

# TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC OF TESTIMONY

## Paul Ricoeur on Witness to the Kerygma\*

Jason T. Lam

New York Theological Education Center Research Associate,  
Christianity in Asia Research Centre, University of Cambridge

Paul Ricoeur is a prolific and provocative thinker who has traversed almost every discipline of the human sciences. A trademark of his thought is his unceasing effort to work on the borderline between faith and philosophy. Ricoeur's bibliography includes more than a hundred titles which have a direct relationship with religious themes,<sup>1</sup> not counting some containing implicit mentions of the matters. However, his position as a vocational philosopher at times hinders him from engaging in the discussion of faith directly. He has been wary of mixing philosophy with theology.<sup>2</sup>

---

\* This essay is an adapted version of chapter 2 of my doctoral thesis "Biblical Hermeneutics and Christian Identity: A Study of Paul Ricoeur's Theological Writings in Dialogue with Hans W. Frei" (Unpublished thesis of the University of Cambridge, 2004). I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisor professor David F. Ford for his guidance and my examiners Dr. Nicholas Adams and Dr. Peter McEnhill for their critical comments.

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive bibliography can be found in Lewis E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Chicago & La Salle: Open Court, 1995), Part Three: Bibliography of Paul Ricoeur.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the interview "Biblical Readings and Meditations," in Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), esp. 139, 150.

Nevertheless, as a recognized scholar in the field of hermeneutics and as a practicing Christian, Ricoeur has never been shy about writing on biblical hermeneutics. He has been writing prolifically on text hermeneutics since the 1970s; and we can find that in the same period Ricoeur has applied his interpretation theory to the biblical texts in many of his essays.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a common starting point for commentators in dealing with Ricoeur's theological thought is his intellectual journey into the interpretation of text.<sup>4</sup>

I want to point out, however, the fact that before that period Ricoeur had already written extensively on hermeneutic issues related to the area of philosophy of religion. Needless to say, his unfinished trilogy in 1950-1960 on the philosophy of the will is closely related to traditional subjects such as freedom, human nature and evil. The decade after publishing *La symbolique du mal* in 1960 seems to be a transitional period in Ricoeur's intellectual journey. However, he continued to write on issues related to religious faith.<sup>5</sup> Testimony is one of those frontiers, if not the most important, that Ricoeur was and is still struggling to work on. Therefore we shall take it as our theme in this essay. We shall find that Ricoeur's frequently treated writings on biblical hermeneutics are a necessary detour in his investigation of testimony.

## **I. Testimony - The Clue Connecting Philosophy and Theology**

The importance of testimony in Ricoeur's thought could hardly be exaggerated. It is generally agreed that the reflexive self is

---

<sup>3</sup> For examples, essays written in the 1970s include: Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 71-85; *idem*, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 29-145; *idem*, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics," *Studies in Religion* 5 (1975-1976): 14-33; *idem*, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977): 1-37; *idem*, "Naming God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979): 215-27.

<sup>4</sup> Typical examples are James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Gregory Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics in Motion: An Analysis and Evaluation of Paul Ricoeur's Contribution to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Many are now collected in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), Part IV & V.

always a theme for Ricoeur at every stage of his thought.<sup>6</sup> Recent studies have pointed out that the corresponding theme in Ricoeur's theological writings is testimony (*témoignage*).<sup>7</sup> We shall see that it provides the crucial link for him in working on the borderline between philosophy and theology.

### 1. A Definition and a Semantic Analysis of Testimony

Let us first glance at what Ricoeur meant by "testimony." In a remarkable essay "The Hermeneutics of Testimony,"<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur pointed out that biblical faith is dependent upon testimony related to the word of the Lord or the mighty acts of God. Testimony here referred to an original affirmation of the manifestation of the divine (or absolute spirit in philosophical term) in history.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand Ricoeur also pointed out that human beings could only have a glimpse of the divine but not a grasp. Its disappearance follows its appearance; thus a witness (*témoin*) to the divine is necessary to retain its trace. As Ricoeur put it, "Revelation, as immediate as it may be, requires a believer a witness. It is never a brute fact, open to public

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Intellectual Autobiography of Paul Ricoeur," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Hahn, 1-54; Gary B. Madison, "Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of the Subject," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Hahn, 75-92; Kathleen Blamey, "From the Ego to the Self: A Philosophical Itinerary," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Hahn, 571-603.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis S. Mudge may be the first to articulate the importance of testimony in Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics ("Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," *Biblical Research* 24-25 (1979-1980), 50f.) with Ricoeur's approval ("A Response," in the same issue of the journal, 77). But the first to articulate the relationship between self and testimony and to develop a constructive theological account could be Andrew D. Wood, "The Wager of Faith: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and a Theology of Testimony" (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 1992); I owe a great debt to his insight. Others who pointed out the fact include: John W. Van Den Hengel, "Paul Ricoeur's Oneself as Another and Practical Theology," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 473-74; Jean Greisch, "Testimony and Attestation," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1996), 81f.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," *Anglican Theological Review* 61 (1979): 435-61; the French version of this article is published as "*L'hermeneutique du témoignage*," *Archivio di Filosofia* 42 (1972): 35-61, which is earlier than most of his other essays on biblical hermeneutics in the 1970s; this essay should be regarded as an important link between Ricoeur's writings on theological hermeneutics in the 1960s and 1970s; see my following discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 435-36; also cf. *idem*, "Negativity and Primary Affirmation," in *idem, History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), esp. 318-28. In the original text Ricoeur claimed that a philosophy of

observation and description."<sup>10</sup> Thus "testimony is both a manifestation and a crisis of appearances."<sup>11</sup>

Ricoeur offered a phenomenological description of testimony and articulated its three important features through a semantic analysis. Firstly, he pointed out that testimony is quasi-empirical.<sup>12</sup> It is because a divine encounter must first involve an individual or a community which has a genuine experience of the divine. However, testimony is only quasi-empirical for it is not the perception directly obtained. It is rather a report of the divine encounter. As in the case of the Bible, the founding events such as the Exodus and the resurrection are recorded in the form of a narrative. The witnesses conveyed the events to others. Hence "[testimony] consequently transfers things seen to the level of things said."<sup>13</sup> In this way a testimony must involve at least two parties: the witness who experiences the event and the one who hears the testimony. In addition, in the transmission of the testimony, the thing being conveyed is not only bare facts but also the meaning of the events. For example, the witnesses of the resurrected Lord did not only proclaim their encounter with him, but also a message derived from the occurrence. Therefore testimony goes beyond a mere recording of events and in addition testifies to something from God. This is another reason for not regarding testimony as solely empirical.

From the intention of testifying, Ricoeur articulated the quasi-juridical character of testimony.<sup>14</sup> If there is always something a

---

testimony is "Une philosophie qui demande a joindre a l'idee de l'absolu une experience de l'absolu." However, the "absolute" in German idealism is something which cannot be experienced. According to his article what Ricoeur wanted to articulate is actually the manifestation of the "absolute spirit." Therefore in what follows the "divine" or "absolute spirit" will be mentioned instead of the "absolute."

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung* in Hegel's Philosophy of Religion," in *Meaning, Truth and God*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 83; beware that the terms "testimony" and "witness" share the same stem in French.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 455.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 438-39.

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 439.

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 439-42.

witness wants to justify in testimony, then it must be raised in a trial situation in the face of rival positions. For example, the Old Testament prophets pronounced their witness in the presence of opposing parties, and the people were summoned to choose between their testifying to Yahweh or the testimony of the false prophets. Seen in this way, testimony is a witness seeking for a just decision by presenting his or her argumentation. However, Ricoeur acknowledged that what one could get from testimony in the end is only a possibility, at best probable but not necessary, because testimony is the *original* affirmation of the divine in the strictest sense. It is not a proof in the sense of logical empiricism, but calls for attestation and persuades those who listen to put their trust in the testifying.

It follows that the third feature of testimony Ricoeur articulated is quasi-ethical.<sup>15</sup> It is ethical in the sense that the issue at stake is not merely an internal decision of one's mind. The decision does not only provide a "possibility" for one's self or consciousness in the weak sense, but it is an authentic possibility which will transform the life of the audience who attests to the witness of the divine. In turn he or she will become another witness testifying to the divine. Ricoeur even linked this idea to the connotation of *martyr*, the Greek word for "witness." The witness of the divine engages his or her life even unto death for testifying to the truth. This is the tragic destiny of the Old Testament prophets and the believers of the early church. The Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah and the testimonies of the apostles before the Sanhedrin and before the crowds (Acts 5:32, 2:32, 3:15 etc.) are examples.

From this brief summary, we can see that for Ricoeur testimony is not simply an ecstatic experience, an effort to prove something, or discipleship for a pious reason. It is a multi-dimensional *attesting* phenomenon essential to religious faith. In light of this, Ricoeur

---

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 442-44; however Ricoeur himself did not use the term "ethical," I borrow this term from Wood, "The Wager of Faith," 12-13.

unequivocally pointed out that theology is an *intellectus fidei* dependent on witness or testimony. He wrote:

As I see it, the cleavage between philosophy and theology takes place in the following way. Theology deals with relations of intelligibility in the domain of *witness*. It is a logic of the Christological interpretation of salvation events.... The philosophy of faith and religion is something else. What [theology] organizes in terms of the Christological basis of *witness*, the philosophy of religion organizes in terms of [human] desire to be.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, Ricoeur's philosophy of the will produced during the years 1950-1960 worked exactly in the field of human consciousness or desire to be. Thus Kevin J. Vanhoozer's comment could serve as a preliminary conclusion here:

It is misleading to view Ricoeur's hermeneutics apart from his earlier work in philosophical anthropology. Ricoeur is interested in texts, including Christian texts, because of his prior and primary interest in human existence.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, Ricoeur himself had pointed out that testimony is a closely related concept to his early works on *The Symbolism of Evil* and *Freud and Philosophy*.<sup>18</sup> Seen in this way, we could claim that since the early days of his career, Ricoeur has been working on "testimony," which is an indispensable trait in his thought.

## 2. A Post-Hegelian Kantian Framework for Appreciating Testimony

As a vocational philosopher, Ricoeur thus tried hard to demonstrate that testimony is a sensible question in philosophy. He knew very well that since Immanuel Kant western philosophy has often excluded faith from theoretical reason and retained it only in the practical realm. It is because according to the first *Critique*, any experience in history would not be accepted into the discussion of

---

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Demythization of Accusation," in *idem, The Conflict of Interpretations*, 343-44; translation slightly altered, italics mine.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 224.

<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 27-28.

eternal truth. It follows that a discernment seeking divine action in human history in order to constitute the knowledge of the divine, or theology in this sense, would become impossible. Any accidental truths of history, including the Exodus, the resurrection, and so on, could hardly become the universal proofs of reason. But Ricoeur was aware that biblical faith is founded on this kind of historical event. Therefore, following his mentor Jean Nabert,<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur tried hard to pave the way for accepting witness or testimony into his philosophical discussion.

Ricoeur knew that the ultimate question of testimony for philosophers is, "Do we have the right to invest a moment of history with an absolute character?"<sup>20</sup> He thought that the original affirmation of the absolute spirit or divine must be made concrete in consciousness, to the point of transforming one's life, like the burning bush experience of Moses as recorded in the book of Exodus. Thus only "a philosophy which seeks to join an *experience* of the absolute [spirit] to the *idea* of the absolute" makes testimony a proper question.<sup>21</sup> However, Kantian philosophy has no room for a self-presentation, a *Selbst-Darstellung*, of the absolute spirit. Hence it would incline us to look only for examples or symbols, but not testimonies.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Kant's philosophy of limits also implicitly demands a totalization of meaning in the practical realm. But Ricoeur (following Hegel) found that the second *Critique* is an abstract ethics of duty. Rarely does it mention the real world we live in. Ricoeur criticized it for dividing the form from its content, rationality from reality. He revisited another philosophical giant, G. W. F. Hegel, in the tradition of German idealism in response to this issue.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 31-37; Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 435ff; it is very clear from these two essays that Jean Nabert, *Le Désir de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1966) has a profound influence on Ricoeur.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 453.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 435; Ricoeur here identified the idea of the divine with the idea of the Absolute, but their relationship is not so straightforward in Hegel's thought; cf. footnote 9 above.

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 71.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," in *idem, Figuring the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 209 [Reprinted from *Proceedings of the American Catholic*

Besides enhancing practice, Hegel believed that faith foreshadows a speculative core accessible within the sphere of absolute knowledge. The realm in which Hegel located faith is *Vorstellung*. It is often translated as "representation," but Ricoeur preferred to call it "figurative thinking," which bears the meaning of not yet conceptual and is still pictorial.<sup>24</sup> According to Hegel, absolute knowledge is possible, because the absolute spirit made itself known to the human mind through the world-spirit. In due course *Vorstellung* consists of a twofold movement: an exteriorization or objectivation and an interiorization or subjectivation. On the one hand, in faith the absolute spirit shows itself to consciousness and becomes its object. Thus the figurative components of faith must relate to the cultural "shapes" (*Gestalten*) and recapitulate all the cultural determinations (*Bestimmungen*) that precede it along its journey of manifestation in history. On the other hand, in the process of objectivation human consciousness offers itself up to the absolute spirit and lets it become the subject. The absolute spirit then internalizes itself in and as the subject of consciousness, but is at the same time the agent which causes its own exteriorization. In sum, the absolute spirit shows itself through exteriorization but at the same time returns to itself in consciousness and becomes the knowing subject. Thus absolute knowledge would eventually form in self-consciousness. In this way, Hegel safeguarded himself from a one-sided materialistic or psychological explanation of faith.<sup>25</sup>

As the absolute spirit is working throughout history mediating itself in a cumulative way through the world-spirit and returning to itself in self-consciousness, accordingly there is a moment in which

---

*Association* 64 (1970): 55-69]; Paul Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," in *idem*, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 413; Ricoeur in these two essays articulated most clearly the rationale of his post-Hegelian Kantianism; also cf. Theodoor M. Van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning: Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), 165-66.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 71-72; cf. John Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur," *Église et Théologie* 14 (1983): 70.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 72-73, 77; cf. Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 70-71.



revelation and reason coincide in absolute knowledge. Philosophy, for Hegel, is regarded as the speculative thinking which retrieves the immanence of the absolute spirit in its course of manifestation. Therefore he could say that the figurative thinking of faith gives rise to the speculative thought of philosophy, while at the same time the latter recognizes the former progression. Seen in this way, the speculative mode of thinking is not extrinsic to the figurative mode of faith. Religious representation cannot be put side by side with philosophy.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, the two form a dialectic and have the same subject matter. *Vorstellung* is a movement of both revelation (of the absolute spirit) and appropriation (of the self-consciousness). In line with this, the process of world history is the self-revelation of the absolute spirit, or in a religious sense, God; everything within history is His *kenosis*.<sup>27</sup> Therefore if we work retrospectively, human beings may have a glimpse of the absolute mediation. As Ricoeur put it, "In the final analysis, it is the absolute [spirit] which generates itself and becomes conscious of itself by means of the rupture."<sup>28</sup>

In working along this route Ricoeur reminded us of the most fundamental insight of Hegel's thought:

The Spirit is present as a whole at each of its phases and... it proceeds not by external additions, but by inner development and in a cumulative manner.<sup>29</sup>

That is to say, although the summation of absolute knowledge is possible only at a teleological moment when the Spirit recapitulates all cultural determinations, the absolute spirit is transparent at any point in the midst of history when it reveals itself to consciousness. The difference is not in terms of the degree of transparency of the absolute spirit to consciousness, but the external form it takes to

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. John W. Van Den Hengel, *The Home of Meaning: The Hermeneutics of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), 215.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 75.

<sup>28</sup> Quoting from Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 75; original: "Aliénation," *Encyclopaedia universalis*, I, 1968, 662; cf. footnote 9 above.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 74.

present itself. In order to be a revealed religion (*geoffenbarte Religion*), which reflects the revelation of the absolute spirit, faith accordingly must include within its own symbolic structure the emergence of self-consciousness.

For Hegel, with Christianity the dynamism of *Vorstellung* reached its climax. As Ricoeur understood him, the very self of Christ is the shape *par excellence* of self-consciousness of the absolute spirit. But at the same time it constitutes the most formidable resistance to transposing the figurative thought of faith into speculative thought of philosophy because of its links with historical events, pictorial contents and sedimented traditions.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, theology is a discourse to relate these figurative components into a conceptual framework. Hence Hegelian philosophy "has to deal with a religious discourse that theology has already brought to its dialectical expression."<sup>31</sup> This may be one of the reasons for Ricoeur to reflect on faith in his philosophical discussion, as he adopted this part of Hegel's thought without reserve.

It seems that consequently there is always an immediacy of the absolute spirit to self-consciousness in revealed religion according to Hegel's thought. But Ricoeur strenuously refuted this view. There is self-revelation of the absolute spirit such that consciousness can have a glimpse of the divine, but Ricoeur pointed out that the converse is not true. One could not hold firm to the autonomy of the knowing subject and claim to have possessed absolute knowledge.<sup>32</sup> The problem of Hegel's system is that it is written from the end toward the beginning. Ricoeur wrote:

The Hegel I reject is the philosopher of retrospection, the one who not only accompanies the dialectic of the Spirit but reabsorbs all rationality in the already happened meaning.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 76-77.

<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 85; for a detail discussion, cf. Part II of the essay.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 78; cf. Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 75.

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," 414.

Ricoeur insisted on the order that revelation must come first and then appropriation of the self. The absolute spirit, or the divine, in revealed religion, is the only initiative of the process. Hegel's notion of absolute knowledge is paradoxically a final meaning which extrapolates from intermediary meanings. Although his intention was to switch from Kant's formality of duty to the concreteness of historical life, eventually the Hegelian system could admit nothing new and became a closed system. Thus Ricoeur's final comment is: "The triumph of the system or the triumph of coherence and rationality leaves a gigantic loss in its wake: *this loss is precisely history.*"<sup>34</sup>

Ricoeur found that Kant's philosophy of limits could serve at this point. As Kant decisively retained the limit of human knowledge, his philosophy abolishes the absoluteness of Hegel's speculative dimension. But the problem posed in the beginning of this section returns: How can we accept the manifestation of the absolute spirit or the divine into thought in this kind of philosophy? Ricoeur articulated here the significance of Kant's distinction between "understanding" (*Verstand*) and "reason" (*Vernunft*) (also "to know" [*Erkennen*] and "to think" [*Denken*] correspondingly). Only the former is a function of conditioned knowledge, while the latter is a function of the unconditioned, the absolute. As Ricoeur pointed out, Kant's *Critique* is a kind of abstract thinking, it is a critique of "understanding" and "knowing" but not of "reason" and "thinking."<sup>35</sup> Therefore "it is not experience that limits reason but reason that limits the claim of sensibility to extend our empirical, phenomenal, spatio-temporal knowledge to the noumenal order."<sup>36</sup> Hence, for Ricoeur, it is not surprising that in the realm of pure and practical *reason*, reason seeks to be total, but the desire to affirm the absolute in both pure and practical *knowledge* is doomed to despair. Nevertheless,

---

<sup>34</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Historicity," in *idem*, *History and Truth*, 66; cf. *idem*, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," 208; Van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 166-67.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," 209; *idem*, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," 415; cf. Van Den Hengel, *The Home of Meaning*, 216.

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," 415.

Ricoeur reminded us that we are not restricted to *hope* for the manifestation of the divine. Theodoor M. Van Leeuwen argued correctly that, for Ricoeur, the object that faith gives to philosophical thinking is not so much Kant's duty but the logic of hope and promise.<sup>37</sup> It could be regarded as the post-Hegelian supplement to Kantianism in Ricoeur's thought.

At the juncture of two kinds of philosophy, Ricoeur emphasized that the three questions raised by Kant in the *Opus Postumum* could not be separated. They read: What can (*können*) we know? What must (*müssen*) we do? What may (*dürfen*) we hope? The three defective verbs "can," "must" and "may" should be brought together. Ricoeur pointed out that "the field of hope has exactly the same extension as that of transcendental illusion."<sup>38</sup> However, we must not jump directly to the end without first passing through the examination of pure reason. To capture the concept of God as a kind of limited human knowledge is impossible. The God of the philosophers is merely a seductive illusion. Thus both the efforts of the theistic proof of God and the atheistic denial are subject to the same critique. Nevertheless, the philosophy of limits only breaks the illusion of objective knowledge at the level of spatio-temporal objects. It does not put a definitive closure to the philosophical discourse. In light of this, Ricoeur thought that the hope in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* should not be taken as a theme which just comes after others; it is an impulse which prevents the philosophy of limits from forming a closed system. Hope adds nothing to the objective knowledge. It is not apodictic but hypothetical. It resides not in the epistemological realm, but in the practical and existential realms. It follows that the God we hope for is not to be thought of as a rational postulate, but is intended as the origin of a gift.<sup>39</sup> Therefore the Hegelian mediation process of the Spirit could still be retained in our hope without a violation of the limits of reason.

---

<sup>37</sup> Van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 173.

<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," 211-12.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," 211-14.

To summarize Ricoeur's post-Hegelian Kantianism in a nutshell, he assumed the initiative of the absolute spirit or the divine from Hegel's phenomenology, and perceived its manifestation within the realm of hope in Kant's framework of limits.<sup>40</sup> In this way the Hegelian type of ontology is appreciated but at the same time *postponed*. That is to say, the realm of human knowledge is open to an experience of the absolute spirit that is not yet comprehensive. Van Leeuwen perceptively pointed out that thus an *eschatological* dimension is introduced into Ricoeur's philosophy; the presence of the divine is not assured by a theory of the principles of being, but may be *hoped for*.<sup>41</sup> As the divine reveals itself in the ongoing history, the human could expect and have a glimpse of its manifestation even with limited reason. Despite the complete picture not being available until the eschaton, the human may affirm the moment of *Vorstellung* in the midst of history as the divine could manifest itself to self-consciousness at any time. Thus there is always a restless passion in Ricoeur's thought to interpret testimony as the original affirmation of the divine and awaiting revelation from the absolute spirit, although the religious knowledge obtained could only be vindicated in the eschatological future.<sup>42</sup>

The coherence of the above post-Hegelian Kantianism is quite clear. However, it appears that Ricoeur did not spell out the philosophical reason for his formulation.<sup>43</sup> John W. Van Den Hengel thought that it is more on theological than philosophical grounds that Ricoeur embraced this framework.<sup>44</sup> Ricoeur was striving to affirm the manifestation of the absolute spirit or the divine in human

---

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Pamela Sue Anderson, *Ricoeur and Kant: Philosophy of the Will* (Atlanta: Scholar, 1993), 21-22.

<sup>41</sup> Van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 180-81.

<sup>42</sup> Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 196-97.

<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur only declared that he is influenced by Eric Weil and is inspired by Jurgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* to work on hope, cf. Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," 404-406, 412; *idem*, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," 204-205.

<sup>44</sup> Van Den Hengel, *The Home of Meaning*, 214-15, footnote.

experience, i.e., accepting testimony in his philosophical discussion. It is both his objective and rationale. He had never articulated a cogent philosophical reason for justifying his stance.

However, as Ricoeur pointed out, in Hegel's system both figurative thought of religion and speculative thought of philosophy are involved in the dynamism of *Vorstellung*. Therefore it may not be appropriate to separate two kinds of reason *within* the post-Hegelian Kantian framework. Moreover, as Ricoeur decisively placed the discussion of testimony in the realm of hope rather than theoretical reason, making a discourse justifying his thought here and now would paradoxically violate the limits of reason. Thus, I believe that the formulation of this framework itself is destined to be a wager, which is a mark of its eschatological orientation.

In fact, as Ricoeur pointed out, his intention of raising the problem of hope rather than that of faith or love is to entail a radical change in the nature of the confrontation between philosophy and theology.<sup>45</sup> It could be true, as Dan R. Stiver articulated, that Ricoeur had set epistemology within the *religious* context of eschatology. But it should imply that Ricoeur's philosophical framework could hardly stand without original *religious* testimony.<sup>46</sup> What is the point of Ricoeur retaining a distinction between philosophy and theology? Facing this kind of question, his answer was:

The philosopher is not a preacher. He may listen to preaching, as I do; but insofar as he is a professional and responsible thinker, he remains a beginner, and his discourse always remains a preparatory discourse.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, Ricoeur wanted to maintain that philosophy is an autonomous discipline with regard to theology from the *methodological* perspective, although his is undeniably a "believing" philosophy.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the conclusion of Vanhoozer's study is right

<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," 203.

<sup>46</sup> Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 196, 202.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," in idem, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 441.

<sup>48</sup> Because of space constraint, we could not address the plausibility of this formulation in detail; one of the recent queries is raised by Pamela Sue Anderson on Ricoeur's exclusion of the two

to an extent: "Ricoeur does not proclaim the Gospel. Rather, like John the Baptist, Ricoeur serves the Gospel by baptizing our imaginations, philosophically preparing the way for the Word."<sup>49</sup>

## II. A Hermeneutic of Testimony in the Historical Realm

Instead of starting from a lofty position affirming the immediacy of the absolute spirit and the autonomy of consciousness, Ricoeur, as we have seen, chose to start his inquiry of testimony in the historical realm. He believed that only in the interpretation of the ambiguous signs through which the absolute spirit shows itself, absolute knowledge would be released. As Ricoeur put it:

Because there is revelation, because there is this seemingly nonhermeneutical moment of sameness between Absolute [spirit] and immediacy, an infinite process of mediation is launched.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, for Ricoeur, philosophy after Hegel can only be interpretation. The above-mentioned post-Hegelian Kantian framework provided an important basis and a conceptuality for working out its implications. If the contents of consciousness are posited by the human self, then any idea of the "divine" must become the predicate of the founding subject. Thus the idea of the autonomy of consciousness would constitute a resistance to any idea of revelation, and must result in the atheism of a Feuerbach.<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur unequivocally rejected this position. He wanted to maintain a transparency of the absolute spirit in the historical realm through mediation, but not an always already-there immediacy. This is the reason Ricoeur reinterpreted the twofold movement of *Vorstellung*. And it brought up issues concerning faith and ideology, the role of the faith community, and biblical hermeneutics in the hermeneutics of testimony.

---

theological Gifford Lectures from *Oneself as Another*; cf. "Agnosticism and Attestation: An Aporia concerning the Other in Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*," *The Journal of Religion* 74 (1994): 65-76.

<sup>49</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 288.

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 78; cf. Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 76; cf. footnote 9 above.

<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 27, 30.

## 1. Faith and Ideology in the Appropriation of Testimony

When the historical realm is taken seriously into the discussion of divine revelation, an ambiguity occurs. Hegel called the moment of exteriorization of the Spirit alienation, when the absolute spirit shows itself as the object of human consciousness and recapitulates cultural determinations. In due course, *Vorstellung* may bring about an unhappy consciousness in the human subject, for the subject must first renounce, or alienate itself from itself in order to become the self-consciousness of the absolute spirit. Thus in some of the early works of Hegel alienation may carry a pejorative meaning. But in his mature works, Hegel understood alienation positively as a necessary process, through which the human spirit must pass, in order to arrive at self-consciousness of the absolute spirit.

It follows that alienation in later use bears a double sense. It can mean both *Entäusserung* (exteriorization) and *Entfremdung* (expropriation or dispossession). Ricoeur thought that this position is possible only if alienation is a double *kenosis*, of the absolute spirit and of the self. But left-Hegelians such as Feuerbach and young Marx took only the negative connotation, i.e. expropriation of the true self. Without a *kenosis* of the absolute spirit, a true self-revelation of the absolute spirit in the historical realm, alienation for them meant nothing more than an inversion of humanity, an equivalence to the expropriation of the true self. Faith becomes merely "a false, ideological superstructure legitimating the capitalist mode of production," especially when instituted religion continuously summoned people to renounce themselves. "Feuerbach and Marx instituted, therefore, a critique of heaven (religion, faith) as a critique of the earth (alienated social relationships)."<sup>52</sup>

Ricoeur was aware of the potential danger left-Hegelians had articulated. That is why he eschewed Hegel's claim of the immediacy of the absolute spirit, which is reflected in his renunciation of the self-sufficient subject. However, Ricoeur was equally unsatisfied

---

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 27, 30; Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 71-72.



with the interpretation of left-Hegelians, which is a one-sided *kenosis* without the incarnation of the absolute spirit in the world. Therefore he worked hard to find a middle way between a one-sided positive and one-sided negative view of alienation after refuting the immediacy of the absolute spirit.

To solve the problem, Ricoeur introduced Max Weber's notion of ideology into his discussion. For Weber, ideology is necessary for a social group to express its identity. It performs an integrative function by first simplifying and schematizing the grounding act of the community to a self-image, e.g. the French Revolution for France, the October Revolution for the U.S.S.R., etc. By means of the symbolic system, the community justifies its emergence, perpetuates itself and exists in a unity. As Ricoeur observed, ideology is thus operative rather than thematic. It operates at a pre-conscious level; we think *from* it rather than *about* it.

Because of this dissimulative character, the authority of a group may legitimate and secure its power by invoking ideology, even to the point of distortion. By making use of the uncritical stance, the authority deceives people by concealing the gap between the lived reality and the ideal world represented by the grounding self-image. Thus it makes resistance to possibilities of establishing new self-understanding from the contemporary historical experience and justifies the *status quo*. Operating in this way, ideology becomes the agent of producing "false consciousness."

The critical point emerges when the authority tries to acquire more power from the group than justified. It does so by making an inversion: defining ideology by *both* its integrative function *and* the present historical contents. That means the authority tries to legitimate its domination by identifying what *is* with what *ought* to be. From this point onwards, ideology has become Marx's ideology *par excellence*. Thus Marx wrote, "if in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-

process."<sup>53</sup> Taking a cue from the Frankfurt school, Ricoeur argued, "the ideological function must therefore be detached from the ideological content," otherwise we could never walk out from the inverted image.<sup>54</sup>

How is this related to Ricoeur's discussion of faith? It is well known that for Marx and Feuerbach, religion is the ready example of ideology *par excellence*. Ricoeur also admitted, "religion is the 'ideological' side of faith in an absolutely primitive, foundational and fundamental sense of the word."<sup>55</sup> Or as Van Den Hengel interpreted him, "faith enroots itself in religion, and religion is the historical and cultural expression of faith."<sup>56</sup> If the divine must show itself through exteriorization, if we must seek its trace within the historically conditioned signs of instituted religion, then faith must suffer from a potential danger of becoming Marx's sense of ideology. Therefore Ricoeur affirmed and even endorsed the Marxist critique of religion as a means of ridding us of the hidden dominating interest in institutionalized faith.

To cope with the problem, Ricoeur thought that Christianity as an institutionalized religion must face an external critique. The phenomenon of religion is criticized in modern times as a sort of coded language of domination and submission. Ricoeur thought that Feuerbach was right to say that human beings are emptying themselves to the absolute in this circumstance. We must stop this bleeding into the sacred. Therefore Ricoeur agreed with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that a critique of religion concerning the human gods

---

<sup>53</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), 47.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Science and Ideology," in *idem*, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), 225-31 [French original: "Science et idéologie," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 72 (1974): 326-56]; cf. Richard Kearney, "Religion and Ideology: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Conflict," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 52 (1986): 111-14.

<sup>55</sup> Quoting from Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 74; original: "L'herméneutique de la sécularisation," in *Archivio di filosofia*, (1976), 66.

<sup>56</sup> Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 74.

pertains to a mature faith for the modern era. Religion must be demystified. Because of this, although Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are often seen as the great foes of Christianity, Ricoeur honoured the three masters of suspicion since for them "de-mystification is characterized in the first place as the exercise of suspicion."<sup>57</sup> This is also the reason he included a corresponding moment in his biblical hermeneutics, as we shall see later.

However, Ricoeur did not conform completely to the left-Hegelians' one-sided view. Ideology may be twisted as an agent of domination to create false consciousness, but it is not only that. This is the significance of introducing Weber into the discussion. As the absolute spirit is not immediate, as human being cannot grasp the absolute knowledge, no one can claim to have a truly pre-ideological vantage point. As Weber pointed out, ideology is an indispensable dimension of historically situated human beings. Thus a critique of ideology is necessary, but it should only aim at unmasking "false consciousness." We cannot completely abolish ideology for the sake of being rid of the hidden dominating function.<sup>58</sup>

In line with this, besides endorsing the hermeneutics of suspicion, Ricoeur also balanced it with a hermeneutics of affirmation. The former is an archeological effort to discriminate "false consciousness" by interpreting religious discourse in terms of a first-order causal reference to some predetermining reality hidden behind. Doing hermeneutics in this sense is a denunciation of a consciousness of falsehood through deciphering certain structures of our cultural text, such that an unmasking of masked consciousness is possible. On the other hand, a hermeneutics of affirmation is an eschatological interpretation to discern the possible meaning lying in front of us disclosed by a second-order signification of the discourse. In sum, we should unravel the concealed interest and at the same time explore the genuine message of the divine which discloses to

---

<sup>57</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 28 (1973): 206.

<sup>58</sup> Kearney, "Religion and Ideology," 114-16.

us authentic possibility.<sup>59</sup> This is the passage we must struggle to pass through to encounter the God we hope for.

Seen in this way, Ricoeur maintained that in the movement of *Vorstellung*, *Entfremdung* must give precedence to *Entäusserung*. Faith must *first* have a positive contribution before it becomes a negative phenomenon. Negation could not be humanity's first reality. Nothing could be renounced before something was first appropriated.<sup>60</sup> In other words, by attesting to the self-revelation of the divine, Ricoeur tried to appropriate a truly double *kenosis*. That is why he could even claim that the three masters of suspicion were finally positive thinkers of faith.<sup>61</sup> If, nonetheless, the immediate bond with the divine is loosened to a mediate one, then it remains an issue for Ricoeur to make an original affirmation of the absolute spirit in the concrete situation of the historical realm. If we cannot grasp hold of absolute knowledge, we must make a wager. As Ricoeur put it:

We wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; verification is therefore a question of our whole life. No one can escape this. Anyone who claims to proceed in a value-free way will find nothing.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, as Vanhoozer pointed out, faith must live out of the tension between the positive and negative functions of ideology.<sup>63</sup> With respect to Ricoeur's semantic analysis of testimony, it is the quasi-judicial aspect of testimony.

Nevertheless, having articulated the two moments of appropriating the experience of the divine, we should no longer appreciate faith with a purely naive stance. As Stiver wrote, "if we are to be naive, it must be a postcritical naivete that has appropriated these critical changes into our understanding."<sup>64</sup> For the sake of

<sup>59</sup> Kearney, "Religion and Ideology," 116-19; cf. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 146.

<sup>60</sup> Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 72-73.

<sup>61</sup> Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," 208.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 312.

<sup>63</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 108.

<sup>64</sup> Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 146.

making a critical judgment, Ricoeur thus took seriously historical human institutions like the historical Christian religion into his discussion. Stiver perceptively pointed out that bringing hermeneutics close to praxis marked a shift in Ricoeur's thought, as Ricoeur articulated this change himself in the preface of his later work *From Text to Action*:

Little by little, a dominant theme asserts itself in this enterprise of militant hermeneutics, namely, the gradual reinscription of the theory of texts within the theory of action.<sup>65</sup>

But in what follows I would like to argue that "little by little" of the dominant theme was present even before his application of text hermeneutics to biblical interpretation in the 1970s, when he dealt with the historical Christian religion. This is an issue overlooked by many commentators on Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics,<sup>66</sup> but I believe that his authentic stance on this frequently treated topic could not be appreciated fully apart from his important account of the faith community.

## **2. The Vital Role of the Faith Community in Christian Hermeneutics**

As we attest to the original manifestation of the divine, though in the course of transmission there is a potential danger that faith may become ideology in the negative sense, we should not abandon the hope of appropriating divine self-revelation in interpreting testimony. This is Weber's positive sense of ideology that Ricoeur articulated with the assumption of the post-Hegelian Kantian framework. Within Christianity the moment of immediacy of the divine is undoubtedly the appearance of the historical Jesus. However, we can no longer have access to this immediate God, but can only appropriate him through past and distance. In Hegel's interpretation of Christianity, as Ricoeur understood him, a hidden

---

<sup>65</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (London: Athlone, 1991), xiv.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*; Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics*; Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics in Motion*.

split had already occurred between the individual consciousness of the historical Jesus and the universal self-consciousness of the primitive church. The historical Jesus is the immediately present God, but his "being" has passed over into "having been." He has arisen in Spirit. Ricoeur pointed out that for Hegel, and to a large extent Rudolf Bultmann, resurrection occurs only in the faith community. The remembrance of the early church has become the interiorization of his immediacy. In other words, the immediate presence of the divine is retained in the figurative thought, *Vorstellung*, borne by the faith community. The initial appearance of the absolute lays the burden of interpretation on the first community as its witness.<sup>67</sup> As Van Den Hengel wrote:

The divine does not enter our history except through human signs and acts. This does not make the divine dependent upon historical testimony, nevertheless, without this historical testimony, the divine would remain *Wholly Other*.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, testimony can only be a contingent, historical expression of the absolute proceeding from a *human Other*, though it is regarded as *His* testimony.<sup>69</sup> This subtle difference brings about the whole problematic of appropriating testimony. However, Ricoeur did not regard it as a negative consequence in the appropriation of the self-revelation of the divine. On the contrary, he claimed:

This disappearance of the [divine] is the turning point between immediacy and mediation, therefore between visible presence and figurative interpretation... this disappearance of the immediate is the very condition of the universalization of the appearance itself.<sup>70</sup>

Ricoeur pointed out that the early church made its original affirmation of the manifestation of the divine in the historical person Jesus, but its confession is not merely a recording of his life. A dialectic between event and meaning, i.e. the quasi-empirical moment

---

<sup>67</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 78-79, 86-87.

<sup>68</sup> Van Den Hengel, "Faith and Ideology," 86.

<sup>69</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 456.

<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 78-79; cf. footnote 9 above.

of testimony, has already occurred in the primitive testimony. As Ricoeur put it:

In calling Jesus Son of God, Messiah or Christ, Judge, King, High Priest, Logos, the primitive church began to interpret the relation of meaning and event. The importance of this is that interpretation is not external to testimony but implied by its initial dialectical structure.<sup>71</sup>

In a sense, this dialectic advances the consciousness of the divine in the community (the quasi-ethical impact of testimony), as it reinterpreted the resurrected Lord in light of the Hebraic tradition, even with additional elements borrowed from the Hellenistic culture. Interpreting from the Hegelian perspective, Ricoeur wrote:

The consciousness of the community is the place where the content of the *Vorstellung* is both rooted in the actual appearance and directed toward its return to the self-consciousness of the Spirit. We may even suspect that the consciousness of the community *is* the revelation, its figurative rendering and its philosophical reinterpretation.<sup>72</sup>

That is to say, the absolute spirit has manifested itself to the self-consciousness of the faith community through an interiorization, and also through an exteriorization in which it has recapitulated the cultural determinations through the world-spirit. Therefore there is a surplus of meaning in the New Testament reinterpretation of the Hebrew scripture.<sup>73</sup> The external form that the divine takes to manifest itself may vary, but the subject matter to be interpreted from the process is always constant, namely divine self-revelation. It turns out that the crucial point for theologians is to interpret the act of testimony of the faith community handed down from the past. This is why Ricoeur thought that theology should deal with the domain of witness and is a logic of the Christological interpretation of salvation events.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 455.

<sup>72</sup> Ricoeur, "The Status of *Vorstellung*," 84.

<sup>73</sup> For details, cf. my discussion in the following section and Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 155-56.

<sup>74</sup> Ricoeur, "The Demythization of Accusation," 343.

Seen in this way, the faith community should play a vital role in Ricoeur's thought, since it is the witness to God. Without the historical Christian community, there would not be any renewal or even any existence of faith. Thus Ricoeur tried not to talk merely about it at the speculative level, but also developed an account of the faith community in the historical realm to substantiate his post-Hegelian stance.

It follows that Ricoeur emphasized the Christian office of preaching, such that the whole world could hear the church's testimony to God. "Christian" here is not taken in the individual sense, but as a collective term, the church. Thus Ricoeur wrote:

I do not believe that the subject of faith can be an individual. The subject of faith is not "I" but "we."<sup>75</sup>

In brief, the church is, for me, the place where I can most authentically live the dialectic between conviction and responsibility, the dialectic between death of religion and the reinterpretation of faith.<sup>76</sup>

Being a Christian is being a member of a historical institution. Any interpretation of the testimony to the divine can only be a segment of the ongoing tradition of this community, since the kerygma is transmitted in the history of the church.

In line with this, Ricoeur claimed that worship is also an essential feature of the church in relation to preaching. They together maintain its internal milieu, such that an external difference from the non-confessing world can be conceived. And the dialectic of conviction and responsibility of the faith community can only be actualized by the dialectic of the church and the world.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, Ricoeur reminded us:

---

<sup>75</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Tasks of Ecclesial Community in the Modern World," in *Renewal of Religious Structures*, ed. L. K. Shook (NY: Herder and Herder, 1968), 252.

<sup>76</sup> Ricoeur, "Tasks of Ecclesial Community in the Modern World," 254.

<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur, "Tasks of Ecclesial Community in the Modern World," 253-54.



[T]here is no direct action of Christian preaching on the collective apparatuses; all that is possible is a constant pressure of the utopian demands of Christian preaching on the ethics of responsibility, regulated by what is possible and what is reasonable.<sup>78</sup>

Therefore the church must give of its best to the office of preaching the kerygma to modern people, although it is always only a partial fulfillment of the eschatological promise in the course of history. My claim is that Ricoeur then turned to work on biblical hermeneutics, the theme which attracted a lot of commentators, for the sake of *preaching* in the modern era.

One particular point needs to be highlighted before we turn to the oft-treated theme. Even during this early stage of his intellectual journey, Ricoeur was aware that interpreting the Bible is not an amateur activity of a professional philosopher. It is because the task of biblical interpretation for Ricoeur is preaching, such that the world can hear the kerygma. If preaching is a transmission of the divine discourse, then reading the scriptures belongs to a listening to the Word. The two cannot be separated. On the contrary, listening is for the sake of Christian preaching. Thus biblical hermeneutics is not the work of a philosopher, but is conducted by the faith community in the course of its history. Therefore Ricoeur claimed that the faith community "is that place where the problem of the Word is lived, thought, and announced as a struggle of religion and of faith."<sup>79</sup> This implies that he had implicitly placed himself in this historical community, and explained why at times he declared openly that he is a listener to Christian preaching.<sup>80</sup>

In line with this, we could say that the influence of the church as a human historical institution interpreting the Bible is evident even in Ricoeur's early thought. However, being primarily a philosopher rather than a sociologist or a theologian, he did not deal deeply with

---

<sup>78</sup> Ricoeur, "Tasks of Ecclesial Community in the Modern World," 244.

<sup>79</sup> Ricoeur, "Tasks of Ecclesial Community in the Modern World," 246.

<sup>80</sup> E.g. Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," 441; *idem*, "Naming God," in *idem*, *Figuring the Sacred*, 217.

the significance of the faith community in the interpreting process. It seems that more attention was paid to the possibility of the negative influence due to the living word being distorted in institutionalized religion. Thus a critique of religion is emphasized, and Ricoeur even thought that modern people should struggle as both believers and atheists.<sup>81</sup> But can the church generate a more positive influence? According to the positive notion of ideology, in the actualization of the kerygma in life, the faith community in its concrete cultural, political, economic situation may get inspiration as to how the scripture can be reinterpreted in a creative fashion. I believe that Ricoeur was not unaware of this issue, as he wrote:

As the Remembrance of some epoch-making events - the Exodus and the Resurrection - it shares something with the positive concept of ideology. As the Expectation of the Kingdom to come shares something with the positive concept of utopia.... The root of faith is somewhere near the point where Expectation springs forth out of memory.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, the most pressing question for a philosopher in interpreting the scripture is how to display the possibility of an authentic existence from the original preaching, such that the reading self could be transformed. In a sense, Ricoeur had underestimated the constructive role of the faith community until the 1980s when he dealt more closely with the problem of praxis in hermeneutics.

### **III. Biblical Hermeneutics in Relation to Christian Testimony**

Briefly we have touched on the fact that with Christianity the problem of interpreting testimony is intertwined with an additional issue. The testimony of the primitive church was cast into the mold of a text, the Bible, as a medium for transmission. The scripture thus is a written discourse of testimony, as it contains two

---

<sup>81</sup> Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," 212.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Ideology, Utopia, Faith," *The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture* 17 (The Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley 1976): 28.

"Testaments" of the divine. In order to see the trace of the absolute spirit in the midst of the contingent signs in the historical realm, Ricoeur tried hard to understand "what a thinking subject formed by and conforming to poetic discourse might be" and applied his hermeneutics to the biblical text.<sup>83</sup> In addition, if Ricoeur's discussion is to contribute to the discernment of Christian testimony, then it must not violate the "internal witness" given by the scriptures, and ought to attest to and interpret this primordial testimony. This illumines Ricoeur's persisting interest in finding God's revelation and how He is known in the past from the Christian scripture since the 1970s. It is because the faith community has regarded the Bible as the original affirmation of the divine, and it is indeed the testimony of the primitive church.

Ricoeur wrote in the "Preface" of the French translation of Rudolf Bultmann's *Jesus, Mythology and Demythologization*:

There has always been a hermeneutic problem in Christianity because Christianity proceeds from a proclamation. It begins with a fundamental preaching that maintains that in Jesus Christ the kingdom has approached us in decisive fashion. But this fundamental preaching, this word, comes to us through writings, through the Scriptures, and these must constantly be restored as the living word if the primitive word that witnessed to the fundamental and founding event is to remain contemporary.<sup>84</sup>

In light of this, Ricoeur perceived that the history of Christianity itself to a degree is a history of the hermeneutic problem, since Christianity presents itself as a kerygma, a proclamation, or a discourse addressed to the world.<sup>85</sup> This claim is in line with Ricoeur's reconstruction of the twofold movements of *Vorstellung*. If the divine has erupted into the historical realm and has manifested itself to human beings, then it must have become a fact of culture, and it has even been inscribed as written discourse:

---

<sup>83</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 27.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," in *idem, The Conflict of Interpretations*, 382.

<sup>85</sup> Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," 205.

It is only by entering into our discourse that the Word of God, alleged by the believer as the Word of God, proclaims itself.<sup>86</sup>

It follows that Christian hermeneutics must deal with the relation between the scripture and what it refers to, i.e. kerygma. It needs to reconvert the scripture into living word through the successive readings of the faith community.<sup>87</sup>

It is indeed an internal problem existing in the Christian scripture. As we have mentioned, the testimony of the Christ event is already an interpretation of a pre-existing scripture. It made the entire Jewish economy suddenly appear old. Thus the first generation Christian needed to address a question: what is the relationship between the two Testaments? As a result, allegorical reading is applied to generate a mutation of meaning inside the ancient scripture. The kerygma, and in fact the whole New Testament, is a rereading of the Jewish scripture and thus is hermeneutically related to it.<sup>88</sup>

The second root of the hermeneutic problem is initiated by Paul, when he invited his audiences to decipher their existence in the light of the passion and resurrection of Christ. Medieval hermeneutics basically followed this principle, and regarded the scripture as an inexhaustible treasure which stimulates thought about everything. To interpret the Bible in this way is to amplify its meaning as sacred and to incorporate the whole world in the economy of Christian existence. In short, the mutual relation of the meaning of Christ and the meaning of existence sets up a hermeneutic circle for the hearers of the Word of God.<sup>89</sup>

The third root of the hermeneutic problem was not fully recognized until modern times, when secular sciences such as history and philology had been applied to the Bible. For Christians, the

---

<sup>86</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Two Essays by Paul Ricoeur," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 28 (1973): 203.

<sup>87</sup> Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," 382.

<sup>88</sup> Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," 382-84.

<sup>89</sup> Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," 384-86.

Word of God is ultimately not the scripture, but Jesus Christ. However, this kerygma is expressed in the form of a witness as a text. This "Testament" announces the event of this person and contains the first confession of the faith community. However, to moderns the scripture appears as the word of humans. We are the hearers of the witness and believe only by listening and by interpreting a text, which is already an interpretation of a testimony in the form of an ancient text. Therefore our relation to the New Testament, not only to the Old Testament, is a hermeneutic relation.<sup>90</sup>

In other words, the whole problematic of biblical hermeneutics as Ricoeur perceived is that the Christian should interpret the New Testament with regard to the Old Testament, and to interpret it for our life and for reality as a whole. But to adopt such an agenda, we have already put ourselves in the faith community which is summoned by the kerygma. The community thus has the responsibility to proclaim the kerygma to all human beings, to let all hear the genuine Word and find their existential meaning in the world.

With the above hermeneutic problem in mind, Ricoeur articulated the significance of Bultmann's demythologization. Against the common and simple idea that demythologization is a mere abandonment of the mythic wrapping of the scripture, Ricoeur saw that it is the inverse side of the grasp of the kerygma, the true Word of God through unveiling the cultural distance between the ancient time and ours. Our task is to understand the essence of meaning in the text but not the life of the ancient authors. However, what we now have is the biblical text as a witness composed by them. Therefore demythologization as an exegetical work is important since it helps us to approach what the text really announces to us.<sup>91</sup> Ricoeur wrote:

To destroy and to interpret: these are the two faces of modern exegesis. For the Christian the destroying belongs to the act of listening. What we want

---

<sup>90</sup> Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," 386-88.

<sup>91</sup> Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," 388-90; Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," 209-10.

is through this process of destruction to hear a more original and more originating word.... Its function is to open up, to inaugurate a *possibility* of existence.<sup>92</sup>

It is because even the figurative language of faith is capable of distortion, illusion and deception. Therefore the hermeneutics of suspicion must be endorsed in biblical hermeneutics as an unmasking process.

Nevertheless, Ricoeur pointed out that if we cannot restore human positivity in the same process, then any critique of religion appropriated by Christian hermeneutics will become just another mask - a mask of fear, a mask of domination, a mask of hate. We are then doing no better than affirming the modern spirit of meaninglessness. But Christians have the office to testify to the abundance of sense over nonsense, since they believe that the Word has erupted into this world, bringing about superabundance through the event of the cross and resurrection. Therefore Christians should proclaim the good news to the world attested in the scriptures, and stand as the adversary of the absurd, as the prophet of meaning. In light of this, Christian preaching must overcome the critique of religion, being a critique of her critique and its criteria, and at the same time restore an interrogation to the kerygma. If demystification is the work of unbelief, then demythologization should be the work of faith. The latter has to transform the former, the external critique of religion, into its internal critique, such that preaching can take place at the junction of destruction and interpretation. That is to say, we should reduce illusions on the one hand, and let the kerygma address modern people on the other hand such that the question of meaning could be taken up again.<sup>93</sup> Thus Ricoeur announced his well-known slogan: Beyond the desert of criticism we wish to be called again.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Ricoeur, "Tasks of Ecclesial Community," 251.

<sup>93</sup> Ricoeur, "Tasks of Ecclesial Community," 249-50; Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," 207-209.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 349.

Because of space constraint, we shall not continue examining Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics here.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile we shall engage in a discussion from the perspective of regarding biblical interpretation as a part of Christian hermeneutics of testimony. Lewis S. Mudge may be the first to point out the significance of testimony in Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics as early in 1979. In addition, he explained that there are three moments in Ricoeur's interpretation process - "testimony in the making," "critical moment," and "post-critical moment" - with Ricoeur's unreserved approval.<sup>96</sup> It seems at first glance that testimony is formed at a pre-critical stage. It generates biblical discourses which can be called "revelatory" since they are written by the witnesses to the divine.<sup>97</sup> But a critical judgment must be brought forth to attain a post-critical faith. Seen from our above discussion about religion as the institutionalized form of faith, testimony seems to function like Weber's notion of ideology. One could only think from it rather than about it. Is testimony then doomed to be a baseless naive wager? Is theology, which in a Ricoeurian definition works in the domain of witness, merely a naive fideism?

Be this as it may, I believe that we should listen more carefully to Ricoeur's response concerning the "critical moment" in appreciating Mudge's interpretation. Ricoeur wrote:

As concerns more specifically the "critical moment," I agree also with Mudge that I have not yet clearly shown how the intellectual integrity embodied in biblical criticism can be encompassed in this dialectic of testimony without any "sacrificium intellectus".<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Readers interested in this aspect may read Jason Tsz-shun Lam "Biblical Hermeneutics in Paul Ricoeur's Writings in the 1970s: Its Relation to Christian Theology," forthcoming in *Asian Journal of Evangelical Theology*.

<sup>96</sup> Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," 49-62; Ricoeur, "A Response," 79; David Klemm, *The Hermeneutical Theory of Paul Ricoeur* (Lewisburg: Bucknell, 1983), 69 refers the three stages as "first naïveté," "critique," and "second naïveté"; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (NY: Crossroad, 1981), 151-52; note 107 calls them simply "understanding", "explanation", and "understanding", in my opinion best display the dialectical relationship between the stages in the process; see the following discussion.

<sup>97</sup> Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," 50.

<sup>98</sup> Ricoeur, "A Response," 79.

After stating this, Ricoeur, and Mudge in his comment as well, interestingly went on discussing the issue of historical reference but ended with a remark about ethical influence or the existential significance of the text. The critical moment, or the hermeneutics of suspicion, is applied more to the interpreting subject than to the biblical texts or any object being interpreted. When Ricoeur appropriated the hermeneutics of suspicion in this way, he regarded it as an unmasking process to the interpreting cogito rather than as a literary skill for dealing with texts.<sup>99</sup>

Without dealing with the details of Ricoeur's textual interpretation, we could already see that all the three moments Mudge articulated have a concern with the interpreting subject. A witness is involved in the making of testimony; an unmasking process is applied in the critical moment; and the result of the post-critical moment should be a transformed self after appropriating the testament. In line with this, in Ricoeur's own discussion about testimony he on the one hand urged us to divest (*dépouiller*) ourselves in appropriating the text, but on the other hand we need to make an original affirmation of the divine revelation in the same process.<sup>100</sup> Seen in this way, a genuine testimony should be formed after a divestment of self, which is a critical moment in the process. In light of this, testimony should not be taken merely as a pre-critical moment, but as a post-critical stage of the self-constituting process.

However, I believe neither that Mudge has made an incorrect interpretation nor that Ricoeur has approved a misunderstanding of his writings. The clue lies in Mudge's label "testimony *in the making*." It is true that the first moment of reading could be naïve and testimony must start with this first naïveté. But a witness should then pass through a judgment to attain a mature stage of testimony eventually.

---

<sup>99</sup> It does not mean that Ricoeur simply skipped the discussion of historical reference and literary analysis of the biblical texts. He took them as serious challenges and dealt with them in his later discussions of metaphor and narrative.

<sup>100</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 31-33; *idem*, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 436-37; the verb *dépouiller* and its noun form *dépouillement* have no direct correspondence in English, which may mean "to cast off," "to strip off one's clothes," "to rid oneself of," etc.; cf. translator fn.2 in 436.



Therefore I claim that Mudge's three moments *as a whole* belong to one process of constituting testimony while the first moment is a naïve but necessary stage. Moreover, the three moments also resemble the three semantic aspects Ricoeur articulated in "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," namely the "quasi-empirical," "quasi-judicial" and "quasi-ethical" aspects.

Nevertheless, as Ricoeur was aware that the manifestation of the divine could not be contained, testimony remains not a strict proof. It requires our judgment to accept it or not. It may bring about doubts in the course of transmission, and faith must remain a wager. In a sense, we can only think from its grounding act rather than about it. However, as it is initiated from a grounding act, it is not a baseless wager. It is triggered from the testimony of the manifestation of the divine as *initium*. Beyond that origin, we can go no further. Nonetheless, Ricoeur formulated this phenomenon positively: "A hermeneutic without testimony is condemned to an infinite regress in a perspectivism with neither beginning nor end." But "the self-manifestation of the absolute here and now indicates the end of the infinite regress of reflection."<sup>101</sup>

If we compare this process with Ricoeur's twofold movements of *Vorstellung*, then we should find that the post-critical stage of testimony is reached when the absolute spirit returns to itself in self-consciousness. The double *kenosis* could refer to the divestment of self as an unmasking process and the revelation of the divine in the historical realm as a making of testimony. And the trace of the divine is inscribed as the biblical witness. When seen against Ricoeur's notion of Christian hermeneutics, I find that Stiver's comment is illuminating:

What happens in this biblical movement from the Old Testament to the New is an intense interiorization of the notion. Finally, the prime witness is God the Holy Spirit testifying in one's heart, in other words, the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" so important to Calvin.<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 454; for the details of the whole philosophical discussion, cf. 453-61.

<sup>102</sup> Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 298.

Therefore in the struggle between affirmation and skepticism Ricoeur could announce boldly, "I hope I am *within* the bounds of Truth."<sup>103</sup> In the case of Christian hermeneutics, Ricoeur unambiguously claimed, "the presupposition of all Christian preaching is the continuity and identity of the earthly Jesus and the Christ who speaks through the tongues of the prophets in the community of faith."<sup>104</sup> Christians wager on this originating event, which they regard as the manifestation of God.

From the above discussion, we can see that the final lesson from Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics agenda is not distilling a set of exegetical principles, but learning from the scriptures how the divine encounter in the past was experienced and influenced the past generations, and how our encounter with this divine record could provide us authentic possibility for our life and be transformed by it. Therefore, finding revelation through the biblical texts may not be the ultimate objective of Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics, though it is a very important and even pivotal segment. Hence Ricoeur did not merely talk about the subject's feeling and the reading experience of the biblical text, but also the practical reaction to and influences on others as he analysed the scriptures. These elements constitute the comprehensive meaning Ricoeur ascribed to testimony as he had explicated it, for testimony to the absolute spirit should reflect the act of the divine upon the ethical existence of the witness. Because of this, Ricoeur paid much attention to the discussion of the transformed self, and achieving an enlarged self is always the ultimate objective in his hermeneutics, regardless of whether it is biblical or not.

It is then not a surprise that, although the transformed self always seems to be the final stage in Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics agenda, his remarkable essay "The Hermeneutics of Testimony" was written prior to most of his essays on biblical hermeneutics. It is because a philosophy of testimony should be a hermeneutic, as we have shown

---

<sup>103</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and the Unity of Truth," in *idem*, *History and Truth*, 54.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Ricoeur. "From Proclamation to Narrative," *The Journal of Religion* 64 (1984): 501.

in the explication above. Andrew D. Wood in his dissertation took a further step and related Ricoeur's idea of testimony to his late work *Oneself as Another*, in which he talked about the constitution of oneself in the presence of "Others." This "Others" could include any significant dialogue partner being there with the interpreting subject, e.g. the fleshly human other, the divine Wholly Other, the voice of an other in a cultural text, or that inscribed in a sacred text, and more. With this hint Wood saw that Ricoeur is returning to the agenda he had set in the very beginning of his career, namely the philosophy of the will.<sup>105</sup>

To this, however, I want to add one point that Wood did not mention: the omitted twin theological lectures from *Oneself as Another*, which are included in the original Gifford Lectures, are also on biblical hermeneutics and the summoned self.<sup>106</sup> The major content of the last lecture "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation" is an explication on the constitution of the self discussing from the account of the Old Testament prophets, through the Christ image and Augustine's figure of the "Inner Teacher" to the testimony of conscience in modern philosophy. I believe that it is not an accidental coincidence, but Ricoeur's constant concern already spelled out in his hermeneutics of testimony, and we may even regard it as an extended discussion of his biblical explication in "The Hermeneutics of Testimony." This time Ricoeur did not limit his discussion to the testimony of the Bible, but extended it along the history of western thought. When seen against the broader perspective of Ricoeur's intellectual journey, this phenomenon may even imply that his turn to general hermeneutics from the late 1960s onwards is for the sake of a better understanding of the philosophy of the will initiated in his unfinished trilogy in the 1950s, which is a treatment of the human consciousness or desire to

---

<sup>105</sup> Wood, "The Wager of Faith," 6.

<sup>106</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," in *The Whole and Divided Self*, ed. David E. Aune and John McCarthy. (NY: Crossroad, 1997), 201-20; Paul Ricoeur, "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation," in *idem, Figuring the Sacred*, 262-75.

be. Accordingly, we may say that Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics is in fact for the service of a better comprehension of Christian testimony; therefore we cannot isolate his discussion of biblical hermeneutics from his concern for the self summoned by the divine.

In conclusion, we have examined Ricoeur's early writings related to testimony in this essay. We find that his post-Hegelian Kantian framework provides a basis for both his philosophical and theological discussion of testimony. The human can hope for the manifestation of the divine and perceive it within the limits of reason. Testimony is the human original affirmation of the divine revelation in the historical realm. With Christianity the witness of the first generation believers' encounter with the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Christ belongs to this kind of affirmation. The New Testament is their written testimony, which is already a reinterpretation of the existing Jewish scriptures. Nowadays Christians can still experience the same divine encounter in reading the scriptures, making the same testifying to Jesus Christ, and being transformed in their worldly existence. Seen in this way, biblical hermeneutics for Ricoeur is a segment of the entire hermeneutic problem of Christianity. We read in order to hear the original Word. The Bible is an important mediation for the transmission of the kerygma for the faith community in the course of history. The task of biblical hermeneutics is then to unfold the divine Word from the human written words, so that Christians may find the existential meaning as the possibility of authentic existing in the modern world. It should be a way of transformative reading and the objective is to achieve a new self-understanding. Christians can thus expect to hear the divine Word anew in the process until the eschaton.

## ABSTRACT

This essay aims to offer an interpretation of Paul Ricoeur's theological writings in the 1960s and the early 1970s. It points out that these writings proposed a theological hermeneutic of testimony, and Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics developed since the 1970s is a necessary detour in this proposal. Testimony for Ricoeur is the human original affirmation of the divine revelation in the historical realm. His post-Hegelian Kantian framework provides a basis for both his philosophical and theological discussion of testimony. With Christianity the witness of the first generation believers' encounter with the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Christ belongs to such kind of affirmation. The new testament is their written testimony, which is a reinterpretation of the existing Jewish scriptures. Nowadays Christians can still experience the same divine encounter when reading the scriptures, making the same testifying to Jesus Christ, and being transformed in their worldly existence. The task of biblical hermeneutics for Ricoeur is thus to unfold the divine Word from the human words, so that Christians may find the existential meaning in the modern world.

## 撮 要

本文闡釋保羅·李克爾 (Paul Ricoeur) 在 1960 至 1970 年代初的神學論述，指出其作品展示了一個對見證 (testimony) 的神學詮釋，而其在 1970 年代起發展的聖經詮釋乃為此議程之必要蹊徑。對李克爾而言，見證乃為人類對神聖在世啟示的原初肯定，他的後黑格爾－康德框架 (post-Hegelian Kantian framework) 為其哲學與神學討論提供了基礎。在基督教來說，初代信徒對在世的耶穌及復活的基督之見證乃為此種肯定。新約聖經就是他們的文字見證，而這又是基於已有之猶太經典的重新解釋。今天基督徒閱讀聖經時仍能經驗相同的神聖相遇，對耶穌基督作相同的見證，並得到存活經驗的更新。對李克爾來說，聖經詮釋的目的就是要從人言中展現聖言，以致基督徒能在現世中尋得存活意義。