

Dallas Baptist University

PAUL RICOEUR AND CHRISTIAN HUMANISM: MEDIATION OF THE FINITE-INFINITE

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By Self I mean a non-egotistic, non-narcissistic, non-imperialistic mode of subjectivity
which responds and corresponds to the power of a work to display a *world*.¹
–Paul Ricoeur, 1975

1 INTRODUCTION

It is often the case that within the disciplines of religion, literature, and philosophy, there is, at any given time, two overriding schools of thought that represent conflicting points of view regarding that discipline's central concerns. Examples from the twentieth century include: realism and anti-realism, analytic and continental, scientific objectivity and subjective relativism, and phenomenology and hermeneutics. None of these relations is necessarily analogous to the others, and some pairs are not even polar opposites, but each relation reflects an inner tension or conflict within the discipline itself, and the question of their possible resolution is almost always ambiguous and unpredictable. Some thinkers within the analytic and continental traditions, for instance, anticipate an eventual synthesis, or at least a dialogic engagement between the two. Others insist, regarding the debate between realism and anti-realism, that we must choose one or the other – no synthesis is possible. Many, like Ricoeur himself, believe the conflict between phenomenology and hermeneutics might be solved if one term is altered slightly and then grafted onto the other, to form, for instance, a hermeneutic phenomenology.

Paul Ricoeur saw this conflicting dialectic at work within such disciplines, explicitly between phenomenology and hermeneutics, and sought throughout his life to bring apparent polar opposites into a kind of mediation or unity. But, unlike the Hegelian system, he wanted a unity that would allow inner tension and conflict to remain at work, hoping that such open-endedness would encourage conversation to continue.

Although scholars have disagreed about how Ricoeur ultimately brings unity, mediation, or even coherence to his own work, the majority have suggested that this unity rests in

¹Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 5, no. 1 (1975), 30.

phenomenology, hermeneutics, or Post-Hegelian Kantianism. Strangely enough, few have attempted to understand his project within the framework of his theological worldview. While the majority of scholars have sought to understand Ricoeur within largely philosophical, areligious categories, I suggest that despite Ricoeur’s professed aim to draw a strict separation between his religious beliefs and his philosophical arguments, that his overall project is one that reflects a kind of Christian humanism.² As we shall see, the structure, inherent boundaries, and dynamism of a Christian framework allows Ricoeur to move freely in a kind of open-endedness without becoming radically relativistic or unintelligible.

This paper is thus an examination of Ricoeur’s Christian humanism and its influence on his work. First, I will outline the specifics of the religious framework within which we might understand Ricoeur, centered on anthropological categories of the Calvinist and Lutheran traditions. Next, I will show the relevancy of these new categories by applying them to Ricoeur’s important essay, “Naming God.” In this way, I hope to indicate not only a better way of understanding and evaluating Ricoeur’s work, but also a better way to respond to the tendency of polarization within the disciplines of religion, literature, and philosophy.

2 CHRISTIAN HUMANISM AND MEDIATION

When referring to Christian humanism, I am denoting an anthropology that is formed within the theological framework of Christianity. It is not a particular kind of Christianity, but a particular kind of anthropology—a way of asking what it means to be human. Ricoeur asks this question within a broadly Protestant tradition, and more specifically, he asks this question with reference to human finitude and man’s inherent link to the infinite, that is, to the the divine, sovereign God. This question of the relation between the finite and the

²I must give ample credit to James Walter Lowe’s fine essay, “The Coherence of Paul Ricoeur,” for this alternative framework I am proposing. Lowe broadly recounts the ways in which Christian humanism, using the categories of finitude and infinitude, provides the framework for Ricoeur’s entire corpus, whereas I am here focusing on Ricoeur’s more recent religious essays (a segment of Ricoeur’s work that Lowe only mentions in passing). Lowe’s essay makes my case much stronger, since he shows that a Christian humanist framework is entirely consistent with Ricoeur’s entire philosophical enterprise, not merely his religious essays.

infinite takes two very different forms in the Lutheran and Calvinist traditions, both of which are echoed in Ricoeur.

2.1 Lutheran Tradition: *finitum capax infinitum*

The phrase *finitum capax infinitum*, “the finite is capable of the infinite,” often surfaces within Lutheran reflections on christology and the sacraments. The implications of this phrase have to do with our ability to grasp, albeit imperfectly, the divinity of God, the possibility of discovering the supernatural within the natural order, and the role of mystery in grasping the richness of the divine in a way more than words can express.

At the same time, this *finitum capax* always risks becoming a kind of immanentism or denial of the omnipotence and omniscience of God. In other words, by blurring the divide between humanity and the divine, *finitum capax* can become a means of making God into our own image. For this reason, the Lutheran tradition has always professed the need for a simultaneous affirmation of our finitude. This finitude is informed by a continual recognition of our sinful nature and the presently unresolvable paradoxes of Christianity. The Lutheran cannot affirm *finitum capax* without also affirming both the full humanity *and* full divinity of Christ, or the simultaneous weakness *and* power of the cross. In this way, mystery plays a double role. It allows us to grasp truths that are beyond the reach of reason, and it also reminds us of the insurmountable otherness of God.

2.2 Calvinist Tradition: *finitum non capax infinitum*

The Calvinist tradition stands at the opposite end of the spectrum. Indeed, Calvinists have long insisted, *finitum non capax infinitum*, “the finite is *not* capable of the infinite.” This should not be surprising, since the Calvinist tradition rests on the absolute transcendence and sovereignty of God, as well as humanity’s full depravity. In this way, *finitum non capax* stresses the insurmountable limits which characterize our human finitude.

Now, just as the *finitum capax* is always in danger of neglecting the crucial *distinction*

between God and his finite creation, Calvinism's *finitum non capax* is always in danger of neglecting the important *connection* between the Creator and creatures. In this way, the *finitum non capax* could easily turn into a kind of Platonic or Manichean dualism, where finitude itself is synonymous with evil, while infinitude is synonymous with goodness. Consequently, Calvin himself and the majority of the Reformed tradition hold strongly to several related theological concepts that affirm our goodness and connection to God: man as *imago dei*, sanctification, redemption, and the "already/not yet" kingdom of God. Consequently, the emphasis on man's finitude is always held in balance with a Christian humanism that stresses our connection to the Infinite.

With these two frameworks in mind, we shall now turn to examine a later, religious essay by Ricoeur, "Naming God," where he develops and maintains several tensions which parallel that between the *finitum capax* and the *finitum non capax*.

3 NAMING GOD

"Naming God" is Ricoeur's philosophic and theological exposition of, as he describes it, what "one listener of Christian preaching may stand ready to describe [as] the ways they understand what they have heard."³ By describing himself as a "listener," Ricoeur wants to make it clear from the very beginning that he is not offering a critical proof of the truth of Christianity to the skeptics, nor a systematic articulation of what he believes. By asserting that, as a listener, he cannot begin to speak outside the circularity of presuppositions (as many philosophers might wish), Ricoeur places himself within the *finitum non capax* tradition. His finitude is central from the beginning: "Can I account for this presupposition? Alas, I stumble already. I do not know how to sort out what is here 'unravelable' situation, uncriticized custom, deliberate preference, or profound unchosen choice."⁴ As a finite listener, Ricoeur must confess to a kind of contingency, to the famous hermeneutical circle of believing in order to

³"Naming God," 217.

⁴Ibid.

understand.

But then, this assertion of finitude is caught up in tension with a kind of *finitum capax* counter-assertion. Without denying that he stands within a circle, he claims that he still stands “boldly” in a “hope” that “defies all these [philosophical] distinctions,” confident that what he has “risked” in faith “will return a hundredfold as an increase in comprehension, valor, and joy.”⁵ He is speaking as one who has been summoned by God and the Scriptures, as one who hopes to communicate that Christian preaching is vital, that the biblical text is worthy of consideration and, when transferred to life, will no doubt verify itself.

From the beginning, Ricoeur offers a framework that contains the tensions of finitude and infinitude, belief and knowledge, and contingency and choice. And, despite his assertion that he will offer no proofs for what he professes, this essay is not devoid of philosophical argument or hermeneutical reflection. On the contrary, Ricoeur offers us a rich exposition of the ways in which philosophy, religion, and literature meet in order to allow man to encounter God through the proclaimed biblical text.

3.1 Texts and Life

“This is the presupposition: naming God is what has already taken place in the texts preferred by my listening’s presupposition.”⁶

Faith is, for Ricoeur, a feeling of “absolute dependence,” a “response to a will that precedes me,” an “ultimate concern” guiding every decision, and an “ultimate confidence that hopes in spite of . . . everything.” In this way, religious faith cannot be reduced to or inscribed in a text or speech, but serves rather as the “origin of all interpretation.” Here, Ricoeur’s position parallels the *finitum capax* of a transcendental phenomenology, because the faith of an existing subject is able to transcend the finitude of language, holding tightly to the divine with a confidence that does not rest on objective certitude. At the same time, the Lutheran tension which serves as a countervailing force to the *finitum capax* comes into

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 218.

play when we recognize that this faith is an “absolute dependence,” a receptivity to “a will that precedes me.” Consequently, while religious faith does serve to take us beyond our finitude to a confident hope in the infinite, it is still only hope, not certainty, and therefore not autonomous or independent, but radically dependent on the One who is our “ultimate concern.”

But, just after affirming the *finitum capax*, placing religious faith beyond the text, in the life of the subject, Ricoeur then proceeds to explain how faith and religious experience always arise *within* language; that is, faith is first articulated in a cognitive, practical, and emotional sense through Christian preaching. Here we have an affirmation of the Calvinist *finitum non capax*, where the phenomenological ego is subsumed within the context of language and community: “. . . faith, inasmuch as it is lived experience, is *instructed*—in the sense of being formed, clarified, and educated—within the network of texts that in each instance preaching brings back to living speech.” By locating the place of faith’s enactment within a sphere outside the self, Ricoeur emphasizes the hermeneutic over the phenomenological, insisting that our finitude forces us to be *receivers* and *listeners*, not isolated *fabricators* of religious meaning.

But, in order to keep this dependence on something outside ourselves from degenerating into relativism, Ricoeur must provide a reason that something outside the self could deliver more than what the self can already provide. This connection to infinitude is found, according to Ricoeur, precisely in the “*textuality* of faith [that] distinguishes *biblical* faith from all others.” Ricoeur explains, “In one sense, therefore, texts do precede life. I can name God in my faith because the texts preached to me have already named God.”⁷

Here, Ricoeur can be better understood if we recall the opening reflection in Augustine’s *Confessions*, where Augustine ponders the question of which comes first, knowing God or calling upon Him. To know God before we call on Him is the Neoplatonic requirement, whereas Christianity asks that we call upon God first, in order that He may be known, that

⁷Ibid.

we believe in order to understand. But, even calling upon and believing in God depend on something outside us:

Yet “how shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe without a *preacher*?” “And they shall praise the Lord that seek him,” for they that *seek* him find him, and *finding* him they shall *praise* him. Lord, let me seek you by *calling* upon you, and let me call upon you by *believing* in you, for you have been *preached* to us. Lord, my faith calls upon you . . .⁸

Here, Augustine concludes that access to God does not take place through inward recollection, but through a dialectic that begins outside oneself: preaching → hearing → calling → seeking → finding → praising. Just as Ricoeur affirms that he can “name God” in faith only because the “texts preached” have already revealed this name, Augustine also insists that faith is only enacted if God is articulated in language outside the self. In these ways, Ricoeur allows a dynamic relation of the finite and the infinite to inform the unity between texts and life.

3.2 Writing and Speaking

After defending the essential priority of life over text, Ricoeur somewhat surprisingly goes on to affirm the priority of texts over speaking. The speech in question is specifically dialogue or encounter between “an I and Thou,” and its priority is being questioned in regard to the ability to communicate discourse, being addressed to and received in a community of interpretation. Ricoeur’s basic argument is that an “apologetic based just on dialogue tends to make us completely lose sight of what is unique to instruction through texts.”⁹ It seems then that the question is not about whether dialogical interpretation is important as a component of the relation between God and humanity, but that its preeminence tends to be too narrow and exclusive, forgetting the unique role that texts can serve.

Ricoeur recalls Plato’s critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* where he claims that when living speech is reduced to the “external marks” of letters and written signs, authentic com-

⁸Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 1.1.1; my emphasis.

⁹“Naming God,” 218.

munication is cut off. Ricoeur gladly consents to this critique to the extent that much is indeed lost when speech is transferred to text, hence the common attempt to recreate in writing a relation, not identical, but analogical, to the original dialogic communication. But, Ricoeur repeats, such an apologetic for dialogue forgets the unique strengths of allowing speech to pass into writing. Such strengths include the text's ability to gain a partial independence from its author, context, and original audience, as well as its consequent opening up to an infinite richness from the innumerable "recontextualizations" that texts can allow to its many listeners and readers.

By making this move from speech to writing, and allowing the text to separate itself in part from its original author, context, and audience, Ricoeur has again embraced the *finitum capax* of the Lutheran tradition, thereby giving the power over textual meaning to the phenomenological subject who can "recontextualize" the text in his or her own way. Indeed, it appears that the capacity of the finite reader has been made infinite.

But unsurprisingly, Ricoeur goes on to counterbalance this move with another move that reflects again the *finitum non capax* of Calvin. Ricoeur asks us, "If I make believers scribes, will it be long before I make them literary critics?"¹⁰ He is clearly aware of the danger of delivering the meaning of a text completely into the hands of a reader who appropriates a critical, literary method. An autonomous reader will very likely force the texts to "close in upon themselves," so that they become "more separated and closed off from the side I have called life."¹¹ For this reason, Ricoeur must make two more arguments concerning the hermeneutic of a text if he is to prevent this degeneration into structuralism.

First, Ricoeur argues that a text is a link in a communicative chain. This chain begins with the author's original life experiences, and these experiences along with the imagination and intentionality of the author then become discourse. Such discourse next becomes speech, and finally writing. The text is then formed. Later, the reader or preacher encounters the text, allowing it to be restored to living speech within the reader or preacher's

¹⁰Ibid., 219.

¹¹Ibid.

own context and discourse. Ricoeur describes this process as “speaking-becoming-writing” followed by “writing-becoming-speaking,” arguing that if one tries to understand a text as isolated from this communicative chain, the text will become no more than an “artifact of critical method.”¹² As a result, the finite reader is no longer capable of an infinite number of interpretations irrespective of their communicative link to the text and the “speaking-becoming-writing” that brought that text to fruition.

Ricoeur’s second argument has to do with the relation between “sense” and “reference.” By “reference,” Ricoeur means the way discourse relates itself to “an extralinguistic reality,” that is, to the “lived experience that is brought to language” by the author before it is bifurcated within discourse into speech and writing.¹³ By “sense,” Ricoeur means “a network of relations purely internal to the text,” dissociated from any reference outside itself. The only difference here between oral and written discourse is that, in oral discourse, interlocutors can reference the surrounding world common to them, whereas in writing, a text is addressed to a reader in any time, and therefore it references “a world that is the world of the text and yet is not in the text.”¹⁴ The reference of written discourse is thus neither behind the text in the author nor in the text as its sense or structure, but is rather “unfolded in front of it” — it is what Gadamer calls the “thing or issues of the text.” This second argument also serves to counterbalance the *finitum capax* because the reader is not only forced to submit her interpretation to the communicative link between herself and the author, but must also recognize that what is unfolded in the act of reading concerns a world that is represented by the author through the text. Notice how Ricoeur parallels his hermeneutical thesis to the way we are to approach biblical texts:

God, who is named by the texts held open by my desire to listen, is, in a way still to be spoken of, the ultimate referent of these texts. God is in some manner implied by the “issue” of these texts, by the world—the biblical world—that these texts unfold.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., 220.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 221.

¹⁵Ibid.

Ricoeur is clearly interested in helping us to see that what is most important in a text is not its author nor its structure, but its central issues, ultimate concern or referent, its world that is allowed to unfold if we desire to listen and receive it. If a text, especially a sacred text, refers to God as its ultimate referent, it is crucial that the reader not “reconfigure” the meaning of this text merely in terms of the text’s human author or linguistic structure at the expense of this ultimate referent.

In these ways, Ricoeur balances the *finitum capax* of his earlier empowerment of the reader to reconfigure the text with innumerable meanings with a *finitum non capax* responsibility to receive the meaning of the text in a way which allows the text’s communicative chain and ultimate reference to maintain its rightful place of prominence.

3.3 Poetic Discourse and Revelation: Affirmation of the *finitum capax*

After Ricoeur has emphasized the limitations and structures which determine the finite subject’s interpretation of a text, he goes on to delimit this focus with another counterfocus on the *finitum capax* aspects of the Bible as poetic discourse and revelation.

With regard to poetic discourse, Ricoeur anticipates the objection that only descriptive discourse can have valid referential meaning. This objection would likely be posed by those confident in concrete, scientific, historical, objective descriptions of the world that can be easily verified as true or false by critical readers. On the other hand, these objectors would likely view poetical discourse as either a kind of self-referential, egotistic language that merely celebrates itself or as language that refers to emotions and beliefs which are considered wholly subjective and meaningless in a description of the objective world. Ricoeur, in response, affirms that much (if not all) of the Bible is poetic, and that this does not limit its meaningfulness or reference to truth.

In order to better explain the difference between descriptive and poetic discourse, Ricoeur must first distinguish first-order and second-order referential functions. First-order

reference, which would certainly include descriptive discourse, is both direct reference to familiar objects in everyday life and indirect reference to physical entities reconstructed by science as underlying the former objects. Ricoeur admits that poetry often has little to add to first-order reference, but, he complains, while first-order reference has “usurped the first rank in daily life” (with the assistance of science), second-order reference, that of poetic discourse, is also about the world and constantly seeks liberation.

It is not the mere contingent and everyday facts of life that poetry addresses, but the ultimate meaning and divine reasons that precede, ground, and grow out of those facts. Poetry also takes into account a certain kind of relatedness or interconnectivity that the world possesses, including a relatedness between the Creator and his creation. This is how divine revelation in Scripture is made possible:

To reveal is to uncover what until then remained hidden. . . . Revelation, in this sense, designates the emergence of . . . a concept of truth as manifestation, in the sense of letting be what shows itself. What shows itself is each time the proposing of a world, a world wherein I can project my ownmost possibilities.¹⁶

If one is to allow the infinite to show itself within the finite order, one must allow this type of second-order discourse to emerge and be taken seriously.

3.4 Overcoming Onto-theology: Affirmation of *finitum non capax*

At this point, it should come as no surprise that Ricoeur’s next step is to juxtapose his affirmation of the *finitum capax* of poetic discourse and revelation with a warning against onto-theological knowledge which takes the form of the *finitum non capax*. Although this is the final section we shall examine in the present paper, it is by no means the last point-counterpoint juxtaposition within the larger essay.

Ricoeur frames this section on usage of the word “God.” He firmly believes that not only is the word itself dangerously overused to the point of emptying it of its originary meaning, but that theology (as opposed to biblical studies) and speculative philosophy are

¹⁶Ibid.

the chief culprits in this harmful trend. He contends that when such thinkers are bogged down in the cacophony of utterances such as “God exists,” “God is the first cause,” and “God is immutable,” they arrive at the biblical text practically handicapped, blinded by abstractions. He instructs,

For the philosopher, to listen to Christian preaching is first of all to let go of every form of onto-theological knowledge. Even—and especially when—the word God is involved. In this regard, the amalgamation of being and God is the most subtle seduction.¹⁷

Ironically, after Ricoeur has told us to think more deeply than descriptive, first-order discourse of concrete, everyday life, he now calls the philosophers and theologians out of abstraction. But, Ricoeur is not urging us to “let go” of poetic discourse. Rather, he is asking us to allow God to reveal Himself in a way that might transcend our own philosophical or theological categories, that is, we must recognize that the infinite cannot always be comprehended in terms of the finite: hence, *finitum non capax infinitum*.

4 CONCLUSION

I began this paper by pointing out the problem of polarization within the disciplines of religion, literature, and philosophy, suggesting that the work of Paul Ricoeur can be characterized as attempting to struggle with this tension and the possibility of mediation. Scholars have suggested that Ricoeur finds a mediating unity in phenomenological hermeneutics or the metaphoric imagination, and while I have certainly acknowledged the important role these categories play in Ricoeur’s thought, I have suggested the framework of Christian humanism as an alternative. This framework has been applied to the essay, “Naming God,” with relative success, but the central question still remains: Is mediation possible?

As we have seen, Ricoeur moves dialectically between the *finitum capax infinitum* of the Lutheran tradition and the *finitum non capax infinitum* of the Calvinist tradition. But we have not seen him find an ultimate resting place in either tradition. What are we to conclude

¹⁷Ibid., 223.

from this?

I would like to put forward two possible answers to this question in light of the above investigation. First, might it be conceivable that a complete mediation must be eschatologically postponed until our consummation, that is, until we are fully redeemed and able to enjoy eternal life in communion with our Creator? If Ricoeur as a Christian that believes the Fall still affects believers, that they are in an “already/not yet” state of redemption, then a postponed synthesis or mediation is only to be expected. Second, might this supposed disjunction between the *finitum capax* and the *finitum non capax* be a problem for the Calvinist and Lutheran traditions, but not for Ricoeur? On the one hand, it is clear that Ricoeur wants to affirm the Calvinist *finitum non capax* in the sense that we must never forget our finitude and its epistemological limits—as human beings, and fallen human beings for that matter, we simply cannot attain to the knowledge of God. But on the other hand, it could very well be that he also wants to affirm the Lutheran *finitum capax*, not meaning that we can attain the understanding of the infinite God, but rather signifying the reality of God’s continuous revealing Himself to us, allowing us to have indirect, yet real access to Him, even as finite creatures.

According to this reasoning, it seems vital that Ricoeur reject neither the finitude nor the infinitude which marks our present human condition. Each presents important components of life, and their paradoxical and often mysterious relation ought not to repel us, but to humble us, each category keeping the other in check. In this way, we are creatures of freedom and ultimate dependency, mystery and clarity, listening and speaking.

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