

**Beyond Ideology and Utopia: Towards a Post-Critical Historical Theology****Rev. Michael J. G. Pahls**

“Christianity appeals to history, and to history it must go.” This aphorism, attributed to the late Oxford biblical scholar, George Caird, aptly summarizes the inescapable duty of the Christian theologian to engage the chronicles of public and personal memory.<sup>1</sup> One might, of course, write-off Caird’s sentiments as the quaint protestations of a man caught-up in the enthusiasms of modernist historiography. This assessment would be premature, however, for Caird’s statement represents as much a *theological* claim as an historical claim. In the creedal faith of catholic Christianity, it is not simply that Jesus Christ was crucified, but that he was “Crucified under Pontius Pilate.” The insertion of the Roman Procurator’s name into the Apostolic Symbol commits Christianity to a public-historical specificity that cannot be sacrificed without a simultaneous forfeiture of Christian baptismal identity.<sup>2</sup>

Once the theological stakes for history are made clear, the question must still be answered as to precisely what one means by “history” and what one may predicate of history after the postmodern turn. Is there yet hope for the establishment of a common memory that is not a mere expression of local knowledge or of the will to power? If so, how might one commence with such a project in an appropriately chastened manner, adopting a style that is self-consciously humbled by the hermeneutic of suspicion while yet remaining aloof to the cynicism and despair of an insistent nihilism. In what remains, I will explore the implications of post-critical history, drawn principally from the reflections of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. I will then turn to consider Ricoeur’s particular value to the task of historical theology, perhaps raising the stakes of his purely philosophical wager in a consideration Christian theological doctrines of the resurrection and of Pentecost.

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Caird by N.T. Wright, “Jesus and the Identity of God,” *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998): 42–56. Cited 22 October, 2005. Online: [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_JIG.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_JIG.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Here I refer to the traditional place of the Creed in the initiatory rite of Christian Baptism. Prior to the application of water, the baptizand is required to affirm the Creed as a self-implicating affirmation of the faith that claims her. The baptizand is then named by and with the Triune name, symbolically clothing her with a new identity. Thus, the Pilate clause situates the baptizand in relationship to God, to the community, to the self, and to the world. In affirming the Creed, the Christian says, “This is my history, this is my community’s history, and this is the world’s history.”

### History as Metaphor and Narrative

Paul Ricoeur's account of history begins with the basic lacuna between *chronos* and *kairos* – between time as the experience of things with no memory or expectation and time as experienced by “ensouled humanity,” possessing the consciousness of past and future and an awareness of the potential relations between them in the present. In this, Ricoeur is building on the thought of Martin Heidegger who described human “being” as uniquely a “being-in-time.” Heidegger, as will be recalled, spoke of human reckoning with time in terms of *caring*.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of this unique care for time, Ricoeur suggests that all human existence and all human identity possesses a narrative character.<sup>4</sup> We make sense of the unique experience of human being in the world by telling stories about ourselves and about others. Reflection on how this is done takes up significant portions of Ricoeur's corpus.

In his collection of studies titled *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur traces out a theory of how metaphor “works” as a discursive phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> He argues that metaphor is a creative discourse in which the one naming the similitude creates resemblances where they were previously unthought. By this constructive act, one “unleashes the power that certain fictions have to describe reality.”<sup>6</sup> By the construction of metaphors, then, new possibilities are opened for human understanding.

Projecting beyond this observation Ricoeur argues in his three-volume *Time and Narrative* that narrative works in a similar manner.<sup>7</sup> In the case of history in particular, the narrator draws upon the various *traces* of past – the raw data of persons, places, and events that comprise the objects of historical inquiry

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<sup>3</sup> *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; New York: Harper and Row, 1962) §41, 235-41.

<sup>4</sup> See particularly the Ricoeur's discussion of “The First Aporia of Temporality: Narrative Identity” in *Time and Narrative: Volume 3* (trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988) 244-49 and his studies of “Personal Identity and Narrative Identity” and “The Self and Narrative Identity” in *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 113-68.

<sup>5</sup> (trans. Robert Czerny, et.al.; Toronto: University of Toronto, 1975). See especially study three (pp. 65-100) in which he moves from metaphor as a misapplied lexeme to metaphorical discourse.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative* were composed successively and intended to be read as a pair as Ricoeur himself continually maintains. *Time and Narrative I: Volume 1*, ix.

– to creatively imagine their temporal emplotment.<sup>8</sup> Far from the naïve conception of history as an immediate description of “what happened,” he argues that history consists in the imaginative configuration of otherwise random “nows,” and in the otherwise random encounters between nows.

By moving to historical narrative from metaphor, Ricoeur successfully transcends the traditional dichotomies of historiography as art or as science. On one hand, Ricoeur is quite willing to concede that the past is a “limiting-idea” and that it remains inaccessible as an immediate thing-in-itself. Because of this, history can never pretend at being a purely empirical or scientific mode of discourse. On the other hand, he believes that it is still valid to speak of the reality of the historical past in a manner that obliges the historian to do critical justice to the *traces* – what we may call the “souvenirs” in the American sense – that exist in the present as tangible testimony to the “something” that once took place. Ricoeur writes,

This predominance of the positive side of the limiting-idea is evident in that it is the past *such as* it was that moves historians to provide historical configurations and that is behind their endless rectifications, as they touch up the painting. This is what I wanted to suggest when I spoke of the historian’s *inexhaustible debt* with respect to the past. The past is thus a guiding-concept as much as a limiting-concept.<sup>9</sup>

In this manner, Ricoeur conceives of historical narration as a mediating concept between “scientific history” that naively conceives its discipline as pure description and a “historical fiction” that makes intercourse between narrative and a real past only incidental. The historian thus remains accountable – inexhaustibly so – to the souvenirs that call for and critique his or her perpetual and creative redescriptions of the past.

### **History as Ideology and Utopia**

To engage in the task of narrating history, one must find a way to critically mediate the persistent ideologies and utopian hopes of the historical past. The themes of ideology and utopia dominate Ricoeur’s writings and he takes great pains to overcome the purely negative connotations associated with both. With regard to the former, he wants to do justice to the constitutive role of what he terms the “fundamental symbolism” of ideology. Societies and individuals rely on foundational stories to provide internal communal coherence and external correspondence to the world. Ricoeur observes that these constitutive narratives seem to be fundamental to human being in the world and he rejects the notion that they are ultimately dispensable or inherently malignant.

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<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur describes this as imaginative process as “configuration” and describes as being close to metaphor in that it represents a “synthesis of the heterogeneous.” Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *The Reality of the Historical Past* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1984), 4.

Rather, turning to an observation made in his much earlier work, he argues that human beings possess an “only-human” and thus “fallible” freedom that, while retaining a certain integrity as freedom, is also prone to fall into the distortion and abuse of freedom.<sup>10</sup> Thus ideology is first constructive and positive and only becomes a force for malignancy in its *distortion*.<sup>11</sup> Ideology narrates an idealized picture that meets “the requirements of authority’s claim.”<sup>12</sup> At its best, the over-predication or “surplus-value” of ideology reminds the community of its constituting identity and summons it to the better angels of its nature. The distortion of ideology occurs, however, when this same feature functions to conceal ignoble interests and prop-up illegitimate power structures. Ideology may thus motivate a society to achieve possible good or it may function only to “fill the credibility gap” in a depraved system of authority.<sup>13</sup>

It is because of this susceptibility to distortion that ideology always remains in tension with the embodied hope and faith of “utopia.” Whereas ideology establishes a community by rooting it in its constituting narratives, utopia becomes the symbolic imaginary of the marginalized, setting forth a prophetic alter-narrative –presently “elsewhere” – that subverts the powers who would domesticate it for corrupted interests. Utopian visions appear as critique when the prevailing distortions of ideology begin to compound. Ricoeur thus writes, “It is always from the point of view of a nascent utopia that we may speak of a dying ideology.”<sup>14</sup>

The paradox that emerges from this construal is all too clear: utopia remains only another imaginative possibility of being in the world and is itself subject to fallibility and distortion.<sup>15</sup> It is here that historical narrative (and in Ricoeur’s thinking, fictional narratives as well) can serve as the priestly mediator between regal ideology and prophetic utopia. It does this, not as the Actonian “moral arbiter,” standing in a privileged space outside of the social game, but as a critical-yet-vested narrator of the “‘true’ stories of the past [as they] expose the potentialities of the present.”<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur writes that the historian must proceed beyond a sterile description of what happened and finally venture

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<sup>10</sup> Thus Ricoeur writes, “Man is the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite. This ‘mixture’ has appeared to us as the progressive manifestation of the fault that makes of man, mediator of the reality outside of himself, a fragile mediation for himself.” *Fallible Man: Philosophy of the Will* (trans. Charles Kelbley; Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), 215.

<sup>11</sup> Thus Ricoeur writes, “Logically if not temporally the constitutive function of ideology must precede its distortive function. We could not understand what distortion meant if there were not something to be distorted, something that was of the same symbolic nature.” *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (ed. George H. Taylor; New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.) 182.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. Here, Ricoeur’s description of ideology and utopia tends to resemble Thomas Kuhn’s narration of “scientific revolutions,” Gaston Bachelard’s conception of “epistemological ruptures” and Georges Canguilhem’s notion of the “displacement” and “transformation” of concepts that Foucault makes use of in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. Hence the Marxist paradox, popularly portrayed by George Orwell in the climactic scene of *Animal Farm*.

<sup>16</sup> “Can Fictional Narratives Be True?” *Analecta Husserliana* 14 (1983): 16.

answers to the question: “Why?” History entails the faithful narration of that which is, “most worthy of being kept in our memories...the *values* that ruled the individual actions, the life of institutions, and the social struggles of the past.”<sup>17</sup> The historian identifies the successive “nows” that his souvenirs permit him to name and narrates the way their underlying ideologies and utopias interact among them for good or for ill. History consists, then, in the attempt to “cure the illness of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology” and to “cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element” so that a fuller range of possibilities can be opened to human experience in the present.<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur is not content to merely let the dialectic stand as a vicious circle, however. From a pre-critical understanding of history as immediate explanation and through the critical display of ideology and utopia, the work of history finally terminates in a self-conscious and post-critical appropriation. In this final move, one must consent to being interpreted at the same time one interprets the world of the text.<sup>19</sup>

### History as Wager

The accountability which the historian has to his souvenirs represents an important shield against a hackneyed propagandizing of history. Attentiveness to the critique of ideology by utopia and vice versa likewise guards the historian from the subtler dangers of propaganda and hagiography. That said, however, the historian can never fully escape his own self-implication in the state of the question. Nor *should* he (or she).<sup>20</sup> The question of history is one that is interested, though not purely *self*-interested. History necessitates certain value judgments wherein the historian selects particular events, texts, persons, periods, etc. over others as being of greater significance. The fact that the historian connects *these* successive “nows” and not others entails acts of selection and suppression that establish a claim to the memorable. Ricoeur embraces this point, admitting that there is in fact no original “given history” to which one may appeal or compare to the historian’s narrative.<sup>21</sup>

Far from dooming the task altogether, however, Ricoeur is merely restoring history to its proper place within the social game. Enlightenment historiography flourished under the pretense that it worked in a position above the fray – somehow above the “slings and arrows” of ideological and utopian discourse. This basic error gave exploitative histories a perfect cover story and conveniently exempted them from critique. For Ricoeur, the enduring achievement of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche was to expose the powers at work with history. Like St. Antony of the Desert, these “masters of suspicion” name the demons and thereby mitigate their furtive power. In the wake of this critical

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> *Ideology and Utopia*, 312.

<sup>19</sup> “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (trans. David Pellauer; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 46.

<sup>20</sup> Use of the masculine here is deliberate. These reflections represent a venture toward my own self- understanding.

<sup>21</sup> *Reality of the Historical Past*, 32.

age, however, historians face an important choice in moving forward: the way of nihilism or the way of faith. Here, Ricoeur stands in sharp contrast to a Michel Foucault. Foucault seized upon Nietzsche's hermeneutical skepticism and followed the way of nihilism all the way down. Suspicious of the powers that lurk behind all social constructions, even supposedly noble concepts of "justice" and "truth," he argued that history must content itself with the purely critical task of "conquering power." Rather than seeking a way out of the vicious circle of ideology and utopia, Foucault believed that the goal of history was to keep the dialectic running.<sup>22</sup>

Ricoeur, on the other hand is not content with a mere perpetuation of the circularity and advocates a way forward – one that he consents to being described as a way of "fideism" or faith.<sup>23</sup>

History, then, is a wager of faithful appropriation. It is a considered, post-critical wager – one that has passed through the desert of criticism – but which remains a wager nonetheless. We venture the telling of stories and we risk the dramatic appropriation of the worlds they imply, believing that in the mediation of historical ideologies and utopias certain values may pass thorough and remain worthy of remembering and reminding as common memory. Sometimes our wagers will falter and combust as chaff beneath the desert sun. On these occasions we must return again to the "endless rectification" and "touch-up the painting" or trash it altogether in favor of a new one. The hope is, however, that others will pay off in a greater power of reflection, in the element of coherent discourse, and in the opening up of better possible worlds which humanity may yet inhabit.<sup>24</sup> Such histories will survive the heat because of their thicker and broader narration of the complexities that souvenirs of the past present. More importantly, they will survive because their values are better embodied by the communities (dare we say the historians?) that produce and embody them. They will survive, as did Tolkein's Tom Bombadil, because "[Their] songs are stronger songs, and [their] feet are faster."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Important in this regard was that when Foucault helped to form the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* in December 1971, the stated purpose was explicitly limited to the gathering and disseminating information about the prison system. The goal of the GIP was not prison *reform*, but prison exposure.

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur writes:

My more ultimate answer is that we must let ourselves be drawn into the circle and then try to make the circle a spiral. We cannot eliminate from a social ethics the element of risk. 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. As Manheim himself asserted [in his *Ideology and Utopia*], anyone who has no projects or no goals has nothing to describe and not science to which he or she can appeal. In a certain sense my answer is fideist, but for me it is only an avowal of honesty to admit that. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 312.

<sup>24</sup> *The Symbolism of Evil* (trans. Emerson Buchanan; New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 355.

<sup>25</sup> *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 142.

### Resurrection and Pentecost: An Embodied, Living Christ

Having this appropriately situated, appropriately humbled history before us, it remains to say something of the value it may have to the historian of theology. Here we may return briefly to George Caird as he advocates the turn to history. He writes, “Anyone who believes that in the life and teaching of Christ God has given a unique revelation of his character and purpose is committed by this belief, whether he likes it or not, whether he admits it or not, to the quest of the historical Jesus.”<sup>26</sup> This, of course, is an understandable comment coming, as it does, from the pen of a scholar engaged in the specific disciplinary discourse of Jesus studies, but it is more than that. What I will venture, as a kind of theological footnote to Caird, is that the quest of the historical Jesus does not end with the life and death of the Nazarene, but continues in the form of the quest of the historical Body of Christ as discerned from the perspective of Resurrection and Pentecost.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke begins by writing, “In the first narration (λόγον), O Theophilus, I have set forth (ἐποιήσαμην) all that Jesus began (ἤρξατο) to do and teach” (1:1). By this he implies that this second narration will consist of a *continuing* chronicle of what the now resurrected Jesus continues to do and teach in his *ecclesial* Body via the Spirit of Resurrection. Luke’s conception of resurrection, made present in Pentecost, commits him to narrate the church’s story as a kind of continuing quest of the Resurrected Jesus. Particularly useful to our present discussion is the fact that his history is quite critical in its mediation of the various ideologies and utopias of the first century. At times he appeals to the ideology of Israel, rooted as it was in the foundational stories of its primordial past, to demonstrate how the community lives in continuity with the past and embodies its ideals.<sup>27</sup> Here the use of ideology appropriately serves as authoritative summons to associate with the ecclesial body of the resurrection and appropriate its values. Alternatively, Luke is quite willing to appeal to the utopian implications of the resurrection when ideology drifts into distortion.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the apocalyptic vision of the open heaven and the voice of the resurrected Jesus together serve as a utopian tool of self-criticism when the ecclesial body itself succumbs to ideological distortion (Acts 10:9-16).

The implications of this are instructive to the historical theologian: the resurrection of Jesus mediates ideology and utopia. Ricoeur was deeply committed to the integrity of his own vocation as a philosopher working within the bounds of reason alone. His project never ventures into theology, though he does gesture toward *something* summoning us forward: “Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.”<sup>29</sup> He limits himself to naming *values* as

<sup>26</sup> *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Althone, 1965), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Note here the appeal to the early church as a reversal the story of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) as early as Acts 2. Shockingly, he is even willing to appeal to the ideology of the Stoics to validate the faith in his narration of Paul’s address at the Aeropagus (Acts. 17).

<sup>28</sup> Note here how the resurrection of Jesus proves to be the foil, first before the “men of Israel” at Pentecost (Acts 2:29-36, cf. 4:1-2) and later before the above noted Greeks (Acts 17:18,32).

<sup>29</sup> *The Symbolism of Evil* (trans. Emerson Buchanan; Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 349.

they are disclosed in narrative, but the historical *theologian*, remaining unbound by the philosopher's self-censoring oath, is more free to acknowledge the calling as calling and to narrate values as *Voice*, embodied and/or distorted historically as the case may be. This would be my best approximation of the proper task of historical theology.

In making this assertion, I am not suggesting that our history should retreat again to the bare narration of Providence or to an exercise in hagiography. Such pre-critical histories can only swim in the seas of their own age. We can no more presume to reproduce the methodology of St. Luke than we can aspire to author Holy Scripture; and the attempt to do so in our own time would yield a narrative virtually unintelligible to our own culture. If the goal is to remember and remind – to commend our particular narrations as common memory – we must mediate according to the discourse of our times. More importantly, a robust affirmation of the embodiment of the resurrection suggests that God is at work with the world and through the events, persons, texts, and periods that our souvenirs present. A broadened and thickened account of the discrete, subtle relations between the souvenirs can therefore be properly recognized as both historical and theological. This is true even from the perspective of the most ancient Christian confessional affirmation.

In the end, the historical theologian is a servant of the church and thus remains firmly inside the social and ecclesiological game. While his ventured narration of the resurrection in history may fail in many or even in all points, we may still appropriately continue to wager on the hope that the Spirit of the resurrected Christ remains with his ecclesial Body. Given that the Spirit's work is properly understood in terms of centuries and millennia, not in hours and days, we may tell our stories, strive to embody their best values, and continue to touch-up our paintings. We do so in the lived hope that the resurrection of Jesus entails a history that is always-already graced and that we are being summoned beyond the desert of criticism and into all truth.

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