

On Daisaku Ikeda's Interpretation of the Concept of Ōbutsu Myōgō and Its Consequences for Political Science

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Abstract

This paper differentiates political science from political philosophy, following Giovanni Sartori's perspective in defining political theory as a separate disciplinary field. Not only is political theory a common referential field of study for political science and political philosophy, but it is a domain of methodological and epistemological research as theoretical philosophy. Theoretical philosophy is a discipline that contributes the use of critical hermeneutics derived from Paul Ricoeur's speculative work. Essentially, it is a general, procedural approach for both the historical-social and political-economical sciences. If the validity of this approach depends on its method, its necessity depends on its contemporary cultural and socio-political tendencies, which strongly raise the question of recognition, the philosophy of the human being and religion. It is within this context that Daisaku Ikeda's Buddhist philosophy of the 'human revolution' inserts itself as a practical-speculative conception, which, for political application, crosses and intertwines the Buddhist concept of Ōbutsumyōgō.

Keywords: political theory, critical hermeneutics, recognition, emancipation, human revolution

1. The contributions of the political theory perspective and why it should be embraced

Theoretical philosophy, not political science or political philosophy, constitutes the fundamental perspective of this research. The basis of my investigations into psychoanalysis, historical knowledge, recognition, personal identity and philosophy of action is the epistemology and methodology of the human and social sciences. Even my research about the relationship between philosophy and religion in Daisaku Ikeda's philosophy corresponds to a speculative interest in philosophy of action and philosophical anthropology. Thus, how do I justify this study? How can a non-intra-disciplinary contribution to political science be useful and productive for political science? One validation for this work is recognition of the global momentum and urgency, as well as novelty and peculiarity, of the problematic relationship between politics and religion. Further validation comes from emphasising the growing interaction between disciplines, namely the productive interdisciplinary work of research. However, while stronger polarisation of the first method of validation risks orienting the scientific research of truth and validity toward currency and contingency, stronger polarisation of the second risks slowing the process of deepening and specialising knowledge. The latter may work in favour of a more shared patrimony of concepts and principles, as well as in favour of their levelling and limitation. Science must have knowledge itself, not communicability, as its first condition. Even interdisciplinary relationships must follow the process of disciplinary research.

The case of political science seems to be emblematic and paradigmatic under different aspects. It is strictly connected, and as once unified, with political philosophy. In fact, initially, political science was called political philosophy. There are still persistent and important points of connection, superposition and reciprocal influence (e.g. the study of philosophy of state or political thought). From the philosophical point of view, we distinguish between political science and political philosophy in the following manner. Political science is mainly an analytical-descriptive science, whereas political philosophy is an historical-normative science. Political science studies and evaluates objects and phenomena for how they are done, whereas political philosophy studies how objects and phenomena are ideally conceived. Political science deals in description; political philosophy in prescription. This is not to say that the study of political ideologies (e.g. communism, liberalism) is completely value-neutral in political science; however, there is a prevalent analytical dimension within political science as opposed to a prevalent practical-evaluative dimension within political philosophy.

In fact, modern and contemporary political philosophy often surrounds questions of 'good' or 'ideal' political values, governance and political institutions. However, regarding theoretical philosophy, this distinction and its articulations are still insufficient. *De facto*, theoretical philosophy has little to do with political philosophy and political science. Political science cannot purely rely on speculation and pure speculation is not fully of interest to practical speculation or political philosophy. The distance between theoretical and political philosophy is considerable. Nevertheless, there is a third domain for political research that is not strictly of political philosophy or political science but is of central reference for both.

Political theory, a specific and intermediate domain, is a third field of study to which theoretical philosophy can significantly contribute. This paper partially follows Giovanni Sartori's point of view, as expressed in *Elementi di teoria politica (Elements of Political Theory)*; 1987), that theory is as a third disciplinary reality between science and philosophy. According to Sartori, 'philosophy can be all ideas without facts, whereas science can be all facts without ideas, and theory is above facts (which are below it). From that it descends that facts can change, whereas theory can remain' (Sartori, 1987, p. 6; the trans. is mine). I am embracing this perspective only partially, not only because today there is more and more ideologically driven science and a philosophy that is increasingly focussed on factual data, but also because principles and conceptions are not enough for a re-definition and re-determination of concepts to develop a theoretical anchoring, semantic framing and analytical deconstruction, as Sartori does (pp. 6-7). Methodological-procedural definition and epistemological anchoring are needed. We must, therefore, also have a methodological and epistemological theory. This is the job for theoretical philosophy. And here I am following the perspective of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics, which has well-defined a procedural model and a foundational principle valuable for both the historical-social and political and economic sciences. This is the model of *critical hermeneutics*. The question of political and social-political sciences' objectivity (and even the objectivity of all the human sciences) are at stake here. In fact, within them, the dialectical relationship between object and method is specific. Besides, the same analytical-procedural operation can never be completely disconnected from the motives of scientific interest, cognitive position and procedural application. Value neutrality is only an *ideal* because, in the human sciences, it is impossible to achieve a non-interpretative process of research and knowledge, or an interpretation freed from a certain degree of preliminary/predetermined evaluative position or orientation.

2. Objectivism and the critical hermeneutics approach

Sartori is right to focus on the necessity of an exact determination of terminological uses and conceptual field operating in scientific research. It is an urgent task because there is a dangerous tendency to distort classical concepts' meanings by combining them with new ones, which are often extrapolated from the world of journalism and public communication. Often, these new terms are just attractive as opposed to useful or productive. This is not conducive to scientific goals, which are not aimed at *persuasion*. Thus, Sartori is right in asserting that in political-social science research needs a conceptual and historical-conceptual clarification. Nevertheless, conceptual analysis and historical-genealogical research do not allow any effective theoretical or cognitive advancement beyond the level of terminological and theoretical clarification. Therefore, a hermeneutical operation must follow in addition to this descriptive-analytic procedure. Hermeneutics is not necessarily a tradition or a speculative operation. In fact, hermeneutics was originally a method as opposed to a school, a technique as opposed to a philosophy. It was born as an interpretative procedure, successively becoming an epistemological-methodological model as a result of the works of Dilthey, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Ricoeur calls this model the 'hermeneutic arc', a procedure able to articulate explanation and understanding under interpretation.

Ricoeur's work is a vast interdisciplinary body of research, encompassing disciplines such as mythology, narrative theory, psychology, history, rhetoric, cognitive science, linguistics and law. Ricoeur anchored his general approach to three specific philosophical-speculative traditions: reflexive philosophy, Husserlian phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics (see Ricoeur, 1991, p. 12). However, from his varied work of research and the conjunction of different traditions, a speculatively neutral procedural model can be extracted. It is for generalisation that it emerges as a flexible methodological approach that is both descriptive-comprehensive and analytical-interpretative. It is essentially due to the characteristic of an interpretative description, which is the quintessence of a hermeneutical phenomenology. Ricoeur summarises all of this with the maxim *expliquer plus pour comprendre mieux*, meaning both 'to explain more is to understand better' and 'to explain more for the purpose of having a better understanding'.

Ricoeur's philosophical research defines and practices critical hermeneutics as a methodology for coordinating description and explanation under interpretation and working with a certain degree of legitimacy and effectiveness between different scientific and non-scientific forms of knowledge and between different discursive registers and argumentative models. All the characteristics of this critical hermeneutics emerge to summarise the general factors and characteristics of Ricoeur's work: the meta- function of philosophy that works at a theoretical level with and for sciences; the ideal of a scientific work realised within a community of scholars and experts; the productive value of an interdisciplinary theoretical-practical work; the focus on logical-argumentative holding; the deductive-reflexive dialectic between data analysis and practical applications; the placement/disposition of philosophy between theory and practice; and the philosophical methodology articulated in analytical levels, reflexive degrees, and thematic registers.

3. Around politics' metamorphoses and the contemporary focus on recognition

Certainly, Sartori's historical-linguistic analysis and Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics can go at the same pace. Indeed, we cannot do otherwise here, because it is only by combining the two approaches that I can defend and give value to the analysis I will develop. This concerns the theme of recognition and the philosophical key through which Ikeda's contribution to contemporary political theory will be introduced. First, I endorse the idea that any contemporary political research needs to take greater account of the social dimension than research of the past did, especially considering the centrality that the problem concerning recognition has assumed today, both in the daily life and in the field of scientific research. It is on this new axis of the close link between the political and the social sphere that the relationship between politics and religion must be revisited. It is at the same time a matter of political and social order and an anthropological question. Of some relevance is how the definition of *politics* has been expressed, both in descriptive and prescriptive perspectives since ancient times. Aristotle, in *Politics*, observes: We ought, moreover, to know the form of government which is best suited to states in general; for political writers, although they have excellent ideas, are often unpractical. We should consider not only what form of government is best, but also what is possible and what is easily attainable by all (Pol., IV, 1, 1288 b 21).

Aristotle argues that a science of politics must determine the best form of government in the absolute sense as well as the best form of government under specific conditions. Thus, political science has a double commitment: first, to describe the form of an *ideal* state (Plato's *Republic* is a utopia in this sense), and, second, to determine the best *possible* form of state within certain due conditions (Aristotle's *Politics* goes in this direction). It was during the Medieval period that the dialectic between religion and politics most influenced political life as well as religion, resulting in the intersection of the domains. Hegel's idea of a perfect and accomplished state as a God on Earth expresses the descriptive and prescriptive unification of politics and religion. However, this synthetic grid is as schematic as it is misleading. It does not allow us to precisely focus on the historical figure of the relationship between the social and political spheres, or between the individual and ideal horizons. Within this context, Sartori is of great help. To him, Machiavelli, not Aristotle discovered politics. According to Sartori, by speaking of *zoon politikón*, Aristotle was expressing the Greek conception of life, a conception that made the *polis* the constitutive unity and totality of human existence. Thus, Greeks did not see in political life and politics a part or aspect of their life; they saw the entirety of life as political life. Political life was all in ancient Greece, both the *polis* and the human essence (see Sartori, 1987, p. 241). Actually, *zoon politikón* defines not politics but the human being as human being, and this politics was already more sociological-anthropological than political.

It was with the fall of the Greek *polis* that the notion of politics was born. It started an historical-cultural transformation that was destined to articulate politics into two new dimensions: the political-juridical (defined within Roman thought) and the political-theological (defined within Christianity). Politics became theological, first by conforming itself to the Christian vision of the world, then through the long dialects between the Empire and the Papacy and finally through the scission between Catholicism and Protestantism (see *Ib.*, p. 246). Historically, only Machiavellian politics has emerged as a fully-differentiated reality from ethics and religion. In fact, it is in his *The Prince* that we apprehend the following:

And you have to understand this that a prince, especially a new one, cannot observe all those things for which men are esteemed, being often forced, in order to maintain the state, to act contrary to fidelity, friendship, humanity, and religion. (*The Prince* [1513], Cap. XVIII - Concerning the way in which princes should keep faith). An equally important passage, dense in theoretical-speculative, cultural and practical-political implications comes from John Locke. He was the first to thematise the individual in politics and political philosophy.

If the contractualistic modern doctrine formulated the first idea of society, then it is equally true that Locke introduced the idea of a social contract as created by individuals. This is how Locke gives operative function to the notion of people, theorising at the same time the concepts of right and majority rule (see Sartori, 1987, p. 248). It is within this historical-doctrinal and discursive dimension that I place that important political theory of recognition, focalised by Charles Taylor in the early 1990s and connected to Rousseau (while it lies between Locke and Rousseau). Today, the theme of recognition is pervasive and fundamental. Taylor's observations at the beginning of *Politics of Recognition* remain true:

A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for *recognition*. The need, it can be argued, is one of the driving forces behind nationalist movements in politics. And the demand comes to the fore in a number of ways in today's politics, on behalf of minority or "subaltern" groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of "multiculturalism" (Taylor, 1992, p. 25).

A political theory must consider and thematise the problem of recognition, and it is precisely in this manner that the anthropological conception assumes its centrality in political research. Questions of the nature of man and what constitutes, favours and determines the emancipator dimension of the man become salient. The theme of recognition goes hand-in-hand with the theme of the dialectic of recognition, which is one with the emancipator process of becoming a person because as individuals we are born but as people we must become. In *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction*, Simon Thompson underlines how Western political-social life has been strongly characterised by a series of *struggles for recognition* since the mid-20th-century. Civil rights movements, women's movements, peace movements, green movements and gender movements are still in progress and still under logic of progressive/regressive dialectics due to the expansion of democratisation, global citizenship and a culture of human rights. While the vertical shift in the balance of power goes from the masses to individuals, horizontally, political culture is translating from ideas and perspectives referring to class, nation and distribution, to ideas and perspectives schematising culture, identity, differences and similarities. Together with scholars like Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, Thompson interprets this metamorphosis as the direct result of the rise of the question of recognition at all levels of the public and political spheres (see Thompson, 2006, p. 3). Taylor distinguishes three kinds of recognition, expressed respectively in the politics of universalism (*recognition as respect*), the politics of difference (*recognition as esteem*) and the private relation context (*recognition as love*). Reversibly, for Robert Brandom, who interprets recognition as a 'normative attitude', it essentially constitutes a social achievement (Brandom, 2007, p. 136). In comparison, Taylor's view seems to be more comprehensive, as it is mirrored in the varied forms of research developed on recognition by different disciplinary perspectives (e.g. anthropology, ethnology, psychology, sociology, politics, philosophy and peace studies). Paul Ricoeur's work on recognition draws on all these many contributions. In fact, his *The Course of Recognition* (2004) not only summarises the different, main uses of the concept of recognition (recognition as identification, recognising oneself and mutual recognition), but also represents a philosophical synthesis realised between cultural anthropology and ethnology, psychology and psychoanalysis, sociology and ethics. In addition, this synthesis puts at the basis of this general philosophy an anthropological-philosophical conception. It is a conception of the human being as *homo capax* that has at its core the idea of dialectics of recognition as the key element of personal emancipation and realisation. This anthropological philosophy offers essential theoretical elements for a political theory that wants to define recognition in its general terms (that is, in cultural, social and political terms) with an appropriate conception of the human being as a universal reference. It is within this theoretical-speculative context that Daisaku Ikeda's work finds prominence.

4. Daisaku Ikeda's interpretation of the concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* and its theoretical-practical consequences for political science

Ikeda's philosophical perspective on politics and political science is deeply related to a humanism based on Buddhism, and more specifically to Nichiren's (1222-1282) reinterpretation of the Lotus Sutra. This reinterpretation underlines that all people have equal potential for spiritual enlightenment. Ikeda's following adagio is well-known, significantly reflecting an emancipator conception of the individual and full of practical, moral and even political implications: 'A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind'. *Humanrevolution* is the key term used by Ikeda to illustrate the process of spiritual, moral, social and human emancipation: from egotism to altruism, from spiritual weakness to strength, from fear to active social commitment.

It is something that actively involves all aspects of human life. Ikeda's philosophy of action clearly expresses a specific religious view as well as a general approach to life and society, as is demonstrated by Soka Gakkai International (SGI) and its varied commitments. Currently, Ikeda is the honorary president of this non-governmental organisation, with official ties to the United Nations (it is an organisation linking 12 million people in about 200 countries and areas of the world). According to the principles of active humanism, SGI's activities are varied and extensive, focusing in particular on the three main thematic areas of peace, culture and education. Ikeda's doctrinal, theoretical and practical research and work mirrors this specific logic or view of a humanistic religion in action, of an active humanism that conceives human emancipation by transforming sufferings, developing inner power and perfecting society.

It is under this perspective that the reasons behind Ikeda's determination to found the Japanese Kōmeitō Party in 1964, which is still operating, must be re-evaluated. My interest is focused on Ikeda's doctrinal and theoretical re-interpretation of the Japanese Buddhist concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* (literally, 'the wondrous fusion of the sovereign and the Buddha', 'the harmonious union between Government and Buddhism'; more extensively, 'the ideal/harmonious fusion of politics and religion'; here, *ō* means *politics*, *butsu* means *Buddhism*, *myō* means *ideal* and *gō* means *union*). By reconsidering Ikeda's work on politics, a new approach emerges based upon ethics and education on the one hand and global citizenship and people's commitment on the other. Thus, even here we find the dialectics of recognition both as a direct and strong expression of political or political-social sensitivity and as a path for personal emancipation and realisation. It is under this perspective that the concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* is becoming more related to the personal dimension.

Ōbutsumyōgō thematises the relationship between the religious sphere and the political sphere: In what way do we have to interpret the nature of this relationship? Is it religious-rhetorical or religious-ideological? For Ikeda, it simply regards the idea that politics should be based on and inspired by a religious philosophy (specifically by Buddhism; see Ikeda, 1968, p. 16). It is not a principle that preaches the unity of state and church, but, similar to much of Christianity in the United States and Europe or Communism in the Soviet Union, it indicates the idealness and necessity of a philosophy-based politics or, rather, of a politics based on religious and philosophical inspirational motives and ideas. In fact, Communism in the Soviet Union virtually played a religious role for decades. Even the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, who is heavily quoted by Ikeda, defines Communism as a 'religion without God' or a 'Pagan religion'. For Ikeda, all nations have religious elements or principles as a base for their respective political philosophies, even when religion remains separate from their public administrations and institutions. Even this represents a manner to the potential function and application of *Ōbutsu myōgō* (see *Ib.*). While the 1964 essay *Politics and Religion* is Ikeda's main work on politics, *Religion and Political Ideology* (1963), which prefaces the first volume of his *Complete Works* (see *Ib.*, pp. 1-12), is an important introductory prospectus and a synthesis of his perspective concerning politics, philosophy and religion. It is at the same time a work inspired and motivated by his personal religious engagement, a work linked to the cultural and religious mission of Soka Gakkai and a work finalised in 1963 as the constitution of the nascent Kōmeitō Party. More than fifty years later, not only are these works still important for theoretical and historical-speculative reasons, but they remain a doctrinal reference for Kōmeitō's politics. Originally, the Kōmei-kai (Fair Council) and the Kōmei Seiji Renmei (League of Fair Statesmen) were two of Soka Gakkai's political branches. They were subsequently dissolved in September 1964, leaving their place to an independent political reality: the Kōmeitō. Kōmeitō refers to Soka Gakkai's religious ideals but is independent from it, as Ikeda is the founder but not its guide and leader. The short 1963 paper is a critical work directed against Japanese politics, intended to be detached from the people, seen as auto-referential and corrupted. It even speaks against a certain idea of politics which is predominant today. It is distant from the ethical vision of Plato (who was a philosophers' policy defender) and from the conceptions of Aristotle (who considered humanity itself as political). It is even antithetical even to Machiavelli's conclusions, according to which not only is man the only law governing political phenomena, but also a politician's task turns directly to the complex matter of human nature for a wise, free and prosperous government. In this paper, Ikeda clearly assumes that citizens' point of view, not the abstract point of view of religion or politics. He wants to speak as one among those citizens who is deeply concerned about Japan's current politics (see *Ib.*, p. 3). It is a politics that, because it ignores the man, cannot be defined as politics.

Nazi Germany demonstrated the inhuman tendency of politics by defining it as the *fundamental form of national existence* and by realising a project of state or power as 'God on Earth', finalised to rule the people. Similarly, one of the major traits of today's democracies dominance over the people, even though they are non-totalitarian states.

Under the current international situation, politics has become a monster, leading man to the brink of his own annihilation. No political instrument has been found to prevent this from happening (see *Ib.*, p. 4). On the one hand, modern politics is facing the contradiction that social prosperity does not always equate to individual happiness; on the other, modern politics must solve this contradiction through the exercise of political technique under an ideal perspective, that is, a philosophical conception or positive ideology. But politics is lacking this ideal or ideology. Only the political *technique* is emphasised. Technocrats without ideas are considered great politicians (see *Ib.*, p. 7). In Japan, discredit against the political world has reached such a level of accumulation that mistrust is predominant. It is now thought that politics is synonymous with fraud or personal business (see *Ib.*, p. 6). Moreover, the nation is still paying for some persistent vestiges of feudalism, so it is still thought that politicians are somehow above the government.

Starting from the ethical-philosophical point of view that politics is man added to technique, Ikeda develops a perspective that remains as particular and specific of his political conception. Naturally, *philosophy* and *ideal* are not to be understood as specific political ideologies or programs but rather as a general philosophical vision. Both in the practical-moral sense expressed in Plato's *Republic* and in the religious sense expressed in the following Nichiren axiom (formulated by quoting *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*): 'Since the Law is wonderful, the person is worthy of respect; since the person is worthy of respect, the land [where he is living] is sacred' (Nichiren, *Nanjo dono gohenji*, 1281). This is expressive of Nichiren's ideal. *Law* means a basic principle, an idea or a philosophy. The statement assumes the following meaning: Since an idea is excellent, a politician who realises that idea is excellent. If the politician is excellent, the country or society is prosperous and peaceful (see Ikeda 1968, pp. 6-7).

For Ikeda, politics without an ideal or philosophical faith is like floating weeds: It cannot help people to become happy. *Ideal*, *ideology*, *philosophy* and *faith* are valid as synonyms, not merely for the semantic flexibility of the terms maturing through the many communicative and cultural uses but for the strong communion of religious and political thought in Ikeda's vision. On the one hand, Nichiren's Buddhism is a flexible philosophy and a practical-pragmatic approach to politics and society. On the other hand, the history of both political philosophy and political history have endowed an ethical and philosophical course to politics (intended as a discipline or technique). Politics received a patrimony of practical wisdom, motivations and values that are, in some respects, approachable to a religious and moral discourse (with specific collective liturgies and rituals, symbols and emancipatory discourses on self-dedication, self-sacrifice and so on). In the final part of his paper, Ikeda introduces the Buddhist concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō*. It is introduced as a key concept as well as a bridge concept because, by insisting on the classic philosophical-practical idea of politics for the man, Ikeda tries to intertwine and merge a Western philosophical perspective with an Eastern religious vision. Politics is the man, he says. Every political structure or law is created by man for the people. We cannot think that any improvement of this structure will directly lead to the prosperity of society or to the happiness of each citizen. Here lies an error committed by reformists. The happiness of individuals must be based on the human revolution realized by a true religion (see *Ib.*, p. 7). The consequence of individual human revolution is political as well as religious, and, if widespread, it becomes a source of personal well-being and social improvement. In reference to the world of politics, human revolution means 'restoring humanity in politics'. This is something that must be understood in a general, comprehensive way. Buddhism, in fact, by placing itself in the middle of spiritualism and materialism, can express a new political vision that embraces, both the spiritualistic and materialistic bases of capitalism and communism. A similar comprehensive logic can be applied to the contemporary post-capitalist and post-communist scenario. A peaceful and prosperous society can be created by a policy inspired by an authentic religion that rejects the extremes of only spirit or only matter¹.

5. Conclusion

The same dialectics of recognition are found as instruments of political practice and as a way for personal and social emancipation.

1 'The free world has a capitalist system based on spiritualism, while the communist world, a communist system based on materialism. These two great ideologies are only parts of truth seen from the Buddhist outlook on life. In the light of Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis principle, a philosophy that can lead both materialism and spiritualism must be born to break the deadlock in the world of thought. This is a great philosophy of life, the essence of Oriental Buddhism' (Ikeda, 1968, p. 8).

It is under this perspective that the concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* becomes more related to personal emancipation and spiritual realisation. This is not to say that politics is strictly a part of religious life and experience, but rather that the dialectics of recognition via human revolution represent an additional element for that generalised emancipator perspective that is an unavoidable object of research and reflection, both for social-political theory and for the political sciences.

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