Tožba in pesniška domišljija v psalmu 22. Razgovor z Ricoeurjem o sekularizaciji in eshatološkem upanju

Povzetek

Psalm 22, ki je globoko zaznamovan s tožbo in prehodom k upanju, ponuja priložnost za premislek bližine med biblično hermenevtiko Paula Ricoeurja ter sodobnimi izzivi sekularizacije in odsotnosti eshatologije. Prispevek izkustvo zapuščenosti, kakršno opisuje psalmist, razgrinja kot potrebo po poetični domišljiji, ki zmore nanovo osmisliti eksistenco. Ricoeur priskrbi orodje za razumevanje performativnosti, s katero psalm premošča napetosti med pripovedjo, metaforo in dinamiko »moči prebivanja«, kakršne so prisotne znotraj biblične govornice.

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Ključne besede: Paul Ricoeur, biblična hermenevtika, tožba, upanje, sekularizacija.

1. Introduction: Psalm 22 as lamentation and eschatological narrative

Psalm 22 begins with one of the most anguished expressions of human despair: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1; NRSV.) This cry is not merely a reflection of suffering, but a narrative, transitioning from despair to trust in God. In Ricoeur’s reading, such a dynamic suggests more than emotional exposition; it is an invitation to explore poetic imagination and the performativity of the text.

In a secularized world, how can we discuss the relevance of lamentation as a narrative structure? Ricoeur argues that secularization can be seen as an opportunity to re-signify the Christian narrative, shifting it from an economy of power to an economy of gift and superabundance.

2. Narrative and metaphor: The performativity of psalm 22

Ricoeur observes that the biblical narrative transcends structuralist logic by introducing existential markers that open the narrative to transcendence. In psalm 22, the initial lamentation is an “unfinished” narrative that only finds meaning in its eschatological opening: the declaration of trust and praise in the final verses. This transition, from the initial abandonment to the proclamation of salvation, operates as a metaphor, re-signifying reality. In metaphor, as Ricoeur explains, we encounter a “calculated error” that reveals new possibilities of meaning. Thus, the lamentation in psalm 22 is not merely an expression of suffering, but a dialectical movement, bringing the psalmist closer to the eschatological hope.

The psalm’s narrative, therefore, is not self-contained. On the contrary, it establishes a “power to be”—an opening to the future promised by resurrection, as Ricoeur suggests in *Vivant jusqu’à la mort*.

In a secularized world, the psalmist’s cry—“Why have you forsaken me?”—takes on new contours. For many, the absence of God seems definitive. However, Ricoeur suggests that secularization can expand the understanding of religious texts, liberating them from authoritarian appropriations and allowing them to be re-appropriated as expressions of vulnerability and hope.

The lamentation in psalm 22 becomes, in this context, a performative practice. It articulates human suffering as a bridge to transcendence, without dissolving the tension between the human and the divine. Ricoeur challenges us to understand this performativity as an act of meaning-making, in which the reader is called to rewrite their own narrative in light of the eschatological hope.

Ricoeur argues that poetic imagination is essential for interpreting biblical texts. In psalm 22, vivid images of abandonment (disjointed bones, pierced hands and feet) and salvation (communal praise, universal proclamation) form a metaphorical tension that points to the mystery of human suffering and divine redemption.

This poetic imagination operates on three levels:

1. linguistic: the tension between the literal and metaphorical in the language of lamentation and praise;

2. existential: the rewriting of the reader's life in light of the psalm, integrating suffering and hope;

3. eschatological: the opening to a future beyond the narrative, not nullifying suffering, but integrating it into a reconciled vision of existence.

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3. Lamentation as an eschatological act

Psalm 22, read through Ricoeur's hermeneutics, is more than a text of despair or relief. It is a narrative structure that teaches the reader to inhabit the space between absence and promise, between the "no longer" and the "not yet."

In a secularized world, lamentation becomes an eschatological act, pointing to a hope that transcends the limitations of the present narrative. Through poetic imagination, we are invited to re-signify the experience of suffering, finding in it not merely the absence of God, but the possibility of a new presence—a presence made real in the superabundance of gift and in the horizon of resurrection.

Ricoeur teaches us that lamentation, when lived in the tension between narrative and metaphor, between faith and critique, is not merely an expression of pain, but a path to freedom according to hope.

The Vatican's 2017 document *Veritatis gaudium* (*The Joy of Truth*; Francesco 2018) offers a rich horizon for reflecting on education, particularly within the

framework of an integral anthropology. It proposes an education that goes beyond the mere transmission of technical or scientific knowledge, fostering the integral development of the human person. In this context, I propose an approach, inspired by psalm 22, which oscillates between a cry of anguish and trust in God, as a model for “restless education.” This approach combines lamentation and hope, acknowledging the shadows and tensions of the world, while steadfastly pursuing meaning and transcendence.

Psalm 22 begins with a heart-wrenching cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is a lament that does not shy away from pain or the sense of abandonment. Yet, as the psalm progresses, a renewed trust in God emerges, culminating in praise full of hope. This movement between lamentation and hope is profoundly pedagogical: it teaches that pain and crisis are not interruptions of the educational journey, but constitutive moments of deeper learning.

In the educational realm, lamentation can be understood as the capacity to question and confront the ethical and cultural challenges of our time with honesty and courage. This includes recognizing institutional failures, inequalities, and the limitations of the dominant technocratic model. On the other hand, hope serves as the driving force that enables education to transcend these difficulties, seeking a renewal of humanism that integrates spirituality, ethics, and science.

The document *Veritatis gaudium* points in this direction by emphasizing the need for “dialogue between faith and reason,” avoiding both fideism and scientism. Restless education, while lamenting the wounds of the world, cultivates a hope grounded in the conviction that learning and human growth have a transcendent purpose.

Paul Ricoeur’s biography, written by François Dosse (*Paul Ricoeur. Les sens d’une vie*; 1997), provides a concrete testimony of how a life marked by restlessness and intellectual exile can become a paradigm of restless education. Ricoeur faced the challenges of secularization and “laïcité” in both France and the United States. In France, he experienced the clash between the Christian tradition and modern rationality. In the United States, particularly in Chicago, he found a more pluralistic and tolerant environment that allowed him to engage with diverse intellectual currents, without abandoning his Christian identity.

This experience of navigating between different cultural and academic contexts shaped his educational perspective. For Ricoeur, intellectual formation should not be a place of absolute certainties, but a space of “restless trust,” as he himself described it. It is a form of learning that acknowledges human fragility, while opening itself to the possibility of reconciliation and hope. In his work, this reconciliation is manifested in the constant dialogue between narratives, traditions, and worlds of meaning.

Drawing inspiration from psalm 22, the document *Veritatis gaudium*, and Ricoeur’s journey, we can envision an education that embraces the tension between lamentation and hope as its central dynamic. This proposal requires the following:

1. The acknowledgment of pain and failure: Restless education must confront the difficult questions of our time—the impact of technology, ecological crises, and social inequalities, etc. Recognizing these issues without offering easy answers mirrors the initial cry of psalm 22.

2. A dialogue with tradition and innovation: Just as Ricoeur integrated both Christian traditions and the challenges of modernity into his reflection, education must promote dialogue that does not discard the past, but also does not fear the new.

3. Active hope: While lamentation is vital, it cannot turn into resignation. Restless education should cultivate in students the capacity to imagine a better world, and work actively to bring it about.

4. The integration of the spiritual dimension: As emphasized by *Veritatis gaudium*, humanistic education must integrate the spiritual dimension, understood as the search for meaning and transcendence.

Restless education lives in the tension between lamentation and hope. Inspired by psalm 22, it acknowledges the pain and suffering of the world, without succumbing to despair. As Paul Ricoeur’s life testifies, restlessness is fertile ground for learning and growth. The document *Veritatis gaudium* challenges us to renew our educational vision, embracing the complexity of the human condition and promoting an integral anthropology that unites faith and reason. In this model, education is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but a restless pilgrimage towards truth.

4. Forgiveness as a surplus: Towards a new logic of hope

The lamentation in psalm 22, culminating in the eschatological hope, resonates profoundly with Ricoeur's notion of forgiveness as surplus. This "poetics of will" transcends the boundaries of reciprocity and the equivalence of moral debt, proposing a new economy rooted in gift and grace. Ricoeur invites us to see forgiveness not merely as an act of moral correction, but as a transformative rupture with the past—a liberation akin to the psalmist's transition from abandonment to praise.

Ricoeur's interpretation of forgiveness emphasizes its metaphorical and imaginative dimensions, paralleling the poetic structure of psalm 22. The vivid imagery of despair and redemption in the psalm embodies what Ricoeur calls "the logic of surplus," disrupting the cycle of retributive justice and opening a horizon of reconciliation and renewal. Just as the psalmist's lament re-signifies suffering into a proclamation of universal salvation, forgiveness reframes human relationships through an economy of generosity.

This logic finds its theological grounding in the Pauline affirmation: "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20; NRSV). For Ricoeur, forgiveness, like grace, is not bound by the constraints of equivalence, but operates through an excess that transforms. The narrative arc of psalm 22, moving from the depths of human vulnerability to the heights of divine promise, mirrors this dynamic. It is in this surplus of meaning—beyond lamentation, beyond justice—that the psalmist and the forgiver alike find their freedom.

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Ricoeur's reflections further illuminate the pedagogical implications of psalm 22. The performative nature of forgiveness, much like the lamentation of the psalm, challenges the reader to engage with their own narrative of suffering and reconciliation. It is an invitation to inhabit the tension between justice and grace, between memory and renewal. In this way, forgiveness becomes an eschatological act, aligning with the psalm's ultimate declaration of trust in God.

Psalm 22, with its interplay of despair and trust, offers a poignant entry point for a dialogue between biblical hermeneutics and secular experiences of alienation and hope. Paul Ricoeur's insights into narrative and metaphor create

a framework to approach the psalm not only as a sacred text, but also as a human one. Its lamentation resonates with universal themes of abandonment, loss, and the search for meaning, making it accessible to secular readers who might otherwise resist theological interpretations.

Ricoeur's concept of "second naiveté" invites a rereading of the psalm that transcends literal or dogmatic interpretations. For the secular reader, the psalm's language of forsakenness and redemption can be reframed as a metaphorical narrative reflecting the human condition. The vivid imagery—"I am poured out like water" (Psalm 22:14; NRSV), "they bound my hands and feet" (Psalm 22:16; NRSV)—functions as a mirror for existential experiences of fragmentation and vulnerability. In this light, the psalm's transition from lament to hope is not merely a theological affirmation, but a poetic re-signification of existence.

256 The secular reader is thus invited into a performative engagement with the text, where the act of reading becomes a form of existential reflection. By entering into the psalmist's narrative, they encounter their own fears, longings, and possibilities for renewal. Ricoeur's hermeneutics, emphasizing the capacity of metaphor to disclose new worlds of meaning, transforms the psalm into a site of dialogue between sacred tradition and secular imagination.

In conclusion, the dialogue between psalm 22 and Ricoeur's philosophy of forgiveness enriches our understanding of lamentation and hope. Both lamentation and forgiveness are transformative acts that refuse to be constrained by the logic of retribution, pointing instead to a future shaped by the generosity of the gift and the possibility of new beginnings. Through the poetic imagination, we are called to dwell in the space where lamentation and forgiveness meet, discovering in both the surplus of meaning that redefines our existence in light of the eschatological hope.

5. The eschatological horizon: Beyond the divide between the secular and the sacred

Ricoeur's philosophical theology suggests that eschatology is not confined to dogmatic formulations of "the end times," but is a horizon of meaning that informs human existence. Psalm 22, with its movement from abandonment to trust, exemplifies this eschatological orientation. The

psalm does not deny the reality of suffering, but situates it within a larger narrative of redemption.

For Ricoeur, this eschatological dimension is not merely a future projection, but an existential posture. The “not yet” of the eschatological hope permeates the present, challenging both secular and religious readers to reimagine their lives in light of promise. Psalm 22 articulates this tension: the psalmist’s lamentation is deeply rooted in the present moment of despair, yet it reaches towards a future of communal praise and universal salvation.

In a secular age, this eschatological horizon is reframed as the human capacity to transcend the given. Ricoeur’s reflections on hope and imagination suggest that the psalm’s vision of salvation can inspire a secular ethics of solidarity and renewal. The poetic imagination enables readers to move beyond the dichotomy of the secular and the sacred, discovering in the psalm’s narrative a shared language for grappling with suffering and envisioning hope.

Psalm 22’s lamentation, viewed through Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, is not a passive expression of despair, but an active engagement with the limits of human existence. By voicing abandonment, the psalmist exercises a form of freedom that disrupts silence and oppression. Ricoeur identifies this performative act as a reclaiming of agency within the constraints of suffering.

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This dynamic is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts of systemic injustice and personal loss. The psalm’s lamentation invites readers to name their suffering and, in doing so, to resist its dehumanizing effects. Yet, the psalm does not remain in lamentation; it transitions to a proclamation of hope, modeling a praxis of freedom that embraces both critique and renewal.

In this sense, lamentation becomes a precursor to the eschatological hope. Ricoeur’s insights into the logic of superabundance underscore the transformative potential of this transition. Just as the psalmist’s cry is answered by a vision of communal praise, human suffering is re-signified through acts of imagination and reconciliation. The psalm challenges readers to live in the tension between the “already” of human agency and the “not yet” of divine promise, embodying a freedom grounded in hope.

The interplay of lamentation and hope in psalm 22 provides a foundation for an ethics of vulnerability informed by Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. Vulnerability, as expressed in the psalmist’s cry, is not a condition to be overcome, but a

space of encounter and transformation. Ricoeur's emphasis on the relational dimension of human existence suggests that vulnerability is integral to the experience of hope.

Psalm 22's movement towards communal praise highlights the social dimension of this ethics. The psalmist's trust in God culminates in a vision of universal worship, where individual suffering is integrated into a collective narrative of redemption. This communal aspect resonates with Ricoeur's call for an ethics of mutual recognition and solidarity.

In a secularized world, this ethics finds expression in practices of empathy and care. The psalm's narrative invites readers to engage with the suffering of others, recognizing their shared humanity and the possibility of shared hope. Through poetic imagination, the lamentation of psalm 22 becomes a catalyst for ethical action, transforming vulnerability into a source of strength and connection.

Conclusion

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Psalm 22, as a poetic and performative text, bridges the tensions between secularization and eschatology, vulnerability and hope, lamentation and freedom. Ricoeur's hermeneutics illuminate its capacity to re-signify suffering and inspire new possibilities for meaning and action. In a world marked by disconnection and despair, the psalm's narrative arc challenges readers to inhabit the space of tension, discovering in lamentation the seeds of the eschatological hope. Through poetic imagination, both secular and sacred readers are invited to dwell in this transformative space, where human vulnerability is met with the promise of renewal.

Psalm 22, as interpreted through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, stands as a profound testament to the interplay of lamentation and hope. Its raw expressions of abandonment resonate deeply with the human condition, yet its transition towards trust and praise reveals a transformative power that redefines suffering within a broader eschatological horizon. Ricoeur's emphasis on narrative, metaphor, and the performative nature of lamentation enriches our understanding of the psalm as a dynamic text that not only reflects despair, but actively re-signifies it, creating new possibilities for meaning and existence.

In this way, psalm 22 invites readers to inhabit the tension between absence and promise, between the present brokenness of the world and the future vision of reconciliation.

In both sacred and secular contexts, psalm 22 challenges us to reimagine our engagement with suffering and hope. Through the lens of poetic imagination, it serves as a bridge between individual vulnerability and communal renewal, offering a framework for both personal and collective transformation. Ricoeur's hermeneutics illuminate the psalm's relevance for contemporary life, particularly in a secular age, where the need for re-signification of meaning is as ever pressing. Ultimately, psalm 22 inspires an ethics of vulnerability and solidarity, where lamentation becomes not a sign of defeat, but a precursor to the freedom found in the eschatological hope, enabling individuals and communities to confront suffering with courage and reimagine the possibilities of a reconciled future.

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