

## Article

# Called by Beauty: Paul Ricoeur's (Late) Liturgical Turn

Daniel O'Dea Bradley

Department of Philosophy, Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA 99258, USA; bradleyd@gonzaga.edu;  
Tel.: +1-509-868-0395

**Abstract:** We are now witnessing a great renewal of philosophical interest in the material aspects of religiosity. In this article I show that we have resources for this work in the very late philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, resources that are equally unexpected and deeply moving. In particular, in Ricoeur's late turn we see the promising beginnings of a sacramental philosophy that links Baptism and the Song of Songs to show how liturgical practice is fundamentally tied to the beauty and sacredness of the natural world. The result is the realization that an ethics of hope is only truly completed in a philosophy of praise, eschatology pointing toward doxology.

**Keywords:** liturgical theology; Ricoeur; Song of Songs; baptism; sacrament



**Citation:** Bradley, Daniel O'Dea. 2021. Called by Beauty: Paul Ricoeur's (Late) Liturgical Turn. *Religions* 12: 796. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100796>

Academic Editor: Christina M. Gschwandtner

Received: 16 July 2021

Accepted: 16 September 2021

Published: 24 September 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## Introduction

One of the most surprising events of the last 50 years of intellectual history has been the theological turn in phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> This movement explicitly recognized the porosity of the relation between “religion” and “philosophy” and even welcomed dialogue across this heretofore highly militarized border. The thawing of relations this fostered is a welcome change and a methodological advance. However, with its exclusive emphasis on eschatological ethics, the official “theological turn” admitted into respectable philosophical discourse only a very truncated version of the religious life. In particular, the 20th Century advocates of phenomenology, deconstruction, and philosophical hermeneutics tended to be dismissive or openly antagonistic toward liturgy and theologies rooted in liturgical and sacramental practice.<sup>2</sup> This is beginning to change, and we are now witnessing a great renewal of interest in the material aspects of religiosity.

In this article I show that we have important resources for this work in the very late philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. This is remarkable, for Ricoeur was among the foremost 20th Century proponents of the *eschatological* meaning of religious desire and, indeed, was quite hostile to any form of “theophany” or “nature mysticism” for much of his life. However, Ricoeur's final phase of thought also provides the promising beginnings of a sacramental philosophy that links Baptism and the Song of Songs to show how liturgical practice is fundamentally tied to the beauty and sacredness of the natural world. Recognizing this helps us understand Ricoeur in a more holistic way, but emphasizing the reasons why he was usually so opposed to liturgical theology also reminds of us of some of the dangers we must avoid in the excitement of this renewal. In other words, a philosophy inspired by the liturgical movement will not merely be a cumulative addition to a critical philosophy rooted in the hermeneutics of suspicion and deconstruction's attacks on presence. Rather, we must find ways to engage both the liturgical and the critical, so they can be mutually challenging but also mutually enriching. Ricoeur's work helps us to begin to do this as we put his methodological rigor to work in integrating a focus on the unjust suffering of individuals with a renewed interest in the sacredness of the material world, thus developing a coherent spiritual life that includes the corporeal and organic without falling prey to the dangers of irrationalism and occultism. The result is a philosophical orientation that unites both ritual and text, eros and agape, nature and language—an orientation that is inspired by a theology of hope but that finds its completion in a theology of praise.

This article is divided into three sections. The first follows Ricoeur in examining the ways that suffering and injustice challenge a liturgically oriented theology, and its grounding in the beauty and intelligibility of an ordered cosmos, but it also reveals what is lost when this critical moment becomes an exhaustive account. The second (to which some readers may wish to jump immediately) introduces Ricoeur's dramatic late turn, in which the beauty of the natural world becomes a channel for divine revelation and transformation. The third proposes a sketch for ways that these two approaches, the hermeneutics of suspicion (eschatology) and phenomenologies of the sacred (doxology), can be held together in a creative tension.

### 1. The 20th Century Theological Turn: The Promise and Limits of Eschatological Ethics

Much of Ricoeur's philosophical career is rooted in hope for the coming of a future that ruptures with the present and provides a radical reorientation of the world that will overcome current injustices and misery. In fact, in an interview with Richard Kearney, Ricoeur claims that eschatology is the "secret meaning" of all his work (Ricoeur 2004, p. 99). Like other late moderns, this is motivated by Ricoeur's deep attunement to the problem of evil. In particular, he is adamant that the innocent suffering of the individual belies the pure intelligibility of being that would make it transparent to the intellect. Epochally, this involves the rise of the Christian (and post-Christian) emphasis on *haecceitas*, developed in the Semitic religious traditions, as a challenge to Greek philosophical essentialism. In this regard Ricoeur is remarkably consistent throughout his intellectual development. In an early work from 1955 he claims, "all classic philosophies are, in varying degrees, philosophies of the *form*, whether form be interpreted as Idea or as Substance and quiddity". Moving beyond this means rejecting all totalizing projects. In a disciplining of the hubris of reason motivated by "the pressure of negative experiences, we must re-achieve a notion of being which is *act* rather than *form*" (Ricoeur 2007, p. 328).

This "existentialism" of the responsible self, *l'homme capable*, takes a long detour through Ricoeur's reflections on our servile will, but the tie between suffering and a critique of philosophical hubris remains consistent. In a very similar vein but over 40 years later, Ricoeur critiques Hans Heinrich Schmid's "Theology of Creation" for its rootedness in the concept of the order of nature. Ricoeur writes, "thought about cosmic order must preserve its *totalizing* intention. But it can do this only by placing the problematic of evil under the sign of retribution, where all suffering must discharge some sin" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 61). He continues, "but if this totalizing theology is to take over, what sense can we make of the psalms of lamentation and Job's protest?" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 61). Further, because the celebration of liturgy is rooted in our harmonious experience of the goodness of Creation, this has a direct implication for our main theme. Recognizing the legitimate protest of innocent suffering means supplanting liturgical theology rooted in Creation with a theology of Covenant rooted in God's revealed law, and Ricoeur is clear that this entails shifting religion away from its old role in safeguarding the sacred toward the new goal of cultivating an ethical life.<sup>3</sup> As he sums up the link and the resulting change of emphasis, "if the faithfulness of God to the Covenant is the sole guarantee that God will finally carry the day against the forces of evil, the contribution of human beings to this final victory is the *mitzvah*—good, right action" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 60).

This is not the final word, but only an intermediate step in Ricoeur's move away from liturgical theology. As we learn so insistently from Paul (and are reminded by Kierkegaard), our ethical capacities are inadequate to the task of living up to the Covenant. No matter how hard we try, ethical religion turns out to fail to achieve the good. This means a second transition in religious thinking. First, on the basis of the failure of Nature to ground the Good, we had to move *from liturgical ontology to covenantal ethics*. Now, on the basis of the failure of Ethical Religion to ground the Good, we must move *from covenantal ethics to eschatological hope*. As Ricoeur puts it,

“A theology of creation that wants to reunite in one thought—thought about the cosmic order—the three terms: *creation, justice, and salvation*, is overthrown by forces that lead to dissociating Creation, as the coming to be of the world, from the justice required of human beings and the salvation projected on the eschatological horizon of history” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 61).

Thus *creation, justice, and salvation* are not merely three theological concepts, but three discreet moments in the temporal progression of salvation history by which humanity learns a deepening dependence on grace for overcoming original sin. The philosophical implications of this emphasis include a deep suspicion toward ontological claims to presence and a related philosophy of desire that mitigates eros (mad desire for the presence of the beautiful)<sup>4</sup> and redirects it toward a progressive/cosmopolitan understanding of conatus (the desire to overcome our misery and oppression as we build a good life with and for others in just institutions).

This project of decentering the claims of conscious self-mastery toward the uncovering of hidden origins and liberatory hopes provides the structure for Ricoeur’s influential reading of the ‘masters of suspicion,’ but it is important to remember that this decentering of the ego is first motivated by the theological concern with a redemption that lies beyond humanity’s ability to achieve out of its own resources. In the *Symbolism of Evil*—before his engagement with the genealogies of Nietzsche, the ideology critique of Marx, and the depth psychology of Freud—it is the experience of evil that prompts Ricoeur’s engagement with hidden and distorting origins. His examination of the symbols used in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures reveal that evil is experienced most primordially as something always already there, prior to the illuminating ray of reason. This is discovered in the images of fall, stain, exile, mixed ancestry, alloyed metals, and for reflection it means that we can interpret guilt as a double movement toward fallen origins on the one hand and the hope for redemption on the other. Thus, a new historical directionality lies at the heart of Judeo-Christian religiously inspired philosophy, and hope for my becoming whole becomes the central meaning of desire. As Ricoeur explains, “this new intentionality, by which the phantasm is symbolically interpreted, is suggested by the very nature of the phantasm, since it speaks of lost origin, of lost archaic objects, of the lack inscribed in desire” (Ricoeur 1974, p. 349). This is then mirrored in hopes for salvation that are expressed in rituals of symbolic cleansing and liberation.

As Ricoeur moves toward a more explicit hermeneutics in his encounter with depth-psychology, this suspicion of presence only deepens. In facing the problem of the fragmenting interpretations of conflicting hermeneutic traditions that this loss of presence engenders, Ricoeur comes to the idea that a coherent understanding must be rooted in the effort to exist, not a speculative concept. As he writes in *Oneself as Another*, a life, even one lived amongst a multitude of competing interpretive strategies, “has a thematic unity that keeps it from the dissemination that would lead the discourse back to silence. [This] thematic unity [is] *human action*”.<sup>5</sup> We can engage in an intelligible study of human actions because they are embodied in the semantic structure of the works they produce, which are themselves grounded in the coherence of the effort to exist as happy and free. This both provides a coherence for philosophy that is not rooted in the imperialistic violence of a limitless rational idealism and shows the value of philosophy for concrete ethico-political struggles, thus defending philosophy’s relevance for an age suspicious of “idle” speculation. It also creates a serious methodological problem, however. Since Ricoeur’s version of hermeneutics can only judge works, for much of his life he tends to suggest that to speak of meaning apart from works is to enter the death of idolatry or the complete dispersion of meaning in the nihilism of absolute difference. That Ricoeur will claim “existence is evinced only in the documents of life” (Ricoeur 1974, p. 18), reveals both the power and the limitations of his hermeneutics.<sup>6</sup> As Kearney puts it, “when the explicit ‘hermeneutic turn’ occurred in the 1960s—with the publication of Ricoeur’s *Conflict of Interpretations* and Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (inspired by Heidegger and Dilthey)—we witnessed an

embrace of language at the expense of the body. The journey from flesh to text often forgot a return ticket".<sup>7</sup>

This originary emphasis on the "*documents of life*" means that the hermeneutic method is able to engage with all of the contemporary social and linguistic sciences, but it also means that it must be iconoclastic toward claims to presence and to experiences of the sacredness of the material world. With this method we can only interpret meaning in text-objects: texts, works of art, dreams, religious poetry, etc. To *withdraw* the experience of a thing from its interplay within a system of difference and regard it as a mystical (*mysterium*: secret) manifestation of the divine is seen as nothing more than idolatry. So every theme, every Name within the ambit of hermeneutics must be de-mythologized and broken of its idolatrous meaning, and the meaning that we do uncover in hermeneutics must be understood as arising from what is not yet or is no longer present.

This privileging of iconoclasm is not unique to Ricoeur and is not only a legacy of northern European Protestantism, but is a tendency inherent within hermeneutics itself.<sup>8</sup> In Plato's discussion of interpretation in the *Timaeus*, he argues that no one in his or her right mind can experience any truth in divination. Rather, the understanding must be bound by sickness or sleep for it to be inspired by a message from the gods. But only a person with his or her wits intact is able to understand the meaning of what these visions signify, and this is so even if the visions are true and divinely inspired:

"So long as the fit remains on him, the person is incompetent to render judgement on his or her own visions and voices ... This is the reason it is customary practice to appoint interpreters to render judgement on an inspired divination. These people are called 'diviners' by some who are entirely ignorant of the fact that they are expositors of utterances or visions communicated through riddles. *Instead of "diviners", the correct thing to call them is, "interpreters of things divined"*" (Plato 1997, 72a–b).

From its very beginnings, hermeneutics is based on the concept of the trace, and this influence has become predominant in our understanding of the philosophy of religion in the Continental tradition. Despite his differences with Ricoeur, John Caputo gives us a good example of another strand of the tradition that is also committed to the centrality of this notion of the trace. He writes in the opening section of the *Weakness of God*, "theology always tries to follow the tracks of the name of God, to stay on the trail it leaves behind as it makes its way through our lives" (Caputo 2006, p. 7). This track or trail (what has passed/past) is also a call to effect the justice and peace called forth by these signs (what is yet to come/future), so we see the bi-directional pull towards the past and the future that also inspires Ricoeur's method. For Caputo, God's address to the world is meant "to call us forth to what [God] promised up ahead, and to call us back to the long forgotten" (Caputo 2006, p. 10). Within the practice of textual hermeneutics, we face the constant danger of being reduced to interpreting the signs of gods who have already fled or prophesying on omens that portend the gods yet to come.

In dulling the edge of our yearning for the other by interpreting it primarily as a struggle for a fulfilled existence and a thriving community, however, we lose the deepest philosophical significance of desire and foster an unbalanced philosophy of religion that becomes alienated from the natural world. Both the fruitfulness and the one-sidedness of this approach are revealed in the privileged place Ricoeur gives to the idea that our theological reflection on the Incarnation must be "guided by the enigma-expression 'Kingdom of God'" (Ricoeur 1995, pp. 149–50). For Ricoeur this liberates Christian preaching "from its falsifications through the Greek Christologies for which incarnation would be the temporal manifestation of the eternal being" (Ricoeur 1995, p. 205). Instead, the theme of the kingdom shows us that the Incarnation must be understood in terms of an event that is coming. It is marked by perfect justice and is thus ethical, and it is beyond human time and is thus eschatological. Ricoeur completes his critique of a Christology of presence by interpreting the Resurrection according to the same structure of the coming of the Kingdom that he applied to the Incarnation. In "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems",

Ricoeur argues that it is the place of a theology of hope to reinterpret the Resurrection also as an eschatological event (Ricoeur 1995, p. 205). According to this reading it is not an epiphany of the sacred, but an event that opens up the future in a new promise of the death of death which will be fulfilled in a new creation at the end of time.

Beyond an interpretation of Christ, the significance of the church and even theology in general must be reinterpreted according to this figure of hope. As Ricoeur writes:

“If it is true that the kerygma of the primitive church, following the preaching of Jesus, was centered around the eschatological event, then *the whole of theology must be reinterpreted according to the norm of eschatology*; theology can no longer take as its leading thread a notion of *logos* or of manifestation that would be independent from, and prior to, the hope for things to come. The task of a theology of hope would be to revise all theological concepts on the basis of an exegesis ruled by the preaching of the kingdom to come” (Ricoeur 1995, p. 204).

Thus in Ricoeur’s main contribution to the philosophy of religion, we see a powerful constellation of ideas that include: the methodological constraints imposed on philosophy by the illusions in which we find ourselves embedded, the attendant place for symbols of defilement and slavery, the claim that the coherent unity of self-consciousness is a task rather than a given, the role of narrative and attestation in achieving morally responsible agency, the central place of *conatus* in ethics, and the ultimate decentering of ethical self-possession toward eschatological hope. Developing these themes and their mutual resonances was extremely fruitful and allowed Ricoeur to become one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. Nonetheless, we now find his rejection of the liturgical to have been rather prejudicial. Theologically, this is manifest in a one-sided iconoclasm that fails to see divinity anywhere in the material world. Philosophically it is manifest in a one-sided preference for textual over embodied meaning and a truncated account of love that fails to account for the positive role of eros.<sup>9</sup> Very late in his life, however, Ricoeur opens toward a more sacramental mysticism and a sapiential religion against which he had been quite closed much of his career. In 1998—when he was 85 years old!—Ricoeur publishes a book with André LaCocque called *Thinking Biblically*, which contains three momentous essays, “A Loving Obedience”, “Sentinel of Imminence”, and, most importantly of all, “The Nuptial Metaphor”. These three works open onto radically new insights and exhibit a turn that is so dramatic and comes so late in his life as to perhaps be unrivaled in any other intellectual biography.

## 2. Baptismal Liturgies and the Song of Songs: Recovering the Sacredness of Nature

Partly this late turn of Ricoeur toward the liturgical emerges out of his friendship with the Passionist priest Stanislaus Breton. But, I think the most important influence is the one he cites so enthusiastically in “The Nuptial Metaphor”, Anne-Marie Pelletier, who as a relatively unknown young woman in 1989 had published a book on the Song of Songs called, *Lectures du Cantique des Cantiques*. This book had a profound impact on Ricoeur. In particular, it does two things: one substantive and the other methodological. In terms of content, it turns his attention to the Song of Songs, but this alone is not enough, as we will see below, to effect a re-evaluation of eros. Even more importantly, Pelletier introduces Ricoeur to the Song of Songs in the context of its use in traditional baptismal liturgies. This effects a significant turn in his hermeneutical method. Ricoeur had always been a master of showing how novel meanings can be generated from a biblical *text* by juxtaposing it with another passage of scripture. He now comes to see how meaning can be generated by drawing a scriptural text into a liturgical *context*, where it interacts with the non-scriptural and often non-verbal rites and sacramental practices that constitute a liturgical ceremony. Ricoeur had long valued the aphorism from Gregory the Great, “Scripture grows with its readers”; he now comes to see how this germination permeates the liturgical life of a people in its hymnic and material practices, as well as its more purely exegetical traditions.

This new turn does not mean Ricoeur merely abandons his older methods of reading. In “The Nuptial Metaphor”, Ricoeur begins his investigation of the Song of Songs in his



usual vein, by highlighting the early Reformers' critique of an excessive allegorization of the text and noting the difference between the Hebrew prophets' view of love and that of the Neoplatonists.

"The Prophets, these [Reformation] exegetes have observed, never risked speaking of mutual love, a mutual possession between God and human beings, in that the reverence for the God of the Torah and the Covenant imposed a vertical distance at the very heart of the covenantal bond. This argument is extremely important. It puts a finger on the invisible line that separates an ethical religion from a mystical one." (Ricoeur 1998, p. 290).

Following Ricoeur's well-trodden path, once set free from a Platonic cosmological/mystical interpretation we should now be able to discover meaning in the text of the Song of Songs by juxtaposing it with the scriptural account of the Fall.<sup>10</sup> And this is exactly what Ricoeur proposes:

"The poem [Song of Songs] when placed alongside the myth [Garden of Eden], confers on the interval of innocence the glory of a poetic pause. Ought we then, in order to bind the poem of innocent love more closely to the myth of good creation, assign to the Song of Songs an eschatological significance, following Karl Barth, the innocence sung by the Song anticipating the Kingdom to come, like the eschatological banquet?" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 298).

This is exactly the line of argument we would have anticipated from Ricoeur's whole body of work and the momentum of his entire career, and Ricoeur goes on to say that "this interpretation is perfectly acceptable" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 298). But then he makes an unexpected break by arguing that objections to allegorical readings are not exhaustive: "in this regard, the work of Anne-Marie Pelletier, by shifting back from modern commentaries to the liturgical, hymnic, and homiletic uses of the Song of Songs represents in a decisive way a complete reorientation of the argument".<sup>11</sup>

This is a major methodological shift in Ricoeur's thinking, and it produces a concordant substantive shift:

Pelletier has shown that the use of analogy . . . precedes a theory of allegory, in a work that has served me as a guide, on the basis of a long analysis which she proposes concerning the reuse of the Song of Songs within the framework of Christian liturgy, hymnody, and epistolary exchange. The case of liturgy is most enlightening as regards our inquiry... The practice of language within the liturgical framework has one specific intention, that of drawing near to a 'mystery' that is as much enacted as said. Consequently, when the liturgy cites the texts of Scripture, the participants reassume the movement of involvement and commitment through the words and in the dialogue of the protagonists of the originary dialogue. In this, way *the liturgy becomes a privileged place for the reproduction of the text* (Ricoeur 1998, p. 279).

The implications of this new hermeneutic are quite astounding, for through its rootedness in baptismal liturgy, the Song of Songs is imbued with a radical new meaning that will now reverberate back to enrich the rest of Ricoeur's understanding of religious desire and religious experience. In particular his trust in salvation is now understood not only in social and voluntaristic terms, but also as resonant with all our experiences of the beauty of the human body and the goodness of the natural world. In other words, his religious philosophy is now oriented not only toward the coming of the Kingdom, but also to life in Paradise.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Ricoeur continues to recognize different strands of religiosity based on what they emphasize: the Sacred (liturgical religion), the Covenant (ethical religion), or Grace (eschatological religion). But this is no longer to be seen as a developmental progression in which more primitive forms are superseded by the higher forms that come later. In fact, the temporal arrow is reversed, and when the joy of the Song is linked to the soteriological event of baptism, the call of the prophet points "backward" to a renewal of forms of religiosity that had been abandoned: "The reinterpretation of the prophetic texts

in light of the Song of Songs can only proceed owing to a veritable passage to the limit, even owing to a subtle subversion . . . at the end of which ethical religion moves toward mystical religion" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 303).

To continue to engage this theme in terms of temporal progression and regression becomes increasingly convoluted and inadequate, and Ricoeur begins to rethink temporality outside its link to a 'direction':

"By assigning an eschatological status to the Song of Songs, symmetrical to the origin we perhaps strip it of its most noteworthy feature, which is to sing of the innocence of love within the very heart of everyday life . . . A theological way of reading the poem would then consist in proclaiming and celebrating the indestructibility at the base of the innocence of the creature, *despite the history of evil and victimization*. This proclamation and celebration need not be placed at the end of time, it can be sung today . . . the epithalamium that sings of an *ongoing rebirth* at the very heart of *profane everyday existence*" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 303).<sup>13</sup>

It is with this link between time and the temporal rhythms of the natural world that Ricoeur shows how we can avoid reducing the Song to a purely erotic, subversive poem, as in the historical-critical method proposed by LaCocque, or to a purely spiritualizing allegory as in the excesses of Neoplatonism. In opposition to both of these, Ricoeur calls the love he finds in the Song of Songs, "nuptial", both free and erotic, but also committed. The committed aspect opens onto Covenantal thinking and connects with the prophets' depiction of God's love for his people and the Christian emphasis on God's love for each individual soul; on the other hand, the erotic aspect opens onto the beauty of the sensuousness of the body and praise for this beauty. Further, as any cursory look at love poetry shows, praise for the beauty of the beloved opens inevitably outward towards connections with the beauty of the rest of the natural world. As Ricoeur puts it,

on the one side, the divine love is invested in the Covenant with [the people of] Israel and later in the Christic bond [with the soul], along with its absolutely original nuptial metaphors; on the other, there is human love invested in the erotic bond and its equally original metaphors, which transforms the body into something like a landscape . . . it is the power of love to be able to move in both senses along the ascending and descending spiral of metaphor, allowing in this way for every level of emotional investment of love to signify, to intersignify every other level (Ricoeur 1998, p. 302).

In other words, the liturgical context of baptism reveals the sacramental nature of the sensuous experiences recalled in the text, in this case the Song of Songs. But the reverberations will go the other direction as well; the intersignifying of divine revelation and the goodness and beauty of our everyday experience will point to a reevaluation of the liturgy of baptism that is attuned not only to its soteriological aspect and the efficacious power of grace, with an attendant emphasis on eschatology and ethical religion, but also to the material signs and the entire poetics of life and light that they can inspire.

Once this link between baptism and the Song of Songs is established, it becomes a hermeneutic key that opens all kinds of other meanings that had also been locked into the trajectory from nature to ethics and from ethics to eschatology. In "Sentinel of Imminence", we see this at work in Ricoeur's reading of Ezekiel's famous prophetic vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. Just as in the "The Nuptial Metaphor", Ricoeur begins by rehearsing the argument that we have come to expect from him. He suggests that we could read Ezekiel's text as a parable for the eschatological promise offered to each Christian that they will be invited into the Kingdom of God, and he concedes that "nothing prevents our saying this" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 179). But he is also clear that that this reading is a later re-interpretation that only reveals one particular strand of meaning in the passage. Further he recognizes that it does so methodologically through "the substitution of eschatology for prophecy, properly speaking" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 179). Significantly for our theme, he sees that this eschatologizing of prophecy is motivated by "an increasing concern for the destiny of

the individual” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 179). While the focus on the individual opens vast new domains for discovery and cultivation (the ‘Interior Castle’), as a putatively exhaustive account, it can obstruct the meaning of religious desire for a more sociologically relational and communitarian ethical life.

Even more remarkably, Ricoeur now sees that the import of prophecy cannot be reduced merely to ethical law (even with a communitarian interpretation of law), for in doing so the full richness of Ezekiel’s account is “reduced to an allegory, closer to a discourse than a vision” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 179). Rather, to do “justice to the vision as vision, that is as irreducible to discourse”, means taking the full materiality of the symbolism seriously. In the case of Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones, that is the strong connection between justice and life, life understood now not merely allegorically and eschatologically but in all its carnal richness. With this renewed vision Ricoeur sees the connection between law and life also at work in the New Testament, but in light of his new emphasis on the extra-textual, he goes on to say that “the force of the symbol [of life] is even more plainly evoked in the rite of baptism”. Ricoeur recognizes the radical consequences of this view for rethinking of Christianity, for it means that “the connection between the symbolism of resurrection and that of the originary creation is periodically reconstituted”. Ricoeur now sees that his methodological turn towards the liturgical and sacramental engenders a re-turn to nature, and he is willing to accept the consequences of a journey that retraces its steps from eschatological hope to prophetic ethics all the way back to a theology of creation, asking “might this not suggest that the typological interpretation, in the sense of the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, is to the prophetic announcement of the restoration of Israel what this latter was to the belief in the renewal of life within the cultic framework of the New Year Festival?” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 182).

Finally, in Ricoeur’s thinking as it is inspired by Pelletier, where the rites of baptism are to be found the Song of Songs cannot be far behind, and Ricoeur closes the essay as follows:

“Remaining within the biblical framework of these studies, it would be with the Song of Songs that I would like to compare the amplifying exegesis we have just practiced in regard to Ezekiel 37:1–14. Love seems to me to unfold, around the nuptial symbol, a comparable range of significations, unfolded in this case between sexuality and spiritual dilection. It seems as though death and life offer parallel metaphorical possibilities. What unites them is the idea of creation. There where the singer, in his ‘wisdom,’ declares love to be as strong as death, the prophet, in his ‘madness,’ proclaims life stronger than death. We need to listen to both voices [that of life and that of love]” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 183)

In light of “The Nuptial Metaphor” it is clear that these references to the Liturgy of Baptism and the Song of Songs are not accidental or merely extrinsic appendices. Rather the new meanings generated by the juxtaposition of a text with the sensuous, non-written actions and materiality of the sacrament yields a new methodology that finally brings Ricoeur back to a theology of creation. This, however, will be quite distant from a depiction of God as cosmic watchmaker. We must remember that beauty was the key in linking Creation and Salvation, for it is with attention to nuptial love we avoid collapsing eros into a purely materialistic desire or letting it escape into a purely spiritualizing allegory. When we do so, the beauty of the beloved is experienced in all his or her sensuality, but it also opens toward the beauty of the entire natural world, and finally toward the beauty of the liturgical rite as a mediation of God’s grace, all of which are categories of participation rather than mechanical causation.

This is a quite extraordinary turn that comes late in Ricoeur’s life, and it shows the ways that beauty can open a path beyond a narrow modern valuation of *haecceitas*. It also clearly brings Ricoeur into contact with a theology of creation toward which he had been closed for much of his life, but it is still only suggestive of the ways that *haecceitas* can be integrated into intelligibility. Nonetheless, there are already important implications that could be developed. As Ricoeur had always known, a theology of creation implies an



encounter with the ordered nature of the cosmos and the interweaving of Word and Matter. In “A Loving Obedience” we get a final, more explicit, contribution from Ricoeur towards our problem of keeping the intelligible and the sensuous integrated.

Ricoeur is reflecting on the meaning of the Jewish-Christian event by which duty to follow the ethical law becomes permeated with love: “Love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength” (Deut. 6:4); “This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mat 22:38–39). The integration of duty and love creates a paradoxical situation in which a loving response to the other becomes demanded by law. This does quite clearly suggest an ethics of *haecceitas* rooted in suffering<sup>14</sup> as developed by Kierkegaard, Derrida, Marion, Kristeva, etc., and Ricoeur points to this in the essay. But he also recognizes the way that this interpretation of the juxtaposition leads to alienation from the natural world. “A discursive ethics tends to make sense of the logos solely in terms of discourse. Indeed this is true of most philosophers following the ‘linguistic turn.’ But then we find human beings separated from other living creatures” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 136). He also sees that this separates us from our own natural being; “Does not what in human beings is not expressed by discourse find itself clearly on the side of the animal?” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 298). Ricoeur’s solution is to suggest that “a reflection more attentive to the connections between a theology of the law and a theology of creation may be one way to respond to these perplexities” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 136). This moves Ricoeur from an eschatological or deconstructive notion of love as an orientation towards an absolute and absolutely unknowable alterity towards a very ‘natural’ notion of love:

“Perhaps we can make better sense of this if we think of a situation apparently quite distant from the idea of a supreme legislation coming from a cloud. This situation is the birth of a baby. From the mere fact that the baby is there, we are obligated by its fragility. Perhaps the birth of an infant, but also that of everything that is subject to the law of being born, growing, and dying is the occasion par excellence where we humans can hear something like ‘love me’ [in its connection to ethical law]” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 121).

By calling our attention to the growth and development of a baby and the ‘law of living things’ we are drawn into the orbit of a natural ethics, for infant humans—and all living things as living—have a quite circumscribed set of needs that have to do with the kind of being that they are and the kind of mature being into which they will grow. The baby cannot speak, and while it certainly already has a personality and idiosyncratic desires, these are as yet clearly subordinated to the needs of its species-nature. And yet, we do not respond to the baby most fundamentally out of the rigid demands of duty in meeting its needs. While that plays a role, and we do need impersonal societal structures to make sure every child’s needs are met, our most essential response (which is also our most ‘animalistic’) comes from the way we are moved by how adorable<sup>15</sup> babies are, with their sparkling, oversized eyes, chubby cheeks, rounded body, and cooing babbles, traits shared not only by human infants but by many other young mammals and birds as well.

Thus, in Ricoeur’s late work, we see that while a philosophy of beauty will re-root our eschatological hope in prophetic imagery and prophetic ethics in our organic nature, the final result is not a ‘descent’ into physicalism but rather an ‘ascent’ toward the source of Creation in an act of praise. As Ricoeur writes, “love speaks, but through another kind of language than does justice. The discourse of love is first of all a discourse of praise. In praising, human beings rejoice at the view of their object” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 125). Later in the essay, he goes on, “what is more, there is an aesthetic element mixed in at this point with the ethical-religious element. The beauty of Creation calls for a specific reverence” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 137). Here Ricoeur finally sets his conception of the good free from its exclusive tie to an ethics of hope and opens philosophy towards doxology, its most complete fulfillment.

### 3. Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Phenomenologies of the Sacred: A Creative Tension

After the exuberance of this celebration of the beauty of the natural world and the possibilities for the renewal of an engagement with Creation, it may be advisable—and quite faithful to Ricoeur—to end on a note of methodological restraint. Ricoeur’s collection of essays, *Thinking Biblically*, is a valuable contribution to the recovery of a sacramental view of nature, but it remains marginal to the enormous body of work that he produced over more than half a century. The weight of Ricoeur’s contribution to philosophy will continue to be his more sober calls for careful and rigorous epistemological work dedicated to overcoming illusion, for the cultivation of responsible ethical action, and for humility and patient hope as a response to the logic of superabundant grace. His late turn does involve a liberatory moment by which the previous restrictions he had accumulated are loosened. In particular, Ricoeur’s late work is a release from an excessive emphasis on *narrative textuality*, but this means that the work of hermeneutic discernment is reconfigured rather than abandoned. In this third section, I briefly retrace the movement towards Creation explicitly as a methodological liberation from the text. Then I conclude by pointing to the way this is reinscribed in a broader hermeneutics of restraint.

As is well known, some of Ricoeur’s most lasting contributions come from his reflections on the superabundance of grace, the ‘how much more’ that ruptures our finite logic of equivalence. He achieves this by understanding our primordial nature in terms of the banishment from the Garden of Eden and the promise that this will be overcome as manifest in the hope for salvation.<sup>16</sup> This hermeneutic framework is extremely fruitful; it is effected, however, with a progressive intensification of textuality that obscures more material considerations. Our embodied nature is understood first in terms of the *myth* of the fall in Genesis 3, and this myth is then interpreted in light of the soteriological *narrative* produced by Paul in Romans 5. Thus the increase in understanding is achieved by the increasing textuality of the movement from *phusis* to *mythos* to *logos*. A closely related movement occurs as Ricoeur understands the Incarnation. The Incarnation is first presented in a cosmogonic/mythic hymn in the prologue to John’s Gospel. It is subsequently interpreted by Ricoeur in light of the *narrative parables* of the coming of the Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels. This juxtaposition of texts produces understanding, but it can harden into an exhaustive interpretation. Pelletier’s work is so explosive for Ricoeur’s thinking because it sets a reflection on the Fall free from its narrative tie to Romans 5 and, by reinserting it in the context of the nonverbal liturgical ritual of baptism, reconnects it to the materiality of being washed clean by water. In turn this allows the Song of Songs to be set free from an exclusively narrative/eschatological interpretation<sup>17</sup> in order to hear the erotic-aesthetic nature of its *poetry* to emerge. Finally this takes Ricoeur back to the sensuous material world, itself, as he is opened for the first time to a philosophical/theological reflection on Creation independent from its subordination to Salvation history.

Under the guidance of this turn to the liturgical, as we have seen above, Ricoeur is even willing to speak of the shift from an ethical religion to a mystical one. All our previous training in Ricoeur, however, reminds us to be suspicious of the irrationality and violence of an undisciplined mysticism. And while Pelletier’s resuscitation of the liturgical has provided the antidote to his allergic reaction to anything “mystical”, he remains wedded to careful hermeneutic strategies for avoiding illusion and idolatry. Methodologically this means refusing to isolate embodied practice from word. As we have seen him say, “the practice of language within the liturgical framework has one specific intention, that of drawing near to a ‘mystery’ that is *as much* enacted as said” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 279). He continues, “the liturgical gesture would remain mute without the aid of the words from the Song of Songs, reinterpreted by the very gesture that seeks and finds its expression in these words. In this way, an exchange is brought about between the rite and the poem. The rite opens the space of ‘sacramental mystery’ to the poem, the poem gives the rite the rightness of an appropriate word” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 280).

The word provides not only an amplified expressiveness for the rite, it provides the ground for judgement based on the criteria of ethical goodness. This establishes the link by

which ritual becomes amenable to hermeneutic discernment and shows the illegitimacy of a ritualistic celebration of materiality that refuses to be disciplined by an ethically discerning word.<sup>18</sup> This is obviously not only a theoretical but a live practical problem: we must be able to tell the difference between beautiful and sustaining rituals (such as the crowning of Mary with garlands of flowers on May Day), relatively innocuous but also relatively empty rituals (such as tailgating at American football games), and violent and hateful rituals (such as Nazi book burnings).<sup>19</sup>

For Ricoeur, this discernment must not be a merely private affair, and he is even open to the idea that we make a place in our discernment of ritual for “confident adherence to an ongoing community of interpretations, up to and including submission to the external power of an ecclesial magisterium” (Ricoeur 1998, pp. 290–91). The authority of communal and magisterial interpretations as a way of discerning illusion and iniquity within liturgical practice, however, must not be understood as an authoritarian gesture, grounded in putative control over origins, e.g., the source of a community, race, or the cosmos itself. As Ricoeur explains, starting from the subjective experience of the finite creature, origins must always recede, and any legitimate investigation of origins starting from the subjective vantage point must be coextensive with a demythologizing method that yields a “progressive purging of the narratives of the beginning in the direction of a vanishing point where the recognition of Creation of everything by God would no longer be borne by any representation and would thus be reduced to the status of a pure confession of faith” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 53). From this demythologization of origins, no authoritative speaking on the basis of a pure “natural theology” would be possible, but only on the basis of a prophetic call to justice, and this is the line of thinking that Ricoeur develops over the course of his career. The liturgical, however, offers a different way of beginning. It allows us to start

from the beginning itself, which decenters consciousness and imposes itself as being there already before consciousness starts to look for it. The religious presupposition here is that the origin itself speaks in letting itself be spoken of. The origins of *things* and the origins of *speech coincide*. This coincidence has to be taken as a gift: a gift of being and speaking of being (Ricoeur 1998, p. 54).<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Creation is not an origin at all, as origin is generally understood in post-Kantian philosophy. Rather it is the commitment to the interweaving of word and thing, in a way that is consonant with, but irreducible to, the transcendental activity of human consciousness<sup>21</sup>. Thus the rigor of communal and magisterial authority in discerning better and worse liturgical practices is not the authoritarian fundamentalism of a tyrannical subjectivity that derives its unquestionable legitimacy from absolute (and secret) possession of hidden origins. Rather it is akin to the fallibilistic confidence that rational judgement bestows on the legitimacy of tradition and authority that Gadamer advocates. Fully explicating this amplified, but nonetheless rigorous, hermeneutics of discernment lies beyond the scope of this paper, but even these brief introductory remarks point to the characteristically Ricoeurian insight that no celebration of the beauty of the natural world, as discovered through a recovery of the liturgical aspects of religious practice, will be defensible without careful discernment.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> And coming from the heartland of *laïcité*, no less!

<sup>2</sup> This paper does not rely on a technical definition of (or distinction between) the terms “liturgical” or “sacramental”. I mean only to invoke the general claim that intellectual inquiry can learn theological truths from careful meditation on communal and embodied prayer practices. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* [the principles of belief (are rooted in) the manner of prayer]. Liturgy can be studied in other ways by the diverse branches of Religious Studies, but when approached theologically, this method is closely

aligned with “Sacramental Theology”, particularly a sacramental theology that highlights the continuity between the official Sacraments of a denomination and all the “sacramentals” that grow up with the liturgical life of a people. In other work I make a more technical methodological distinction between the liturgical and the sacramental by linking the former with the noesis pole of the phenomenological correlation and the latter with the noema pole, but that is only hinted at here.

It is certainly possible to have an interest in liturgy, while reducing its role to nothing more than helping produce ethical behavior. This is akin to Kant’s approach in *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*. However, I imagine that most readers of this journal will already agree that a true “liturgical theology” will have a more than merely pedagogical function.

For the collapse of eros into conatus see: “Hermeneutics of Symbols, II” and “Religion, Atheism, Faith” in *Conflict of Interpretations* (*Le Conflit des interprétations* 1969). See also how much more satisfactorily eros is treated in 1998, (“The Nuptial Metaphor”, *Thinking Biblically*) than in 1960, *Sexualité: la merveille, l’errance, l’énigme*. *Esprit*, No. 289. 1960.

[Ricoeur’s emphasis], Ricoeur (1992, p. 19).

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is not entrapped in texts. In fact, his hermeneutic investigations always point beyond their source material (both teleologically and eschatologically) towards the Kingdom of justice and peace, and I appreciate my anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. However, the origin in textuality yields a notion of “paradise” that continues to focus on the “social” and even the “good will” of the Kantian “Kingdom of Ends” to the negligence of our animal nature and participation in the material world.

Kearney (2015, p. 16) “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics”.

Even a carnal hermeneutics will be forced to emphasize gaps. See *Carnal Hermeneutics*, edited by Kearney and Treanor.

Ricoeur’s (1960) article for *Esprit*, “La Sexualité: Merveille, Éroticisme, et Énigme” only confirms this judgement.

It is worth pausing to note that Ricoeur may not be explicitly aware that the meaning of the Fall has already been generated by a previous textual juxtaposition, namely the meaning of Genesis 3, for him, has already been determined by Romans 5.

My emphasis, Ricoeur (1998, p. 298).

“Paradise” in English, Latin, and Greek is ultimately borrowed from the early Iranian, \*paridayjah: enclosed garden, which points to our participation in the organic and inorganic world, while ‘kingdom’ points primarily to the social realm.

My emphasis, Ricoeur (1998, p. 303).

Suffering individuates. Part of Aristotle’s break with Plato has to do with Aristotle’s emphasis on evil as not merely a ‘lack’ of the goodness of being in all its plenitude, but a ‘privation’ of the particular good proper to a being’s particular kind. The evil of an osprey with its wings torn off cannot be captured by saying that it is now a being that cannot fly, for there is a much greater tragedy in the fact that it is an *osprey* that cannot fly. However, we must go further and say that an individual’s suffering also goes beyond (cannot be contained within) a description of deprivations of its (intelligible) nature. In fact suffering with no recourse makes my being unintelligible, as it makes being itself unintelligible. Hence, the opposition we saw the young Ricoeur make above between an existential philosophy and a philosophy of form, and the connection between suffering and *haecceitas*. Beauty also transcends intelligibility, but in a way that is able to harmonize the good of the kind with the good of individual. This is why the ‘value’ of the natural world on which liturgical theology calls cannot be reduced to instrumental value and safely contained with ‘ethics.’ For example by reducing the meaning of the material sign of baptism to the need of all for access to unpolluted drinking water.

My American culture does degrade and abuse words. To call a sandwich ‘awesome’ is a crime against language. But babies *are* adorable, or at least an occasion for adoration; they are among the most exuberant and excessive manifestations of the divine that we can experience.

“The Hermeneutics of Symbols” and “‘Original Sin’ A Study in Meaning” in (Ricoeur 1974, pp. 286, 311, 314). “We never have the right to speculate on either the evil that we inaugurate or the evil we find, with reference to the history of salvation. Original sin is only an antitype. But type and antitype are not only parallel (‘just as . . . so to’), but there is a movement from one to the other, a ‘how much more,’ an ‘all the more’: where sin abounded, grace did much more abound’ (Romans 5:20)”. “What in the old theodicy was only the expedient of false knowledge becomes the understanding of hope”.

Ricoeur explicitly recognizes this methodological liberation, saying: “an exegesis that imposes a subsequent interpretation on an earlier text not recognizing the steps involved in such a reading is false” (Ricoeur 1998, p. 180).

I understand that we use the distinction between ‘ritual’ and ‘liturgy’ to mark human activities with different degrees of social organization and prescription. But the distinction also has a less explicit normative component that points to the need for discernment about the value of the activity in question. Unfortunately, like other distinctions such as Priest/Shaman and fetishism/religion this normative component still often implicitly tracks our tendency to divide human practices into primitive/modern, superstitious/enlightened, backward/progressive, etc. Thus the normative component is smuggled into our thinking in prejudiced ways and without proper deliberation.

You may not agree with my judgements about the relative value of a May Day parade, a football game, and a book burning party (and I cannot defend them here), but I hope my claim that we must discern a ritual’s value is *prima facie* plausible. For a more detailed argument, see Kearney’s *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*.

My emphasis, Ricoeur (1998, p. 54).

- <sup>21</sup> For a more developed account of this theme in the context of Richard Kearney's work, please see my chapter, "Deep calls to Deep." In Richard Kearney's *Philosophical Legacy*. Edited by James Taylor and Brian Treanor. Routledge, 2022.

## References

- Caputo, John D. 2006. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Kearney, Richard. 2015. *Carnal Hermeneutics*. Edited by Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Plato. 1997. *Timaeus*. Plato Collected Works. Translated by Donald J. Zeyl. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1960. "La Sexualité: Merveille, Éroticisme, et Énigme". Paris: Esprit.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1974. *Conflict of Interpretations*. Translated by Don Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1995. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. Translated by David Pellauer. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1998. *Thinking Biblically*. Translated by David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2004. Universality and the power of difference. In *Debates in Continental Philosophy*. Edited by Richard Kearney. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2007. *History and Truth*. Translated by Charles Kelbley. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.