

Ricœur and/or Theology

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1. Paul Ricœur – a puzzling case for philosophy

For more than half a century the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) was almost omnipresent at the forefront of philosophical development, he also interposed in a wide spectrum of other disciplines, stretching from history and theology to linguistics and neuroscience. Despite this and even though without any doubt he may be said to have been extremely influential, his position remains somewhat enigmatic. Ricœur himself appears as a *puzzling case* within contemporary philosophy and there are several reasons for this. A confrontation with Ricœur raises a number of crucial questions.

The first question to arise is: what kind of intellectual position is implied in a philosophical project that started in the intellectual soil of French and German existential phenomenology, successfully managed to navigate in the antiexistential (and anti-humanistic) cognitive landscape of structuralism, and finally blossomed in the context post structuralism? For a long time Ricœur appeared as the great “survivor” in French philosophy. After that contemporary colleagues, from Merleau-Ponty and Foucault to Lévinas and Derrida, all had passed away, Ricœur himself continued his conversation with ever new dialogue partners, regardless of the changing cognitive infrastructures. How was this possible? What kind of cognitive resources made him compatible with contexts that differed so widely in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions? Moreover, how can we determine the position of someone who recontextualized his thoughts time after time in this variable philosophical geography?

After this first set of questions follows a second: what kind of philosophical resources made it possible for Ricœur to be able to develop a transatlantic philosophical project from the 70s, when he constantly moved back and forth across the intellectual English Channel that for many years brutally separated Anglo-Saxon and Con-

tinental philosophical territories? Considering the fact that Ricœur tried to bridge the gulf between the different epistemologies as well as ontological assumptions of Continental and Analytic philosophies, we may once more ask: what did Ricœur’s own epistemological and ontological orientations look like? Is this project just a kind of philosophical eclecticism?

To these difficulties to determine Ricœur’s own philosophical identity, we may also add questions emanating as a result of his profound involvement and frequent interventions in a broad variety of other disciplines and debates, which raises a third set of issues, this time – concerning how this affected his identity as a philosopher: What does it mean to still insist on being a philosopher, as Ricœur did, whilst also having the role of a disciplinary boundary-crosser?

I will not take up these issues here, as that has been done elsewhere.¹ In this article I will focus instead on a fourth set of questions, regarding challenges that seem to be even more complicated; elaborating on what may be recognized as the major reason why Ricœur appears to be a puzzling case for philosophers: his connection to religion and the profound presence of a religious dimension in his work. Many philosophers have been so puzzled and annoyed by this that they have sometimes even termed him a theologian – in opposition to his own declaration of being a philosopher and his strong rejection of the label theologian.

The general history of the hostility, interspersed with attempted amalgamations, between theology and philosophy stretches back to the “origins” of Western civilization. In modern times, theology has tended to be regarded as a ghost of a repressed memory that has constantly

¹ Cf. Bengt Kristensson Ugglå, *Kommunikation på bristningsgränsen: En studie i Paul Ricœur’s projekt* (Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 1994) and *Ricœur, Hermeneutics, and Globalization* (London/New York: Continuum Books, 2010).

chased the identity of philosophers. However, today these issues of the place of the secular and the religious in the public space have become urgent matters. Effectively this also means that the challenges associated with coping with Ricœur, can in many ways be said to be equivalent to coping with some of the most crucial issues in our time. Thus, the enigmas associated with Ricœur, and the reception of his thought in the strained areas between philosophical and theological discourses, are expressions of more general problems and dilemmas of extraordinary importance from a broader perspective.

It is an undeniable fact that religion, as well as theological topics, is present in a profound way through Ricœur's comprehensive publication list. The occurrence of this dimension is most obvious in his many articles, but we also find a recurrent discussion in his major books, even though two clear periods characterized by different publishing strategies may be delineated. We are confronted with a great number of religious themes and concepts already in his very earliest works on Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel.² For readers who are trained as theologians, it is not difficult to detect profound influences from Luther's theology, which particularly is seen in the philosophical anthropology of Ricœur's philosophy of the will, both in his dissertation from 1950 and in the two volume second part of this project published ten years later.³ The internal structure of his interpretation of the Lutheran concept of *self-arbitre* (how we can be at once bound and free) can even be recognized as a predecessor of the wounded cogito (*cogito blessé*), which he elaborated on from the second half of the 60s. Explicit religious and theological issues are also dealt with in the major books from this decade: his hermeneutical essay on Freud from 1965, and the collection from 1969

of essays that summarize Ricœur's 1960s (similar to the earlier collection of essays from 1955).⁴

Paradoxically, it was only after Ricœur received a professorship at a theological school (Divinity School, University of Chicago), that a new logic was introduced into his publishing strategy, resulting in a separation of theological and religious issues into different books. Some of which were edited by others⁵ and some published by himself.⁶ The dilemmas associated with this separation became a critical issue in the preparation of *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), when the author ultimately decided to eliminate two chapters from the final publication, consisting of two lectures on "natural theology" which were part of the original Gifford Lectures which constituted the main content of the book.

However, also Ricœur as a person had strong affinities with what he himself named "the biblical faith" and identified himself with the Christian tradition (without claiming any exclusivism). Those who prefer a clear cut and an easy dichotomy between philosophy and theology have been puzzled by Ricœur as a philosopher, who explicitly declared that he is one of those who "identify themselves with the book that itself stems from the metaphorical identification between the Word of God and the person of Christ" in terms of a "second-degree identification."⁷ He was a member of the French Reformed Church – although he later in his life sometimes played down this connection to

² Paul Ricœur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (Paris: Seuil, 1947) together with Mikel Dufrenne, and Paul Ricœur, *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers: philosophie du mystère et philosophie du paradoxe* (Paris: Temps présent, 1948).

³ Paul Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté: I, Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (Paris: Aubier, 1950); *Philosophie de la volonté: Finitude et Culpabilité. I, L'homme faillible. II, La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier 1960/1988).

⁴ Cf. Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), Paul Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations: Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil 1969), and Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955/1967).

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980, edited with an introduction by Lewis S. Mudge), and Paul Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Fortress Press 1995, edited by M. I. Wallace, translated by David Pellauer).

⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Penser la Bible* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) together with André LaCocque.

⁷ Paul Ricœur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures", 219 in *The Whole and the Divided Self: The Bible and Theological Anthropology* (ed. J. McCarthy; New York: Crossroad 1997, translation David Pellauer).

French Protestantism by explaining it as being part of his resistance to organized ecumenism and his support of greater diversity, and although some of his most important dialogue partners were Catholics, it is nevertheless an inescapable fact that he donated his library to the *Faculté de théologie protestante de Paris*. Furthermore, Ricœur was frequently invited to speak in churches and congregations, he even delivered many sermons and has since long been a very common reference for theologians. It is not by coincidence that so many of the scholars who have written on Ricœur have (at least in their former life) been trained theologians, many of his fundamental concepts are also strongly associated with religion and theology: symbol, text, metaphor, narrative, memory, promise, forgiveness, etc.

If we consider that all these circumstances refer to a thinker who strongly refused to identify himself as a theologian, we may recognize why his presence tends to challenge the self-understanding of both philosophers and theologians. It is “an event that looks like a thought”, that in the same year we were celebrating the centennial anniversary of Paul Ricœur, we also celebrated the bicentennial anniversary of Søren Kierkegaard – two thinkers who both generate frustration by challenging the identity of philosophy and theology to the bursting point.

From this we may understand why the theme of the conference “Paul Ricœur in Dialogue with Theology and Religious Studies,”⁸ can also be described as the major cause why Ricœur emerges as a puzzling case for philosophy. The attempts to evaluate and assess his particular philosophical position and contribution have generally resulted in extraordinarily diverse judgments. According to some standard works, aimed at presenting an overview of the philosophical scene of the past century, Ricœur is distinguished as one of the major leading figures, while in others he is overlooked and ignored.⁹

⁸ Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, 6 September 2013.

⁹ Only in the French context, we are confronted by the contrast between François Dosse, for whom Ricœur gradually appears as the hero in his evolving historical drama of development within the human and social sciences, cf. *Histoire du structuralisme I-II* (Paris: La

This polarized reception has even been aggravated by the uncertainties concerning the relationship between philosophical and theological discourses and has also generated complications within the specific theological reception of his thought.

What further complicates the attempts to establish a clear distinction in Ricœur’s project between philosophy, on the one hand, and religious faith and theology, on the other, is the fact that he claimed that the most important sources for critical thinking have religious origins, they emanate from Jewish and Christian traditions:

Critique is also a tradition. I would even say that it plunges into the most impressive tradition, that of liberating acts, of the Exodus and the Resurrection. Perhaps there would be no more interest in emancipation, no more anticipation of freedom, if the Exodus and the Resurrection were erased from the memory of mankind.¹⁰

The circumstance, that Ricœur did not identify religious faith with (more or less blind) convictions – and critique as an external threat – but deduced the critical thinking as a tradition itself and stated that this tradition stems from religious sources, undermines any attempt to operate according to a simple dichotomy that puts religion and theology in opposition to secular, critical thinking and modernity. Moreover, since Ricœur’s reflections on religious faith may be conceived as integral parts of his hermeneutics of suspicion and his elaborations on critical hermeneutics, he rejected every attempt to identify religion with an immediate self-consciousness. In the same manner as he fully affirmed the critique of religion, his idea of “the hermeneutical

Découverte, 1991-1992), *L’empire du sens: L’humanisation des sciences humaines* (Paris: la Découverte 1995), and Paul Ricœur, *Le sens d’une vie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997) – and Vincent Descombes, who instead completely ignores Ricœur when describing the philosophical scene in France in his *La même et l’autre: Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française 1933-1978* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, “Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology,” 63-100 in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 99-100.

function of distanciation in all communication”¹¹ was applied in a generalized way to his understanding of religion and faith. It is true that Ricœur believed in the necessity of convictions, but it is equally true that he also stressed that all convictions can and need to be developed by critical distanciations. The decentering of the subject is also motivated by religious reasons. Thus, not only the internal structure of hermeneutical experience, but also Ricœur’s understanding of the religious experience, harbor a remarkably high degree of alienation, due to the omnipresence of different forms of critical distanciations. Ricœur found it as a necessity to ask critically – not only against Hans-Georg Gadamer’s understanding of the hermeneutical experience, but also considering the nature of the religious experience – how it is possible to introduce a critical instance into the consciousness of belonging. The dialectic between the experience of belonging and alienating distanciation is “the key to the inner life of hermeneutics.”¹² This idea of “the hermeneutical function of distanciation in all communication” has profound relevance also for the strong linkage between Ricœur’s reflection on the wounded cogito and the fractures and disproportions of the fragile self – and his contemplations on the silence, weakness and death of God, reflections that in an early stage was influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, although he gradually found his most important dialogue partner in Eberhardt Jüngel. If we consider the profound inspiration from this theologian on the two Gifford Lectures excluded from his book on identity, *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), it is not by coincidence that there is a strong resemblance between Ricœur’s considerations on the ontological commitment of attestation in the last chapter of *Soi-même comme un autre / Oneself as Another* (Chapter 10: “Vers quelle ontologie?”, in English: “What ontology in view?”) and Jüngel’s plea for the abandonment of God as the guarantor of absolute knowledge and power in favor of the virtue of weakness and a trust without any security, as

it is outlined in *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*.¹³ These constellations, where Ricœur’s project to reach beyond Descartes Cogito as well as Nietzsche’s Anti-Cogito, joins Jüngel’s project to reach beyond theism as well as atheism, open the perspectives for a trust without any security, undermining all prospects of establishing a simple dichotomy between philosophy and theology. In this paper, I have limited my elaboration on Ricœur’s enigmatic position to the challenges associated with a theological appropriation of his thought.

2. Theologians and (their obstacles against) philosophy

Without neglecting the global scope of the influence that Ricœur’s philosophy has been the subject of, I think one could say that there seems to be two major contexts of particular interest for Ricœur’s work: the French context (with an epicenter in Paris) and the North American context (with the epicenter in Chicago). Similarly, without ignoring French-speaking theologians, such as Pierre Giesel and Claude Geffré and a philosopher of religion like Jean Greich’s (all mentioned have a marked philosophical profile), together with the important German theological reception and other thinkers like Peter Kemp, Richard Kearney, and Werner G. Jeanrond, arguably the most extensive (and unfortunately also “overgrown”) theological reception has been taking place in North America. There are several reasons for this, among which the most important cause may be the fact that the professor’s chair that Ricœur occupied was situated at a Divinity School (at the University of Chicago), where he frequently co-taught together with the theologian David Tracy. Thus, we approach a particular “theological” Ricœur in the US, which stands in stark contrast to the more “philosophical” Ricœur in France. A contextualization of these “two Ricœurs,” in America and France, is also of interest due to the two different ap-

¹¹ Ricœur, “Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology,” 91.

¹² Ricœur, “Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology,” 87-95.

¹³ Eberhardt Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1977/1982).

proaches they represent to coping with the relationship between religion and secularization.

Ricœur's life among theologians in North America has itself been strongly polarized between "embrace" and "reject." In his book *Ricœur between Theology and Philosophy*, Boyd Blundell paints the following picture:

Two theologians. David Tracy and Hans Frei, have dominated the reception of Ricœur in North American theology, and characterize the initial positive and negative responses to Ricœur's hermeneutics.¹⁴

I agree with Blundell when he states, that there seems to be two main answers to the question of whether philosophical hermeneutics can be productively appropriated into theology: "enthusiastic affirmation and equally charged rejection."¹⁵ Yet, it becomes more complicated when Blundell, within this polarized terrain, recognizes the post-liberal attack from George Lindbeck and Hans Frei as an attack on Tracy's *appropriation* of philosophical hermeneutics – and that very little of this attack actually reaches Ricœur. By distancing Ricœur from Tracy, he intends to display that Ricœur is much more compatible with Frei's position (even if he has not realized this himself) and finally (in line with Mark Wallace) put Ricœur in the service of Karl Barth's theology. According to Blundell's view, the French philosopher shares not only faith and reformed background with Barth, also his methodology and respect for the integrity of theology are said to have the same origin. This profound influence from Barth is used as an explanation to, what Blundell mentions as, "Ricœur's double life," which means: firstly, that Ricœur never mixed philosophical and theological reflections, and secondly, that there should be a fundamental affinity between Ricœur's hermeneutic philosophy and Barth's Christocentric theology.¹⁶

Blundell's conclusion raises a number of critical questions: Did Ricœur really practice a

"double life" and an "arm's-length approach" in his publication strategy? Is Ricœur's interpretation of the Christian faith really in accord with Barth's "resolutely Christocentric" theology where "a study of the *real* human can be done only by taking the man Jesus as its starting point"?¹⁷

What is the price of this operation – and is this reasoning sustainable? Blundell's argumentation does not only appear simplistic, he also ignores fundamental elements in Ricœur's ontological and anthropological as well as hermeneutical considerations. As a response to the first question above, one can note that, even if Ricœur's contributions to scriptural exegesis and biblical studies in particular were never published in the same volume as his philosophical work, it is an inevitable fact that his general discussions on religious and theological issues were interwoven into his philosophical works, this is the mainline at least until the late 60s. But, more important is to disclose the weak points of Blundell's (and Wallace's) when intending to detect structural connections between Ricœur and Barth.

Here, I find it clarifying to turn to the extraordinary critical investigation of Ricœur's work presented by Kevin Vanhoozer. Even though I find his theological conclusions hasty and incorrect, his interpretation of Ricœur's work offers an important contribution by his identification of some fundamental structures that are overlooked by Blundell and Wallace.¹⁸ What becomes clear in this critical reading is that Ricœur "prefers to define the religious dimension in terms of creation rather than salvation", that "Ricœur's mediation of religion and atheism results in a faith in and love of Creation" – and that, according to Ricœur, "[t]he 'Yes' of Jesus towards Creation is stronger than his 'No'. Meaning is more fundamental than absurdity".¹⁹ All this, however, causes him to reject Ricœur. This rejection is reinforced by the fact that Vanhoozer insists on describing Ricœur as theologian – and thereafter criticizing his shortcomings as theologian. How-

¹⁷ Blundell, 154.

¹⁸ Mark Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricœur and the New Yale Theology* (Mercer UP, 1990).

¹⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge UP, 1990), 130, 132, 209.

¹⁴ Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricœur between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Indiana UP, 2010), 40.

¹⁵ Blundell, 32.

¹⁶ Blundell, 51-53, 131.

ever, what is more obvious is the fact that Vanhoozer himself seems to lack theological resources to cope with Ricoeur's philosophy of creation. Vanhoozer's inability to identify any positive connections between salvation and creation, makes Christ appear in a world that is totally alien to him. Vanhoozer is maybe right in criticizing Tracy, McFague, and Jeanrond for ignoring this anthropology together with its ontological implications, due to their ignorance of Ricoeur's earlier philosophy, but he is incorrect, not only when he recognizes Ricoeur as a theologian, but also in his inability to mobilize any possible theological interpretation of Ricoeur's preference for creation when speaking about God's presence. The fact is that a post-liberal christocentric theology, with a profound anti-liberal approach, has no theological resources which make it possible to identify a positive link between creation and christology, and thus no ability to cope with a philosophical anthropology linked to a perspective of creation, together with its ontological implications, in a constructive way. Thus, neither the theologians who embrace, nor those who reject him, seem to have access to necessary theological resources in order to cope with Ricoeur.

Before we enter into a more constructive discussion, let us further extend the gap to the anti-liberal approaches of theologians operating on post-liberal conditions – no matter whether we talk about Barth, Frei, Lindbeck, Vanhoozer or Blundell – by briefly looking at Ricoeur's own concept of revelation. In contrast to Barth's christocentric concept of Revelation, in Ricoeur's work we approach a polyphonic concept of revelation, involving a multitude of genres and forms (narration, prophecy, wisdom, hymn and so on). This concept of revelation is open to creation, in a sense that comes close to Jasper's universal cipher; it is linked to an ontological surplus of life and meaning, in a sense that comes close to Marcel's incarnational mystery; and it manifests itself as an original Yes stronger than all the No's of negative ontologies, in line with Jean Nabert's concept of an *original affirmation*. We may also add the fundamental *indirect* approach to revelation inspired by hermeneutics, which makes mediation a necessity, as well as the Lutheran inspiration, that emphasis that God re-

mains hidden, also after his revelation: "God is designated at the same time as the one who communicates and the one who withdraws."²⁰ Thus, the revelation takes place between the secret and the revealed: "The one who reveals himself is also the one who conceals himself."²¹ According to Ricoeur's concept of revelation, the New Testament *continues* to speak about God; Christ is subsumed into an *economy of gift* where salvation is acknowledged as a recapitulation and restoration of the original creation, in accordance with Irenaeus and others.

3. Philosophy of creation – theology of creation?

At the same time as Ricoeur was expressly a Christian philosopher, he (at least the "later" Ricoeur) was totally foreign to any idea of a particular "Christian philosophy" and he made it quite clear that there can be no such things as a "Christian morality." The relationship between philosophy and theology became prominent to him when he should explain why the two chapters, that were originally part of his Gifford Lectures 1986, were finally excluded from his book *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990) In this particular situation he emphasized the importance of "an autonomous philosophical discourse" and declared his commitment to keep to the "asceticism of the argument" in order to avoid both crypto-philosophy and crypto-theology. No "ontotheological amalgams" are accepted.²² His strategy to avoid both confusion and separation is also flanked by a theological dimension inspired by a faith that knows itself to be without guarantee, a Cogito that is protected from all self-foundational claims because it appears as a wounded Cogito in "the hermeneutical age of reason."²³

²⁰ Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures", 216.

²¹ Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 93.

²² Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990/1992, translated by Kathleen Blamey), 24.

²³ Cf. Jean Greich, *L'âge herméneutique de la raison* (Paris: Cerf, 1985).

Following on from these considerations, how can we cope with the fact that the main influences behind Ricœur's idea of creation originates from philosophy and the impasse caused by a post-liberal concept of theology that reduces theology to christology? The dilemmas associated with the lack of a relevant theological discourse able to transcend the dichotomy of philosophy and theology is further reinforced by the fact that Ricœur himself seemed to labor with a christocentric understanding of theology. Thus the result is a philosophy of creation without any theological connections – and, even worse, a philosophy of creation that seems to be theologically unacceptable.

As a kind of ontological prerequisite for Ricœur's hermeneutical philosophy and philosophical anthropology, we may identify a surplus of meaning, associated with the epistemological "seeing as," which is linked to a surplus of life, associated with the ontological "being as." Against the negativism of existentialism, Ricœur stressed the Yes of creation, the abundance of the incarnated mystery, and an original affirmation that is more fundamental than all negation. Although it may be true that Ricœur first learned that the subject is not a centralizing master but rather a discipline or auditor of a language larger than itself from Karl Barth, this was however an insight that he later learned from many sources – and, more important, the positive understanding of this decentering of the subject was a recognition of gift and creation, rather inspired by a philosophy influenced by Marcel's incarnated mystery. Moreover, it is beyond all doubt that his philosophical and ontological considerations were not derived from a christological theology.²⁴ According to Ricœur, the most fundamental motivation behind the deconstruction of the security of modern man and the recognition of the limitations of the subject are connected to the perspective of creation. To be decentered means to be a *recipient* of life and

meaning from outside; yet this decentering move is simultaneously a part of an "economy of gift," where it is correlated by a centering move. The dialectical relationship between the centering and the decentering of the subject, the productive and receptive elements of the appropriation of a text, the reorientation generated by the extreme possibilities for self-distanciation in the world in front of the text – are all part of Ricœur's understanding of *homo capax*, a dialectical anthropology which make it possible to reach beyond both anthropocentrism and anthropoclastism. The reason why Vanhoozer and others find every kind of philosophical anthropology to be illegitimate²⁵ – and ask whether Ricœur's philosophical anthropology is fundamentally Christian – is that they fail to recognize the fundamental decentering moves within Ricœur's dialectical anthropology, as well as the fundamentally positive implications of the weakness and fragility of the subject. Contrary to Vanhoozer, who acknowledges Ricœur's anthropological prerequisites as evidence of a narcissism that makes self-consciousness the only reference of biblical narratives, *homo capax* is never, according to Ricœur, equivalent to anthropocentrism. *Homo capax* is considered as the human being who both acts and suffers – text interpretation is thus defined as an extreme experience of self-distanciation. From the Greek tragedies Ricœur learned that the acting human being is always also a suffering human being – and the reverse: the same human being that suffers still acts. That is why the hero of the tragedies still insists on being responsible. Although one can never resist the supernatural forces that control fate, it remains necessary for one to author his/her actions, and even if accidents certainly dominate tragedy so they should be endured in a responsible manner.²⁶ This dialectical anthropology is anticipated already in in the staged "circulation" of meaning in *La symbolique du mal* (1960), where the Adam myth is not only correlated to the narrative on Job within the Scriptures, but also related to Greek and Baby-

²⁴ Ricœur recounts that his earliest years were formed by an internal conflict between the influence from Karl Barth's anti-philosophical reading of the bible – and Ricœur's passion for a religious philosophy influenced by Bergson. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *La critique et la conviction. Entretien avec François Azouvi et Marc de Launay* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), 16-17.

²⁵ Vanhoozer, *Biblical narrative in the philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, 119.

²⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), and *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

Ionian myths. In this circulation between Adam, the responsible man, and Job, the victim of evil, we may also understand how Jesus in the story of the passion appears both as a “second Adam” and a “second Job.” There is a striking continuity over decades in these anthropological considerations – and its implicated recognition of creation.

In order to find an appropriate theological articulation of these fundamental anthropological dynamics, where an initial decentering move is counterbalanced by a centering move, in line with what Ricœur mentions as a “double Copernican turn,” we may turn to the contribution from the specific tradition of Scandinavian creation theology, as it has been elaborated by theologians such as Gustaf Wingren in Sweden, and K E Lögstrup in Denmark, from original interpretations of Irenaeus, Luther, and Grundtvig. Here, we find an alternative model, where God’s presence in creation is approached as a prerequisite for an understanding of salvation as a restoration of creation and a restored humanity (*recapitulatio*), in contrast to the predominant post liberal theological paradigm and its stereotypical articulation of God’s revelation in Christ.²⁷

4. Ricœur – an anti-theologian?

Given that Ricœur was frequently involved in religious issues, both by his personal religious involvement and his publications as well as the extensive reception of his works among theologians, it is surprising to recognize his own neglect of dogmatics and the absence of systematic theological reflections. Considering Ricœur’s religious and theological interest, it is remarkable how seldom the philosopher entered into dialogues with systematic theologians, with very few exceptions (where Jüngel is perhaps the most important). Far from being the almost schizophrenic figure that Blundell profiled, when detecting Ricœur as someone who clearly

separated philosophy and theology as an act of respect in front of a theology in its own right, I would instead emphasize the anti-theological traits in Ricœur’s philosophy. The fact is that Ricœur, despite his great interest in the field, tends to ignore theology and theologians – with one major exception: biblical scholars and exegetes.

Ricœur had a life long love affair with the texts of the Bible, he published numerous articles concerning the interpretation of different biblical texts and also published books together with exegetes. Among theologians, biblical scholars thus appear as his most important dialogue partners. However, it was not the Bible recognized as a container of messages or theories, but “the world of the text”, the Bible as a polyphonic world of discourses, genres and texts that caught his interest; the Bible as a configuration functioning as a mirror (held by an invisible hand) for the reconfiguration of the self in the world in front of these texts. In addition, he saw no limitations to the implementation of a critical scientific analysis of either the world in front of these text or the world of the text.

When noting that, for Ricœur, biblical exegesis was the royal road to theology, it is important to add that, in accord with his hermeneutical focus, the main focus of interest was directed towards what he mentioned as the “biblical thinking” or the “biblical faith” – and in particular the tension between the configuration of the texts and the refiguration of the world in front of the texts. The concept “biblical thinking” and Ricœur’s work on the Bible were integral parts of a broader hermeneutical ambition to rehabilitate a poetic discourse. This project was programmatically outlined in his inventory of symbols, myth, and speculative symbols of evil in *La symbolique du mal* (1960). In order to travel beyond the “desert of criticism” and start from the “fullness of language” – still with all the resources of critical thinking intact – he used a methodological approach inspired by Kantian aesthetics: “the symbol gives rise to thought” – *le symbole donne à penser*. This means, first, that the symbol *gives* (i.e. I do not posit the meaning myself, the symbol gives it) – and second, that it invites *thoughts* (i.e. the symbols are recognized as a source for reflection, but they do

²⁷ Cf. my own book *Gustaf Wingren: Människan och teologin* (Stockholm/Stephag: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2010), which will be published in English translation on Cascade Books in 2015 as *Becoming Human Again: The Theological Life of Gustaf Wingren*.

not think themselves – interpretation and mediation is a necessity). However, before the symbols may speak to us, they need to “speak to each other” in terms of a circular movement. *La symbolique du mal* is an inventory, and at the same time a staged circular movement of symbols, myths and speculative symbols, where the biblical myth is subsumed in a wider economy of symbols and myths. Thus in this book, Ricœur manifests his general preference for more primitive and original expressions, which was also a guiding principle for him when dealing with theological issues. This recognition of the symbolic dimension as the most fundamental in language is also a core of Ricœur’s impressive investigations of metaphors and narratives in the 70s and 80s. Furthermore, in his later work he returned to the idea of the birth of philosophy in non-philosophy. The insight that poetic language teaches us things that we otherwise could not have recognized, is an important theme in the “Interlude” on tragic action, designated to Olivier (who committed suicide) – *encore*, once again – in *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990). Furthermore, in Ricœur’s last major work, *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (2004), Ricœur repeats that philosophy must learn from tragedy, even though it does not proceed conceptually, nevertheless, these pre-philosophical discourses carry a surplus of meaning; they are richer than philosophy because they can say more and teach us crucial things, not as allegory or gnosis, but as primitive symbols and myths – if we are capable of interpretation.²⁸

What may appear as Ricœur’s ignorance of systematic theology and dogmatics – and his constant involvement in dialogues with biblical scholars – can also be traced back to his “posthegelian Kantianism” and the strong influence from Kant’s philosophy of religion, where the focus is turned from God towards religion as representation, belief and institution. Instead of metaphysical speculation, Ricœur focus on

limit-expressions, limit-situations, and limit-experiences. Religious language “uses limit-expressions only to open up our very experience, to make it explode in the direction of experiences that themselves are limit-experiences.”²⁹ This kind of “biblical thinking” radicalizes the aporias and the paradoxes as well as the experience of discordance and critical distanciation. There is a strong anti-speculative dimension in Ricœur’s religious considerations that prevents him from being too much involved in traditional doctrinal discussions. Thus, we may identify an anti-theological approach in Ricœur’s preference to talk about “biblical thinking” and “biblical faith” instead of “theology.” It is a matter of fact, that Ricœur in his considerations on religion and faith gave priority to pre-theological, more primary and original expressions of religious faith (including the linguistic mediations of this faith) and the circulation of meaning within the framework of a greater polyphony.

5. A possible model for theological appropriation?

In this article I have mentioned some of the extraordinary difficulties associated with how the appropriation Ricœur’s philosophy within theology has been actualized by its reception as well as his own works. In the last part of my paper I would like to return to Chapter 9 in my doctoral thesis from 1994, where I presented a one hundred pages discussion about the prerequisites for a possible theological appropriation of Ricœur’s philosophy.³⁰ My intention was to cope with the combined challenges from the dilemmas in the theological reception and Ricœur’s own interpretation of the Christian faith. Using the formulation “the world in front of the text” as a model, made it possible for me to discuss three problem areas, and the relationship between them: hermeneutics (“the world in front of the text”), anthropology (“the world in front of the text”), and imagination (“the world in front of the text”).

²⁹ Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 61.

³⁰ Kristensson Ugglå, *Kommunikation på bristningsgränsen*, 473-572.

²⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance: Trois études* (Paris: Stock, 2004). The use of a three-level model in Ricœur, *La symbolique du mal* (1960) is repeated by Ricœur in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and his analysis of memory and forgetting in Ricœur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (2000).

First, theology has to deal with "the world in front of *the text*," this means questions raised by the fact that theology is an activity that takes place in the world in front of a specific collection of texts, and the issues associated with the hermeneutical conditions for a theological discourse. The starting point in the text implies an initial decentering of the subject; theology thus has to be more than *Glaubeshlehre*. However, the hermeneutical conditions also mean that theology has to be developed without absolute knowledge, as a discourse that welcomes conflicts of interpretations. Thus, hermeneutics does not provide a final solution to theology's task of interpretation, instead it leaves theology with conflicts and furthermore teaches us the necessity of communicating in the search for truth. From a hermeneutical perspective, the theological alternative to various forms of objectivism may not be a relativistic anarchy of interpretation, but a critical and communicative hermeneutics developed by responsible selves. Hermeneutical theology is a critical and communicative theology, and as such it is an alternative to both various forms of objectivism as well as a relativistic anarchy of interpretations.

Second, theology needs to understand what it means to be human and live in the world (which is God's world) in front of the text. This does not only raise questions concerning philosophical and theological anthropology, but indicates that the shortest path to the self is through the other. Here, I would like to contend with the structural impossibility of relating Ricœur to a liberal theological anthropocentrism, but also the necessity to avoid theoretical anti-humanism. Since Ricœur's anthropology is developed within the framework of an understanding of the world as creation, it needs to be considered within a theological discourse able to identify a positive connection between creation and salvation in order to avoid a radical juxtaposition between anthropology and christology, that is blocking the theological reception of Ricœur's philosophy. Here I recognize an important contribution from the profound tradition of Scandinavian creation theology, which can provide an anthropological impulse beyond the one-sided centering of anthropocentrism and anthropoclasm's one-sided decentering. A communicative anthropology has

the potential to elaborate theologically on the mutual relationship between receptivity and activity, gift and task, in all human projects.

Third, we are confronted with the question: what kind of concept of theology is implied by the words "in front of"? The task is to qualify that kind of imagination which is implied by the correlation between hermeneutics and anthropology, starting from the understanding of theological imagination as a dialectical interpretation of the mediating acts "in front of" texts. In accordance with his earlier correlation between symbol and thinking, text and interpretation, Ricœur's extensive investigations on metaphors and narratives, during the 70s and 80s, are conducted by the linkage of two complex of problems: *semantic innovation* and *productive imagination*, with a marked poetic dimension.³¹ This double, dialectical approach takes us beyond both a romantic concept of imagination and a theological grammar. This understanding of the theological imagination provides the possibility for the discussion of theological paradigms and models to go beyond the "either/or" which characterizes questions on whether theology should deal with texts *or* human beings, and take its point of departure in language *or* experience, and whether it should take the form of dogmatics *or* *Glaubeshlehre*. This focus on imagination means - in contrast to the post-liberal understanding of theology as grammar - that language is not only grammar, but also rhetoric, and in contrast to a theology of consciousness it emphasizes the necessity of linguistic mediation. This dialectical structure also implies the presence of a profound critical instance, which reveals an understanding of theology and religious faith as dynamic realities necessary to approach by the combined perspectives of first, second, and third person, in accordance with the three-

³¹ Paul Ricœur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) and *Temps et Récit I-III* (Paris: Seuil, 1983-1984-1985). My understanding of the theological dimension of this poetic imaginative approach is closely associated with Peter Kemp, *Théorie de l'engagement: I, Pathétique de l'engagement. II, Poétique de l'engagement* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) and Richard Kearney, *Poétique du possible: Phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984).

folded structure of Ricœur's concept of the person (in *Soi-même comme au autre*). A multidimensional interpretation of theology and religious faith cannot be limited to a first person perspective (religion as intuition), the second person (religion as dialogue) or the third person (religion as phenomenon and institution). Moreover, there seems to be a striking resemblance between the internal structure of Ricœur's concept of imagination and the hermeneutical experience and the internal structure of a religious experience configured according to his "heterogeneous synthesis." This liberates new questions and perspectives, due to the correlation between the understanding of theology as a praxis of in-

terpretation in the world in front of the text and the internal structure of Christ according to the Chalcedonian tradition. Ricœur stressed that hermeneutics must choose between absolute knowledge and interpretation. This is also the case when coping with the theological imagination. From him we might learn that it is necessary to choose between theological imagination and absolute knowledge, but also that it is important to make a clear demarcation between theology and arbitrary thinking. Faith has primarily to be acknowledged in terms of hope – but hope is something that we can and need to talk about in terms of critical reflected convictions and trust.³²

³² A reduced version of this article has previously been published as "Paul Ricœur as the Other" in *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity: A Festschrift for Werner G Jeanrond*, ed. U. Schmiedel and J. Matarazzo (London/New York: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2015).