INTRODUCTION

1

The passion for the possible: preface to Paul Ricoeur

The aim of this book is to render Ricoeur's thought, particularly his recent work on narrative, accessible to English-speaking students of religion and theology, and to offer an appreciative yet critical interpretation of his hermeneutics and its application to the Gospels.

"Ricoeur deserves to be presented as the most theologically sophisticated of the major contemporary theorists of interpretation."[1] While this is undoubtedly true, it is somewhat surprising that few booklength studies have explored Ricoeur's "theological sophistication," and this despite Ricoeur's many forays into matters biblical and theological.[2] Indeed, many commentators pass over this aspect of Ricoeur in silence, even though it is arguably fundamental to his whole enterprise.[3] The theological tenor of his work is lost in studies which focus on his interpretation theory to the exclusion of the larger context of his hermeneutic philosophy, namely, his search for the meaning of human being. Moreover, Ricoeur has been subjected to extended analysis by philosophers, theorists of interpretation, literary critics and social scientists, but seldom by theologians.[4] Theologians, however, have been quick to use Ricoeur's approach and insights when convenient,[5] and many Ricoeurrian terms and phrases are now part of the common theological currency ("the conflict of interpretations," "the hermeneutics of suspicion," "second naiveté," "the symbol gives rise to thought"). The present work intends to bridge the gap between those treatments of Ricoeur that focus on his philosophy and hermeneutics to the exclusion of his theology on the one hand, and those that focus on the theological significance of his hermeneutics without attending to his larger philosophical project on the other.

Ricoeur's own interest and work in matters theological, together with the widespread interest in the resources of his thought for theological reflection, clearly justify the present study. What theological reviews

of Ricoeur's hermeneutics there are have thus far been mixed. While for the most part many of Ricoeur's seminal insights concerning textual interpretation have been appropriated with little or no criticism by theologians as well as exegetes, one group of theologians (all, interestingly enough, connected with Yale University) has seen fit to reject Ricoeur's approach outright.[6] The issue is one of theological method and the battlefield is the Gospel narrative. Ricoeur's recently completed magnum opus, *Temps et récit* (English translation, *Time and Narrative*), provides additional fuel to this debate. Ricoeur's three-volume, 1,000-page study of narrative represents a major contribution to our understanding of narrative, has far-reaching implications for the currently fashionable "narrative theology" and reveals Ricoeur's own theology in a new light.

Exegetes too are divided on the merits of Ricoeur's hermeneutics for biblical interpretation. In his recent book on canonical criticism, James Barr speaks of Ricoeur's approach as one of the most viable options in the exegetical marketplace.[7] Brevard Childs expresses an opposing viewpoint, questioning what he sees as a cavalier disregard for historical questions in Ricoeur's treatment of the Bible as a deposit of free-floating metaphors.[8] But Barr insists that Ricoeur is "far more interested in historical study" than is Childs.[9] In short, there are not only divergent opinions regarding the *value* of Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy for theology, but there is a "conflict of interpretations" concerning its very *description*. Thus the goal of this book: description and evaluation.

Why should theologians and exegetes bother reading Ricoeur? His vocabulary is strange, his arguments dense and sinuous, and he is steeped in French and German phenomenology, a philosophical tradition whose conceptual apparatus is as opaque as its prose. This would be a perfunctory reading indeed. Ricoeur is grappling with fundamental questions of language, meaning and truth that exegetes and theologians ignore only at the risk of losing their interpretative integrity. Moreover, Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy commends itself to theologians by its prime "theological" virtue: charity. While the Christian faith affirms a single mediator between humanity and God, mediators between human beings are always welcome. The style of Ricoeur's philosophy is irenic: he rarely criticizes other positions, but tries to assimilate them when he can.[10] This accounts for the "grafting" of one position on to another, the "detours," the "long routes" – it takes longer to forge agreements than to disagree. Ricoeur marches to a conciliating drummer: as far as possible, be at peace with all other philosophical positions.

Ricoeur, then, is a mediating thinker. What does he mediate? To begin with, Ricoeur mediates thinkers in the history of philosophy. For instance, he reads Kant through Hegel and Hegel through Kant. This "mutual indwelling" reflects Ricoeur's hope that all thinkers are to some extent "in the truth."[11] Ricoeur also attempts to mediate Anglo-Saxon and Continental philosophy, two traditions which often talk past each other.[12] His personal career reflects this mediating ambition: he simultaneously held professorial chairs in Paris and Chicago for a number of years. Perhaps of most significance for theology, however, is Ricoeur's mediation of the methods and goals of different disciplines. His narrative theory makes an original contribution, for example, in mediating the truth claims of history and fiction, the two major forms of narrative. One of the most impressive features of Ricoeur's philosophy is precisely this ability imaginatively to mediate seemingly irreconcilable oppositions.[13] Ricoeur is a mediator, then, not because he "bears sin," but because he "bears meaning" from afar and makes it intelligible or near. Ricoeur is particularly gifted in making positions which at first blush seem mutually exclusive to appear compatible and even mutually dependent.[14] This "bringing near" (*meta-pherein* = "trans-fer") is also the essence of metaphor, a "seeing together," which associates seemingly disparate realms of meaning and puts them to creative use.[15] As we shall see in Part II, Ricoeur ultimately strives to bring the world of the Bible "near" to the denizen of the twentieth century by creating philosophical "approximations" of theological ideas. By so doing, Ricoeur hopes to enable those who are blind to grace to "see" again. It is only fitting, then, that Ricoeur's favorite form of language, the metaphor, should itself characterize the spirit of Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy. Ricoeur's mediation is metaphorical.

And yet the mediation is never total, never perfect. The dialogue between philosophers and between different disciplines has truth as its regulative ideal, but never as its possession. The final synthesis is always delayed. Hegel appears as the serpent in Ricoeur's garden, beckoning him to eat of the Tree of Absolute Knowledge, representing the greatest attempt and the greatest temptation of the philosopher. Ricoeur would never think of writing a "systematic theology," for the work of interpretation never ends: "I maintain that the unity of truth is a timeless task only because it is at first an eschatological hope."[16]

"A passion for the possible"

My exposition of Ricoeur's work is, like all narratives, both chronological and thematic. The story I will tell interprets Ricoeur's developing thought under the rubric of "a passion for the possible." I hope to show that this phrase is appropriate in several ways as a description of Ricoeur's project.[17] First and foremost, "the passion for the possible" is Kierkegaard's definition, with which Ricoeur is in full agreement, of hope. It is no exaggeration to claim that this "passion for the possible" is the driving force behind Ricoeur's whole philosophical enterprise. Accordingly, we would not be far off the mark in labelling Ricoeur a "philosopher of hope."[18]

A *passion* for the possible. Philosophy for Ricoeur is reflection on human existence. Ricoeur is not interested in abstract reflection, as was Descartes, where the subject directly inspects itself, as it were. Rather, Ricoeur begins his philosophical reflection from pre-philosophical experience. Thinking does not give rise to existence, but existence precedes thinking. And existence is desire and effort, that is, desire and effort *to be*. According to Ricoeur, the *passion* to exist, the desire to be, is more basic in human beings than the dread and anguish of existence. This intense *passion* to be, which surges up whenever human existence is threatened, indicates to Ricoeur that humans are constituted by an original, positive impetus rather than by a negation of being or nothingness (as in Sartre). In search of appropriate metaphors to express this thought, we might say that the most "originary" fact of human life is not a primal scream but a primal "Yes." That there is anything at all – that there is *me* – is primarily a source of wonder and cause for gratitude. Ricoeur's is an existentialism of affirmation rather than negation.[19] This positive charge which Ricoeur attributes to existence distinguishes him from his contemporary and compatriot, Sartre. It is precisely because the ultimate meaning of human existence remains illusory that Sartre can define man as absurd – "a useless passion."[20] By contrast, Ricoeur in an early essay entitled "Christianity and the Meaning of History" identifies his passion to exist with faith in the meaningfulness of existence: "Ambiguity is the last word for existentialism; for Christianity it is real, it is lived, but it is the next to last word."[21] The "central intuition" of Ricoeur's philosophy is that human existence is *meaningful*.[22] There is a "surplus of meaning" over meaninglessness. And, in direct opposition to Sartre, Ricoeur describes his philosophy as "a style of 'yes' and not a style of 'no,' and perhaps even a style characterized by joy and not by anguish."[23]

This passionate will to live, which is stronger and more fundamental than anguish, is hope enacted. This *passion* for the possible is thus hope which stands under the sign of the "already."

A passion for the *possible*. Hope is not an empty passion but a passion for the possible. Ricoeur is not interested in just any kind of possibility, but in *human possibilities*. Beginning with his 1950 doctoral dissertation, published as *Freedom and Nature*, to his most recent *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur has been engaged in a constant search to articulate and recover worthwhile human possibilities. Moreover, according to Ricoeur, human being *is* possibility: "it does not yet appear what we shall be" (1 John 3:2). Human existence is "forward-oriented," constantly projecting itself in front of itself towards a possible way of being. Possibility is thus intimately connected to the imagination which projects it, and to time, specifically the future.[24] Human being, then, is not limited to the here and now, that is, to present actuality. It is one of the most important tenets of Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology that there is a "surplus of being" to human existence, and this surplus of being is nothing other than *possibility*. We are not as we shall be. Thanks to this surplus of being – possibility – humanity can hope. If there were no possibilities, there would be nothing to hope for, for we would live under the tyranny of the "what is." In the kingdom of possibility, however, we glimpse a vision of what *might be*. Chapters 2 and 3 present Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology, his thinking about the "surplus" of human being. In these chapters I argue that the passion for the possible is related both to human temporality (Heidegger) and to the creative imagination (Kant), and that Ricoeur's thought is best understood as a continuation of the "unfinished" projects of Heidegger and Kant.

How does Ricoeur determine what is humanly possible? His early work views human possibilities in terms of the fundamental structures of human volition. Ricoeur attempts directly to describe the project-forming capacity of the will. But human consciousness is not open to such direct inspection. Thus Ricoeur sets off on the first and most important of his many detours: the final destination is still an understanding of human being, but the route now passes by symbols, myths, metaphors and texts – all of which attest to the meaning of human existence. These linguistic works are expressions of our desire to be, our passion for existence. Human existence is only reached via these works which *mediate* it. If understanding human existence is the goal, then language and texts are the means. But what kind of language and texts refer to the possible, to *what might be*? Here philosophy encounters a

problem. For traditionally, only language which refers to *what is* is held to be true. Other types of language were thought to refer only to the "imaginary," in the sense of "unreal." But Ricoeur insists that to speak of possibility is to refer to an integral aspect of being: to *what might be* or to *what is not yet*. As Aristotle remarks, "Being may be said in many ways." Ricoeur proposes that it is poetic or creative language which best expresses the surplus, the "more than actuality," of human being. Poetic language responds to this surplus of being with a *surplus of meaning*. And among the various forms of poetic language, Ricoeur esteems metaphor and narratives above the rest. Metaphors offer different ways of seeing the world; narratives present different ways of seeing human being in the world. Metaphors and narratives are thus the preeminent linguistic forms of the passion for the possible – the language of hope. Chapters 4 and 5 examine these forms of creative language, and their relation to possibility, in further detail. The passion for the *possible* is hope under the category of the "not-yet."

A passion for the possible. This fruitful phrase is susceptible to a final, more explicitly theological, interpretation. The Gospels tell the story of a "passion" for the possible. It was Martin Kähler who first suggested that the Gospels are "passion narratives with extended introductions."[25] "Passion" in this sense means more "submission to suffering"[26] than "will to live," and "possibility" corresponds to what I will call the "Christian" possibility, namely, "new life" or simply "freedom." The Gospels therefore display the possibility of freedom which Jesus somehow "makes possible" through his suffering on the cross. In the Gospel narratives, then, Ricoeur sees the possibility of human "freedom in the light of hope," to borrow the title from one of his essays. In his "Preface to Bultmann," Ricoeur distinguishes the work of the philosopher who describes the formal possibility of authentic existence from the theologian who announces the realization of this possibility.[27]

Taken together, then, the various meanings of a "passion for the possible" converge in the notion of *narrative hope*. It is as a philosopher cum theologian of narrative hope that I will discuss Ricoeur's reading and interpretation of the Gospels in chapters 6 to 10.[28] In so doing we shall try to determine whether the biblical narrative serves to inform and found Ricoeur's passion for the possible, in which case Ricoeur's philosophy could be construed as fundamentally "Christian," or whether the Gospels merely illustrate a philosophical principle, in which case we may wonder in what sense and to what

degree Ricoeur regards the stories and histories of Jesus as indispensable for philosophy and theology alike.

Invention and discovery

Is this passion for the possible an unhealthy, pathological passion or a healthy one? Is it the glory or the irony of the human condition that we strive for what might be and are never content with what is? Regardless of its sincerity or intensity, whether or not the passion is a healthy one can only be determined by first interrogating the possible. Is the possibility of, say, goodness or freedom real or imaginary? What of the Christian possibility of new life, or John Wesley's doctrine of human perfectibility? Are these possibilities genuine or illusory – prescriptions for fulfillment or frustration? These questions about ethical possibilities (namely, what can we do?) are related to an epistemological query: are human possibilities invented or discovered? Do we create imaginary possibilities which can never be realized or do we discover real possibilities that can become actual? How can we tell the difference between statements about the true meaning and capacity of human being and instances of wishful thinking?

The distinction between the real and the imaginary, Ricoeur believes, is symptomatic of a deeper dualism, namely, the metaphysical cleavage between being and non-being.[29] In traditional metaphysics, that which exists is temporal or eternal *presence*. Imagination is thus conceived as the faculty which brings to mind *absent* or non-existent things.[30] Book X of Plato's *Republic* represents the *locus classicus* of this critique of the imagination. According to Plato, artistic imitation (*mimesis*) is two steps removed from truth (eternal being), for it is but a copy of an appearance. Jean-Paul Sartre represents the culmination of the Platonic tradition with regard to the imagination. Sartre says of his *L'Imaginaire* that it describes "the great function of consciousness, or 'imagination,' to create a world of unrealities and its noetic correlative, the imaginary."[31] If this dichotomy is left intact, then possibilities that are created, i.e., imagined, will *ipso facto* be illusory, i.e., unreal.

Ricoeur, however, claims that poetic language transcends this dichotomy. There is an alternative to the Platonic view of *mimesis* as copy, namely, Aristotle's view of *mimesis* as "creative imitation." While images reproduce an already given reality, fiction "imitates" only because it recreates reality on a higher level. The problem with the traditional view of metaphysics is that the image or picture was taken to

be the paradigm of the imagination. Ricoeur, on the other hand, takes fiction to be paradigmatic of the creative imagination. In the case of fiction, there is no original model to copy. Fiction thus refers to reality in a "productive" way. In fiction, then, we have a blurring of the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary. Ricoeur claims "that fiction changes reality, in the sense that it both 'invents' and 'discovers' it."[32] Ricoeur wants nothing less than the rehabilitation of the concept of imagination: "In short, we must restore to the fine word *invent* its twofold sense of both discovery and creation."[33]

The power of narrative fiction to "invent" reality in the sense just described may perhaps be illustrated by another creative domain – painting. Whereas Ricoeur's narrative theory studies the verbal representation of the real, E. H. Gombrich's classic study, *Art and Illusion*, investigates the visual representation of the real. The similarities as well as the differences between verbal and visual representation are instructive. Ricoeur and Gombrich agree that *mimesis* is the creative imitation of reality, and this distinguishes artistic from scientific representation which is more concerned with making accurate copies. In the final part of his book, entitled appropriately enough "Invention and Discovery," Gombrich asks why visual representation – painting – has a history. On the traditional view, the history of art is the story of the gradual discovery of appearances. Painters learned to see more accurately by disregarding what they thought they knew about the world, by progressing towards unbiased perception. But, according to Gombrich, there is no such thing as the "innocent eye." All seeing is interpretation. According to Gombrich, the discovery of appearances was due to the invention of pictorial effects. It is only by certain *inventions* that painters came to *discover* the appearances. In Gombrich's terms, there is no "matching" before "making." Commenting on Constable's experimentation with different styles, Gombrich writes that "Only through trying out new effects never seen before in paint could he learn about nature. Making still comes before matching."[34]

Ricoeur and Gombrich are thus suggesting that visual and verbal representation alike both invent and discover. Of course, the materials with which each works are different. Painting represents a possible world in terms of "configurations" of space and light; narratives display a possible world by configuring time. Narratives shape a beginning, middle and end into a temporal whole. Whereas paintings "invent" space and light, narratives "invent" human time. Time, according to Ricoeur, is not only the "stuff" of narratives but also of human being. Narratives express the temporality, that inevitable reckoning with past,

present and future and their interrelations, which characterizes human existence. Consequently, Ricoeur argues that narratives "invent" plots in order to discover and explore the human historical condition. Ricoeur's concern to restore both a moment of creation and discovery to poetic discourse, the language of possibility, represents one of his most ambitious attempts at mediation.

Mediating invention and discovery has far-reaching consequences not only for literary criticism and historiography, but also for theology. Donald MacKinnon treats one of these consequences for theology in his discussion of the question of invention and discovery – a discussion which he places under the heading of idealism and realism.[35] How does our thinking relate to what is the case? Do we "fashion" or "find" the real?[36] Is reality of our own making or is it there, silent, waiting to be discovered? Here too Ricoeur wishes to mediate: idealism and realism need not be construed as opposites, for, as we have seen, the imagination, through its inventions and creations, discovers the real. Unlike Ricoeur, however, MacKinnon is less interested in mediating these two positions than in taking sides in the debate. MacKinnon insists that only a robust realism guarantees the intellectual integrity of Christianity:

> we 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.[37]

Faith for MacKinnon is a new dimension of experience, and "what has made this new dimension possible ... are events which it is claimed have actually happened."[38] The possibility of redemption which Jesus procured "cannot belong merely to the world of ideas; it must be the stuff of reality, including indeed an act in flesh and blood as costing and as ultimate as the cross."[39] MacKinnon clearly believes that theology discovers the Christian possibility, and his realism finds its natural ally in history rather than fiction.

But this sharp dichotomy between history and fiction is just as misguided in Ricoeur's opinion as that between the real and the imaginary. It is Ricoeur's thesis that both history and fiction "invent" *and* "discover." Indeed, it is a virtual constant in Ricoeur's philosophy that we come to discover the real only by first inventing. In this way Ricoeur tries to mediate the approaches of historical and literary critics