PAUL RICŒUR AND THE RENEWAL OF CHRISTIAN TRADITION

INTRODUCTION

There are already a number of excellent studies that rightly detect the rich import and relevance of Paul Ricœur's thought for understanding the nature and task of theology.[1] These studies, however, are restricted to an analysis of his philosophical writings, and so confined that contribution to his philosophy. His colleagues at Chicago such as Langdon Gilkey and David Tracy, who first appropriated his thought for theology, found in it a general philosophical hermeneutical foundation on which to ground and apply regional biblical hermeneutics.[2] Propelled by the pioneering work of Mark Wallace, current scholarship argues that Ricœur's philosophical reflections, especially on hermeneutics and narrative, can be used on an *ad hoc* basis to clarify the nature of post-liberal theology initiated by Karl Barth and pursued by proponents of the Yale School such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.[3] The terms of this debate, however, have been defined by and restricted to Ricœur's *philosophical* contribution to the task of theology. Yet in the 1960s, precisely at a time when he was reflecting on and formulating his philosophical hermeneutics, he devoted a number of articles to theology and theological hermeneutics. Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, but also Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Gerhard Ebeling, and Jurgen Moltmann, are frequently cited in his

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[1] Mary Gerhart, "Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutical Theory as a Resource for Theological Reflection," *The Thomist* 39, n.3 (1975): 496-527; David Klemm, *The Hermeneutical Theory of Paul Ricœur: A Constructive Analysis* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983); Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricœur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990); Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricœur Between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[2] Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1969); David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

[3] Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricœur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990); Dan R. Stiver, *Theology After Ricœur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricœur Between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

writings during this period of intellectual ferment. By consulting the entire range of Ricœur's corpus, which includes many untranslated and less well-known articles, I will reappraise Ricœur's contribution to theology. This paper aims to present not only a broader and deeper appreciation of Ricœur's distinct contribution to theology, but also suggests that his contribution uniquely offers an understanding of the nature and task of theology that is sensitive to the 'linguistic' and 'cultural turn' that characterizes much contemporary thought and is responsive to a 'post-secular age' that is enjoying the so-called return of religion. For Ricœur's theological reflections offer a complex and sophisticated approach that at once retrieves a post-Enlightenment appreciation of religious tradition on the one hand, and yet insists on the ongoing creative appropriation and interpretation of religious symbols, myths, narratives, and texts for the purposes of personal, social, and institutional transformation.

I. CHICAGO OR YALE?

The appropriation of Ricœur's philosophical hermeneutics for the task of theology by David Tracy, his colleague at Chicago, sparked a vigorous debate in theology between the 'Chicago school' and 'Yale school', which colored the reception of Ricœur's thought in North America.[4] The central point of contention was the priority to which Ricœur seemed to give to a fundamental philosophical anthropology and a general hermeneutics in approaching the Biblical text.[5] The theological implication of Ricœur's philosophical anthropology and hermeneutics,

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[4] See especially David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975). For an interpretation of Tracy's misappropriation of Ricœur, see Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricœur Between Theology and Philosophy*. Ricœur himself, to my knowledge, only explicitly refers to Tracy once in his works, drawing from his notion of the 'classic'. The use of Tracy in this context does not clearly settle Ricœur's own position as it is more a passing allusion. See Paul Ricœur, "Le soi dans le miroir des Écritures," in *Amour et justice* (Paris: Éditions Point, 2008), 50. For the 'New Yale Theology' and its misappropriation of Ricœur, especially by Hans Frei, see Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricœur, and the New Yale Theology*, 96-103.
[5] For an extended analysis of the debates between the Chicago school and the Yale school, see Vanhoozer, "A literal Gospel?" in *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, 148-189.

then, was that biblical hermeneutics became simply a regional instance or a particular case of a general hermeneutics. Hans Frei, for instance, cites Ricœur as exemplary of the position where "biblical narrative becomes a 'regional' instance of the universally valid pattern of interpretation"[6] and Tracy's fundamental theology, Frei added, offered a "precise regional application of Ricœur's general hermeneutic", such that Jesus became merely an 'allegory' of *universal* meaningfulness.[7] George Lindbeck, Frei's colleague at Yale, associates Ricœur's hermeneutics with the 'experiential-expressive' model aligned with a tradition of 'liberal' theology from Schleiermacher through to Otto and *not* the 'cultural-linguistic' model that he endorses.[8] The Yale School led by Frei, Lindbeck, and others, unlike their counterparts at Chicago, sought to render the Bible intelligible on its own terms without situating it into a general theory about the religious dimension of human experience. In recent years, there have been attempts to revise this reception history, by arguing that Tracy's interest in academic relevance outweighed the integrity of theological identity in Ricoeur's thought, and for that reason theologians of both schools came to misinterpret Ricœur. These more recent readings of Ricœur align him closer to Barth, and therefore friendlier to the 'cultural-linguistic' model of religion and post-liberal theology that has come to be associated with the Yale School.[9]

These scholarly works, however, particularly in the English literature, have a narrow acquaintance with Ricœur's writings and the picture presented thereby is one-sided, focused for the most part on his philosophical contribution to theology. The early interpretation and

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[6] Hans Frei, "The 'Literal' Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch of Will It Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 44.

[7] Ibid., 47.

[8] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 136n5.

[9] For example, Mark I. Wallace, "The World of the Text: Theological Hermeneutics in the Thought of Karl Barth and Paul Ricœur," in *Union Seminary Quarterly* 41, n.1 (1986): 1-15; Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricœur, and the New Yale Theology*; Blundell, *Paul Ricœur Between Theology and Philosophy*.

appropriation of Ricœur by theologians in America focused especially on *The Symbolism of Evil*.

When Gilkey draws on Ricœur it is *The Symbolism of Evil*, which is cited and he reminds the

reader that it is part of a larger project that begins from the essential 'eidetic' structure of the will

and moves towards concrete actual human experience through a hermeneutics of religious

symbols.[10] Tracy himself cites Ricœur's *The Symbolism of Evil* and Gilkey's *Naming the*

Whirlwind among others as representative of "the dominant criteriological concerns of an

investigation of various symbol-systems…[that] show the relative experiential adequacy of one

symbol-system (e.g. the Christian) both to the meaning and truth of religious theism and to the

meaningfulness of this particular symbol-system for the human situation."[11] Tracy demonstrates

a much broader acquaintance with Ricœur's works, but it remains tied to his earlier thought and

confined to articles and works in the English-language. Ricœur himself underlines that *The*

Symbolism of Evil was written within the framework of a *philosophy* of the will, as he sought to

describe experiences such as guilt, bondage, alienation and sin in religious terms.[12]

By considering Ricœur's overall corpus, which includes not only his 'philosophy of

religion', but also his lesser-known and untranslated 'theological writings', this paper offers an

alternative reading of Ricœur's relevance to theology from the ones made by both the Chicago

theologians who first introduced him and the Yale theologians who critiqued them. For it is odd

to categorize and reduce Tracy (and therefore Ricœur), as Lindbeck does, to the 'experiential-

expressivist' model of religion, and while I agree with the assessment made by Ricœur scholars

such as Mark Wallace that Ricœur can be seen more in line with a post-liberal theology from

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[10] Gilkey exclusively cites Ricœur's *The Symbolism of Evil*. See Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1969), 279n20; also 249n1, 269n9-10, 274n13, 281n23, 290n35, 391n16, 422-423n4, 431n8, 434n12. It is noteworthy that Gilkey's book concludes with a chapter entitled "Christian Discourse about God", and it is preceded by a chapter entitled "The Dimension of Ultimacy in Secular Experience."

[11] Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, 80.

[12] Paul Ricœur, "From Existentialism to the Philosophy of Language," in *Criterion* 10 (1971): 14.

Barth through to the Yale School, I wish to complicate this analysis. Instead, I argue that Ricœur's understanding of and contribution to the nature and task of theology closely follows what Gerhard Ebeling called the '*process of the word'*.[13] It neither situates Ricœur's religious thought within a general anthropology and a general hermeneutics, nor does it reduce it to the proclamation of the Word. The 'process of the word,' rather, affirms the priority of the Word of God, acknowledges the embeddedness of its proclamation in language and narrative, recognizes the necessity for hermeneutics in interpreting Christian symbols and narratives, and re-interprets them in light of Christian ethics. The following section, then, will be devoted to the fundamental task of expositing Ricœur's theological method and his basic understanding of the nature and task of Christian theology.

II. THE NATURE AND TASK OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

i. Karl Barth and the Priority of the Word of God

It is often noted that Ricœur sought to separate his philosophical writings from his theological writings throughout his career. It even led one scholar to speak of Ricœur's 'double life'.[14] Nowhere is this dual program more explicitly enunciated than in *Soi-même comme un autre*, which in Ricoeur's own words pursues an 'autonomous philosophical discourse'.[15] It is well-known that the original Gifford Lectures delivered in 1985-86 included two studies on biblical hermeneutics, entitled "*Le soi dans le miroir des Écritures*" and "*Le sujet mandaté. O my prophetic soul !*,"[16] so as to remain faithful to the founder's will for the lectures to be on 'natural

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[13] Paul Ricœur, "Contribution d'une réflexion sur le langage à une théologie de la parole," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 18 (1968): 334.
[14] Blundell, *Paul Ricœur Between Theology and Philosophy*, 51.
[15] Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 36. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 24.
[16] Both lectures can be found in Paul Ricœur, *Amour et justice* (Paris: Éditions Points, 2008). An English translation of "*Le sujet mandaté. O my Prophetic Soul !*" can be found in Paul Ricœur, "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narrative of the Prophetic Vocation," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans.

theology'. They, however, were removed from *Soi-même comme un autre* to remain faithful to

the separation of philosophy and theology that Ricœur had maintained throughout his life.

He writes in *Soi-même comme un autre*:

> Les dix études qui composent cet ouvrage supposent la mise entre parenthèses, consciente et résolue, des convictions qui me rattachent à la foi biblique. Je ne prétends pas qu'au niveau profond des *motivations* ces convictions soient restées sans effet sur l'intérêt que je porte à tel ou tel problème, voire même à l'ensemble de la problématique du soi. Mais je pense n'avoir offert à mes lecteurs que des *arguments* qui n'engagent pas la position du lecteur, que celle-ci soit de rejet, d'acceptation ou de mise en suspens, à l'égard de la foi biblique. On observera que cet ascétisme de l'argument, qui marque, je crois, toute mon œuvre philosophique, conduit à un type de philosophie dont la nomination effective de Dieu est absente et où la question de Dieu, en tant que question philosophiques, reste elle-même tenue dans un suspens qu'on peut dire agnostique, comme un témoignent les dernières lignes de la dixième étude.
> The ten studies that make up this work assume the bracketing, conscious and resolute, of the convictions that bind me to biblical faith. I do not claim that at the deep level of motivations these convictions remain without any effect on the interest that I take in this or that problem, even in the overall problematic of the self. But I think I have presented to my readers arguments alone, which do not assume any commitment from the reader to reject, accept, or suspend anything with regard to biblical faith. It will be observed that this asceticism of the argument, which marks, I believe, all my philosophical work, leads to a type of philosophy from which the actual mention of God is absent and in which the question of God, as a philosophical question, itself remains in a suspension that could be called agnostic, as the final lines of the tenth study will attest.[17]

On the one hand, his philosophical writings are guarded from a crypto-theology such that

philosophy retains its own autonomous validity claims, but equally important, biblical faith is

guarded from a crypto-philosophy. Ricœur puts this separation between philosophy and

theology most succinctly when he was asked by an interviewer, "Would you accept being

introduced as a 'Protestant philosopher'?", to which Ricœur responds, "Certainly not. But

'philosopher and Protestant', yes!"[18] And even though Ricœur succeeded Paul Tillich's chair as

John Nuveen Professor at the University of Chicago, a position that was devoted to

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David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 262-275. To my knowledge, "*Le soi dans le miroir des Écritures*" remains untranslated.

[17] Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 36. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 24.

[18] Paul Ricœur, "Paul Ricœur: la foi du philosophe," *Le Christianisme au XXème Siècle* n.697 (July 11-24, 1999): 6.

'philosophical theology', Ricœur found the title bizarre as it contradicted his own view regarding

the separation between philosophy and theology.[19]

While it is well-known that Ricœur sought to distinguish and separate his philosophical

reflections and writings from his theological thought and works, it is less explored Ricœur's

deeper *theological* motivations for keeping them separate. I argue that the independence and

separation of philosophy and theology is grounded in Ricœur's Reformed tradition and critical

retrieval of Barthian theology in particular. "The 1930s to 1960s," Ricœur acknowledges, "were

massively dominated by Barth."[20] The emergence of Barthian theology within French Protestant

thought was due in large part to the work of Pierre Maury. Introduced to Barth by W.A. Visser't

Hooft in 1925, they fast became good friends and intellectual conversation partners. Barth's

doctrine of predestination, in particular, was much indebted to the work of Maury. In an

extended excursus in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth acknowledges this debt when he writes:

> The Christological meaning and basis of the doctrine of election have been brought out
> afresh in our own time, and with an impressive treatment of Jesus Christ as the original
> and decisive object of the divine election and rejection. This service has been rendered
> by Pierre Maury in the fine lecture which he gave on 'Election et foi', at the *Congrès
> internationale de théologie calviniste* in Geneva, 1936…That Congrès dealt exclusively
> with the problem of predestination, and its records will easily show how instructive was
> Maury's contribution, and how it stood out from the other papers.[21]

In turn, Maury worked hard to spread the new insights of Barthian theology to the French

context. He asked Visser't Hooft to write an article on Barth that would introduce his thought to

France and submit it to the journal *Foi et vie* where he was assistant editor.[22] Maury himself

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[19] Paul Ricœur, *La critique et la conviction. Entretien avec François Azouvi et Marc de Launay* (Paris: Éditions Calmann-Lévy, 1995), 80. Paul Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 49.

[20] Paul Ricœur, "L'écart," *Le christianisme au XXe siècle* n.37 (October 14, 1985): 8.

[21] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, pt. 2 *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 154-155.

[22] See W.A. Visser't Hooft, "Le message de Karl Barth," *Foi et vie* 36 (February 1928): 915-921. He also wrote a more extensive article introducing Barth's thought in France, which was a translation of his lecture that he gave at King's College London and in Toronto. See W.A. Visser't Hooft, "Introduction to Karl Barth," *Canadian Journal*

translated selected writings by Barth into French under the title, *Parole de Dieu et parole humaine* in 1933.[23] Together, Maury and Visser't Hooft invited and hosted Barth's visit in 1934 to Paris at the Sorbonne and at the Faculté protestante de théologie, where he lectured in front of luminaries such as Jacques Martin, Gabriel Marcel, and Etienne Gilson. Maury's attempt to revive the Confessing Church in France, then, was shaped and formed by the new dialectical theology of Karl Barth.

While Ricœur, to my knowledge, never explicitly refers to Maury, he unquestionably exerted considerable influence on him.[24] Maury reared the next generation in French Protestant thought, including André Philip, Roger Mehl, Pierre Burgelin, Jean Bosc, and Jacques Maury, many whom were Ricœur's teachers and colleagues. That generation led by Mehl, however, sought to enlarge the role of philosophy with respect to Christian faith. Ricœur notes in an extended review of Mehl's *La condition du philosophe chrétien* (1947), that it was "le premier grand ouvrage de langue française où la nouvelle theologie reformée s'affronte aux pretentions et à la vocation de la philosophie [the first great book in French where the new Reformed theology confronts the vocation of philosophy]" and that "L'intérêt principal de ce livre réside en ceci qu'il tente de dépasser la phase de crises et de rupture qui a été celle de la première génération barthienne et qu'il fonde une attitude positive à l'égard de la philosophie et de la culture précisément sur une theologie radicalement christocentrique. [The main interest of this book resides in that it attempts to move beyond the phase of crisis and rupture that was of the first

of Religious Thought 8 (January-February 1931):37-51; W.A. Visser't Hooft, "Introduction à Karl Barth," *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* (July-August 1931).

[23] Karl Barth, *Parole de Dieu et parole humaine*, trans. Pierre Maury and Auguste Lavanchy (Paris: Société Commerciale d'Edition et de Librairie, 1933).

[24] Indeed, one of Ricœur's first publications in 1936 was to *Le Semeur*, and he also contributed to *Foi et vie*, both journals where Maury served as editor. See for instance, Paul Ricœur, "Notes sur les rapports de la philosophe et du christianisme," *Le Semeur* 38, n.9 (July 1936): 541-557; Paul Ricœur, "Discerner pour agir," *Le Semeur* 48, n.7-8 (1950): 431-452; Paul Ricœur, "Responsabilité et culpabilité au plan communautaire," *Le Semeur* n.4 (1958): 3-6; Paul Ricœur, "La question de l'« humanisme chrétien »," *Foi et vie* n.4 (July 1951): 323-330.
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generation of Barthians and towards a positive attitude regarding philosophy and culture precisely from a radically Christocentric theology.]"[25] While Ricœur is much indebted to the insights of Barth and the first generation of French Barthians, he fully belongs to this second generation of Barthians that probe the philosophical dimensions from a Christocentric theology.

What Ricœur shares with Barth and the first generation of Barthians in France was a rejection of the liberal theology that preceded it from Schleiermacher onward, which had argued for the appropriateness of Christianity to the modern age by seeking a rapprochement with wider culture by employing modern methods in historical studies, culture, philosophy, and biblical criticism. If liberal theology built up and built in presuppositions of historical understanding and research that could serve as a basis for theology as a universal science, Ricœur in agreement with Barth argued for the priority of 'listening to the Word of God'.[26] Ricœur writes, echoing Barth, "If the believer speaks of God, it is because he speaks first of the Word of God."[27] And again, "En ce sens je reste fidèle à la position du problème théologique par Karl Barth. L'origine de la foi est dans la sollicitation de l'homme par l'objet de la foi. [I am in accord with the way in which Karl Barth poses the theological problem. The origin of faith lies in the solicitation of man by the object of faith.]"[28] In other words, the central task of theology is neither an answer to the anthropological or epistemological question, 'How is human knowledge of revelation possible in general?', nor is it an historical-critical approach that commits the intentional fallacy

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[25] Paul Ricœur; "La condition du philosophe chrétien," in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994), 235.

[26] Paul Ricœur, "Le philosophe en face de la confession des péchés," *La Confiance* n.1-2 (1957): 25. See also Paul Ricœur, "La question de l'humanisme chrétien," *Foi et vie* n.4 (July 1951): 326. Importantly, Barth begins his *Church Dogmatics* with a section entitled, "The Doctrine of the Word of God."

[27] Paul Ricœur, "La critique de la religion," *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d'Etudes* n.4-5 (June 1964): 5.

[28] Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 504. Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 523.

of searching for the authorial intent of the historical writers of the text, but rather it is the response to the Word of God spoken to this or that person.[29]

Theology, for Barth and Ricœur, presupposes the community of the Church and strives to understand and critique the Word of God that is revealed in Christ and mediated by Scripture.[30] It is in this respect that scholars who interpret Ricœur closer in line with Barth and the Yale School of theology are correct. Like Barth, Ricœur holds that theology is a function of the Church, which criticizes and revises language about God not by foreign or external principles, but by a principle peculiar to the Church. Moreover, the 'world of the biblical text', the written Word of God, is the basic theological source for the Christian community. As George Lindbeck has written, "Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extratextual categories."[31] And Mark Wallace, the first scholar to observe Ricœur's close affinity to Barth, has stated, "For both thinkers, the world of the text is primarily not the Bible's *Sitz im Leben* uncovered by historical criticism, but its *Sitz im Wort* that confronts the listener as the reliable Word of God."[32] Their common concern was that extrabiblical material – Platonism, Aristotelianism, historicism, existentialism, phenomenology, general hermeneutics etc. - would be inserted into the biblical world and become the basic framework for interpretation. Both Ricœur and Barth sought to let the text speak for itself without external impositions and presuppositions.

But this understanding of theology does not preclude the possible import of philosophy. The very language and meaning of the *Word of God*, for instance, is clarified through

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[29] Ricœur's distinction between theology as a response to a question raised by philosophy and as a response to a call distances himself from Paul Tillich. See Paul Ricœur, "Le soi dans le miroir des Écritures," in *Amour et justice* (Paris: Éditions Point, 2008), 46.

[30] Paul Ricœur, "Le renouvellement du problème de la philosophie chrétienne par les philosophies de l'existence," in *Le problème de la philosophie chrétienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949), 55.

[31] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 118.

[32] Wallace, "The World of the Text: Theological Hermeneutics in the Thought of Karl Barth and Paul Ricœur," 7.

contemporary linguistics. Within the field of structural linguistics, Ricœur appropriates the now well-known distinction between langue and parole. On the one hand, *langue* refers to the social institution and rules of the game of language that function by themselves. Ricœur writes, "The system of language [langue] does not have external relations; in the dictionary, a word returns from one to the others."[33] In other words, there is a closed universe of signs; the place of both a subject *who* speaks and an external referent about which something is spoken are eliminated. *Parole*, on the other hand, refers to the individual performance of language that is addressed to someone by someone. Moreover, there is a fundamental reference to and intentionality of language (parole): "to say *something* and to say *about* something."[34] Parole, then, is a deeper and more concrete dimension of linguistic analysis than langue. The word (le mot) is no longer simply a difference in a dictionary, but a moment in an *act* of parole – the word takes *life*. With this distinction in hand, Ricœur suggests that "theology seems to be on the side of the word [parole], while (structural) linguistics chose the side of language [langue]."[35] In Ricœur's estimation, structural linguistics opposes biblical theology because "as all theology of the word [parole] presupposes that language has not only a structure but a sense [sens], the sense of a word addressed by someone to someone."[36] The concept of *parole* in contemporary linguistics, then, is helpful in elucidating the affirmation that the Word of God fundamentally 'speaks' or addresses someone. By appropriating the concepts of parole and langue from contemporary linguistics, Ricœur does not so much provide a philosophical basis for a theology of the word, but rather clarifies its meaning and priority.[37] Even as Ricœur grants philosophy a more

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[33] Ricœur, "Contribution d'une réflexion sur le langage à une théologie de la parole," 337.
[34] Ibid., 342.
[35] Ibid., 337.
[36] Ibid., 338.
[37] Ricœur also seems to assess 19th century historical theology in relation to contemporary linguistic categories. He notes the distinction between synchronic language, i.e. how language is organized at a certain moment in a state of system and diachronic language, i.e. emphasis on the changes and transformations. Ricœur notes that contemporary

extensive role in his theology than Barth, it is employed on an *ad hoc* basis that must always

return to and begin with the priority of the Word of God.

III. THE NATURE AND TASK OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

i. Biblical Hermeneutics as a Moment in the 'Process of the Word'

The Word of God, for Barth, is first and immediately the revealed Word of God in Jesus

Christ and mediated by the form of the written Word of God in Scripture and the form of

Proclamation through Church preaching and sacraments. Scripture attests, then, to the revealed

Word of Jesus Christ. Insofar as contemporary Christians no longer have direct access to the

historical Jesus, contemporary Christians still have access to Christ through Scripture and

proclamation. Ricœur follows Barth, for he too emphasizes the necessary mediation of the Word

by Scripture to the human community.

Here, too, philosophy and especially philosophical hermeneutics sheds light on the nature

and task of biblical hermeneutics. On the one hand, Ricœurian hermeneutics proceeds from the

philosophical to the biblical pole; biblical hermeneutics is merely an application of general

hermeneutics insofar as it is an instance of the figures of speech and writing.[38] As Ricœur

writes: "In one sense theological hermeneutics appears as a particular case of philosophical

hermeneutics, to the extent that it contains the major categories of the latter: discourse, writing,

explanation, interpretation, distantiation, appropriation, etc."[39] Fundamental concepts in general

hermeneutics are applied to biblical hermeneutics, such that it appears subordinate and derivative

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structural linguistics tends to focus on the synchronic whereas 19th century linguistic studies focused on the diachronic. Both synchronic and diachronic language, however, fails to account for *parole*.

[38] Paul Ricœur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 89. Originally published as "Herméneutique philosophique et herméneutique biblique," in *Exégèses. Problèmes de méthode et exercices de lectures* (Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1975).

[39] Paul Ricœur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics," *Studies in Religion. Sciences religieuses* 5, n.1 (1975): 14.

of philosophy. Perhaps most importantly, in both Ricœur's general and special hermeneutics, there is an 'objectivity' of the new being projected by the text such that the reality of the world is not presented immediately through psychological intentions, but mediately through the structures of the work. The reader encounters the Bible, like any other text, as it unfolds the world of the being of the text, discloses the possible, and thereby transforms the reader. On the other hand, "theological hermeneutics presents features that are so original that the relation is gradually inverted, and theological hermeneutics finally subordinates philosophical hermeneutics to itself as its own organon… Nothing can better illustrate the 'excentric' character of theology than the very effort to 'apply' to it the general categories of hermeneutics."[40] The application of general hermeneutics, particularly the notion of the new Being and Thing of the text, to the Bible discloses that its referents are distinctly theological and *revealed*. As Wallace states, "Ricœur makes clear that he uses general hermeneutical categories only insofar as they are dialectically related to, and not in control of, actual exegetical practice…hermeneutical theory *guides* our understanding of the text while the text's unique referents of ultimacy (i.e. God, Jesus, Kingdom of God, and so on) *govern* our understanding of the Bible's meaning."[41] Thus, what begins with the application of concepts and categories from general hermeneutics to biblical hermeneutics reverses such that the priority becomes the revelation of the Word of God mediated through text to which human control and mastery are suspended. With respect to the referents of the text, philosophy thereby appears subordinate to theology.

Ricœur's emphasis on hermeneutics counters claims to unmediated revelation or religious experience. In an essay appropriately entitled "From Proclamation to Narrative", Ricœur argues

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[40] Ricœur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 90.
[41] Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricœur, and the New Yale Theology*, 42.

for "the necessity of developing the Christian kerygma in a narrative form"[42] and that there is "a requirement of narration internal to the proclamation itself."[43] Elsewhere, he writes, "it seems to me that the most striking feature of the Gospels' narrative lies in the indissociable union of the kerygmatic and the narrative aspects."[44] Christian kerygma, whatever else it is, is *necessarily* mediated through language, through symbols and narratives. He continues, "The equation we are seeking to reconstruct between a narrativized kerygma and a kerygmatized narrative seems indeed to have its rationale in the identity proclaimed between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history."[45] Rather than follow the traditional dualism between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith which itself is grounded in a strong distinction between narrative and kerygma, Ricœur brings them together so that he can say, "To say who Jesus is, is also to say who the Christ is."[46]

If the 'objective' side of revelation is always embedded in narrative, so too, the 'subjective' side of religious experience is mediated by language. The relationship between experience and language is precisely at the center of Lindbeck's famous distinction between the 'experiential-expressive' model, understood as the external expression of a common core of inner experience, and the 'cultural-linguistic' model, understood as a cultural and/or linguistic framework that structures and shapes inner human experience and understanding.[47] When Lindbeck associates Ricœur's hermeneutics with the 'experiential-expressivist' model,[48] that claim not only neglects the complexities of Ricœur's thought, but also blatantly misrepresents it. Whatever Tracy's appropriation or supposed misappropriation of Ricœur may be, surely his

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[42] Paul Ricœur, "From Proclamation to Narrative," *The Journal of Religion* 64, n.5 (October 1984): 501.
[43] Ibid., 511.
[44] Paul Ricœur, "Interpreting Narrative," in *Figuring the Sacred*, 183.
[45] Ibid., 185.
[46] Ibid., 185.
[47] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 31-41.
[48] Ibid., 136n5.

critique of Lindbeck's interpretation of Ricœur is right.[49] Ricœur leaves unanswered the question of *whether* religious experience is prior to linguistic expression, except to say *that* it is inextricably tied to language without being reducible to it. Ricœur writes, "Religious experience is not reduced certainly to religious *language*…An experience that is not *brought to language* remains blind, confused, and incommunicable. All is thus not language in religious experience, but religious experience is not without language."[50] Elsewhere he puts the point more emphatically: "For a philosophical hermeneutic, faith never appears as an immediate experience, but always as an experience articulated in a language."[51] Ricœur is clearly hesitant to elaborate on the nature of 'religious experience' and instead prefers to speak of the 'textuality of faith'.[52] The religious faith of a community as well as the faith-experience of the individual is necessarily bound up with its language and text. It is to Ricœur's understanding of the nature of hermeneutics, then, which I now turn.

ii. The Task of Biblical Hermeneutics: From Demystification and Demythologization to Reinterpretation

In "La critique de la religion"[53] and "Le langage de la foi"[54], both published in *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d'Etudes* in June 1964, the two essays are intended by Ricœur to form a pair involving two moments within the task of hermeneutics. Firstly, it involves a movement of 'destruction', the negative moment of the critique of religion. Secondly, it involves a movement of reinterpretation. The two are inextricably linked, but for heuristic purposes, they are kept separate here.

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[49] David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology," *The Thomist* 49, n.3 (July 1985): 463.
[50] Paul Ricœur, "Politique et symbolique," in *Intuition à la pratique de la théologie*. Vol. I, *Introduction* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994), 37; cf. Ricœur, "Naming God," in *Figuring the Sacred*, 218.
[51] Paul Ricœur, "La philosophie et la spécificité du langage religieux," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 55, n.1 (1975): 25.
[52] Ricœur, "Naming God," 218.
[53] Paul Ricœur, "La critique de la religion," *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d'Etudes* n.4-5 (June 1964): 5-16.
[54] Paul Ricœur, "Le langage de la foi," *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d'Etudes* n.4-5 (June 1964): 17-31.

The first moment of 'the critique of religion' involves two points: demystification and demythologization. *Demystification* is necessary because Christian kerygma is always a discourse 'addressed to'. Ricœur, drawing on the insights of who he calls the three 'masters of suspicion', Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, is sensitive to the problem of self-alienation and false consciousness with religious discourse.[55] "Consciousness, far from being transparent to itself," Ricœur observes, "is at once what shows itself and what hides itself."[56] The alienation of man from himself implies a false consciousness and therefore textual interpretation requires a hermeneutics of suspicion and doubt that 'unmasks' consciousness.

The second moment of the critique of religion, for Ricoeur, is *demythologization*. If demystification offered an external critique of the origins of religious discourse, demythologization offers an internal critique. Here Ricœur follows the lead of Bultmann. Bultmann was fundamentally interested in the hermeneutical problem of how to relate and interpret the New Testament to twentieth century man, and sought to do this not by demystification in destroying the mythical symbol, but rather by seeing it as accessing the sacred. What distinguishes Bultmann from Barth is the former's greater appreciation of the fact that we are separated from the Word by Scripture. Ricœur notes that "while Barth had the tendency to take the text as it is and to think that one could preach it directly, Bultmann is much more sensitive to the culture distance that separates us from these texts."[57] Bultmann's awareness of this distance between us and the text is what makes Ricœur side with him over Barth, even as they both reaffirm the primordiality of the Word of God. For even though Ricœur and Bultmann both accept with Barth the revealed Word of God as the foundation of

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[55] Ricœur, "La critique de la religion," 7. See also Paul Ricœur, "Sens et fonction d'une communauté ecclésiale," *Centre Protestant de recherche et de rencontres du Nord* n.26 (April-June 1968): 41.
[56] Ibid., 8.
[57] Ricœur, "Sens et fonction d'une communauté ecclésiale," 46.

Christian theology, they also both acknowledge the necessity of interpreting it within one's concrete situation.

Here Bultmann's distinction between myth and kerygma is critical for Ricœur. Myth, firstly, can be seen as prescientific representation that has been rebuked by the scientific view of the world.[58] In this respect, myth no longer has any explanatory power given the advances of the modern sciences. Thus, demythologization in this sense of the word has a purely negative meaning. "To demythologize is to unmake the conceptual unity in which the message of the New Testament is expressed, in the measure where this conceptual unity constitutes a vision of the world which is no longer ours because it is a pre-scientific vision."[59] Demythologization does not threaten Christian kerygma for there is nothing specifically Christian in the mythical view of the world. It is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific era. Still, myth can serve a second function as a symbolic expression of the destiny of man. As Rudolf Bultmann himself claims: "The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically or better existentially."[60] Bultmann sought to remove the 'scandal' of the New Testament and to restore its meaning as a call for radical obedience and the transformation of existential self-understanding. The task of demythologization then is to recognize the first understanding of myth as a pre-scientific view of the world that is irrelevant with regards to Christian kerygma, and then to recognize the second understanding of myth within an existential interpretation of faith.

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[58] Paul Ricœur, "Mythe et proclamation chez R. Bultmann," *Cahier du Centre Protestant de l'Ouest* n.8 (1967): 24.
[59] Paul Ricœur, "R. Bultmann," *Foi et éducation* n.78 (January-March 1967): 23.
[60] Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 1, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1953).

There are, however, two major criticisms that Ricœur levels at Bultmann. Firstly, it subsumes the meaning of interpretation according to existential categories. For Ricœur, interpretation is understood rather as the unfolding of the world of the text. "The theological implications here are considerable: the first task of hermeneutics is not to proceed immediately to a decision on the part of the reader, but to allow the world or being which is the 'issue' of the biblical text to unfold."[61] Thus, he emphasizes what he calls the 'objectivity' of the new being projected by the text.[62] Secondly, the problem with Bultmann's position, according to Ricœur, is that the guiding hermeneutic is *obedience* to the kerygma.[63] For Ricœur, hermeneutics must also include a moment of personal appropriation, moving from the text's meaning to its life significance. After the critique of religion, there must be a moment of *reinterpretation*, which is the subject of his second essay, "Le langage de la foi". After the destructive moments of demystification and demythologization that critique the symbol as the representation of a false reality of an alienated consciousness and pre-modern mythological worldview, Ricœur gestures toward a renewed understanding of religion that rather restores and regenerates the reader. "Beyond the desert of criticism," he writes, "we wish to be called again."[64]

iii. The Word of God and History: Gerhard Ebeling

Ricœur found in Ebeling a figure who advanced Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of kerygma and Scripture by considering the role of history and tradition in a way that his predecessor overlooked.[65] In an important essay, "Contribution d'une réflexion sur le langage à une théologie de la parole," Ricœur considers the connection and movement between the Word

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[61] Ricœur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics," 26.

[62] Ibid., 27.

[63] Another critique that Ricœur levels at Bultmann is that for Bultmann's hermeneutics of demythologization, God is decontextualized language, unencumbered by the mythological framework that carries the biblical message. As has been indicated above, for Ricœur, kerygma and myth cannot be so easily separated.

[64] Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 351.

[65] Ebeling studied under Bultmann at Marburg during the summer session of 1930 through the winter session of 1931-1932.

of God and God as Word in Christ, the Word of primitive predication and its actualization in modern predication. Ricœur appropriates from German church historian Gerhard Ebeling the concept the 'process of the word' to name this movement that accounts for the priority of the Word of God and its mediation in Scripture *and* in history and tradition.[66] That Bultmann was an exegete and Ebeling a Church historian is important for Ricœur because through his scholarly training, Ebeling determined that the history of the Church is not so much a history of dogmas, but "it is the history of predication and it is the history of the interpretation of Scripture across predication. Thus, it is not in the job of the exegete, but in the understanding, in sum, of the destiny of the Church and of its predication that is constituted by the dominating problem of hermeneutics after Bultmann."[67] In short, Ebeling's insight tied interpretation and history, especially church history, together in a way that Bultmann's existential interpretation had overlooked.

Ebeling, Ricœur notes, discovered the hermeneutical underpinnings of Church history by turning to Luther and the Reformation and his readings of the Bible.[68] Indeed, Ebeling radicalizes the historical significance of the Reformation, for it initiated, what Ricœur calls an 'exegetical revolution'.[69] Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic Church, so goes the argument, gave an ontological interpretation of the event of revelation as the once and for all disclosure of eternal truths. The double nature of Christ, both divine and human, fed into the understanding of Scripture, constituted by holy and profane history, and finally in the transmission of tradition in

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[66] Paul Ricœur, "Ebeling," *Foi et éducation* n.78 (January-March 1967): 43. Ricœur draws from Ebeling's collection of essays entitled *Word and Faith*. See Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963). Ricœur translates Ebeling's term *Wortgeschehen* into French as *le procès de la parole*.
[67] Ibid., 36.
[68] Ibid., 39.
[69] Ibid., 43.

the Church.[70] The doctrine of the infallibility of the Church belonged to sacred history, Ebeling observes, which in turn was ultimately rooted in the metaphysical realism of the Word and Christ's divine nature. Insofar as the Church remains hermetically sealed from profane history, it remains the carrier of immutable and eternal teachings. For this reason, Ricœur highlights Ebeling's attention to the significance of relics for the Catholic Church. Relics do not merely remind us of the past, nor are they dead remains of the past, but rather they exemplify 'realistic metaphysical actualization'; in them, the unique past event of revelation is itself present.[71]

Luther's insight, according to Ebeling, is that instead of grounding the Church and its history in a 'metaphysical realism', he turned to the word itself. His claim to *sola fide* was revolutionary, for Ebeling shows that its anti-clerical, anti-sacramental protest was a fundamental critique of the notion of 'realistic metaphysical actualization' embedded in the Catholic Church and implicit throughout its understanding of history and tradition, of Christ and Scripture.[72] The unique historical origin and event of Jesus Christ, it was argued, could only become another unique event through interpretation. The bridge between revelation and the present was not mediated, but rather fundamentally in the relationship between Word and Interpretation.[73] "It is uniquely in this junction between an event of the word [parole] and another word which interprets it," Ricœur notes regarding Ebeling's insight, "that a history of the Church is possible, and that History constitutes itself."[74] In short, the exegetical revolution that Luther initiated was one where the word replaced the ontological and metaphysical structure of the Catholic Church.

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[70] Paul Ricœur, "L'événement de la parole chez Ebeling," *Cahier du Centre Protestant de l'Ouest* (1968): 25.
[71] Gerhard Ebeling, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism," in *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 34.
[72] Ibid., 56.
[73] Ricœur, "Ebeling," 42.
[74] Ibid., 42.

It is precisely at the interface between Word and History over the contested meaning of the Church, where Ricœur quotes Ebeling: "I consider the category of interpretation alone open to assume the theological question of the essence of the Church and of its history because in it is seized the structural manner which is absolutely historical in the continual actualization of the process of the word."[75] By focusing on the concept of 'process of the word' (*Wortgeschehen*), Ebeling underlines that it is neither an instantaneous eruption of the Word that does not require interpretation nor a hermeneutical issue that diminishes the Word of God, but rather it is both a *process…of the word*. This movement from the historical Word to the attestation of the Word in writing culminates in the proclamation of the Word. Ricœur writes, "The word came, but as it became text, it is a matter of converting constantly from text to the word, and this is the process; the process which it still specifies frequently the movement from writing [écriture] to predication or from text to proclamation."[76] Scripture is *not* the Word *per se,* but *becomes* the Word again through proclamation. In the movement from text to proclamation, from written word to spoken word, it is not so much an exposition of a historical understanding of the text as past proclamation, but rather, it is proclamation in the present.   Such an understanding of proclamation belies the radicality of Luther's critique against the metaphysical realism of the Catholic Church: the Church is not a relic of past proclamation that remains present and eternally so, but rather it is involved in a history where a word which once came, must come again anew.

Ricœur's understanding of the 'process of the word', however, goes one step beyond Ebeling by shifting from text to action. As he states in a lecture importantly entitled, "Le soi dans le miroir des Ecritures," the reader configures the internal narrative of the text, but also the

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[75] Ibid., 43.
[76] Ibid., 44.

text itself refigures and transforms the self.[77] The language of the Bible as a 'mirror' echoes Calvin's understanding of its theological or moral use that reveals a state of misery and sin. Yet, if the Bible is a 'mirror', it is also a 'whip,' to use Calvin's language, that serves a pedagogical function. Ricœur states, "Biblical faith is instructed – in the sense of formed, clarified, educated – in the network of texts that preaching renews each time to the living word."[78] Thus, the pedagogical use of the law has the force of exhortation by urging one to shake off sluggishness and chastise imperfection. "Understanding oneself in front of the text is not something that just happens in one's head or in language," bur rather Ricoeur insists that "It is what the gospel calls 'putting the word to work.' In this regard, to understand the world and to change it are fundamentally the same thing."[79]

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to outline Paul Ricoeur's understanding of the nature and task of theology. It is a systematic theology that unifies the domains of theology under the concept of the 'process of the word', which recognizes the movement from the Word of God, biblical hermeneutics, and finally to proclamation throughout Church history and tradition. And it is critical theology, for it confronts the hermeneutics of the 'process of word' with diverse disciplines. Ricœur's theology presents a post-Enlightenment retrieval of Christian tradition that is constituted and re-constituted through the ongoing appropriation and interpretation of Christian symbols, myths, narratives, and texts. In short, his theology offers a complex and rich understanding of what Christian tradition means and how it is to be renewed for contemporary life.

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[77] Ricœur, "Le soi dans le miroir des Écritures," 50-51.
[78] Ibid., 54.
[79] Ricœur, "Naming God," in *Figuring the Sacred*, 234.