

**Revelatory Texts and Moral Lives: Reinterpreting the  
Specificity of Christian Morality Through a Ricoeurian  
Hermeneutic**

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To Mark, for everything.

“If one gives back to the world its character of horizon, of inexhaustibility, and of opacity, has one not to question anew the concept of truth and to acknowledge that its amplitude is equal to that of the world?”

(Paul Ricoeur)

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Finally, I owe more to Thomas Mealey and Mark Humphries than words can express. Without their belief in me this thesis would still be sitting on my desk.

## ABBREVIATIONS

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- AAS* *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, no. 16, 58 (1966), Vatican Press. *AAS* is the monthly official publication of the Papacy, containing the authentic promulgation of Church laws, the official texts of papal and conciliar documents, the proceeding of the 'Sacred Congregations', or Vatican Departments, and the announcements of ecclesiastical decisions and appointments. Formerly called *Acta Sanctae Sedis* (1865-1908).
- CB* *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
- CC* *Cross Currents*
- BTB* *Biblical Theology Bulletin*
- DL* *Doctrine and Life*
- HTR* *Harvard Theological Review*
- IKZ* *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift*
- ITQ* *Irish Theological Quarterly*
- JAAR* *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
- JBL* *Journal of Biblical Literature*
- JES* *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*
- JRE* *Journal of Religious Ethics*
- JRS* *Journal of Ritual Studies*
- JVE* *Journal of Value Enquiry*
- LS* *Louvain Studies*
- LT* *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory and Culture*
- NRT* *Nouvelle revue théologique*
- RSR* *Recherches de science religieuse*
- RTL* *Revue théologique de Louvain*
- SM* *Studia Moralia*
- THJ* *The Heythrop Journal*



*TS*    *Theological Studies*

*TT*    *Theology Today*

## EDITORIAL METHOD

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The layout of this thesis follows the guidelines offered by Kate L. Turabian's *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.<sup>1</sup> Where Turabian gives a choice of two methods, such as is the case for the presentation of footnotes and bibliographical references, for instance, I have chosen one and used it consistently throughout the thesis.

Where I have quoted from the work of another, the punctuation depends on whether the quotation is a full sentence in its original form. Question marks, exclamation points, commas, etc. are placed outside quotation marks unless the question, exclamation, or subordinate clause is part of the quotation. This rule applies equally to quotations within quotations.

In other sections of this thesis I have used block quotations to emphasis a text of particular importance. When the material in a block quotation begins with a paragraph in the original, it is given a paragraph indentation of four spaces and the first letter is capitalised. The punctuation used in quotations of this kind follows that of the author in question. If in a quotation of several paragraphs a full paragraph or more is omitted, the omission is indicated by a period and three ellipsis points at the end of the preceding paragraph, and followed by a period. These four dots at the end of a paragraph are followed by three dots at the beginning of the next paragraph. This paragraph is also indented.

Regular quotations within the body of the text appear within single quotation marks. Double quotations marks are used for quotations "within" quotations. Where for syntactical reasons it is necessary to change a letter of the original text from higher to lower case it is indicated by placing square brackets around the first letter of the first word of the quotation. If the quotation is set off syntactically from the text by a comma, period or colon, the first word is capitalised, even though it is lowercase in the original. Ellipsis points enclosed in square brackets are used to indicate the omission of a word or a sentence from the original text. The punctuation used in quotations of this nature depends on whether the end of the sentence is the one used by the cited author or whether it is mine. The period is placed inside the quotation marks to indicate that the end of the sentence as it appears in this text is also the end of the sentence as it appears in its original form. The period is placed outside the final quotation mark when the end of the sentence as it is presented here is not that of the original author.

Titles of foreign works are italicised, but every word of the title is not capitalised. I have only capitalised what would be capitalised in a normal sentence. The first word of a subtitle is also capitalised. As with works in English, a colon separates the title from the subtitle. I have done this at the beginning of every chapter, where the work of an author is being cited for the first time. Thereafter, the title will usually appear in abbreviated form. Titles of journals and periodicals are italicised and abbreviated in the footnotes used in this thesis, and a list of abbreviations may be found at the

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<sup>1</sup> Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn., revised by John Grossman and Alice Bennett, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

beginning of this thesis. Note also that italics are sometimes used in the body of the text for emphasis.

Ricoeur's writings on language present the translator/reader with several problems, especially when distinctions which seem to make perfect sense in French do not carry the same degree of clarity when translated into English. Where this is the case, I have enclosed the French term in brackets beside its English translation. In addition, a glossary is appended.

## ABSTRACT

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This thesis will attempt to show how the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur can help to move discussions about the specificity of Christian morality beyond the search for specifically Christian norms and principles to emphasise the importance of the biblical narrative in answering the 'Who?' of personal identity. It will also show how Ricoeur's work is useful in determining how the Bible can help to deepen our understanding of the virtues by providing us with paradigmatic examples of what virtuous behaviour looks like.

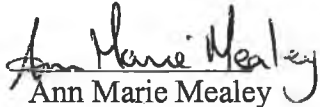
It will be argued that the similarities between a Ricoeurian interpretation of the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate and current trends in virtue ethics and spirituality make it an attractive alternative to the search for specifically Christian norms and values. The key to understanding Christian morality is not to be found in a search for norms and principles but in the particular way the Christian community understands itself. Stories and practices supplement ethics with the kind of personalism that was lacking in traditional moral theology.

The study will further demonstrate that Ricoeur's understanding of history and tradition can provide a way of answering to the respective concerns of the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools vis-à-vis tradition without showing a bias towards one or the other. Later sections will show how Ricoeur's work can provide us with a model for understanding how Christians can dialogue with the rest of world without being forced to abandon the narrative that continues to shape their lives.

## DECLARATION

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I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, that it has not yet been submitted in fulfilment of degree requirements at this or any other university, and that the library may lend a copy of this thesis on request as per the relevant regulations.

  
Ann Marie Mealey  
Maynooth, 2005.

## INTRODUCTION

Moral theology is at a crossroads. As it looks forward it seems also to be looking back. Recent interest in the merit of an ethics of virtue over an ethics of rules and principles now seems to be marked by a desire to recapture some of the certainty of the past, of scholasticism and of casuistry. The legacy of moral theology from Augustine and Aquinas today is often expressed not so much in rules and principles of conduct but in the more supple form of the virtues. Yet there appears to be differences between theologians as to whether virtue ethics can supply the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle of the moral task, which up until Vatican II was largely defined in terms of duty and obligation. Some theologians are now attempting to furnish virtue ethics with a deontological base so that Christian ethics does not move too far away from its traditional foundations, or fall into a sectarian or self-interested posture *vis-à-vis* other religious traditions and the universal ethical task to seek the truth.

Hitherto there have been rare moments of combining both casuistry (or a form thereof) and the virtues in a heuristic relationship. James Keenan and Thomas Shannon are among those who are currently seeking to move away from the negative connotations associated with casuistry and its various forms. In so doing, they propose that, if rules and principles are to play a part in contemporary moral theology,

casuistry needs to be expressed in the teleological anthropology that virtue ethics promotes.<sup>1</sup> Their work is marked by a desire to transcend the tensions and, perhaps, the myths surrounding casuistry and any attempt to explain moral theology in terms merely of norms and principles. Thus Keenan and Shannon are among those who are seeking to combine an ethics of virtue with an ethics of rule. They do this by arguing that the only way one can explain virtue or vice is by recounting stories and cases which show how a particular rule works.

It is clear that contemporary moral theology has come a long way since the renewal period, when theologians were in search of an alternative approach to that of the manuals of moral theology. The development of moral theology, however, seems rather circular; from the manuals to biblical ethics; from biblical ethics to autonomous ethics or faith-ethics; and from virtue ethics to casuistry, albeit in a different form to that of its historical beginnings. While this circular movement may be interpreted by some as a sure sign of the uncertainty of the future of Christian ethics, it may also be seen as a sign that contemporary moral theology is evolving at quite a pace, and that it is in search of new approaches to old questions and alternative ways of interpreting the dichotomies of the past. This clearly suggests that as a discipline moral theology is not averse to change, and that it is continually striving to answer to the needs of Christians living in a world that is marked by individualism and secularism.

Nevertheless, anyone familiar with the development of moral theology since the Second Vatican Council will agree that the many changes which have occurred in moral theology have been the result of lively debates and arguments about practically

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. James Keenan, S.J. and Thomas A. Shannon, "Contexts of Casuistry: Historical and Contemporary," in James Keenan, S.J. and Thomas A. Shannon, *The Context of Casuistry*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995, 221-231.

every aspect within its domain. Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor explains that what began as a mere dissatisfaction with some aspects of the method used by most scholars before the Council has turned into a long and sometimes acrimonious debate over every aspect of the discipline.<sup>2</sup>

The debate on the specificity of Christian ethics may be so described. Beginning in the 40s and 50s, this debate gave rise to a considerable amount of discussion in the area of moral theology, which now seems to have come to a halt. The result, however, is that scholars of moral theology are to be divided into two distinct but, as we shall see, not unrelated schools: the '*Glaubensethik*' and 'Autonomy' schools. The notion of the autonomy of morality vis-à-vis religion is a difficult one, and proponents of this view have not found it easy to state their position. There are two strands of the autonomy thesis, which correspond to two different but related concerns. One seeks to emphasise that we should not expect to receive our moral norms from an external authority or from revelation. Instead, we must acknowledge that we are meant by God to discover the content of morality ourselves. The other maintains that the content of Christian morality is identical to that of the humanist because it is discovered using natural law and reason.

Proponents of the *Glaubensethik* school, however, contested these views. Their position may be summarised by saying that they wish to preserve the idea that Christian morality has a specific content that is derived from faith and revelation. Similarly to the Autonomy school, there are two main strands of thought, called respectively the 'strong' and the 'weak'. Those authors who believe that there are

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<sup>2</sup> Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition Since Vatican II*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, 6.



*specific norms* available through revelation and known in faith are considered to be proponents of the former view. The weaker form, put briefly, includes those who maintain that, even if there are no specifically Christian norms or values, Christians sometimes find themselves 'going the extra mile' or beyond the merely reasonable because they believe it is part of being a true disciple.

That there are tensions between the so-called *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools is obvious. But the questions raised by writers of both positions have had a positive effect on the discipline of moral theology in so far as its primary focus is no longer merely rules and principles of conduct. It is on these grounds that Enda McDonagh can say that moral theology in the classical sense is dead, given that the interests, language and presuppositions of moral theology since the Council have undergone dramatic changes which make much of the discipline almost unrecognisable from its manualist past.<sup>3</sup> But as moral theology continues to live in its renewed form, there seems to be little or no sign of a consensus being reached concerning the nature and uniqueness of Christian morality. Indeed, many scholars have moved away from the debate, convinced that it has run its course. James Walter, for instance, advocates that moral theologians should concentrate on the more general task of determining how the Scriptures can inform and direct us morally.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Enda McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples: Tasks of Moral Theology*, Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1.

<sup>4</sup> James J. Walter, "The Question of the Uniqueness of Christian Morality: An Historical and Critical Analysis of the Debate in Roman Catholic Ethics," in Todd A. Salzman (ed.), *Method and Catholic Moral Theology: The Ongoing Reconstruction*, Omaha, Nebraska: Creighton University Press, 1999, 170.

Indeed, following the publication of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, some theologians seem to have adopted a 'wait and see' attitude towards moral theology,<sup>5</sup> while others, most notably Joseph Selling, express disappointment about the encyclical's view of contemporary moral theology. It seems quite clear that *Veritatis Splendor* gives much of postconciliar moral theology and the moralists of the period less than a pass-mark. One of the encyclical's central concerns is to underline the point that the work of some theologians of the postconciliar period denies some important Christian truths.<sup>6</sup> Referring to moral autonomy, John Paul II speaks of certain trends in theological thinking, of philosophical affirmations which are incompatible with 'revealed truths' (*VS*, 29). Moreover, he speaks of a remarkable lack of harmony between 'the traditional response encountered in seminaries and faculties of theology, with regard to questions of the greatest importance for the Church and for the life of faith of Christians, as well as for the laity' (*VS*, 29).

Some of the disharmonies to which the Pope refers in *Veritatis Splendor* are evident, in his view, from the way in which certain theologians of the postconiliar era answer the recurrent questions of context versus principle, faith versus reason, autonomous ethics versus faith-ethics, conscience versus authority, and the existence of moral absolutes. Although the aim of the encyclical is to redefine the nature of Catholic moral theology, it seems to have caused further divisions, not to mention disappointment, among scholars. Some writers feel that although their theology does not seek to undermine the Magisterium, or the Christian faith, or imply that freedom should be absolute, the encyclical suggests otherwise. In an extensive commentary on

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Joseph Selling and Jan Jans (eds.), *The Splendor of Accuracy: An Examination of the Assertions Made by Veritatis Splendor*, Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994, 7.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1993, parag. 29.

*Veritatis Splendor*, Joseph Selling remarks that ‘[o]ne of the more general trends that [he] found frequently repeated was with respect to theories, trends, or currents that “exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes absolute” (*VS*, 32-53).’<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Selling points out that he has not yet met anyone who believes the encyclical is addressed to them, for no Catholic theologian agrees that human beings possess absolute freedom. This is one of the reasons why he is disappointed with the encyclical: the revisionist view of moral theology is misrepresented and misunderstood.<sup>8</sup>

Those who hold a more traditional view of moral theology are also disappointed with postconciliar moral theology. Servais Pinckaers, for instance, believes that post Vatican II moral theology is little more than a wasteland of relativism. Pinckaers expresses a concern about the place of orthodoxy in a pluralistic society which claims to be open theoretically to all opinions but, in fact, excludes orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup> His allegations are perhaps stronger than the Pope’s, and show a general dissatisfaction with the kind of moral theology which is being promoted by those who seek to encourage dialogue with the secular world, and ensure that Christian ethics do not become insular and incompetent in the face of secularism or ecumenism.

Although, of course, their reasons are different, the dissatisfaction expressed by Pinckaers and Selling is a factor which unites them. The same may be said of the

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<sup>7</sup> Selling and Jan Jans (eds.), *The Splendor of Accuracy*, 35; cf. Joseph Selling, “*Veritatis Splendor* and the Sources of Morality,” *LS* 19 (1994), 3-17.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘revisionists’ are those who accepted that the moral theology of the manuals was far from adequate and began the task reconstructing moral theology on the basis of Scripture and tradition, rather than on natural and canon laws.

<sup>9</sup> Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995, 305ff.

writers of the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools: each school is dissatisfied with the approach taken by the other in respect of the uniqueness of Christian ethics. While one could interpret this division in a negative way, and conclude the divisions will never be resolved, one could also look at the divisions between the two schools as a sign that both wish to protect the Christian tradition, albeit from different perspectives. Both schools of thought wish to ensure that the Christian tradition does not become obsolete in the contemporary world. As Jeffery Stout tells us, pluralism need not be viewed in negative terms: it is a sign that many theologians agree that there is a common good and a central *telos* of the Church which needs to be protected.<sup>10</sup>

It is from this perspective, then, that this study of the Christian *proprium* debate will begin. Instead of attempting to show which scholar or school of thought has it right (so to speak), the aim will be to find an intermediary position, in which the concerns of both schools are represented. In chapter one, the historical matrices that gave rise to the debate, as well as the emergence of the so-called Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools, will be discussed. This will allow us to see that in spite of the weaknesses in both schools' presentation of the specificity of Christian ethics, both share a desire to protect a specifically Christian identity, however this is to be conceived.

The second chapter seeks to redefine the role of the biblical texts in Christian ethics using Paul Ricoeur's philosophical theory of interpretation. It will be shown that Ricoeur's work can perhaps mediate between the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools, for it asserts that the role of narrative is to provide Christian believers with a

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988, 210.

unique identity, rather than specific rules of conduct. His writings demonstrate that narrative performs a more fundamental role than that of a 'law-maker'. When applied to the biblical texts, Ricoeur's work suggests that the Bible is significant for Christian ethics since it tells Christians who they are, and connects them with their specifically Christian identity.

Moreover, chapter two will argue that the ethical stories contained in the Bible are significant because they provide believers with an imaginary space in which they may try out various proposals for living. Similarly to Ricoeur's interpretation of texts, it will be suggested that, rather than telling Christians what they should do, the biblical texts speak of that which is humanly 'possible'.

Chapter three is dedicated to virtue ethics. Since self-knowledge is central to Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, rules and principles are no longer given priority. This is similar to what virtue ethicists such as Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre are trying to achieve. The emphasis is placed upon the importance of knowing oneself rather than knowing simply what one should do. While Hauerwas, MacIntyre and Ricoeur interpret the role of narrative in the acquisition of virtue in different ways, they are united in the belief that good behaviour is not simply a matter of obedience but of developing good character traits and engaging in the practices of one's community that help to sustain and shape the virtues. Highlighting the similarities between a Ricoeurian interpretation of the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate and current trends in virtue ethics will serve to strengthen the argument that the specificity of Christian morality pertains to a specific story or identity.

Chapter three will further argue that there are certain aspects of Ricoeur's writing that hint at the kind of practices necessary to sustain a morality of virtue rather than rule. Reading the specific narrative of the Christian community, for instance, serves as a way of reminding the faithful of who they are as they pursue the virtues. Indeed, reading ethical narratives is also important for Ricoeur because it provides believers with paradigmatic instances of virtuous behaviour, which they may analogously transfer into the moral arena when necessary. This is another way of saying that reading ethical narrative helps to make us ethical.

The practice of forgiveness is also significant in a Ricoeurian interpretation of Christian morality, since it can help us to move on from the sins of the past, whether they have been carried out by us or done to us. For Ricoeur, forgiveness is absolutely necessary in all forms of society and community, because it helps us to learn a new story about ourselves and about those around us. However, he makes an important distinction between forgiveness and amnesty. Forgiveness, he argues, is not a matter of forgetting the sins of the past, or erasing the debt. It is not amnesia. A certain amount of remembrance of past offences is necessary so that the re-enactment of those offences might be avoided in the future.

Of course, moving the central focus of the Christian *proprium* debate from acts, norms and principles to emphasise character, story, practices and identity means that Christian ethics is offered a broader horizon of meaning. This broader horizon of meaning can account for the fact that there are dimensions of morality that we do not see. This will be the focus of chapter four.

It will be argued that since Ricoeur interprets revelation in such a way that we are not looking to it merely for norms, he opens up the possibility of responding to the contemporary call to put morality and spirituality back together. Similarly to current trends in spirituality, Ricoeur's theory of interpretation invites us to consider revelation as an invitation to enter into a spiritual relationship with God, where obedience to rule is not a cardinal concern. Instead, believers are invited to look at creation as God does. This means that the significance of revelation resides not so much in its content but in the kind of moral sensibilities it awakens in the hearts of the faithful.

The link that a Ricoeurian approach to the specificity of Christian morality debate establishes between spirituality and morality makes it an attractive alternative to the search for specifically Christian norms and principles. The general thrust of chapter four, then, is to show that although Ricoeur's rejects the idea that revelation yields new norms or principles, his work can account for the fact that, for Christians, love of God means love of neighbour. This means that even though Christians are expected to provide rational reasons to justify their moral actions, they will interpret these actions as the outpouring of God's love. For this is what Christians believe they should do because of who they are.

The final chapters raise some objection to the validity of Ricoeur's contribution to the Christian *proprium* debate. Chapter five raises questions about the role of the Magisterial teaching authority in a Ricoeurian approach to Christian ethics. It asks whether Ricoeur's work affirms or undermines the place of tradition in moral discernment. If the Christian tradition does not provide believers with any new or

'extra' material norms or rules of conduct, one wonders whether such a view could be deemed unorthodox. Outlining Ricoeur's understanding of tradition and subsequently applying it to the Christian *proprium* debate will help us to see that tradition may be interpreted as a healthy dialectic between the orthodoxy and the received wisdom of the past and the forward looking praxis of the present. In this way, it is hoped that Ricoeur's work will provide proponents of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy positions with a more inclusive understanding of tradition, where the legitimate concerns of both parties are respected.

The sixth chapter constitutes a more general critical appraisal of a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate. It seeks to identify some of the possible objections to, and possible criticisms of, introducing the work of Paul Ricoeur into the area of Christian ethics at all. Some of the issues raised include the limitations of narrative as means of explaining identity, tradition and 'being'. The need to include women in the quest for self-understanding through the texts of tradition will also be explored. Other questions which will be raised include the role of obligation in Ricoeurian virtue theory, and whether it promotes a strictly Aristotelian account of the virtues. Subsequently, it will be asked whether a Ricoeurian approach to Christian ethics, with its emphasis on symbolism and the imagination, undermines the truth of the biblical story. Investigating how Ricoeur combines history and fiction in a dialectic relation will indicate how both are necessary for the communication of God's message in a Kingdom that is at the same time revealed but yet to come.

Another question that will be raised in chapter seven relates to the place of moral rules in a Ricoeurian approach to the specificity of Christian morality debate. Since



the general thrust of Ricoeur's work is similar to the contemporary retrieval of virtue ethics and spirituality, one might wonder whether obligation plays any part in his interpretive theory. Nonetheless, it will be argued that his treatment of the universal Golden Rule (Lk. 6:31) indicates that Ricoeur does not present us with an account of morality that is purely subjective or narcissistic. For Ricoeur, morality is not simply about desires and their fulfilment; it involves also the need to respect the 'other' at all costs. Being obedient, then, means finding ways of living out the call to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Chapter six will conclude by considering what is perhaps one of the most controversial questions asked of the work of Stanley Hauerwas and other scholars, who assert that Christian moral behaviour cannot be understood apart from the narrative that shapes it. That is, does a Ricoeurian account of Christian morality promote a sectarian view of the Christian community and its role in society? In response to such criticisms, it will be argued that Ricoeur's writings about the ethos of the European community can provide us with a useful model for interpreting the role of Christians in a pluralist and secular world, where 'identity' and 'alterity' are given sufficient attention.

In short, the view taken in this thesis is that Paul Ricoeur's work can assist in showing that the specificity of Christian morality pertains to a unique identity or story. It is not incompatible with either the *Glaubensethik* or Autonomy school's view, since it asserts that the Bible is an indispensable resource for the formation of the ethical and communal identity of the Christian community. The difference between a Ricoeurian approach to the issues arising out the specificity of Christian morality debate and that

of the so-called *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools is that the former invites us to consider the Bible as an archive for *self-understanding* and for the *development* of ethical understanding. Thus the texts of the Christian tradition are placed in the most fundamental role of all. They are the means through which the Christian community answers the most basic, and perhaps most important, human question: 'Who am I?' For if we do not know ourselves, how can we know what we should do?

Moreover, since Ricoeurian theory considers the Bible as the primary archive of self-understanding, rather than of ethical doing, it will be suggested that Ricoeur succeeds in placing the Bible at the heart of the Christian life without limiting the complexities of moral decision making to a mere obedient following of historical texts. In this way, it will be shown that, in spite of their unique story of election and salvation, Christians are called to share in the common search for universal truth and dialogue with 'the world of women and men, the entire human family seen in its total environment...[i.e.,] the world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures.'<sup>11</sup>

Of course, one might wonder why or, indeed, how the work of a philosopher is suited to discussion of the nature of faith, and what or whether it contributes to human reason. Moreover, given that some philosophers believe that reason is the only means through which truth can be attained, one might be sceptical of analysing the debate on the Christian *proprium* through the eyes of a philosopher.

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<sup>11</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, in Austin Flannery O.P., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996, 164, parag. 2.

The encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, however, suggests that faith and philosophy can assist each other in the search for truth. According to John Paul II, faith in divine revelation can stimulate natural reason to new and deeper ways of thinking about the meaning of being and of persons through a reflection on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He argues that faith reminds philosophy that there are higher truths beyond the capacity of unaided reason to attain. Faith keeps philosophy humble and aware of its own limits, and protects it from the tendency to arrogance or to the presumption that reason is limitless.<sup>12</sup>

That the Pope is calling for a philosophy that acknowledges its limits and avoids the temptation to consider itself self-sufficient or separate from community is certain.<sup>13</sup> Philosophy, he notes, needs a community of persons, especially the experience of trust in persons, since so much of what we know and take for understanding must come from trust in what others tell us. The Pope's understanding of the relationship between faith and philosophy is best construed as a circle. Since theology is an understanding of faith in the light of the twofold methodological principle, the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*, faith and reason and theology and philosophy must coexist. Theology ensures that philosophy does not lose sight of the existence of a higher being and of a higher source of meaning and truth, while philosophy can help theology to attain a deeper understanding of revelation. Thus the Pope writes:

Theology's source and starting-point must always be the word of God revealed in history, while its final goal will be an understanding of that word which increases with each passing generation. Yet, since God's word is Truth (cf. Jn. 17:17), the human search for truth—philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules—can only help to understand God's word better. It is not

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<sup>12</sup> W. Norris Clarke, "John Paul II: The Complementarity of Faith and Philosophy," *Communio* 26/1 (1999), 562.

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1998, parag. 73.

just a question of theological discourse using this or that concept or element of a philosophical construct; what matters most is that the believer's reason use its power of reflection in the search for truth which moves from the word of God towards a better understanding of it.<sup>14</sup>

There can be no doubt, then, that the Pope sees value in using philosophy to arrive at a deeper understanding of faith. The truth of revelation to which Christians commit must be understood by human reason in order to be personally possessed by them, to become truth for them. As the Austrian Theological Commission puts it, theology needs philosophy so that the faith community can continue to answer some of the most fundamental human questions: Who am I? Where did I come from and where am I headed? Why does evil exist? How should I live?<sup>15</sup> And the principal instrument given to us by God to work out in detail this intelligibility of revealed truth is natural reason, especially in its most fully reflective form—philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, a philosophy that denies the existence of God or the limitations of human reason will undoubtedly hinder the kind of mutual enrichment the Pope believes is possible between theology and philosophy. The philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, however, does no such thing. At no point in his writings does he leave his readers in any doubt about the limitations of human reason or about the need to be a part of a community that strives to understand life and to draw closer to the Sacred. Ricoeur's agenda is to protect philosophy from degenerating into an over-rationalistic and mechanical search for truth, where transcendental meaning has no place. As we shall see, he is constantly calling philosophers to acknowledge that there is 'something

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Österreichische Theologische Kommission, "Fides et Ratio: Inhalt und Würdigung," *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 122/3-4 (2000), 266.

<sup>16</sup> Clarke, "John Paul II," 563.

other', something more, which prevents human reason from becoming absolute, and ensures that the mystery of God's creation is not forgotten.

Thus Ricoeur's philosophy is suitable for discussions concerning the nature of Christian morality, revelation, tradition and truth. In fact, it seems to answer to—at least in style—the call of *Fides et Ratio*, and places philosophy in service of a community which is formed by faith, not solely by reason. Ricoeur's writings leave us in no doubt that, although he is not a proclaimer of the Christian religion, his philosophy is an attempt to move away from the idea that humans are self-made, autonomous beings. For Ricoeur, we are dependent upon something greater than ourselves. Reason, therefore, must be understood as existing in relation to the human search for the Sacred, for meaning and belonging. That Ricoeur's philosophy is congenial to theological discussions is clear. For, as we will see shortly, it is with Ricoeur that 'faith may sit in thought'.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN *PROPRIUM* DEBATE

The *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate is not new to anyone who has studied moral theology since the renewal. The issues involved are complex and have left moralists divided over the precise nature of Christian morality. While some writers are concerned that if faith has no bearing on ethics, Catholic moral theology will degenerate into secularism, others are anxious to show that faith is the foundation stone upon which Christian truth is based. The questions asked include: Does Christian faith add any 'new' material content to Christian morality that cannot be discovered by reason alone? What is the precise role of the Bible in moral theology, and can it be taken as the proximate source of Christian morality? And if morality is a matter of human experience, what role is played by revelation?

The task of answering these questions is complicated, however, by the statement often found in encyclicals that faith informs or contributes to Christian morality. *Humanae Vitae* (1968), for example, says that faith illuminates and enriches human reason.<sup>1</sup> This ultimately means that, in the search for moral truth, reason may be unreliable and must be informed by faith. Published in 1967, *Populorum Progressio* suggests that

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<sup>1</sup> Paul IV, *Humanae Vitae*, 1968, parag. 4.

earthly goods are for the benefit of all persons,<sup>2</sup> and relies on biblical passages to justify this claim.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (1974) asserts that its moral principles are derived in the light of faith, and again biblical references are used to support this view.<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to see why these encyclicals have been debated over and over again, among other reasons, because their statements suggest that faith should make a difference to the way in which believers make moral decisions. Furthermore, they imply that the Christian story illuminates the moral quest and that faith completes or improves moral reason. The issues at stake here have crystallised around the debate on the specificity of Christian morality. Although it is still a bone of contention in academic circles, and most students of theology are aware of the issues dividing the *Autonomy* and *Glaubensethik* schools, it is important to remember that the issues are the result of their respective efforts to move away from former attempts to describe Christian ethics that scarcely referred to Christ or to Christian sources. This kind of theology was typical of the neo-Scholastic period.

But what was this period and how did it give rise to the debate on the specificity of Christian morality? It is from this question that we will begin. Examining the background to the Christian *proprium* debate, and subsequently highlighting the contrasting stances of the *Autonomy* and *Glaubensethik* schools, will not only provide us with a sound basis from which to begin our analysis, but it will also suggest a need

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Populorum Progressio*, 1967, esp. parags. 3, 17, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985, 2. Some of the texts used in *Populorum Progressio* include: Lk. 22, 2 Thes. 3.10, Mt. 5.3; 16.26; 19. 6, Gn. 1. 28, 1 Jn. 3.17, Eph. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Is. 49:1-5; 46:3; Ps. 22:10; 71:6; Lk. 1:44.

for a new approach to an old but unresolved question: What is specific about Christian morality?

The aim of this chapter will be to show how the limitations of approaching the Christian *proprium* debate from the perspective of ‘content’, norms or principles may be overcome by beginning from what is common to both sides. That is, that there exists a specifically Christian identity, narrated in the texts of the Bible, upon which Christians are invited to reflect on what it means to be a person, including a moral person.

### **1.1 A Call for Renewal**

Neo-Scholasticism is the name given to a late nineteenth and early twentieth century period in Roman Catholic theology.<sup>5</sup> During this period moral theology was identified with the manuals and with their method for determining sinfulness and degrees of sinfulness. Often described as a legal model, with law as the objective norm of morality, the manuals scarcely mentioned scriptural teaching, and while they recognised the role of human reason and natural law, they were marked by a predominant emphasis on authoritative hierarchical teaching.<sup>6</sup> Being moral was a matter of following the rules offered by the manuals, and little attention was given to the role of freedom or individual conscience in moral decision-making.

The manuals provided clear guidelines on moral and immoral conduct. Their most significant role during the neo-Scholastic period was their use in the formation of

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<sup>5</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Charles E. Curran, *Moral Theology at the End of the Century*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology, Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1999, 14.



priests, and the certainty with which they were written facilitated a clear, if minimalist, understanding of morality.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that from about 1918 onwards other disciplines, such as spirituality, dogmatic theology and patristic studies, were attempting to integrate notions of 'kerygma' and 'personalism' into their theological reflection, moral theology seemed to remain focused on sin, obligation and the human act. 'Moral theology [notes Raphael Gallagher] was, in general opinion, in an almost perfect state'.<sup>8</sup> The tone of the neo-Scholastic manuals was due in part to a struggle against modernism, especially the Enlightenment. In the same way as other scientific disciplines sought to emphasise the importance of objectivity and rationality, moral theology placed a great deal of emphasis upon the objectivity of moral knowledge and action, without of course denying the role of faith.<sup>9</sup> As a result, it became formal in its approach, focusing on rules and principles of conduct.

But this is not to suggest that neo-Scholastic moral theology should only be associated with a rigid and ahistorical system of natural law, since this type of theology did include reference to the Thomistic virtues. Although the influence of the

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that some authors compare the manuals of moral theology with the Celtic penitential books, which may have originated in Welsh synods held under the influence of St. David in the sixth century. Mostly written in Latin but some in Old Irish, the penitentials were similar to the manuals in the sense that they were used by confessors in the confessional, and focused to a large extent on penance. The absence of diocesan organisations and Episcopal jurisdiction in Wales and Ireland explain why the penitentials were not decreed by Synods but were the work of individuals—abbots of monasteries. These abbots had the task of issuing penance based on the teaching of the Scriptures, canonical and monastic tradition, and on their own judgement. Cf. John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 5-17; for a full study of the Irish Penitentials, see Hugh Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials and Their Significance for the Sacrament of Penance Today*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Raphael Gallagher, "The Manual System of Moral Theology Since the Death of Alphonsus," *ITQ* 51 (1985), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Klaus Demmer, *Shaping the Moral Life: An Approach to Moral Theology*, trans. Roberto Dell'Oro, James Keenan S.J. (ed.), with a foreword by Thomas Kopfensteiner, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000, 12ff. For an example of how the Decalogue could be described as 'casuistic law', see Karl H. Peschke, S.V.D., *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, Alcester, Warwickshire: C. Goodliffe Neale Ltd., 1986, 16ff.

Enlightenment on moral theology cannot be denied, we must not over-generalise and presume that the moral theology of neo-Scholasticism was purely rule-based. Nor must we forget that moral theology became less focused on Thomistic virtues and more engaged with rule and principles, especially after the renewal of the sacrament of confession at the Council of Trent. Instead, we must consider *why* moral theology became more formal and less speculative in its approach. It is also important to note that some themes that originally were integral to moral theological reflection (e.g., 'kerygma' and 'personalism') fell under the category of dogmatic theology. This meant that, when confronted with the scientific rigor of dominant culture, moral theology was lacking because it became preoccupied with acts, principles and argumentative consistency<sup>10</sup> to the detriment of virtue. This is clear when we look at how morality was defined by the neo-Scholastics.

Morality arises from the precept laid on us by God to reach our last end. Morality strictly has to do with what is necessary to reach the end. The last end is given by God to us as a reward for good living. The content of morality is discovered by reason, unaided by revelation, reflecting on the nature of the rational animal. But the divine positive law confirms it. Moral obligation arises not from the inherent rightness of an action but from the command of God.<sup>11</sup>

Although this legalistic approach to moral theology continued throughout the 40s and 50s, at the same time there emerged a group of theologians who were dissatisfied with the style of morality presented by the manuals, and emphasised the need for renewal. The dissatisfaction was such that the Second Vatican Council had some terse comments which any schoolteacher would recognise as of the 'could do better variety'.<sup>12</sup> In discussing the educational and vocational formation of men for the

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<sup>10</sup> Demmer, *Shaping the Moral Life: An Approach to Moral Theology*, 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 303.

priesthood, the bishops had to examine the nature of the various branches of theology which they had studied and to which they referred when formulating a pronouncement. It was in this context that they made certain recommendations concerning moral theology.

Among these recommendations was the need to pay special attention to the role of the Scriptures in moral theology and to the figure of Christ as the basis for moral living.<sup>13</sup> But perhaps the most interesting changes were already taking place within the discipline of moral theology itself, and it is worth investigating the views of some of the moralists who instigated the call for renewal in the first place.

## 1.2 Scholars of the Renewal

The scholars of the renewal expressed dissatisfaction with the formal, philosophical style of morality that featured in the manuals.<sup>14</sup> They believed that the sources of moral theology ought to include the Bible and the figure of Christ. In fact, it appeared that the driving force behind the renewal, at least in part, was the belief that Christian morality had a specific content, and that this content is derived from revelation. The central tenet of the renewal was the belief that Christian ethics is not simply about philosophical enquiry into the nature of moral goodness; it also involves a recognition that a transcendental order exists,<sup>15</sup> and that through grace, faith in Christ and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Optatam totius*. The recommendation mentioned here ran as follows: 'Specialis cura impendatur Theologiae morali perficiendae, cuius scientifica exposition, doctrina S. Scripturae magis nutrita, celsitudinem vocationis fidelium in Christo illustret eorumque obligationem in caritate pro mundi vita fructum ferendi', no. 16, *AAS* 58 (1966), 724.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Bernard Häring, C.Ss.R., *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priest and Laity*, 3 vols., trans. Edwin G. Kaiser, Westminster: The Newman Press, 1963-1966; Josef Fuchs, "Gibt es eine spezifische christliche Moral?" *Stimmen der Zeit* 185 (1970), 99-112.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Delhaye, "La mise en cause de la spécificité de la morale chrétienne," *RTL* 4 (1973), 339.

consideration of the sacred Scriptures, the path of goodness will be revealed. As Häring puts it, 'To come to Christ, the "light" of eternal truth, also means to arrive at a profound understanding of the good.'<sup>16</sup>

Although the authors of the renewal were united about the importance of situating Christian morality within the biblical tradition, they differed somewhat in their individual presentations of what this new approach should look like. Some stressed the importance of the new life in grace,<sup>17</sup> and sought to concretise the principle of *Agapè*. Others maintained that Christian morality should be based on the principle of charity,<sup>18</sup> and that the moral task of the Christian was the imitation of Christ.

Bernard Häring, for example, maintains that the Good News is not actually a new law, but the sovereign majesty of God intervening in the person of Christ and the grace and love of God manifesting itself in him.<sup>19</sup> For him, Christian morality is deepened by the figure of Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit. The law of the old Covenant in the Decalogue is thought to establish minimum requirements in the form of prohibitions, and Christ is considered to be the sole teacher of the new Covenant founded in his sacrifice on Calvary. Law is life in Jesus; it is the following of his footsteps; it is loving service, humility and love of enemies. 'The Gospel preaching of the Saviour [notes Häring] is the announcement of the divine message of salvation

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<sup>16</sup> Häring, *The Law of Christ*, vol. 1, 134-135.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Delhaye, "La mise en cause de la spécificité de la morale chrétienne," 308-339.

<sup>18</sup> Enda McDonagh, "The Primacy of Charity," in Enda McDonagh (ed.), *Moral Theology Renewed*, Dublin: The Furrow Trust, 1965, 130-150.

<sup>19</sup> Häring, *The Law of Christ*, vol. 1, 3.

and the summons in an actual concrete situation presented with unique dramatic vividness.’<sup>20</sup>

There can be no doubt that Häring is advocating a move from the style of moral theology found in the manuals to a Scripture-based one. His position typifies what the renewal sought to achieve: it emphasises the need to place the Bible at the heart of Christian ethics. Of course some scholars understood this to mean that Scripture not only provides a general moral orientation for believers, but that it also gives principles and concrete rules which may be applied to specific situations.<sup>21</sup>

Josef Fuchs is also among those authors who in the early stages of the renewal sought to move away from the moral theology of the manuals towards a more Christocentric morality. In his earlier writings, Fuchs advocates that Christ is the prototype to whom Christian life must conform, and that the newness in Christian morality has to do with the activity of grace, which transcends the ordinary category of rational human behaviour.<sup>22</sup> Thus he counsels: ‘We are not meant to live merely as *man*, but as man baptized into Christ, into his death and into his resurrection, man who, through baptism, has died to sin and awakened to “walk in the newness of life.”’<sup>23</sup>

Fuchs uses St Paul’s letter to the Romans to support the view that, through baptism, Christians are influenced by divine grace—an active presence in Christians that

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<sup>20</sup> Häring, *The Law of Christ*, vol. 1, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Josef Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, trans. M.H. Heelan, Maeve McRedmond, Erika Young and Gerard Watson, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970, 28-29.

<sup>22</sup> Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, 5; cf. Helen Oppenheimer, *The Character of Christian Morality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Leighton Buzzard: The Faith Press Ltd., 1974, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, 5; for a discussion of biblical ethics as the imitation of Christ, see Peschke, *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, 58ff.

encourages them to live a virtuous life. Similarly to Häring, Fuchs believes that the norm of Christian morality is sacramental, and that Christian morality is derived from a supernatural 'being-in-Christ'.<sup>24</sup> Thus he contends that Christians have access to the supernatural order, which transcends the natural order discerned by reason. As such, they are called not only to live in accordance with the requirements of natural law, but also in accordance with the requirements of the supernatural order.

...[I]n accordance with the principle that human behaviour derives from man's 'being', it follows that not only must all of us be brought to see that the person of Christ is a pattern for every one of us, but all of us collectively must regard ourselves as forming a brotherly community and make the brotherhood a reality by active participation. Whoever is concerned to lead a truly Christian life, when he participates in this way, reveals the reality, the life, of Christ, who is the first-born of all.<sup>25</sup>

Another strand of thought which came out of the renewal emphasised the need to acknowledge the primacy of charity in Christian morality. Underlying this view is the belief that sanctifying grace is the communication of charity.<sup>26</sup> Gérard Gilleman's name is associated with this approach.

As MacNamara explains, 'What was exciting about Gilleman's work was that it combined the gospel spirit, which the renewal sought, with a philosophical grounding which was dependent especially on Aquinas.'<sup>27</sup> Taking Aquinas' understanding of the end as his starting point, Gilleman explains that moral acts must be understood in relation to their ultimate end, that is, God. Gilleman also stresses that no single act of goodness can reach the supernatural goal (God) unless it takes the form of Christian

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<sup>24</sup> Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Gérard Gilleman, "Théologie morale et Charité," *NRT* 74 (1952), 806-820.

<sup>27</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 24-25.

charity.<sup>28</sup> '[T]he moral act only makes sense if it points towards our ultimate end.'<sup>29</sup> Christian charity, in other words, illuminates the moral act and gives it meaning. In the same way as a body has no significance without the soul, for Gilleman, Christian morality only makes sense when understood as charity.<sup>30</sup> Christian moral actions, therefore, are more than mere human expressions of love; they are considered to be manifestations of the most profound love conceivable—*Agapè*.

A third group of theologians writing during the renewal period emphasised the importance of following the person of Christ in the search for Christian moral truth. This involved showing the ways in which the figure of Christ could be considered as the cardinal principle of Christian moral discernment. Fritz Tillman, Rudolf Hofmann, Bernard Häring, Joseph Fuchs and Enda McDonagh are associated with this line of thought: each stresses the importance of following Christ in the quest for truth. McDonagh, for example, explains that Christ taught man 'how he must die to self to reach the other and so love in a fully personal way.'<sup>31</sup> He also contends that the sacraments of the Christian community must be translated into the everyday activity of Christian believers through Christian acts of charity. Similarly, Fuchs maintains that Christ is the pattern and law of Christian morality, and thereby the measure of every Christian believer's life.

Both McDonagh and Fuchs sought to locate Christian morality in its Christological context, which involved relying heavily on Christological doctrine and the biblical

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<sup>28</sup> Gilleman, "Théologie morale et Charité," 818.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., trans. mine.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 819.

<sup>31</sup> McDonagh, "The Primacy of Charity," 141.

texts, without indicating how the figure of Christ concretely contributed to Christian moral conduct. Although these two scholars insist that the axiom *Agere sequitur esse* is central to the Christian understanding of morality, it is still uncertain as to what the content of a 'Christ-centered' morality would look like. If Christians participate in the life of Christ, how does this contribute to their daily living and to the way in which they make moral decisions? Does it mean that Christ should be seen as an inspirational figure? Or does it mean that moral living is a sharing in the discipleship of Christ? And if it does (either), what does it mean?

It is clear that, in spite of being united in the quest to locate the Bible and the life of Christ at the heart of Christian discernment, theologians of the renewal differed on what this 'new' kind of Christian morality should look like. Moreover, their individual presentations of the proposed Bible-centered moral theology raised a number of issues, which continued to be propounded by some writers, notwithstanding the work of Congar, Rahner and Schillebeeckx. The idea that the unbaptised individual could not reach the supernatural goals of morality in the same way as the Christian believer, for instance, raised the question of whether the requirements of Christian morality go beyond human morality. This was the case because divine grace was thought to confer a supernatural quality upon the actions of believers.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, theologians of the renewal failed to indicate the ways in

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<sup>32</sup> The theologians of the renewal relied mainly on the Karl Rahner's understanding of grace as a supernatural reality, i.e., that which is higher than merely human experience. Grace was thought to raise the natural actions and habits of believers to a supernatural status, because Christian action is essentially directed towards God. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace*, trans. Dinah Wharton, London: Sheed and Ward, 1963, 4-7.



which grace contributed to the content of moral actions, or how it served as the mediator between the ontological and psychological orders.<sup>33</sup>

MacNamara raises other problems. Most scholars, he says, suggest (in various ways) that Christian morality involves a 'following' or a 'sharing' in the life of Christ, but none of them states clearly just how the Christian is to live. "Following" or imitation may also mean that one is to take the content of one's moral life from what is known of the life of Christ, i.e., from the Bible.<sup>34</sup> These assertions raise questions about the range of interpretations of the figure of Christ presented in the Bible. It must be noted that one of the main aims of the renewal was to integrate the Bible and moral theology, but how this was to be done became problematic. On some occasions Scripture was used to support certain moral truths said to have been arrived at by reason, on others it was used as itself the source of moral norms or principles, or as a source of moral obligation—the idea being that if a rule was written in the Scriptures, then it must be God's will. Yet little attention was paid to the rules and principles of scriptural exegesis; scholars simply gathered together all the scriptural references to the topic which they were discussing and, often enough, texts that had only the most oblique relation to their topic.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> For an interesting discussion on the use of the biblical texts by moral theologians, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996, esp. 220ff. Hays maintains that on the whole moralists are only interested in the big theological themes of the New Testament, not in close exposition of biblical texts. Referring to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, Hays explains that Niebuhr's use of the biblical texts is typical of a moralist, for it is highly selective and suits his purposes. Thus Hays explains: 'In the Gospels [Niebuhr] focuses on "the ethic of Jesus" as expressed particularly in the Sermon on the Mount; in other words, he concentrates on Jesus' sayings to the virtual exclusion of the narrative framework. His reading of Paul is highly selective, focusing on Romans 7 as a classic evocation of the "impotence and corruption of human nature" but giving scant weight to Romans 8, with its depiction of transformed life in the Spirit... What about Old Testament texts?... All in all, this narrowly circumscribed use of biblical sources is a weakness in Niebuhr's method.' (p. 220).

It is interesting to note that the recourse to the Bible in the search for moral truth was something that had always been a feature of the Protestant churches.<sup>36</sup> But this is not to say that these concepts were completely foreign to the Roman Catholic tradition; we have seen that the manuals used biblical statements to justify various moral stances and provide support for pre-existing philosophical positions. The main difference between the manual tradition and the proposed style of moral theology of the renewal was the way in which the role of the Bible was understood.

The Roman Catholic manuals did not take the Bible or revelation as their *primary source*. Instead, they used the Bible as ‘corroborative proof for positions already arrived at philosophically.’<sup>37</sup> The newness of the renewal in Catholic moral theology was due to the fact that it promised a biblical morality, not unlike that of some of the Protestant traditions. Some models based morality on the New Testament principle of *Agapè*, while others explored the motifs of discipleship and imitation of Christ.

But the way in which scholars went about explaining what this kind of morality should look like caused much division, as those who had formerly welcomed the proposal to base the renewal on the Bible had second thoughts, in view of what they saw as a naïve approach to the moral content of the Bible. Some authors claimed that the figure of the historical Jesus could not be taken as the norm of Christian morality because, as Mackey puts it, ‘Precise details of the words and actual deeds of the historical Jesus are difficult to establish.’<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the moral utterances of Jesus

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<sup>36</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> James Mackey, *The Problems of Religious Faith*, Dublin: Helicon Ltd., 1972, 268.

contained in the Bible are a product of their time and cannot be taken as a definite guide illustrating how Christians of all ages should behave. Those who shared this view believed that the content of Christian morality was not any different to that of the non-believer, and that Christians had to use natural law in the search for moral truth.

Not all who had formerly welcomed the renewal's proposal of a biblical morality shared this view, however. Josef Ratzinger and Heinz Schürmann, for instance, were of the opinion that, although we must attend to their literary character,<sup>39</sup> the words of Jesus 'may be held to be the ultimate ethical norm'.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Schürmann argued that many of the moral utterances of Christ recorded in the Bible should be understood as paradigms of human ethical action that are morally binding for Christian believers: 'The central demand of the New Testament, in whatever garb it is presented, is the demand for *total* self-giving that follows from the love of Christ or of God. This is the ultimate commandment and is absolutely binding.'<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, in this view the role of the magisterial teaching office is indispensable to the moral life of the Church because it is responsible for expounding the truths of faith, and 'faith involves fundamental decisions (with definite content) in moral matters.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Examining the literary character of the words of Jesus reveals that much of what he says is intended to motivate believers by way of example rather than give to them a specific code for living.

<sup>40</sup> Heinz Schürmann, "How Normative are the Values and Precepts of the New Testament?" in Josef Ratzinger, Heinz Schürmann & Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality*, trans. Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Schürmann, "How Normative are the Values and Precepts of the New Testament?" 33.

<sup>42</sup> Josef Ratzinger, "The Church's Teaching Authority—Faith—Morals," in Ratzinger et al., *Principles of Christian Morality*, 1986, 72.

It is clear that the proposals of the renewal did much to replace the legalism of the manuals of moral theology and the much too impersonal, ontological and sometimes almost physical categories in which subjects such as divine grace were explained. But the move from the formalism of the past presented Catholic moralists with a new set of questions and problems about which there was little or no agreement. The following questions were asked: Is Jesus the norm for Christian morality? If so, how do his words and deeds give content to human morality? Are the texts of the Bible not historically conditioned and therefore limited in terms of what they can teach the faithful of today's world? In fact, such were the disagreements between scholars of the renewal about the precise role and function of the Bible in Christian morality that in the early 70s a split emerged among Roman Catholic theologians as they separated into two schools of thought: the '*Glaubensethik*' and 'Autonomy' schools.

The former school gets its name from the German word for faith, and the name implies a view of Christian morality which connects its intimately with Christian belief. Some supporters of this school of thought believe that revelation contributes to the content of Christian morality. The latter school are so called because of the apparent autonomy which they attribute to morality vis-à-vis religion. But, as we shall see, they do not suggest that faith has nothing to say to Christian morality. A closer look at the central arguments of both schools of thought will make their distinguishing lines of response clearer.

### 1.3 The Emergence of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy Schools

#### 1.3.1 *The Movement for an Autonomous Ethic*

The early 70s saw a critical period for moral theology, as scholars who had initially welcomed the renewal's appeal to Scripture as the source of Christian morality began to qualify their positions, insisting that

[w]hen we speak of the law of Christ, we must first of all pay attention to the fact that he himself, the person of Christ, is our law, the pattern of our life, its basis; secondly we must consider in which way and precisely in which sense Christ can truly be and is our law; and thirdly we must specially [sic] take note of the relation between the law of Christ and the moral natural law.<sup>43</sup>

Those who supported this view became known as the Autonomy school. Writers of this school of thought agreed with Alfons Auer's assertion that the moral demands by which Christians are expected to live are identical in content to the demands of natural law.<sup>44</sup> Such statements appeared to run contrary to the renewal's proposal that Christian morality should be based on the Scriptures and on the figure of Christ. Josef Fuchs, Richard McCormick and Bruno Schüller, to name but three prominent authors, were among those who could not conceive of a biblically-centered morality which did not correspond in content to the demands made on moral subjects by natural law. In their opinion, neither the figure of Christ nor the biblical texts which deal with ethical matters can be used to justify moral positions: the texts of the Bible are the product of their time, and the moral demands of Christians must also meet the rational demands of the natural law.

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<sup>43</sup> Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Alfons Auer, *Autonome Moral und Christlicher Glaube*, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1971, 27ff.

An important factor contributing to the emergence of the Autonomy school was the fear that if morality were derived from Christian faith and revelation, it might give the impression that Christianity was a 'ghetto'—a view which went counter to the mood of the time in Europe where there was a move towards inter-religious dialogue and discussion.<sup>45</sup> According to MacNamara, the desire to communicate with members of other religious traditions and with all sensitively moral individuals in the search for moral goodness was a cardinal concern of the Autonomy school.<sup>46</sup> In addition to this move towards a shared morality, the Autonomy school sought to show that Christian morality was not simply a matter of following the commands of the Bible. In its view, Christian morality, like human morality, is something which can be found in the immanent structures of the world.

Around the same time as the emergence of the Autonomy school, 'The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World', a document of Vatican II, made a significant statement which helped to advance its central argument. The mood of the document is set in paragraph two, as it addresses not only Christians but all those who seek truth and moral understanding. It reads as follows: 'Now that the Second Vatican Council has studied the mystery of the church more deeply, it addresses not only the daughters and sons of the church and all who call upon the name of Christ, but the whole of humanity as well, and it wishes to set down how it understands the presence and function of the church in the world of today.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 38.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, parag. 2, in Austin Flannery (ed.), O.P., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, revised edn., Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992.

The document also stressed the autonomy of the natural order. It asserted that the natural order is rooted in the divine order, and encouraged the whole of humanity to use the methods of the sciences and arts in the search for human moral truth—a view that, if extended to the field of morality, seemed to support the stance taken by proponents of the Autonomy position.<sup>48</sup> Similarly to *Pacem in Terris*, an encyclical of Pope John XXIII, the methodology employed in *Gaudium et Spes* was one which did not exclusively rely on the Scriptures or on faith statements. Instead, it appealed to reason as its primary source, keeping with its opening address to all men and women of good will.

But this is not to suggest that the aim of *Gaudium et Spes* was to promote a purely autonomist view of Christian morality. As Curran points out, '[T]here are some startling individual statements about the identity of the fully human and the Christian'.<sup>49</sup> Generally speaking, however, one could say that *Gaudium et Spes* and *Pacem in Terris* 'create the milieu in which theologians raise the question about a distinctive and specific Roman Catholic ethics.'<sup>50</sup>

And raise questions they did. Although the scholars of the Autonomy school were united in the recognition that the content of morality is substantially the same for

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<sup>48</sup> The document reads as follows: 'Many of our contemporaries seem to fear that a close association between human activity and religion will endanger the autonomy of humanity, of organizations and of science. If by the autonomy of earthly affairs is meant the gradual discovery, utilization and ordering of the laws and values of matter and society, then the demand for autonomy is perfectly in order: it is at once the claim of humankind today and the desire of the creator. By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth, and excellence, its own order and laws. These, as the methods proper to every science and technique, must be respected.' *Gaudium et Spes*, parag. 36.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Curran, "Is there a Catholic and/or Christian Ethic?" in Charles E. Curran and Richard McCormick, S.J., (eds.), *Readings in Moral Theology No.2: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*, New York: Paulist Press, 1980, 64-65.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Christians and non-Christians, their presentations of this human morality are quite different. Indeed, it is not unusual to find authors of the Autonomy school (as well as those of the Faith-Ethic school) criticising one another for misunderstanding the specificity of Christian morality.<sup>51</sup> Charles Curran, for example, has reservations about Josef Fuchs's understanding of the natural law and human reason. Curran cannot accept that the sensitively moral person, by reason, can come to understand that the love commandment requires self-sacrifice, even unto death on a cross. Thus Curran writes:

I have grave doubts that suffering, sacrifice and the cross are historically verifiable as rational. Such an approach does not seem to give enough importance to the reality of sin and what effect it has on man and reality. There is such a thing as the mystery of evil and the mystery of iniquity which is so strong that in the midst of it rationality does not shine through. In the midst of suffering and unrequited love one could very easily conclude to the irrationality of the whole human enterprise. I do not want to say that sin totally does away with some aspects of the rational, but I do think sin has more effect than the proponents of this position are willing to admit. This approach to the question seems too abstract, ahistorical and overly rational to be fully satisfying.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Norbert Rigali, for instance, claims that many contributors to the debate on the specificity of Christian ethics have misunderstood the central issue. 'In short, then [notes Rigali] the debate is not about Christian ethics; not about the distinctiveness of Christian morality; not about Biblical fundamentalism nor even about Biblical morality or ethics; not about ecclesiastical authoritarianism nor even about ecclesiastical authority; not about whether morality should be theonomous rather than autonomous; not about whether morality should be rooted in reason or in Christian faith; not about whether reason is too weak to achieve certainty with regard to moral norms; and not about preserving, in crusade-like or other fashion, a Christian character of morality. The debate is about whether Christian faith makes any difference with regard to the material content of moral life.' Norbert Rigali, "The Uniqueness and the Distinctiveness of Christian Morality and Ethics," in Charles E. Curran (ed.), *Moral Theology: Challenges for the Future*, New York: Paulist Press, 1990, 80. Other writers have highlighted the need for conceptual clarification concerning the terminology used in the Christian *proprium* debate, especially in respect of the terms morality and ethics, distinctiveness and specificity. Cf. James J. Walter, "The Question of the Uniqueness of Christian Morality: An Historical and Critical Analysis of the Debate in Roman Catholic Ethics," in Todd A. Salzman (ed.), *Method and Catholic Moral Theology: The Ongoing Reconstruction*, Omaha, Nebraska: Creighton University Press, 1999, 163.

<sup>52</sup> Curran, "Is there a Catholic and/or Christian Ethic?" 76.



Curran is also dissatisfied with Fuchs' use of the terms motivation and intentionality.<sup>53</sup> Fuchs writes of a specifically Christian intentionality and motivation which affects the formal but not material cause of morality. Curran, however, asks whether the formal motivational or intentional element, which is present for Christians when making moral decisions, can be understood as existing apart from the material content of moral actions. His concern may be put in the form of a question: Is there not a reciprocal causality between the formal cause of morality and its material element? We thus find Curran arguing that Fuchs' approach does not seem to prove conclusively that human morality understood in the metaphysical sense has the same content as Christian morality.<sup>54</sup>

This explains why Curran prefers to argue for the existence of an explicitly Christian consciousness, rather than intentionality or motivation, which affects moral judgement.<sup>55</sup> This means that what is specific about Christian morality is the explicitly Christian way in which morality is known and manifested. Christian ethics is *thematically* and *explicitly* Christian, but what the Christian knows with an explicit Christian dimension is and can be known by all others.

Other proponents of the Autonomy view highlighted the uniqueness of Christian ethics by distinguishing between exhortation and normative ethics, and between the

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<sup>53</sup> Fuchs maintains that the specificity of Christian morality has to do with the particular intention, or thrust, or motivation of Christian morality, i.e., Christian morality is going somewhere, it has a goal and a specific intentionality. Cf. Josef Fuchs, "Is there a Christian Morality?" in Curran et al., *Readings in Moral Theology No.2*, 1980, 15; idem, "Gibt es eine spezifisch christliche Moral?" *Stimmen der Zeit* 185 (1970), 111ff.

<sup>54</sup> Curran, "Is there a Catholic and/or Christian Ethic?" 76.

<sup>55</sup> Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue*, Notre Dame: Fides Publishers Inc., 1972, 20.

genesis and truth-value of moral or morally significant insights.<sup>56</sup> In Bruno Schüller's view, gospel and law yield different kinds of ethical propositions, and because the law has yet to be fulfilled, the gospels can only serve as a reminder to the faithful to constantly seek to do good and avoid evil. The gospels deal with ethical goodness in a real way but, according to Schüller, do not give Christians any new or extra material norms to which the non-religious or sensitively moral individual does not have access. 'The normative character of the gospel as the message of God's action and Christ's action for the salvation of the human race is thus the normative character of a model.'<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, Schüller takes this a step further by saying that if the 'ought' of ethical action were to come from Christ, or from the ethical pronouncements found in the biblical texts, then to act morally would simply be a matter of acting like Christ, and morality would degenerate in a Christonomous moral positivism. In order to avoid such misrepresentation of the moral life, Schüller counsels that we must be clear about the origins of moral goodness: 'The exemplarity of God and the exemplarity of Christ are not the standard for the meaning of "to be morally good" but for the exercise of moral goodness.'<sup>58</sup>

Though at one with Schüller and Curran in the view that the content of morality is the same for the believer and the non-believer, Richard McCormick and Vincent MacNamara approach the question of the specificity of Christian morality in yet

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<sup>56</sup> Bruno Schüller, "The Specific Character of Christian Ethics," in Curran et al., *Readings in Moral Theology No.2*, 1980, 208.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

another way. McCormick believes that one's motivation for doing good can be profoundly affected by one's belief in revelation and prayer, and that Christianity provides believers with a new dynamism or view of persons and their meaning, a new style of life inspired by the figure of Christ,<sup>59</sup> and a special context which facilitates moral reflection.<sup>60</sup>

The suggestion here is that the Christian tradition should be understood as a 'value-raiser' rather than an 'answer-giver', and it was supported by many theologians of the Autonomy stance. John Macquarrie, for instance, says that '[t]he distinctive element [in Christian morality] is the special context within which the moral life is perceived. This special context includes the normative place assigned to Jesus Christ and his teaching – not, indeed, as a paradigm for external imitation, but rather as the criterion and inspiration for a style of life.'<sup>61</sup> MacNamara also espoused the view that Christianity can sensitise us to what it means to be a human person. Christianity, he notes, provides the faith-community with a wealth of stories about human beings, God, and the cosmos. It facilitates a moral sensitivity in the pursuit of norms, even if these are *per se* available outside the community.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Richard A. McCormick, "Does Faith Add to Ethical Perception?" in Curran et al., *Readings in Moral Theology No.2*, 1980, 170.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Mackey, *The Problems of Religious Faith*, 278ff. Here Mackey points out that '[h]owever paradoxical it might seem, religious faith facilitates and even calls for moral commitment which takes the form of the most dedicated involvement in man's world and in man's history....The truth is that religious faith saves man from being frenetic and inhumane, enables him to give of his best in history, and calls for his best in such a way that he must take thought as to how best he can give it.' (Mackey, 278).

<sup>61</sup> John Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics*, New York: Harper and Row, 1970, 89.

<sup>62</sup> Vincent MacNamara, "The Distinctiveness of Christian Morality," in Bernard Hoose (ed.), *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, London: Cassell, 1998, 159.

In spite of the various ways in which authors of the Autonomy school sought to explain the special nature of Christian morality, they were united in the view that revelation did not contribute any new norms or values to human morality. Their central stance may be summed up in three main points: a) the content of morality is discoverable by reason and the natural law; b) one does not need Christian faith in order to know what morality requires; c) revelation and faith give a *context* to moral striving; a *vision of life* which informs our perceptions and choices; a *motivation* for right action, and a *model* and *inspiration* for moral endeavour in the person of Jesus Christ. In short, scholars of the movement for an autonomous ethic sought to show that there is nothing required of the Christian that is not also perceivable by, and required of, the non-Christian.

This view did not gain the support of all Roman Catholic theologians, however, and it was contested in particular by a school of thought which became known as the *Glaubensethik* school. As the theologians of the *Glaubensethik* school saw it, the movement for an autonomous ethic had reversed the central aims of the renewal, and the whole fate (*Schicksal*) of Christian morality was brought into question.<sup>63</sup> But what was the *Glaubensethik* school,<sup>64</sup> and why did it emerge in opposition to the movement for an autonomous ethic?

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Bernard Stöckle, "Flucht in das Humane? Erwägungen über die Frage nach dem Proprium christlicher Ethik," *IKZ* 4 (1977), 312.

<sup>64</sup> Some commentators prefer to consider this movement as a more advanced stage of the renewal. Cf. MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 56.

### *1.3.2 The Glaubensethik Stance.*

Proponents of the Faith-Ethic view could not accept the Autonomy school's insistence that the content of Christian morality is the same for the believer and non-believer. They expressed concern about the suggestion that reason is sufficient in the search for moral truth. While they agree with the autonomists concerning vision and context, supporters of *Glaubensethik* further believe that there are things asked of Christians, which are recognised only in faith, with the help of divine grace. It is for this reason that Philippe Delhaye could not accept Fuchs' autonomy thesis: in his view it did not account for the action of divine grace on human conduct.<sup>65</sup> For Delhaye, Christian moral action is specific in the sense that it is influenced and perfected by the grace of God.

Other supporters of the *Glaubensethik* school rejected the autonomy stance because it was too secular in its approach. In his article "Flucht in das Humane?" Bernard Stöckle criticises Fuchs, Auer and Blank, claiming that they are affected by the general trend towards secularism—a movement which was gaining considerable momentum and support from various scholars during the renewal period. Furthermore, Stöckle believes that the Autonomy school's presentation of Christian morality was far too abstract and philosophical.<sup>66</sup> The autonomists' insistence on natural law and reason seems to be at the root of Stöckle's concerns. For Stöckle, as

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<sup>65</sup> Delhaye, "La mise en cause de la spécificité de la morale chrétienne," 339.

<sup>66</sup> Stöckle, "Flucht in das Humane?" 321ff.

for most proponents of the Faith-Ethic view, Christian ethics cannot be based on reason alone: God, not man, is the source of moral obligation.<sup>67</sup>

More recent scholarship seems to show that some authors of the *Glaubensethik* persuasion have not changed their views. Writing in the early 80s, Konrad Hilpert, for example, takes the criticisms against the movement for an autonomous ethic a step further. In particular Hilpert focuses on the work of Alfons Auer, saying that Auer has adopted the concept of autonomy from philosophical ethics solely for the purposes of communicating with the secular world.<sup>68</sup> In Hilpert's estimation, the autonomy position denies all transcendence, and the concept of autonomy should not be used to overcome the weaknesses of the casuistic approach to moral theology.<sup>69</sup> Further concerns raised by Hilpert and others have to do with the kind of freedom associated with the term 'autonomy'. For the idea of being autonomous seems to suggest that the individual's freedom and self-fulfilment comes first, while the idea of being persons living together in a community comes second.

In addition to the concern that the views of the Autonomy school seemed to make reason absolute and to promote a secular morality, the Faith-Ethic school also feared that the autonomy position encouraged a denial of a place for the magisterial teaching office.<sup>70</sup> Josef Ratzinger states that the movement for an autonomous ethic 'has no room for an ecclesiastical Magisterium in the moral field. For norms essentially

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<sup>67</sup> It is important to note that proponents of the Autonomy view were not suggesting that God was not the source of ethical obligation; they were simply trying to show that belief in God did not alter the content of morality or give new material norms or values that went beyond the scope of human reason.

<sup>68</sup> Konrad Hilpert, "The Theological Critique of 'Autonomy'," *Concilium* 171-176 (1984), 11.

<sup>69</sup> This criticism is made against Auer's use of the term autonomy as a way of overcoming the problems associated with the moral theology of the manuals.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, "The Church's Teaching Authority—Faith—Morals," 48ff.

based on the tradition of faith would, according to... [the autonomy thesis], spring from the misunderstanding that the teachings of the Bible are absolute and perennial indications while they are only a reference to the positions reached at different moments by the knowledge attained by reason.<sup>71</sup>

Of course the Autonomy school did not intend to undermine the role of the Magisterium in the teaching of morals; it simply sought to show that the Christian tradition did not add any new material norms to morality, i.e., that the content of morality is discoverable by all. Nevertheless, the criticisms against the Autonomy school continued. Josef Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Philippe Delhaye, James Gustafson and Gustav Ermecke are among those who rejected the autonomy stance, preferring instead to support the view that the ethics of Christians must be Christian.

There are two main points of orientation to be considered here. The first is that authors of the Faith-Ethic school believe that Christians have a particular vocation to follow Christ in obedience. The second is more complex: the assertion that the Christian community has a significant grounding in an historical event, and its history and conduct are to be determined by that historical revelation.<sup>72</sup> According to writers of this line of thought, it is a mistake to equate the content of Christian morality with the content of philosophical ethics, because the content of the former is and should be determined by revelation. In other words, Christ is the prototype for Christian morality, and this means that there are things expected of Christians which are

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<sup>71</sup> Josef Ratzinger, "Magisterium of the Church, Faith, Morality," in Curran et al., *Readings in Moral Theology No.2*, 1980, 176.

<sup>72</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics be Christian?* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975, 171.

recognised only in faith.<sup>73</sup> Similarly to the autonomists, however, there are differences in the ways in which individual supporters of the *Glaubensethik* explained their views. Though united with colleagues in the view that faith gives a specific content to Christian morality, each scholar makes his own argument.

Highlighting the fundamental problem with ‘orthopraxy’, Josef Ratzinger, for example, emphasises that the truth of reality (or of being) is inextricably linked with faith, even if people are not aware of it.<sup>74</sup> Ratzinger contends that the question of the distinctiveness of Christian morality seems to revolve around the historical origin of certain biblical statements, the problem of how faith communicates with reason, and the limitations of reason in matters of faith.<sup>75</sup> In response to the Autonomy view, that various biblical statements may be traced back to other sources and therefore cannot be considered as elements of a specifically Christian morality, Ratzinger asserts that it is wrong to say that texts inherited from elsewhere can never attain a specific character when imported into a different context.

Ratzinger also points out that it is futile to sift through the biblical moral utterances and precepts in an attempt to find out if similar statements existed in other traditions. ‘Christianity’s originality [he says] consists rather in the new total form into which

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<sup>73</sup> Some scholars referred to Christ as the norm *par excellence* of Christian morality. See esp. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Nine Theses in Christ Ethics,” in Curran et al, *Readings in Moral Theology No.2*, 1980, 190-207; idem, ‘Nine propositions on Christian ethics,’ Ratzinger et al., *Principles of Christian Morality*, 1986, 77-102; for a useful entry into Urs von Balthasar’s thesis, see Marc Ouellet, “The Foundations of Christian Ethics according to Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* (Fall 1990), 375-438. For a discussion of ethics as divine drama and praxis, see Edward T. Oakes, “Ethics and the Search for God’s will in the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 17 (1990), 409-431.

<sup>74</sup> Ratzinger, “The Church’s Teaching Authority—Faith—Morals,” 51.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid; and for an interesting study of the Jewish and Hellenistic cultures out of which the biblical texts developed, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, “The Bible and Christian Moral Practices,” in Lisa Sowle Cahill and James Childress (eds.), *Christian Ethics*, Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1996, 3-17.



human searching and striving have been forged under the guidance of faith in the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus Christ.’<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, Ratzinger was not the only scholar who maintained that the words of Jesus have normative significance because they are clothed in the authority of God as revealed in the Scriptures.<sup>77</sup> Heinz Schürmann also took the view that there are binding demands which remain valid for Christians in spite of the fact that they may be conditioned by time and culture. Although it is true that we must attend to the literary character of his words, Schürmann believes that the following of Christ must remain the basis of the Christian moral life.

Nevertheless, Schürmann’s approach to the biblical texts and their use in Christian morality is different. He asserts that believers should assess the binding moral implications of the ‘primitive Christian paradosis’<sup>78</sup> found in the New Testament by distinguishing between ‘the theologically oriented values and precepts, which we describe as appropriate conduct in the presence of the God who, in Christ, reveals himself eschatologically and brings about man’s salvation, and “particular” values and precepts referring to various areas of the world and of life.’<sup>79</sup>

James Gustafson’s approach is different again. Gustafson contends that the moral admonitions and injunctions found in the Bible may be considered as Christian ethical

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<sup>76</sup> Ratzinger, “The Church’s Teaching Authority—Faith—Morals,” 53.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>78</sup> Schürmann, “How Normative are the Values and Precepts of the New Testament?” 30.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

demands because it is in Christ that all things are created, and Christ is Lord of all things.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, Gustafson argues that the ethics of Christians must be exclusively Christian because the community is called to obedience to Jesus, implying that all moral actions must be determined by the lordship of Christ. But this is not to say that the content of Christian moral actions is different to that of the non-believer. In Gustafson's view Christian ethics and universal human ethics are convertible terms. This means that what is ethically justifiable in a rational sense is the Christian thing to do, and vice versa.

The claim that all rationally defensible moral actions are Christian is a significant one, for it implies that, when Christians make moral decisions, it is not the intention that renders the action specifically Christian. This is the case because both Christians and non-Christians would justify truthfulness, for instance, on rational grounds. Rather, what is unique about Christian moral action is the final justification for moral actions: Christian moral acts should be consistent with a Christian way of life.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, the moral act is qualified by the religious significance it has for the moral agent, without undermining the rational grounds upon which it is justified as being a good or bad action. Gustafson's central position is that actions are good for two distinctive but related reasons: 'It is a morally right or good act because of its consequences or because of the immediate moral principles that governed it. It is also a "good" act for the more ultimate "theological" and "religious" reasons it was done; it was done in fidelity to God, or done to honor God.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* 170.

<sup>81</sup> See James Gustafson, "Can Ethics Be Christian?: Some Conclusions," Curran et al., *Readings in Moral Theology No. 2*, 1980, 146-155.

<sup>82</sup> Gustafson, *Can Ethics be Christian?* 174.

Although Gustafson is generally thought to be of the Faith-Ethic persuasion, there are striking similarities between his stance and that of some of the authors of the Autonomy school. Charles Curran springs to mind here because, similarly to Gustafson, Curran believes that, through the faculty of human reason, all can arrive at the same ethical conclusion. What is distinctive for Curran is the explicitly Christian way in which Christians make their moral judgments, i.e., in light of the story of revelation and election. This is not unlike Gustafson's view that the specificity of Christian ethics has to do with the reasons *why* particular actions were carried out rather than *what* was done.

It is for this reason that there are considered to be two versions of the *Glaubensethik* position, called respectively the 'strong' and the 'weak'. Those authors who believe that there are *specific norms* available through revelation and known in faith are considered to be proponents of the former view. The weaker form, put simply, includes those who maintain that, even if there are no specifically Christian norms or values, Christians sometimes find themselves 'going the extra mile' or beyond the merely reasonable because they believe it is part of being a true disciple. Of course, this makes distinguishing the *Glaubensethik* school from the Autonomy school difficult, as there appears to be little to choose between some versions of what are ostensibly contrasting views. Although generally explained in terms of a belief that faith and revelation add new content to human morality, it is difficult to explain the *Glaubensethik* position without over-generalising and presuming that their position may be described solely in terms of a belief that faith contributes to the content of morality.

#### 1.4 The Limitations of Both Approaches

The similarities between the autonomists and the weaker forms of the Faith-Ethic school are perhaps one of the reasons why MacNamara says that the *Glaubensethik* School's use of the Bible is problematic.<sup>83</sup> For if one believes that there are no new norms given by revelation, one's view of the Bible would be radically different from one who maintained that revelation provides new norms for moral conduct. One is left wondering then as to what the authors of the *Glaubensethik* school intend when they speak of the role of the Bible in Christian morality, and how is this different from the Autonomy school.

Furthermore, does the Faith-Ethic school always intend to say that the Bible contains specific values, or principles of conduct, or norms? Or does it mean to suggest that the Bible encourages or motivates Christians to live a good life, taking the figure of Christ as a model, and not as a norm? Whether one supports the former or the latter view, significant questions arise. The former view seems to suggest that Christian morality is a 'revealed morality'. This is a dubious approach, especially when one begins to consider how the first century biblical utterances on morality are relevant in today's world. It also raises serious methodological questions: How can a person or an event be considered as a norm? And if Christ can be considered as a norm for Christian believers, in what way does this manifest itself in the every-day lives of the faithful? What is the content of such a morality? And how can moral positions be justified by saying that 'Christ willed me do such and such an action'?

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<sup>83</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 60.

Concerns also arise from the assertion that the figure of Christ as presented in the Bible should be taken as a model or an inspiration for moral action. One wonders how the example of Christ as the one who 'goes the extra mile' affects concrete moral actions. What does this kind of morality look like, and how can one differentiate between actions that are based on natural law and those that are the result of choices that go beyond what is 'merely reasonable'?

This is not to suggest that the Autonomy school's presentation of the unique character of Christian morality does not have limitations, or that it is to be preferred over the Faith-Ethic stance. It, too, has its weaknesses. While the Autonomy school claims that the content of Christian morality is available to people generally or, at least, to those who sincerely seek to do good and avoid evil, it is difficult to see how this claim concretely promotes dialogue with other religions. Frequently authors of this school of thought are reticent about their central thesis; they make statements which indicate a degree of uncertainty about their fundamental position.<sup>84</sup> Stating that the content of Christian morality is 'largely' or 'substantially' the same as it is for the non-believer or the sensitively moral individual, for example, raises the question of whether there are times when the Christian is expected to behave in specific ways. If this is the case, it becomes difficult to see how a natural law approach could always include the possibility of inter-religious exchange.

Moreover, while the Autonomy school contends that the biblical moral admonitions, injunctions and directives depend upon the natural law for their justification, it does not seem to get beyond the proposal itself. Instead, proponents of this view seem

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<sup>84</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 43.

merely to hypothesise about the close relationship between philosophical and theological ethics. Furthermore, supporters of the autonomy position do not seem to give sufficient consideration to the implications of adopting natural law theory as the basis of Christian morality. It is often asked whether the natural law theory is sufficient in itself, since its reliance on the physicality of acts or circumstances seems to provide an impersonal account of human morality. In addition, one has to ask whether natural theory is flexible enough to accommodate magisterial teachings on human morality, or whether it will lead to the prohibition of certain actions 'defined in nonmoral terms and sometimes defined merely according to [their] physical or biological structure'.<sup>85</sup>

Above all, the movement for an ethics of autonomy seems unable to prove convincingly that the material content of morality is the same for all. It asserts that Christianity gives a specific context or a 'new motivation' to Christian morality, but one wonders whether these terms are neutral? Is the relationship between the 'Why?' and the 'What?' of human action so clearly defined that the motivation behind an action never affects its content?

The criticisms discussed above show that the issues surrounding the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate are complex and that there is much disagreement as to the precise nature of Christian morality. It seems that even within their own schools of thought, there is little agreement among theologians as to how Christian morality should be explained.

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<sup>85</sup> Charles E. Curran, *A New Look at Christian Morality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London: Sheed and Ward, 1976, 115; for an interesting treatment of what is known as the 'new natural law theory', see Jean Porter, "Natural Law and the Specificity of Christian Morality," in Salzman (ed.), *Method and Catholic Moral Theology*, 1999, 209-229.

Perhaps the most striking factor of all is that although generally spoken of as opposites, there are clear similarities between weaker forms of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools. This seems to suggest that classifying them as opposites or indeed attempting to show which one has it right is a futile venture. As Alfons Auer reminds us, we should perhaps spend more time examining our own understanding of morality and less time trying to say what is wrong with that of others.<sup>86</sup> But this approach seems rather ambitious given that a large number of scholars seem to have moved away from discussions about the Christian *proprium* debate. In fact, the debate seems to have come to a standstill. According to Auer, however, the lack of dialogue should not lead one to presume that the problems have been solved; rather, one should feel compelled to find a more modern way of putting the message across and of explaining the issues involved.<sup>87</sup> Auer is right that an alternative is needed. But what should this alternative be?

### **1.5 Beyond the Impasse**

Despite the shortcomings and complexities of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools' presentation of Christian morality, there is a common concern in both approaches which not only mediates the current impasse regarding the existence of specifically Christian norms, but also assists in the reorientation of the debate. This common thread is the desire to say what is specific about Christian morality and to situate the Bible in a context *vis-à-vis* its role in the moral life.

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<sup>86</sup> Alfons Auer, "Die autonome Moral im christlichen Kontext," in Walter Seidel and Peter Reifenberg, (eds.), *Moral konkret: Impulse für eine christliche Weltverantwortung*, Würzburg: Echter, 1993, 15.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, the similarities between the weaker forms of the Faith-Ethic approach and that of the Autonomy school show that the tensions dividing scholars are perhaps pseudo-tensions, as both schools are similar insofar as they wish to ensure that the Christian tradition is protected, and that it continues to function as a life-giving entity. Rather than distinguishing these two by their respective stances vis-à-vis specifically Christian norms or values, then, the situation between the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools could be put in a more positive way. It could be said that both schools of thought are marked by the desire to protect a *specifically Christian identity* in the midst of a secular world.

The move to an approach that places the question of the identity at its center is made all the more convincing when we consider the problems that arose from an approach that concentrates on the search for specifically Christian norms or principles. Both schools of thought run into difficulty about the specific nature of Christian morality, for they seem unable to state convincingly where the specificity lies. In fact, the lack of conceptual clarification of terms such as ‘content’, ‘motivation’, ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ makes the positions offered more problematic still.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, if one believes that faith contributes to either of these, in particular to morality, it seems that one is overlooking an important observation made by Wittgenstein. Beliefs are so entangled in other claims that a person can hardly isolate one belief and definitely say how it is specifically Christian or how it contributes to the content of a specifically Christian morality.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 203.

<sup>89</sup> Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996, 202.



The belief in Jesus as the Son of God, for instance, involves a range of issues such as consideration of what it means in the broader context of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It implies background beliefs about a God who could have such a Son and subsequently raise Him from the dead and about the possibility of such an event occurring in such a way as it could be translated into purely Christian norms or values. The issue may be summed up in the following way: How can one translate religious convictions about an historical event into concrete, specific principles for action?

Another not unrelated issue has to do with the way in which one understands the development of Christianity as a religion. Of course, it is incontrovertible that revelation is the central defining event which gave rise to the Christian community, but this community was made up of converts, mainly from Judaism. This meant that the early Christian community was made up of people who moved from one tradition to another, bringing with them an already-established moral code. As Wayne Meeks explains,

The moral sphere within which the new Christians [were] urged to think about their own behaviour is a strongly bounded space. Its symbolic shape and texture [were] formed by Jewish conceptions and stories about the one God and by their peculiar Christian story about God's crucified and resurrected son. Its social boundaries [were] determined by the turning of those who have received these stories as their own and by separation from 'the Gentiles' who include those formerly their families and associates.<sup>90</sup>

This seems to indicate that attempting to look for purely Christian beliefs or values unmixed with the surrounding cultures from which Christianity developed and with which it continued to interact is a dubious venture. Moreover, it carries with the suggestion that as long as the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate is discussed in terms

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<sup>90</sup> Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of the First Christians: The First Two Centuries*, London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 5.

of the existence of specifically Christian norms or values, it is most certainly bound to yield poor results and little agreement. The shift to an approach centered on a specifically Christian identity, then, seems all the more promising.

Such an approach asserts that when Christians reflect on moral actions and on human behaviour generally, they are not only reflecting on what it means to be a person, but on what it means to be a Christian person. This is specific. Christians have a specific identity because they are connected to a specific story. It goes without saying then that when Christians ask questions about the morality of a particular action, they are effectively reflecting on two specific questions. The first is 'Who am I?'; the second, 'What should I do as that person?'

When considered in light of the Christian *proprium* debate, this means that what is specific about Christian morality is not so much the individual actions that ensue from moral reflection as the way in which Christian moral reflection takes place. As MacNamara explains,

Moral judgements are not made in a vacuum. They are made by people who see life in a particular way.... Like all basic myths, the Christian story gives us our stance towards the world and its creation, towards the value and significance of the human person, towards body, matter, spirit, towards the meaning and significance of history, towards life and death, towards what constitutes flourishing and perfection, towards success and failure.<sup>91</sup>

It is from this perspective that we begin our study of the Christian *proprium* debate. The fundamental idea will be that the specificity of Christian morality is less about the search for specific norms and values and more about the search for a particular identity, a Christian identity. In order to show how this shift in focus may be justified

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<sup>91</sup> MacNamara, "The Distinctiveness of Christian Morality," 153.

from a scriptural and magisterial point of view, and in particular how it may assist in liberating the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools from the current impasse, the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur will be used.

The preference for Ricoeur's work is due to his ability to consider ethical problems from the perspective of a particular tradition, while maintaining an openness towards all sides of the argument. In addition, his work on biblical interpretation and on the interpretation of literary texts in general allows him to put forward an assiduously balanced position concerning the role of the Bible in ethical reflection, this being one of the central issues at stake in the Christian *proprium* debate.

Indeed, one of the most important issues surrounding the Christian *proprium* debate is whether one can be part of a tradition, religious or otherwise, and dialogue with other religions as to the content of human morality without falling into a sectarian posture. These topics are treated in Ricoeur's work, which indicates that his philosophy can take us to the heart of the issues arising out of the Christian *proprium* debate. By analysing the aspects of Ricoeur's thesis that are relevant to the Christian *proprium* debate, we will attempt to show how the French philosopher's work can help to mediate between the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools, thereby showing that there may be a way out of the current impasse. More precisely, this study will attempt to show that the work of Paul Ricoeur can assist in moving the specificity of Christian morality debate away from the disagreements over Christian norms and principles, motivation and intention, to a stance which respects the integrity of the Christian moral tradition without undermining the concerns of the *Glaubensethik* or Autonomy schools.

## CHAPTER TWO

### NARRATIVE AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

The previous chapter suggested that the Christian *proprium* debate should be looked at from the point of view of a specifically Christian identity, and that the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur can assist in doing this. But Ricoeur is generally spoken of as a philosopher and his contribution to ethics may not be obvious. Indeed, the lack of works explaining Ricoeur's contribution to ethical thought suggests that it is necessary to state precisely why Ricoeur's work is useful in the context of an ethical debate. The first section of this chapter will discuss some of the ethical themes that feature in Ricoeur's many works, with a view to determining how they take us to the heart of the issues surrounding the Christian *proprium* debate.

The second section will focus more specifically on Ricoeur's contribution to the interpretation of texts. As pointed out in chapter one, the debate on the special character of Christian ethics gave rise to much controversy as to how or whether the Bible contributes to the content of Christian morality or to the motivational aspects of Christian moral striving. This led to tensions and much disagreement between theologians, as commentators in each school sought to use the Bible in a way that would serve their own purpose. The need to determine the role of the Bible vis-à-vis Christian morality is clear. Owing to the fact that Ricoeur has published much on the

interpretation of texts and on the necessity of texts for the construction of a coherent self-identity, the second section of this chapter will demonstrate that the primary function of texts is to tell us something about ourselves, rather than provide us with a code of moral conduct. It is at this point that we will see where ethics and the interpretation of texts converge in Ricoeur's interpretative method, thereby showing why his work is congenial to discussion of the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate.

Our task, then, is twofold: a) to justify using the work of Paul Ricoeur in the context of an ethical debate, namely that of the Christian *proprium*; and b) show how it assists us in determining the precise function of texts in the moral arena. Once we have sketched Ricoeur's contribution to the ethical and hermeneutical fields, we will then be able to see how Ricoeur's work locates the texts of the Christian tradition at the heart of the human quest for self-understanding, rather than at the heart of specifically Christian moral behaviour, thereby moving the Christian *proprium* debate beyond the current impasse.

## 2.1 Ricoeur and Ethical Thought

Unlike his predecessors, Gadamer, Heidegger, Husserl, Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Ricoeur's primary intention is to analyse the human person through texts, signs and symbols. Whereas the former seek to explain existence in a direct way, i.e., through theoretical or philosophical theories, Ricoeur believes that the only way to understand the self is through signs and symbols.<sup>1</sup> His hermeneutical project, therefore, is to interpret the self through the narrative texts and stories of a given tradition. We thus

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is expressed by Ricoeur in his well-known 'wager': 'I wager that I shall have a better understanding of man and of the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings if I follow the indication of symbolic thought.' Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, 355.

find Ricoeur steering away from the rationalism of Descartes and Kant, as well as the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. Whereas Husserl located the self and 'meaning' in general in the subject's intuition of the 'things themselves', Ricoeur prefers to analyse human beings, ethical meaning and existence through language, symbolic meaning and texts. This is because Ricoeur believes that things are always given to us *indirectly* through signs and symbols, which include the signs and symbols contained in cultures, narratives and traditions.<sup>2</sup>

In saying this, Ricoeur does not seek to deny existential meaning in the philosophical sense. Rather, Ricoeur's project is to show that the interpretation of the self includes signs, symbols and stories that ask us to think more, not to abandon speculative thought altogether. The power contained in symbols and narratives provides individuals with a heightened awareness of what it means to be a human person, as well as an ethical person. Symbols allow us to understand more than can be explained by theoretical means.

This is clear from Ricoeur's treatment of evil in his work *The Symbolism of Evil*. As its title suggests, this work represents an attempt to explain the ethical theme of evil through the stories and symbols of evil contained in the major Western traditions—Greek, Hebraic and Babylonian. By interpreting a) the *primary* symbols of stain, guilt and sin, b) the *secondary* symbols of searching for meaning, decline, fall and blindness, and c) the *tertiary* symbols of freedom and will, Ricoeur succeeds in

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<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to move away from explaining human existence according to the Cartesian expression 'I think, I am', Ricoeur proposes to examine being through an indirect route, that is, through signs and symbols. Thus he says: 'The first truth— *I think, I am* — remains as abstract and empty as it is unassailable. It must be "mediated" by representations, actions, works, institutions, and monuments which objectify it; it is in these objects, in the largest sense of the word, that the *ego* must both lose itself and find itself.' Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Don Ihde (ed.), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 327.

demonstrating how stories assist moral agents in articulating ethical meaning and understanding ethical concepts.<sup>3</sup>

For Ricoeur, the more we seek to understand stories and ethical symbols, the better equipped we will be to understand ourselves and what is required of us as ethical beings. By engaging with stories and symbols of evil, good, virtue and vice, Ricoeur believes that we come to the realisation that we exist in relation to others. This again implies that ethics is an important theme for the French philosopher. Indeed, Ricoeur even goes as far as to say that understanding ethical concepts or subjectivity is only attained after we have undergone a series of interpretative steps. Reading texts, questioning symbols, listening to the received wisdom of the past are necessary projects in the quest for understanding.<sup>4</sup> However, this does not mean that once we are familiar with the texts of our tradition, the hermeneutical task ends. In fact, the opposite is the case.

In Ricoeur's view, texts require interpretation so that they can effectively convey ethical and subjective meaning. But the task of interpreting the self in this way is never finished, since rereading texts opens up new meanings and fresh interpretations that call us to question once again that which we formerly considered to be true. Here again the theme of ethics is introduced into the Ricoeurian corpus. Although reading

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 269-354.

<sup>4</sup> Commenting on his famous phrase *le symbole donne à penser* (the symbol gives rise to thought), Ricoeur says the following: 'This maxim that I find so appealing says two things. The symbol invites: I do not posit the meaning, the symbol gives it; but what it gives is something for thought, something to think about. First the giving, then the positing; the phrase suggests, therefore, both that all has already been said in enigma and yet that it is necessary ever to begin and re-begin everything in the dimension of thought. It is this articulation of thought...in the realm of symbols and of thought positing and thinking that I would like to intercept and understand.' Paul Ricoeur, 'The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection,' in Charles E. Regan and David Steward (eds.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 36.

texts and ethical stories heightens our awareness of who we are, it does not offer a conclusive account of what it means to be human.<sup>5</sup> For Ricoeur, the search for authenticity is a constant one, which ends only in death. When we read the texts of our tradition, then, there is an ethical element at stake: the self is never master of the text but a disciple who allows him/herself to be transformed by the text. Hence the self is not so much the originator of truth and self-understanding as an agent who critically engages with the world of the text to arrive at a deeper and more authentic view of the self and of the world.

By saying this, Ricoeur does not wish to promote the idea that ethical and subjective meaning be defined only by cultural symbols and stories of the past. When discussing social imagination and the dynamics of socio-political action, for instance, Ricoeur states that, although informed by tradition and collective stories of the past, communities exist within a creative tension. By this he means that we are informed not only by the ideological vision of ourselves, which is handed down to us by tradition, but also by utopian images of rupture, novelty and disruption. The suggestion here is that communities are the product of a past which is not yet complete, and which needs to be critically accessed so that ideological or self-interested views do not hinder the development of the future. While ideology gives us a sense of identity and belonging, it must be coupled with a healthy suspicion. Thus Ricoeur analyses society and its citizens as a balance between past and future, between utopia and tradition, between critique and ideology.

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<sup>5</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 33. Here Ricoeur says that 'what we call the *subject* is never given at the start. Or, if it is, it is in danger of being reduced to the narcissistic, egoistic and stingy ego, from which literature, precisely, can free us. So, what we lose on the side of narcissism, we win back on the side of narrative. In place of an *ego* enamoured of itself arises a *self* instructed by cultural symbols, the first among which are the narratives handed down in our literary tradition.'



This is no less true of his treatment of texts. Texts of a given tradition provide readers with a space in which they may appropriate the story of their past; in short, their identity. Nevertheless, this hermeneutical interpretation via texts, he explains, must exist alongside a suspicion for the texts and for the possible biases or unhealthy ideological perspectives they harbour.<sup>6</sup> In relation to society, then, no less than with texts, Ricoeur insists that the interpretation of communities and the hermeneutics of the self must take place somewhere between belonging and distance. In other words, to belong to a tradition, including a narrative tradition, we must be critical, so as to avoid falling into a sectarian or self-indulgent stance.

Once again we see an ethical perspective emerging from Ricoeur's work. Similarly to what is taught in fundamental moral theology, for instance, Ricoeur insists that we must always ask questions. The search for meaning, truth and authenticity is a never-ending quest, which asks us time and time again to rethink who we are and what it is we are required to do.

In fact, one of the most urgent ethical tasks today seems to be the need to combat illegitimate prejudices or sectarian approaches to religious traditions. Ricoeur's works seem to provide a way in which one could belong to a particular community without running such a risk. He explains that we must always question our stance in relation to the world from beyond ourselves, i.e., from beyond or outside our tradition. The way to do this, according to Ricoeur, is to maintain a healthy suspicion and constantly question our prejudices, choices, communities and vision of ourselves. Put

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*, trans. Kathleen McLoughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 68-69; 77-79; 166-208. Note: Hereafter, the abbreviation 'TN' will be used to refer to this work. The volume in question will be indicated by placing 'I', 'II' or 'III' after the abbreviated title.

simply, we can only become authentic persons and communities by a process of alienation, that is, by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion which demystifies our illusions, permitting us to decipher the masked workings of desire, will and interest.'<sup>7</sup>

An equally urgent ethical task of the contemporary society is that of individualism and the idea that we are completely autonomous beings. It is also an issue that arises in the context of the Christian *proprium* debate. This issue could be put in the form of a question: Does the idea of autonomy promote absolute freedom on the part of moral agents? Indeed, the use of the term autonomy is one of the criticisms made against the autonomists by theologians of the faith-ethic persuasion. The latter believe that it promotes a self-indulgent, self-interested society, since it seems to indicate that human beings are both judge and jury. Yet again, however, Ricoeur does not fail to offer some reflections on this matter.

Unlike Husserl, who maintained that one could understand reality apart from its historical and temporal context, Ricoeur insists that meaning not only precedes us but it outlives us.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Ricoeur moves the hermeneutical debate away from the idea that meaning is deciphered easily and in a way that serves the purposes of particular individuals or communities. For Ricoeur, we must always be aware of our finitude; we exist in a horizon of consciousness that we have not created but which we must interpret. Understanding is a process, not a given, which requires us to engage with the past and its significations. This means, then, that understanding of any kind

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004, 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

can never be completely autonomous, since we are not solely responsible for the horizon of meaning which surrounds us.<sup>9</sup>

Here again we see that Ricoeur tends towards an ethical vision of autonomy. His suggestion is that we belong to the world, to a horizon of meaning and pre-understanding which existed long before we did. This means that we are not the originators of truth and meaning but companions on a journey of discovery. Furthermore, it seems to imply that one can speak of autonomy in such a way as to avoid falling into a self-interested, self-justifying and insular perspective.

It comes as no surprise then that Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy includes reference to the sacred. For the sacred, he explains, demands that we abandon the idea that we are our own gods, and encourages us to acknowledge that our knowledge and understanding of all earthly things is finite and limited. Self-righteous certainty has no place in Ricoeur's theory. We must be humble in our approach to knowledge but hopeful that we will find meaning and unity of meaning amidst conflicting views of every aspect of human existence. Hence the ethical reappears in Ricoeur's work, albeit in a different way, as he suggests that the existence of the sacred serves, among other things, as a constant reminder that we do not know everything; like Moses, we may catch a glimpse of the promised land but may never possess it.<sup>10</sup>

The desire to resist an inflated view of the self is a theme which also features in Ricoeur's treatment of texts. To read a text, according to Ricoeur, is to allow oneself

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, John B. Thompson (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 145.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 101ff.

to be affected by the horizon of meaning contained in the text; we must experience the 'otherness' of the text. The text requires the reader to transcend his/her own subjective tendencies and abandon any biases or prejudices about the text and its meaning. This will ensure that the text is read in a way that respects its integrity and allows its horizon to emerge. Frequently, however, what is proposed by the text may be foreign to the reader, i.e., it may ask the reader to reflect upon a situation or an experience which his/she has not already encountered. In this way, the text opens up new possibilities for the reader, as he/she moves from their 'first-order reference', i.e., the world which he/she inhabits, to the 'second-order reference' contained in the text.

The interaction between reader and text involves a distancing of sorts.<sup>11</sup> The reader is invited to experience something beyond him/herself, something other. It is precisely this process of distancing that leads to an enlarged view of the self. Being open to new experiences, new ethical tales and new perspectives is vital for Ricoeur; it leads to an enlarged ego, which is capable of listening to other perspectives. Reading, then,

...shows that the act of subjectivity is not so much what initiates understanding as what terminates it. This terminal act can be characterized as appropriation. [But] it does not purport...to rejoin the original subjectivity which would support the meaning of the text. Rather it *responds* to the matter of the text, and hence to the proposals of meaning which the text unfolds. It is thus the counterpart of the distanciation which establishes the autonomy of the text with respect to its author, its situation and its original addressee. Thus appropriation can be integrated into the theory of interpretation without surreptitiously reintroducing the primacy of subjectivity.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, reading texts is ethically formative, as it leads to an openness to the other (i.e., the text), and constitutes a critique of the self. We are invited to question ourselves in front of the text. Hence the danger of egocentricism is once again

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<sup>11</sup> Note: This is often translated as alienation, from the French term *alienation*.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 101.

avoided in Ricoeur's anthropological philosophy, as he invites us to interpret reading as complementary dialectic of self and other.

The ethical function of texts is not confined to the process of reading, however. In the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur analyses the 'testimonial role' of narrative. In fact, this is one of few instances where Ricoeur makes explicit reference to the ethical in texts. Speaking of historical narrative, Ricoeur urges his readers to consider the ethical task of the historian writing about the atrocities of the past. Writing about events such as the Holocaust, for instance, requires an ethics of responsibility because of 'a debt we owe to the dead'.<sup>13</sup> The responsibility, Kearney tells us, is twofold: 'On the one hand narrative provides us with figural reconstructions of the past that enable us to see and hear things long since gone. On the other, it stands for [...] these things as events that actually happened.'<sup>14</sup>

It is Ricoeur's belief that events such as Auschwitz could be suppressed from our memories were it not for the mediating function of narrative. In this case the ethical task is that narrative responds to the need to recount and remember the sadness and suffering of the past. Narrative acts as a way of remembering devastating events in the hope that they will not happen again, for 'it is always through some transfer from Same to Other, in empathy and imagination, that the Other that is foreign is brought closer.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 185-6.

<sup>14</sup> Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 185ff.

Moreover, narrative is a means through which we may respect the individual stories of other countries and nations. Telling their story and their experience of suffering gives individual communities a voice of their own in the face of accounts of history that tell of the triumph of the powerful over the weak. Remembering takes on a new meaning; it transforms the act of telling history into an act of justice. The reader is now invited to relive the suffering of others as if they had experienced it themselves. The *tremendum horrendum* is felt by the reader; it strikes him/her and the scandal of history is revealed.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the oppression of others is communicated to the world, and the hope of liberation loses its fictional character.

There can be no doubt that, although he is generally read and interpreted as a philosopher, Ricoeur has made a significant contribution to some of the major ethical themes that concern fundamental moral theology. Good and evil; virtue and vice; recognition of the other; the desire to become an authentic self, rather than a self-interested ego; the hope of liberation and truth; suspicion and prejudice; freedom and autonomy—these are among his central themes. In fact, most of the themes mentioned are ones which have been raised in the context of the Christian *proprium* debate, which makes the case for analysing the debate through Ricoeur's work all the more promising.

We have already mentioned that proponents of the faith-ethic persuasion are reluctant to accept the autonomy position out of the fear that it will lead to the idea that believers exercise absolute freedom. But Ricoeur tells us that we cannot view ourselves in this way, for understanding precedes us. Furthermore, he explains that,

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<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 187.

as historical beings, we are naturally limited by history, time and the horizon of meaning given to us by a particular tradition. Hence the claim that the content of morality is discovered 'autonomously' is qualified by the fact that interpretation of any kind is limited, because we exist in a world and in a community which we have not created. The latter, therefore, interpret us before we interpret them.

Moreover, each time Ricoeur speaks of ethical issues, it is always in relation to narrative. Evil is communicated to us through symbols; the good is spoken of by telling stories; tradition is communicated through historical narratives and self-interest is avoided by respecting and engaging with the world of text. This makes the case for incorporating Ricoeur's work into the Christian *proprium* debate stronger still. For it seems to suggest that narrative is not only foundational for ethics, but that it is a necessary condition for ethics.

In this respect, Ricoeur takes us to the heart of one of the main issues dividing scholars of the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools: the role of the biblical texts in Christian ethical living and reflection. From what has been said already, it seems that each time Ricoeur speaks of ethics, he also speaks of narrative. This is because he cannot conceive of ethics without narrative. How would one explain the good without stories of the good, for example? Ricoeur's philosophy, therefore, may be described as a narrative approach to ethics, and seems to represent a meeting place for the questions asked by scholars of the post conciliar debate in moral theology.

Of course, the most fundamental question of all is to determine not so much how narrative educates us ethically, but whether it contributes particular norms to

morality's content. Before we engage with Ricoeur on this issue, however, we need to investigate a more general question: what do texts contribute to life? Once we have determined this, we will then be equipped to answer the subsequent question of whether the texts of the faith-community alter the content of human morality.

## 2.2 Narrative and Memory

As with his interpretation of the ethical function of narrative as a means by which we may record past events, Ricoeur interprets historical communities by the texts which constitute them. In his work *Critique and Conviction*, Ricoeur explains that because human beings are limited in terms of their historicity, they cannot experience everything. They rely, therefore, on narrative accounts of the formation of their community to provide them with a coherent story of their community that distinguishes them from other communities, religious or otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

This implies that the primary function of narrative is to record the past, so that we may return to it and experience historically-significant events which we ourselves have not witnessed. Writing narrative is a way of combating the passage of time. This is what Ricoeur calls narrative configuration. It is a way of holding on to events that would otherwise pass away. Taking his inspiration from Aristotle's *Poetics*,<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur explains that narrative organises historical events, and gives them a coherent form, so that they may be read time and time again throughout history. As he puts it,

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Aristotle, "On the Art of Poetry," in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T.S. Dorch, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965, esp. 31-75.



narrative allows us to recount episodes of the past in a comprehensible way, where discordant events are given a concordant form.<sup>19</sup>

The plot plays a vital role in the recording of time in narrative. It not only synthesises heterogeneous events, by placing them in the form of a story that has a beginning, middle and end, but it also alters time. This is particularly true in the case of historical narrative. The historian gathers the documents of a particular event in order to give them a coherent form, that is, a beginning, middle and end, so that the event is remembered in the present. The result is that the reader is left with a configuration of time, i.e., that which remains over that which 'passes and flows away.'<sup>20</sup>

It is this kind of configuration of events that, for Ricoeur, founds communities. Take the example of biblical Israel; it is a historical and spiritual community that is formed on the basis of foundational narratives of the exodus and Genesis. The same is true of Judaism. Books and stories are the means through which these ancient societies defined themselves and ensured some kind of continuity of identity. Indeed, it would be difficult to understand how one could remain faithful to one's promises and covenants unless one had some minimal remembrance of one's origins and of how one's community came to be. For Ricoeur, then, narrative is a form of memory. The 'culture of the book' is necessary for the continuation of identities formed by particular stories or events.

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<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *TNI*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 22; for a clear account of how time functions in Ricoeur's narrative theory, see Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 141ff.

In fact, in his conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay, Ricoeur states unequivocally that historical narratives give rise to and sustain religious communities. Although he admits that there are certain specific characteristics dividing them, such as naming God as Allah or Yahweh, for instance, Ricoeur recognises religious communities by the presence of three criteria: a) the anteriority of a founding word; b) the mediation of writing; c) the history of interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

Insofar as all of these elements are present in Christianity it could be said that the primary function of the Bible is to communicate a particular identity to Christians and provide them with a coherent account of their community. There would be no Christian community without a minimum of narration that tells Christians *who* did what in the Christian story, and *what* that action meant in the broader context of the narrative of salvation and resurrection.

This is not to suggest, however, that Ricoeur is promoting a formal or unchangeable account of the self through the stories of tradition; for if the identity of an historical agent can be understood only through story, it cannot be a substantial or a formal identity.<sup>22</sup> It is not a fixed identity, since the fragility of the human character suggests that identity is not an immutable phenomenon. This means that while narrative provides an identity that is constant and cohesive, it 'can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one's life-time.'<sup>23</sup> Therefore, identity is not simply given;

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<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Kemp, "Narrative Ethics and Moral Law in Ricoeur," in John Wall, William Schweiker, and W. David Hall (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 246.

human beings are both interpreted and interpreters of their individual- as well as communal life-stories.

It follows then that untruthful narratives of a community may be reinterpreted if they contain narrow-minded, egotistical or xenophobic suggestions. Although the power of the historical narrative resides in its ability to provide communities with a bearable account of who they are, these narratives must always be accompanied by a suspicion in order to resist insular or sectarian postures. Thus, as Ricoeur explains,

...the self of self-knowledge is not the egotistical and narcissistic ego whose hypocrisy and naïvete [sic] the hermeneutics of suspicion have denounced, along with its aspects of an ideological superstructure and infantile and neurotic archaism. The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life, to recall Socrates' phrase in the *Apology*. And an examined life is, in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture. So self-constancy refers to a self instructed by the works of a culture that it has applied to itself.<sup>24</sup>

It goes without saying that Ricoeur envisages the interpretation of the self through narrative in an ethical way. The ethical task is to constantly question the narratives of tradition and maintain a responsibility towards other cultures and religions in the pursuit of self-constancy in an ever-changing and complex world.

From what has been said here, it is clear than that the function of narrative is to provide us with a coherent account of ourselves. But this is not to say that religion is the only means through which this can be done, for the 'storied self', to use Joseph Dunne's phrase, begins at birth, and children do not become familiar with the texts of their tradition until they can read. The quest of self-perception and self-knowledge is enfolded in a web of relationships that begins with one's parents.

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<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 246.

### 2.3 The Storied Self

As with his treatment of the vision of the self presented in narrative texts, Ricoeur resists the temptation to explain selfhood in numerical or factual terms. The interpretation of the self lies outside the self and depends to a large extent on the stories others tell us about ourselves.<sup>25</sup> The possibility of constructing an empirical self, therefore, is out of the question.

In fact, if the interpretation of the self were conceived in such terms, it would be impossible to account for the influence of parents on the development of an infant. Before a child begins to use the word 'I', he/she needs first to become aware that he/she exists in relation to an other. The child's primary realisation of self comes when he/she realises that his/her parents are others. But the child also realises that he/she depends on these significant others for basic needs: food and love.

Thus the self is historical through and through, and is enfolded *ab initio* within a web of relationships. At a very early stage these relationships are the means through which the child's physical needs are met and through which meaning is transmitted. The child becomes aware for instance that he/she is worthy of love or respect, and these feelings are internalised by the child.<sup>26</sup> Although this experience is not a reflexive one on the part of the child, the loving encounters with his/her parents are what provide her/him with a sense of self; in short, of what it means to be a human person.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 30ff.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Dunne, "The Storied Self," in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, Philosophy and Social Criticism Theory, London: Sage Publications, 1996, 144.

Gradually, the child adopts the language of his/her parents and becomes a part of the world of those around him/her. Indeed, the child may even ask the parents to recount what happened on the day the child was born. Again, this activity of storytelling provides the child with a sense of worth and identity in the world.

This is not to suggest that the child becomes confined to the language and meanings that its parents bestow on it. Deviation from these meanings is necessary so that the social construction of the child's identity is not lost. Otherwise the child may suffer estrangement and alienation.

In fact, without a sense of self (independent from the sense of self gained from parents) the risk of psychological problems is great. Sometimes children who are unsure of who they are need therapy, the function of which is to give coherency to their lives. Ricoeur says that often the function of the psychoanalyst is to help the patient to piece together the disjointed episodes of his/her life so that the patient gains a sense of self that is meaningful amidst the confusion of broken plots. As the story emerges the subject also emerges.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that although religion and the texts of religious traditions assist believers in maintaining self-constancy throughout their adult lives, the process of self-understanding through narrative begins at an earlier stage in life. In fact, it would seem that without some form of primary engagement with stories of one's life and of one's environment, the possibility of authentic growth is difficult. As Joseph Dunne, one of Ricoeur's many commentators and interpreters, argues, 'If no account can be

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<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 30.

given of my life, it can scarcely be called a *human* life (this may be related to Aristotle's famously ascribing a life without *logos* either to a beast or a god); and if *I* cannot give an account of it, it can scarcely be said to be *my* life—or, what perhaps amounts to the same thing, I can scarcely be considered a self.<sup>28</sup>

To sum up this part of the argument, then, it seems that the primary function of narrative, be it in oral or text form, is to provide human beings with an identity which they can call their own. Of course, the identity of communities that is formed through texts interacts with the stories we tell of ourselves; all forms of story telling interact. Hence the self is entangled in different stories, some of which are shared by other people.

Nonetheless, there are limits to this kind of self-interpretation that prevent it from degenerating into a quest for superiority at the expense of others or from becoming detached from reality. For example, the story of biblical Israel could be interpreted as a story of a chosen people and used to justify the view that the believing community is to be placed above all others. Thus Ricoeur is quick to point out that although narrative provides us with a coherent sense of self, it has its limits. There is an ethical task involved in the interpretation of the texts of a community or of an individual that invites us to question constantly our identity in the face of other communities or, indeed, conflicting identities. Narrative identity is answerable to something beyond the world of the text and must be coupled with a responsibility to the other beyond the text.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dunne, "The Storied Self," 147.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 249; cf. Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 112.

But to speak of the ethical task involved in the interpretation of the self through story leads to an enquiry about what stories contribute to ethics. Most narratives convey something of the Rilkean summons: Change your life! And so we arrive at the second aim of this chapter which is to determine the precise role of texts in the ethical quest for goodness. This is so because the presentation of the self through narrative almost always involves some element of ethical persuasion, however subtle or tangential. Moreover, it would be difficult to see how narrative could explain what it means to be an historical being without carrying with it some suggestions as to how one should live. And so we arrive at a crucial question: Does narrative give us rules of conduct and principles of behaviour by which we are obliged to live?

#### **2.4 Narrative and Ethics**

There are three main reasons why Ricoeur answers no to this question. The first is related to his maxim 'life is lived and stories are recounted'. The second is due to the process involved in writing ethical narratives (*mimesis*), while the third has to do with the fact that ethical narratives do not give us theoretical justification by which we may consider actions to be good or bad. Ricoeur observes that it was Aristotle who first acknowledged that the truth contained in ethical narratives is not one of abstract rules and principles, but one that allows us to relate goodness with happiness and evil with unhappiness.<sup>30</sup> Although related, each of these three reasons merits attention as they will allow us to see why narrative cannot be considered as the proximate source of morality or used to justify certain ethical positions.

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<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, *TN I*, 40.

'Life is lived and stories are recounted' is a phrase used by Ricoeur in his article 'Life in Quest of Narrative'.<sup>31</sup> It immediately suggests that there is a distinction between living life and telling stories. For Ricoeur life is lived and the stories we tell or read are a means of talking about life in a symbolic way. This is what Ricoeur calls symbolic mediation,<sup>32</sup> which is another way of saying that signs and symbols give stories their readability. But this is not to suggest that stories tell us how we should live our lives, since the symbols contained in narratives are derived out of life itself. It is for this reason that stories make sense to the reader and are accredited with a capacity to provoke ethical reflection.

However, it remains that their ability to communicate ethically relevant stories to the reader depends on the fact that the symbols and ethical messages they contain are ones with which the reader is already familiar. Narrative does not present us with irrational or incomprehensible stories. It communicates to us in such a way that we can relate to the events that unfold in the reading process. Yet it remains that narrative depends on life for its construction and articulation. There would be no narrative without life and without life stories that inspire it. As Ricoeur tells us, 'reality is contained neither in the dictionary nor in grammar.'<sup>33</sup>

This means that while narrative has the ability to tell stories about life in a symbolic way, it cannot replace life. Nor can it dictate the way in which we should live life. Narrative is derived out of life, but it is not sophisticated enough to deal with its complex vicissitudes. If, therefore, it contains specific principles or codes for living,

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<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 25.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 26.



these codes are ones which have been already tested and considered as valuable by the author writing the text, or by the community for whom the narrative was written.

Linked to the idea that stories are derived out of life itself, and therefore cannot be taken as the source of any ethical rules or principles, is the process of narrative composition. For Ricoeur, narrative, including ethical and historical narrative, is the 'imitation of action' (*mimesis*). In the case of the historical narrative of the Holocaust, for instance, this is an action which has already taken place. The purpose of the Auschwitz narrative is to communicate suffering or injustice to the reader so that, by remembering, the human community may avoid the re-enactment of such events. And so we see clearly that narratives are not ethically vacuous.

What is important, however, is that the significance of the event is not determined by the story itself; this has already been decided by society, which explains why the story was deemed important in the first place. Furthermore, the story's ability to transform the reader does not lie within the story itself, but depends on the reader's capacity to decode its meaning and evaluate its proposal. The narrator proposes; the reader disposes.<sup>34</sup> As Ricoeur points out,

The strategy of persuasion undertaken by the narrator is aimed at giving the reader a vision of the world that is never ethically neutral, but that rather implicitly or explicitly induces a new evaluation of the world and of the reader as well. In this sense, narrative already belongs to the ethical field in virtue of its claim—inseparable from its narration—to ethical justice. Still it belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of *action*, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by the reading.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 249; cf. Dietmar Mieth, "Moral Identity—How is it Narrated?" *Concilium* 2000/2, 20ff.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 249.

Here we see that Ricoeur is leaning towards an Aristotelian interpretation of the good life. Narrative, comments Ricoeur, has the capacity to present readers with a vision of the world that is loaded with ethical significance. Moreover, by identifying with the protagonists of a given story, readers learn to relate modes of good behaviour with happiness and bad behaviour with evil. Emotions also play a part in the Ricoeurian understanding of ethical narrative. In tragedy, for instance, the reader learns the feelings associated with the reversal of fortune, where the good is not always rewarded or where fate overpowers justice.<sup>36</sup> We may say, then, that ethical narratives not only excite the emotions associated with ethical behaviour, but also teach us something about virtue.

It is clear that Ricoeur is not suggesting a morality of rule but one of virtue. From his treatment of ethical narrative it seems that stories provide readers with an imaginative space in which they may try out various proposals for living. By following the development of the characters in stories, readers become familiar with the kinds of character traits necessary for authentic growth and moral maturity. More importantly, perhaps, readers are given a stock of stories which allows them to recognise and describe virtues such as courage, wisdom and *caritas*. Narrative fleshes out the contours of the virtues which would be all but incomprehensible without stories which explain their meaning. 'To understand what courage means, we tell the story of Achilles; to understand what wisdom means, we tell the story of St Francis of Assisi.'<sup>37</sup> Thus writes Ricoeur:

Aristotle did not hesitate to say that every well-told story *teaches* us something; moreover, he said that the story reveals universal aspects of the human condition and that, in this respect, poetry was more philosophical than

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<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, *TN I*, 59ff.

<sup>37</sup> Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 114.

history, which is too dependent on the anecdotal aspect of life. Whatever may be said about this relation between poetry and history, it is certain that tragedy, epic and comedy, to cite only those genres known to Aristotle, develop a sort of understanding that can be termed *narrative understanding* and which is much closer to the practical wisdom of moral judgement than to science, or more generally, to the theoretical use of reason.<sup>38</sup>

Thus we begin to see that the wisdom contained in narrative is not theoretical enough to provide adequate justification for considering certain norms and rules of conduct to be true. The function of ethical narrative is more general; it functions less in terms of rules and principles and more in terms of a familiarity with what virtuous behaviour should look like.

For this reason Ricoeur, again drawing on the work of Aristotle, believes that the 'lessons' contained in narratives are universals: they can be understood by all cultures, nationalities and religions. Nonetheless, Ricoeur is quick to point out that the particular stories used by traditions, religious or otherwise, are specific to them, which means that stories of virtue and happiness, etc. are context-sensitive. This is similar to Ricoeur's interpretation of myth: on the one hand, myths are specific to a particular tradition, while on the other hand they have a horizon of universality that allows them to be understood by other cultures.<sup>39</sup> As is the case with myth, therefore, we must conclude that while ethical narratives, symbols and stories of goodness and virtue are rooted in a particular culture, they also have the capacity to reach beyond their implicit horizon to include all cultures, religions and members of the human community.

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<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 22-3.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, "Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds," in Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 122.

## 2.5 Ricoeur's Contribution to the Christian *Proprium* Debate

Having sketched Ricoeur's contribution to ethical thought and in particular to the interpretation of narrative, we begin to see what his work brings to the Christian *proprium* debate. The first point of contact concerns the role of texts in organised religion. Ricoeur tells us that texts are the means by which one religious community differentiates itself from another. Stories act as a memory by which believing communities are reminded of the history and formation of their identity.

In an interview with Richard Kearney, Ricoeur remarks that the 'biblical experience of faith is founded on stories and narratives—the story of the exodus, the crucifixion and resurrection and so on—*before* it expresses itself in abstract theologies which interpret these foundational narratives and provide religious tradition with its sense of enduring identity. The *future* projects of every religion are intimately related to the ways in which it remembers itself.'<sup>40</sup> This is a crucial point for our discussion of the Christian *proprium* debate, since one of the overriding issues dividing proponents of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy views concerned the function of the biblical story in the moral quest for goodness. The divisions seemed irreconcilable and led to a long and acrimonious debate about the nature of the biblical texts and their role in moral theology.

Ricoeur's work, however, seems to provide an alternative orientation, one that pushes the function of texts into a more foundational role. If Ricoeur is right, it would seem that the significance of the biblical texts is not so much in terms of a moral teacher, who provides rules and specific norms of conduct, but rather in terms of an identity

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<sup>40</sup> Ricoeur, "The Creativity of Language," in Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 135.

giver. The texts of the biblical canon recount the history of the Christian tradition in a way which, although open to critique and revision, allows believers to construct a coherent account of who they are. In the context of the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate, Ricoeur's work seems to offer the prospect of transcending the polemics of the discussion as it has up to now been conducted.

Ricoeur's contribution does not stop here, however. When discussing the function of the biblical narratives, for instance, Ricoeur reminds us that the promises made by Yahweh to his people are not ones which can be realised in the same way as a legal promise. Whereas a legal promise can be realised immediately and requires no further action, the promises of the faith community cannot be carried out in this way. The promise made to Abraham, for instance, that his people would have a salvific relation with God, is an inexhaustible promise. Moreover, it is repeated with Moses on Sinai, with David, and so on. This implies that faith requires a commitment to a way of life that cannot be summed up in a legal promise, a rule or a code of conduct. It is a promise that is eschatological in character and therefore 'not-yet-realised'.<sup>41</sup>

Another not unrelated point has to do with the way in which the various writers in the Bible interpret the Law. Saint Paul talks about the Christ event as an overcoming of the Law; and yet we find the synoptic authors continually affirming that the Christian event is a response to the prophets, as recounted in the Scriptures. Here we see disagreement and a lack of continuity concerning the way in which the Law should be interpreted for the faith community. This for Ricoeur is significant, since it

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<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur, "The Creativity of Language," 135.

demonstrates that the promises made in the Covenant cannot be described unequivocally or in terms of specific rules and principles.

Considered in light of what the authors of the post-conciliar debate in moral theology sought to achieve, it would seem that once again we are confronted with the weakness of an approach centred upon the search for specifically Christian moral rules and principles. If the texts of the biblical tradition show little or no sign of agreement about the content or indeed interpretation of the Law, it leaves little hope of such being the case today.

Nevertheless, Ricoeur's work appears again to come to our assistance. The giving of the Covenant is not disregarded, but affirmed in terms of a life-project and commitment to God. It involves an invitation to become part of a community that strives to be the best it can be, in the hope that it will one day realise the eternal promises made in the Covenant.<sup>42</sup> In this respect, the Torah refers to a commitment to love and to constantly strive to be the best one can be, even in the face of adversity. And the texts of the biblical tradition are placed at the service of a community which needs to understand itself if it is ever to realise the covenantal promises made again and again by its ancestors.

Of course, it could be argued that certain biblical narratives are not lacking in terms of their moral worth and in terms of what they expect from Christian believers. The Creation narrative, for instance, shows the activity of a loving God who entrusts creation to human beings and expects them to care for creation with compassion,

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<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 439.

reverence and love. In this respect, its moral orientation is definite, and it could be argued that it contributes to the content of morality.

Further, the image of God that is presented in the Creation narrative is of one who provides human beings with a moral space in which they are to interpret themselves as stewards of the human community. As William Schweiker asserts, 'The creation narrative [...] provides orientation for how people can and ought to live in response to the decidedly natural features of existence.'<sup>43</sup> The crucial question then is whether or not it can be interpreted as a narrative that adds to or alters the content of Christian morality.

Showing again his reluctance to concede that narrative alters the content of ethics, Ricoeur argues that the significance of the Creation story lies in its ability to teach us that we are ultimately dependent upon a power that 'precedes us, envelops us, and supports us.'<sup>44</sup> Hence we are not isolated beings endowed with absolute freedom, but beings who belong to a 'cosmos' in which we are set where 'nature is between us, around us—not just something to exploit but as an object of solicitude, respect, and admiration.'<sup>45</sup> The story supports a vision of interrelatedness and of ultimate dependence upon something outside and beyond us. We are not the originators of creation and all it entails, but stewards of a creation entrusted to us. The picture of human existence presented to us in the Creation narrative, therefore, is not one that requires obedience or one that tells us precisely what we must or should do with it.

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<sup>43</sup> William Schweiker, "Starry Heavens and Moral Worth," in Wall et al.(eds.), *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, 2002, 133.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer and Mark I. Wallace, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 287-298.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Instead, as Ricoeur sees it, we are invited to consider human existence as ‘participants in a complex and differentiated reality infused with worth who also, in the core of their being, are enabled and required to assume responsibility for existence—that is, to respect and enhance the integrity of life.’<sup>46</sup>

Thus Ricoeur suggests that what is significant about the Creation story is not the legal or moral implications that ensue from the giving of creation by God, but the freedom that human beings now have as a result. This freedom brings with it a responsibility that Christians are required to develop precisely because the offer of creation was an act of freedom on God’s part. We are not given precise rules as to how we should care for creation, but we are invited to act responsibly to protect the goods of creation, since we are now accountable for it.

The implication here is that the content of ethics is ‘open-ended’, not predetermined or written in the form of a legal code. It could be argued, therefore, that the Scriptures symbolically demonstrate two significant ethical concepts: a) freedom and b) responsibility. But this raises another question: Do the Scriptures leave us empty handed in terms of how these should be used?

From what has been said here already it would seem that Ricoeur’s response is no. The Gospels leave clues as to what a possible ethical response would look like. Recall what was said about the ethical function of narrative. Narrative allows us to try out various proposals for living in a way that resembles virtue ethics. As we follow the development of various biblical narratives, we learn to relate good

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<sup>46</sup> Schweiker, “Starry Heavens and Moral Worth,” 134.



behaviour with happiness and vice versa. In this respect it could be argued that the biblical texts do not leave believers empty handed as to what good behaviour looks like, but they remain general and open-ended, allowing us only to grasp what being virtuous means in a particular context, i.e., that of the story.

Nevertheless, their moral worth should not be underrated, for, as Aristotle reminds us, it is only by reading and telling stories of virtuous behaviour that we become virtuous. In this way, narrative has the power to summon the self symbolically, thereby playing a part in the construction of an autonomous self that is not absolute, but instructed by the signs, symbols and paradigms of behaviour offered by tradition.

There is a further point that is useful here, however. It pertains to Ricoeur's understanding of the interaction between the reader and the text. Unlike Schleiermacher and many of his predecessors, who believe that the interpretation of a text involves deciphering the mind of the author who wrote it, Ricoeur gives equal status to the text and to the reader. In his view, the text must communicate more than the author's intentions; narratives are not merely expressions of that which the author believes to be important. Texts are much more dynamic than this. They represent concrete possibilities of action, possible ways of doing things, possible worlds. The world of the text, notes Ricoeur, opens up a horizon of possibility and meaning within which the reader could live.

A text is not something closed in upon itself, it is the projection of a new universe distinct from that in which we live. To appropriate a work through reading is to unfold the world horizon implicit in it which includes the actions, the characters and the events of the story told. As a result, the reader belongs at once to the work's horizon of experience in imagination and to that of his or her own real action.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 26.

Ricoeur envisages the reader's interaction with the horizon of the text as an imaginary way of experiencing behaviour and of deciphering possible ways of living. This explains why he often refers to narrative as an 'immense laboratory' for ethical reflection, or, to use his own phrase, for 'thought experiments'.<sup>48</sup> For we cannot understand the good life if we do not have ways of imagining what the good life would look like, or if it were not gathered together in some way.<sup>49</sup>

Returning to the case of the biblical narrative, then, it can be seen that a Ricoeurian approach suggests that its ethical import consists in its ability to provide believers with the space to imagine possible ways of living and to figure out possible ways of living fitting for life in a messianic community. Although he admits that other forms of writing can also do this, Ricoeur does not fail to point out that the Gospels project possible worlds that are oriented towards eternity.<sup>50</sup> Hence he does not underestimate their eschatological character.

But it is for precisely this reason that one might find fault with Ricoeur's theory of interpretation. For if the biblical texts provide believers with possible ways of living oriented towards eternity, one might ask why or how it is possible to contend that they do not provide new norms or values that go beyond what is merely rational. If they are eschatological in character, do they not contribute more to the moral search for truth than secular literature or myths? In what sense can we say that the Gospels announce something new?

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 159; cf. p. 164.

<sup>49</sup> Kemp, "Narrative Ethics and Moral Law in Ricoeur," 36.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 224.

If reading secular narratives opens up possibilities for living for its readers, it becomes difficult to accept that the possibility of life in Christ asks nothing more of believers than an imaginative possibility. What difference does Christ make? Does the Christian narrative not offer more than secular narratives or myths? We must conclude this part of the argument, therefore, with a few comments on the place accorded to the man Jesus in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of biblical narrative.

## **2.6 Biblical Revelation and the Power of the Possible**

For Ricoeur the Gospel narrative is an imaginative, revealed and possible world. The Gospels are imaginative because they invite the reader to imagine ways of living in the world; revealed, because they show what human existence is capable of doing; and possible because the world proposed by the text is one with which the reader can identify and appropriate. Revelation, therefore, is not understood in terms of a morality of obligation, but in terms of what is humanly possible. Thus Ricoeur says: 'I believe that the fundamental theme of Revelation is this awakening and this call, into the heart of existence, of the imagination of the possible. The possibilities are opened before man which fundamentally constitute what is revealed. The revealed as such is an opening to existence, a possibility of existence.'<sup>51</sup>

This means that the Gospel narratives provide the symbols of freedom or new life for which humanity hopes. Revelation is not simply about the showing forth of the person of Jesus Christ; it is the offer of a possible existence and liberation in him. For Ricoeur, therefore, the newness of the Christ event is not bound up with obedience or new principles of morality. Instead, it is understood as a new existence, one that

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<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 237.

allows us to imagine what was formerly thought to be impossible, that is, resurrection after death.

Here again we see Ricoeur's emphasis on the power of narrative to act as a memory or to remind us of past events. The Gospels recount the Christ-event, and, in so doing, they serve to awaken possibilities, possibilities that may have been forgotten. According to Ricoeur, this is the function of poetic language (i.e., the language contained in texts); it does not alter our existence, but it makes something possible which was formerly impossible.<sup>52</sup>

On this view, the passion narrative is truly a 'poem of existence', whose purpose is to recall and awaken us to a vital, though forgotten, human possibility. The implications of awakening to resurrection, however, are not transposed into dogmas, theologies or codes for moral living. Instead, Ricoeur believes that the possibility of resurrection in Christ confirms that we have freedom, because Christ has freed us, and enables us to go on searching for truth 'in spite of' evil, suffering and mortality.<sup>53</sup> By affirming the possibility of meaning in spite of meaninglessness, the Gospels enable us to trust and to affirm life.

Nevertheless, it is Ricoeur's belief that Jesus did not change something in the structure of the world or in the way human freedom is understood and exercised. Rather, as Vanhoozer puts it, 'Through the story of Jesus we are able to look at the world differently. One might say that Jesus came not to abrogate our structural possibilities but to fulfill them. [...] In short, the passion story discloses an existential possibility

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<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 231.

<sup>53</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 235.

that is always-already there. Jesus did not inaugurate a new way of being-in-the-world, but rather illustrated a universal possibility.’<sup>54</sup>

Thus Ricoeur fulfils his duty as a philosopher. Although he asserts that communities distinguish themselves by their narrative texts, he does not concede that the possibilities which texts open up are limited to a particular community. The possibility of liberation in Christ, for instance, is considered to be a universal one and therefore open to all. To some theologians, however, this may seem rather strange. Indeed, some might argue that divine grace plays little or no part in Ricoeur’s philosophy, and that the moral significance of the Christ event cannot be understood without some reference to divine grace. This is an issue which arises in the context of the debate on the Christian *proprium*: proponents of the *Glaubensethik* position could not accept a morality based on natural law because it could not account for the effects of divine grace on Christian moral action.

By way of response, however, it is clear from Ricoeur’s work that he believes that such an argument presumes that divine grace was not already present in the giving of the Covenant or in the Creation story, where in each case the human community was invited to share freely in the divine life but failed because of the way in which it used its freedom. Thus Ricoeur maintains that if one considers that grace contributes to ethics in any way, one runs the risk of suggesting that grace or God’s favour has to be won through obedience, rather than received in spite of disobedience.<sup>55</sup> Put simply, Ricoeur argues that grace is always already present before the Christ event, and that it

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<sup>54</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 236.

<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 321.

will continue to be available—not only to specific religious communities, but to all those who seek to do the truth in love.

And so we see that for Ricoeur the Christian religion is not one that is full of specific moral norms and principles. It is concerned with the gift of freedom rather than its lawful regulation. Moreover, the faith story offers the believer a vision of the world which is radically new; it offers the possibility of resurrection in spite of death. Thus Ricoeur's work suggests that Christians have more reason to hope rather than to despair. This is what leads Ricoeur to define human freedom as follows: 'For my part I should say that freedom is the capacity to live according to the paradoxical law of superabundance, of denying death and of asserting the excess of sense over non-sense in all desperate situations.'<sup>56</sup> In short, it is Ricoeur's belief that in the Christ event the ultimate possibility is offered, which means that Christians can hope in spite of everything.

Returning to our discussion of the Christian *proprium* debate, we can now see the significance of Ricoeur's contribution. His work suggests that the texts of the Christian tradition are the means through which believers interpret their lives and their history in a coherent way. This means that their primary function is to provide the believing community with a coherent account of who they are, rather than what they should do.

This shift in emphasis means that the ethical stories contained in the biblical narrative can no longer be viewed as offering specifically Christian norms and values, but as

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Association* 64 (1970), 59.

exemplary narratives that are helpful in understanding all that is involved in a life of virtue. In this respect, they offer human and ethical possibilities to the Christian community. But perhaps the ultimate possibility offered by the Christian narrative is that of hope in spite of suffering; liberation in spite of oppression; and resurrection in spite of the cross.

Whether one can agree with Ricoeur or not, it is clear that his work encourages a move beyond considerations of the legal implications of the biblical texts to considerations of a more basic kind. The most fundamental question is 'Who am I?', not 'What am I to do?' Consequently, Ricoeur's work seems to move the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate beyond discussions about specifically Christian norms to the quest for identity and self-understanding through the narrative texts of the Christian tradition. After all, without a coherent sense of self and an imaginative space to reflect on moral behaviour, it would be difficult to see how one could act in a morally responsible way.<sup>57</sup>

Of course, the suggestion that the unique element in Christian ethics pertains to a unique identity is not a new one. It may well have been ignored by the authors of the post conciliar debate in moral theology on the special character of Christian morality, but virtue ethicists are now discussing the idea of identity. The most important question for virtue ethicists has less to do with the obedient following of texts or rules

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<sup>57</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Christian Life," in James Fowler and Antoine Vergote (eds.), *Towards Moral and Religious Maturity*, Illinois: Silver Burdett Company, 1980, 467. Here Hauerwas argues that our primary story is that we have no story, or that the stories we have must be overcome if we are to be free. Very often, we seek to be objective in issues of socio-political or ethical nature so that we can choose between pluralistic stories. Nonetheless, the fact of the matter is that we all need narrative in some form or other. Narrative allows us to make sense of our lives; it connects birth to death, etc., and it provides us with a way we can understand and interpret ourselves. This is similar to what Ricoeur's work achieves in the context of the Christian *proprium* debate; it places narrative at the heart of self-understanding rather than at the heart of moral obedience, rules or principles.

than with developing an understanding of oneself (identity) that will ensure that moral agents continue to use their freedom in a way that is faithful to their master story. The similarities between Ricoeur's work and all that is involved in the current return to virtue ethics seem to strengthen the case that the Christian *proprium* debate should be interpreted from the perspective of identity. This will be the focus of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RIKOEURIAN THEORY AND THE RETURN TO VIRTUE ETHICS

Thus far, this study has attempted to show how the work of Paul Ricoeur takes us to the heart of the issues arising out of the Christian *proprium* debate. We have also endeavoured to show how Ricoeur's work is able to move the discussion away from the search for specifically Christian norms and place self-knowledge, freedom and responsibility at the centre of Christian ethics. This shift in emphasis is similar to current trends in moral theology, especially when one considers all that is involved in the return to virtue ethics advocated in the works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas.

Interest in virtue ethics has stemmed from the conviction that Christian character, moral dispositions and habits are more fundamental than the question of the morality of individual acts. Moreover, who a believer is and what a believer does or becomes is as important as any faith claim a believer makes.<sup>1</sup> As James Keenan puts it, virtue ethicists are not primarily interested in particular actions.<sup>2</sup> They do not ask, 'Is this

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Farley, *In Praise of Virtue: An Exploration of the Biblical Virtues in a Christian Context*, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, 1; cf. Lee H. Yearley, *New Religious Virtues and the Study of Religion*, Fifteenth Annual University Lecture in Religion at Arizona State University, Arizona State University: Department of Religious Studies, 1994, 10-12.

<sup>2</sup> James Keenan, "Virtue Ethics," in Bernard Hoose (ed.), *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, London: Cassell, 1988, 84.

action right?’ or ‘What are the circumstances of an action?’ Rather, virtue ethicists invite people to see themselves as they really are, to examine themselves, and see who they can become, rather than to what extent they demonstrate conformity to rules and principles. Virtue ethics therefore invites all people to see that they set the goal of their life, as well as choosing the means to accomplish that ultimate end.<sup>3</sup>

Hence virtue ethics offers an alternative to any purely rational or ahistorical system of ethics. Similar to what Ricoeur’s work can achieve in the context of the Christian *proprium* debate, virtue ethics highlights the importance of knowing oneself before knowing what one should do. Furthermore, like Ricoeur, virtue ethicists highlight the need for narratives in understanding the virtues. For without a stock of stories that make virtuous action intelligible, it would be difficult to see how we could know what is required of us to become morally good.

Here we see a correlation between Ricoeur’s work and that of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. These scholars are at one in the belief that one cannot know what the good life requires or what it would look like if its constituents were not gathered together in some way.<sup>4</sup> Although each stresses a different function of narrative in the pursuit of goodness, all three seem to transcend former preoccupation with acts and principles of conduct in favour of an approach that places story at the centre of Christian ethics. This makes the case for moving the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate in a similar direction all the more promising.

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<sup>3</sup> Keenan, “Virtue Ethics,” 89.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Peter Kemp, “Narrative Ethics and Moral Law in Ricoeur,” in John Wall, William Schweiker, and W. David Hall (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 36.

In order to see clearly the links between Ricoeur's work and that of virtue ethicists, we will proceed in two stages. First, we will explain what is meant by virtue ethics; second, we will discuss the approaches to virtue ethics offered by Hauerwas and MacIntyre. We will then attempt to show how similar trends may be seen in Ricoeur's work, which seems to strengthen the case for approaching the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate from the perspective of self-knowledge and identity instead of acts and principles.

### 3.1 What is Virtue Ethics?

In recent years, many theologians have encouraged a return to the virtues as a way of moving away from the legalistic style morality typical of the manual period in moral theology. This is the case because, unlike rules and principles, virtues are not primarily concerned with individual actions, but with the effect that particular actions have on a person over the course of his/her life. The scope is wider than that offered by moral principles; virtue ethics expects the moral agent to *want* to do the good rather than be coerced into doing it.<sup>5</sup>

Virtue ethicists believe that, if we are to live a truly good life, we must maintain a course of good activity over time. The emphasis is placed on sustaining good behaviour and on striving to be consistently good rather than on individual actions which will ensure that evil is avoided. In this respect, there is no definite map one can follow in order to be good. Therefore, one must concentrate on cultivating dispositions and habits that enable moral agents over the course of their lives to

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. David Solomon, "MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral Philosophy," in Mark C. Murphy (ed.), *Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 114-151, esp. 138-141.

choose consistently good actions.<sup>6</sup> This implies virtues. A virtue, as defined by Jean Porter, is:

...a trait of character or intellect which is in some way praiseworthy, admirable or desirable. When we refer to somebody's virtues, what we usually have in mind are relatively stable and effective dispositions to act in particular ways, as opposed to inclinations which are easily lost, or which do not consistently lead to corresponding kinds of actions. And so, for example, someone who has the virtue of generosity will consistently respond in generous ways in a variety of situations, including those in which generosity is difficult or costly, in contrast to someone who is moved by pity to one uncharacteristically generous act, or someone whose generous impulses are frequently overcome by desires for self-indulgence.<sup>7</sup>

For the virtue ethicist, then, the motivation for seeking what best befits human subjects is not based on any finite theory of the good; rather, it comes from a natural desire for and a genuine willingness to seek the truth.

This desire to find what pertains to human flourishing was typical of Greek ethics. For the Greeks, 'Obligation simply is not a fundamental category because it makes no sense to say that we have an obligation to seek happiness when happiness is already what we most yearn for in our lives. What the Greeks called virtue is simply another name for what makes our lives good lives, that is, lives of happiness.'<sup>8</sup> Although Aristotle, Plato and Socrates differ somewhat in their individual presentations of the 'good life' and of the virtues, they share the belief that good behaviour has less to do with external compliance with rules and norms of conduct than with a personal desire to do the good and to cultivate character traits that sustain virtuous behaviour. Thus Aristotle writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, London: Duckworth, 1999, 119ff.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," in Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 96.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002, 3.

[The good person] wishes for what is good for himself, and what appears good, and he does it (for it is a mark of a good person to work hard at what is good), and for his own sake (for he does it for the sake of the thinking element of himself, which is what each of us is thought to be). He also wishes himself to live and to be kept safe, and most of all that with which he understands, since to the good person existing is something good, and each of us wishes good things for himself....<sup>9</sup>

Of course, since both ancient and contemporary accounts of virtue ethics underline that a desire to do good is preferable to the mere following of rules of conduct, both approaches raise the question of how we understand, learn or describe the virtues. At least with rules and principles one has a definite description of the action that is to be avoided, but the same cannot be said of the virtues. The issue could be put in the form of a question: When we call somebody gentle, or kind, or caring, or patient, what do we mean? How do we go about explaining what a virtue is?

### **3.2 Describing Virtues**

According to Porter, we do not describe virtues by referring to a dictionary.<sup>10</sup> Nor do we use theoretical definitions to describe what is truly virtuous. Instead, we give examples of people who exhibit virtuous behaviour. This indicates that our description of a particular virtue will be tied to a notion of a certain kind of action in such a way that our concept of a particular virtue will be inseparable from the concept of an action typical of that virtue. In fact, as human beings who have experienced life in one way or another, we are able to pick out instances or events where a particular character trait manifests itself. Hence, one cannot adequately describe a virtue except

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Rowe & Sarah Brodie, trans. *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics: Translation, Introduction and Commentary*, New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2002, 230.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics*, Great Britain: Cromwell Press, 1994, 100-101. Porter's work is used here because it has been very well received by other virtue ethicists. For a review of Porter's work, see Simon Harak, review of *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* by Jean Porter in *TS* 52 (1991), 581-582.

by giving some account of how this notion is exemplified in recurring features of our common experience.<sup>11</sup>

But this seems to be another way of saying that story is at the heart of any understanding of virtue. Describing a virtue involves telling stories that indicate the boundaries of a particular character trait. As Paul Ricoeur asserts, 'It is due to the familiarity we have with the types of plot received from our culture that we learn to relate virtues, or rather forms of excellence, with happiness or unhappiness.'<sup>12</sup> We are fundamentally story-telling animals (*homo narrans*), and the stock of stories we inherit from our community and environment allows us to understand more about ourselves, our roles in society, ways of being in the world, and the difference between virtue and vice.

Moreover, narrative allows us to interpret our lives in a coherent way, since it does not interpret life as a series of individual actions but as a complete story which links birth and death, being and doing, past and present. As Alasdair MacIntyre explains, 'There is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.'<sup>13</sup> Moreover, according to MacIntyre, when trying to understand what someone is doing and why, 'We always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. John Horton and Susan Mendus, "Alasdair MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre," in John Horton and Susan Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, 1-15, esp. 8-14.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London: Duckworth, 1985, 201.

set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the setting in which they act and suffer.’<sup>14</sup>

This is also true of the heroic societies. *Aretê*, the classical Greek term for virtue, was all but untranslatable for the Greeks.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, they overcame this obstacle by describing what it would look like when manifested in human action. Courage, for example, was closely related to the Greek understanding of *arête*,<sup>16</sup> and the process of telling stories of courageous war heroes served as a medium through which the concept of virtue was explained and exemplified.

Indeed, it could be argued that the Greek understanding of virtue promotes a culture of war and glory, rather than peace and humility, since it is linked to incidences excellence and courage in battle. Moreover, owing to the fact that morality and social structure were inseparable in the world of ancient Greece—what one was expected to do was determined by the place one occupied on the social ladder—it would seem that the Greek concept of virtue is incompatible with the Christian vision of *caritas*, love and equality.

In spite of these criticisms, however, the Greek understanding of virtue is useful in two ways. First, as MacIntyre argues, it shows us that all morality is to some extent tied to the socially local and particular and that the morality of modernity, which

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<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 197; cf. Peter Johnson, “Reclaiming the Aristotelian Ruler,” in John Horton and Susan Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, 44-64, esp. 56-58.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Woodhill, “Virtue Ethics and its Suitability for Orthodox Christianity,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 41 (1997), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Radford-Reuther, “Courage as a Christian Virtue,” *CC* (Spring 1983), 8.

seeks to free universality from all particularity, is an illusion; and second, there is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition in which we inherit them and our understanding of them from a series of predecessors in which series heroic societies hold first place.<sup>17</sup>

This is a view which MacIntyre shares with Stanley Hauerwas. Both scholars are of the opinion that the virtues can only be learned within the confines of a community through its narrative stories, otherwise the members of the community become ‘unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and in their words.’<sup>18</sup>

### 3.3 Hauerwas and a Community of Character

According to Hauerwas, questions only receive answers, and actions receive explanations, only by reference to a narrative that provides the background against which answers and explanations make sense at all.<sup>19</sup> This is what he means when he asserts that communities embody stories. For Hauerwas, communities need stories because they make sense out of our actions and out of our lives.<sup>20</sup>

But the centrality of story in the moral life of Christians does not stop here. According to Hauerwas, the believing community and its narratives perform at least three vital functions in our lives. First, being part of community and its story points to

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<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 119.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>19</sup> Brad J. Kallenberg, “Positioning MacIntyre within Christian Ethics,” in Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg & Mark Thiessen Nation (eds.), *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “Towards an Ethics of Character,” *TS* 33/4 (2001), [ATLA Religion Database], 698-715. (02/11/2004); cf. *idem*, “The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretative Power of the Christian Story,” *JRE* 8/1 (2001), [ATLA Religion Database], 55-82. (02/11/04).



the fact that moral agents never exist in isolation. Although modern society expects and demands one to be a self-creator, the fact of the matter is that we need to belong in some way to a community before we can claim to be a person at all.<sup>21</sup> Hauerwas observes that if a person could ever be successfully ‘freed’ from his or her historical and communal ties, the person’s identity would be *lost*, not gained. This means that for Hauerwas the human self cannot be explained without some reference to his/her historical ties, background and shared narrative story. As Brad Kallenberg puts it, ‘the human self is not monadic—a generic and interchangeable political atom—but dyadic, which is to say, having only the identity that derives from occupying a place in each other’s lives!’<sup>22</sup>

Since Hauerwas believes that there is no objective vantage point from which the moral life can be described, the second function of narrative is to provide us with a way of developing the capacity to deal with moral questions. Before we can answer the questions, ‘Why be moral?’ or ‘What does it mean to be moral?’ we must talk about a set of skills called virtues, which an individual must possess if he/she is to act responsibly when called to act. For Hauerwas, these skills can only be found in communal life. They are passed on through stories and practices from one generation to the next, and become the means through which communities define themselves. Hence we can speak of a Christian ethics, since the ethics of Christians is worked out from stories, skills and practices that are formed by the Christian community.

The belief behind this view is that the key to right action cannot be simply a matter of obedience to moral rules or principles. Nor can it be explained in terms of motives

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<sup>21</sup> Hauerwas, “Towards an Ethics of Character,” 698.

<sup>22</sup> Kallenberg, “Positioning MacIntyre in Christian Ethics,” 59.

and intentions, for in Hauerwas' view we can only act in a world we see, a seeing partially determined by the kind of beings we have become through the stories we have learned throughout our lives and embodied in our life plan. Thus Hauerwas explains: 'Christian ethics must not be reduced to a conception of the moral life that does not share its stories and metaphors.'<sup>23</sup>

A third function of narrative in the construction of a virtuous life, as Hauerwas understands it, lies in its ability to provide a master story that makes sense out of our individual stories. In the absence of a community that embodies and extends a master story, the moral life, argues Hauerwas, cannot be navigated because the map would remain hidden.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the moral stories of the Christian community provide purpose and meaning to moral actions because they tell us where they are headed, i.e., towards God. This has implications for the way in which the Christian community understands freedom.

The liberal story, for instance, has its root in the Promethean myth that humans control the future of society by making policy decisions that can be implemented by an authority or by an institution. In addition, liberals view freedom as the continuous effort to free oneself from external constraints. Freedom is thus defined in terms of autonomy and liberation, from which we get the terms 'liberal' and 'liberalism'.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the Christian story sees freedom as the power to live faithfully to a master

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, Notre Dame: Indiana: Fides Publishers, 1974, 75. For a brief statement of Hauerwas' ethics of character, see Paul Lewis, "The Springs of Motion: Jonathan Edwards on Emotions, Character, and Agency," *JRE* 22/2 (2001), [ATLA Religion Database], 275-297, esp. 287ff. (02/11/04).

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (eds.), *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989, 158-190.

<sup>25</sup> Kallenberg, "Positioning MacIntyre in Christian Ethics," 60.

story. Autonomy that promotes individualism is not the primary issue. What is important, rather, is subordination to a community in which skills for moral living are learned and passed on. The truths about morality are not mediated by a universal theory. Instead, the moral life is embodied in a particular people. Sustaining, educating and forming character and identity becomes the chief end of human existence,<sup>26</sup> and the truth value of the Christian story lies in its ability to shape characters and provide believers with the necessary resources to act virtuously when called to act.

In short, then, it could be said that for Hauerwas the Bible helps to shape the moral character of the Christian community. It provides a context for reflecting upon and making sense of moral actions. Thus he states: 'The moral use of Scripture, therefore, lies in its power to help us remember the stories of God for the continual guidance of our community and of individual lives.'<sup>27</sup> In this approach the ethical teachings of the Bible are not so much laws or rules as they are a part of the Christian community's story of faith, and they provide believers with the necessary tools for developing moral character and virtuous dispositions.<sup>28</sup>

MacIntyre's position is similar to Hauerwas' in that it represents an attempt to show how a return to virtue ethics, as exemplified in the work of Aristotle, Plato, Augustine and Aquinas, can help to combat the 'depersonalisation' of ethics. MacIntyre's

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 10, 36, 51, 62, 93, 95.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> For a brief statement of Hauerwas' position, see Daniel Harrington and James Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology*, Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 2002, 22.

concern is that ethicists have become overly rational in their approach to morality, with the result that they are left only to comment on actions to the detriment of the narrative and historical character of human existence. Hence, like Hauerwas, MacIntyre's project is to show how communities assist in the moral formation of individuals by providing them with a stockpile of stories, rather than rules and principles, to which they can refer when making moral decisions.

### **3.4 MacIntyre's Narrative Ethics**

According to MacIntyre, life can only be understood through narrative. He suggests, moreover, that knowledge of any kind is narrative-shaped in the sense that no action performed, no sentence spoken can be understood apart from a wider context/story that gives it its sense. In the equation  $x = y$ , for example, we must understand what both 'x' and 'y' mean before we can begin to say whether or not one is equal to the other. Hence, the stories told about 'x' and 'y' provide the background for understanding the significance of 'x' and 'y' when they appear in other contexts.<sup>29</sup>

For MacIntyre, the same is true of ethics. We learn ethics by means of stories. The stories of a given community are necessary for transmitting values and meaning to its members. Without them, argues MacIntyre, children cannot become confident in the pursuit of moral truth.<sup>30</sup> With stories, however, children learn to distinguish between good and bad behaviour. By telling stories of good and evil, virtue and vice, children learn to interpret with confidence situations which require a moral response. Thus MacIntyre points out:

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<sup>29</sup> For an outline of MacIntyre's position, see Horton and Mendus, "Alasdair MacIntyre," 1-15, esp. 8ff.

<sup>30</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

We enter into human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a partner is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that, according to MacIntyre, the only way we can begin to know the kinds of moral response expected from us in any given situation is by becoming familiar with stories that tell of the kinds of roles people occupy in society and the kind of behaviour expected from those who occupy these roles. This is another way of saying that our community and its stock of moral stories provide us with our moral starting point. Stories give us the tools we need to consider all that is involved in making responsible moral decisions. Of course, there is no guarantee that we will use these tools correctly or interpret the stories of our tradition correctly, but there is more reason to hope than to despair since they are available to us. Possessing a genuine understanding of our own narrative stories and those of others makes it more likely that we will know how to act when we are called to do so.

Thus MacIntyre rejects the conception of a person as principally a chooser and decider, in favour of a conception of a person as having an identity which is at least partly given in advance of any decisions or choices the person makes. As a consequence, the central question of our moral lives is not, as the liberals maintain, about which choices we ought to make, or which principles we ought to follow, but

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<sup>31</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201.

rather how we are to understand who we are, independent and antecedent to our choices.

To understand what we ought to do, therefore, we must recognise that the story of our lives possesses a certain narrative structure in which what we are now is continuous with what we were in the past. This implies that the search for who we are and what we ought to do is indeed a *search*, not simply a set of rules or decisions that must be followed. According to MacIntyre, it is this search that is essential to the moral unity of a person's life. Thus he writes:

In what does the unity of an individual consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask 'What is the good for me?' is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask 'What is the good for man?' is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasise that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest.<sup>32</sup>

And so we begin to see the links between Ricoeur's work and that of Hauerwas and MacIntyre. It will be recalled that Ricoeur emphasises the following four points (which we will only mention here since they were discussed in detail in chapter two):

- 1) the self cannot be understood in the Cartesian sense, that is, as a disembodied ego;
- 2) the stories contained in our communities are the means through which we interpret ourselves and learn about the virtues;
- 3) narrative provides us with a way of remembering who we are and maintaining a certain amount of self-constancy as we search to do the truth in love; and
- 4) narrative allows us to identify evil. For if we had no way of identifying evil, how would we know it was evil? From the above it can be seen that Hauerwas and MacIntyre also discuss these.

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<sup>32</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 203.

### 3.5 Ricoeur and Virtue Ethics

But this is not to suggest that MacIntyre, Hauerwas and Ricoeur interpret the narrative quality of the moral life in the same way. For instance, MacIntyre is mainly considering stories enacted in everyday life, while Hauerwas' main focus is on the role of biblical narrative in the navigation of the moral life. Ricoeur, on the other hand, uses narrative as a way of remembering who we are and of trying out various proposals for ethical living.

Yet, in spite of these differences, all three agree that the key to good living is not to be found in the obedient following of rules and principles in which good actions are predetermined, but in the way in which we use the narratives of our tradition as a way of educating us into the life of virtue. Good behaviour does not arise out of a simple desire to do good; rather, it stems from an understanding of what the good life entails as exemplified in the narratives of our tradition. As Peter Kemp, one of Ricoeur's commentators, asserts, 'Without emplotment [i.e., the activity of placing episodes in a narrative sequence, that is, a story] there would be no sense in unfolding some models for action. Thus ethics must necessarily be the narrative configuration of the good life.'<sup>33</sup>

All of this points to the fact that the proposal of using Ricoeur's work to move the Christian *proprium* debate away from the search for specifically Christian rules and principles to the search for self-understanding through the texts of the biblical canon is a promising one. In fact, it would seem that many scholars, especially those involved in discussions on virtue ethics, have already made this move. As with

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<sup>33</sup> Kemp, "Narrative Ethics and Moral Law in Paul Ricoeur," 38.

MacIntyre, Hauerwas and Ricoeur, they prefer to interpret to the moral life as a quest for goodness which depends on narrative for its articulation.

Of course, telling or reading stories about virtuous men and women, although essential for the acquisition of virtue, is not in itself sufficient for the sustenance of a virtuous life. Becoming virtuous requires time, effort and support in the form of practices, rituals and institutions that help to reinforce beliefs about the good and create a culture within which the virtues can flourish. Behaviour building takes time. Our behaviour is influenced over a long period of time as we become habituated to choosing the right ends for the right reasons and begin doing the right thing at the right time for the right purpose.<sup>34</sup> The more we practice being virtuous, the more likely we are to sustain a course of activity which promotes the virtues over the course of our lives. One virtuous act, for example, encourages the moral agents to perform another and so on.<sup>35</sup>

This suggests that any account of Christian ethics which emphasises the virtues, rather than rules and principles *per se*, must be sustained by the practices of a community. As MacIntyre explains, the virtues cannot flourish in a society that does not promote or sustain a culture of virtue.<sup>36</sup> The practice of any virtue is intrinsically connected to culture, environment and institution. Without practices that help to create a milieu in which the acquisition of virtue is encouraged, virtues risk falling prey to the

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<sup>34</sup> Farley, *In Praise of Virtue*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 180.



corrupting power of institutions.<sup>37</sup> To echo MacIntyre's words, the relationship between institutions and practices is so intimate that they form a single causal order in which the ideal and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.<sup>38</sup>

And so we must conclude this part of the argument with a few comments on the kind of social practices that help to sustain the virtues and give meaning to the moral sensibilities of the believing community. Once we have defined a practice and offered some examples used by the Christian community to sustain a culture of virtue, we will then suggest possible links with Ricoeur's work.

Although Ricoeur's primary task is that of a philosopher, not a virtue ethicist, there are certain aspects of his work that hint at the kinds of practices which he deems necessary for a life of virtue. Drawing attention to these practices will allow us to see again that Ricoeur's potential contribution to the Christian *proprium* debate is similar to all that is involved in the retrieval of virtue ethics: Christian ethics is not simply a matter of following or finding Christian principles of conduct; rather, it is based on cultivating and maintaining a desire to constantly seek the truth and act responsibly when called to act. The first step, however, is to define what is meant by the word 'practice.'

### **3.6 Sustaining Virtue**

According to MacIntyre, a practice may be defined as: 'any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal

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<sup>37</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 180.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods, are systematically extended.<sup>39</sup>

Although MacIntyre's definition of a practice may appear complex, Patrick Riordan offers a useful example which makes its meaning clear. Riordan considers all that is involved in the teaching profession to show what is meant when we speak of a practice.<sup>40</sup> An individual teacher measures him/herself against the standards of excellence set by the best teachers he/she has encountered. In this way, the teacher attempts to be the best he/she can be, by striving to accomplish the goods internal to the teaching practice, that is, the development of the student in their mastery of the course or curriculum. The success of the project, however, does not depend solely upon the student, but upon the teacher's achievement and mastery of their practice. A life devoted to teaching means that the quality of one's whole life is dependent, at least in part, on one's success or excellence in teaching. This is experienced as worthwhile if the goals are achieved. There is an additional pleasure in striving for excellence in teaching, because it gives the teacher a sense of joy that he/she has helped the student to pass and achieved something for themselves. In other words, the teacher has attained the goods associated with the practice.

Although in the case of the teaching the standards of excellence set by the practice are defined by other teachers, this does not mean that the achievement of excellence in

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<sup>39</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175.

<sup>40</sup> Patrick Riordan, S.J., *A Politics of the Common Good*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1996, 52.

the pursuit of internal goods does not include change or revision. Indeed, it is almost inevitable that, as the teacher begins to achieve excellence in the profession, his/her own performance will lead to a redefinition and deeper awareness of what constitutes good teaching.

In a similar way, good moral behaviour is determined by the kinds of practices in which we are engaged. This is not something that we decide for ourselves from the first instance we are born, but developed over time. Practices make us more attuned to the standards of excellence required of us as moral human beings. But practices need to be situated in a wider context, that of a tradition. For being part of a tradition that promotes moral behaviour requires that we periodically engage in practices that will help us to define the virtues and provide the resources with which the individual may pursue his or her quest for the good.

As MacIntyre explains, the practices of a community provide us with the space in which we can reflect on and judge our moral performance. To enter into a practice is 'to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences, and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice.'<sup>41</sup> It is this dimension of a practice, as defined by MacIntyre, that is present in the various practices of the Christian community. The practices of Eucharist, of baptism, of reading the Scriptures, etc. provide believers with a way of measuring their own moral performance against the suggestions offered by these practices either in a paradigmatic or in a literary/imaginative way. The standards of excellence which they recount help to

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<sup>41</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 190.

sustain the believer on his/her quest to do good and avoid evil, since they promote a culture of goodness rather than evil.

The most obvious practice of the Christian community that contributes to promoting a culture of virtue is that of the Eucharist. Its memorial character serves as a reminder to the faithful of their specific identity and of the covenantal promises made between Yahweh and Israel. This was also true of the Passover meal. Recall Matthew's account of the event. Central to the rite Mathew describes are two acts of sharing by Jesus: one of bread, the other of a cup (of wine). The words that accompany these two acts ("Take and eat...Drink from it, all of you....This is my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (26:26-28)) serve as a reminder to the disciples that the blood of Christ represented by the wine is the blood of the Covenant. Moreover, Matthew's account of the rite, as well as the Eucharistic prayer read out at Mass every day, can be interpreted as a means of remembering who we are as believers and the new union we have with Christ—a union which is of course linked to the wider Jewish tradition.<sup>42</sup>

In moral terms, this means that the practice of the Eucharist is understood less in terms of rule and more in terms of memory. The Eucharistic celebration and the Scripture readings that accompany it give us a sense of who we are, which is vital in the quest for moral goodness. As Mark Allman puts it, the celebration of the Eucharist invites believers to 'enter into the story, the meta-narrative of salvation and retrace the steps of their ancestry, thereby giving a multigenerational backdrop to the

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<sup>42</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "The Practice of Community Formation," in Nancey Murphy et al. (eds.), *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition*, 1997, 90.

story of God's intervening on Israel's behalf against which one comes to understand his/her own place in that history.'<sup>43</sup>

However, practising the Eucharist is not only important in the construction of a coherent account of the identity of the community, it also plays a part in reminding us that we are not masters of our own moral lives, but members of a community that constantly searches for moral meaning. In fact, the eschatological character of the Eucharist prayer seems to support this view. For, in recounting the events of the Passover meal, we are reminded that, although we are redeemed in Christ, we await the full disclosure of the Kingdom: 'Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.' (Eucharistic Prayer I-IV). This thrust towards the future is similar to what we find in the Matthean text: 'I tell you, [Jesus says] I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's Kingdom. (Mt. 26: 29). The moral implications of the Eucharistic celebration are clear, therefore: the following of Christ involves acknowledging the limitations of the human quest for goodness, since the Kingdom is both *already* and *not-yet*.

Another practice necessary for the sustenance of a moral community that seeks to educate people into the life of virtue is that of forgiveness. To see why this is so, it is necessary to recall the nature of forgiveness. To forgive is to grant pardon without resentment. According to James McClendon, this points to two elements: one formal and juridical (the granting of pardon), the other affective, attitudinal and inward (establishing new ties with the one forgiven).<sup>44</sup> This means that forgiveness requires

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<sup>43</sup> Mark Allman, "Eucharist, Ritual and Narrative: Formation of Individual and Communal Moral Character," *JRS* 14/1 (2000), [ATLA Religion Database], 63. (07/03/02).

<sup>44</sup> McClendon, "The Practice of Community Formation," 98.

an *act* and an accompanying *attitude* to be considered as genuine. Possessing the desire to forgive, however, is often complicated or hindered by feelings of resentment.

Nevertheless, as the nineteenth century theologian and preacher Joseph Butler explains, feelings of resentment are normal: they protect us from greater harms by inciting us to seek a justice we might otherwise be too placid or too compassionate to enforce.<sup>45</sup> This is not to suggest that resentment may be used as justification for harbouring feelings of betrayal. For while we are meant to resent the suffering of others, and the pain that others bring into our own lives, resentment must come to an end. This is another way of saying that resentment is healed by the practice of forgiveness.

Indeed, the practice of forgiveness is one which is of particular importance in the Eucharistic celebration. Reciting the Our Father serves as a reminder to the faithful that mature moral growth requires us to forgive in two senses. We ask God for forgiveness ('forgive us our trespasses'), and we are invited to forgive those who have sinned against us ('as we forgive those who trespass against us'). Thus the practice of forgiveness is useful in the acquisition of the virtuous life: in the act of forgiving others, we learn a new story about ourselves. We discover that both our lives and our sins are bound up with those of others.

Moreover, we become aware that while moral failure is a reality, it can be healed. We can start anew. As McClendon points out, 'Attitudinally speaking, forgiveness is this: one takes another's life up into one's own, making the offender a part of one's own

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph Butler, *Butler's Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel and a Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue*, London: SPCK, 1970, 72-79.

story in such a way that the cost of doing so overcomes the power of the injury, healing it with a new bond of union between them.’<sup>46</sup> Thus we can speak of the practice of forgiveness as essential to any understanding of the moral life, since it encourages believers to move beyond incidences of failure, evaluate and learn from them and be reconciled with the community in the ongoing search for truth and moral meaning.

It is clear, therefore, that many of the practices found at the heart of the Christian community help to promote a culture of virtue. The Eucharistic meal reminds believers of their ancestry and keeps their imaginations focused on the spiritual promises made by Israel in the past and repeated by the faithful in Baptism. Furthermore, it encourages them to focus on the power of forgiveness as a way of being liberated from sin and resentment.

Having defined the concept of a practice, we must now look at examples from Ricoeur’s work which hint at the kinds of practices he believes are necessary to sustain the believing community in the moral quest. Some of the practices suggested by his work are similar to those mentioned above. This will allow us to see again how his work is congenial to all that is involved in the current retrieval of virtue ethics.

### **3.7 Ricoeurian Practices and the Quest for Self-Knowledge and Virtue**

The first practice is that of reading the texts of one’s tradition. Since for Ricoeur the only way to understand ourselves or what is required of us morally is through reading the signs and symbols contained in the texts of tradition, it goes without saying that he

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<sup>46</sup> McClendon, “The Practice of Community Formation,” 100.

considers reading narrative as an important, if not essential, practice in the pursuit of goodness.<sup>47</sup> This is particularly true when we look at the context in which Ricoeur considers the term *phronesis*.

In chapter two it was shown that, according to Ricoeur, the stories we inherit from our culture allow us to relate good behaviour with happiness and vice versa. Drawing on the work of Aristotle, Ricoeur asserts that the ‘lessons of poetry’ contained in narrative are comparable to the universals of which Aristotle spoke. Moreover, he explains that the kind of wisdom contained in narrative ‘develops a kind of understanding that can be termed narrative understanding and which is much closer to the practical wisdom of moral judgement than to science or, more generally, to the theoretical use of reason.’<sup>48</sup> For this reason Ricoeur believes that ethical narrative gives us a *phronetic* account of the good. But what does this mean?

The word phronetic is derived from the Greek term *phronesis*—or *prudentia* as the Latins called it. Although the secondary literature on Ricoeur’s work seems to suggest that some commentators have unresolved questions about his use of the term,<sup>49</sup> what is certain is that it is based on the Aristotelian understanding of *phronesis*. In the Greek world *phronesis* was thought to be an intellectual virtue necessary for making practical decisions and shaping character virtues. The belief was that without the intellectual virtues of understanding (*nous*), knowledge

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Don Ihde (ed.), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 327.

<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 23.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Ricoeur on Tragedy,” in Wall et al. (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, 2002, 264-276, esp. 274-275.



(*episteme*), philosophy (*philosophia*), skill (*techne*) and prudence (*phronesis*), the character virtues of temperance, courage and justice would be incomplete and lacking.

Moreover, Aristotle believed that possessing good character traits is not sufficient in itself; intellectual virtues are also needed so that moral subjects can make intelligent decisions.<sup>50</sup> Left to themselves, character virtues can lead to unhealthy moral actions and choices that do not enrich our lives with fulfilment and happiness. As Rosalind Hursthouse puts it, the virtuous Aristotelian agent does not characteristically act from the kind of desire that humans share with animals, but from reason (*logos*) in the form of choice (*prohairesis*).<sup>51</sup> This means that character virtues should not be interpreted as *a priori* guides for deciding the reasonable course of action one should take when faced with an ethical decision. Temperance, courage and justice are the result of prior intelligent decisions, as well as reflection on these virtues carried out by the intellectual virtues. Of these intellectual virtues practical wisdom or prudence (*phronesis*) is considered to be cardinal.<sup>52</sup>

While prudence (*phronesis*) is often interpreted by scholars as something which fine-tunes our capacity to make effective moral decisions, or to see where exceptions need to be made in respect of certain principles, it had a much richer meaning in the Greek world. It referred to prudence in relation to decision making that preceded principle.

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<sup>50</sup> For an interesting treatment of the necessity of intellectual and character virtues, see Joseph Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996, esp. 27ff. Kotva suggests that although virtue theory assumes that good character traits are necessary for making good moral choices, intellectual virtues help us to give reasons for acting in particular ways, thereby preventing the character virtues from degenerating into a quest for self-fulfilment. (p. 27).

<sup>51</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 121ff; cf. idem, "Virtue Ethics and Emotions," in Daniel Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997, 99-117.

<sup>52</sup> DeVettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics*, 73.

For the Greeks, adherence to principles did not guarantee prudence; instead, they believed that principles followed prudence. In this respect, prudence was considered necessary for the development of authentic character virtues because it involved making a deliberate choice to do something for its own sake, not for the sake of conformity to rule. Thus the prudent person did not have to forfeit his/her freedom in order to be prudent. Of course, this raises the question of how one becomes prudent. If becoming prudent does not require obedience to principles, how is prudence learned?

According to Aristotle, we learn about prudence by watching people who are prudent, not by theorising about it. 'We understand what *phronesis* and how it works by watching the *phronimoi* [i.e., prudent people], the people who manage their lives well. Prudent people are the virtuous people; we learn about virtue by watching how they live virtuously. We learn how to live a successful human life by looking at those who are already doing it.'<sup>53</sup>

Owing to the fact that Ricoeur's use of *phronesis* is taken from the Aristotelian understanding of the term, it seems likely that he shares the same view as Aristotle, that we become prudent by watching prudent people. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that Ricoeur's project is to explain human beings and ethical behaviour through texts. This means that when Ricoeur speaks of *phronesis* it is in relation to literature. In so doing, he expands the Aristotelian account of *phronesis* to include

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<sup>53</sup> Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics*, 111. It is interesting to note that in the Aristotelian view prudence also corrects the flaws of the moral sense. For instance, prudence can help the overly generous person to understand that giving to the poor does not require that one gives all of one's money away. For other examples of how a lack of prudence can lead to extreme behaviour, see Julia Driver, "The Virtues and Human Nature," in Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 112-129, esp. 112-113.

reading texts. Whereas Aristotle believes that one becomes prudent by watching those who are prudent, Ricoeur underlines the point that one can also become prudent by reading about prudent people. Hence, for Ricoeur, the practice of reading is vital for all that involved in becoming prudent, since reading ethical texts allows us to emulate the prudence of others and provides us with a way of shaping and evaluating character virtues lest they become self-interested.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.8 Metaphor and Moral Striving

Still, Ricoeur's work suggests that the practice of reading is also useful in another sense. This is clear from his treatment of the role of metaphor in texts, especially those of religious significance. Metaphor, as defined by Ricoeur, 'is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to re-describe reality.'<sup>55</sup> This means that the function of metaphor is to bring unrelated images and descriptions of objects together in order to create a feeling of discomfort in the world of the reader. The bringing together of unusual images creates a tension in the text and shatters preconceived notions of reality by bringing new ideas into focus. For Ricoeur this is particularly true of religious texts. For example, 'Lamb' and 'God' are two distinct terms that seem logically unrelated. But the union of both terms in the biblical metaphor of 'Lamb of God' sets free a new understanding of the divine life—as a bloody and innocent salvation-bringer—hitherto unavailable to the reader.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For an interesting account of how virtue ethics may be connected with self-interest and/or the well being of the self, see Michael Slote, *Morals and Motives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLoughlin and John Costello, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, (ed.), Mark I. Wallace, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 8.

The same may be said of the parabolic texts contained in the gospels. Seemingly unrelated images are brought together and create a new metaphor or, to use Ricoeur's phrase, a new way of 'seeing' or 'feeling'.<sup>57</sup> The parable of the mustard seed is a useful example, as it unites the image of the Kingdom of God with that of a tiny vulnerable seed. Ordinarily, it would be difficult to see how or why these images could function in complementary terms, since one would assume that the greatness of the Kingdom could not be encompassed using the metaphor of a seed. Nevertheless, as the parable tells us, the smallest of seeds grew into the biggest shrub, so that the birds of air could take shelter in it (Mt. 13:31). Here we see that placing unrelated images side by side encourages the reader to see more, to ask more questions, to examine any preconceived notions they may have had about the nature of the Kingdom. Moreover, it demonstrates that the weak can become strong, the vulnerable can become great and the disheartened can be saved.

In this respect, reading and interpreting metaphors plays an important role in the quest for moral goodness: bringing together unrelated images and symbols creates a feeling of discomfort in the reader. The reader is invited to question his/her world-view and any preconceived notions they might possess concerning what it takes to become great, good or just. Metaphors act as 'mini-texts' that call us time and again to re-examine our moral stance. As Ricoeur argues, the power of poetic language (i.e., language contained in texts) lies in its ability to 'set forth novel *ontologies* that disorient readers in order to reorient them by way of an ever-expanding vision of the whole.'<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 245.

<sup>58</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 8.

The disorientation of the reader's world-view invites a new beginning, a new way of seeing the world; like Christ, the reader loses his/her way in order to find it.<sup>59</sup> The process of orientation-disorientation-reorientation generated by reading biblical texts is one which, for Ricoeur, is necessary in the search for goodness and virtue: it ensures that the search for goodness does not become a single-minded quest for self-satisfaction or superiority.<sup>60</sup>

### **3.9 The Practice of Pardon and Forgiveness versus Amnesty as Amnesia**

Another practice suggested by Ricoeur's work is one which was mentioned earlier, that is, forgiveness. Although Ricoeur's use of the term has been used in legal studies and jurisprudence to explain the difference between forgiveness and amnesty in cases of genocide and ethnic cleansing,<sup>61</sup> it may be also be used in understanding the kind of practices necessary for the sustenance of morality of virtue rather than principle. Indeed, Ricoeur admits that the practice of forgiveness is one that belongs to the moral sphere. In order to see this, we must distinguish between forgiveness and amnesty.

According to Ricoeur, forgiveness is a 'marvel' because it surpasses the limits of irrational calculation and explanation. Pardon is not a rational necessity. In fact, it is

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<sup>59</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *L'herméneutique biblique*, trans. François Xavier Amherdt, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2001, 262-265.

<sup>60</sup> See Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 284-288.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Dimitrios E. Akrivoulis, "A New Ethos for the Balkans: Collective Memories, the Weight of Suffering and Forgiveness," Paper presented at the 54<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Political Studies Association, University of Lincoln, UK, 6-10 April, 2004, 1-13.

something which makes little sense before we give it but much sense once we do.<sup>62</sup>

Thus Ricoeur defines forgiveness as a charitable action.

Forgiveness falls within the scope of an economy of the gift whose logic of superabundance exceeds the logic of reciprocity....Insofar as it exceeds the order of morality, the economy of the gift belongs to what we would be able to term the 'poetics' of the moral life if we were to retain the twofold sense of the term 'poetics', that is, the sense of creativity at the level of dynamics of acting and the sense of song and hymn at the level of verbal expression. It is thus to this spiritual economy, to this poetics of the moral life, that forgiveness especially belongs. Its 'poetic' power consists in shattering the law of the irreversibility of time by changing the past, not as a record of all that has happened but in terms of its meaning today. It does this by lifting the burden of guilt which paralyses the relations between individuals who are acting out and suffering their own history. It does not abolish the debt insofar as we are and remain the inheritors of the past, but it lifts the pain of the debt.<sup>63</sup>

Forgiveness can be therapeutic, notes Ricoeur, because it does not involve forgetting offences but encourages all involved to remember them so that they might be avoided in the future. In the practice of forgiveness the offence is discussed, the offender takes responsibility for the injury caused, and the injured party agrees to forgive. Consequently, the sin or debt is not forgotten but worked through and remembered before it is forgiven.

In contrast, amnesty 'purports to erase the debt and the fact'.<sup>64</sup> This is another way of saying that amnesty is a kind of amnesia, where 'the slate is wiped clean' and wrongdoing is forgotten or erased from memory. To echo Peter Krapp's words, a general

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 96.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, in Richard Kearney (ed.), London: Sage Publications, 1996, 3-13.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 125.

amnesty would allow one to go on 'as if nothing had happened'.<sup>65</sup> It is for this reason that Ricoeur considers amnesty as a kind of amnesia about the past that should be used as infrequently as possible.<sup>66</sup>

Forgiveness, however, is different. It requires an exact call of the injury to be forgiven. It conjures up the past to the extent of making it present again, opening the wound, so that its full extent might be forgiven.<sup>67</sup> This is what allows us to distinguish genuine forgiveness from amnesty. Whereas amnesty goes to the limits of forgetting, forgiveness goes to the limits of memory, requiring that all involved understand what is being forgiven, thereby providing the hope of a peaceful future, where all are reconciled with one another.

And so we begin to see how Ricoeur's interpretation of forgiveness is useful in the pursuit of virtue. According to Ricoeur, forgiveness has a healing power insofar as it seeks not so much to erase the sinful act as to discuss it and understand why it was sinful, so that a genuine reconciliation might be achieved. In this respect, the practice of forgiveness (rather than amnesty) helps to promote a culture of peace, where immoral actions are discussed and all are invited to take responsibility for their actions before being forgiven. This is similar to McClendon's view that forgiveness helps to heal broken bonds so that individuals and communities may start anew and

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<sup>65</sup> Peter Krapp, "Amnesty: Between an Ethics of Forgiveness and the Politics of Forgetting," *German Law Journal* 6/1 (2005), [www.germanlawjournal.com](http://www.germanlawjournal.com), 4. (21/02/05); for an interesting discussion on the abuse of memory and of collective forgetting, see Sarah Gensburger and Marie-Claire Lavabre, "Entre 'devoir de mémoire' et 'abus de mémoire'," in Bertrand Müller (ed.), *L'histoire entre mémoire et épistémologie: Autour de Paul Ricoeur*, France: Éditions Payot Lausanne, 2005, 75-98.

<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, 125; cf. Louis Fèvre, *Penser avec Ricoeur: L'introduction à la pensée et à l'action de Paul Ricoeur*, Lyon: Chronique Sociale, 2003, 62-65.

<sup>67</sup> Krapp, "Amnesty," 5.

learn a truer story about themselves, as well as the kinds of actions required of them as free individuals in search of goodness.<sup>68</sup> As Ricoeur puts it, forgiveness is a kind of healing of memory, the end of mourning. Delivered from the weight of debt, forgiveness gives us a future.<sup>69</sup>

Of course, for the believer, the practice of forgiveness is linked to the practice of confession, since believers confess their sins to God in the hope of gaining forgiveness. According to Ricoeur, this is a specifically religious practice. Its significance lies in the fact that it provides believers with a way of ‘placing evil *before* God’.<sup>70</sup> Religious invocations, such as that of the Psalmist ‘Against you, against you alone have I sinned, I have done evil in your sight,’ provide believers with an opportunity to acknowledge that they have sinned and used their freedom in a sinful manner.

Moreover, Ricoeur believes that the practice of confessing sins before God places sin in a context of hope. This is so because the religious community uses confession not only as a means of admitting wrongdoing, but as a means of renewing the covenantal promises. The confession of sins represents a way of beginning again for the believing community. Faith encourages the believing community to believe that, adapting Saint Paul’s phrase, ‘Wherever evil “abounds”, there hope “superabounds”’.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> McClendon, “The Practice of Community Formation,” 99; cf. John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, London: Routledge, 2003, 15ff.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “Sanction, Rehabilitation, Pardon,” in *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 133-145. For a summary of Ricoeur’s treatment of pardon and forgiveness, see Fèvre, *Penser avec Ricoeur*, 62-65.

<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 437-8.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 439.



The view of faith, according to Ricoeur, is that man is essentially benevolent and that in spite of sin there is the hope of freedom and liberation.

In summary, the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur invites us to interpret the narrative texts and practices of the Christian community as a means of educating and sustaining believers in the quest for goodness. Ricoeur's work necessitates a hermeneutics of the self: it interprets the Christian story and tradition as the locus for *all* understanding, both ethical and personal. The whole of the Christian life of faith is interpreted as a dialectic between two questions: 'Who am I?' and 'What is required of me if I am to continue to be that person?'

Since Christians use the Christian story to answer the 'Who?' of personal identity, this means that they will inevitably refer to it to answer the 'What?' of morals. (For who we think we are, and what we believe we should do are inextricably linked.) This is a help to Christians in search of truth, for a familiarity with what virtuous behaviour looks like leads to an ability to identify what is required in moral decision making. Indeed, the similarities between the work of Stanley Hauerwas and MacIntyre cohere with Ricoeur's belief that narrative is the key to understanding morality and the self, which makes the case for interpreting the distinctiveness of Christian morality debate in this way all the more promising.

Of course, using Ricoeur's work to move the Christian *proprium* in the general direction of virtue ethics means that Christian ethics is offered more resources than before. This is the case because, as James Keenan explains, virtue ethics not only

provides bridges between Scripture and moral theology, Church life and worship,<sup>72</sup> but also between ethics and spirituality. Owing to the fact that the emphasis is now placed upon self-knowledge and the cultivation of good character traits, rather than on obedience to principles, a link is opened up between Christian ethics and spirituality. In fact, given that spirituality is comprised of various practices that serve to awaken affectivity, it would seem that spirituality is vital for the sustenance of the virtues. Moreover, the moral life for Christians is not simply about becoming good, it is also about becoming holy. It makes sense, therefore, that our understanding of Christian morality should include reference to the affective and transcendental dimensions of Christian moral striving.

And so we begin to see that one of the advantages of approaching the Christian *proprium* debate from the perspective of identity, as suggested by the work of Paul Ricoeur, is that it provides a space where Christian ethics and spirituality can coexist as we strive to integrate our lives in goodness and holiness. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

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<sup>72</sup> Harrington and Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*, 24-5.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY, VIRTUE ETHICS AND MORAL THEOLOGY

In the previous chapter it was shown that moving the Christian *proprium* debate away from the search for Christian norms and principles is similar to all that is involved in the return to virtue ethics advocated by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre. The general thrust towards character and identity highlights the fact that the key to understanding Christian morality is not to be found in individual acts but in the particular way the Christian community interprets itself. Stories and practices supplement ethics with the kind of personalism that was lacking in traditional moral theology. The similarities between Ricoeur's work and the current retrieval of virtue ethics strengthen the proposal that the Christian *proprium* debate should be approached from the perspective of identity.

Yet the advantages of a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate are not confined to the area of virtue ethics. The change in focus, from acts to person, also invites a healthy dialogue with those who wish to emphasise the unseen, spiritual or devotional aspects of moral living. Christian ethics is offered a broader horizon of understanding. This broader horizon can account for the spiritual dimensions of the search for goodness, and makes it impossible to separate morality and spirituality. In this way, a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate can create a space

where spirituality and moral theology meet and find a common language of expression. The primary concern is with persons in relationship and in community, which makes it an attractive and promising alternative to the search for Christian norms or values.

In order to see how interpreting the Christian *proprium* debate through the eyes of Paul Ricoeur can create a space where the spiritual dimension of moral striving is considered, we must first define the term spirituality. We will then show how spiritualities are specific to the tradition within which they are lived. This will allow us to see how the Christian community interprets morality as the expression of its spirituality. Later sections will focus on some of the obstacles that stand in the way of current attempts to relate morality to spirituality, with a view to determining how Paul Ricoeur's interpretation of biblical revelation can provide a way forward.

A preliminary clarification offered by William Spohn will help to explain the *kind* of spirituality being discussed here. Spohn draws a distinction between 'lived spirituality' and 'reflective spirituality'. The former is analogous to morality, and refers to the practice of holistic and transformative disciplines that seek to assist in connecting persons with their inner core and with their desire to live a life that consciously seeks to live in tune with ultimate or comprehensive realities. 'Reflective spirituality', which is analogous to ethics, has to do with the practical communication of the spiritual experience.<sup>1</sup> The first part of this chapter will discuss spirituality in the 'lived' sense. The second part will include reference to 'reflective spirituality'. The context will make it clear which one is being discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> William Spohn, "Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections," *TS* 58 (1997), 109.

#### 4.1 What is Spirituality?

For all the interest in spirituality today, there remains a lack of precision about what exactly is meant when one speaks of spirituality. In moving towards a general definition it might be useful to note that, although various forms of spirituality exist, it appears to be grounded in two central ideas: (a) that there are dimensions of reality which we do not see; (b) that an acknowledgement of these dimensions helps us to live in a less fragmented way, and move towards the fullness of being, both ethically and spiritually.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, there are many spiritualities and the term is used to cover a range of beliefs and practices in areas as diverse as the occult and self-help programmes. The term spirituality has also been used by anti-religious and non-religious groups, (the most obvious examples being Marxist spirituality, black spirituality and feminist spirituality), which further complicates the task of giving it a clear definition.<sup>3</sup> In religious circles one of the difficulties has to do with the different types of Christianities, e.g. Catholic, Lutheran, evangelical, charismatic, etc. Each tradition leads to different types of spiritualities, thereby making it difficult to give a precise definition of the term spirituality.<sup>4</sup> Michael Downey, however, offers a number of ways in which lived spirituality might be explained.

The term "spirituality" is used by some to describe the depth dimension of all human existence. Here the emphasis is on spirituality as a constitutive element of human nature and experience. Joann Wolski Conn speaks of spirituality in terms of the capacity for self-transcendence. For Ewert Cousins, spirituality refers to the "inner dimensions of the person...[where] ultimate

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq (eds.), *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, New York: Crossroads, 1985, 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Sandra Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" *Horizons* 13/2 (1986), 224-225.

<sup>4</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999, 13.

reality is experienced.” John MacQuarrie understands spirituality to be concerned with “becoming a person in the fullest sense.” For Gordon Wakefield, spirituality has to do with the “constituent of human nature which seeks relations with the ground or purpose of existence.” Edward Kinerk envisions spirituality as the expression of the dialectic by which one moves from the inauthentic to the authentic. Perhaps the most open-ended formulation of all comes from Raimundo Panikkar who speaks of spirituality as “one typical way of handling the human condition.”<sup>5</sup>

When viewed in a broad sense, then, spirituality is used to describe an element in human experience which is both human and spiritual. It refers to the individual’s ultimate goal: authenticity and fullness of living. It involves a personal striving for perfection, and is consciously pursued by the individual within a specific horizon or context. Spirituality involves a genuine effort to pursue ideals and goals which individuals consider to be essential to who they are and to the persons they wish to become.

None of this is to suggest that the desire to achieve perfection or to attain one’s ultimate goal is an individual or strictly religious quest, as the need for perfection involves a self-transcendence towards the good one perceives. A non-religious example would include a person who devotes his/her life to the pursuit of peace and justice, channelling all of life’s energies to bear upon this pursuit.<sup>6</sup> Even though it does not refer to God, and is conducted outside the context of a faith community, the pursuit is still an authentic one. In the same way, one could give one’s life to promoting equality among men and women in every sphere of life. Again, the absence of a religious context does mean that this effort is not a spiritual one. Striving for personal perfection or for an ultimate goal does not have to be carried out

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

in a religious community to be authentic: spirituality is a way of consciously pursuing the highest values one holds or perceives.

This is similar to the idea that one does not have to be religious to be moral, and that one can give an account of morality without any reference to religion. For this reason, many writers argue that spirituality allows for conversations between persons of different traditions and faiths. According to Sheldrake, the shift to experience in the disciplines of spirituality and theology has also led to dialogue with other disciplines. Postmodernism, he says, blurs the boundaries that previously hindered such dialogue.<sup>7</sup> Within the academic world, the modernist approach to knowledge tended to produce a series of inwardly consistent but mutually exclusive disciplines, which prevented interdisciplinary conversation. The mood has changed, however, and spirituality has necessitated the possibility of mutual exchanges with other disciplines, including literary ones.

But staying with the discussion of 'lived spirituality', it must be said that, in spite of its diverse forms, spirituality is lived in a context. For the Christian, this context is that of a faith community, whose focus is the work and teachings of Jesus. In this sense we may speak of a specifically Christian spirituality.

#### **4.2 Spirituality in Context**

Since spirituality in its widest sense includes the whole person's or group's spiritual experience or orientation, it may involve beliefs, ways of thinking and feelings that

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God*, Trinity Truth Series, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1998, 62.

are specific to a particular tradition. This is so because spirituality is all-embracing: it includes every aspect of one's existence, as well as attitudes which underlie it.

Therefore context is an essential element of the contemporary study of spirituality. Imported from the social sciences and history, it refers to the specific framework in which the study of theological and spiritual experience takes place. Sheldrake points out that context is not really 'something' that may be added to or subtracted from spiritual experience but is the very element within which such experiences take their forms and expressions. Even though religions claim a transcendent dimension, all faiths throughout their long histories have been embedded in specific cultures.<sup>8</sup>

This is no less the case for Christian spirituality: it is rooted in the context of the person and the story of Christ revealed in the New Testament. Christian spirituality is grounded in the revelation of God through Jesus and facilitates the faith experience. The move away from doctrine, the basis for earlier forms of spirituality, facilitates the experience of faith and the self in its unique relationship with God. Christian spirituality cannot avoid the question of tradition, since it does not purport to an isolated quest for self-fulfilment but to the communal search for wholeness of an entire community which takes revelation as its starting point. In this way, Christian spirituality relies on the story of a people who are capable of entering into a special relationship with a God whose presence is felt in all aspects of their lives. It is not simply about belief in doctrine. It is about faith. For, as MacNamara puts it, 'Faith is

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<sup>8</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, 59.



what opens the spirit and provides the climate for a living acceptance of the great religious symbols and stories.’<sup>9</sup>

The faith community, then, interprets spirituality as the quest for fulfilment and union with God. While some find ultimate meaning in the configuration of the stars and make the horoscope the map for living, believers make God their map for living. In Christian spirituality, we believe that God’s desire for us, revealed in Jesus, gives ultimate foundation, meaning, worth, energy and direction to our lives.<sup>10</sup> This is based on the belief that God loved us first (1 Jn. 4:10). Knowing that God loves us not only brings him close to us, but also empowers us to care for the things he cares for, that is, creation in all its forms. And so we begin to see that spirituality and its drive to fulfil our deepest longings and live in a unified way is inseparable from morality.

### **4.3 Morality and Spirituality**

Recent scholarship in the areas of moral theology and spirituality is marked by the thrust to show how the moral life is born out of spirituality. The key question for moralists is no longer, ‘What should I do?’ but ‘Who should we be and how should we live if we believe that God loves us and that we love God?’<sup>11</sup> This indicates that the moral life begins in that spiritual space where we realise that we are loved, and we are subsequently awakened to the responsibility to care about what God cares about.

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent MacNamara, *New Life for Old: On Desire and Becoming Human*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2004, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Gula, “Morality and Spirituality,” in James Keating (ed.), *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues: Festschrift for James P. Hanigan*, New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2004, 164.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Edward C. Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1994.

Our love for God and for spiritual fulfilment is thereby transformed into the moral quest to protect the things God loves. This means that Christian morality is rooted in the desire to bring all people together in love, in short, to perfect the art of right relationships.

In this way, Christian morality loses its legalistic character and becomes a genuine and loving search to find ways of living that mirror the love God has shown us through the giving of his Son, Jesus Christ. The moral starting point is no longer one of obedience *per se*, but one of love and reciprocity, call and response. In fact, one could say that it is a 'loving obedience'<sup>12</sup> in the sense that it involves a genuine commitment to find ways of living based upon a desire to love in the fullest possible sense. As Richard Gula puts it, 'We are living morally when we give freely in love what we have received in grace.'<sup>13</sup>

However, this is not to say that the relationship between morality and Christian spirituality is one-dimensional. Morality and spirituality mutually enhance each other. For instance, without morality, spirituality can spin off into some otherworldly concern and lose its connection with reality and the world, the place where God's love for us is expressed.<sup>14</sup> In short, then, morality is rooted in spirituality, nurtured by its practices and its drive for loving union with God, while morality provides spirituality

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Une obéissance aimante," in André LaCoque and Paul Ricoeur, *Penser la Bible*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998, 162-195.

<sup>13</sup> Gula, "Morality and Spirituality," 165.

<sup>14</sup> For an interesting discussion on the need for guidance in the spiritual life, see Brian Noble, "Tradition, Spiritual Direction, and Supervision," *The Way* 2005, 105-112. Noble argues that '[t]he maps for the spiritual life provided by doctrine and liturgy reflect the insights of others who have already made the journey. They have a crucial role in guiding us, and without them, perhaps, our journey is simply impossible. The spiritual journey will inevitably be personal, but it can never be solitary, purely private' (p. 109).

with a way of reasoning about how this loving union should be lived in our interaction with others. It is for this reason that 'holiness' includes moral aspects even if it is not reducible to the moral life.

#### **4.4 Morality and Spirituality: A Difficult Union**

Although contemporary trends in spirituality assert that spirituality is at the root of morality, and can never be reduced to some kind of external aid that helps us to be good, moral theology has not always made the connection clear. In fact, since moral theology formerly focused on acts and principles and on the necessity of obedience in the quest for goodness, it seemed to separate morality from its grounding in spirituality.

Indeed, some scholars have suggested that the Christian *proprium* debate, with its emphasis on determining whether there are specifically Christian norms, has diverted attention away from the relationship between morality and spirituality.<sup>15</sup> This is so because some scholars, most notable those of the Autonomy school, have affirmed that natural law and reason are reliable foundations for Christian moral norms.

Of course the advantage of a natural law approach is that it allows the Catholic tradition to enter into moral dialogue with non-Christian traditions and with 'all people of good will'. Such dialogue is particularly important in pluralistic and secular societies. But the very presupposition that reason is a reliable source for the attainment of moral truths seems to detract attention from non-rational foundations of Christian ethics. As Mark O' Keefe points out,

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<sup>15</sup> See Mark O' Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship between Ethics and Spirituality*, New York: Paulist Press, 1995, 18ff.

...the effort to affirm that moral norms are “in principle” available to those without explicit Christian faith can detract from the equally important questions of *how* explicit Christian faith—as lived and celebrated by ordinary Christians—*does*, in fact, impact, form, and guide the Christian moral life. Finally, the vitally important task of dialogue on moral questions in a pluralistic society can divert attention from the essential *intra*-community task of helping committed Christians to make sense of their moral lives in light of their spiritual longing.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the ongoing renewal of Catholic moral theology and the drive to reclaim the discipline’s theological and biblical foundations, therefore, there is still a need to explore and acknowledge the spiritual dimensions of Christian moral striving. This explains why some scholars are calling Catholic moral theology to consider the full dynamism of authentic Christian living, and reflect the actual lives of Christians who must pray in order to become both good and holy.<sup>17</sup>

To echo Richard Gula’s words, since Christian morality is a living response to God’s love, it is more than the sum of our reasons for acting.<sup>18</sup> It involves the whole self—spirit, soul, body and mind. What we care about deeply and our understanding of what love is are prior to rational consciousness. This means that we are also living from the heart and the spirit. Feelings, emotions and spiritual yearnings to give and receive love are just as important as the critical reason in the pursuit of goodness. Hence, morality and spirituality must be considered together, so that we might interpret what is going on and order our feelings and values to create a world in which all of Creation can flourish.

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<sup>16</sup> O’ Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Gula, “Morality and Spirituality,” 167.

Other obstacles that obscure the view that morality and spirituality are inseparable arise out of our image of God. For it is believed that our image of God is what influences the quality of our spirituality and morality. A morality that rises out of spirituality asks what kind of God we experience and what difference it makes. The image we have of God says something about who we are and who we think God is for us. Images of God evoke affections and feelings that make us more attuned to what is required of us morally.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the image of God as one who is involved in creation, who loves the creation and wills its rescue from bondage and decay (Rom. 8:21) helps to sensitise us morally. Moreover, it engenders a spirituality of liberation and compassion, and a morality of hopeful engagement with the world.

On the other hand, the image of God as a distant and threatening God engenders feelings of guilt and fear rather than freedom, hope and loving engagement. Instead, it leads to a preoccupation with sin and failure, and gives us a disappointing and demoralising view of ourselves and of our moral capabilities. Negative images of God engender a timid spirituality and a morality that is afraid to embrace life in new and creative ways.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, both of the obstacles mentioned here have to do with the way in which we interpret the Christian story. If we interpret the biblical image of God as an impersonal rule-maker, morality loses its grounding in spirituality and becomes a matter of following rules and being obedient. On the other hand, if we assert that the Bible cannot be taken as a source of Christian morality, and that morality's content is discovered using natural law, it becomes difficult to see how the Christian story can

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<sup>19</sup> Patrick Hannon, "More than Meets the Eye," *The Furrow* 55/12 (2004), 670.

<sup>20</sup> Gula, "Morality and Spirituality," 169.

operate as a resource for the kind of spiritual conversion necessary in the search for truth. For when we experience God's love, we feel compelled to act morally: our hearts are opened, and our spiritual desire to love and be loved spills out into our moral actions, so that the moral and spiritual strands of our lives are integrated.

So how, then, could one assert that the content of morality is the same for all without undermining the spiritual transformation necessitated by the Christian story which empowers Christians to love as God does? This is where we begin to see the benefits of a Ricoeurian approach to Christian morality.

#### **4.5 Ricoeur and Revelation**

The move from acts and principles necessitated by Ricoeur's work seems to broaden the horizon of Christian morality: it interprets the biblical texts as revelatory in the symbolic rather than the literal sense. Rather than submission to an authoritative divine word that demands obedience, Ricoeur prefers to speak of the imagination being transformed in the living encounter with God through Scripture. Similarly to current trends in spirituality, Ricoeur is more interested in how symbols and images of God help in the transformation of human hearts and imaginations than in norms and principles.<sup>21</sup> A closer look at how Ricoeur interprets the biblical texts will make this assertion clearer.

For Ricoeur, the biblical texts are revelatory in the sense that they communicate something to us about the inner-life of God. His agenda, therefore, is not to determine who wrote a particular text, or whose voice is heard behind the text. Nor is Ricoeur

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, esp. 3-24 and *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1975, 45-87.

interested in determining whether or not the texts of the Old Testament given at Sinai may be considered as specifically Christian norms. In fact, he suggests that the biblical texts cannot be properly understood if they are considered in a legalistic way, for this only serves to overlook their symbolic and revelatory function.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Ricoeur's purpose is to emphasise the power of the biblical texts in terms of the self-disclosure of God.<sup>23</sup>

Ricoeur argues that what is significant about the Sinai event, for instance, is that it establishes a Covenant between God and Israel. In this respect, the Law (Torah) is no longer understood in terms of obedience but in terms of relationship, evoking what scholars sometimes offer as what is perhaps a more basic sense of the word Torah (way). Furthermore, Ricoeur believes that the Sinai event tells us something about the nature of God. It shows us that God is interested in Creation and wishes to liberate it from oppression. Hence, Ricoeur's project is to show that the Decalogue is significant because it symbolises the transformation of God's relationship with his people, Israel. The content of the Law is secondary, while the relationship it establishes is primary.

By interpreting the revelatory texts of the biblical canon in this way, Ricoeur avoids undermining the spiritual engagement that revelation intends. This is the case because he interprets God's design for humanity in terms of an invitation to share in the Divine Life, rather than in terms of the giving of an immutable codification of every communal or individual practice. The implications for the believing

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, 93ff.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *HTR* 70/1-2 (1977), 5.

community, then, are that it is invited to experience a relationship with God, to care for Creation in the way He does, and to strive for perfection in all subsequent relationships.

The well-known biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders is at one with Ricoeur in the belief that the revelatory power of the biblical texts lies in their ability to reveal something about God. In fact, she argues that personal revelation, even in the human order, is first and foremost self-disclosure. A person chooses to invite another into his or her interiority. But unless the other accepts the invitation and reciprocates, revelation does not achieve itself. Revelation, notes Schneiders, though often initiated by one person, 'is necessarily a mutual experience of personal disclosure giving rise to a mutual treasuring of what has been shared, for the "what" is really a "who."'<sup>24</sup>

The purpose and result of revelation, therefore, in whatever garb it may take, is a shared life characterised by irrevocable commitment. It is mutual self-gift expressive of and terminating in love. Such an understanding of the biblical texts, as suggested by Ricoeur and echoed by Schneiders, moves considerations of Christian morality away from the legalistic tone formerly found in the manuals of moral theology, and reinforced by a literal reading of the biblical texts, to considerations of a more spiritual kind. If we may speak of God's claim on us and his call to obedience, it is now understood in terms of a personal and intimate union with a God of love, who asks us to love. Revelation is now the locus for the transformation of human hearts. To echo the text of Ezekiel, '[God gives us ] a new heart and [puts] a new spirit in

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<sup>24</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999, 34.



[us]; [he removes] the heart of stone from [our] bodies and give [us] a heart of flesh' (Ezek. 11:19).<sup>25</sup>

Hence, a Ricoeurian interpretation of the biblical texts can account for the transformational and spiritual aspects of Christian morality. When the texts of the Bible lose their legalistic character, the spiritual emerges, and believers are invited to share in a special relationship with a God of love. In terms of morality, this sharing means that we are asked to express God's love for us in all other relationships. The experience of a loving God as witnessed by the biblical texts poured into the hearts of Christians can no longer be considered as a 'extra' or as a minor addition to Christian ethics but as the basis for all Christian morality.

Furthermore, Ricoeur's work encourages us to see that God is not a superego God but a God of love, who calls us to love. When we experience this love spiritually, we feel the moral tug to mirror it in other relationships. In this way, morality gives expression to spirituality, and the moral and the spiritual strands of our lives can be considered together.

It is important to note, however, that although Ricoeur's analysis of the Bible suggests that the biblical image of God is not one of retribution and punishment but of love and mercy, he is not suggesting that the image of God presented in every text is identical. This is the case because the scriptural figuration of the divine life—the phenomenon of revelation—is not one-dimensional. In fact, the various literary genres and images used by the scriptural authors are chosen to suit their theological itineraries. Thus

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<sup>25</sup> My emphasis.

Ricoeur writes: ‘Throughout these discourses, God appears differently each time: sometimes as the hero of the saving act, sometimes as wrathful and compassionate, sometimes as he to whom one can speak in a relation of an I-Thou type, or sometimes as he whom I meet only in a cosmic order that ignores me.’<sup>26</sup>

In this way, Ricoeur wishes to indicate that no one image can adequately describe the divine life. Images alternately clash and complement one another. The Bible, therefore, bears witness to a many-sided God by using a range of images: father, mother, husband, rock, king, lover, judge, potter, whirlwind, etc. In terms of spirituality, this variety of images keeps our hearts attuned to the fact that God is still a mystery, and that human images are limited in terms of what they can tell us of God. Moreover, it keeps our hearts continually focused on our relationship with God, lest we become over familiar and presumptuous in our spiritual understanding of him. Alternating images also ensures that our spirituality is always nourished by, and open to, new images and new perspectives of what God is enabling us to do morally.

Further examples of how a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate provides a space where the affective dimensions of moral striving are considered can be found in his treatment of the Creation story. In Ricoeur’s view, the Creation story should be interpreted in terms of a symbol of a gift.<sup>27</sup> It recounts the story of God’s supreme work, which he considers to be intrinsically good (Gn. 1:31).<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Ricoeur argues that the symbol of God’s Creation contained in the biblical

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer and Mark I. Wallace, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 87.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

texts is a moral one, for it joins the idea of God's power with goodness. When we read this text, we are invited to recognise that creation is good: God saw it was good. Consequently, the texts of the Bible summon believers to see the depth and worth of creation as God sees it, and to find ways of living worthy of such a generous God. Of course, there is no obligation on the part of the reader to do so. The reader is free to accept or reject the proposals offered by the text; but the person of faith will be summoned by the call to respond to God's gift in a fitting way.

This suggests that for Ricoeur the symbol of God's creation gives direction to moral sensibilities and helps to engender feelings of solicitude, respect and admiration for all that God has created.<sup>29</sup> Although we are not told precisely how we should do this, the sensibilities and feelings necessary to respond morally are awakened. Thus a link is established between spirituality and morality: Ricoeur's work shows us that the biblical texts help to cultivate feelings and dispositions necessary to 'live from the heart', and embody in our relationships the kind of love God has shown to his Creation.

#### **4.6 Critically Reading the Text as a Transformative Experience**

Of course, none of this is to suggest that Ricoeur is encouraging a naïve reading of the texts of the biblical canon. For he acknowledges the need to supplement any spiritual reading of the Bible with the critical tools of exegesis so that false and idolatrous representations of God are avoided. Ricoeur uses the terms 'first naiveté' and 'second

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<sup>29</sup> William E. Schweiker, "Starry Heavens and Moral Worth," in John Wall, William Schweiker, and David W. Hall (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 134.

naïveté' to explain how the biblical texts can only transform the world of the reader when they are critically interpreted.<sup>30</sup>

First naïveté is a spontaneous immediacy of the reader to subject matter through a text that is so totally transparent that one is not aware of its existence, much less its deficiencies. Understood in this way, reading is a naïve activity. Sandra Schneiders uses the example of reading a street sign to show the kind of understanding that arises from reading in the first naïveté sense. In fact, she suggests that much of our everyday reading is naïve.

When I see a street sign I do not see it as sign but am simply aware, through it, that the street I am driving on is Broadway. My reception of that knowledge is unreflective and uncritical. Such reading is made possible by the reader's and the text's sharing the same tradition. The sign is written in English, has the literary form (one word, capitalized on a placard, at an intersection, etc.) of a street sign within the culture of the reader, is a recognizable word from the lexicon, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

Or take the example of a child listening to a fairy tale or the person reading a novel for the sheer enjoyment of the experience. In both of these activities the text is experienced in an immediate way; it is transparent.

The same may be said of the biblical texts: the first reading of a text may be naïve. Indeed, the spiritual images of God that nourish the moral life and seek to convert human hearts may be perceived immediately. We may be awestruck by the possibilities that the text opens up, and believe that we have grasped its full significance.

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<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 347-357.

<sup>31</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 169.

Nevertheless, as Ricoeur argues, the first encounter with a text (first naïveté) is merely a preengagement with the text. In terms of the biblical texts, he explains, this means that while we may hear a certain call, we cannot hear it authentically because we have not yet acquired the critical tools of exegesis to decode correctly its full significance.<sup>32</sup> To quote Lewis S. Mudge, 'Our "first naïveté" is surely the condition of being in some sense "called" but unable to distinguish the authentic message from reality-apprehension of our culture or from the dogmatic and ecclesiastical framework in which we hear it.'<sup>33</sup> In terms of interpreting the biblical images of God and their significance for spirituality and morality, then, this shows that a naïve reading of the Scriptures can be deeply idolatrous.<sup>34</sup> Thus a more critical reading of the text is required.

Ricoeur refers to this critical reading a second naïveté. Second naïveté is a critical reading of the text that is achieved when the reader distances him/herself from the text. The reader begins to ask questions about whether the text is accurately, fairly, or honestly conveying that which it seeks to communicate. Indeed, it could be said that the reader is required to become suspicious of the text and sift through it for errors or, in the case of a spiritual reading of the Bible, for false or idolatrous images of God.

The purpose of a critical reading of the text, however, is not simply to detect its deficiencies. Rather, it is to enhance its meaning and our appreciation of the power contained in the text, uncovering its strategies, and placing in relief its enriching

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<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 33.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis S. Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur : On Biblical Interpretation," in Lewis S. Mudge (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: 1981*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 33.

internal and external connections.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the critical reading of the text encouraged by Ricoeur serves to protect text from a premature appropriation by the reader. It invites a healthy, rather than naïve, fundamentalist or misinformed, dialogue between the text and its reader. In this way, the text is allowed to say what it says and make proposals which the reader can either accept or reject.

Yet this is not the final stage in the interpretative process. The critical activity of interpreting the text leads to a post critical moment (post naïveté).<sup>36</sup> It is at this stage that the reader's world may be transformed by the proposals of the text, and the transformation can be considered as authentic since it is the result of critically probing the meaning of the text. As Schneiders points out, without critical interpretation, the text cannot be considered as a space where a new worldview or horizon of existence may be perceived.<sup>37</sup>

This points up the fact that when Ricoeur speaks of the transformative (spiritual) power of biblical images of God, he is not suggesting a naïve appropriation of these images; Ricoeur's interpretation is always a critical one. In terms of morality, this ensures that the biblical images of God continue to nourish the moral quest for goodness without confining us to one biblical image of God.

Ricoeur's critical reading of the biblical images of God is particularly useful in response to the feminist argument that our image of God as the Father over-

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<sup>35</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 169.

<sup>36</sup> See Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur: On Biblical Interpretation," 26.

<sup>37</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 169.

emphasises the masculine image of God and suggests that biblical spirituality is intended for a masculine Church.<sup>38</sup> A naïve reading (first naiveté) of the biblical texts could lead to the idea that God is on the side of men, calling them to pour out his love in their moral actions.

A more critical reading of the texts (second naiveté), however, calls us to consider the full tenderness of God's love for us in terms of images of both mother and father (Hos. 11:1-4; Isa. 66: 9-13; Jer. 31:20). This effectively conveys the idea that God's love for us goes beyond gender and includes the whole human family, male and female. It is this kind of reading of the biblical texts that engenders a healthy spirituality, one which nourishes the moral actions of all members of God's community without subordinating anyone or giving the impression that only male power saves.

To sum up, then, Ricoeur's interpretation of the biblical texts and their role in the Christian community shows that he is attuned to the fact that Christians do not split themselves into religious and moral compartments. His critical reading of the biblical texts affirms that the personal gift of God's love instilled in our hearts and recounted in the Scriptures remains a fundamental resource for the moral life, even if it does not yield any specifically Christian norms. Hence, the natural law tradition remains intact and the argument for the autonomy of morals can still be justified.

The difference Ricoeur's work brings, however, is that it demonstrates how the moral and the spiritual mesh. The spiritual awakening to a life of union and love with God

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<sup>38</sup> For extensive accounts of the feminist view, see Sandra Schneiders, *Women and the Word*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986 and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, New York: Crossroad, 1992.

is considered to be foundational for a community which takes revelation as its starting point. God's gift of himself represents an invitation to be moral and calls for a commitment to love in the fullest possible sense.<sup>39</sup> Given that current scholarship in the area of spirituality is calling for an approach to Christian morality that can account for God's call to love and our response (call and response) without undermining the autonomy of morals, Ricoeur's work seems to illuminate the way.

Another advantage of an approach to Christian morality that emphasises character and the inner dimensions of moral striving is that we can now suggest various ways in which virtue ethics and spirituality, in the reflective sense, can enhance each other. It is important to remember, however, that Ricoeur's work is not that of a theologian but of a philosopher; he does not discuss the relationship between spiritual practices and the virtues *per se*. For this section of the argument, we must rely, therefore, on the suggestions of Jean Porter and William Spohn, both of whom have contributed much to our contemporary understanding of how the practice of spirituality can enhance the life of virtue, and vice versa.

#### **4.7 Integrating Virtue Ethics and Spirituality**

A first way in which the cultivation of the virtues is helped by spiritual practices is that the latter can help to sharpen moral perception. According to William Spohn, two ordinary spiritual practices play an important role in correcting our moral myopia: the Eucharist and intercessory prayer.<sup>40</sup> Although the practices mentioned remind us of our specifically Christian identity, by recalling the story of the Christian community, they also play a part in tutoring moral dispositions and affections. As

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<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, "Une Obéissance aimante," 170ff.

<sup>40</sup> William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, New York: Continuum, 1999, 112.



spiritual practices, they aim to engender feelings of gratitude, forgiveness, and love into the hearts of the faithful.

According to Spohn, the practice of worship may be understood by looking at Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church (1 Cor. 8:1-23). Here Paul speaks of the change in moral perception that Christian worship aims to bring forth. The Church at Corinth was divided into two groups, which he calls the 'strong' and the 'weak'. The former group saw themselves as being superior because they could in conscience eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. The 'strong' looked down upon those who had reservations about doing so. Paul refers to this scrupulous group as the 'weak'. The 'weak' worried that they would be contaminated if they ate meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods. This posed a problem for Paul's Church when they sat down at the Lord's table: some were willing to eat meat and some were not.

The significance of Paul's narrative, however, lies in its call for understanding and tolerance in the community. Paul does not ask the 'strong' to change their views. Nor does he tell the 'weak' to do so. Instead, he invites the 'strong' to change their *image* of the 'weak'. As Spohn explains, 'Paul exhorts the "strong" to look at these people in a different metaphorical frame.'<sup>41</sup> Paul calls on the 'strong' to consider the weak in the way that Christ would, that is, as members of the Christian family. Christ thought enough of the human family to give up his life. Therefore, Paul sees it fitting to assert that when one sins against another (in this case by calling them 'weak'), one sins against Christ (I Cor. 8: 12).

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<sup>41</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 114.

Thus Paul interprets the gathering of the community at the Lord's table as an opportunity to be reconciled with all members of Christ's body. All are one, regardless of differences of opinion or judgement. Although Paul does not give the 'strong' a set of rules that will ensure that further divisions are avoided, he attempts to reorient vision. In terms of virtue ethics, the spiritual practice of coming together in worship invites Christians to transcend disagreements and to consider 'others' as equal partners in the pursuit of goodness and holiness.

The spiritual practice of prayer is a second common spiritual practice that shapes moral perception. When we make a petition to God, it is a self-involving statement; it commits the faithful to do something about the problems and incidences of injustice in the community. Praying for peace should make us recognise and identify our own hostility and try to overcome it. Praying for equality invites us to acknowledge incidences where we have contributed to inequality in the world. While spiritual practice of prayer does not guarantee that we will become more virtuous or give us solutions to moral issues, it prevents believers from thinking they are alone in the search for goodness. Intercessory prayer gives us confidence that God is with us throughout the moral journey and offers hope that we will find the path of righteousness.

This does not mean that the spiritual practice of prayer ensures an instant transformation or a direct route to acquiring the virtues. Nothing is automatic. To quote Richard Gula, 'While we can say that our love of God as expressed through the practices can and ought to lead to loving what God loves, the causal connection is not an inevitable one. Spiritual practices might keep alive our relationship to God and

engender a way of seeing things in relation to God, but it takes intentional effort to implement our spiritual experience and vision.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, cultural and personal influences play a role in how we understand the virtues and what is required of us morally. To believe that God will automatically make us love others is to misunderstand the complexity of becoming good. While worshiping God may encourage us to look favourably upon our neighbour, there can be no certainty that one will lead to the other. Christians ought not to expect, therefore, that spiritual practices are all that is required to become good. They are not the sole determining factor in shaping moral character; rather, they represent one of the ways in which Christians attempt to transform their love of God into a love of neighbour.

Hitherto we have suggested ways in which spiritual practices can help to shape moral perception and encourage a genuine commitment to develop good character traits. The interaction between virtue ethics and spiritual practices is not one-dimensional, however. The tradition of the virtues is equally important for the development of spirituality and its forms.

Jean Porter, for instance, argues that a significant point of contact between the tradition of the virtues and spirituality concerns the ways in which the virtues can set parameters for what is acceptable within the spiritual life.<sup>43</sup> This is a point which has been brought up again and again by scholars who wish to highlight the point that

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<sup>42</sup> Gula, "Morality and Spirituality," 175.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics and its Significance for Spirituality," *The Way* 88 (1997), 32.

spiritual practices need reflective guidance from the tradition of the virtues, for example, or from moral theology, so that the practice of spirituality does not become an instrument of self-deception, narcissistic good feelings, or destructive ideology.<sup>44</sup>

Although it must be said that moral perception and the affective dimensions of morality may be enhanced by spirituality and its various forms, 'insofar as [spiritualities] are not accountable to other voices, they run the risk of being insular and ideological, because they will inculcate some of the very oppressive and exclusionary traits their writings denounce.'<sup>45</sup> As Spohn explains, spiritualities that arise from an experience of great trauma, such as the Holocaust, ecocide, or the oppression of women and the poor, for instance, may be more susceptible to using spirituality ideologically. The sacred is often enlisted as an ally to remedy social conditions of evil. However, if used primarily as an instrument rather than appreciated in its own right, legitimate suspicions arise.<sup>46</sup>

Spirituality needs the tradition of the virtues and the critical reflection of moral theology in general to guard against lived forms of spirituality becoming isolated from an adequate reflective spirituality, that is, communities which provide ways of discerning healthy forms of spirituality from their unhealthy counterparts. The tradition of the virtues can also prevent forms of spirituality from becoming sectarian: it grounds spirituality in a reflective framework and seeks to provide ways of sustaining good character traits rather than narcissistic or deceitful ones.

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<sup>44</sup> Spohn, "Spirituality and Ethics," 113.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 113; cf. idem, *Go and Do Likewise*, 180ff. Here Spohn explains that when a finite community becomes the exclusive source of value and meaning, a limited portion of reality has been inflated to stand for the whole. 'That is how idols are made; the loyalty that should be directed to the One God is concentrated on one group. Loyalty that fails to be sufficiently inclusive eventually becomes exclusive' (p. 180). In Spohn's view a reflective and mature spirituality can prevent Christians from becoming sectarian in respect of their identity.

And so we may speak of the tradition of the virtues and spiritual practices as existing in a mutually supportive relationship. Spiritual practices help to expand our imaginative skills and our perception of what it means to be a human being, while the tradition of the virtues provides the critical tools necessary to distinguish between authentic and ideological forms of spirituality. Each has a particular role to play in the quest for goodness. Consequently, we must avoid the temptation to consider morality and spirituality as one and the same. Although morality is born out of spirituality, spirituality and its forms cannot formulate the virtues. Nor can it answer the 'What?' of morals. Instead, it helps to open hearts, so that love of God is transformed into love of neighbour. Considered in this way, the Christian moral response is not disembodied from faith in God but born out of a desire to respond to God's love in every aspect of their lives.

And so we are brought back to the central thrust of current trends in the area of spirituality, and can offer some concluding remarks. That there is a call for greater alliance between morality and spirituality is clear. This stems from the conviction that Christians do not separate their spiritual yearning from their moral actions. For the Christian, faith in God and the experience of God's love requires a commitment to finding ways of giving expression to God's love, even if faith in God does not yield any new norms or values.

Of course, if act-centred approaches to Christian morality or, indeed, to the Christian *proprium* debate continue to be the norm in Catholic moral theology, the assertion that moral actions are the expression of God's love poured into the hearts of the faithful will fall silent. Spirituality and morality will not achieve the kind of

integration called for by contemporary theologians. Moreover, as long as Christian revelation is discussed in terms of norms and principles of obedience, Christian morality will remain estranged from its roots in spirituality.

This is one of reasons why consideration of what Paul Ricoeur's work can bring to the Christian *proprium* debate is promising. For Ricoeur does not interpret revelation or any aspect of the biblical story in terms of law. Obedience is not the key issue. Relationship, however, is. The biblical texts lose their legalistic character and symbolise an invitation to love for the believing community, rather than a call to obedience. In this way, Ricoeur neither reduces the moral response to the heteronomous following of rules found in texts nor undermines the significance of the biblical texts for the faith community. He successfully manages to affirm that, although they are not required to do anything that cannot be discovered by the non-Christian, Christians will explain their moral actions as the outpouring of God's love, as recounted in the biblical narrative. For this is *what* they believe they are called to do because of *who* they are.

Thus interpreting the Christian *proprium* debate through the eyes of Paul Ricoeur can account for the fact that, for the Christian, morality is understood in terms of a commitment to finding ways of giving expression to God's love, even if faith in God does not yield any new norms or values. In this way, Ricoeur's interpretation of revelation and its significance for the faith community seems to put morality and spirituality back together again. Moreover, it gives us more reason to hope that the contemporary call made by scholars of spirituality who wish to generate a greater alliance between morality and spirituality can be answered.

Yet given that the general thrust of a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate is similar to all that is involved in the retrieval of virtue ethics and current trends in spirituality, problems arise about the place of the Magisterium. If our ultimate guide to goodness and holiness is no longer considered to be found in norms or objective rules but in the way we see and interpret ourselves through the Christian story, one wonders whether there is a need for a magisterial teaching authority.

In fact, it could be argued that our approach is fundamentally flawed to the extent that it appears to resist any attempt to describe morality in terms of obedience to an external authority. And so we must ask, 'Does a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate envisage a need for a magisterial teaching authority?' Or, to put it differently, 'Does it undermine the role played by the Magisterium in the moral formation of the believing community?' It is to this issue that we now turn.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### NARRATIVE THEORY AND TRADITION

The previous chapters demonstrated how the work of Paul Ricoeur can move the Christian *proprium* debate away from the tensions over specifically Christian norms and values to emphasise the role of the Bible in self-understanding and in the acquisition of virtue. Possessing good character traits and engaging in the practices of one's community are thought to be more important than the following of rules and principles. The shift from acts to persons in relationship can also account for the fact that the Christian sees his/her moral actions as the outpouring of God's love for creation, without suggesting that faith contributes to the content of morality. Interpreting revelation as the symbolic self-disclosure of God facilitates a richer understanding of Christian morality, one which can account for the affective dimensions of the moral quest.

But the drive to move away from the search for specifically Christian norms and principles to emphasise character, self-knowledge, interiority and relationship might seem to raise serious questions about the role of the Magisterium in Christian morality. Since the general thrust of a Ricoeurian interpretation of the Christian *proprium* debate is similar to current trends in virtue ethics and spirituality, one begins to wonder whether it is at odds with the idea that a teaching authority is



necessary to protect the 'truths of faith'. Indeed, it could be argued that approaching the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate from a narrative perspective over-emphasises the role of the individual in the search for truth, thereby making it impossible to assert the need for a magisterial teaching authority, or indeed an authority of any kind.

One might also find fault with a Ricoeurian analysis of the Christian *proprium* debate because it may appear one-sided. Although we began this study by saying that the intention was not to determine which school has it right, so to speak, thus far it may seem as if Ricoeur's interpretation of the biblical texts shares more in common with the Autonomy view than that of the *Glaubensethik*.

Recall the Autonomy school's central position: a) the content of morality is discovered by reason and the natural law; b) belief in revelation is not necessary to know what morality requires; c) revelation and faith give a *context* to moral striving, a *vision of life* which informs moral choices; a *motivation* for action, and model for action in the figure of Jesus Christ. Recall Ricoeur's position: a) the texts of the Bible do not give believers any new or 'extra' norms or values; b) the texts of one's tradition assist in the articulation of personal identity and assist in the formation of moral character; c) revelation is the symbolic disclosure of God, rather than the disclosure of a legal code by which Christians are expected to live.

In both cases the most important question is not whether faith in God or the texts of the faith community contribute to morality's content, but the particular way in which believers see and interpret their moral lives. The whole moral enterprise is considered through the lens of the Christian story. Moreover, in each case the content of morality

is left open-ended, which indicates that the natural law tradition is vital in the search for moral truth.

Given the similarities between Ricoeur's position and that of the Autonomy school, supporters of the latter position might welcome a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate. Supporters of the *Glaubensethik* position, however, might not. In fact, proponents of the *Glaubensethik* view might reject it for the same reasons they rejected the autonomy school's position<sup>1</sup>: Ricoeur's reliance on natural law could lead to a rationalistic style ethics and thereby undermine the role of tradition and the Magisterium in the protection and teaching of moral truths.

It is clear that there is a need to determine whether analysing the Christian *proprium* debate through the eyes of Paul Ricoeur undermines the role of the Magisterium, and that of tradition in general. Furthermore, given the similarities between the autonomy view and all that Ricoeur's work can bring to the debate on the Christian *proprium*, there is also a need to reaffirm that Ricoeur does not favour the autonomy view. In fact, in attempting to determine the role of the Magisterium and tradition in a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate, it will become clear that Ricoeur's position is one which seems to satisfy the concerns of the Autonomy and Faith-ethic schools vis-à-vis tradition and Magisterium without choosing one over the other.

In order to do this, we will proceed in three stages. First, we will outline Ricoeur's view on history and tradition, paying particular attention to its Gadamerian and

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985, 43ff.

Habermasian heritage. Then, we will examine how Ricoeur combines elements of Habermas' and Gadamer's work to provide an assiduously balanced interpretation of both history and tradition. Subsequent sections will discuss the issues regarding tradition and Magisterium situated at the heart of the divisions between the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* positions, with a view to showing how Ricoeur's work offers a more inclusive alternative, where the concerns of both schools are considered.

As with the previous chapters on virtue ethics and spirituality, it is important to remember that Ricoeur's account of history and tradition is that of a philosopher, not a theologian. This explains why we must begin by examining Ricoeur's account of history in its philosophical context before we can suggest how it might be used in a theological one. It also explains why Ricoeur does not use the word Magisterium or refer to tradition in the theological sense, that is, as revelation, sacred Scripture and sacred Tradition.

### **5.1 Towards a Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness**

Ricoeur's understanding of history and tradition combines aspects of Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Jürgen Habermas' thought.<sup>2</sup> From Gadamerian thought, Ricoeur borrows the idea that the past should not be viewed as a fossilised residue of events or facts but as an ongoing process of reformulation, revision and interpretation. From Habermas, he borrows the idea that tradition must always be questioned so that it continues to provide us with an authentic view of the past. A brief sketch of both Gadamer's and Habermas' positions will help to show how and why Ricoeur combines the works of his predecessors.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the similarities between Ricoeur's work and that of Gadamer and Habermas, see S. H. Clark, *Paul Ricoeur*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, esp. 110-119.

### 5.1.1 Gadamer's Interpretation of History

Gadamer interprets tradition (history) as a process. He believes that history is not a closed entity because history has yet to be made. Included in our understanding of history and the past is the hope or expectation of a future. This means that history and tradition are always open-ended, never complete. Indeed, to understand history, we must acknowledge that while it might recount events that occurred in the past, these events are interpreted in the present, and may be interpreted and reinterpreted again in the future. Hence, history and tradition must be considered as a process.<sup>3</sup>

Gadamer also makes the point that understanding of any kind is conditioned by history and the past. This is another way of saying that when we attempt to interpret our own lives, for instance, our interpretation is already influenced by history and tradition. In other words, reason itself is historical. Heidegger's influence on Gadamer's thought emerges here.

According to Heidegger's conception of the prestructure of understanding, we are capable of understanding a given text, matter or situation because we hold an already established way of seeing these phenomena, as well as certain 'preconceptions' of what they mean.<sup>4</sup> The fundamental consequence of this can be seen from the outset: there is no pure seeing or understanding of the present without reference to the past.

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<sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1960, 375. For a similar statement, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Replik," in Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, Frankfurt, 1971, 307.

<sup>4</sup> Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, John Wild (ed.), James M. Edie (associate ed.), Herbert Spiegelberg, William Earle, George A. Schrader, Maurice Natanson, Paul Ricoeur, Aron Gurwitsch, Calvin O. Schrag, (consulting eds.), Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969, 176.

Nor can there be an understanding of history without a consciousness located in the present.

Hence, for Gadamer, as well as for his predecessor Heidegger, the present can only be examined and seen through the intentions, ways of seeing and preconceptions bequeathed by the past. The past must not be viewed as a pile of dead facts or objects, but as a continuing force throughout history in which we move and participate in every act of understanding in the present. Tradition is not something that exists over and against us; it is something in which we stand and through which we interpret our being.<sup>5</sup>

In more basic terms, this means that human beings are required time and time again to consider the horizon of meaning offered to them by the past. Owing to the fact that the consideration of the past takes place in the present, '[t]he grasping of meaning cannot be understood but as an ever-provisional truth-requisition. [For both Gadamer and Heidegger], the very idea of temporality cautions us against the presumption that a once-and-forever-established "fixation" of truth is possible. In this respect, insights which have proved true in the past ought to be regarded as replaceable by other, more refined insights, in accordance with the novel circumstances of a particular epoch.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur uses the Latin expression *res gestae et historia rerum gestarum* (we make history and we are made by history (my translation)) to formulate his dialectic understanding of history. For a clear account of how Ricoeur uses this Latin phrase to interpret history and tradition, see Domenico Jervolino, *Paul Ricoeur: Une herméneutique de la condition humaine*, Paris: Ellipses, 2002, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Georges De Schrijver, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," *JES* 19 (1982), 32.

According to Georges De Schrijver, Gadamer's approach to history and tradition is one which attempts to understand history in a hermeneutical way;<sup>7</sup> it locates truth in a dialectic between stagnation and fluidity.<sup>8</sup> Viewed in this way, history is a dynamic process of value transmission and reinterpretation in the present. This means that our understanding of history lies not in totally leaving our own experience to one side, but in realising that we ourselves are historical beings. It is for this reason that Ricoeur sees value in Gadamer's understanding of history: it asserts that nothing can be understood apart from its historical context or apart from the horizon of meaning in which it is located.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, this is another way of saying that reason itself is a historical phenomenon. It is conditioned by the past. Unlike some Enlightenment philosophers who attempted to explain reason as something detached from tradition, Gadamer insists that reason is a product of tradition. Yet, this is not to suggest that reason is incapable of criticising the past from which it developed, and in which it continues to develop. Reason also exists in the horizon of the present, which gives it the space it needs to interpret and reinterpret the past. In fact, in Gadamer's view one cannot accept tradition at all,

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<sup>7</sup> When the word 'hermeneutics' is used here it refers to the interpretation of the self through texts or through history. The sense of the term is derived from Heidegger's 'hermeneutics of facticity'. This approach to both texts and history is based not on the way that the world belongs to a human subject, but on the way in which the human subject belongs to the world. So basic is the process that it is not so much one thing among others which one does but that process in which and through which one exists as a human being. Cf. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 180ff.

<sup>8</sup>De Schrijver, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; cf. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 177ff. Ricoeur borrows his interpretation of history and of 'historical consciousness' from Gadamer and Heidegger. The critique of 'historical consciousness' in both Gadamer and Heidegger is primarily directed at the 'historical school' in Germany, whose most famous representatives in the nineteenth century were J.G. Droysen and L. von Ranke. These represented a group of thinkers who supported 'romantic hermeneutics', i.e., as an effort to attain an objective understanding of history. The task of the historian was to enter into the world of the past and give an accurate and objective account of it. Heidegger, Gadamer and later Ricoeur are among those who believe that the interpretation of history must consider the present, and what it means to exist as historical being in the present, so that the past does not become a series of facts and dates.

unless one is critical.<sup>10</sup> For when we subject our notion of tradition to critical scrutiny, we gain a better understanding of our tradition and our convictions about the past become more authentic and credible. Consequently, Gadamer believes that an individual may possess 'legitimate prejudices'.<sup>11</sup> For these are the result of a critical engagement with the past in the interpreting present.

Gadamer's view of history and tradition may be compared to all that is involved in the interpretation of texts. In the process of interpretation the horizon of the text fuses with the horizon of the reader, which is another way of saying that the past and the present interact with each other permitting the presence of the past in the present, and vice versa. This is so because the act of reading takes place in the present; while the text itself was written before the reading process could take place. Even though historical texts configure events which occurred in the past, the present cannot be abandoned in order to go into the past; the meaning of a work cannot be seen solely in terms of itself.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the Gadamerian understanding of history and tradition, whether configured in texts or considered in their own terms, is a dialectic between the horizon of the past and the present, where both are interconnected. Understanding as such is always functioning simultaneously in three modes of temporality: past, present and future.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991, 280 (Note: Hereafter the abbreviation 'TA' will be used to refer to this work.); cf. Rod Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue*, Suny Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy, Dennis J. Schmidt (ed.), Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, *TA*, 278.

<sup>12</sup> Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 182.

However, Gadamer's understanding of history and the interpretation of texts as a dialectic between past and present was criticised by Jürgen Habermas, one of Ricoeur's influential figures. While Habermas sees the value of Gadamer's dialectic approach to history, he argues that it should be accompanied by an element of critique and suspicion.<sup>13</sup>

### ***5.1.2 Jürgen Habermas and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion***

According to Georges De Schrijver, Habermas cannot accept an account of history that overlooks the fact that language is often be used as a source of power and domination by various political groups who wish to promote their own cause.

Georges De Schrijver summarises Habermas' objections in the following way:

Since factual history contains power and domination as its elements, it is likely to use a language differently from that worked out by some ethereal philosophical system focusing on the quiet process of value-transmission in the best of all worlds. History fleshed out in socio-economic facts takes full advantage of the language of manipulation, subjection, and deceit. The distorted rhetoric of politicians succeeds in throwing dust in people's eyes, so as to attain recognition as the legal authorities, even among those whom they manage to keep in subjection. In the light of these legitimation methods, one should be on guard against the magic of philosophies which talk people into complying with the fundamental law of "harmonious fusion". The "wise" philosopher speaking in defence of easy integration might on closer inspection prove to be the secret ally of the established authorities in power. They take advantage of the subdued who conform to their wishes.<sup>14</sup>

The element of suspicion in Habermas' account of history and tradition is clear.<sup>15</sup>

Tradition must be summoned to the tribunal of critique and suspicion in order to be evaluated for its truth and authenticity. It needs to be unmasked and scrutinised so

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<sup>13</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, London: Heinemann, 1972, 191-213.

<sup>14</sup> De Schrijver, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," 40.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Otto-Apel, "Regulative Ideas or Truth-Happening? An Attempt to Answer the Question of the Conditions of the Possibility of Valid Understanding," in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Library of Living Philosophers Series, vol.24, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1997, 81.



that our understanding of tradition does not consist in accepting the ideologies of interest groups who are in power. For an authority may distort our vision of our past for its own political or ideological gain.<sup>16</sup> This will ensure that our understanding of tradition does not involve accepting unhealthy or biased accounts of who we are or of what we should become.<sup>17</sup>

While Gadamer's work helps in understanding the horizon of the past and that of the present in complementary terms, Habermas introduces a critical element into this linguistic understanding of tradition. That both scholars make important points regarding our understanding of history is certain, which explains why Ricoeur chooses to combine both approaches. Ricoeur adopts Gadamer's understanding of tradition and combines it with the hermeneutics of suspicion as explained by Habermas. This allows him to put forward a stronger argument than that of either Gadamer or Habermas for understanding history in the same way as literary texts, i.e., as a critical dialectic between past and present.

## **5.2 Paul Ricoeur: Continuity and Discontinuity in History**

Following in the footsteps of Gadamer and Habermas, Ricoeur renounces the Hegelian claim to a 'total mediation' of history in the form of absolute knowledge. By this he means that history and its meaning are not mediated directly. Instead, he proposes that history be understood as 'an open-ended, incomplete, imperfect mediation; namely, the network of interweaving perspectives of the expectation of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, *TA*, 284.

<sup>17</sup> Graeme Nicholson, "Answers to Critical Theory," in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, Continental Philosophy IV, edited and with an introduction by Hugh J. Silverman, London: Routledge, 1991, 158.

future, the reception of the past, and the experience of the present, with no *Aufhebung* into a totality where reason in history and its reality would coincide.’<sup>18</sup>

Ricoeur rejects the idea that the past can be understood by simply analysing the past as past, i.e., as something accomplished, fixed and fossilised, and advocates an approach to history that considers it as something which has yet-to-be-made.<sup>19</sup> In so doing, Ricoeur intends to show how history may be understood as a dialectic—which takes place in the present—between the past and the future.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly to Gadamer, Ricoeur is of the opinion that we are not only ‘affected-by-the-past,’<sup>21</sup> but are also in the process of making it. His intention is to move our understanding of history from being a *fait accompli* to being a dynamic process of interpretation, dialogue, critique and legitimation. Tradition is now to be understood as an ongoing dialectic between our past which affects us and our hope and expectation of a future.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, like Gadamer and Habermas, Ricoeur reverses the traditional way of examining the past as past and replaces it with a dialectical model. ‘The immediate benefit of this reversal of strategy [he argues] is that it gets rid of the most tenacious abstraction

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative III*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 207.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “La crise: un phénomène spécifiquement moderne?” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 120 (1988), 1-19.

<sup>20</sup> Leonard Lawlor, “The Dialectical Unity of Hermeneutics: On Ricoeur and Gadamer,” in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, Continental Philosophy IV, edited and with an introduction by Hugh J. Silverman, London: Routledge, 1991, esp. 88ff.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 207.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Kearney, “Between Tradition and Utopia: The Hermeneutical Problem of Myth,” in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 56.

of the past as past. This abstraction is a result of forgetting the complex interplay of significations that takes place between our expectations directed towards the future and our interpretations oriented toward the past.<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur warns against looking at the past as a static phenomenon. He believes that as soon as we lose or choose to ignore our anchorage in the experiences of the past, history loses its direction and becomes tainted by the ideologies of the dominant political groups of our time.

In an article entitled 'La crise: un phénomène spécifiquement moderne?' Ricoeur adverts to the dangers of ignoring the effects of history on our decisions and on the way in which we interpret ourselves.<sup>24</sup> He maintains that we cannot strive towards our ideals or goals without any reference to our past. Moreover, he argues that if we attempt to remove ourselves from our historical ties, our goals become empty and ideological. This is what he calls 'schismatic negation'.<sup>25</sup>

This emphasises the idea that history and tradition play a role in formulating the goals we set for ourselves in the future. Tradition, argues Ricoeur, makes our ideals more determinate and realistic. Moreover, if we can accept the suggestion that the orientation of our goals arises out of history, our understanding of history becomes less static and inhibiting. This is so because while it plays a role in telling us about

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<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 208; cf. Alain Thomasset, *Paul Ricoeur: Une poétique de la morale*, Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 1996, esp. 185-189.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, "La crise," 1-19.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 215. Here Ricoeur explains what he means by schismatic negation: 'If the newness of the *Neuzeit* was only perceived thanks to the growing difference between experience and expectations—in other words, if the belief in new times rests on expectations that distance themselves from all prior experience—then the tension between experience and expectation could only be recognized at the moment when its breaking point was already in sight. The idea of progress which still bound the past to a better future, one brought closer by the acceleration of history, tends to give way to the idea of utopia as soon as the hopes of humanity lose their anchorage in acquired experience and are projected into an unprecedented future. With such utopias, the tension becomes schism' (p. 215).

our history and ourselves, it does not imprison us but offers us a sound basis for formulating goals and expectations.

In fact, as Ricoeur tells us, if our ideals are not grounded in our understanding of the past, they forfeit the potential to solicit responsible commitment.<sup>26</sup> Only by acknowledging the *split* character of history may we prevent our future goals from dissolving into an empty 'dream-world', and ground them in the history that precedes us.<sup>27</sup> This ensures that our actions and goals are not detached from our history but are the result of a critical engagement with it.

Ricoeur's interpretation of history could be seen as a struggle against the tendency to consider the past only from the angle of what is done, unchangeable and past. The aim is to reopen the past and revivify its unaccomplished and, perhaps, suppressed potentialities. It represents an attempt to prevent the future from becoming ideology ridden and to ensure that the past does not become a lifeless fossil, which has nothing to contribute to the present or the future. Interpreting history in this way will help to 'make our expectations more determinate and our experiences less so. For these [Ricoeur explains] are two faces of one and the same task, for only determinate expectations can have the retroactive effect on the past of revealing it as a living tradition. It is in this way that our critical meditation on the future calls for the complement of a similar meditation on the past.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 216ff.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 216.

None of this is to suggest that Ricoeur's fusion of the horizon of the past with that of the present and the future is a naïve one. For he advises that we should also be critical about the way in which we interpret the past. As Richard Kearney explains, Ricoeur's dialectical model of history preserves the idea we are historical beings, who possess a historical consciousness, while 'at the same time taking full stock of the "decentering of the thinking subject" carried out by the hermeneutics of suspicion.'<sup>29</sup> That Ricoeur combines Gadamer's and Habermas' understanding of history is clear: he completes Gadamer's attempt to understand history in a hermeneutical way with Habermas' hermeneutics of suspicion.

Although it is clear that for Ricoeur tradition is essential if we are to interpret who we are in every age, and if we are to make responsible judgements about our future and the goals we set for ourselves, questions arise as to how one could make an apologia for tradition. If tradition must be questioned and reinterpreted time and time again so that it continues to answer the 'Why?' of who we are and what we should become, it becomes difficult to see how a tradition may be considered as orthodox in any sense. The issue may be put as follows: How can one be critical of a tradition and still claim to belong to an orthodox tradition? An elaboration of Ricoeur's three categories of tradition is useful here.

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<sup>29</sup> Kearney, "Between Tradition and Utopia," 58.

### 5.3 Ricoeur's Three Categories of Tradition

#### 5.3.1 *Traditionality*

Ricoeur understands history in a triadic manner: (1) traditionality, (2) traditions, and (3) Tradition (with a capital T). The first category of tradition, traditionality, accounts for the fact that we are born into history and are affected by it before we are in a position to critique it or judge it. History precedes us: the past judges us first before we judge it.

Furthermore, in line with the Gadamerian understanding of history, this category of tradition suggests that tradition is something transmitted to us from previous generations. This transmission, however, is not carried out in a lifeless way; rather, a process of mediation carries it out, i.e., 'by the chain of interpretations and reinterpretations.'<sup>30</sup> Traditionality is to be understood in the more general sense of a formal style which transmits the heritage of the past to us.<sup>31</sup> This means that we should not interpret the past as a phenomenon that separates us from our ancestors and from what happened before we were born. Instead, we should look at history as being the bearer of a rich heritage of experience and knowledge which it transmits to us in the present.<sup>32</sup>

Traditionality, then, is a dialectic between the effects of history upon us (which we passively experience) and our response to this history (which we are in control of and

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<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 220.

<sup>31</sup> Kearney, "Between Tradition and Utopia," 58.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 221.

actively operate).<sup>33</sup> This first category of history invites us to consider that we are, first and foremost, heirs of our tradition.<sup>34</sup> This is the case because human beings are historical, and they do not begin reasoning, thinking or, indeed, being who they are without any reference to the past or an already existing tradition.<sup>35</sup> This point is significant, since it suggests that we cannot either completely abolish the past as an irrelevant consequence of our historical being or exclude it from discussions concerning our understanding of ourselves in the present.

### *5.3.1.1 Traditionality and The Interpretation of Literary Texts*

Ricoeur's first category of history is similar to his understanding of literary texts in the sense that both may be described as the living transmission of our sedimented history. The implication here is that if one understands the phenomenon of tradition, one will also understand the functioning of narrative. For Ricoeur, the 'constituting of a tradition...depends on the interaction between two factors, innovation and sedimentation.'<sup>36</sup> He explains further that '[i]t is to sedimentation that we ascribe the models that constitute, after the fact, the typology of emplotment which allows us to order the history of literary genres; but we must not lose sight of the fact that these models do not constitute eternal essences but proceed from a sedimented history whose genesis has been obliterated.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kearney, "Between Tradition and Utopia," 58.

<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 221.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 24.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

When stories or narratives are constructed, we can normally say that they belong to a certain genre or history of literary genre. The history of human action is recorded in texts, which ensures that certain events or stories leave a trace or a mark and become the *documents* of human action. Ricoeur understands history itself as the record of human action. Texts record history and allow us to retain something which happened in the past and revise it in the present. In this sense, argues Ricoeur, texts act as ‘archives.’<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, ‘Thanks to this sedimentation in social time, human deeds become ‘institutions’, in the sense that their meaning no longer coincides with the logical intentions of the actors. The meaning may be “depsychologized” to the point where the *meaning* resides in the work itself.’<sup>39</sup> In turn, we can categorise texts as belonging to a certain literary genre. However, the mere fact that we can categorise texts does not imply that the models are static and not open to change. This is where the idea of ‘innovation’ comes into play.

In Ricoeur’s view, the term sedimentation, when it refers to texts and history, takes into account the idea of innovation because the sedimented models themselves came out of an innovative idea. Thus, our understanding of sedimented narrative should not exclude the possibility of innovation or deviation from the standard genre. This is not to deny the ability of texts or of history to guide our reasoning and our interpretative capacity in the present. Rather, it is to indicate that tradition, be it literary or otherwise, must be interpreted in the present, and therefore must include the possibility of revising what was previously taught or reactivating elements of tradition that have been forgotten.

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<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, *TA*, 154; cf. Ted Klein, “The Idea of a Hermeneutical Ethics,” in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, The Library of Living Philosophers Series, vol. 22, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1995, 349-366, esp. 356-358.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, *TA*, 154.



One only has to look at trends in the area of biblical scholarship to see that the interpretation of texts is constantly changing from one paradigm to another. The rules of genre change when a new innovative idea exerts its influence, which explains why Ricoeur can legitimately consider human action, texts, history and tradition considered as 'open works.'<sup>40</sup>

The same could be said about fundamental moral theology. Very often, traditional moral rules and principles need to be reinterpreted in light of new circumstances or contexts, which arise in the present, so that the rules remain relevant in an evolving society. Thus we can agree with Ricoeur that, similarly to texts, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is 'in suspense,' because it 'opens up' new references and receives fresh relevance from them, that human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations that decide their meaning.<sup>41</sup> Put briefly, it can be said that insofar as texts, history and tradition recount the past or provide us with 'archives' of the past, they are not fixed entities; they are open to present praxis.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that although tradition needs reinterpretation to ensure that it is protected from total degeneration and continues to answer to today's world, changing traditional values or perspectives takes time. As

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<sup>40</sup> Ricoeur, *TA*, 155; for an interesting account of how Ricoeur's work succeeds in keeping language, history and meaning 'open', as it were, see Hans H. Rudnick, "Naive and Sentimental Hermeneutics: Keeping Language Open," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, vol. 22, 1995, 140-144.

<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur, *TA*, 155; cf. Clark, *Paul Ricoeur*, 115-119.

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, *TA*, 155; a discussion of the interplay between innovation and sedimentation may be found in Ricoeur, *TNI*, 68-69, 77-79, 166-208.

Ricoeur tells us, while the idea of sedimentation allows for change, the rules of narrative modes do not change quickly; in fact, some even resist change.<sup>43</sup>

This can be clearly seen when we examine Ricoeur's dialectic of sedimentation and innovation in narrative texts. While the meaning of a given text is contained in the text (sedimentation), the act of writing the text in the first place was possibly due to an innovation on behalf of the writer/author. But this is not to say that the meaning of a given text is set in stone, never to be changed in spite of new interpretative methods. On the contrary, texts which are classified as being of a particular genre, for example, can give rise to new ways of writing or to new genres, which act as a critique of what was previously considered to be typical of a genre.

What is important here is that the new genre or new innovation is the product of the old one. Hence the force of what Ricoeur calls innovation does not come from nowhere; it grows out of an already existing or sedimented genre or tradition. In this way, tradition includes the possibility of deviance from the standard way of thinking, seeing or interpreting something, while deviations are constituted by what has gone before them, i.e., tradition. 'The variations between these poles gives the productive imagination its own historicity and keeps the narrative tradition a living one.'<sup>44</sup>

If Ricoeur is right, what keeps any tradition alive, be it narrative or otherwise, is the interplay between sedimentation and innovation. To ensure that a tradition remains living, one has to allow for deviation from the standard genres. Ricoeur's first category of tradition, which he terms traditionality, signifies that 'the temporal

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<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 25.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

distance separating us from that past is not a dead interval but a transmission that is generative of meaning. Before being an inert deposit, tradition is an operation that can only make sense dialectically through the exchange between the interpreted past and the interpreting present.<sup>45</sup> This brings us to Ricoeur's second category of tradition, which he terms 'traditions'. There is a move from the formal concept of tradition (traditionality) to the material contents of a tradition,<sup>46</sup> which is necessitated by the activity of interpretation.

### ***5.3.2 Ricoeur's Second Category of Tradition: Traditions***

Whereas 'traditionality' is a formal concept referring to the historical transmission of meaning, the category of 'traditions' refers to the contents of a tradition. It is at this level that we truly become heirs of our tradition. In the struggle for meaning and understanding in our lives, we find ourselves accepting what tradition has to offer rather than attempting to create meaning *ex nihilo*.

Here the consciousness of being exposed to the past becomes supplemented by our interpretive response to texts, stories, symbols and truths communicated to us by our tradition. And we find ourselves responding to our tradition and grappling with what it proposes to us. In this way, we can say that we truly belong to a tradition, because we accept to take what it proposes as a basis or a starting point for interpreting our lives.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, we can agree with Ricoeur that '[t]he notion of tradition, taken in

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<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 221.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, *TN I*, 68-70; see also Charles E. Regan and David Steward (eds.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 162-166.

<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur, *TN I*, 68-70.

the sense of traditions, signifies that we are never in a position of being absolute innovators, but rather are always first of all in the situation of being heirs.’<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, our consciousness of being exposed to the past and its effects must be coupled with our interpretative response. We must interpret what our tradition is proposing to us. For instance, just as the texts of our tradition question us about who we are, so we must question the texts of our past. This is no less the case when we attempt to interpret the past: just as the past questions us, so we must question the past. The past and its meaning exist in a dialectical tension with the interpreting present. Various proposals of truth and meaning are put forward in this category of tradition, and the struggle between past and present proceeds in the same way as an exegete struggles with a literary text. The text proposes several possible meanings to the exegete. In turn, the exegete interrogates the text and proposes several possible interpretations. In this sense, text and reader are in a constant state of being made familiar and unfamiliar.<sup>49</sup>

In brief, it could be said that Ricoeur’s second category of tradition, i.e., traditions, conceives of the past in terms of several proposals of meanings. The past proposes certain meanings and truths to us, and we propose new possible meanings of what this past might mean in the present so that tradition remains alive, responsive and relevant in the present. This brings us to the third and final Ricoeurian category of tradition: Tradition (with a capital T).

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *TN III*, 221.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

### 5.3.3 Ricoeur's Third Category of Tradition: Tradition (with a capital T)

The confrontation between the past and the present or, to use Ricoeur's terminology, the confrontation between the 'so-called hermeneutic of traditions and the critique of ideologies...results from a shift from the consideration of traditions to an apology for tradition.'<sup>50</sup>

This shift is necessitated by the activity of critical interpretation and brings us to Ricoeur's third category of tradition: Tradition (with a capital T). Although tradition binds us to things already said in the past and proposes certain truths to us, it must be critically interpreted. Critical interpretation allows us to question the truths of tradition and revise them if necessary. In this category, therefore, we must interrogate and raise suspicions about tradition. Taking a step back from tradition—a movement known as *distanciation*—and critically examining the truths it proposes allows us to make an *apologia* for tradition.

That Ricoeur is proposing a hermeneutical approach to tradition is clear. The hermeneutical approach allows us to 'sift through the dead traditions in which we no longer recognize ourselves.'<sup>51</sup> Distancing ourselves from tradition, critically accessing it, and proposing several possible meanings of tradition in the present (traditions) allows us to make a legitimate defence of tradition. Calling into the question the received wisdom of the past and engaging the hermeneutics of suspicion guarantees the existence of a more authentic and orthodox version of the truth.

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<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 222.

<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 224; cf. Joseph Dunne, "Beyond Sovereignty and Deconstruction: The Storied Self," in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, London: Sage Publications, 1996, 137-158.

Literary texts may be understood in the same way. The critical interaction between the text and the reader allows various possible meanings to emerge (traditions). Subsequently, these proposed meanings are submitted to the tribunal of reason and suspicion, and are taken as legitimate claims to truth so long as a stronger reason, that is, a better argument, has not been established.<sup>52</sup>

In summary then, Ricoeur's three categories of tradition, i.e., traditionality, traditions and Tradition, may be mapped out in the following way:

Traditionality designates a formal style of interconnectedness that assures the continuity of the reception of the past. In this respect, it designates the reciprocity between effective-history and our being-affected-by-the-past. Traditions consist of transmitted contents insofar as they are bearers of meaning; they set every received heritage within the order of the symbolic and, virtually, within a language-like and textual tradition; in this regard, traditions are proposals of meaning. Tradition, as an instance of legitimacy, designates the claim to truth (the taking-for-true) offered argumentation within the public space of discussion. In the face of criticism that devours itself, the truth claim of the contents of traditions merits being taken as a presumption of truth, so long as a stronger reason, that is, a better argument, has not been established.<sup>53</sup>

This brings us back to the question posed earlier: Can one adopt a hermeneutical approach to tradition without undermining its orthodoxy? According to Ricoeur, the answer is yes. Texts and traditions should be understood as the critical dialectic between past and present, text and reader. All traditions, be they literary or otherwise, demand critique and reinterpretation so that they remain alive and responsive to who we are in today's world.

We must remember, however, that we are *not* the originators of truth or history; we are born into a context of 'presumed truth'. Truths and traditions are passed on to us.

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<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 227; cf. Regan and Stewart (eds.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 161ff.

<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 227.

We become the heirs of our tradition. The same applies to literary texts. In texts we find a trace of history which we have not made ourselves but which has been passed on to us by successive generations. In this way, any attempt to understand ourselves, our narratives, or our tradition must begin by an acknowledgement that meaning is derived out of a process of receiving as well as giving. Tradition questions us as much as we question tradition.

Hence it can be said that there exists a certain orthodoxy about our past that we have not created or written. To prevent our notion of the past from becoming some kind of naïve nostalgia for the past, as was typical of the Romantic period, the truths and texts of our past require critical interpretation so that our understanding of ourselves remains a true interpretation of who we are. Praxis is necessary so that the past remains alive in the present, and the present is grounded in the past. Without praxis, we run the risk of either creating a new tradition or inhibiting the already-existing tradition.

Thus praxis and orthodoxy go hand in hand. The former conditions the latter, and vice versa. Praxis and critical interpretation 'liberate the still untapped potentialities of inherited meaning,'<sup>54</sup> and ensure that our understanding of our past and ourselves remains authentic and true. This is what Ricoeur terms innovation. In turn, the orthodoxy of the past guarantees that our understanding of ourselves today is grounded in the history of our tradition and prevents the innovative forces of critique and reason from creating a new tradition of its own.

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<sup>54</sup> Kearney, "Between Tradition and Utopia," 63.

In short, criticism of tradition or texts leads to legitimation, and praxis keeps the orthodoxy of the past alive in the present and allows us to discriminate between true and false interpretations of the past. Moreover, orthodoxy safeguards the received wisdom of the past until such times as praxis and critical hermeneutics find a better argument. Therefore, praxis and orthodoxy co-exist and mutually condition each other so that the texts and the received wisdom of our past stay alive in the present and help to further reinforce ‘the community’s consciousness of its identity, its narrative identity, as well as the identity of its members.’<sup>55</sup>

#### **5.4 Ricoeurian Tradition and the Christian *Proprium* Debate**

Returning to our discussion of the Christian *proprium* debate, we can now suggest various ways in which Ricoeur’s work can help proponents of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy stances to move beyond the tensions regarding the role of tradition and the Magisterium in Christian morality. We will begin by relating Ricoeur’s three categories of tradition more closely to the Christian tradition and to the search for moral truth.

The first category, traditionality, indicates that the search for truth takes places in a context of ‘presumed truth’. It makes sense to speak of the Christian tradition in such terms, since the Christian community represents a place where moral values are transmitted to successive generations. But this first category of tradition also refers to the handing on of the ways in which a tradition rehearses its identity. Hence, we can speak of stories, rituals and practices of a community being passed on to us from our

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<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 187; for a recent summary of Ricoeur’s views on the necessity of an open-ended interpretation of history and tradition, see Christian Delacroix, “De quelques usages historiques de P. Ricoeur,” in Bertrand Müller, *L’Histoire entre mémoire et épistémologie: Autour de Paul Ricoeur*, France: Éditions Payot Lausanne, 2005, 99-123.



tradition. For Christians, reading and interpreting the story of Jesus, reflecting on the symbols of faith, engaging in practices of worship, prayer and the Eucharist, for example, are ways of keeping the tradition alive, which they have not invented but inherited. The process of 'handing on' the already-established rituals and stories ensures that the Christian community does not lose its sense of identity and that its future is grounded in the past, a past that arises out of the story of Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup>

Ricoeur's second category of tradition, traditions, refers to the actual reception of the past. It is within this category that one's sense of identity is communicated and beliefs about one's tradition are proposed to, and accepted by, us. In terms of the Christian tradition, it could be argued that it is within this category that Christians gain a better understanding of their faith and of the moral expectations of their community. This is not to say that the reception of tradition is an easy task. Questions are also asked about the meaning of the Christian narrative and its significance for the Christian living in today's world. The question of legitimacy, however, is only introduced after engaging in a hermeneutics of suspicion.

This may be compared to Ricoeur's third category of tradition: Tradition (with a capital T). It involves questioning all that has been inherited and given by one's tradition. It is at this stage, for instance, that Christians might begin to question magisterial pronouncements or the validity of certain moral norms. The need for change in the tradition may be expressed in this category; issues of social justice, inequality and exclusion, for instance, may be discussed and critically analysed.

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<sup>56</sup> For an interesting discussion on the transmission of the biblical texts as perceived by Ricoeur, see Louis Fèvre, *Penser avec Ricoeur: Introduction à la pensée et à l'action de Paul Ricoeur*, Lyon: Chronique Sociale, 2003, 117-120.

But this is not to say that criticism of one's tradition undermines it in any way. In fact, if Ricoeur is right, questioning one's tradition leads to a more authentic and orthodox tradition. Moreover, since the criticisms raised about one's tradition are the result of having accepted it in the first place (in the two former categories), it is unlikely that a new or unorthodox tradition will be created. Questioning a tradition is rooted in our horizon of experience and acceptance of that tradition, which ensures that tradition's future remains grounded in its grand narratives, stories and beliefs without giving rise to an unconditional acceptance of them. Thus, to use Ricoeur's words, 'schismatic utopianism' is avoided.<sup>57</sup> This has implications for the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate.

We have seen that proponents of the *Glaubensethik* view cannot accept the Autonomy school's proposal to use the natural law and reason as the source of Christian morality out of a fear that it will undermine tradition and the Magisterium and make reason absolute.<sup>58</sup> We have also seen that proponents of the 'stronger form' of the Faith-Ethic view are at one in the belief that the Christian tradition can give specifically Christian norms to its members. From the perspective of the Autonomy school, however, the issues are slightly different. Its supporters fear that the *Glaubensethik* school's position were adopted, it would lead to a 'ghetto' mentality within the Christian tradition, and make it impossible to engage in inter-religious dialogue.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ricoeur, *TN III*, 215.

<sup>58</sup> See MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 43; cf. Philippe Delhaye, "La spécificité de la morale chrétienne," *RTL 4* (1973), 314ff. Delhaye argues that Josef Fuchs' autonomy thesis triggers a denial of Christ as the giver of moral norms and a disrespect for the Magisterium's authority to teach on moral matters.

<sup>59</sup> MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 38.

The dynamic between the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools may be likened to the first two Ricoeurian categories of tradition. The *Glaubensethik* school wishes to emphasise the formal contents of the Christian tradition in terms of specifically Christian norms and principles (traditionality), while the Autonomy school is anxious to show that the content of morality is discoverable by reason and the natural law, *informed* by the Christian vision and story (traditions). Neither school intends to undermine tradition; each appears to be defending two important aspects of the Ricoeurian dialectic of tradition.

Thus both schools have it right. The *Glaubensethik* school is right to assert that the Christian tradition gives norms and values to its members. It does. Being a part of a tradition means that we are situated in a context of already-established truths to which we can refer when making moral choices (traditionality). However, as Ricoeur asserts, truth is not mediated to us directly; the discovery of truth is a *process*, not a given. This is another way of saying that truth involves a *search*. Furthermore, the truths of tradition are universal, which means that although they may be mediated in a particular context, they are discoverable by other traditions. The Autonomy school argues rightly, therefore, that reason and the natural law are the basis upon which Christian moral truth is attained. The search for Christian moral truth, then, may be understood as a dialectic between what tradition proposes as true and what the natural law demands of us in light of our contemporary experience.

It is important to remember, however, that the way in which we reason about our tradition is already conditioned by it and is the result of having already accepted it. This must change the way in which one views natural law. For it locates the natural

law at the heart of the Christian tradition and in an acceptance of what the Christian tradition proposes as true. In this respect, that natural law is seen as something which is already informed by the Christian vision, stories, and practices. It is unlikely, therefore, that any natural law approach to Christian morality will undermine tradition, or suggest ways of living that go against the central *telos* of the Church.<sup>60</sup>

In short, then, Ricoeur's dialectical approach to tradition indicates that the respective stances taken by proponents of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools vis-à-vis tradition may be seen in complementary terms. They are two sides of the same coin. Ricoeur's approach to tradition does not favour one school of thought over the other, but seems to provide some necessary clarifications as to what is at stake when we claim to be a part of a tradition and take it as our moral starting point. However, as long as the Christian *proprium* debate remains focused on the search for specifically Christian norms and values, the Christian tradition may be deprived of the kind of enrichment it might otherwise receive if the search for truth were understood in terms of a Ricoeurian dialectic.

### **5.5 The Need for a Magisterium**

Of course, the question still remains as to whether Ricoeur's interpretation of tradition allows for a Magisterium. Although Ricoeur does not discuss the Magisterium in his work, we can make some suggestions as to where it might be placed based on what has been argued here already. Recall what was said in the previous chapters. A Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate asserts that what is specific about Christian morality is the particular way in which Christians interpret themselves

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<sup>60</sup> For an account of the criticisms made against the Autonomy school regarding a natural law approach to Christian morality, see MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 54.

and their moral actions, that is, through the Christian story. However, if the Christian story is not protected, it becomes susceptible to misinterpretation. Thus one could say that the Magisterium is necessary to protect the Christian story from the kind of distortion that arises out of a fundamentalist reading of the biblical texts.

Moreover, in a dialectical approach to tradition one has to acknowledge that we are born into a context of 'presumed truth'. This means that truth precedes us until such times as it no longer answers to the needs of contemporary society. The same may be said in terms of the Christian church: there are truths which have already been established by the Church concerning our identity and ways of living which are faithful to life in a messianic community. These truths, although available to those outside the Christian community, need to be protected until such times as a better argument is found which demands that they be changed. This suggests that a Magisterium is absolutely necessary in a Ricoeurian approach to tradition, as it will ensure that the goals of the Christian life are rooted in the Christian heritage, not based on a narcissistic desire for self-fulfilment or superiority.

A further way which highlights the necessity of a Magisterium in a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate concerns the role of practices in the acquisition of virtue. As pointed out in earlier chapters, practices serve to remind the faithful of their identity and shape character. They play a vital role in a morality of virtue rather than rule.

In its role as protector of the faith, the Magisterium can ensure that the practices of the Christian community are not lost but continue to sustain the Christian faithful in the

ongoing search for truth and understanding. As De Schrijver points out, 'An organized religion cannot survive if it fails to keep alive its 'common memory' by means of rituals, religious customs, catechetics, liturgical and [though not specific to the Christian community] moral preaching, prayers, etc.... Indeed, it is imperative for a congregation to engage periodically in the rehearsal of its past salvation history, for this rehearsal is of such a nature that it bears upon the 'basic trust' looked for in religion.'<sup>61</sup>

None of this, however, is to suggest that magisterial role in a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate is confined to the protection of the Christian story, already-established truths and Christian practices. For the Ricoeurian understanding of tradition makes reference to Habermas' theory of 'communication free from domination'. This means that the Magisterium is also called to stand before the tribunal of critique and reason so that its functioning remains responsive to the needs and demands of the Christian community in a secularised society.

Hence it could be argued that a dialectic approach to the magisterial authority, based on Ricoeur's interpretation of tradition, expects the Magisterium to provide well-reasoned answers and explanations for issuing this or that set of pastoral or theological directives. The advantage of this kind of approach to tradition is that the Magisterium is called to engage in open dialogue with the Church and its members. For the faithful should know why they are required to accept the magisterial pronouncements which pertain to their identity as Christian or their conduct as members of the human community. As De Schrijver notes,

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<sup>61</sup> De Schrijver, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," 42.

If those reasons are suppressed, the suspicion arises that the Magisterium, just like other lobbying officials in secular life, seek to conceal their true intentions so as to strengthen their 'traditionally' untouchable power position. Especially those who have been trained in the socio-critical school, Church officials cannot escape being put to the test, just like any other power group, to see whether or not they are giving their support to some influential political or financial group in society.<sup>62</sup>

A Ricoeurian approach to the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate, then, does not exclude the need for a magisterial teaching authority. In fact, it asserts that a Magisterium is necessary to protect the Christian heritage from misinterpretation and misuse. Consequently, it seems to satisfy the concerns of the Faith-Ethic ethic school regarding the need to protect the orthodoxy of the Christian tradition. Indeed, Ricoeur's interpretation of tradition seems also to satisfy the concerns of the Autonomy school, since it asserts not only that all are united in the common search for truth, but also that one must be critical about one's tradition in order to avoid falling into a sectarian and insular Church.

In short, Ricoeur's interpretation of tradition combines orthodoxy with orthopraxis and gives us a broader understanding of tradition and Magisterium. His account of tradition allows him to play the role of mediator between the concerns of *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools regarding tradition: he can account for the need to have and to defend the Christian tradition, and to dialogue with the rest of God's creation about the content of morality, without suggesting that one is more important than the other. Ricoeur's genius lies in his ability to offer us an assiduously balanced account of history and tradition, which may be used to discuss and shed new light upon the issues arising out of the Christian *proprium* debate; orthodoxy is as important as orthopraxis; protecting a tradition and its practices is as important as

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<sup>62</sup> De Schrijver, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," 46.

being critical of them; the role of the reader is as important as the role of text, etc. All coexist in a dialectical relationship.

In this way, a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate invites us to reconsider some of the divisions between the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools in terms of a necessary dialectic, instead of an unnecessary division. Of course, this will only be possible if one can agree with Ricoeur's belief that what is specific about Christian morality is that it is considered (not given) through the lens of the Christian story. Then we might be able to proceed to understanding tradition in dialectical terms. Until such times, however, perhaps all one can do is hope.



## CHAPTER SIX

### THE LIMITS OF CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE

It has been argued here that the work of Paul Ricoeur can help to change the way in which the question of the distinctiveness of Christian morality question has hitherto been interpreted. His work invites us to consider biblical revelation in such a way that we are not looking to it merely for moral norms. In so doing, Ricoeur succeeds in demonstrating that the Bible represents a space in which believers can interpret themselves and develop the kind of character traits necessary for a life of virtue. That Ricoeur's work situates narrative at the heart of Christian morality is clear.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that narrative has its limitations. The misuse of story can lead to sectarianism,<sup>1</sup> and to the exclusion of minority groups whose individual narratives differ from the dominant narrative of a particular community. In fact, it is often said that the traditional understanding of story does not account for all

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<sup>1</sup> This is true when the Christian narrative becomes preoccupied with itself, becomes tribal, and is considered only to be available to a small minority of people. In addition, Christian theology becomes more concerned with maintaining a fidelity to the Christian narratives than with providing external justification for maintaining that fidelity. Cf. Terrence P. Reynolds, "A Conversation Worth Having," *JRE* 28/3 (2000), [Academic Search Premier Database], 1-19. (21/06/2004).

domains of human life, that it is exclusionary,<sup>2</sup> and that it overemphasises the role of the plot—thus presuming that every story results in the triumph of order over chaos and good over evil.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter will discuss some of the possible objections to, and criticisms of, a narrative approach to Christian morality. It will begin by highlighting the limits of the narrative structure as a medium through which human beings gain a better understanding of themselves and of their identity. Then it will ask whether the interpretation of the self through the medium of texts is a solitary or communal venture, and whether one can justify using the narrative structure to explain human existence.

The chapter will also examine the limitations of using Ricoeur's identity theory as a way of mediating the impasse between the Faith-Ethic and Autonomy schools, as well as raising some general concerns about placing virtue ethics at the heart of Christian moral living. These concerns will appear in the form of two questions: a) Where does the concept of obligation come into a Ricoeurian approach to Christian ethics? and b) Does this approach favour a Greek understanding of virtue, in which case it might be thought to promote a culture of violence rather than peace? The chapter will conclude

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<sup>2</sup> There may exist a gap between the story of a community and the narrative of an individual's life. It must be remembered that it is often difficult to see one's own story in the larger story of one's tradition or community. This is particularly true of the role of women in the Bible, for instance. In addition, there may be times in the course of a person's life, or in some cases a person's entire life, when he/she has practical difficulties identifying with alien situations and characters, i.e., a motiveless priest and Levite, a senseless prejudice against improvident virgins, etc. This is the case because of the distance which separates the reader from the text itself; the reader may not be in a position to relate to the episodes presented to him/her by the text. Likewise, it could be said that stories give us a false sense of security because they sometimes tend to avoid presenting us with a disturbing account of life, one which bears witness to the 'mess' all around us in which people are trapped in lives of hopelessness. See Richard Lischer, "The Limits of Story," *Interpretation* 38/1 (1984), [ATLA Religion Database], 30ff. (07/03/02).

<sup>3</sup> Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 30.

by asking two more general questions: a) whether Ricoeur's emphasis on the role of the imagination undermines the truth of the biblical texts; and b) whether using his work in the context of Christian ethics encourages a sectarian view of the Christian community.

### 6.1 Narrative and its Limitations

It is easy to assume that every story, whose plot assists in moving the story towards its end, has a resolution of one kind or another to which the reader can relate. This is the shape which Ricoeur gives to story, both fictional and non-fictional. Nevertheless, '[s]uch a shape does not always reflect the way things are but mercifully—or arrogantly—imposes a pattern on the disorder and anarchy of life as it is.'<sup>4</sup> While Ricoeur believes that the human person only understands his/her own existence through the interpretation of signs—personal and cultural—scattered in the world,<sup>5</sup> his theory seems to overlook two important points. First, signs and symbols, whether found in narrative or in life itself, are difficult to interpret; and second, not every story or life-story can be easily described in terms of a coherent beginning, middle and end.

Richard Lischer argues that many people, especially preachers, have assumed that, because of the apparent simplicity involved in storytelling, stories may be easily understood.<sup>6</sup> Stories, however, come with built-in limitations. The first of these limitations has to do with the fact that a story is peculiar to its teller. Added to this is the difficulty the listener/reader may experience trying to identify with the principal

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<sup>4</sup> Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 30.

<sup>5</sup> Loretta Dornish, "Symbolic Systems and the Interpretation of Scripture: An Introduction to the Work of Paul Ricoeur," in *Semeia: An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism* 4 (1975), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 29. Here Lischer points out that any aesthetic object, including an 'artless' story, comes with built-in limitations which make it difficult to understand.

characters of a particular narrative. It is at this point in the reading process that the reader no longer recognises him/herself in the story, as he/she becomes aware that there exists a kind of dissonance—often explained using the metaphor of a veil—between *the* story and his/her *personal* story.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, to many, telling stories may seem to be a more honest form of communication than other forms of communication, perhaps because it is a more straightforward mode of imparting history and wisdom; but we must not lose sight of the fact that the quest for authenticity and for self-understanding *via* texts is a difficult one. Very often, what begins as a search for truth about our past and our identity results in a thickening of the veil between the reader and the text, between the individual and his/her master story.

In addition, as mentioned above, the traditional description of story in terms of a plot, which helps the story to move through various episodes towards its end, can lead to the presumption that every aspect of an individual's life may be interpreted and explained by story. It seems to suggest that resolution always follows chaos, and that any sorrow can be overcome if a story can be told about it. Although stories can assist in the articulation of personal identity, and give us the coherence we need to live a balanced life, we must not overlook the fact that there are storyless places in our lives. Story can perform a comforting function, and give us a secure sense of who we

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Zeiss Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way Between Myth and Madness: Maxine Hong Kong Kingston and Contemporary Women's Autobiography" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 3/1 (2001), [ATLA Religion Database], 1-5ff. (18/06/2004).

are, but sometimes life and narrative have more in common with Samuel Beckett's *Theatre of the Absurd* than with Ricoeur's unified self.<sup>8</sup>

Storyless places exist in our lives, on the face of it, 'wherever episodic complications have stagnated and ceased to develop with any organic connection toward new episodes and new complications.'<sup>9</sup> When this happens, life is perceived as proceeding in an episodic way. But the episodes are not connected, for they either lack the coherent unity we have come to expect from life and from stories about life, or proceed as a series of individual sketches typical of a cabaret show.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Lischer points out, an objective thread of identity may persist, but to those caught in this kind of life the 'I' previously known by them has become a stranger. In order to make sense of such a life, the individual will have to move away from casting his/her life into 'acts' and rationalising its plot, and attempt to rediscover the continuity of identity throughout the confusion of broken plots.<sup>11</sup>

If one accepts the idea that the Christian tradition tells us more about who we are than what we should do, consideration must be given to the storyless places in the life of the Christian believer. Christians often question their faith, their identity as Christians and their relationship with God. We lose our way in the search for truth. Sometimes

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<sup>8</sup> The implication here is that story often resembles parataxis, i.e., placing episodes side by side, rather than syntax, i.e., tying episodes together to form a cohesive story. It is interesting to note, however, that some scholars maintain that, by offering exaggerated accounts of broken identity, motion pictures can help Christians to construct a responsible, ethical self. Cf. Glenn Whitehouse, "Unimaginable Variations: Christian Responsibility in the Cinema of Broken Identity," *LT* 18/3 (2004), 321-350.

<sup>9</sup> Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 31.

<sup>10</sup> In the former case life proceeds as if it were a collection of unrelated short stories written by different authors. In the latter case, however, life proceeds by a series of 'slices' or 'snippets', even though all of the snippets are part of one show which may have been written by one person.

<sup>11</sup> Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 31.

we lose faith and give up hope of ever finding the truth. On other occasions, we succumb to the temptation of evil. We also experience suffering, which can alienate us from ourselves and from the Christian story. Therefore, we must not presume that our story always gives us a sense of belonging, or that it can be considered as a safe place where we can take refuge.

## **6.2 An Egalitarian Approach to Narrative**

Moreover, we must be mindful of some particular difficulties involved in trying to attain a coherent understanding of what it means to be a Christian from the texts of the biblical canon. The biblical texts are culture-bound, and can be criticised for, among other things, their androcentric vision of the world and of the self. It can be difficult, therefore, for women to gain the unified sense of self, which Ricoeur claims is provided by the interpretation of signs and symbols contained not only in texts but also in the wider context of community and culture. If story is the raw material of the Christian life, we must ensure that it does not become oppressive, and that it continues to operate as an inclusive Gospel, giving life and a sense of belonging to the faithful, whether male or female.

Writing about autobiographical narrative, Mary Zeiss Stange contends that men and women envision the unified self or 'me', who we all strive to become, differently.<sup>12</sup> Zeiss Stange explains that this difference is embedded in sociological realities: traditionally women were denied the opportunity to participate in life in the same way as their male counterparts. The result of this sociological fact is that, when they attempt to interpret and search for the unified self through reading the texts of their

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<sup>12</sup> Zeiss Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way," 2.

tradition, women often find themselves alienated, for they fail to find their gender represented in the narrative.

Indeed, in patriarchal society the distinguishing feature between men and women was that men were expected to strive to attain their identities, while women had their identities imposed upon them.<sup>13</sup> The task of becoming oneself was altogether more straightforward for men than for women: men strove to become themselves and women strove to become what society expected them to become.

An egalitarian approach to narrative is imperative,<sup>14</sup> so that both men and women are included in the quest for self-understanding through the texts of the biblical canon. If the Bible is to be understood as the archive of a unique Christian identity, then we must ensure that our interpretation of this identity is representative of both sexes. The interpretation of the Christian story should not equate authentic Christian identity with subordination. In fact, the model of the Trinity should act as a source of inspiration in the quest for equality and integration. Throughout the Gospels, the Son is obedient to the Father through the power of the Spirit, yet Father, Son, and Spirit are equal, united as one God. By the same token, Christians must learn to mirror the Trinity as they

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<sup>13</sup> Zeiss Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way," 2; for an interesting account of how gender affects our understanding of ourselves, see Susan Frank Parsons, "To Be or Not to Be: Gender and Ontology," *THJ* 45/3 (2004), 327-348.

<sup>14</sup> See Anne Patrick, "Narrative and the Social Dynamics of Virtue," *Concilium* 191 (1987), 69-80, esp. 71-74. According to Patrick, we must strive to attain an egalitarian paradigm of narrative, character and virtue. Rather than understanding power as control over persons, this paradigm operates with a sense of power driven by proper relatedness. For a similar discussion on gender and morality, see Brad J. Kallenberg, "Positioning MacIntyre within Christian Ethics," in Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg & Mark Thiessen Nation (eds.), *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, 45-81, esp. 49-51. The crucial point here is that 'morality' becomes immoral when it ignores other voices or opinions; no voice should be denied the right to speak.

seek to attain an authentic understanding of their special identity, for it is the perfect example of unity in difference.<sup>15</sup>

This acceptance of unity in difference can also assist fellow believers when they lose their way on the path of the Christian life, for it asserts that, while all are different, and may be at different stages in the life of faith, we are all one in Christ. This means that even though it is difficult to attain a unified sense of self, and to be confident that one has grasped the meaning of Christian identity, we are never alone in the quest for authentic identity; we are companions on the journey.

### **6.3 Reading Narrative: An Embodied Experience**

The idea of being companions on the journey is also an important metaphor for understanding the process of reading as a socially embodied activity. Another possible concern that may arise from the claim that the Bible is identity-constitutive is that the reading process will be interpreted as a solitary experience, that is, as an activity of the mind and memory, not of the body or of the community. Although liturgical celebrations demand that Scripture be read in public, believers often read the sacred texts of the Bible alone, which might imply that the interpretation of the self is a solitary venture, carried out in isolation from the community. Applied to the Christian *proprium* debate, this view of reading runs the risk of promoting the false

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Scott Bader-Saye, "Listening: Authority and Obedience," in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004, 164. Bader-Saye suggests that biblical authority should be understood in a Trinitarian way, i.e., by respecting difference in unity. In my view, this understanding of the Trinity may also be used to make the point that, although different, male and female are one in Christ. (Saint Paul's letter to the Romans (7.1-6) seems to add weight to the idea of being one in Christ, for it asserts that Christians are freed from the constraints of the old law to become one in Christ.) In addition, the equality among the persons of the Trinity highlights the fact that all persons are the same. By the same token, the male understanding of the unified self should not be considered as superior to the female, and vice versa.



idea that the Ricoeurian self can be whatever we want it to be. It seems also to suggest that human beings have absolute self-determination.

According to Jim Fodor, reading need not be understood in this way. For reading does not simply involve extracting meaning or content from Scripture by means of a process which ignores the role played by the body; it is a bodily activity and is therefore social and communal.<sup>16</sup> Reading is more than the movement of one's eye across a page; it is embodied. We are enmeshed in social relations and community before we learn to read at all. When we develop the capacity to read and interpret texts, especially those of the Bible, we realise that our ability to understand is already embodied in the believing community. Hence, the reading process, whether carried out alone or in liturgical settings, is unavoidably communal.

Indeed, as Fodor explains, the relationship between text and reader is similar to that of yeast and dough: 'By being read, Scriptures work themselves into the lives of the faithful just as yeast is kneaded into dough.'<sup>17</sup> This means that the interpretation of the self through the Scriptures is less about what the reader *expects* to be told about their identity and more about how we relate to the Scriptures, how we allow ourselves to be informed and transformed by them. The biblical texts do not hold meaning

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Fodor, "Reading the Scriptures: Rehearsing Identity, Practicing Character," in Hauerwas et al. (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2004, 149.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

similarly to the way in which bottles hold water. Nor do readers possess the sense of Scripture in the way a landlord owns property.<sup>18</sup>

Instead, readers relate to the Scriptures in the way a musician relates to a score, or an actor to a script, or a cartographer to a map.<sup>19</sup> Reading is not a private process but a process which is relational to its core. To view the reading process as a purely solitary action is to undermine the relational quality of reading itself and to suggest that human beings are only physically present in the communities in which they live, or that they possess absolute self-determination.

Of course, the possible criticisms of a Ricoeurian interpretation of the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate are not confined to the way in which we read the biblical texts. A more fundamental question could be asked: Why should the self, the moral life, tradition and the story of the community be understood in terms of narrative? While we might agree that our desire to know ourselves over time and to describe our past may require a narrative structure, i.e., that we tell stories about ourselves and our experience, it could be argued that this does not necessarily imply that our identity should be understood in terms of such a structure.

#### **6.4 Why Narrative?**

But there are compelling justifications for using the narrative structure as the means through which we interpret and come to understand ourselves. The first reason is

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<sup>18</sup> The interpretation of the texts of the biblical canon is often complex; it requires us to follow a complex set of rule-keeping activities so that we might eventually become attuned to its message. It is for this reason that it can be said that reading the Scriptures involves a process similar to that of a musician rehearsing his/her part in an orchestra; it requires hours of rehearsing and effort before one becomes aware of the kinds of dispositions and attitudes they seek to encourage and promote.

<sup>19</sup> Fodor, "Reading the Scriptures," 150.

probably the most straightforward of all, for it refers to the human ability to experience and perceive things in the world. We are limited as human beings, limited in terms of what we can experience and understand in life. To cope with our limitations, and with the sheer immensity of our past, we need to be selective. This requires that we classify our experiences into beginnings and continuations, resolutions, plots and sub-plots.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, we rely on others doing the same in order to understand their narrative story, as well as the complex nature of our own communities, societies and cultures. For example, parents tell their children about the day they were born because their children cannot remember it. Christian parents tell their children of the story of Christ because their children cannot yet read, and because the only way to make children feel a part of a history or an event, which they did not witness, is to tell a story about it. Or, to put it in Ricoeurian terms, narrative liberates the reader from a major obstacle to freedom: temporal distance.<sup>21</sup>

A second reason why the narrative structure is important in the search for self-understanding is because narrative increases awareness of what it means to be a human being. From a very early age children are told stories about wicked

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Crowther, "Narrative and Self-Consciousness: A Basis for Virtue-Ethics," *JVI* 36/4 (2002), 438.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* III, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 144. Ricoeur asserts that, by re-enacting the past (i.e., telling a story about it), we can identify with what once was. It is important to note that Ricoeur borrows this term from Augustine's reflections on time. For Augustine, the human experience of time in the face of the Eternal Kingdom produces a *distentio animi*, i.e., a dissonant soul or a soul which cannot access or hold on to the past, present or future all at the same time. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 22ff. Here Ricoeur explains that the narrative structure is the configuration of that which endures and remains across that which passes away. See also Brian Mahoney, "The Affective Narrative: A Grammar of Praxis," *ITQ* 54 (1988), 50. For a clear explanation of Ricoeur's reliance on Augustine's work on time, see Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 80ff.

stepmothers, wicked witches and selfish stepsisters, etc. They are also told non-fictional stories about their own identity or about the experiences of the person who is telling the story.

Understanding or following the story requires in part the capacity to achieve what Crowder terms 'emphatic identification with how other individuals perceive and feel.'<sup>22</sup> Along with learning to understand the stories of others, we gradually begin to form our own story from the stories others have told us about our past, our society and our culture. The relationship then becomes reciprocal: 'The narrative of a life involves learning from others and then going beyond this, and others learning from us and then going beyond that.'<sup>23</sup> Hence, narrative is essential to our being relational human beings in the world, for it is the *first* means by which we understand what it is to be human, to exist, to have a history and an identity.

Indeed, Ricoeur points out that if we did not have narratives, which construct durable properties of character to which we can relate, we would have no choice but to explain the self as something abstract and impersonal. We would be forced to interpret selfhood as a 'supplementary fact' of our being.<sup>24</sup> There would be no continuity between person and life-story, for identity would be described in an impersonal manner, as an empty question. An impersonal account of identity, then, is

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<sup>22</sup> Crowther, "Narrative and Self-Consciousness," 440.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," in Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur*, 1991, 193.

undesirable because it 'seems to be dependent on a technological dream in which the brain has from the start been the substitutable equivalent of the person.'<sup>25</sup>

In addition, if we did not have narratives which we could carry over and transpose into the exegesis of ourselves, the dialectic of the self would not take place; and if it did, it would be deprived of the kind of humanness we have come to expect from stories of ourselves and our past. It is for this very reason that Ricoeur's interpretation of the self is connected to stories we tell and read about ourselves and our experiences: the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts, narrative being one of them.<sup>26</sup>

What narrative interpretation brings to life is its figural nature of character by which the self can interpret him/herself and through which the self can gain access to the past. And even if one were to say, 'Identity does not matter', it is still a person who says this, who pronounces the words. The only difference between someone who says, 'I am nothing' and someone who says, 'I am X or Y' is that the former is experiencing difficulty articulating who they are. In Ricoeur's own words,

Is that not the meaning of many dramatic—not to say terrifying—experiences in respect of our own identity, that is the necessity to go through the trial of this nothingness of permanence-identity, to which nothingness would be the equivalent of the null case of the transformations dear to Lévi-Strauss. Many conversion narratives bear witness to such dark nights of personal identity. At these moments of extreme exposure, the null response, far from declaring the question empty, returns to it and preserves it as a question. What cannot be effaced is the question itself: who am I?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," 197; It is interesting to note that recent publications which discuss the role of narratives, especially "grand narratives", are putting forward the idea that even the sciences can be understood as modes of story-telling. This is true because scientists have to tell stories to convey their findings. See Stephen Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, esp. 1-13.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Dornish, "Symbolic Systems and the Interpretation of Scripture," 7ff.

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," 198.

## 6.5 Ricoeurian Theory and Contemporary Trends in Theology

Possible criticisms of Ricoeur's work are not confined solely to his use of the narrative structure to explain identity; particular questions arise from the application of Ricoeurian theory to the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate. In chapter five the role of the Magisterium was discussed, and it was suggested that the disparity between the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* approaches does not look so great if we use Ricoeur's categories of tradition. It was also suggested that both schools seem to be defending tradition, albeit from different perspectives.

Nevertheless, given that there has been so much disagreement between scholars over the specific nature of Christian morality, it is likely that some would reject the proposal that the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools can be interpreted in complementary terms.

In response to this possible criticism, it is worth mentioning James Keenan's article, "Fundamental Moral Theology at the Beginning of the New Millennium: Looking Back, Looking Forward." Here, Keenan suggests that the insuperable differences and exclusions created by the so-called autonomous ethics and an ethics of faith are now being transcended. Keenan mentions Kathryn Tanner as an example of the kind of work now being done in contemporary theological scholarship that seeks to reconcile conflicting views in theology, and move away from a contrastive style of thinking.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the work of Eric Gaziaux also bears witness to the desire to reconcile

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<sup>28</sup> James F. Keenan, S.J., "Fundamental Moral Theology at the Beginning of the New Millennium: Looking Back, Looking Forward," *TS* 65 (2004), 130.

contrasting theologies: he attempts to find a compromise between Josef Fuchs' autonomy position and Philippe Delhaye's faith-ethic stance.<sup>29</sup>

The Dutch theologian, Frans Vosman is also among those authors cited by Keenan who are attempting to minimise divisions between authors regarding the interpretation of moral autonomy, and move towards a more inclusive understanding of moral action.<sup>30</sup> Vosman argues for an understanding of autonomy, especially in the political arena, which accommodates a morality of faith and an autonomous morality.<sup>31</sup> This suggests that the general trend in theology at present is towards a more inclusive style of reflection, as opposed to an oppositional style, and to a much more relational way of understanding and of talking about theology, God and morality than was earlier the case.

In our study of the Christian *proprium* debate the use of Ricoeurian theory, especially in respect of our understanding tradition and Magisterium, assists in moving the terms of discourse towards a more inclusive and less confrontational approach. The positions of the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools were integrated so that a more fruitful interpretation of tradition and Magisterium might be provided.

In keeping with the general trend of current theological discussion, then, a Ricoeurian approach to the specificity of Christian morality debate seeks to accommodate

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<sup>29</sup> Éric Gaziaux, *Morale de la foi et moral autonome: Confrontation entre P. Delhaye et J. Fuchs*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995, esp. 352ff. Gaziaux suggests that Delhaye's account of concept of autonomy should be understood as being founded in theonomy but accomplished anthropologically. This analogy is based on the humanity of Christ, i.e., created by God for an earthly purpose.

<sup>30</sup> Keenan, "Fundamental Moral Theology," 131.

<sup>31</sup> Frans Vosman, "Tussen debat en gebed: De moraaltheologie in de openbare morele discussie," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 43 (2003), 323-345.

contrasting views rather than categorise them as opposites. It does not favour the position of one school of thought over the other but seeks to find a common ground between their respective stances, especially between that of the Autonomy school and weaker forms of the *Glaubensethik* school. In this way, Ricoeur's work provides us with an account of tradition and the Magisterium which is faithful to our Christian heritage, and responsive to the needs of the Christian living in secular society. It could be said, therefore, that a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate seeks to transcend differences, rather than maintain and encourage separation and division, to compromise rather than defend, to dialogue rather than argue.

#### **6.6 Paul Ricoeur: Philosopher or Theologian?**

Of course, in spite of its advantages, one could also object to examining the Christian *proprium* debate through the eyes of Paul Ricoeur because he is primarily a philosopher, not a theologian. Indeed, since many philosophers seem to be at an impasse concerning the problem and origin of values,<sup>32</sup> one might argue that Ricoeur's work is more aptly described as an attempt to respond to the atheist critique of religion than to the concerns of theologians regarding the specificity of Christian morality.

Nonetheless, whether considered in light of philosophy or theology, Ricoeur's work is significant. For it responds to some of the most fundamental challenges facing modern theology and philosophy, that is, the loss of meaning. As Vanhoozer puts it,

Two centuries of biblical and historical criticism have in large part silenced the Scriptures, even in the Church. Outside the Church, atheist existentialism proclaimed the loss of meaning in the world. Sartre, while acknowledging the

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<sup>32</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 279.



mystery of human freedom, declared that bereft of any meaningful context (creation), man was a “useless passion”. Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy is aimed at recovering meaning in texts and the meaningfulness of life, and in showing the two tasks are at root one.<sup>33</sup>

Ricoeur’s attempt to show how texts help us to affirm rather than despise life is no small contribution to either philosophy or theology. In terms of philosophy, Ricoeur manages to move the discipline away from the idea that human beings are autonomous and self-made towards the idea that there is ‘something other.’ His agenda is to assert that human beings are dependent upon something greater than themselves. In this way, Ricoeur’s work represents an attempt to make a space for the sacred in philosophical considerations of the human person.

In terms of theology, and the Christian *proprium* debate, Ricoeur successfully manages to place the biblical texts at the heart of the Christian search for meaning and self-understanding, without turning them into legal codes for living. In this way, he encourages us to look at the Bible as an indispensable resource for the whole of the Christian life.

Thus while one might be sceptical about any attempt to examine the specificity of Christian morality through the eyes of a philosopher, one must also be open to what it has to offer. Indeed, given that we all share a common humanity, and that we are all in search of meaning, belonging, and truth in our lives, it makes sense that one should look to other disciplines in search of new answers to old problems.

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<sup>33</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 279

### 6.7 Moral Rules and a Ricoeurian Approach to the Christian *Proprium* Debate

Other questions arising out of a Ricoeurian interpretation of the Christian *proprium* debate concern the role of moral rules. Earlier chapters suggested that Ricoeur's contribution to the debate is similar to all that of others involved in current scholarship in virtue ethics and spirituality. Character, self-knowledge and relationship are considered more important than the following of moral rules and principles.

While it is true to say that a morality of virtue is to be preferred over a morality of obedience, this should not mean that moral rules have no place in Christian morality. As Stanley Hauerwas argues, 'Virtues need principles and some kind of understanding of obligation, for they are not simply emotions but skills of perception, articulation and action.'<sup>34</sup> The same applies to stories; although stories can educate us about the virtues by giving us examples of what virtuous behaviour look like, stories need principles. We need a way of testing the validity of moral stories, otherwise we risk misinterpreting them or using them to suit our own purpose.

Yet, given that our approach to the Christian *proprium* debate has not yet mentioned the need for rules in Christian morality or in the interpretation of the Christian story, we must ask the following question: Is there a need for moral rules in a Ricoeurian interpretation of the Christian *proprium* debate?

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<sup>34</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, with Richard Bondi and David Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977, 45.

## 6.8 The Golden Rule

Yes. According to Ricoeur, one cannot simply consider the aims or goals of moral living without considering the need for rules and principles, for our vision of life may be distorted or driven by a desire for self-fulfilment. Indeed, we may misinterpret the texts of our tradition and use them in an oppressive rather than loving way. In order to avoid presenting a one-sided account of morality, Ricoeur emphasises that all visions of the Aristotelian good life, moral stories, aims and intentions must be tested against the Golden Rule: 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (Lk.6:31).<sup>35</sup>

This is the case because the Golden Rule emphasises reciprocity at all costs. It invites us to consider the 'other' in every situation. Although it is quite general in its application insofar as it does not state precisely what one should or should not do, its value should not be underrated. For Ricoeur, the power of the Golden Rule lies in its ability to question whether our intentions, actions or dispositions towards others are ones which will promote goodness rather than evil, peace rather than violence. The universal demand to 'love one's neighbour as oneself', therefore, ensures that we do not treat humanity as a *means* to an end, or impose our will and desires on the will of another.<sup>36</sup>

However, this is not to suggest that Ricoeur is in favour of adopting a situationist ethics approach to morality. For he believes that the application of the Golden Rule will vary given the circumstances of a particular situation. Indeed, he is clear that

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 170.

<sup>36</sup> Christoph Theobald, 'La règle d'or chez Paul Ricoeur,' *RSR* 83/1 (1995), 43-59.

sometimes one will have to test the Golden Rule against the intention or aim, so that 'doing the loving' thing will not become a matter of 'doing what I want' or interpreting the loving response in a purely subjective manner. Thus Ricoeur argues that rules or principles do not always have the final say; it is necessary to refer to the 'aim whenever the norm leads to impasses in practice.'<sup>37</sup>

### **6.9 The Golden Rule: A Specifically Christian Rule?**

Of course, since the Golden Rule appears in the biblical texts, one might argue that it is at this point that the Ricoeurian argument regarding specifically Christian norms breaks down. We have seen that for Ricoeur texts do not yield any specifically Christian norms or principles that cannot be known by means of reason and rationality. But his use of the biblical formulation of the Golden Rule as way of testing the goals of the virtuous life might give the impression that he interprets the Golden Rule as a specifically Christian rule.

In response to such claims, Ricoeur's offers a very carefully thought out response. He argues that the Golden Rule is universal and can be known and understood by anyone, regardless of race, religion or culture.<sup>38</sup> It is not unique to Christianity. Judaism teaches, 'What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man.' Islam teaches, 'No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.' Even Buddhists, some of whom deny the existence of any God, teach, 'Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.' Thus, some formulation of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 170.

<sup>38</sup> See Peter Kemp, "Narrative Ethics and Moral Law in Ricoeur," in John Wall, William Schweiker, and W. David Hall (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 42.

Golden Rule or some principle of respect towards others is common to most societies and religions.

In spite of its universality, however, Ricoeur maintains that the Golden Rule is specific to the narrative traditions within which it appears. This explains why the quotations used above are different; different narrative traditions use different formulations of the same principle. Thus Ricoeur interprets the specificity of the Golden Rule in terms of its narrative context rather than its material content. In this way, he avoids suggesting that the biblical Golden Rule may be considered as a specifically Christian rule.

#### **6.10 Aristotle or Aquinas? Greek or Christian Virtue?**

Another possible objection to using Ricoeur's work as a way of mediating between the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools has to do with his understanding of virtue. As pointed out earlier in this study, Ricoeur's contribution to the Christian *proprium* debate is similar to all that is involved in the current return to virtue ethics advocated by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre.

Similarly to Hauerwas and MacIntyre, Ricoeur believes that stories give coherence to our lives and help us to gain the necessary tools for understating the virtues. All three are at one in the belief that stories make virtuous actions intelligible by giving us paradigmatic examples of what virtuous action looks like. Moreover, all three believe that the motivation for seeking what best befits human subjects does not come from the following of moral rules but from cultivating an internal desire to do the good.

The enthusiasm among some over the current return to virtue, however, is matched among others by a strong disquiet. While, as Stanley Hauerwas explains, 'This in some cases signals nothing else but battles for turf as the hegemony of liberalism is challenged, it is not a false alarm. It is quite right to ask what sort of politics matches or is entailed by the so-called return to virtue ethics.'<sup>39</sup>

This concern stems from the fact that most contemporary accounts of virtue ethics rely on the Greek understanding of virtue, which is closely associated with war and courage in battle (*arête*). The virtuous man is a warrior who seeks to outshine his adversaries.<sup>40</sup> The intrinsic reward in this kind of understanding of virtue lies in the honour one receives from a fellow soldier and from one's community. Receiving is more important than giving, and being master is preferred over being slave.

Moreover, as MacIntyre explains, in Greek society only the Athenian gentlemen could aspire to attain certain virtues: 'Certain virtues are only available to those of great riches and of high social status; there are virtues which are unavailable to the poor man, even if he is a free man.'<sup>41</sup> Thus the social role one occupied was often a prerequisite for possessing certain character traits, which makes the possibility of incorporating a Greek understanding of virtue ethics into a Christian context all the more questionable.

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<sup>39</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London: Duckworth, 1985, 169-174; Raymond J. Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002, 62ff; and for an interesting treatment of the Greek interpretation of virtue viewed through the lens of Christianity, see Rosemary Radford-Reuther, "Courage as a Christian Virtue," *CC* (Spring 1983), 8-16.

<sup>41</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 170.

According to Hauerwas and Pinches, however, 'Greek accounts of the virtues are there to be *used* by Christians, not *built* upon.'<sup>42</sup> 'To use' requires that one apply a thing within a framework significantly other than the one in which it originally appeared, which is precisely what Christianity requires, since it is based on the story of Christ, that is, the God of love made flesh. As rooted in the story of Christ, Christian virtue cannot but be teleologically ordered to peace, just as Greek virtue cannot but be ordered to war.<sup>43</sup> Its essence is to direct us towards mutuality, and to love as God loves. Considered as a response to the love God has shown to humanity, Christian virtues are a response of love and peace.

This call to peace may be found in the Pentateuch, where we find the commandment to which Jesus so frequently referred: 'You will not harbour hatred for your brother. You will reprove your fellow country men firmly and thus avoid burdening yourself with sin. You will not exact vengeance on, or bear any sort of grudge against, the members of your race, but will love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19: 17-18). Hence, although Christian virtue shares certain characteristics with the Greek understanding of possessing an internal desire to do good, it need not be understood in terms of self-satisfying aims and objectives; its essence is to direct us towards relationship with God and with one another. 'Characterized as Christian charity, the relation this mutuality involves is one in which love produces love, limitlessly, for it has its end in God, who is boundless love. In the end, then, Christian virtue is not so much an initiated action but a response to a love relation with God in Christ.'<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues*, 68.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

But can the same be said about Ricoeur's understanding of the virtues as learned through stories? That Aristotle inspires his work is clear. He frequently refers to Aristotle's 'lessons of poetry' as a way of explaining how stories *teach* us something about virtue by equating it with happiness.<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur's use of the word *phronesis* is also taken from Aristotle's work, which shows that the thrust of a Ricoeurian interpretation of virtue ethics is an essentially Greek one.

In spite of its Aristotelian roots, however, it must be remembered that Ricoeur believes texts are both 'open' and 'closed' entities: closed to preserve the meaning of the text, open to allow the meaning of the text to be critically interpreted.<sup>46</sup> In this way, the act of reading not only places the text in its original context but recontextualises its meaning if the previous interpretation is no longer an acceptable one.<sup>47</sup>

This means that although Ricoeur suggests that reading texts can help to educate us about the virtues—because texts provide us with examples of what virtuous behaviour looks like—he does not encourage a naïve reading of the texts. His work encourages us to be critical of what texts suggest to us about virtue. The advantage of such an approach is that what is valuable in texts may be built upon and what is oppressive or detrimental may be scrutinised and/or recontextualised. In spite of its Aristotelian roots, therefore, a Ricoeurian understanding of virtue (as learned through texts) is unlikely to promote a culture of war and individualism, since it invites us to

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 22-23.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991, 155.

<sup>47</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutic Function of Distanciation," *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973), 137.



constantly question and revise the texts of our tradition so that it continues to answer to who we are.

### 6.11 True Stories

Another possible criticism of a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate concerns his interpretation of the biblical texts. Ricoeur frequently refers to the biblical texts as offering possible ways of living.<sup>48</sup> By this he means that texts open up possible worlds for the reader, in which the reader can imaginatively ‘try out various proposals for living’.<sup>49</sup> This is why Ricoeur believes that narrative should be considered as an ‘immense laboratory for thought experiments.’<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, his understanding of biblical metaphor is also based on the assumption that the power of the biblical texts lies in their ability to engage the reader’s imagination, and to present him/her with new ways of imagining God and the Kingdom. Metaphors bring unrelated objects together in order to present readers with a broader or renewed vision of the world.<sup>51</sup> Thus Ricoeur’s point is that the biblical texts refer to a world which is appropriated imaginatively by the reader.

Fiction [he argues] has the power to ‘remake’ reality and, within the framework of narrative fiction in particular, to remake real praxis to the extent that the text intentionally aims at a horizon of new reality which we may call a world. It is this world of the text which intervenes in the world of action in

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<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 26.

<sup>49</sup> See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 159.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer and Mark I. Wallace, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 8.

order to give it a new configuration or, as we might say, in order to refigure it.<sup>52</sup>

However, this raises questions about whether Ricoeur intends the biblical texts and indeed faith, insofar as it involves a belief in the story of Jesus, to be understood in an imaginary or fictive way. Where does the real or the historical come into play? Given that the story of Christianity is based on a *real* event, not an imaginary one, Ricoeur's interpretation of the biblical texts might be criticised because of its lack of consideration for the historical reality of the story of Jesus.

Donald MacKinnon summarises the issue in a useful way. He argues that

[w]e are fudging if we allow ourselves to suppose that we do not recognize a distinction between the actual and the non-actual, between the eruption of Vesuvius and the murder of Caesar on the one side, and the birth of Venus from the foam, and the exploits of St. George with his dragon, on the other; and it is a matter of crucial importance for Christian belief that the resurrection of Jesus belongs with the former, and not with the latter.<sup>53</sup>

Faith for MacKinnon is a new dimension of experience, and what makes this new experience possible is not imaginary ways of living but real events.<sup>54</sup> MacKinnon also argues that the possibility of redemption that Jesus procured cannot belong to the world of ideas; it must belong to reality. For the Christ event was an act of flesh and blood.

But this sharp dichotomy between history and fiction in Ricoeur's opinion is as misguided as that between the real and the imaginary. For it is Ricoeur's belief that

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," in Alan Montefiore (ed.), *Philosophy in France Today*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 185; see also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Philosophical Antecedents to Ricoeur's Time and Narrative," in Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur*, 1991, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Donald MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1968, 77.

<sup>54</sup> Donald MacKinnon, "Introduction," *Newman's University Semons*, London: SPCK, 1970, 17-18.

both history and fiction 'invent' and 'discover'. In fact, he argues that it is only by imaginatively appropriating real events in history that we can enter into the real significance of the event.<sup>55</sup> But what does this mean?

In Ricoeur's view, there is a certain amount of fiction contained in history. Likewise, there is a certain amount of history contained in fiction. This means that while history is thought to communicate facts to us and to describe events in chronological terms, it also includes some fictive elements. Consider the historian trying to construct a picture of the past from various documents or traces of the events. He/she is attempting to write one coherent story from the evidence available. Nevertheless, since the evidence is incomplete, the historian must begin to tell stories about the event and imagine possible ways of giving the event a coherent form. This means that there is a fictive experience at play before the writing of history takes place.

If we consider all that is involved in writing works of fiction, we begin to see what Ricoeur means when he argues that history is included in fiction. Writing fiction means that we are not bound by the constraints of time or logic. Fiction is a work of the imagination. Nonetheless, fictional works depend on history and real events in order to be credible and coherent. It is not unusual, for instance, to find references to time and allusions to real events in fictional novels, which indicate that fiction needs history. Otherwise it becomes useless and incomprehensible. Thus one can agree with Ricoeur that there is a certain amount of fiction contained in history and vice versa.

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<sup>55</sup> See Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 11-12.

Gerard Loughlin relates Ricoeur's distinction between history and fiction more closely to the biblical texts. In fact, Loughlin argues that Ricoeur is correct to assert that they contain both fictive and historical elements.

The Gospel of Luke repeatedly seeks to locate itself in historical time, in the time of ruling successions: "In the days of King Herod of Judea..."; (Luke 1.5) "Now at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census..."; (Luke 2.1) "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign...". (Luke 3.1). Are these examples of referring or of mentioning, of history or of fiction? The Gospel of Matthew also seeks historical location, telling us that Jesus was born "during the reign of King Herod". (Math. 2.1) But it opens with a "genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham", (Math. 1.1) which is not biological, unless we assume Joseph to be the biological father of Jesus, but ancestral and apparently mythical. This seems to indicate that the Gospel is both history and fiction.<sup>56</sup>

That the Bible includes certain fictive elements, then, is clear. These fictive elements, however, do not tend to undermine the historical reality of Jesus. Instead, they serve to make the person of Jesus more real because they encourage us to ask more questions, to enter into the story, and to ponder its significance, its wonder. Without imaginative elements the biblical texts would be lifeless and prosaic. Combined with the imaginative power of symbols and myths, however, the Bible becomes intriguing—even mysterious.

But of course it speaks also to the intellect and rational mind. Acknowledging the Bible's power to speak to the intellect as well as to the imagination, then, does not serve to undermine or distort the reality of Jesus. Rather, it makes the truth of Jesus more credible, since it can account for the fact that Kingdom is the 'already' and the

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<sup>56</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 148-149.

'not-yet'.<sup>57</sup> It is what happened (history) and what is yet to come, which we can only imagine (imagination), since only God knows the whole story.

Thus we can conclude that Ricoeur's insistence upon the imaginative aspects of the biblical texts and the faith experience of the Christian community is not intended to deny the historical reality of Jesus, but to bring us more deeply into the mystery of revelation and God's eternal promise of salvation.

### **6.12 Ricoeur and Sectarianism**

Perhaps the most important concern arising out of a Ricoeurian approach to the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy debate is that it may be sectarian. This is not only the case because it shares certain characteristics with Stanley Hauerwas' work on Christian ethics and virtue, sometimes said to be sectarian, but also because it emphasises the need to belong to an historical community which provides a master narrative through which we interpret our lives and our actions. The charge of sectarianism is made in as much as this argument seems to imply that there is certain politics intended for those of the Church which is separate from the world and from non-Christians.

Similarly to MacIntyre and Hauerwas, Ricoeur belongs to a school of thinkers who deny the Enlightenment claim that meaning can be mediated to us directly. Instead, Ricoeur argues that society cannot be organised without a narrative that gives it

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<sup>57</sup> See Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, West Broadway, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers 1997, 143-144. Frei suggests that the interpretation of Christ's identity, and of those who seek to follow and understand it, is a dilemma. This is true because the Jesus story is an already and not-yet embodied identity. But the advantage of such an approach, however, is that readers are prevented from formulating prior judgements about the identity of Christ. As has been suggested here, the uncertainty of the Gospels shows that, although it has already been established, the Kingdom has yet to come.

meaning. Nor can one become virtuous without referring in some way to all that has been passed on to us by tradition. Ricoeur resists the impulse to free all peoples from the chains their own historical particularity in name of freedom. Absolute freedom, therefore, is not an option in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Truth for Ricoeur is not something which is found independent of any particular conception of the 'good life'.

In recent years, however, there has been much debate about the legitimacy of such claims. They have been deemed sectarian in the sense indicated above. It is also believed that such perspectives make dialogue with Christians difficult, and encourage them to withdraw from discussions concerning social justice and the politics of the community.

Stanley Hauerwas is in the foreground in this respect.<sup>58</sup> Similarly to MacIntyre, Hauerwas believes that theology, in its attempt to remain intelligible within modern culture, has actually emptied itself of its distinctive theological content, as modern intellectual culture is deeply antagonistic to its presuppositions.<sup>59</sup> Hauerwas argues that those theologians who attempted to recast their moral sensibilities in philosophical (i.e., neutral) terms have failed, since such efforts only serve to disguise theology as philosophy. Citing the works of James Gustafson, Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr, Hauerwas maintains that these works are attempts to re-shape Christian ethics so that it will become acceptable to the modern, 'secular' world.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See Michael J. Quirk, "Beyond Sectarianism?" *TT* 44/1 (1987), 78-86.

<sup>59</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969; Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 12ff.

<sup>60</sup> For a clear outline of Hauerwas' position, see Quirk, "Beyond Sectarianism?" 80.

Alternatively, Hauerwas appeals to theologians to stop trying to square their distinctively Christian moral viewpoint with that of secular culture, and proclaim it as a true alternative.

Thus Hauerwas argues that the Church must not feel pressurised to develop a natural law morality, but should develop its internal resources and beliefs about the good to provide society with alternatives that are not part of the current social and political agenda.<sup>61</sup> Of course there is much debate as to what these alternative are, and many have criticised Hauerwas for suggesting that the Church can provide answers to all political and social issues of contemporary society. For instance, Hauerwas' statement that 'the church serves the world by giving the world the means to see itself truthfully'<sup>62</sup> has caused much tension between theologians, for it seems to imply that the Church is in some way more truthful than any other institution.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, for the Church to fulfil the fundamental role of witness to the world, Hauerwas explains that 'a certain kind of people is required to sustain it as an institution across time'—people of virtue. For him, this means 'the virtues necessary for remembering and telling the story of a crucified saviour,' especially patience and hope. As he puts it, 'the church must learn time and time again that its task is not to *make* the world the Kingdom, but to be faithful to the Kingdom by showing to the world what it means to be a community of peace. Thus we are required to be patient

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<sup>61</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Will the Real Sectarian Stand Up?" *TT* 44/1 (1987), 89.

<sup>62</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983, 101-2.

<sup>63</sup> See Wilson D. Miscamble, "Sectarian Passivism?" *TT* 44/1 (1987), 71ff.

and never lose hope.’<sup>64</sup> In doing this, Hauerwas believes the Church should be like the poor and powerless and to live totally within the control of others.<sup>65</sup> He also argues that Christian social ethics is not to be written from the point of view of those in power, but by those who are subject to such people.

In spite of the strong ecclesial claims in Hauerwas’ work, however, it is difficult to see how the Church is to deal with and relate to the world. In this respect, his argument remains, as he admits, very abstract.<sup>66</sup> We are not given precise details as to how the Church that embodies the narrative of God revealed in the stories of Israel and Jesus is to conduct itself in society. Is it to ignore social policies that go against its central *telos*? Or should it expect others to adopt its claim to truth because it is based on the story of Jesus? Moreover, does belief in the story of Jesus mean that Christians are excluded from public discussions on social ethics because their language is incomprehensible to non-religious persons?

That Hauerwas’ work is provocative is clear. His attempt to situate the story of Jesus Christ at the heart of Christian social ethics is significant. Indeed, it is almost impossible not to be moved by his call for us to live out a truly Christian life in a divided world and help develop the Kingdom on earth. Nonetheless, his work also raises serious questions regarding the possibility of inter-religious dialogue regarding issues of social justice and public policy. Is the Church the sole model for contemporary society, and can the non-religious person expect to understand the values of its teachings by using the natural law?

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<sup>64</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 103.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-115ff.



Some scholars cannot but label Hauerwas as a sectarian—a label which he rejects<sup>67</sup>—because he sees the mission of the Church as one which *stands apart* from society, or which stands ‘against’ culture.<sup>68</sup> Others argue that, in claiming that the Christian story gives Christian a distinctive viewpoint, Hauerwas excludes the role of Christians in secular politics and in the world.<sup>69</sup> The fundamental question then is whether one can contribute to social and political discourse while remaining faithful to the narratives that inform and shape our lives.

In essence, this is what is, in common parlance, thought to be at issue when one speaks of sectarianism. According to Michael Quirk, “Sectarianism”, in its usual sense, entails the impossibility of any rational dialogue with those outside the “sect”, on the grounds that their epistemically and morally central convictions are corrupt and diametrically opposed to those of “insiders.” Trying to forge a consensus, then, would not only be difficult but possibly dangerous, since arguing a point on ‘their’ terms might undermine ‘ours.’<sup>70</sup> Hence there are two options available to sectarians: a) they can either proclaim their truths and beliefs to the world and risk being ignored, or b) they can retreat from public discussion altogether, and limit their audience to those who share the same views. Often compared to the theology of Karl Barth, this kind of sectarianism interprets the quest for truth as an ‘in-house’ affair; it is,

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Hauerwas, “Will the Real Sectarian Stand Up?” 90ff.

<sup>68</sup> Miscamble, “Sectarian Passivism?” 73.

<sup>69</sup> See Quirk, “Beyond Sectarianism?” 79.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

therefore, marginal, exclusive and, perhaps worst of all, lacking in any sort of robust rationality.<sup>71</sup>

Of course our intention here is not to determine whether or not Stanley Hauerwas is a sectarian.<sup>72</sup> Rather, it is to determine whether a Ricoeurian interpretation of the Christian *proprium* debate, with all that it shares in common with Hauerwas's views, presents us with a sectarian view of the Church and the claim to truth. The question may be put as follows: given his instance on the need to belong a tradition that provides narratives and practices which promote virtuous behaviour and assist in the quest for self-understanding is Ricoeur's contribution to the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate sectarian? Put more generally, how can one claim to belong to a tradition ('of presumed truth') and still engage with the world on issues of justice, equality, poverty, etc? It may be useful to begin by asking whether the word 'sectarian' includes the idea of 'belonging to' rather than 'opposition to'. Wayne Meeks' understanding of the word 'sect' is useful in this regard.

### **6.13 Christianity: A Messianic Sect in Israel**

When we use the term 'sect', according to Meeks, we must recognise that we are using the term in an extended sense.<sup>73</sup> Included in our understanding of the expression 'Christian sect' is the 'sect of Judaism'. Christianity did not simply develop by itself, independent from the cultures and religions that preceded it. The

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians," in *Against Self-Images of the Age*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978, esp. 15-16.

<sup>72</sup> For an interesting discussion on Hauerwas and sectarianism, see Nigel Biggar, "Is Stanley Hauerwas Sectarian?" in Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (eds.), *Faithfulness and Fortitude: Conversations with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000, 141-160.

<sup>73</sup> Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, London: SPCK, 1986, 98.

Christian movement understood itself in terms of the great traditions in which and from which it developed—both negatively and positively.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, it was considered ‘sectarian’ because its identity consisted in adopting beliefs, practices and patterns of behaviour that were not shared by other groups of Jews. It was those beliefs and behaviour patterns that determined who the Christians were.<sup>75</sup>

Similar to other identifiable sects, such as the Essenes and the Pharisees, members of the Jesus movement adopted many practices and beliefs from the already-existing traditions, most notably Judaism. Yet, they frequently interpreted and responded to the tradition from which they emerged in deviant ways. As Meeks tells us, ‘[the Christian sect] drew the boundaries of the sacred community differently and more narrowly than did the established leaders in Jerusalem.’<sup>76</sup>

Thus we may speak of a ‘sectarian identity’. Very soon after the death of Jesus, his followers took a major step in shaping the Christian community so that its unique identity became more obvious. Ritual baptism, for instance, was used to initiate members into the sect. The ritual of the Lord’s Supper was also a distinctive practice by which Christians defined who they were and worshipped the God of Jesus Christ. Reenacting the Last supper represented a way of reminding the Christian sect of their identity and of relating it more closely with the identity of one person more than any other Jewish sect had ever done before. In this last respect, Christians were ‘messianic’ in a special sense.

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<sup>74</sup> Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, 98.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 99.

All of this points to the fact that applying the word sectarian to the Christian community need not instantly carry negative connotations. This is the case because the term 'sect' carries with it the sense of a unique identity. Insofar as Christians share in the belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and take revelation as their starting point for living, *Christianity is a sect*.

However, Meeks' view on Christianity as a 'sect of Judaism' is also useful in a second way. For it draws attention to the fact that Christianity is not something which developed from a vacuum in opposition to the world. Meeks explains that it developed from the Judaic tradition, and that many Christians did not see themselves as leaving Judaism. This suggests that there lies a certain ecumenism at the heart of the Christian identity.<sup>77</sup> It exists 'in relation to' that which precedes it and that which surrounds it.

Hence, contemporary discussions on 'sectarianism' would do well to note that Christianity is not something which developed over and against the world. Its distinctiveness lies in its particular story and in the particular way in which it interprets itself in light of the story of Jesus Christ. Asserting its particularity in terms of story does not, and should not, immediately suggest that Christians cannot dialogue with the rest of the world about the content of morality, issues of social justice,

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<sup>77</sup> For an interesting discussion of Christianity as an ecumenical movement, see Frederick Bird, "Early Christianity as an Unorganized Ecumenical Religious Movement," in Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Dumaine and Paul-André Turcotte (eds.), *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York & Oxford: A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, 225-246. Bird offers three reasons as to why Christianity may be considered as ecumenical. The first is due to the fact that Christianity was constituted by varied and distinctly different kinds of associations, between which existed at times various disputes, disagreements, and rivalries. Second, this movement from its early stages sought adherents widely, from people shaped by multiple cultural and ethnic traditions. And third, Bird maintains that by referring to the early Christian community as an 'ecumenical community', one is acknowledging the many ways in which the members of the Christian sect expressed their interrelatedness. See esp. 224-225.

inequality, public policy, and so forth. It has been doing all of these things since it began. To quote Meeks: “If therefore we are looking for some ‘pure’ Christian values and beliefs unmixed with the surrounding culture, we are on a fool’s errand.”<sup>78</sup>

Nor should the belief in a particular story imply that Christians should forget who they are when they are called to contribute to dialogue with other religious traditions or with the secular world. For if we do not know ourselves, how can we know others or expect to find ways of living that will secure the conditions necessary for human flourishing?

Having sketched what is meant by sectarianism and related it more closely to the idea of a specific identity, we must turn now to the functioning of Ricoeur’s interpretive theory in the context of the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate and determine whether it encourages sectarianism as it is understood in common parlance. That is, as something which exists over and against the world and which makes it impossible for Christians to dialogue with the rest of the world regarding morally significant issues.

#### **6.14 Dialogue with Others as a Critique of Religion**

There are several reasons as to why a Ricoeurian approach to the specificity of Christian morality debate does not entice us to view Christians as superior to others in terms of their moral education or to exclude them from contemporary discussions in society. Recall what was said in chapter five of our discussion. It was argued that, although one may belong to a particular tradition and use its story as a master story, our understanding of ourselves and of our tradition (sedimentation) must always be

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<sup>78</sup> Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, 97.

open to critique and revision (innovation). This means that, whether one is Christian or not, what constitutes *all* traditions involves a hermeneutic between that which we have inherited and that which we do not yet know.

This explains why the natural law is so important in a Ricoeurian interpretation of Christian ethics, since it can provide Christians with the necessary resources to ensure that their tradition remains capable of revising itself in light of new experiences or, indeed, in light of criticisms made by other religions or atheists. It is clear from Ricoeur's work that he sees value in Christians considering the views of others: these views can serve as a critique of religion, thereby inviting Christians to reinterpret their views in light of contemporary experience.

According to Ricoeur, interaction between Christians, atheists and non-religious persons can help to strip away the masks which religion can create.<sup>79</sup> For instance, it can encourage Christians not to idolise Christ, or indeed themselves, when faced with questions from other traditions or from society in general. Ricoeur also argues that when God is no longer understood as an immutable idol, superior to all others, his image may be recovered. This renewed image can help to remind Christians that God is love, not superiority or dominance. In this way, Christians will be invited to reassess their own identities in light of this loving image and be open to the criticisms of their tradition which may come out of inter-religious or inter-political discussions.

But this is not to say that Ricoeur is proposing that Christians should only accept criticism when engaging in such dialogue. When discussing the role of Christians in

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<sup>79</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Don Ihde (ed.), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 442.

creating a new Europe, for example, he is clear that Christians may also criticise other traditions in light of what they believe to be true and just. For this will provide the necessary external critique needed to ensure that other religious traditions or atheists do not create a culture of superiority in society.<sup>80</sup>

In fact, in his writings about the ethos of the European communities Ricoeur makes some of his most compelling comments about the role of religion in society and in the formation of a just society. It is worth mentioning his central points here because they will serve as a model through which we may gain a clearer picture as to how Ricoeur views the role of Christians in society. This will also serve us for the purpose of showing that his position is not sectarian in any way.

### **6.15 Christians in Europe and the World**

Ricoeur's interest in constructing an ethos for Europe stems from the unprecedented problem of how to get beyond the form of the nation-state, with its particular identity, without repeating its well-known structures at a higher lever of 'supranationality'. Put more simply, Ricoeur is interested in examining how the individual identities of states can be guaranteed without hindering the common tasks of the larger society, that is, Europe. In his view, Europe cannot be fashioned after any one of its nation states, for to do so would be to undermine and estrange others from contributing in political life.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> For an excellent account of Ricoeur's understanding of religions in society, see Alain Thomasset, *Paul Ricoeur: une poétique de la morale*, Leuven: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 1996, 600-606.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, London: Sage Publications, 1996, 3.

As usual, Ricoeur's project is not to determine whether national identity is more important than integration in the complex European community. Rather, he attempts to mediate between these two respective points of view. Both historical difference and the right to universality are of equal importance in Ricoeur's view for the construction of a European community, where the particular identities of all are protected in the common search for integration and the creation of just institutions.<sup>82</sup>

Combining 'identity' and 'alterity', then, are at the heart of the matter. What we most desperately need, according to Ricoeur, are models of integration between these two poles. His own approach comprises three models: a) the model of translation; b) the model of the exchange of memories; and c) the model of forgiveness.

#### ***6.15.1 The Model of Translation***

Ricoeur's first model, translation, refers to the need for bilingual translators in Europe so that the language of one nation state may be translated into that of the others. The need for translation is also indicative of Ricoeur's position regarding the integration of individual identities in a larger community. For he does not suggest that one language should be taken as *the* language of Europe, but highlights the need for translation so that the particular identity of all countries, which is expressed in their language, is protected.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Ricoeur also argues that, without adequate

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<sup>82</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Quel éthos nouveau pour l'Europe?" in Peter Koslowski (ed.), *Imaginer l'Europe: Le marché intérieur européen, tâche culturelle et économique*, Paris: Cerf, 1992, 107-116.

<sup>83</sup> Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," 4; for an interesting discussion on the necessity of translation in a pluralistic world, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth, 1988, esp. 370ff.



translation, countries will undoubtedly retreat from discussions about Europe out of a fear that their own linguistic and cultural tradition will be lost.<sup>84</sup>

But when Ricoeur speaks of the need for translation, he is not simply referring to the linguistic task of literally translating one language into another. He is also making reference to the cultural, spiritual and moral aspects of a given country or tradition. Thus he speaks of the need for cultural bilingualists capable of 'attending to this process of transference to the mental (symbolic) universe of the other culture, having taken account of its customs, fundamental beliefs and deepest convictions; in short, the totality of its significant features.'<sup>85</sup>

#### ***6.15.2 The Model of the Exchange of Memories***

Linked to the idea that there can be no integration between countries without translation is Ricoeur's second model of integration: the exchange of memories. Owing to the fact that translation is understood in the broad sense of transferring both cultural and linguistic meanings from one language to another, Ricoeur believes it is necessary to extend again the idea of translation to include the narrative history, customs, rituals, beliefs, norms and values of a particular culture. This means that, in the act of translating, one must be sensitive towards the particular *story* of a given culture. Ricoeur counsels that translators must exercise sympathy towards the 'other culture', even if this is only possible in imaginative terms.<sup>86</sup> There is a responsibility, therefore, to respect the narratives of other cultures and to be careful not to misinterpret or undermine their meaning when translated into another language.

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<sup>84</sup> Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," 4.

<sup>85</sup> Ricoeur, "Quel éthos nouveau pour l'Europe?" trans. Mine, 108.

<sup>86</sup> Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," 6.

Yet this is not to say that Ricoeur believes that translating the story of one tradition involves translating illegitimate prejudices or unhealthy biases, for the identity of any community, he notes, is not immutable but open to revision. Included in the act of translation or in the act of interpreting another tradition is the idea that the stories of other communities may be recounted differently. A plural reading is often necessary so that countries are protected from presenting an authoritarian or false view of their founding events. Take Germany, for instance: there is little agreement among German historians regarding the significance of the criminal episodes of World War II and, indeed, of the Holocaust. In this case, a plural reading, or translation, of events carried out by another tradition can help to guard against the commemoration of an immoral event.

Thus being a part of Europe and interacting with other communities can lead to a healthy revision of the 'founding events' upon which countries build their identities. This interaction is, of course, mutual. It is not simply a case of 'us' criticising 'them'. There is no threat of unilateral domination in Ricoeur's understanding of the wider community; instead, he proposes a mutual dialectic between countries, which can help countries to avoid being blinded about their identity and the significance of certain historical events. For Ricoeur, no tradition can survive if it fails to revise its beliefs and stories in light of contemporary praxis.<sup>87</sup>

Nor can any tradition survive if society keeps reminding it of the evil it has committed in the past. Events such as the Holocaust, for instance, should be remembered (so that they do not recur), but they should not be used as a way of oppressing countries or

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<sup>87</sup> See Thomasset, *Paul Ricoeur*, 604.

keeping them in an inferior position. This brings us to Ricoeur's third model of integration: forgiveness.

### ***6.15.3 The Model of Forgiveness***

This model of tradition is connected to the tendency to commemorate and glory in the wounds inflicted on one country by another. Ricoeur advises that integration will not be possible as long as particular communities continue to commemorate events which signify profound suffering for others. If one country has been at the mercy of another in history, communication becomes almost impossible. Thus Ricoeur argues that forgiveness for the 'debts of the past' is absolutely necessary for the creation of a peaceful and loving Europe.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should forget the suffering of others. For other countries can learn from the narratives of suffering experienced by their neighbours and take the necessary corrective steps to ensure that similar events are not re-enacted in their community. However, without a move towards forgiveness and reconciliation, Ricoeur believes that the communal goals of the European community will not be achieved.<sup>88</sup>

The model of forgiveness goes beyond the logic of politics and brings us into the religious sphere. This is where Ricoeur believes that religions can assist in the creation of a peaceful and just society. The emphasis on love of enemies, reciprocity and forgiveness, which is central to Christian belief, can provide the necessary resources for sustaining a peaceful community.

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<sup>88</sup> Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," 12.

Ricoeur believes that the Christian manner of approaching the problems discussed here would begin with forgiveness as the dominant theme.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, Ricoeur also notes that, in order to be heard, the Christian tradition must abandon the tendency to dominate or control the political sphere or to take advantage of the invitation to public life in order to increase its authority. Christians must adopt a model of fraternity so that a genuine inter-denominational and cross-cultural exchange will be possible. Thus he writes:

...Christian communities also pay a price for being heard. This price is two fold: they must, on the one hand, thoroughly pursue the course of relinquishing power...[in favour of] the horizontal relation of wishing to live together. [The ecclesia must assert] itself as a place of mutual aid with a view to salvation...This leads us to say—and it is the second price to pay [sic] by the Christian communities—that the primary context in which the model of forgiveness is designed to be put to the test is that of interdenominational exchanges. It is primarily with regard to each other that the Christian communities must exercise mutual forgiveness in order to ‘shatter the debt’ inherited from a long history of persecution, inquisition, repression, acts of violence which were perpetrated by some communities by other or by all of the communities against non-Christians and non-believers. The new evangelisation of Europe is a project which carries this twofold price.<sup>90</sup>

That Ricoeur’s vision of Christianity is not sectarian is clear. He interprets the Christian’s role in society as an important one, but suggests that Christians must be willing to abandon the quest for superiority and dominance. Failing this will make genuine dialogue with other communities impossible. From what has been said above it is also clear that, although Ricoeur is not partisan to the Christian religion, he presents us with an account of society that respects the particularity of communities in the ongoing search for integration on inter-religious, inter-denominational and international levels.

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<sup>89</sup> Ricoeur, “Quel éthos nouveau pour l’Europe?” 115.

<sup>90</sup> Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe,” 13.

In this respect, his theory of interpretation is useful in the context of the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate, for it can account for the need to dialogue with the rest of the world regarding issues of social justice, equality and public policy without undermining the specific identity of each community, religious or otherwise. Far from presenting us with a sectarian view of the Christian community, then, Ricoeur presents us with a compelling model that seems to transcend disagreements concerning 'alterity' and 'identity'. For Christians, this means that they can be present in society as Christians and contribute to the human search for justice, equality and love without being forced to abandon the narrative that continues to shape their lives.

## CONCLUSION

One of the most difficult things to do with any piece of work is to finish it. As the work progresses it raises new question and new perspectives. In this respect, no treatment of a given topic is every truly complete. Nonetheless, we must attempt to bring together the ideas which have been put forward throughout this study in the hope that they will help to show how Paul Ricoeur's anthropological philosophy can contribute to the Christian *proprium* debate.

Ricoeur's insistence on the power of narrative to act as a memory of the past is perhaps the most important way in which his work can help proponents of the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy debate to move beyond the current impasse. For it invites us to reconsider the role of the Bible in Christian morality and to place it in what is perhaps the most important role of all, that of identity. This means that the primary role of the Bible is to answer the question 'Who am I?' rather than merely 'What am I to do?'

Introducing Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory of interpretation into the Christian *proprium* debate moves discussions about the role of the Bible in Christian morality away from acts, norms and principles, to emphasise the human person and his/her

need to understand their master story. For Christians, this master story is the story of Jesus Christ. The Bible acts a memory for the believing community. Reading the biblical stories, in public or in private, is important for the faith community, since it is the *only* way they can access their story—a story which they did not witness but in which they believe, in faith.

Moreover, Ricoeur's work affirms that without some minimal remembrance of one's origins or of the story in which they are entangled, Christians would find it almost impossible either to remember or remain faithful to the promises made in the Covenant. In this way, Ricoeur's work affirms that the Bible is an essential resource for the Christian community, for its future is based on the promises made in the past. And if these promises were not recorded (through narrative), the Christian community would lose its direction and its sense of identity.

Of course, none of this is to say that, although it can move the Christian *proprium* debate away from the search for norms and principles, Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory undermines the role of the Bible in the moral lives of believers. In fact, the opposite is the case. It is Ricoeur's belief that every society needs stories and ethical tales that recount episodes of good and evil to which they can relate when making moral decisions. His writings invite us to reconsider the value of the ethical stories contained in the Bible. We are asked to interpret them as 'proposals for living', as 'possible ways of behaving in the world'.

Moreover, Ricoeur's interpretation of ethical narrative helps us to move away from the idea that Bible should tell how to live by giving us specific rules and principles.

Instead, Ricoeur offers us an imaginative alternative. His work suggests that the ethical stories contained in the Bible are useful insofar as they give us examples of what virtuous behaviour looks like. Following the development of the characters in stories allows believers to become familiar with the kind of character traits necessary for authentic moral growth and maturity. More importantly, these stories allow us to articulate and recognise the virtues, which would be all but incomprehensible without stories that explain their meaning.

The similarities between a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate and current trends in virtue ethics seem to confirm this view. The works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas show strong links with a Ricoeurian interpretation of the Bible. These scholars are united in the belief that we cannot know what the good life requires if it were not gathered together in some way. Although each stresses a different function of narrative in the pursuit of goodness, the work of all three is marked by the desire to transcend former preoccupation with acts and principles. This makes the case for moving the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate in a similar direction all the more promising.

But the advantages of adopting a Ricoeurian interpretation of the Bible do not stop here. The move away from the search for norms and principles to emphasise the role of the Bible in the formation of character and identity means that Christian ethics is offered more resources than before. Virtue ethics not only provide a space where biblical scholars and moralists can dialogue, but it opens up the possibility of putting morality and spirituality (which includes biblical spirituality) back together.



Ricoeur's understanding of revelation as the symbolic disclosure of a loving God who invites us to union with him makes it possible to affirm the affective dimensions of Christian morality. Rather than submission to an authoritative divine word that demands obedience, Ricoeur prefers to speak of the imagination being transformed in the living encounter with God through the Scriptures.

When incorporated into the debate about the specific identity of Christian morality, Ricoeur's interpretation of revelation engenders a spirituality of hope and liberation, of loving engagement with the world. The events of Sinai are no longer understood as legal codes that demand obedience and undermine freedom. Instead, the giving of the covenant is affirmed in terms of an invitation to relationship. The believing community is, therefore, asked to care for creation in the way that God does, and strive for perfection in all subsequent relationships.

Contemporary trends in spirituality emphasise the need for greater alliance between morality and spirituality. For the faith community believes that morality is born out of spirituality. For Christians, love of God means love of neighbour. Moral action is the outpouring of God's love. Since a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate interprets revelation as the invitation to relationship, rather than to obedience, it can answer to the contemporary call to acknowledge that Christian morality is rooted in Christian spirituality. Although the content of Christian morality may not be any different from that of a non-believer, faith in God means that Christians will interpret their moral actions in light of their relationship with God. Love gives rise to love.

In spite of its ability to account for the affective aspects of Christian morality, however, a Ricoeurian approach to the specificity of Christian morality debate can also demonstrate the need for a Magisterium. This is the case because Ricoeur believes that we are born into a context of 'presumed truth'. We are historical beings who exist in a community, a tradition that considers certain things to be true. Although Ricoeur's work suggests that the content of Christian morality is discoverable by all, it does not support the idea that human beings are autonomous or absolutely free. In Ricoeur's view, individuals are historical beings who belong to a horizon of meaning which existed long before they did.

Yet this is not to say that history is fixed. Nor is it to suggest that the truths of history should be considered as absolute truths in every age. This is why Ricoeur chooses to consider history and, indeed, truth as a dialectic between 'sedimentation' and 'innovation'. Thus, for Ricoeur, the search for truth is truly a search. Moral agents are called time and time again to question the received wisdom of the past so that it continues to answer to the needs of contemporary society and its demands. However, since Ricoeur believes that one cannot access the truth without some reference to the received wisdom of the past, his work suggests that there is a need to protect this wisdom. In this way, it can provide us with a way of affirming the need for a Magisterium in the Christian tradition.

The Magisterium can protect the received wisdom of the past until such times as it needs to be changed or revised. Moreover, since a Ricoeurian approach to Christian morality also suggests that texts should be understood in the same dialectical way, the magisterial role may again be affirmed. This time, however, it is placed in the role of

protector of the primary archive of Christian identity, that is, the Bible. The Magisterium, therefore, is called to act as a protector of truth and of the 'memory' of the Christian community.

It is also called to stand before the faithful and before the court of critical reason. For in Ricoeur's view, no community can survive without the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. His work provides us with a model of the Christian tradition which includes Habermas' theory of 'communication free from domination'. This means that the Magisterium is expected to provide well-reasoned answers as to why the faithful are expected to accept this or that set of directives. In this way, the Magisterium is prevented from falling into a self-interested body that is free from critique or adverse to change. This is a compelling model: it can account for the need to have leadership in the church without suggesting that the Magisterium is something which exists apart from or over and against the experiences and needs of all its members.

But perhaps Ricoeur's most interesting contribution to the Christian *proprium* debate lies in his ability to provide us with an account of tradition that appears to satisfy the concerns of the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools. Indeed, most of Ricoeur's commentators agree that he is extraordinarily considerate to all the alternative positions which he interrogates, and these positions have been many.<sup>1</sup> As Walter James Lowe put it, 'There is no surer rule for reading Ricoeur than to watch for the apparent dichotomies and then look for the argument by which the dichotomies will

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<sup>1</sup> Don Ihde, "Paul Ricoeur's Place in the Hermeneutic Tradition," in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Library of Living Philosophers Series, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1995, 64.

be overcome.’<sup>2</sup> Of course it must be said that Ricoeur has not made any direct comments about the issues at stake in the *Glaubensethik*/Autonomy debate, his understanding of history and tradition as a dialectic between past and present can provide us with a way of transcending the dichotomies between the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools vis-à-vis tradition.

This is the case because, similar to what the *Glaubensethik* school is trying to achieve, Ricoeur believes that tradition mediates truth to us (sedimentation). Nonetheless, Ricoeur’s position is almost always a dialectical one. Therefore, he also asserts the need for critique in the present (innovation), so that past does not fall into practical insignificance. This is what proponents of the autonomy view are trying to achieve by asserting the importance of the natural law in the search for moral truth. When we use Ricoeur’s model in the context of the debate on the special character of Christian morality, then, it shows us that the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools are defending two sides of the same coin. In this way, Ricoeur’s work provides us with a way of transcending the existing dichotomies between the two schools. It provides us with an approach to tradition in which the concerns of both schools are not only considered but integrated to give us a broader understanding of the Christian tradition and its role in the Christian search for truth and understanding.

Indeed, Ricoeur’s views on the role of individual states in the European community offer us another useful model which may be incorporated into the Christian *proprium* debate. For it provides us with a way of understanding how Christians can dialogue with the rest of the world about moral matters while remaining faithful to the narrative

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<sup>2</sup> Walter James Lowe, “The Coherence of Paul Ricoeur,” *Journal of Religion* 61 (1981), 389; see also Alain Thomasset’s comments in *Paul Ricoeur: une poétique de la morale*, Leuven: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 1996, 621.

that constitutes their specific identity. Ricoeur proposes a mutual dialectic between the countries of Europe, where each country is invited to *respect* and *question* the identities and views of the others. He sees value in countries questioning each other, for it prevents any one country from dominating the European community or from adopting an unhealthy self-image.

This dialectic may be used in the context of the Christian *proprium* debate for it can account for both 'identity' and 'difference'. It does not expect individuals to abandon their master story when faced with adversity or with the ethical issues of the wider community. This means that Christians can be Christians in society. However, Ricoeur also asserts the need for criticism so that one community does not try to control another. He sees value in inter-religious, secular, and international dialogue. The views of 'another' or of an 'outsider' can help traditions, religious or otherwise, to revise or reinterpret their position. For when we are partisans to a given tradition we may be blinded by its biases and prejudices.

Thus there is no threat of sectarianism in a Ricoeurian approach to the Christian *proprium* debate. Nor is there any threat of a loss of identity. Ricoeur invites us to understand the whole of the Christian life in terms of a healthy dialectic between who we are and what we are expected to do in every age; between the past which shapes us and the present which asks us to be critical; between our story and the story of others; between love of God and love of neighbour; between Christians and atheists; between community and the world; between *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy.

In short, Ricoeur is a mediator. He calls us to consider the significance of Scriptures, and ourselves, again. His writings invite us to reconsider the long-standing divisions between the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools and provides us with an alternative way of interpreting and affirming what is specific about Christian morality: Christians consciously pursue the goals of morality, as well as their quest for self-understanding, through the lens of the faith story.

But this is not to say that the Christ event gives Christians a detailed code for living. Instead, as Ricoeur sees it, Jesus came to disclose what is humanly possible. Belief in Jesus means that we have more reason to hope rather than to despair, that we can affirm life rather than despise it, that we can go on searching in spite of the absurdity of life and death. Thus Ricoeur's philosophy is significant for Christian ethics because it approximates in style and in content an account of the theological virtues of grace, hope and love.

Grace—Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy helps us to see that, for Christians, the meaning of life is a gift, a gift which we have received in freedom. In the beginning was the Word. This means that we are not our own makers but invited to participate in life in a meaningful and responsible way because it has been given to us by God. The Christian story of Resurrection and Salvation opens up the possibility of affirming life and of saying 'yes' to it in faith and in freedom. This is Ricoeur's 'second Copernican revolution'<sup>3</sup>: we are not self-constituting but are constituted by the world around us, by our story and by the master story of our tradition. The Word

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<sup>3</sup> This is a term used by Kevin J. Vanhoozer to describe how Ricoeur's philosophy is an attempt to overthrow the self's pretensions to be the source of its own existence. See Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 127.

shapes the Christian imagination and opens the hearts of the faithful so that they can receive and participate in the gift of creation.

Hope—Ricoeur's work also shows us that the Christian story is a source of hope for Christians as they engage with the world and attempt to find ways of living that promote and sustain all human persons. Biblical metaphors, narratives and poetic language nourish the Christian community by displaying visions of possible worlds, possible ways of living and of behaving. They help Christians to recognise and articulate the virtues, and encourage them to continue searching for truth 'in spite of everything'.

Love—Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy interprets the Christian story and faith in terms of an affirmative acceptance to enter into a special relationship with God, where love, not obedience, is a cardinal concern. God is not the authority above us but the spirit among us. In this way, Ricoeur's work caters for the fact that, while it does not yield any new or rationally defensible norms or values that are beyond the scope of reason, faith provides Christians with a sense of belonging, of worth and of meaningfulness in the face of the absurdity of life. For Ricoeur the Word invites Christians to look at creation in a loving way. But it remains that this Word does not concretely demand anything more from Christians than that they use their freedom and interpret their specific story in a responsible way as they continue to find ways of loving creation as God does.

Nonetheless, it might well be argued that since Ricoeur's view lead to a rejection of the argument that there are specifically Christian norms or values contained in the

Christian tradition, or in the texts of the canon, that his position comes close to that of the Autonomy school, thereby weakening the argument that he may be seen as a mediator. There are several points worth noting here, however, that seem to suggest otherwise. It will be recalled that the Autonomy position is not merely described in terms of a belief that the content of Christian morality is the same for the Christian and the non-Christian. Its proponents also stress the importance of a specific motivation to do the good. Although, as MacNamara points out, no author has given an adequate explanation of the term, and the *Glaubensethik* school has dismissed it as mere decoration, proponents of the Autonomy school continue to emphasise its importance.<sup>4</sup>

Ricoeur, however, does not seem to agree that the texts of the biblical tradition can or should be adequately described in terms of their motivational value. This is the case because one can also be motivated by secular literature and by stories of injustice told to us by the media and by autobiographical narratives.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some Ricoeurian scholars have attempted to explain how the cinema can motivate and deepen one's desire and awareness of what it means to be moral or to be a self-conscious being.<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, merit in such studies. However, insofar as the Bible recounts what is the most profound event in history (i.e., God made flesh) Ricoeur does not seem to agree that emphasising the motivational character of the Bible encompasses the richness that the Christian story has to offer. Emphasising its motivational power

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996, 200.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds," in Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 122.

<sup>6</sup> See Glenn Whitehouse, "Unimaginable variations: Christian Responsibility in the Cinema of Broken Identity," *LT* 18/3 (2004), 321-350.



strips the Bible of its ability to shape character, to deepen our understanding of ourselves, and to develop good dispositions so that Christians will have the necessary moral tools for moral action when they are called to act. This is not something that has been discussed by the Autonomy school, which further highlights the fact that Ricoeur cannot be categorised as an Autonomist.

Nor can he be classified as a proponent of the *Glaubensethik* view. Although Ricoeur agrees that truth and goodness must be mediated to us through history and through the received wisdom of the past, he goes a step further to emphasise the need to interrogate our preconceived notions of truth so that they continue to answer to the needs of the Christian community. This dialectical model sets Ricoeur's approach apart from the *Glaubensethik* and Autonomy schools. His work offers the possibility of interpreting the Christian tradition and its moral worth in terms of a dialectic between that which tradition proposes and that which the moral agent must find out for him/herself.

The former point further highlights the fact that Ricoeur's position lies somewhere in between the stances taken by the Autonomy and *Glaubensethik* schools, for it seems to suggest that, although the Christian tradition does not offer Christians any new norms or values that are beyond the scope of reason, there may be times when Christians are swayed by the summoning voice of the biblical texts. This means that Christians may find themselves 'going the extra mile', or beyond what is merely rational, forgetting themselves and putting the welfare of another first.

While these situations will only arise out of an *acceptance* of what the biblical tradition *proposes* as the Life of Christ and cannot be predetermined, Ricoeur, like many writers of the Autonomy schools and weaker forms of the *Glaubensethik* view, does not rule out the possibility that giving up the self is a specifically religious ethical proposal. It is not specifically Christian, but it is certainly an ethical motif that runs throughout the history of the faith community and appears to go beyond the demands of rationality.<sup>7</sup>

For Ricoeur, nothing is set in stone. The quest for truth, although carried out with the help of tradition and its proposals for living, is ongoing and cannot be easily understood or read off from the texts of tradition. It must be open-ended, because the nature of the human person and of life itself demands it to be. It must be closed, because the fallen nature of man means that we run the risk of adopting a purely subjective morality. Truth, then, lies in one's ability to deal with the 'in-between' and with the difficult task of critically interpreting tradition and its proposals and of using reason in a way that will flesh out what tradition has to offer in terms of how we should live.

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<sup>7</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 152. The conversation between Azouvi and de Launay runs as follows: Azouvi and de Launay: 'What you say about "bracketing" the problem of the resurrection of the flesh, in a glorious body, should have as its primary ethical consequence a lack of concern about one's own salvation, but also, more deeply, a lack of concern with salvation as such in the sense of an afterlife. Would you go as far as that?' Ricoeur: 'Yes, of course. I believe more and more that one has to divest oneself of that concern in order to pose the problem of life until death. Everything that I have tried to say about the self and otherness in the self, I would continue to defend on the philosophical plane; but, in the religious order, perhaps I would ask to give up the self. I have already quoted the word attributed to Jesus and which is undoubtedly one of the *ipsissima verba*: "He who would save his life must lose it." It may very well be that, philosophically, I must persevere in the defense of the self in opposition to the reductive claims addressed to it. I remain a reflexive philosopher, hence a philosopher of the self, of the *ipse*. But the shift to the religious question, which in Kantian terms has for its sole theme, unlike morality, regeneration—I translate: the restoration or the establishment of a capable human being, one capable of speaking, of acting, of being morally, juridically and politically responsible—this shift from the moral to the religious presumes a letting go of all the answers to the question 'Who am I?' and implies, perhaps, renouncing its insistence as well as its obsession' (p. 155-156).

Thus Ricoeur's work demonstrates that selfhood does not begin with reason or with an autonomous self but with an awareness that the subject enters consciousness already formed by the symbolic systems within its tradition. This implies that moral consciousness and self-understanding are never empty concepts but always already interpenetrated by the founding symbols and stories that constitute one's communal heritage. What constitutes the self and the moral consciousness of Christians involves the interpretation of the specific symbols of the Christian identity and faith, not those of any other tradition.

Christian morality is, therefore, unique. Christians have a specifically Christian identity that is formed through the Christian story. If Ricoeur is correct, the journey to selfhood commences with the exegesis of the imaginary symbols and stories constitutive of one's tradition in order to equip the subject to become an integrated self by means of appropriating these symbols and stories as her own. Thus faith is the belief that listening to the summoning voice of the Christian tradition, texts, stories and symbols leads to the performance of a life well lived in relation to self and others.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Note: There are similarities between this view and that of Joseph Selling. Selling argues that 'thinking about acts or simply about intentions is never enough if we hope to come to a realistic understanding of committed discipleship. In order to move in that direction, we need to think twice—about the attitude that we develop, and the sense of proportion we engage in making concrete decisions.' Cf. Joseph Selling, "The Renewal of Moral Theology," *DL* 55/4 (2005), 10.

## GLOSSARY

Ricoeur uses specific terms to translate German expressions. For example, he generally renders *Deutung* as *interprétation* and *Auslegung* as *explication*, even though both German expressions are commonly translated as 'interpretation' in English. Accordingly, most of Ricoeur's translators have translated these, and related terms, as follows:

*compréhension* (*Verständnis*): understanding  
*explication* (*Erklärung*): explanation  
*explicitation* (*Auslegung*): explication  
*interprétation* (*Deutung*): interpretation

Although in most cases I have used an English translation of Ricoeur's work, some of Ricoeur's terms are quite specific to his anthropological philosophy. Hence their meaning may not be immediately obvious to the reader. What follows is a brief explanation of some of the Ricoeurian terms used in this thesis. It is hoped that it will serve as a guide for the reader.

**Distanciation:** the effect of being made *distant* from the producer of the text and the cultural conditions under which the author wrote. There are four functions of distanciation: 1) the text as a relation of speech and writing; 2) the text as a structured work; 3) the text as a projection of a world; 4) the text as mediating self-understanding.

**Emplotment:** the organisation of the various elements of a story into a coherent whole.

**La langue:** grammar. Grammar is necessary for the construction of a coherent sentence or phrase.

**La parole:** speech or an act of saying. Ricoeur's use of this term shows that speech is an instance of discourse, i.e., it is more than just a system of signs.

**Mimesis:** a representation of human reality. Ricoeur uses this term to explain how narrative functions as a medium through which aspects of reality may be communicated to the reader. There are three kinds of *mimesis*: mimesis I, mimesis II, and mimesis III.

**Muthos:** plot.

**Phronesis:** practical wisdom. (Also called *prudentia*.)

**Schismatic utopianism:** this occurs whenever our projection of the future is disassociated from the past. In other words, it refers to the negation of the past in the present and in our utopian ideals concerning the future.

**Temporal dissonance:** this refers to the distance which separates us from the past. According to Ricoeur, this obstacle may be overcome through narratives which recount events from the past, for narrative is that which remains over that which flows away.

Other terms which are not exclusively Ricoeurian but which merit a brief explanation here are:

**Orthodoxy:** Derived from two Greek words: *orthē*, meaning right or correct, and *doxa*, meaning opinion or glory, this term refers to that which is representative of established or sound doctrine in any given field.

**Praxis:** Praxis is a notion which has become foundational in many contemporary theologies. Political and liberation theologians are accredited with introducing the term into modern theology, as they called for a restructuring of theology in which praxis would not only be the aim of a theoretical and already-established theology, but would also be the foundation of modern theologising. The use of the Greek term, *praxis*, indicates a complex and diverse range of meanings. It does not simply mean action or activism in opposition to theory; rather, it refers to a dialectic between theory and praxis, i.e., a transposition of traditional theological issues or concerns on the relation between faith and reason into a contemporary, as distinct from modern, context. In terms of moral theology, it performs a significant role, for it encourages human agents to take responsibility for their own lives, gives them experiences of what it means to be a 'person', and not merely passive objects of their histories. A full study of the weaknesses and strengths of praxis is beyond the scope of this editorial piece. Cf. *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1987, 784-787.

**Utilitarianism:** Utilitarianism is the extension of philosophy of the Christian doctrine of *Agapè*, which has counterparts in the various formulations of the Golden Rule. The central idea is that, if we are to love our neighbours as ourselves, we are to love all equally. This view runs into difficulty, however, when two values of equal importance conflict, or where the good of one person conflicts with the good of another. Utilitarianists respond to such conflicts by following whatever course of action will lead to the greatest happiness among the greatest number of persons. This means that the good of one person may be sacrificed if it will make a greater number of people happy. Cf. *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Mcquarrie, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967, 351-352.

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