Ricoeur Comments On Altered Hermeneutics

By RICHARD BEST

The central problem of Christian religious language has been one of the relationship of the two testaments. Christian exegesis differs from the Greek tradition in that it claims to be based not on allegorical interpretation but rather on historical fact; it differs from the Jewish tradition in that it originated in the person of Jesus, not in a text.

THIS WAS THE essential hermeneutical problem within Christianity as presented by Paul Ricoeur of the University of Paris in the first Rockwell Lecture of 1963.

Tuesday night, M. Ricoeur began by opposing two definitions of "hermeneutic," the technical definition of "a rule of interpretation of a text" and Aristotle's usage of the term as "a reflection on the science of language." He then showed why this "theory of interpretation" became a problem to the Church Fathers and to trace the development of hermeneutics from the patristic era to the Reformation.

THE GREEK FATHERS had to employ a unique hermeneutic because of Christianity's intrinsic differences from both Stoicism and Judaism. They were, however, attached to the Greek method and made use of the Old Testament as a promise of the consummation of the Christ event.

Christian hermeneutics makes a re-interpretation of Scripture and proceeds to a new understanding of life and reality.

WEDNESDAY EVENING Ricoeur viewed the external critiques of religion made by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Formerly, the meaning of religion was confined within Christianity; in the nineteenth century religion itself was hit.

Marx saw religion as an aspect of the class struggle; Nietzsche believed religion to be the revenge of the weak against the strong.

In response to such attacks, Christianity had either to yield or to radicalize faith. The role of Christian hermeneutics became a text long separated in time from the modern age, only in modernity was the uniqueness of the Christian proclamation understood.

ALTHOUGH THE OLD hermeneutic circle of "I have to understand in order to believe and to believe in order to understand" remains, the Gospel can be interpreted truthfully for today because of the iconoclasm of nineteenth century atheists.