

Article

Humanism Reformed: Narrative and the Divine-Human Encounter in Paul Ricoeur

Glenn Whitehouse

College of Arts & Sciences, Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL 33965, USA; gwhiteho@fgcu.edu

Abstract: “Narrative Theology” has often been construed in contrast to broader humanistic discourse. Protestant and particularly Reformed Christianity has often set the “Old, Old Story” apart from humanism and the humanities. This chapter explores the juxtaposition of humanism and reformed thinking in Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is compared with the Reformed “covenant theology” of 17th Century Puritanism. Covenant theology balanced the belief that God exceeds our powers of knowing and language and the conviction that God consents to be known within the limits of human understanding, as developed through the liberal arts. Similarly, Ricoeur sees God as limiting and disrupting human language, but while, for Ricoeur, encounter with God may begin as impossible dialogue, it develops by dispersing the names and signs of the divine throughout the tropes and genres of human discourse, narrative chief among them. Ricoeur’s thought is interpreted as a Christian humanism in which religious inquiry and secular humanistic thought coexist and mutually enhance one another. Ricoeur’s humanism will be preferred over approaches to narrative that set the Christian story and its hearers apart from the broader conversation of culture; a solipsism of faith is inadequate to the challenges of a modern pluralist culture.

Keywords: Ricoeur; Hauerwas; narrative theology; narrative; hermeneutics; covenant theology; puritan; Ramus; Perry Miller



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Narrative theology and humanism are often not on the best of terms. While both projects value storytelling as a core human activity and acknowledge narrative as a central mode of identity for communities and individuals, narrative theology has often set itself apart from broader humanistic discourse and in tension with “humanism” itself. Narrative approaches ground theology in the story of particular communities and founding events, often encouraging a religious identity that is distanced from the secular and pluralist commitments of individual believers, and producing a theological discourse that is incommensurable with a broader humanistic standpoint that includes philosophy and social science as voices alongside literature. This implied contrast between a narrative of religious identity and the presumed secularism of philosophical reflection, social analysis, and political commitments can be found in narrative theologies of varied provenance, but Protestant and Reformed traditions have particularly set the “Old, Old Story” apart from humanism and the humanities in this way. This tendency to distance narrative theology from humanism is lamentable for a number of reasons. A model for bringing them closer together is the work of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), a thinker who combined rigorous thought on narrative, a broad humanistic vision, and Reformed religious roots. Ricoeur’s approach offers resources for a broad theology of culture that includes narrative but does not confine itself to the shelter of stories, and it does so precisely through the most Reformed elements of Ricoeur’s intellectual sensibility.

The contrast between narrative and other humanistic approaches has been a concern of narrative theology both in its modern form and its historical precedents. Narrative theology over the past few decades has largely taken inspiration and direction from Stanley Hauerwas, whose work has become hugely influential in seminaries and has impacted

a generation of clergy in both mainline and evangelical Protestant churches. Hauerwas' writings on Christian ethics have made narrative central to the enterprise of doing theology and understanding the church as a community. In *A Community of Character*, Hauerwas makes bold claims for the social relevance of storytelling, taking "as a basic methodological claim that every community and polity requires a narrative" (Hauerwas 1981, p. 4). He goes on to posit that the Christian church is at its best a "story-formed community" that is characterized first by having a compelling story and second by explicitly taking its identity and approach to life from it. For Hauerwas, to act ethically as a Christian is to construe oneself as part of the story-formed community, and to develop a character and set of virtues whereby everyday acts and hot-button issues are both construed in terms of how a community formed by the Christian story should act and care for its members (Hauerwas 1981, pp. 9–12, 144).

Narrative ethics, and by extension narrative theology, is, then, an approach that looks to story as the milieu where identity is formed for individuals and communities, but that is the positive side of the card. The flip side of this approach is often a rather aggressive polemic against secular perspectives and humanistic approaches. Hauerwas does more than champion narrative; he proposes that we move "From System to Story" (see Hauerwas and Burrell 1977, pp. 15–39). For him, to embrace a narrative approach to ethics is to reject not philosophy as such, but certainly the Enlightenment philosophy that has funded modern humanism. With Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum, Hauerwas finds Aristotle's ethics with its focus on character congenial to the ethical insights of narrative, but the reflective rationality and proceduralism of Kant, Rawls or utilitarianism is to be rejected (see MacIntyre 1984; Nussbaum 2001). As Hauerwas' project continued, the rejection of Enlightenment philosophy often came to expression as a polemic against "liberalism" both in church and society—the conviction that the modern grounding of public life in procedural moral principles and a universalist humanism was something very wrong. Hauerwas was long associated with *First Things* founder Richard John Neuhaus, who insisted that the "naked public square" should be clothed with the tradition-particular voices of its inhabitants (see Neuhaus 1988). For Hauerwas and his many admirers, a narrative approach increasingly drove a particularist and traditionalist approach to Christian engagement with the world, and it pulled sharply away from the more philosophical and humanistic approach to theology of the previous generation, exemplified by a figure like Paul Tillich. At times, Hauerwas' story-formed mainline church identity became hard to distinguish from that of evangelical churches self-consciously set off against "the world" and "secular humanism"—at least when Hauerwas was mustering his blistering rhetorical assaults on "liberalism".

While Hauerwas' style of narrative theology is rooted in a mainline Methodist identity and takes its bearings from Roman Catholic sources—MacIntyre, Neuhaus—narrative has of course also historically been championed by Reformed Protestantism, especially in the form of biblicism, from the scriptural focus of Calvin and the other reformers, to the biblical inerrancy of fundamentalists, to the contemporary evangelical hocking "biblical X"—where X could be marriage counseling, parenting advice, a diet regimen . . . or a political candidate. For Reformed Christians as well, to embrace the biblical story is often also to reject a secularism and humanism they regard as corrupt. Even for evangelicals who take a conciliatory stance toward secular culture, as for instance Francis Schaeffer in the 1960s (see Schaeffer 2005), the alternative is often still a humanism of the "Christian bubble." For evangelicalism today, the rejection of broader secular culture specifically *as* humanist is increasingly thoroughgoing. Hauerwas showed affinity for secular literature by comparing the Bible to the popular novel *Watership Down* (Hauerwas 1981), but contemporary evangelical culture makes its own separate culture in which its theories of bible interpretation themselves become the plot for mass entertainment (e.g., in *Left Behind*), or where their perceived persecution by secular humanism becomes the basis for a cathartic dramatization of the culture war (in *God's Not Dead*). Many Reformed evangelicals today process and enjoy the biblical story in ways that aggressively distance them from the humanism embodied in

secular culture, both politically and in terms of what stories, symbols, and artifacts weave meaning into the lives of Christians.

There is much to lament in the fact that a wedge has grown between a story-based stance in religion and a broader humanism, whether in academic theology or in American culture. For one, it has encouraged the distancing of confessionally conservative Christians from democratic values. As Jeffrey Stout has pointed out, the rejection of political “liberalism” in the name of tradition one finds in Hauerwas and others neglects the extent to which democracy itself is a tradition in conversation with the biblical one (Stout 2004, pp. 152–53). The ambivalent stance toward democracy exhibited by contemporary evangelicals, whose biblicism is amplified in cultural jeremiads and persecution fantasies, is currently fracturing American civic life to a frightening degree. A related problem is the risk narrative-only versions of identity pose to the viability of pluralist societies like the United States. Narrative approaches to religiosity often encourage groups to identify with their religious in-group to an extent that makes it difficult to understand how those same people can interact with religious others who do not share the same story but who do live in the same country. If my identity is tied to a story that is incommensurable with the narratives of those outside my community, what do I really have to say to them? Additionally, if narrative-defined people have difficulty understanding and interacting with religious others, that brings in its train a corresponding distance from the broader culture—those artistic, economic, scientific, or political spheres of American society that Christians share with their religious and culturally different neighbors. The rift of narrative-centered Christianity from humanism has done harm to all players involved. The pluralist majority must fear dissolution of democratic institutions and civic life, as well as creeping theocratic aggressions. Meanwhile, those who espouse humanistic values increasingly tend to embrace a vapid scientism espoused by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris; a stance that mimics the smug cultural self-confidence of their fundamentalist opponents—and a “humanism” that holds the actual humanities in contempt (Whitehouse 2010, p. 11). Christian believers on the other hand are increasingly led to see broader American culture as empty, their neighbors as enemies, and to fall victim to conspiratorial narratives. Meanwhile, the “Christian” culture they consume increasingly consists of books, films, and music whose makers could be justly prosecuted for false witness against their neighbors, not to mention general aesthetic malpractice. A stance that could bring together the biblical story and the conversation of culture would answer the call of the present cultural moment nicely; this stance is exemplified in the work of Paul Ricoeur.

The relationship between sacred and humanist commitments in Ricoeur’s thought has provided fertile ground for commentary. He embraced *une certaine schizophrénie* between his religious and philosophical writings (Thomasset 1996, p. 81),¹ and declared at the start of *Oneself as Another*, “I think I have presented to my readers arguments alone, which do not assume any commitment from the reader to reject, accept or suspend anything with regard to biblical faith (Ricoeur 1992, p. 24). Many readers, concluding that Ricoeur protests too much in such statements, have attributed to his philosophy either religious implications or religious motivations (Bouchindhomme 1989, p. 179).

Ricoeur’s stance on the relation of philosophy and religion can perhaps best be illuminated by making a detour, by looking away from the aporia of faith and philosophy and starting instead with the encounter of God and human beings in stories—with a literary problem. Ricoeur’s response to the challenge of interpreting the divine–human encounter in language places his hermeneutics in proximity with certain historical strands of Reformed Christianity. This family resemblance will help show how Ricoeur’s hermeneutic thought can support a Christian *humanism* in which secular disciplines (philosophical and otherwise) have a relative validity and autonomy that should be respected.

In 20th century and contemporary literature, it is the experiences of disorientation, rupture and otherness that often enough mark the way God and human beings meet. From *Waiting for Godot* to McCarthy's *The Road*, the God who comes to the characters and readers of recent literature often enough does so in a crisis created by his own absence, and when he does appear, it is in a flash of meaning emerging from the clash of human expectations and divine purposes.

It is unsurprising that contemporary fiction should configure divine–human encounter in this way because doing so fits closely with the legacy of late modernism, whose literary shadow covers our own time. Charles Taylor has written of the “Epiphanies of Modernism,” whereby modernists like T.E. Hulme viewed the world as too tainted by evil, too disrupted and fragmented, to manifest ultimate meaning in the human domain or in a humanized world of nature (Taylor 1989, p. 459). Instead, in a ruptured or fragmented world, meaning will come when it comes, in a flash of energy or insight generated in and through the divided nature of modern experience itself. Taylor writes of a “poetics of juxtaposition” in which an epiphany of meaning is generated by the clash of distinct images within a work, as used to great effect in the poetry of Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot. In “ideogrammatic” poetry as practiced by Pound, a deeper reality

“doesn’t come to us *in* the object or image or words presented; it would be better to say that it happens *between* them. It’s as though the words or images set up between them a force field which can capture a more intense energy . . . This is the nature of the Poundian epiphany . . . Instead of an epiphany of being, we have something like an epiphany of interspaces” (Taylor 1989, pp. 475–76).

The God of late modern and postmodern literature does not encounter humans in order to allegorize some cosmic sacred order, nor to present a didactic dramatization of some previously assented doctrine. Rather, true to the forms of late modernism, the God of our literary texts comes to humans in and through the fragments of our experience and the gaps of our language—finally, a God even the MLA can love!

However, this configuration of the divine in literature also has affinities to specific variants of Christian theology and practice. The God encountered in the paradoxes of late modern and postmodern literature parallels most closely the God of *Reformed Protestantism*. Let us review a few features of Reformed piety, following the account provided by Perry Miller in *The New England Mind* (Miller 1982).² For Reformed Christianity, God is a sovereign and mysterious being whose transcendence and incomprehensibility to finite intellect make any human approach uncertain. God is

“in the final analysis . . . something that cannot be systematized at all . . . an unchained force, an incalculable power. God can never be delineated even momentarily in any shape, contour or feature recognizable to human discourse, nor may His activities be subjected to the laws of reason or of plausibility. He is a realm of mystery, in whom we may be sure that all dilemmas and contradictions are resolved, though just how we shall never in this world even remotely fathom” (Miller 1982, p. 2).

As opposed to rationalist theologies that see God as limited by universal and independently knowable standards of goodness or reason, the Reformed stance exalts God’s sovereign *will* above all. Though ultimately the divine will defines goodness itself, from the side of human comprehension, it will often appear arbitrary and at times even unjust. As for human nature, Reformed Christianity sees it as fundamentally disrupted by sin, a force which jumbles our reasoning powers, disorders our will, and makes our self-knowledge subject to a thousand ruses. The redemption that leads out of this mess can never be affected by our own power. Rather, we must be jolted out of our sin by the grace of God, in a process that generates the classic Reformed conversion narrative.

For both contemporary literature and Reformed Christianity, then, the human condition is one of fragmentation, contradiction, and uncertainty; both stress mystery and inscrutability in their treatments of the divine; both are suspicious of human claims to

self-sufficiency and self-knowledge; both bring their human characters to encounter the divine through a road that stresses struggle, pain and uncertainty. Even if the Calvinist will differ from the modernist in affirming God's *ultimate* justice, she agrees that from the human point of view, God's will can *appear* arbitrary and even unjust. It may be the case that a postmodern age—so concerned with fragmentation, power, and the decentering of the self—has rediscovered its own version of original sin, and with it an affinity for Reformed versions of the divine–human encounter. Whatever the cause, the family resemblance is more than passing. Call the literary pattern of divine–human encounter which exhibits these features the *Reformed/Modernist paradigm*.

One 20th century thinker whose intellectual biography spans both sides of this paradigm is Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur is known for his readings of late modernist authors Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann, interpretations which formed the test cases of the influential narrative theory he laid out in *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur 1985). He is also known for his interpretations of biblical texts, distributed among many writings over his long career. What may be less well known to his literary readers is his background in the minority tradition of French Reformed Protestantism, the fact that as a young member of protestant youth groups he was influenced by the 20th Century Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, and that he was involved in a Christian socialist community prior to World War II (Ricoeur 1998, pp. 5–6; 12).

The place where we can see Ricoeur's modernist and Reformed tendencies in closest proximity is in his biblical criticism, particularly his analysis of parable. The literary effect of a parable, in Ricoeur's estimation, depends on its systematic use of hyperbole and paradox. In parable, the ordinary narrative intelligence that follows a human agent's action in the world clashes with a twist in the story that contradicts the normal narrative expectations of intentions, motivations or results—a landlord would not send his son to collect from tenants who had killed the previous two messengers, and a vineyard owner would not pay the same wage for one hour as for a full day (Ricoeur 1978, p. 144). For Ricoeur, New Testament genres work their effect by pushing our ordinary narrative intelligence to its breaking point; the "world" of these texts is not the ordinary world of human action, but rather the "burst" or "exploded" universe indicated by the biblical image of a Kingdom of God (Ricoeur 1995, pp. 59–60). In many ways, then, a parable for Ricoeur is like a Poundian ideogrammatic poem. At the level of literary structure, it partakes of the modernist "poetics of juxtaposition" mentioned before, and it likewise seems to share in the late modernist conviction that an epiphany of ultimate meaning cannot be directly represented but must rather come in a flash or shock effect generated by a clash between the incommensurable fragments of experience. Whether Ricoeur the Huguenot finds modernist "tales of time" appealing for their similarity to biblical genres or Reformed conversion stories, or alternately whether as a 20th Century French intellectual he simply finds it natural to read the bible as if it were a text by Proust, Ricoeur has brought his religious writings and his literary theory into sufficiently close enough proximity that we may be able to look to him to theorize the connections between modernist and Reformed encounters with the divine.

However, what kind of Reformed Christian *is* Ricoeur? Reformed thought tends to stress the transcendence of God, which can severely limit the forums of divine human encounter—how can humans ever meet or understand a being who is so irreducibly Other? Hence, despite Calvin's background in Renaissance humanism, there is in Reformed Christianity a powerful anti-humanist streak which tends to segregate the discussion of God from the insights of secular ways of knowing such as philosophy or social science—or, for that matter, literature. In the face of the absolute transcendence of God and the lack of an access point in humanistic discourse, Reformed Christianity can become radically centered around the biblical scriptures as the only available point of revelatory insight, whether this biblicism is the reformers' slogan *sola scriptura*, the anti-intellectualism of protestant fundamentalism, or Karl Barth's call to encounter "the strange new world within the Bible."

There is something to connect Ricoeur with the original theology of Calvin and its revival in 20th Century Barthianism (see [Wallace 1990](#)). Inasmuch as his religious writings are mostly limited to biblical studies, he shares something of the scripture focus just mentioned. However, ultimately for Ricoeur—a defender of humanism and perhaps the most rigorously interdisciplinary thinker of our time—the segregation of religious from literary and other scholarly concerns will not do. Without claiming a specific historical influence, I claim that Ricoeur’s thought bears a family resemblance to a different strand in Reformed intellectual life, specifically the cluster of ideas surrounding the notion of *covenant theology* in Anglo-American Puritanism. These resemblances come to light in comparing general features of Puritan covenant theology to some key themes and patterns of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics.

As Perry Miller presents it in *The New England Mind*, the characteristic pattern of Puritan intellectual life was its *covenant theology*, referring originally to the tendency of some Reformed thinkers to frame the whole of their theology on the pattern of a compact or covenant such as God established with Israel in the Hebrew Bible (see [MacCulloch 2003](#), pp. 178–79, 389–91).³ As Miller explains things, covenant thinking arose in Puritanism from the need to mitigate the harsh logic of predestination that comes down from 16th Century Calvinism ([Miller 1982](#), p. 373). If my destiny is eternally decreed by the arbitrary edict of an unknowable God, what is to prevent me from simply doing what I like, knowing my fate is sealed, or alternately, from being consumed by despair or anxious uncertainty? Puritanism’s characteristic solution to such questions was to make God more knowable and less willful, by positing that God has voluntarily entered into a contract or covenant with human beings, whereby he binds his own divine will to a set of knowable features and doable rules ([Miller 1982](#), p. 376). “In His nature He remains above all law, outside all morality, beyond all reason, but in the Covenant He is ruled by a law, constrained to be moral, committed to a sweet reasonableness” ([Miller 1982](#), p. 379). Absolutely considered, God continues to be unknowable and willful, but there is a separation between God as he is absolutely on the one hand and the manifestation of God’s works in creation, in which for the sake of his creatures God has graciously agreed to be tied down to features that will make him just and knowable. In the logic of covenant thought, universal principles of rationality and goodness are not independent standards that can bind God’s essential being, but they are nonetheless valid as features of the world that God, in his absolute will, consented to make. Within the circuit of the covenant, “spacious enough to include all humanity, two and two will always equal four, a cause will have its effect, and the fulfillment of conditions never fail of the assured reward. Within this circumference, God speaks no longer with unpredictable fury” ([Miller 1982](#), p. 380).

With the covenant idea, Puritan intellectual life exhibited a rationalism that tried to plot a middle course between a Protestant absolutism in which reason and human justice are useless in the encounter with an unknowable God, and a Catholic scholastic rationalism for which, in the Puritan opinion, God was tied down or dissolved into the categories of secular or pagan metaphysics. For the Puritans, by contrast, Reason and the humane discourses in which it was embodied would retain a relative legitimacy within the terms of the covenant established by God. As opposed to the anti-humanist strain that can lurk within Reformed thought, the Puritans sought to tie together faith and knowing as much as possible, in a systematic perspective that integrated the disciplinary perspectives of the liberal arts rather than excluding them ([Miller 1982](#), p. 77). While they were Calvinist and Augustinian enough to believe that human reasoning capacities had been severely corrupted by sin and the Fall, corruption was not read as complete incapacity. Rather, for Puritans, the art of logic, studied as part of the liberal arts, was a gift that allowed us to approximate the right reasoning that Adam originally practiced ([Miller 1982](#), p. 111). The Puritans took their logical bearings from Peter Ramus, a 16th Century French convert to Protestantism who built a simplified system of reason that was based around the “dialectical” classification of knowledge into its constituent parts using a series of dichotomies that could ultimately render the structure of human knowledge in the form of a visual chart. Such classification,

for Ramists, created a system which to some extent mirrored the divine order of things. Reason for the Puritans was fundamentally tied to rhetoric, though, with the goal for the student of Ramist dialectic to be able to construct a discourse that mapped very closely the knowledge of the order of things (Miller 1982, pp. 126–33). Though it was always necessary to acknowledge the limitations of human knowledge *vis a vis* God, the liberal arts, viewed as rational and inter-related on the Ramist scheme, could be seen almost as emanations “from primary, infinite and most perfect wisdom just as rays from the body of the sun” (Miller 1982, p. 106). Humanistic disciplines, then, could be seen as the means by which finite human beings encountered God within the rational limits of the dispensation set up by God’s covenant. Far from being anti-humanistic or limiting religious knowledge to scripture, then, the Puritan version of Reformed Christianity set out an ambitious intellectual agenda that sought to use humane knowledge in all its breadth to advance understanding, not of God absolutely considered, but of God as he consents to be known and dealt with according to the canons of human reason.

Four main points of analogy between this Puritan Reformed synthesis and Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical project can be found. The first concerns the relative legitimacy of analytical humanistic disciplines within the task of interpretation. Like the Puritan holding out for the mediating function of the liberal arts on the road to understanding God against enthusiasts who wanted a direct union with the almighty, Ricoeur has opposed thinkers who construe hermeneutics as direct understanding, either of another person’s subjectivity or of the Truth of Being (Ricoeur 1991, pp. 62, 69, 73–74). As opposed to the approach of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics has refused to divorce truth from method. Rather, Ricoeur’s thought takes on a characteristic pattern of dialectic between interpretive approaches that seek direct understanding—of a text, of another interlocutor, or of Being—and approaches that subject texts to various techniques of analytic rationality and reductive method—what hermeneutic thinkers typically call *explanation*. For Ricoeur, distantiation from the object of understanding is a condition of interpretation, and humans can only pass from naïve to full understanding through the mediating function of some explanatory discourse (Ricoeur 1991, pp. 82–83, 87–88). For this reason, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic has been able to hold together interpretive practices from rival schools in the humanities and social sciences, over against the tendency of some theorists to force a choice. Ricoeur’s approach resembles the Puritan intellectual synthesis here *first*, in the conviction that knowledge of the ultimate object of human understanding (God, Being) is a back and forth between direct experiential dialogue with something we cannot completely grasp, and rational analysis of those aspects of that dialogue that *can* be regularized and explained; *second*, in that however much the object of understanding may transcend our analytic categories and disciplines, those disciplines still provide a legitimate access point for that object within the confines of human finitude; *third*, in the confidence that though the ultimate reality may itself be infinitely disbursed, the universe of human knowledge has some unity; the arts and disciplines of understanding that we use can be brought into conversation with one another.

The second point of analogy has to do with the role of rhetoric, dialectic and literary tropes in Ricoeur’s thought. Puritan thinkers turned to the Ramist dialectic to structure their thought, a system that was tied to rhetoric, given the practical imperative to *use* the building blocks of knowledge in the communication act of a rationally constructed sermon. Ricoeur similarly builds his thought around some basic structures of language, gleaned from rhetorical study. A theoretical text by Ricoeur will typically consist of a careful consideration of the structure of some basic component of language and its role in the production of meaning—symbols in *The Symbolism of Evil*, metaphor in *The Rule of Metaphor*, or narrative emplotment in *Time and Narrative* (see Ricoeur 1967; Ricoeur 1977; Ricoeur 1984–1988). Likewise, to the extent that Ricoeur often takes *structuralism* as a privileged critical method for hermeneutics, he would seem to share something of the Ramist penchant for structuring thought in terms of dichotomies. Granted, for Ricoeur, binary structures only ever tell half the truth about a meaningful expression, and he would

balk at the Ramist claim that they can be sufficient in themselves to construct a system of knowledge. Still, to the extent that the dichotomies in Ramism are something to be *used* in the task of constructing arguments, there is an affinity with Ricoeur, whose specific version of “post-structuralism” is premised around the idea that the binary oppositions seen in a synchronic view of language are constantly mediated in the diachronic process of using language in discursive sentences (Ricoeur 1974, pp. 88–89, 4–95). Ricoeur follows the Puritan Ramists here in taking his “first philosophy” from a general study of discourse rather than from ontology or epistemology, thus marking his thought as ontologically modest compared to other roads leading from Heidegger, just as the Puritans sought to differentiate themselves from the metaphysical morass of scholasticism (Ricoeur 1974, pp. 6–8, 10–11, 23–24).

Third, the Puritan distinction between God as considered absolutely, who is unknowable, disruptive, etc., and God as manifested through relatively knowable works and discourses has a parallel in Ricoeur’s treatment of religious texts. For Ricoeur, sacred texts are constantly exhibiting an interplay between the ordinariness of the discursive forms that structure them and the divine referent “God” or “Kingdom of God” that lies beyond the text but breaks into it. In Ricoeur’s analysis of parable and other New Testament literary forms, it is the forms of narrative and metaphor that point toward a God that cannot be grasped within conceptual knowledge. In texts such as “Naming God,” Ricoeur comes to see *God* as a name that coordinates the various forms of discourse found in the sacred text, without being exhaustively captured in any one of them. Rather, “God” sets in motion a play within the biblical text, where the divinity schematized in narrative, for instance, is constantly juxtaposed with the one given through law or hymn, with the name serving as the “index of incompleteness” for all the different discourses that it coordinates (Ricoeur 1995, pp. 224–25, 228–29). Here, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics resembles the Puritan approach *first* in the fact that the transcendence of the divine referent God is held together with the attempt to read the effects of that unknowable God on the knowable texts that are objects of human understanding and *second* in the way that “God” can coordinate or organize other forms of knowledge and discourse, without the divine referent becoming a concept within a metaphysical system.

A fourth and final point of analogy concerns the ways in which the appropriation of divine understanding by human beings impacts *secular* knowledge by a kind of recoil effect. Puritan covenant theology posited that God deals with us through the intellectual means appropriate to the human beings that we are. Ricoeur follows this pattern in that he sees human rational and linguistic faculties as the indispensable means through which humans may *appropriate* the encounter with the divine. In contrast with thinkers like Levinas who would view the divine as an inassimilable Other who interrogates me, dismantles the totalizing systems I use to conceptually master the world, and calls me to total responsibility, Ricoeur contends that philosophical systems and discourses of selfhood are necessary preconditions to allow a person to *receive* responsibly a call emanating from another (Ricoeur 1992, p. 339). Accordingly, Ricoeur has made human understanding and its structures crucial to understanding religious identity and religious expression. He goes so far as to say that “a Christian is someone who discerns ‘conformity to the image of Christ’ in the call of conscience” (Ricoeur 1995, p. 274), where *conscience* is a structure of human selfhood tied to philosophical concerns such as moral judgment and literary concepts such as narrative identity. One can thus see in Ricoeur something similar to the covenant theology that made humane disciplines the point of access to the realm of human understanding—the place where God consents to speak to humans. The covenant pattern in Puritan thought acknowledged no wholly “secular” disciplines; all are susceptible to being used for divine purposes. Similarly, for Ricoeur, the relation between sacred and secular understanding is a two-way street: secular understanding provides the point of access and appropriation for the divine referent, but there is also an educative relationship in which secular thought becomes less closed and more flexible as the encounter with the divine Other rewrites some of our existing discourses. In essays such as “Love and Justice,”

for instance, Ricoeur has spelled out how the divine referent disrupts the secular discourse of justice without destroying it. Instead, love educates justice toward greater generosity and solicitude for singular others (Ricoeur 1995, pp. 324, 327–29).

The overall tenor of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics is thus analogous to the Puritan/Ramist cultural synthesis—interpreted in Miller's way as an instance of Christian humanism. Of course, every analogy limps a little.

On the side of the *object of knowledge*, Ricoeur partakes of the postmodern idea of the Other as something that disrupts our systems of discourse. Though he does not go so far as to posit a disconnect between all “totalizing” systems and the divine, it is still in the *gaps* of our discursive paradigms that God comes to literature for Ricoeur, and the appropriation of the divine referent will transform those paradigms. By contrast, Miller notes that for Puritans, applying the tools of Ramist logic and the liberal arts to God was a relatively unproblematic enterprise, not requiring fundamental adjustments to the methods and approaches used in the liberal arts (Miller 1982, pp. 147–53, 161). On the side of the *knowing subject*, Ricoeur, unlike the Puritans, appropriates the 19th and 20th century “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which decode the ruses of power, desire or economics that first speak me as a subject before I as subject become a speaker (see Ricoeur 1974; Ricoeur 1970). Of course, the consciousness of original sin and the consequent necessity to always be on guard against self-deception did run very deep in Puritanism. What sets Ricoeur's hermeneutics apart is the acknowledgment that this self-deception can extend even to the systematic discourses of knowledge that human subjects construct. Hence suspicious critique must be a crucible that tests not only individual selves but also the conceptual systems they create, a realization that makes it impossible for Ricoeur to be an epistemological realist in the way that came naturally to Reformed thinkers of a pre-critical age.

Thus Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory and practice exemplifies a rational and humanistic Reformed thought that has affinities to the covenant theology of American Puritanism. However, what of the initial question about the status of narrative theology and humanism? How can Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach help heal the rift between narrative religiosity and a broader humanism?

An initial place to look for insight is in the literary forms which schematize the encounter of God and human beings. Whether we speak of the postmodern novel or the Bible, the divine-human encounter typically takes the form of a *dialogue*. This is understandable, given that we tend to think of this encounter as a direct address from God to humans in the prophetic call, or from humans to God in the case of religious practices such as prayer. For literature, the dominance of dialogue often employs the divine-human encounter as some variant on a conversion story, recounting the drama of an individual singled out by God or specially called into divine partnership. However, God can prove to be a difficult conversation partner. Religiously, God is often seen as so powerful and unknowable as to make direct dialogue impossible. Theoretically, our attempts to think the encounter of God and humans often enough become caught in this figure of an impossible dialogue. Do we travel the route laid out by Martin Buber and see the encounter with God as what happens in a perfect dialogue, the flash of an I–You moment (see Buber 1970), so that the impossibility lies in the fact that our moments of dialogue are only ever fragmentary and limited? Or do we follow Emmanuel Levinas in figuring God's address to me as accusation, command, or disruption (Levinas 1969, pp. 194, 197–201), where the impossibility concerns the mismatch between the totalizing violence of my thinking and the absolute ethical command addressing me from the Other? As we become increasingly conscious of the barriers to and difficulties with dialogue, the privileged literary sites become stories of crisis, dislocation and rupture that pervaded the treatment of religious themes in modernism and its aftermath. Meanwhile, religious practice tends to reduce the dialogue with God to a “Jesus and me” personal piety that embraces expressive individualism at the expense of the hard self-scrutiny that comes from seeing oneself distantiated in the mirror the narrative text (Bellah et al. 1985, pp. 232–35). Does this aporia foretell a closing of the divine-human encounter for the postmodern age?

Or does it call interpreters to expand their engagement with traces of the sacred beyond the tropes of dialogue and individualist piety?

Ricoeur's approach can move us toward such an expansion and can do so precisely as a synthesis of literary criticism and Reformed religious sensibility. The intercourse of my soul with God is largely mute, caught between the mutual conversation stoppers of God's inscrutable will and the limits of my self-knowledge. The Puritan wager was that we could read the *effects* of that dialogue more effectively than we could understand the dialogue itself; that is why the covenant for them symbolized an understanding of ourselves and God that could be achieved indirectly, but more reliably. Similarly, by expanding the situation of dialogue to include the forms of symbol, text, metaphor, and narrative, Ricoeur opens the door to thinking the whole of written culture as a field where the dispersed effects of the divine-human encounter can be taken up and appropriated. Ricoeur often speaks of his "detours" into the study of literary or social structures as a "wager" that will pay off in a deeper understanding of an "I" that cannot be directly known through introspection or dialogue (Ricoeur 1967, p. 355). This kind of "covenant theology of the self" can have as its counterpart an expanded paradigm of religious inquiry that sets interpreters on our own detour of treating a greater range of cultural genres and features as indirect points of access to the divine-human encounter.

Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics as well expanded the range of discourses that may schematize the divine-human encounter. Not only the I-You of prophetic address and prayer, but the second person of the imperative command, the third person of narrative, and the varied addresses of praise and wisdom literature—each can be the site of *testimony* to the encounter between humans and God (Ricoeur 1995, pp. 226–27). This bears with it a couple of consequences when we look to find such encounters *outside* of sacred texts. For one, it implies that the diverse *forms* of human discourse are each in play for locating the encounter—description as much as dialogue, analysis as much as introspection. Ricoeur's careful delineation of the different structural modes of discourse, and his willingness to see God "named" in each of them, opens up the full range of human discourses as fields for the relation of religion and culture. It is in the places where these ordinary discourses are *affected by* juxtaposition, hyperbole or other forms of discursive excess that the critic should look for traces of the sacred. Second, in rendering the range of different discursive forms as sites for the divine-human encounter, Ricoeur likewise implicates the *forms of life* named by those discourses. The vast range of phenomena of lived finite experience named by language now are opened to participating in the epiphany of the divine. Like the late Puritan Jonathan Edwards looking for "images of divine things" in the objects of the natural world, Ricoeur gives us the tools by which the modern subject can look for similar epiphany in the world, insofar as that world is seen through the lens of language that may come to exhibit the "extravagant" characteristics that mark the inbreaking of the divine. Against the tendency to see the encounter of humans and God only in certain very specific situations, genres or forms, Ricoeur, like Perry Miller's Puritans, can read "sermons in brooks and morals in stones" (Miller 1982, p. 214).⁴ opening the whole realm of ordinary finite experience and human discourse and knowledge to this extraordinary possibility.

For Ricoeur, our literary and religious discourses can be understood as moments of conversation between God and human beings. The divine-human encounter takes place indirectly, in the spaces where the primary discourses of 'human-ness' come up against their own incompleteness or limitation. Humans, existing on one side of this conversation, appropriate the effects of their encounter with elusive divinity largely through adjusting and transforming their prior vocabularies and systems of thought. Every expression of a finite human being is a potential site for the transformation of divine grace, but this does not take place through some rapture of inspiration that would replace human speech with a perfectly pure alternative. Rather, it is by a series of adjustments, openings, redescriptions, and paradigm shifts in our own finite discourses that we can read the human responses to the divine initiative. This is all that we should expect as philosophers, critics, or as religious readers. Texts do not give us access to the voice of God, nor to the "still small voice" in the

human heart. What they do give voice to, in their plural and sometimes messy way, is an ongoing indirect conversation between humans and the divine. The task for interpretation is to find where the effects of such conversations are disseminated through the plural world of speech and writing, testifying to the sites where an encounter with God has disrupted the closed systems of human discourse and graced our thinking with the call to make new meaning.

We can read Ricoeur's work as funding a *Christian humanism* which is simultaneously jealous of the intellectual integrity of disciplines of humane learning and on guard to look toward them as potential sites for the faithful reappropriation of religious meaning. Were it not for Ricoeur's usual reticence about "doing theology," one might even identify this as a *theology of culture* after the style of Paul Tillich (Tillich 1964), or as an instance of the *theological humanism* more recently advocated by David Klemm and William Schweiker (Klemm and Schweiker 2008).⁵ Indeed, Ricoeur's characteristic procedure of following the insights of literary criticism or philosophy according to their internal standards first, and only afterward identifying the aporia, paradox or limit case which may provide the occasion for a religious re-reading, closely tracks the relationship between *autonomy* and *theonomy* Tillich used in texts such as *The System of the Sciences* (Tillich 1981, pp. 203–15).⁶ However, Ricoeur is reticent about building theological systems—hence the more modest label of religious humanist is a better fit. Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach opens the door for theonomous readings of the broader culture—even if that is a door Ricoeur seldom walks through himself. A Ricoeurian religious reading of culture is one that is able to see images and shadows of divine things across the symbolic forms of culture—not just in stories—and is able to utilize the analytical insights of philosophy and social science rather than rejecting them as irrelevant or hopelessly secular. In these regards, his approach is better equipped to deploy humanistic scholarship for theological ends than those versions of narrative theology that end by opposing storytelling to the rest of human thought and expression.

Comparing Ricoeur's humanism with the Puritans may bring to mind the goal of Christianizing culture that Puritanism shares with contemporary evangelicalism, but Ricoeur's stance is no Christian bubble humanism *a la* Francis Schaeffer. Instead, Ricoeur's Christian humanism makes its home in a world of culture which Christians share with neighbors who have other religious stories, or secular ones. For Ricoeur's hermeneutics, difference does not prompt a quest for cultural dominance, nor does it elicit a fearful defensive crouch. Rather, difference for Ricoeur's version of interpretation is an invitation to a dialogue that need not erase our identities—a dialogue that empowers democratic life instead of threatening it. Ricoeur's hermeneutic succeeds in funding a narrative religiosity that avoids the story-solipsism that afflicts some versions of narrative theology. Ricoeur's work projects an intellectual milieu in which religious inquiry exists in mutual critical dialogue with "secular" disciplines in a wider intellectual forum, and in which Christian thinkers are participating citizens in the republic of letters, rather than lords, lepers or hermits.

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¹ Citing an interview with Paul Ricoeur in *France Catholique* dated January 17, 1992.

² This paragraph and the next paraphrase elements from Miller's chp. 1, "The Augustinian Strain of Piety" and chp. 2, "The Practice of Piety."

- 3 As MacCulloch notes, the theme originated with Zurich Reformer Heinrich Bullinger, was later taken up by influential Puritan writers William Ames and William Perkins, and through them was widely influential in American Puritanism.
- 4 Miller uses the image to draw a connection between the Puritans and the later Transcendentalists. Miller's words rephrase a line from *As You Like It*.
- 5 Klemm and Schweiker differentiate their theological humanism from Christian humanism. Ricoeur's thought definitely moves toward the broad theological interpretation of culture advocated by Klemm and Schweiker—and the interdisciplinary humanism I am proposing to find in Ricoeur would likewise move him toward that stance—but because he limited most of his religious writing to scriptural studies, and because of his reticence to engage in explicit theological reflection, I prefer to categorize Ricoeur as a Christian humanist.
- 6 For a version of the corresponding dynamic in Ricoeur, see "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics", in (Ricoeur 1991, pp. 89–101).

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