

**THE READER(S) AND THE BIBLE(S)
'READER VERSUS COMMUNITY' IN READER-RESPONSE
CRITICISM AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

PAULIAN-TIMOTEI PETRIC

Abstract: The paradigm shifts that have taken place in the field of literary criticism – particularly in the twentieth century – have challenged traditional views of the relationship between author, text and reader. With the different forms of reader-response criticism, the emphasis has been placed on the reader and on the meaning that he or she brings to the text. In our study, this emphasis is discussed in the light of the community's role in a particular type of interpretation, namely the interpretation of the Bible. After a general presentation of the history and types of reader-response criticism, this article would limit its discussion to the reader of the biblical text and the role his or her interpretive community plays in the process of interpretation. Through the relationship between a Christian – as believer and 'reader' – and the interpretive community (*i.e.* the local manifestation of the Church), the community becomes the place where both worship (liturgy) and interpretation take place.

Keywords: Literary Criticism, Biblical Hermeneutics, Reader-Response Criticism, Interpretive Community

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in the last decades, within the field of Hermeneutics, on the identity of the reader and his or her interaction with the text. As the focus shifted from the author to the text and eventually to the reader, important hermeneutical discussions have emerged – with a strong impact on biblical interpretation. Is it possible to reconcile – at least to a certain point – the modern trends in hermeneutics (particularly various types of reader-response criticism) and the way in which a Christian regards and reads the Bible? Or are we entitled to pronounce a divorce whose first signs occurred with the dawns of the Enlightenment? In this paper we will deal indirectly with these questions – and other similar ones – by focusing on reader-response criticism's history and developments in view of biblical interpretation. From there, we will narrow our discussion to the community's role in interpreting the Bible. As a key concept in one of the forms of reader-response criticism, the concept of "interpretive communities" seems to become a common ground in the dialogue between secular

THE READER(S) AND THE BIBLE(S)
'READER VERSUS COMMUNITY' IN READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION

and biblical hermeneutics. At least partially, this paper would try to underline both the possibilities and the limits of the emphasis on the community's role in biblical interpretation.

Before turning to that issue, it is necessary to understand the larger context of reader-response theories. Therefore, the first part of the paper deals with the history and the types of reader-response criticism. Then, we will engage in a critical discussion of the movement, underlining several ways in which its agenda contradicts the essential set of beliefs professed by Christians. The second part of our study will be focused on how reader-response critics have viewed the community's role and influence upon the reader in the process of interpretation. In the last section, our analysis will be narrowed to the particular case represented by the relationship between the Christian as reader and believer, and his or her community as the place where both interpretation and worship take place.

1. From Author to Reader: History and Developments in Reader-Response Criticism

1.1. From Author to Text

For most of the human 'interpretive' history, the reading of a text involved almost implicitly the challenge of understanding the mind of the author in the complex network of words, phrases and concepts the author used. This has been in fact a reflection of our basic understanding of language as a means of communication. In the daily life, when we have to understand the words we hear, we seek to know what the context is, to whom they are addressed and, more than anything else, who speaks. With the radical changes that took place during the last two centuries in the field of science, philosophy (particularly epistemology) and linguistics, the primacy of 'authorial' intention has ceased to be as implicit as it was before.

Historical Context: A Post-Enlightenment Era

The limits of our present article do not allow us to trace a detailed history of the 'paradigm' shifts that eventually generated the radical change in which today we read a text. But before turning to the recent history of interpretation, we should refer to several people that marked the post-Enlightenment era.

Particularly three people have been considered as "sources of the modern mind": Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Isaac Newton.¹ Using different methods

¹ L. WILKINSON, "Hermeneutics & the Postmodern Reaction Against the 'Truth'", in E. DYCK (ed.), *The Act of Bible Reading*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1996, 116.

to approach reality, all of them believed in the capacity of the human mind to have access to the truth. In Bacon's view, the 'organ of knowledge' is the inductive method that starts with an objective analysis of the facts. Descartes speaks about a total detachment of the mind from what it knows, realizing that he can doubt on every aspect of reality excepting his own thinking. As for Newton, he sees the universe as a mechanism designed to function according to certain laws that can be understood; it is through this understanding that humankind has access to the truth.² But this belief in the capacity to know the truth (and the implicit emphasis on human reason) was to be shattered both at an ideological level (Kant's *Critic-s*, Einstein's theory of relativity) and at a historical level (through the two World Wars). The end of modernity was felt not only in the fields of philosophy and science, but also in the way how people read, wrote and interpreted.

New Criticism

During the 1940s and 1950s, the position of the author came to be questioned by some literary critics. Gradually, a movement took shape that emphasized the "text's verbal form" and pleaded for the autonomy of the text.³ For the supporters of this view, the concern for the author "leads to 'intentional fallacy'", while "questions about the reader lead to the 'affective fallacy'".⁴ To avoid both of these fallacies, New Criticism - as the movement came to be known - made the text to be the governing principle in reading.

For New Criticism, interpretation begins with the text and deals exclusively with the reality of the text. The whole pursue for meaning has to do with understanding the significance of the words in their context. In the interpretive process, the author is cut off from the text and the reader is subjected to the text.⁵ But the text proved to be a fragile 'point terminus' in hermeneutics. As the movement developed into different directions, it became clearer that in interpretation the text cannot exist by itself. Without an author to determine and control the interpretation, the text has to be subjected to other constraints; otherwise, meaning would have so many possibilities, than it could hardly be called '*meaning* of a text'.

² See WILKINSON, 116-118.

³ K. J. VANHOZER, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of 'Aesthetic' Theology", *Trinity Journal* 8 (NS/1987), 43.

⁴ K. J. VANHOZER, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth...", 43.

⁵ K. J. VANHOZER, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth...", 43.

Structuralist Criticism

Structuralist Criticism continues the agenda of New Criticism, refusing to accept that the author's intention has anything to do with the meaning of the text. The movement could be described as "a belief in the non-referential character of literature; a concern for literary form, shape, and genre".⁶ The structuralist view makes the author to be "overshadowed by the literary codes that are held to be real determiners of meaning".⁷

The text is the master of its own interpretation, as in the New Criticism. But the structuralists go further and speak about finding the meaning of the text by paying attention to cultural 'codes' and rules embedded in the text: "The unconscious constraints of linguistic convention, not the author's conscious intent, are the real determiners of meaning."⁸ These codes are different from one text to another and especially from one type of literature to another. Therefore, in the interpretive process, an important task is to accurately recognize the type of literature that a certain text belongs to and implicitly to acknowledge its appropriate 'literary code'. Such an approach changes dramatically our way of reading and our 'search' in the text. The text is no longer seen as bearing the mark of its author, but rather as using 'cultural conventions' through which it "makes sense."⁹

Either referring to the text or to the structures enclosed in it, New Criticism and Structuralist Criticism have a large common ground: the emphasis on the text along with the rejection of any 'authorial' claim in the quest for meaning. The text is completely cut off from the author and it has to be interpreted accordingly.

Beginning with New Criticism in the 1940s and continuing through structuralism in the 1960s, literary critics have attempted to find a principle for determinate meaning based on the text alone, considered as an entity autonomous from its author.¹⁰

While the main trend in literary criticism was to separate the interpretation from the author, there has been at least one 'voice' who sought to preserve the role of the author in interpretation. E. D. Hirsch tried to reconcile the traditional

⁶ K. J. VANHOOZER, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth...", 44.

⁷ K. J. VANHOOZER, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth...", 44.

⁸ K. J. VANHOOZER, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth...", 44.

⁹ K. J. VANHOOZER, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth...", 45.

¹⁰ K. J. VANHOOZER, "The Reader in New Testament Interpretation", in J. B. GREEN (ed.) *Hearing the New Testament - Strategies for Interpretation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995, 304.

concern for the author's intention and the new emphasis on the text. In his work *Validity in Interpretation*, Hirsch – contrary to the perspective of most his fellow contemporaries – argued for the author's intent as foundational for the text's meaning. In his view, “a text means what its author meant” and the author's intention is the only principle that could govern the interpretive process.¹¹ According to Hirsch “the meaning of a text is determined by virtue of its being grounded in the author's intent. This intention is a matter of the author's consciousness, and as an object of consciousness it may be reproduced”.¹²

1.2. From Text to Reader – Types of Reader-Response Criticism

The difference that E. D. Hirsch made between *meaning* – defined as the author's intention – and *significance* – the effect of the text upon the readers – showed that another concern was gradually becoming predominant: the reader. The text-oriented theories were closing the text into itself in such a way that there was no place for the reader in the interpretive process. The emphasis on the reader has resulted not only as a reaction to previous hermeneutical theories, but also as an effect of the discussions in culture and politics regarding human identity and the different ways in which each type of community relates to reality. The interpretive theories resulted from this approach – namely, the reader-response theories – take the attention away from the meaning of the text in relation to its author and its context, and place the reader in the center of the hermeneutical process. In its general form, reader-response criticism is defined therefore as a “theory of interpretation that asserts that the meaning of a text does not lie in the author's intended message but in the thoughts and feelings of readers as they encounter the text”,¹³ investigating “how the reader responds to a text”.¹⁴ This approach took a conservative or moderate form and also a radical one; in the following two sections we will briefly describe both of them.

¹¹ E. D. HIRSCH Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1967, 1.

¹² VANHOOZER, “A Lamp in the Labyrinth”, 29.

¹³ W. E. ELWELL and R. W. YARBROUGH, *Encountering the New Testament - A Historical and Theological Survey*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1997, 402.

¹⁴ D. F. WATSON, “Rhetorical Criticism”, ” in J. B. GREEN, S. MCKNIGHT and H. I. MARSHALL (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1992, 701.

Conservative Reader-Response

Still indebted to their structuralist roots, “early reader-response critics tended to be ‘conservative’”, trying to keep in balance the role played by the reader in interpretation and “the rhetorical strategies of the text itself” that direct the reader towards a certain interpretation.¹⁵ From such a perspective, where both the text and the reader have a role in producing meaning, reading becomes “essentially an *obedient* activity”.¹⁶

Conservative reader-response critics differ from one another in matters of understanding the dynamic relationship between the text and the reader. Wolfgang Iser speaks about ‘gaps’ that exist in the text and that are filled by the reader in the interpretive process.¹⁷ Therefore, reading is defined as “filling in the blanks” and “making connections”.¹⁸ Without being filled, these ‘gaps’ in the textual meaning “remain only potential rather than actual”.¹⁹ This approach is to be considered a conservative one due to its emphasis on what the text says – actually, on what the text does not say. Even when the reader completes the meaning of a text, he does so “following authorial instructions and textual indications”.²⁰ However, Iser’s theory belongs to the side of reader-response criticism because of the active role played, in his approach, by the reader in filling the textual ‘gaps’ with meaning. In Iser’s words, “...the text only takes on life when it is realized... The convergence of text and reader bring the literary work into existence”.²¹

Another view that tries to reconcile the text and the reader has been outlined by Paul Ricoeur. He describes the reading as “the process by which the world of the text intersects with the world of the reader”.²² The text offers a wide space of interpretation, but this space is limited by the text itself. In the meantime, due to its openness, the text does not enforce to the reader a certain meaning: “Perhaps we

¹⁵ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 307.

¹⁶ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 307.

¹⁷ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 308.

¹⁸ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 308.

¹⁹ A. C. THISELTON, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics - The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1992, 515.

²⁰ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 306.

²¹ W. ISER, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1974, 274-75.

²² VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 309.

should say that a text is a finite space of interpretation: there is not just one interpretation, but, on the other hand, there is not an infinite number of them.”²³

Iser and Ricoeur share the same concern for the role of the text as imposing, if not the content of interpretation, at least its limits. For both of them, reading remains an interaction between two sides, in which each side acknowledges the presence or the potential presence of the other. Their reader is free to interpret and search for meaning, but in doing so, the reader has to relate himself or herself to the text’s world. However, later reader-response theories discredited the text and build their entire hermeneutical edifice on the reader and on the history of readings.²⁴

Radical Reader-Response

Most of the scholars who have approached the biblical text in the light of reader-response theories have used a moderate or a conservative form of reader-response criticism. However, the literary criticism’s spectrum includes also a radical view of reader-response. According to this view, the reader is the absolute and unique source for meaning, creating it in the act of reading. “The reader determines what to make of the text” and his or her interests “drive the process of interpretation”.²⁵ Following that, interpretation is no longer a response to the text; it becomes a reaction, and even a reaction against the text: “we could speak of reader-rejection rather than reader-reception of the text”²⁶.

For neo-pragmatists as Richard Rorty, the main concern is not the meaning of a text, but rather its uses. There is not a ‘right’ reading, but rather there are readings that are more useful and interesting than others.²⁷ Besides Neo-pragmatism, the other dominant view in radical reader-response is represented by Roland Barthes. With Barthes, the classical distinction between author and reader is surpassed, because he “proclaims both the death of the Author [...] and the birth of the Reader”.²⁸ When the reader-response hermeneutics proclaims “the death of the Author”, the question is whether the status of the ‘reader’ himself or herself is not affected. Without an author to relate to, in front of a text that has no intrinsic meaning, the reader becomes eventually the creator of meaning and the actual ‘writer’ of the text.

²³ P. RICOEUR, “World of the Text, World of the Reader” in M. J. VALDES (ed.), *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1991, 494.

²⁴ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, p. 304.

²⁵ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 306.

²⁶ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 307.

²⁷ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 311.

²⁸ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 311.

1.3. Challenges to Christianity

Without the Author, is there a Bible?

Our main concern regarding reader-response criticism, at least in its radical form, is that it affects the essential Christian belief that sees the Bible as the Word of God. If the historical and the conceptual gap between the author and the reader rule out the possibility of a meaning transmitted from one to the other, then how much more the ontological and epistemological “gap” between a transcendent God (as Author) and a human being limited in time and space (as reader) makes the reader totally incapable to see anything else in the text than his or her mind. Therefore, without God as the Author, the Bible can no longer be regarded as the revelation of God. It becomes just a literary product of a certain culture, written throughout several centuries, that speaks about the beliefs (probably) of an antique civilization (Judaism) and of a Jewish-Christian community in the first century A.D. With each reading of the biblical text, a new meaning would emerge and actually a new text would be created:

For proponents of ‘reader-response theory’, however – at least in its more extreme forms – there is no such thing as an objective text. Insofar as every reader brings an interpretative framework to the text, to that extent every reader generates a new meaning and thus creates a new text.²⁹

A reader-response approach, taken to its ultimate implications, leads to the death of the biblical hermeneutics simply because the literary text to which the hermeneutic paradigms and principles are applied is no longer the *Bible*. It is something else, but no longer the Book that shaped the history of mankind and changed the lives of thousands of people.

A Postmodern Confession of Faith - “*My Lord and my God...*”

These words were spoken by Thomas, when he met the risen Lord, after initially doubting His resurrection (Jn 20,28). As it is generally agreed, they express his devotion to the risen Christ and his belief in Him. However, in view of the recent shift in hermeneutics, they could be seen as a symbol of the ultimate result of a reader-response approach. If the reader is the one who brings meaning

²⁹ M. SILVA, “Contemporary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation” in W. C. KAISER Jr. and M. SILVA (eds.), *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics - The Search for Meaning*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1994, 243.

into the text, then eventually the identity of Jesus and his ministry will be understood differently from one reader to another. As reader, I will find in the biblical text “*my* Jesus” as other readers would find “*their* Jesus”. The pronouns added would not mean that we have different ways of experiencing the same Divine Reality, but rather, due to our different life experiences and expectations, *my* Jesus would be radically different from *theirs*. The focus and the limits of our present research do not allow us to fully explore all the theological implications of such a view. The historical-critical approach led to the issue of a Christ of faith different from the Christ of history. The reader-response criticism would inevitably make *my* Christ ontologically and functionally different from *their* Christ. From that point on, the essence of Christianity is lost.

From “*Sola Scriptura*” to “*Solus Lector*”

The new directions in hermeneutics challenge the evangelical Christians to reconsider and re-define one of the basic principles of the Reformation, namely *sola Scriptura*.³⁰ Historically and theologically, this principle has been related to and thought together with the other *sola*-s of the Reformation: *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*. Actually, *sola Scriptura* has never meant reading the Bible in a total separation from the Christian belief and witness throughout the centuries. However, with the postmodern challenge to all that had been previously accepted and considered authoritative, the interpretative principle of the Reformation needs to be detailed and clarified in view of the present hermeneutical debate. Under the pressure of the changes that have recently taken place in hermeneutics, another principle threatens to become a governing principle in biblical interpretation: *solus lector*. Therefore, the issue of Scripture’s authority needs to be defined and explained to a pluralistic world in which the concept of authority is no longer a function of a community or a culture, but rather of an individual.

2. The Role of the Community in Interpretation

2.1. Stanley Fish’s Hermeneutical ‘Pilgrimage’

The solutions proposed by the main two types of reader-response criticism did not satisfy all the critics. Conservative reader-response was accused for its attempts to satisfy both parties - “both ‘objectivists’ who still believe in textual ‘givens’, and pluralists who view meaning as constructs determined by the agenda and expectations of readers”.³¹ The radical form of the movement was accused of

³⁰ For an analysis of *Sola Scriptura* and its implications, see A. N. S. LANE, “*Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan*” in P. E. SATTERTHWAITHE and D. F. WRIGHT (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scriptures*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994, 297-327.

³¹ THISSELTON, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 522.

allowing an infinite number of readings for the same text, leading toward interpretive anarchy. Stanley Fish has attempted to adjust the reader-response criticism by introducing a certain governing principle in interpretation. In fact, the course of his life reflects the changes produced in the last decades in the interpretive theories.

Stanley Fish started as an early reader-response critic, arguing that "all readers are textually directed"; the fact that the texts determine their own interpretation is sometimes overlooked by the readers "because they have not paid attention to the ways texts have controlled them".³² From this form of extreme structuralism, Fish moves in the 1980s to post-structuralism, rejecting any objective control of the text on the readers. From his new position, he sees the reader as responsible of bringing meaning into the text. The reader objectifies the text and its characteristics, and doing so, it controls it – because "the text and all its features are only defined and therefore brought into existence by the reader's interpretive strategies".³³

2.2. "Interpretive Communities": An Attempt to Avoid Hermeneutic Anarchy

However, Fish considered that there have to be certain limits in interpretation. When the reader is the one who brings meaning into the text and controls its interpretation, then anarchy can no longer be avoided – unless a parallel governing principle is used. Fish finds this principle in the role that the community plays. Each reader belongs – consciously or not – to an 'interpretive community'; this 'critical community' defines the reader and his reading experience.³⁴ In another words, while the reader is still the 'master' over the meaning of a text, he or she is ultimately under the rule of a community that objectifies for itself a certain meaning in interpretation. Fish states that

...there is no subjective element of reading because the observer is never individual in the sense of unique or private, but is always the product of categories of understanding that are his by virtue of his membership in a community of interpretation.³⁵

³² R. M. FOWLER, "Who Is 'the reader' in reader response criticism", in *Semeia* 31 (1985), 13.

³³ FOWLER, "Who Is 'the reader...'", 14.

³⁴ FOWLER, "Who Is 'the reader...'", 14.

³⁵ S. FISH, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, 83.

Stanley Fish's approach has been influenced by the discussion that Thomas Kuhn – a scientist – has raised with the publication of his work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³⁶ Referring specifically to the field of science, Kuhn considers every scientist belonging to a certain community “of other whose research is oriented by a particular ‘paradigm’ of interpretative framework”.³⁷ Such a community becomes the context where the interpretation of data takes place and therefore it influences the interpretive process. In Fish's theory, Fowler identifies three processes that take place simultaneously in the interaction between the community, the text and the reader: (1) the community defines the text and the strategies to be used in interpretation; (2) the text shapes its reader and the expectations of the community; (3) the reader, under the community's instruction, construes the text and generates changes in the critical community.³⁸

3. A Particular Case: The Evangelical Christian Community and Biblical Interpretation

In their attempt to remain faithful to the exegetical heritage of the Reformation, contemporary evangelical exegetes saw in very positive terms the focus on the author – focus present in literary criticism until the middle of the twentieth century. Reformation hermeneutics considers “that the author's intention is something determinate and unchanging, about which objective knowledge may be had on the basis of objective evidence.”³⁹ Therefore, many evangelical exegetes were confident with the methods and developments in hermeneutics, because these were confirming in fact the interpretative principles of the Reformation. With this confidence, they have approach the new movements in literary criticism, hoping that the new tools and emphasis that modern hermeneutics was bringing would raise biblical interpretation to the status of a valid dialog-partner with the field of hermeneutics as a whole.

However, due to this (sometimes uncritical) openness, biblical interpretation has become subjected to the fast-changing world of hermeneutics. “The normative status of authorial intent”⁴⁰ had a short life and the new waves – new criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism – dazzled the exegetes of the Bible. With each new movement, the Bible has been re-read from another perspective, in the biblical scholars' attempt to adapt their research to the ongoing status of the hermeneutic discussion. We wonder whether these attempts are responsible for the attitude that

³⁶ T. S. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.

³⁷ VANHOOZER, “The Reader...”, 302.

³⁸ FOWLER, “Who Is ‘the reader...’?”, 14.

³⁹ VANHOOZER, “A Lamp in the Labyrinth”, 28.

⁴⁰ VANHOOZER, “A Lamp in the Labyrinth”, 29.

we have, as post-modern readers, towards the Bible: as something to read ourselves into rather than *something to be read by*.

3.1. The Christian as Reader within an Interpretive Community

In an honest analysis of the way we read the Bible, it is essential to recognize the community's influence on our interpretation. A community of "belief, liturgy and praxis" is also an "interpretive community", providing the interpretation of the Bible and of the life itself. In fact, understanding a community from this perspective would enable us to grasp better its theological identity. As Christians, we are all "inevitably constrained by histories of interpretation, traditions and contemporary communities of faith."⁴¹ The community influences the way in which a reader approaches a text, the expectations and even the conclusions drawn from the text – in other words, the entire pursue for meaning: "meaning must always have some locale".⁴²

A Christian community is more than just an interpretive community; in the meantime, the Bible is more than a simple text to read and interpret. Literary theory, while it can produce attractive definitions of meaning and consequently new methods for interpretation, should not become normative for biblical interpretation. There are, of course, similarities between these two areas where interpretive processes take place – and some of them have already been mentioned. However, most of the literary criticism is dependent upon certain premises and paradigms that do not have anything in common either with the Christian belief or with the biblical text itself.

Literary theory, for good or for ill, brings into biblical studies an intimidating and complicated network of assumptions and methods which were not in origin designed to take account of the particular nature of *biblical* texts. These carry with them their own agenda of deeply philosophical questions about the status of language, the nature of texts, and the relations between language, the world, and theories of knowledge.⁴³

The Community forms the Reader

A community's role in interpretation is mainly visible on three levels: it sets the *limits* of the interpretation, it offers the *methods* used and it validates its *results*. A community has a set of beliefs and practices on the basis of which it is

⁴¹ MCKNIGHT, "Literary Criticism" in J. B. GREEN, S. MCKNIGHT and H. I. MARSHALL (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1992, 476.

⁴² MCKNIGHT, "Literary Criticism", 476.

⁴³ THISSELTON, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 471.

considered to be close to some communities and different from others. Particularly, a Christian community is defined by a specific understanding of revelation, redemption and the believer's communion with God. It is in these limits determined by the 'Confession (or Rule) of Faith' that a Christian reader from a certain community operates.⁴⁴ Acknowledging the identity of the community expressed theologically and liturgically, the reader who belongs to it would willingly subscribe to certain limits; these limits would determine the way in which the biblical text is approached. The Eastern Orthodoxy underlines the principle that the Bible is the Book of the Church. Although such a perspective could be seen as an expression of a reluctant attitude towards a personal reading of the Bible, it rather places the biblical interpretation in its proper place: the Eucharistic community. A Christian reads the Bible as an act of community worship and as a personal expression of that corporate worship life.

The Community reforms the Reader

An important aspect of reading the Bible within a Christian community is that the reader is constantly re-formed by the tradition, beliefs and present experiences of his or her community. It is not only that the community sets, by its own identity, a certain 'rule' of interpretation. The community is itself renewed in its ongoing interaction with the biblical text. New perspectives, new expectations and new experiences would mean eventually new 'readings' for all the readers belonging to the same community. While the interpretation is governed by the community's identity and beliefs, it is however a dynamic process. In the act of reading, a community discovers itself, and specifically defines and re-defines itself.

However, this process is bi-directional. In the same time, readers have their own experiences, which – brought into the life of the community – would affect and sometimes even govern their community life. It is extremely important to understand that both the world of the reader and the life of the community change in time, and therefore each reading has a new personal dimension and a new communal expression. Whenever the community's life is governed by its fundamental creed and values, the reader would approach the text with an 'obedient' perspective. But when a community bears too much the mark of the reader's experiences, these experiences would receive a normative status and would encourage readers to see themselves as 'masters' of the text. In this way, from what it can be described as '*our* reading', a Christian community would eventually get to a diversity of '*my* reading'-s, that will sooner or later will undermine the essence of Christian identity.

⁴⁴ See the discussion on the 'Rule of Faith' as governing Christian interpretation in R. W. WALL, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics" in J. B. GREEN and M. TURNER (eds.), *Between Two Horizons - Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000, 88-107.

3.2. The Christian as Believer within a Liturgical Community

As we have previously mentioned, a Christian community shapes the way in which its members read and understand the Bible. We could say that, at least in this respect, the emphasis on the 'interpretive community' proves to be a valid approach to the process of interpretation. But a community is not based upon 'reading experiences', but upon 'belief experiences'. In many cases, it is the act of proclamation that leads people to belief, rather than the act of reading. For a Christian, belonging to a worshipping community is not a matter of 'reading or interpretive experience' but rather of 'discipleship experience'. Along with being shaped by the community he or she belongs to, a Christian would always think of himself or herself as being shaped by the work of the Holy Spirit. Eventually it is through the work of the Holy Spirit that a person is brought to the Christian belief, expressed in a particular community and lived out in a particular way of life. To consider the Christian believer only as a reader within a community that has its own interpretive tradition means to rule out the act of faith as it is prepared and empowered by God's direct illumination through the Holy Spirit and expressed in the liturgical life of the Church.

Conclusion

The reader-response criticism rightly emphasizes the role played by "interpretive communities" in governing the interpretation of a certain text. A reader will always be a part of a "reading" community that has its own history, tradition, values and methods in interpretation. Referring particularly to the Christian community and the Bible, this form of reader-response criticism helps the interpreter to understand the various 'driving forces' in interpretation; but in the meantime, it remains subjective and pluralistic. At the core of the Christian belief is the fact that Christ Jesus is not merely "*our* truth", but "*the* Truth". A reader will always be influenced by the community to which – consciously or not – he or she belongs. His or her reading will be either along with the community's interpretation ("obedient reading") or against it ("revolutionary reading"). But the approach of a Christian reader to the Bible transcends such a status. A Christian reader of the Bible will not "interpret for believing" but rather "interpret while believing". Moreover, the reader who belongs to a Christian community would see the community – namely, the Church – as a place for both worship and interpretation, where each of these 'acts' is done in the light of the other. For the believer, the reading is an act of worship, as he or she stands in the front of God's

PAULIAN-TIMOTEI PETRIC

revelation expressed in human words; and his or her worship is an act of 'reading', as the faith rooted in the Word is lived and expressed liturgically.

Paulian-Timotei PETRIC
Doctoral Student
Faculty of Letters, Romania
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași