

DIALECTICS OF SYMBOL AND HERMENEUTICS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PAUL RICOEUR AND FAZLURRAHMAN'S THOUGHT ON RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article examines the problem of religious language through a comparative study of Paul Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman. The main problem addressed in this study is the tendency to understand religious language literally, which often reduces the depth of symbols and weakens the ethical meaning of revelation. Religious language is not merely doctrinal or verbal expression, but a symbolic and hermeneutical discourse that requires interpretation. This research uses a qualitative library research method with descriptive-analytical and comparative approaches. Primary sources are taken from the works of Paul Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman, while secondary sources include relevant books and recent Indonesian journal articles on hermeneutics, symbol, and Qur'anic interpretation. The study finds that Ricoeur understands religious language as symbolic discourse containing a surplus of meaning that opens existential self-understanding. Meanwhile, Fazlur Rahman views Qur'anic language as a historical-moral discourse that must be interpreted through the double movement method. The comparison shows that Ricoeur emphasizes symbolic-existential meaning, while Rahman emphasizes historical-ethical transformation. Together, both offer a critical framework for overcoming literalism and developing a more reflective, contextual, and transformative understanding of religion.

Keywords: Religious Language; Symbol; Hermeneutics; Paul Ricoeur; Fazlur Rahman

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji problem bahasa agama melalui studi komparatif pemikiran Paul Ricoeur dan Fazlur Rahman. Masalah utama yang dibahas adalah kecenderungan memahami bahasa agama secara literal sehingga kedalaman simbol dan makna etis wahyu sering tereduksi. Bahasa agama tidak dapat dipahami hanya sebagai ungkapan doktrinal atau verbal, tetapi sebagai wacana simbolik dan hermeneutik yang menuntut penafsiran. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan deskriptif-analitis dan komparatif. Sumber primer diambil dari karya-karya Paul Ricoeur dan Fazlur Rahman, sedangkan sumber sekunder berasal dari buku serta artikel jurnal Indonesia terbaru yang relevan dengan kajian hermeneutika, simbol, dan penafsiran Al-Qur'an. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Ricoeur memahami bahasa agama sebagai wacana simbolik yang memiliki surplus makna dan membuka pemahaman eksistensial manusia. Sementara itu, Fazlur Rahman memandang bahasa Al-Qur'an sebagai wacana historis-moral yang perlu ditafsirkan melalui metode double movement. Perbandingan keduanya menunjukkan bahwa Ricoeur menekankan makna simbolik-eksistensial, sedangkan Rahman menekankan transformasi historis-etis. Keduanya menawarkan kerangka kritis untuk mengatasi literalisme dan membangun pemahaman agama yang reflektif, kontekstual, serta transformatif.

Kata Kunci: *Bahasa Agama; Simbol; Hermeneutika; Paul Ricoeur; Fazlur Rahman*

INTRODUCTION

Religious language is one of the most complex problems in the philosophy of religion because it does not merely function as ordinary communication, but also as a symbolic medium through which human beings express their relationship with God, revelation, sacred reality, moral responsibility, and the meaning of existence. Unlike scientific language, which tends to be empirical, factual, and verificative, religious language often appears in the form of symbol, metaphor, myth, narrative,

command, promise, parable, and eschatological imagination. Therefore, religious language cannot be understood only through literal meaning. It requires interpretation because its meaning is layered, symbolic, historical, and existential. In this sense, the study of religious language is not only a linguistic issue, but also a hermeneutical and epistemological problem.¹

The problem becomes more urgent in the modern context, where religious language is often trapped between two extremes. The first is literalism, which reduces religious texts and symbols to fixed verbal meanings without considering historical context, symbolic depth, and moral purpose. The second is relativism, which treats religious language merely as cultural expression and neglects its claim to ethical and transcendent truth. Both tendencies create serious problems in religious understanding. Literalism can lead to exclusivism, rigidity, and ideological closure, while relativism can dissolve the normative and transformative power of religion. Therefore, a more balanced hermeneutical approach is needed, namely an approach that is able to read religious language as symbolic, historical, ethical, and open to deeper interpretation.²

In this context, Paul Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman are two important figures who can be placed in a productive comparative dialogue. Paul Ricoeur represents the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, especially through his reflections on symbol, metaphor, text, interpretation, and self-understanding. For Ricoeur, symbol is not a simple sign with a single meaning. Symbol has a double structure: a first, literal, and direct meaning, and a second, indirect, figurative, and deeper meaning.³ This is why Ricoeur famously states that “the symbol gives

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 45

² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2

³ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 55–56.

rise to thought.”⁴ Symbols do not close meaning, but open the possibility of thinking. Religious symbols such as sin, guilt, defilement, fall, salvation, and hope reveal the human condition before the sacred and the transcendent. Thus, religious language, in Ricoeur's view, is a symbolic discourse that invites interpretation and self-understanding.⁵

Ricoeur's hermeneutics is significant because it does not simply defend naïve belief, nor does it completely surrender religious meaning to suspicion. He recognizes the importance of critical interpretation, especially after the emergence of modern hermeneutics of suspicion represented by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. However, Ricoeur does not stop at suspicion. He moves toward a post-critical understanding of symbol, in which interpretation becomes a way to recover meaning after criticism.⁶ Through this approach, religious language is not accepted blindly, but is re-appropriated through reflective interpretation. The interpreter does not merely repeat the literal meaning of the text, but enters into the world opened by the text. This makes Ricoeur's hermeneutics highly relevant for understanding religious language as a field of symbolic meaning.⁷

Fazlur Rahman, on the other hand, represents Islamic hermeneutical thought that places the Qur'an as a moral and historical discourse. Rahman criticizes the tendency of Muslim thought to read the Qur'an atomistically, namely by interpreting verses separately without seeing the unity of Qur'anic moral vision.⁸ For Rahman, the Qur'an is not merely a book of law, but a book of moral guidance that aims to form an ethical and socially responsible human being. Therefore, Qur'anic

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347

⁵ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 3–7.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27–32

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 143

⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 1–5

language must be understood not only through its literal wording, but also through its historical context and universal moral objectives.⁹

Rahman's most important contribution is his theory of double movement. This method consists of two interpretive movements. The first movement goes from the present situation back to the historical context of revelation in order to understand the specific social-moral problem addressed by the Qur'an. The second movement moves from that historical context toward general moral principles, which are then reapplied to contemporary situations.¹⁰ Through this method, religious language is understood as a dynamic discourse that connects revelation, history, morality, and modern reality. Symbols and concepts in the Qur'an such as justice, faith, taqwa, prophecy, the hereafter, heaven, hell, light, darkness, and the straight path should not be read only literally, but also as moral symbols that guide human beings toward ethical transformation.¹¹

The comparison between Ricoeur and Rahman is important because both thinkers reject a narrow literalistic understanding of religious language. Ricoeur emphasizes that symbol always contains a surplus of meaning, while Rahman emphasizes that revelation contains universal moral ideals beyond its particular historical forms. Ricoeur's hermeneutics moves from symbol to existential reflection, whereas Rahman's hermeneutics moves from historical revelation to moral reconstruction. Ricoeur asks how religious symbols help human beings understand themselves before the sacred, while Rahman asks how Qur'anic language can guide human beings in building a just and ethical society.¹²

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 30

¹⁰ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6

¹¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Karachi: Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965), 149–51

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216

Nevertheless, the two thinkers have rarely been studied together in one comparative framework. Studies on Paul Ricoeur in Indonesia generally discuss his hermeneutics in relation to text interpretation, literature, culture, visual symbols, or Qur'anic interpretation. For example, recent studies have examined Ricoeur's hermeneutics in relation to cultural, religious, and political meanings, as well as the interpretation of Qur'anic texts and symbolic meaning in literary works.¹³ However, these studies have not sufficiently connected Ricoeur's symbolic hermeneutics with Fazlur Rahman's Qur'anic hermeneutics in the specific context of religious language. As a result, Ricoeur is often discussed as a philosopher of symbol and text, but not as a dialogue partner for Islamic hermeneutics.

Similarly, studies on Fazlur Rahman in Indonesia mostly focus on his double movement theory as a method of Qur'anic interpretation, Islamic legal reform, hadith studies, and contextual reading of revelation. Recent Indonesian scholarship shows that Rahman's double movement theory remains relevant as a response to modernization and dissatisfaction with classical atomistic interpretation.¹⁴ Other studies also discuss the definition, application, and methodological structure of double movement in Qur'anic studies.¹⁵ However, most of these studies do not place Rahman's hermeneutics within the broader philosophical problem of religious language, especially in relation to symbol, metaphor, and the plurality of meaning.

This condition shows a clear research gap. First, previous studies tend to discuss Ricoeur and Rahman separately, even though both

¹³ M. Anzaikhan, "Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur: Dinamika Budaya, Agama, dan Politik Modern," *al-Lubb: Journal of Islamic Thought and Muslim Culture* 1, no. 1 (2024): 1–15.

¹⁴ Muhammad Miftahun Najib, "Teori Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur dalam Memahami Teks Al-Qur'an," *Ar-Rosyad: Jurnal Keislaman dan Sosial Humaniora* 1, no. 2 (2023): 152

¹⁵ Kharis Nugroho, Muhammad Zawil Kiram, and Didik Andriawan, "The Influence of Hermeneutics in Double Movement Theory: Critical Analysis of Fazlurrahman's Interpretation Methodology," *QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies* 2, no. 3 (2023): 275

thinkers share a concern with interpretation, meaning, and the limitation of literalism. Second, studies on Ricoeur often emphasize symbol, text, metaphor, and self-understanding, but rarely connect these concepts with the moral and historical interpretation of revelation in Islamic thought. Third, studies on Rahman often emphasize double movement as a method of contextual interpretation, but rarely examine it as a theory of religious language that deals with symbol, metaphor, and moral meaning. Therefore, there is still a lack of comparative study that brings Ricoeur's symbolic hermeneutics and Rahman's Qur'anic hermeneutics together in order to formulate a more integrative understanding of religious language.¹⁶

Based on this gap, this article argues that Ricoeur and Rahman can be read together as two complementary thinkers. Ricoeur contributes a philosophical theory of symbol as a surplus of meaning that opens human self-understanding. Rahman contributes an Islamic hermeneutical theory that understands revelation as a moral discourse requiring historical and contextual interpretation. The dialogue between both thinkers can help overcome the crisis of religious literalism by showing that religious language is not merely a fixed doctrinal statement, but a symbolic and ethical discourse that requires continuous interpretation.¹⁷

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to build a comparative framework between Western philosophical hermeneutics and Islamic Qur'anic hermeneutics. This study does not merely compare two figures biographically or historically, but examines how their concepts of symbol, text, interpretation, history, and moral meaning can be used to understand religious language more deeply. Through Ricoeur, religious language is seen as an existential-symbolic discourse. Through Rahman,

¹⁶ Muhammad Umair and Hasani Ahmad Said, "Fazlur Rahman dan Teori Double Movement: Definisi dan Aplikasi," *Al-Fahmu: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 2, no. 1 (2023): 71–81

¹⁷ Yuni Amalia Wahdah, "Hermeneutika Double Movement Fazlur Rahman dalam Studi Hadits," *Al FAWATI'H: Jurnal Kajian Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 2, no. 2 (2021): 30

religious language is seen as a historical-moral discourse. The combination of both perspectives produces a dialectical model of religious language: symbol opens meaning, while hermeneutics directs that meaning toward existential reflection and ethical transformation.¹⁸

Methodologically, this research uses a qualitative library research approach with descriptive-analytical and comparative methods. The primary sources of this study are Ricoeur's works such as *The Symbolism of Evil*, *Interpretation Theory*, *The Rule of Metaphor*, *Freud and Philosophy*, and *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, as well as Rahman's works such as *Islam, Major Themes of the Qur'an*, *Islamic Methodology in History*, and *Islam and Modernity*. Secondary sources are taken from relevant books and recent Indonesian journal articles discussing Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Rahman's double movement theory. The data are analyzed by identifying the main concepts of both thinkers, comparing their similarities and differences, and formulating their contribution to the study of religious language.¹⁹

Therefore, this article aims to answer three main questions. First, how does Paul Ricoeur understand symbol and hermeneutics in relation to religious language? Second, how does Fazlur Rahman understand Qur'anic language through his historical-moral hermeneutics? Third, how can the comparison between Ricoeur and Rahman contribute to a more open, critical, and transformative understanding of religious language? By answering these questions, this article is expected to contribute to the development of philosophy of religion, Islamic philosophy, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and contemporary studies of religious language.²⁰

¹⁸ Zakiyah, Edriagus Saputra, and Rahma Ghania Alhafiza, "Rekonstruksi Pemahaman Hadis dan Sunnah Menurut Fazlur Rahman," *Mashdar: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 2, no. 1 (2020): 19

¹⁹ Yulia Novitasari, "Makna Q.S. An-Nisa: 3 Analisis Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur," *Hikami: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 5, no. 1 (2024): 1–15

²⁰ Hidayat Ridho, "Interpretation of the Qur'an from Classical-Textual to Contemporary-Contextual: A Study of Double Movement Theory in Fazlur Rahman's Hermeneutics," *QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1

DISCUSSION

1. Religious Language as Symbolic Discourse

Religious language cannot be understood merely as a literal statement about divine reality. It is a symbolic discourse that mediates the relationship between human beings and the transcendent. When religion speaks about God, revelation, sin, salvation, prophecy, heaven, hell, justice, and the afterlife, it does not always employ direct conceptual language. Instead, it often uses symbols, metaphors, narratives, and images that point beyond their immediate linguistic form. Therefore, religious language contains a depth of meaning that requires interpretation.

In this context, symbol is not identical with ordinary sign. A sign usually points to a fixed object or meaning, while a symbol opens a wider horizon of interpretation. A religious symbol does not only indicate something; it also reveals a deeper reality. For example, the symbol of “light” in religious discourse does not merely refer to physical brightness, but can signify guidance, truth, purity, divine presence, and moral consciousness. Likewise, the symbol of “darkness” may refer to ignorance, error, spiritual alienation, or moral corruption. Thus, religious symbols contain layers of meaning that cannot be exhausted by literal reading alone.²¹

This symbolic character of religious language becomes the starting point for comparing Paul Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman. Ricoeur understands religious language as a symbolic field that gives rise to thought and self-understanding, while Rahman understands Qur’anic language as a historical and moral discourse that must be interpreted to uncover its universal ethical vision. Although they come from different intellectual traditions, both reject a narrow literalism that freezes religious meaning at the surface level of the text.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 45–46

2. Paul Ricoeur: Symbol, Text, and Existential Hermeneutics

Paul Ricoeur's theory of symbol is rooted in his broader project of philosophical hermeneutics. For Ricoeur, human beings do not understand themselves directly, but through signs, symbols, texts, myths, and narratives. This means that self-understanding is always mediated by interpretation. Religious symbols are important because they reveal aspects of human existence that cannot be expressed adequately through abstract concepts.

Ricoeur defines symbol as a structure of double meaning. A symbol has a first meaning that is direct, literal, and apparent, but this first meaning points toward a second meaning that is indirect, figurative, and deeper.²² This double structure distinguishes symbol from ordinary sign. A sign tends to function in a direct and conventional way, whereas a symbol carries surplus meaning. Therefore, the task of hermeneutics is to unfold this surplus meaning without destroying the symbolic depth of the text.

Ricoeur's famous statement, "the symbol gives rise to thought," shows that symbol is not an obstacle to reason, but a source of reflection.²³ Religious symbols invite human beings to think more deeply about themselves, their relation to the sacred, and their condition in the world. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur analyzes symbols such as defilement, sin, and guilt. These symbols do not merely describe moral violations, but express the existential experience of human fragility, alienation, and responsibility before the sacred.²⁴

The symbol of defilement, for instance, begins from the concrete experience of impurity, but it points toward a deeper spiritual condition. Sin is not merely a legal offense, but a broken relation between human beings and God. Guilt is not only external punishment, but an internal experience of moral responsibility. Through these symbols, religious

²² Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 55–56.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347

²⁴ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 3–7.

language reveals the depth of human existence. Religion, therefore, does not only speak about doctrines, but also about the human struggle with evil, suffering, hope, and redemption.²⁵

Ricoeur's hermeneutics also develops through the dialectic between suspicion and faith. He acknowledges that modern thought has introduced a hermeneutics of suspicion through thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These thinkers teach that meaning can be distorted by ideology, power, desire, and illusion. However, Ricoeur does not stop at suspicion. He proposes a movement toward a second naïveté, namely a renewed openness to symbol after critical interpretation.²⁶ In this sense, religious symbols are not accepted blindly, but are re-appropriated through reflective understanding.

Thus, Ricoeur's contribution to religious language lies in his ability to show that religious symbols are neither irrational nor merely decorative. They are meaningful structures that disclose human existence. Religious language becomes a medium of self-understanding because it allows human beings to interpret their own finitude, guilt, hope, and relation to transcendence.²⁷

3. Fazlur Rahman: Qur'anic Language and Moral-Historical Hermeneutics

If Ricoeur approaches religious language through philosophical hermeneutics, Fazlur Rahman approaches it through Qur'anic hermeneutics. Rahman's main concern is how the Qur'an can remain relevant in the modern world without being reduced to literalism or historical rigidity. For Rahman, the Qur'an is not merely a collection of

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 143

legal commands, but a moral book that seeks to shape a just, ethical, and God-conscious society.²⁸

Rahman criticizes what he calls atomistic interpretation, namely the tendency to interpret Qur'anic verses separately without considering the unity of the Qur'an's moral vision. This approach, according to Rahman, often produces rigid legalism because it isolates particular verses from their historical context and ethical purpose.²⁹ As a result, the Qur'an is treated as a static legal document rather than a dynamic moral discourse.

To overcome this problem, Rahman proposes the double movement method. The first movement goes from the present situation back to the historical context of revelation. This step aims to understand the specific social, moral, and historical problem addressed by the Qur'an. The second movement moves from that historical context toward universal moral principles, which can then be applied to contemporary situations.³⁰ Through this method, Qur'anic language is read not only in terms of what it said in the past, but also in terms of what moral vision it offers for the present.

For Rahman, Qur'anic symbols such as light, darkness, straight path, heart, heaven, hell, resurrection, and divine judgment must be understood in relation to the moral transformation of human beings. These symbols are not merely metaphysical descriptions, but also ethical signs that direct human beings toward responsibility, justice, compassion, and social reform.³¹ The Qur'an speaks symbolically and historically because it addresses human beings within concrete social

²⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 1–5.

²⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2–6.

³⁰ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6–7.

³¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 30–

realities. Therefore, its message must be interpreted by connecting historical particularity with universal moral values.

Rahman's hermeneutics is especially relevant in responding to modern religious literalism. Literalism tends to absolutize the external form of religious language while neglecting its moral purpose. Rahman argues that the true meaning of revelation lies not merely in the literal form of the text, but in the moral ideals that the text seeks to establish.³² For example, Qur'anic teachings about social justice, family relations, economic ethics, and human responsibility must be interpreted by identifying the moral principles behind specific historical regulations.

Thus, Rahman's contribution to religious language lies in his emphasis on the ethical and historical dimensions of revelation. Religious language is not a closed system of dogma, but a living discourse that continues to guide human life. Through double movement, symbols and texts are not frozen in the past, but are brought into dialogue with contemporary problems.³³

4. Convergence between Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman

Although Ricoeur and Rahman come from different traditions, their thoughts converge in several important aspects. First, both reject literalism. Ricoeur rejects the reduction of symbol to a single meaning, while Rahman rejects the reduction of revelation to isolated legal statements. Both argue that religious language must be interpreted because it contains deeper meaning beyond its surface expression.

Second, both thinkers understand interpretation as a movement. In Ricoeur, interpretation moves from the literal meaning of symbol toward its deeper existential meaning. In Rahman, interpretation moves from present reality to the historical context of revelation, then returns to

³² Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Karachi: Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965), 149–51.

³³ M. Anzaikhan, "Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur: Dinamika Budaya, Agama, dan Politik Modern," *al-Lubb: Journal of Islamic Thought and Muslim Culture* 1, no. 1 (2024): 1–15.

the present with universal moral principles. Although the structures of movement are different, both show that meaning is not static. Meaning emerges through a dynamic process of interpretation.³⁴

Third, both Ricoeur and Rahman see religious language as transformative. For Ricoeur, religious symbols transform self-understanding. They help human beings understand their guilt, hope, fragility, and relation to the sacred. For Rahman, Qur'anic language transforms moral and social life. It guides human beings toward justice, responsibility, and ethical reform. Thus, religious language is not merely informative, but transformative.

Fourth, both thinkers emphasize mediation. Ricoeur argues that human beings understand themselves through symbols, texts, and narratives. Rahman argues that modern Muslims understand revelation through historical context and moral reasoning. In both cases, understanding is not immediate. It is mediated by language, history, symbol, and interpretation.³⁵

This convergence shows that Ricoeur and Rahman can be brought into a meaningful comparative dialogue. Ricoeur provides a philosophical foundation for understanding the symbolic depth of religious language, while Rahman provides an Islamic hermeneutical framework for understanding the moral and historical function of revelation. Together, they help formulate a broader theory of religious language as symbolic, interpretive, historical, and ethical.

5. Differences between Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman

Despite their similarities, Ricoeur and Rahman differ in orientation, object, and purpose. Ricoeur's hermeneutics is primarily

³⁴ Muhammad Miftahun Najib, "Teori Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur dalam Memahami Teks Al-Qur'an," *Ar-Rosyad: Jurnal Keislaman dan Sosial Humaniora* 1, no. 2 (2023): 152

³⁵ Kharis Nugroho, Muhammad Zawil Kiram, and Didik Andriawan, "The Influence of Hermeneutics in Double Movement Theory: Critical Analysis of Fazlurrahman's Interpretation Methodology," *QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies* 2, no. 3 (2023): 275

philosophical and existential. His main concern is how symbols open the possibility of thought and self-understanding. He does not limit his analysis to one religious tradition, but studies symbols as part of the broader human experience of meaning. His analysis of evil, guilt, myth, metaphor, and narrative is directed toward understanding the human condition.

Rahman's hermeneutics, however, is more explicitly Islamic, Qur'anic, and ethical. His main concern is how the Qur'an can be interpreted in a way that remains faithful to its original moral vision while also relevant to modern life. Rahman does not focus primarily on symbol as a general philosophical category, but on revelation as a historical-moral discourse. His hermeneutics is directed toward reforming Islamic thought and overcoming stagnation in Muslim societies.³⁶

Another difference lies in their understanding of the role of history. Ricoeur sees history mainly through the mediation of text, narrative, and interpretation. A text becomes autonomous from its author and original context, opening a world that can be appropriated by the reader.³⁷ Rahman, however, insists that the historical context of revelation is essential for understanding the Qur'an. Without historical analysis, interpretation may become arbitrary or literalistic. Thus, while Ricoeur emphasizes the world of the text, Rahman emphasizes the movement between historical context and contemporary application.

Their final orientation also differs. Ricoeur's hermeneutics leads to existential reflection and self-understanding. Rahman's hermeneutics leads to moral reconstruction and social transformation. Ricoeur asks: what does the symbol reveal about human existence? Rahman asks: what moral principle does revelation offer for human society? These different

³⁶ Muhammad Umair and Hasani Ahmad Said, "Fazlur Rahman dan Teori Double Movement: Definisi dan Aplikasi," *Al-Fahmu: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 2, no. 1 (2023): 71

³⁷ Muhammad Umair and Hasani Ahmad Said, "Fazlur Rahman dan Teori Double Movement: Definisi dan Aplikasi," *Al-Fahmu: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 2, no. 1 (2023): 71

questions show that Ricoeur and Rahman are not identical, but complementary.

6. Religious Language between Symbolic Depth and Moral Transformation

The comparative reading of Ricoeur and Rahman allows us to formulate religious language as a dialectic between symbolic depth and moral transformation. Ricoeur reminds us that religious language cannot be reduced to literal propositions because it contains symbolic depth. Rahman reminds us that religious language cannot be reduced to abstract symbolism because it has moral and social objectives.

This dialectic is important because some approaches to religion tend to emphasize symbol without ethics, while others emphasize law without symbolic depth. When symbol is separated from ethics, religion may become merely aesthetic, mystical, or speculative. When law is separated from symbol, religion may become rigid, formalistic, and legalistic. Ricoeur and Rahman help overcome both reductions.

Through Ricoeur, religious language is understood as a symbolic discourse that opens the human imagination toward the sacred. Through Rahman, religious language is understood as a moral discourse that directs human action toward justice and responsibility. The synthesis of both perspectives produces a more complete understanding: religious language is symbolic because it opens meaning, and it is ethical because it calls for transformation.³⁸

For example, the Qur'anic symbol of "light" can be read through Ricoeur as a symbol that opens existential reflection on guidance, truth, and divine presence. At the same time, through Rahman, it can be read as a moral symbol that calls human beings to build a life based on justice, knowledge, and ethical responsibility. Likewise, the symbol of "straight

³⁸ Zakiyah, Edriagus Saputra, and Rahma Ghania Alhafiza, "Rekonstruksi Pemahaman Hadis dan Sunnah Menurut Fazlur Rahman," *Mashdar: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 2, no. 1 (2020): 19

path” can be understood existentially as the human search for meaning and morally as the direction toward righteous action.

Thus, the dialectic between Ricoeur and Rahman shows that religious symbols are not passive signs. They are active structures of meaning that shape consciousness, identity, morality, and social life. Religious language does not merely describe reality; it forms human beings and communities.

7. Relevance for Contemporary Religious Thought

The relevance of Ricoeur and Rahman becomes clear in the contemporary context, where religious language is often used in rigid, ideological, and exclusive ways. Many religious conflicts emerge not only because of doctrinal differences, but also because of the failure to interpret religious symbols properly. When symbols are absolutized literally, they can become tools of exclusion and domination. When religious texts are read without historical and moral awareness, they can be used to justify intolerance, violence, or social injustice.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics offers a way to recover the depth of religious symbols. It teaches that symbols must be interpreted, not merely repeated. Religious language should lead to reflection, not fanaticism. Symbols should open thought, not close it.³⁹ Meanwhile, Rahman’s hermeneutics offers a way to recover the moral vision of revelation. It teaches that religious interpretation must move beyond textual formalism toward ethical responsibility. Religion should not be reduced to legal rigidity, but should become a source of justice, compassion, and human dignity.⁴⁰

Therefore, the comparative study of Ricoeur and Rahman contributes to a more open and responsible understanding of religious

³⁹ Yulia Novitasari, “Makna Q.S. An-Nisa: 3 Analisis Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur,” *Hikami: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur’an dan Tafsir* 5, no. 1 (2024): 1

⁴⁰ Hidayat Ridho, “Interpretation of the Qur’an from Classical-Textual to Contemporary-Contextual: A Study of Double Movement Theory in Fazlur Rahman’s Hermeneutics,” *QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1–18

language. It helps build a hermeneutical model that is critical but not destructive, faithful but not literalistic, contextual but not relativistic. Such a model is urgently needed in contemporary religious discourse, especially in plural societies where different religious communities must learn to interpret their symbols without denying the humanity of others.

8. Synthesis: A Dialectical Model of Religious Hermeneutics

Based on the comparison above, this study proposes a dialectical model of religious hermeneutics. This model consists of four main dimensions.

First, the symbolic dimension. Religious language must be understood as symbolic because it speaks about realities that exceed ordinary empirical description. Symbols open deeper meanings and invite interpretation.

Second, the historical dimension. Religious language emerges within concrete historical contexts. Therefore, interpretation must consider the socio-historical background of revelation, text, and religious discourse.

Third, the existential dimension. Religious language addresses human existence. It speaks about guilt, hope, suffering, responsibility, fear, faith, and the search for meaning.

Fourth, the ethical dimension. Religious language must lead to moral transformation. It should not stop at doctrinal explanation, but must shape just, responsible, and compassionate human action.

Ricoeur contributes strongly to the symbolic and existential dimensions, while Rahman contributes strongly to the historical and ethical dimensions. The combination of both thinkers produces a more integrative hermeneutic. Religious language is not only a matter of meaning, but also a matter of life, history, morality, and transformation.

Thus, the dialectic between symbol and hermeneutics in the thought of Paul Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman shows that religious language is neither closed nor arbitrary. It is open to interpretation, but

still directed toward truth, meaning, and ethical responsibility. This is the main contribution of their comparative study to the philosophy of religion and Islamic hermeneutics.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, this study concludes that Paul Ricoeur and Fazlur Rahman offer two complementary hermeneutical perspectives for understanding religious language. Both thinkers reject a literalistic reading of religion that reduces sacred texts and symbols to fixed verbal meanings. For Ricoeur, religious language is symbolic because it contains a surplus of meaning that must be interpreted. Symbols such as sin, guilt, defilement, hope, and salvation are not merely doctrinal expressions, but existential languages that reveal the human condition before the sacred. Through symbolic hermeneutics, Ricoeur shows that religion speaks through layered meanings that invite human beings to reflect on themselves, their limitations, and their relation to transcendence.

Meanwhile, Fazlur Rahman understands religious language, especially Qur'anic language, as a historical and moral discourse. Through his double movement theory, Rahman argues that the Qur'an must be read by considering the historical context of revelation and by deriving universal moral principles that can be applied to contemporary life. In this sense, religious symbols and Qur'anic concepts are not static expressions, but ethical signs that guide human beings toward justice, responsibility, and social transformation.

The comparison between Ricoeur and Rahman shows that religious language has two inseparable dimensions: symbolic depth and moral direction. Ricoeur contributes to the existential-symbolic understanding of religion, while Rahman contributes to the historical-ethical understanding of revelation. Therefore, religious language should not be understood merely as literal doctrine, but as a symbolic, historical, ethical, and transformative discourse. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to bring Western philosophical hermeneutics and Islamic Qur'anic hermeneutics into dialogue. This dialogue provides a critical

framework for overcoming religious literalism, formalism, and exclusivism in contemporary religious thought. Thus, the dialectic between symbol and hermeneutics becomes an important path toward a more reflective, contextual, and humane understanding of religion.

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