

JEFFERSON MACARIOLA CHUA**A SKETCH FOR A RICOEURIAN HERMENEUTICS OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY****Jefferson Macariola Chua**

Ateneo de Manila University, Department of Philosophy, Philippines.

Email: jeffersonmchua@gmail.com

Abstract: Religious identity has, in recent times, become an important point of inquiry because of the growing awareness of religious diversity. On the one hand, this reality of diversity has served as an impetus to return to the roots of one's religion. On the other hand, others have called for a more pluralist stance, out of the need to open up to other traditions. In light of this polarity, I argue that one can commit to one's religion while opening up to the religious other in a way that does not threaten one's own tradition. This is done through a hermeneutic analysis of the religious identity, taking off from Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics – how this identity is formed and informed by the different significations of meaning within the tradition, and how the believer interacts with this tradition to construct his or her own narrative identity, through his or her imagination, mapping out the constellations of possible human action that root themselves in the necessity in encountering and working with the religious other, for this necessity is constitutive of one's commitment to the tradition, embodied in the biblical narratives that call for this encounter. In sum, it is possible to be committed to one's faith conviction while being hospitable to the religious other because it is constitutive of religion itself to encounter its other, and it is in this encounter that faith is truly understood as conviction.

Key Words: philosophy; religion; hermeneutics; identity studies; religious identity; Paul Ricoeur; interreligious dialogue

Introduction

The question of religious identity, in light of the challenge of religious diversity, has seen its resurgence in recent years because of certain events in contemporary history. Within the Catholic Church, for example, the question arose out of “the signs of the times” that pointed to the reality of many religions.¹ Dupuis and Barnes would call this change in perspective in Vatican II “a watershed moment” in terms of understanding religious diversity in light of God’s plan for salvation,² and in terms of the Church’s new responsibility with other religions as their numbers also grow.³ But more importantly, different historical events point to the fact that more than being a *reality*, the question of religious identity is a *challenge* in the presence of different religions. Volf and Moyaert both point to tendencies to either assert one’s ethnic and religious identity over others violently,⁴ or simply a reassertion of the basic tenets of one’s faith, as espoused by the postliberalists.⁵ Such responses can be said to be a product of the increased frequency of encounters with the “religious other,” or people of other faith traditions, and as such, groups and communities fear for the loss of their own identity because of these encounters, which can pass off as strange and different.⁶

Coming from this twofold outlook at the reality of the religious other – both as a reality and as a challenge – there seems to be a tension between staying committed, and at the same time being open to other traditions, as if presupposing that being open to other traditions means eroding one’s own religious identity. We can therefore ask: can there be an understanding of religious identity that can include the possibility of inscribing a hospitable ethic towards the religious other while being committed to one’s own tradition? In order to address the question, I propose a hermeneutic analysis of religious identity and how it is formed through the different structures of meaning found within a particular tradition.

For the general argument of the paper and for its general structure, I shall be using Paul Ricoeur’s threefold hermeneutic analysis of religious identity found in his essay “Experience and Language in Religious Discourse” as a heuristic tool in trying to discern the different movements of meaning within the structures of the text, through imaginative discourse. This hermeneutic analysis is done by looking into the scripture itself in order to flesh out the themes of alterity and strangeness, which will then form the critical hinge of the study, as it will expose that encountering and working with the other is itself constitutive of one’s faith conviction. This analysis will then be subsumed under Ricoeur’s hermeneutic anthropology in order to bring the analysis home to the whole problematic of identity and otherness, and how these two interact

with one another. Only after this method we can say that *encountering and working with and for the other is constitutive of the very faith that one proclaims, and consequently, one's religious identity.*

The study's scope is the notion of religious identity and how it relates to and for the religious other. The main limitation of the study consists in the fact that the author is confined to his own religious tradition.⁷ Thus, this study can be read as a response or a contribution to the dialogue of religions that is informed by Christian revelation.

The Formation of Religious Identity: A Hermeneutic Analysis

At the heart of the question of religious identity is the very process of forming the identity, that is, how such an identity came to be known as *this* particular identity and not as some other. The question of identity contains within itself two presuppositions: (1) that there is an entity called a "person" that persists through time, what can be called the *metaphysical* element; and (2) how this particular entity called "person" relates to other entities in terms of practical concerns, such as promising, remorse, and empathy, among others, what we can call the *practical* element.⁸ The two categories are not mutually exclusive, West claims, as to ask for the persistence of identity through time – the metaphysical element – is "inextricably conceptually tied to the practical questions."⁹ In other words, it is through the person-directed attitudes of the individual relating to different identities through the passage of time, as "an entity whose persistence conditions are partly determined by the practices of individuals and communities,"¹⁰ that allows us to point to a particular identity.

Transposing this schema to the notion of religious identity, we can therefore speak of an identity – if you want, an entity – that is animated and partly constituted by the religious beliefs and practices he or she belongs to. Our primary concern for this section, then, is to map out the structures that allow for the formation of religious identity from within the religious tradition. I shall be focusing on the linguistic mediation and how this identity is formed and informed through his or her interaction with the different semantic structures within the tradition that give rise to meaning.¹¹ This focus on the linguistic mediation necessitates a hermeneutic analysis of the different structures within a particular social entity – in this case, religion – as an analysis of such a nature will expose the different operative levels of interpretation and meaning-formation mediated by language.¹² For this section I shall be following Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the hermeneutic structure of religion as it presents the most vivid account, as far as I have seen, of the dynamism of the movement of meaning within a religious tradition which is intimately connected to the formation of the religious identity that makes manifest both the metaphysical and practical elements of identity, that is, both the

identification to one's own tradition, and the very act of attesting one's own conviction to *others*.

The main challenge confronting the commitment to one's own religious identity – and subsequently a dominant idea that pervades our thinking once we speak of religious identity – is the blind adherence to dogma and Magisterium.¹³ It is through theological propositions and religious edicts that we come to know of the “articles of our faith,” which form the core of our religious identity. For instance, it is obvious that one has to believe that the Christ Jesus resurrected in order for one to be considered “a Christian,” or that, according to Cyprian the Great, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Religious identity, it seems, rests on the acceptance of such propositions as *true*.

Recent scholarly developments have challenged such truth-claims. We may cite three of these developments, which locate their roots in the “postmodern” tendency to shun reductionism:¹⁴ (1) the historical contingency of such statements; (2) the different order of meaning in every doctrinal assertion; and (3) the frequent citations in Scripture, which bear a very poetic form of discourse. Permit me to go through each of the points carefully in order to flesh out the need for a hermeneutic analysis of religious identity.

On the first point, we see that such truth-claims were not only informed by the language at the time the edicts were proclaimed, but were also in response to certain historical developments,¹⁵ such as heresies and the like. It is here that it seems fruitful to mention that the assertion that “there is no salvation outside the Church” was actually a response to a particular heresy during the time that the above statement was proclaimed, and not – as some are wont to commit – as a rejection of other faith traditions.¹⁶ Such statements, if one is not conscious of their historical and contextual indebtedness, could lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It seems all the more important to address this particular challenge because religious identity is formed and informed by such statements.

On the second point, and Ricoeur himself readily agrees, that these truth-claims are second-order in nature and fail to give justice to the richness of the texts on which these religions are founded: “I do not intend to deny the specificity of the work of formulating dogma, whether at the ecclesial level or the level of theological investigation. But I do affirm its derived and subordinate character.”¹⁷ What is at stake here is not the validity of such statements, but their claims to truth despite their “subordinate character,” in the words of Ricoeur. And here we are indeed moving into the epistemology of religion, but we might stop short at the threshold and merely point out the *difference* of the kind of discourse that such statements have from that of our own religious experiences.

Finally – and this will open us up to the necessity of undertaking a hermeneutic analysis – we find that such statements root themselves in

the Sacred Scripture. But as we have already pointed out, the discourse found in the Scripture is of a different order than that of theological statements. If theological statements are subordinated, scriptural discourse is largely poetic. That is why we can speak of the Bible as a polyphonic text.¹⁸ This presents another challenge for theological statements: how can a theological statement have a claim to truth if the mode of discourse is different from that where these statements come from? Thus, a conflict of interpretation arises, necessitating the hermeneutic analysis.

The Circle of the Event-Text

This conflict of interpretation is made even more problematic because of the irreducibility of one religious experience to another, which after all serves as the point of departure for any religion.¹⁹ Religion, or at least the Judeo-Christian tradition, is founded upon texts that embody a revelatory event. Such articulations of religious experiences are found within language, embodied in these texts.²⁰ These revelatory events are only known through the mediation of such texts that point to this unnamable revelatory event. This represents the first “circle of meaning;” that is, the revealed is only known through the mediation of texts, and that these texts cannot exist without having something to talk about, in this case, the revelatory event.²¹ The “embodiment” of the event of revelation through textuality opens the event to a hermeneutic analysis: “the Word cannot attest to its foundational function without recourse to the Scriptures that give it something like a body.”²² In conclusion, we see that religious experiences are articulated within this circle of event and text, which form the first locus of interpretation.

The Circle of the Believing Community

The circle of event-text is in turn subsumed under a bigger hermeneutic, that of the believing community and the event-text: “this circle of Word and Scripture appears to be inscribed in a wider circle that puts in play, on the one hand, the pair Word-Scripture, and, on the other, the ecclesial community that draws its *identity* [my italics] from the acknowledgement of these Scriptures and the Word that is supposed to have founded them.”²³ The text itself is formed, informed, and interpreted anew by this community, who “understands itself in the light of *these scriptures*, rather than *those other scriptures*.”²⁴ It might be fruitful to make mention of the fact that these texts put forward by the community are always attempts at interpreting, i.e., articulating the event of revelation. This in no way totalizes the event of revelation, although one must concede that any act of interpreting always runs the risk of doing violence against the event by claiming a direct link from event to believer, that is,

claiming absolute truth and inerrancy. Hence, the second hermeneutic circle: we can say that the text only exists insofar as the believing community constructs the text as an act of interpretation to the more originary source of revelation, and that this community cannot exist at all without the binding power of such texts. A further point must be made: more than the community of believers that influence the text, the proximity of the particular community to other traditions and communities have also influenced how the text is constructed, and how the believing community derives meaning out of these intercultural encounters: “ecclesial identity concerns the considerable segment of the tradition that is made up of debts to neighboring cultures.”²⁵ For example, the encounter between Hebraic traditions and the Greek culture, specifically its philosophical form of discourse allowed for Christianity to appropriate Greek philosophical thought in its teachings.²⁶ Thus, we can say that the believing community learns and relearns from the text, which is in turn informed by the confluence of different cultures and traditions that form the identity of the community.

The text that is encountered by the believer is in itself composed of numerous narratives composed and passed on by different people. Ricoeur identifies five modes of discourse in scripture that point to this encounter with the event of revelation: prophetic, narrative, prescriptive, wisdom, and hymnic. Such encounters represent the radical intimacy of the event with the act of interpretation, that is, how such events are constitutive of the very lives of the people who have been witnesses.²⁷ Furthermore, and more importantly, such narratives preserve the radical alterity of the event by presenting not one common denominator that can be extracted from all of the narratives, but that the very structure of revelation is itself polyphonic. This “withdrawal of the name” presents itself as constitutive of the narrative form of revelation itself, in that revelation always structures itself according to a particular narrative that interacts with the believer or the community of believers. In this sense we can speak of revelation, by being embodied through the text, as assuming the structure of a text.²⁸ This structure allows us to speak of the interaction between the world of the text – the constellation of signs and signifiers that act as the referential totality of the text – and the world of the reader – the constellation of signs and significations that form the context of the reader. It is in this interrelation between these two “worlds” that give rise to refigurative action – the reader assuming the narrative he or she has read – because of the similarity in the semantic structure of both the text and the reader, which is that of a narrative.²⁹ Through the mediation of imaginative discourse, the reader interacts with the text in such a way that his or her self is projected within the narrative of the text: one sees oneself in front of the text.³⁰

The Existential Circle

This opens the discussion to the third hermeneutic circle: “This believer is, in effect, confronted with the preaching by which the meaning of the Scriptures is actualized for him [*sic*] in each instance; but, this happens only on the condition that he lay hold of this meaning and understand himself [*sic*] through it.”³¹ Through the choice of appropriating the meaning of the polysemy of meaning nestled in the sacred scripture, the link, albeit indirect, between the originary event of revelation to the individual believer is established. The movement of meaning circumventing through the community, through the texts that speak of a Transcendent reality, is placed “in front” of the believer – through others that have come before him or her – as a choice: to let oneself be transformed by the kerygmatic power of the faith through the poetic character of the kerygma itself and, in this sense, allow a radical orientation of one’s life in relation to the narrative of the particular religion.³²

It is at this juncture that religious identity gains an existential characteristic, or in the words of Ricoeur, “an accident transformed into destiny through an ongoing choice.”³³ In so doing, the believer is made a member of the community that calls itself a particular religion, thus becoming part of the long narrative tradition stretching to the limits of any expression, the event of revelation itself. The structure of the text – its mimetic characteristic towards human action – allows a space for the believer to assume or appropriate as his or her own action. It should also be noted that the polysemy present in Biblical narratives allow for a constellation of human action as embodied in the different forms of narratives found within the Scripture. Thus, we can say that religious identity is not only formed, but that it is also assumed as a radical redescription of one’s own narrative.³⁴ Religious identity, therefore, is both a *confession* – I believe *in* the revealed and I am part of *this* believing community – and a *profession* – only through a redescription of my own life can I be truly a part of this particular believing community by living out my conviction as if I was truly part of the community of believers. Taken in this sense, religious identity does not only mean being nominally related to a particular religion, nor is it about knowing about the religion in an epistemic fashion; religious identity always involves assuming the values of the religion in one’s own life, or, in Jean Greisch’s words, belief that is “credence rather than opinion.”³⁵ Such is the hermeneutic structure of religious identity, and one might even say, of religious conversion.

In sum, we can say that religious identity arises out of the interaction of these different levels of meaning that continually construct the religious person, mapping out the possibilities of human action,

embodied in the choice to commit oneself continually to one's religious convictions.

Religious Imagination and Refigured Action

Elsewhere, Ricoeur himself broaches the idea of an “interconfessional form of hospitality” that may proceed from a hermeneutic analysis of one's own religion, in this case, the Judeo-Christian tradition:

The problem that this deliberately fragmentary investigation leaves open is that of knowing how this religious consciousness, informed by the biblical Great Code, could be open to other religious consciousnesses, informed by other scriptural codes, and how it could communicate with the latter within the horizon of the regulative idea [...] [of an] interconfessional hospitality of one religion to another.³⁶

If we recall, our prior hermeneutic analysis has uncovered that religions and religious identity are formed according to their interaction with other traditions and identities. And if this is the case, should we not also include within the horizon of our investigation how this interconfessional ethic towards the religious other is inscribed in how we understand religious identity? I will take Ricoeur's cue on the matter of being open to other religious consciousnesses as the matter for this analysis. In short, it is in this section that we confront the main question of this essay.

In the above quote we see how Ricoeur puts a prime on the “Great Code” as the ground for founding a kind of a religious consciousness that engenders a hospitable ethic towards other traditions. It is from this suggestion that our analysis for this section will start. Following Ricoeur, I have spoken earlier about the polyphony of the Scripture as constitutive of the very experience of revelation, and how this polyphony presents itself as “the world of the text” in front of the reader, or in this case, the believer. It was already mentioned that such texts operate on a different level of discourse from what we normally encounter in doctrines and precepts. Looking into the formation of meaning within the scriptures, we are confronted with a polyphonic structure; that is, different modes of articulating religious experience.³⁷ As was already mentioned, Ricoeur identifies five modes of discourse in the Scripture that point to its intimate connection with the revelation event: prophetic, narrative, prescriptive, wisdom, and hymnic. These particular forms of discourse reveal that assents to faith are not contained in what Ricoeur would call second-order theological language such as “God exists;”³⁸ his hermeneutic analysis reveals that the encounter with revelation, insofar as this revelation event

exceeds any totalizing form of comprehension, is mediated by the many voices that speak of God not in the sense of speculative knowledge, but more intimately, as narratives, stories, and Delphic, i.e., prophetic teachings that point to a God that does not lay down a grand plan for salvation, but rather is enlivened by the stories consistently told and retold by the community through time: “The religious ‘saying’ is only constituted in the interplay between story and prophecy, history and legislation, legislation and wisdom, and finally wisdom and lyricism.”³⁹

This is not to say that these forms of discourse can be rigorously divided and scattered across the Sacred Scripture, as if it were some puzzle. These forms of discourse are at best analogical not only to one another, but also to their referent, or, in Ricoeur’s own words: “The God who reveals himself is a hidden God and hidden things belong to him.”⁴⁰ This analogical structure is important for it preserves the radical alterity of that which we call God. Additionally, this analogical structure also makes the relationship between the reader and the text apparent by mapping out the constellation of signifiers that arise out of the interaction of the reader’s world and the “world of the text.”⁴¹ The polysemy of the Sacred Scriptures “point” to a vast interconnection of signs and signifiers that refer to something that cannot be referred to – and hence, the different “names” of God in the Scripture⁴² – which form and inform the context of the reader, or in this case, the member of the community of believers.

This “world of the text” is related and intertwined with reality not in the way of descriptive reference, but of poetic discourse, which for Ricoeur is a more originary mode of discourse – originary in the sense that it reflects the existential condition of the interpreting agent.⁴³ This is the heart of phenomenological hermeneutics: “to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front* of the text.”⁴⁴ We can therefore say that the textual nature of the Scriptures – that of poetics – allow for a different kind of intersignification between “the world of the text” and the “world of the reader” by trespassing the world of things, referring to the *possibilities* of the agent reflected in the text. This structure allows the reader to “relate” to the text in a manifold different ways, according to his or her experiences.

Particular attention must be given to a specific characteristic of this world: the similarity of the structure of human action in both the text and the reader, through the mediation of imagination.⁴⁵ As the world of the text projects its foremost possibilities unto the reader’s horizon, the reader is enjoined to reimagine him or herself within this particular narrative. This is made possible because of the pre-narrative capacity of the human actor – in this case, the believer – to structure his or her imagination in the form of a narrative, as seen in familiar terms such as project, motive, and other temporal assertions.⁴⁶ Moreover, such narrative structures are also intelligible because just as a narrative is structured

according to symbols and significations, so is human action prefigured according to symbolic articulations.⁴⁷ For example, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, suspicion on Fyodor's murder immediately falls on Dmitri precisely because he displays the same symbolic schematizations that are also shown by a suspected criminal in lived experience. In short, I can intuit an event within a narrative precisely because I have experienced that event in its particularized symbolic configuration in lived experience; this is why we can speak of empathy towards characters in tragedies, or laugh out loud in amusement in comedies; there is an element of cogency within each moment of imagining.⁴⁸

This structural similarity of human action is also the basis for refigurative action insofar as the narrated human act within the narrative is projected as a *possible mode of action* for the reader, or in this case, the believer. In other words, action mirrored in the text is within the horizon of the intelligible symbolic schema of the reader, allowing the reader to act it out in lived experience: "Its referential force consists in the fact that the narrative act, winding through the narrative structures, applies the grid of an ordered fiction to the 'manifold' of human action."⁴⁹ In this sense we can speak of fictive characters as images – as imaginative variants – of our very being-in-the-world.

The numerous struggles of the characters in a particular text as acting and suffering agents mirror real human action and real human suffering that the reader is always confronted with in his or her life. In this regard we can speak of such narratives as limit-expressions that demand the reader or the believer to do "something more," in the hopes of opening one's experiences "up to the limit."⁵⁰ This element of the narrative is what allows the assumption of the mirrored human action within the text unto the believer. The power of the narrative to redescribe life through the use of metaphorical discourse allows for such a self-evaluation of the believer of his or her own life; the structure of the text, and subsequently the interaction between reader and text, provides a space where the reader can initiate a movement of self-understanding.⁵¹ Because the possibility is charted out in the plot of the narrative, so is the reader enjoined to redirect his or her life according to such redescrptions through the power of imaginative discourse engendered by the interaction between text and reader.⁵²

The Biblical Text and the Narratives of Otherness

So we have seen the pivotal role of imagination in the refiguration of the human agent in the field of human action – let us now plunge into the "Great Code" to extract narratives that point to a refiguration of human action within the realm of the encounter with the religious Other. Particular focus will be given to narratives within the tradition that speak of an invitation to encounter the Other or the stranger, in order to map

out the constellation of symbols that emerges out of the interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader, that in turn enjoin the reader to assume the configured human action within the text unto his or her own life. If we were to speak of the *possibilities* of refigured action, then it is necessary to look into the narrative of the faith itself that provides the conditions of possibility for such a refigurative movement to emerge. The Bible – both the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament – is rife with narratives that speak of the necessity to encounter the neighbor and the stranger. The notion of the Other or the neighbor finds its roots deep within the Jewish tradition; to love one’s neighbor is to mirror the love of YHWH, embodied in the covenant relationship with the tribes of Israel.⁵³

We can point out two examples within the Biblical narrative that also speak of this necessity to encounter the Other or the stranger, not only for its ethical import, but also within our whole question on identity, and how encounters with such narratives enjoin the reader or the believer into a refiguration of his or her actions through the mediation of imagination: the Abrahamic feast narrative (Gen 18: 1-15, NIV), and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Each of the narratives will flesh out not only the necessity in encountering this Other, but also – and more importantly – the appropriate action within this encounter.

Abraham and the Three Strangers

On the first narrative, we see Abraham sitting outside his tent, when, upon seeing three strangers, immediately “hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground” (v. 2). The *agency* of Abraham is apparent in this narrative: it is he who leaves his own place in order to approach the strangers. We also note that bowing low “to the ground” is for the Jewish tradition an extreme act of respect and recognition; in this case, of being “lowly” in front of this Other. After such a gesture, we see Abraham offering the strangers some water to “wash their feet” (v.4) and some food “so you can be refreshed and then go on your way” (v. 5). In the Jewish tradition, the washing of the feet does not only signify the act of hospitality, but also stewardship, as exemplified by Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:1-17). Offering a meal is also an important symbolic category within the Jewish tradition – the meal represents an act of thanksgiving for the gratuity of the whole of creation, of the grace of community (that is, the mediation between self and others), preserved and strengthened throughout history in the form of the Eucharist.⁵⁴ Finally, we see Abraham being blessed after his gesture of hospitality through Sarah: a son is to be born (v. 10). It is good to note that for the Eastern Orthodox Church, this encounter of Abraham with the three strangers – taken to be the Trinity – constitutes the *only* image of the Triune God.⁵⁵ Not only this, it is also important to note that within the

Eastern Orthodox tradition, this particular encounter signifies divine *communion*.⁵⁶ Seen in this light, we can speak of this particular narrative not only as a call to encounter and be hospitable to the stranger, but also – and more importantly within the whole question of religious identity – to recall one’s relationship with the divine, to be in communion with the divine.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

The second narrative is situated within the Jesus narrative of the New Testament. Ricoeur notes that there is something peculiar in the structure of the parable: the fact that this narrative is found inscribed within a bigger narrative – that of Jesus Christ’s life and teaching – comes off as in itself constitutive of the ministry of Christ, which is to tell of narratives that have the power to refigure one’s identity.⁵⁷ In this sense, telling one’s story is itself refigurative action – to speak of one’s experiences and life stories to this other. And what must be told to others here? – none other than the necessity to encounter and embrace the stranger. It is within this hermeneutic gaze that we situate the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable opens up with a question on salvation: “what must I do to inherit eternal life” (v. 25)? We can read this as a question on whether people outside the faith – in this case, the Judeo-Christian tradition – or what we can call our neighbors are included *within the fold* despite the clear difference. This question then does not only involve a choice between an exclusivist stance and an inclusivist one: the question speaks of the necessity of living in a community that recognizes the differences of each member of the community, be in religious, ethnic, or whatnot. After the question, and after Jesus cites the Great Commandment (v. 27), he is egged on with another point of inquiry: “and who is my neighbor” (v. 28)? Jesus then presents a story of three different people (it is peculiar that Jesus uses religious figures in the narrative) who chance upon a traveler who was brutally beaten up by a group of thieves (v. 30). After seeing the wounded man, the first passerby – a priest – “passed by on the other side” (v. 31). So too with the second passerby, who was a Levite (v. 32). The Samaritan, long regarded as outcasts by the Jewish community, “felt pity on him” (v. 33). The Koine Greek word for pity or compassion is *splagnizomai*, which literally means, “gut-wrenching feeling,” signifying the intense empathy towards the suffering. Such was the affection towards this stranger, an affection so strong that moved the Samaritan to care for the injured person, even bringing him to an inn and paying for the costs of staying in that inn (vv. 34-35). This classic narrative has been used as the paradigmatic narrative in terms of relating to the other; but here it is given new light: “for Jesus, saving faith is not only remotely accessible to pagans and foreigners; it is actually operative among them.”⁵⁸ In this sense the Other is not excluded from the narrative

of the faith – in fact, they are *constitutive* of the tradition itself, by virtue of their assumption of hospitality. It is the Samaritan, through his compassion, that actually informs us of our oftentimes lack of concern for the other: simply put, the Other itself shows us the way. In terms of the practical import of the narrative, we can also speak of the act of narrating as itself constitutive of our ethical task towards the stranger;⁵⁹ part of our responsibility to encounter the stranger is to tell stories of hospitality, of welcoming, of what Volf calls narratives of “embrace.” In this sense, narration is itself at the core of any hospitable ethic towards the Other – and for the right reasons: the very act of narrating is an establishment of a trust relation between the self and the other.⁶⁰ It is with the very act of narrating that we say to the Other: trust me on my word! In this sense, we uncover a deeper meaning of testimony: “to share a testimony is an exchange of trust.”⁶¹

On the Themes of Otherness: Essential Points in the Biblical Texts

In sum, we can point out three key elements in these narratives that enrich our understanding of religious identity in light of religious diversity: (1) being hospitable to the Other mirrors God’s relationship with his creation, which is a relationship of gratitude; (2) it is with the Other that we are enjoined to become hospitable, by virtue of the Other’s initiative to extend hospitality; and finally, (3) the narrative act as essential to the task of religious identity. We have seen in the first narrative how this assumption of hospitality not only opens one towards the stranger; this hospitality is also an invitation to communion with whatever is radically different from my own identity. Likewise, in the second narrative we uncover a deeper relationality with the Other: in encountering the Other we learn from them. It is therefore safe to say that one can only “learn” to enrich one’s religious identity if he or she opens to this encounter. Finally, it is with narration that one responds to this necessity in encountering the Other: it is with narrating one’s testimony – and we have already uncovered that the testimony is constitutive of the encounter with the Other – that one can establish a trust relationship with the Other. In other words, the Other shows us that it is important to narrate one’s responsibility to be hospitable to this Other, thus establishing a trust relationship of reciprocity.⁶² It is in this incessant movement of hospitality that we find our religious identity in the face of religious diversity.

Trust and Alterity

The previous sections have charted out the necessary structures within the text that call for an assumption of human action (refigured action) found in the text – in this case, the call to hospitality. In order to

understand this notion of refigured action, one has to look into how the individual takes the narrative interaction between his own identity and the hermeneutic structure of the text. In other words, the preceding analyses enjoin us to ask: how does one, properly speaking, *learn* from the narrative? Or, we can ask in differently: what happens between the text and the reader? We have spoken earlier of the similarity of both the text and one's life in terms of narrative; because of this structural similarity – that of action emplotted across the passage of time – “narrative can reopen the question of the self as a subjective and particular self, but on the basis of a form of linguistic expression.”⁶³ In other words, the narrative structure itself raises the question of the self by virtue of the self's involvement in the narrative: I see myself in the narrative. In this sense we can speak of the crossing over from narrative to ethical life precisely at this point.⁶⁴ Precisely because there are other *possibilities* of selfhood mapped out in the narrative does the reader raise the question for himself or herself, perhaps even for the first time: who am I? In this sense, we can speak of the interaction between the world of the reader and the world of the text not as a tool in finding answers, as with our example: *who is my neighbor?* Rather, such an interaction raises the possibility of questioning one's life narrative.⁶⁵ As such, we do not get an answer from Jesus when the scribe asked him; instead, Jesus narrates a *possibility* to the scribe, enclosed within the narrative structure.⁶⁶ To be sure, “by enabling us to rehearse possible future scenarios from a variety of different points of view and to prefigure our emotional responses to those scenarios, imaginative projection can provide an important source of insight into, and can help us transform, our motivational structures and normative commitments.”⁶⁷ This opens up the discourse beyond the confines of imaginative projection: that of real acting-in-the-world through *choice*, or what Richard Kearney would call *poetics*.⁶⁸ Therefore we understand Jesus' reply to be transcending the world of the text onto the possibility for refigured action: “go and do likewise” (v. 37). It is thus a confrontation: do I choose to refigure my life according to this particular narrative, and not some other?

It is at this juncture that we uncover two conceptions of identity: an identity that is formed and informed by the tradition, and an identity that is assumed. From this dialectic, I propose to use Ricoeur's hermeneutic anthropology in order to map out the hermeneutics of the self that is concerned precisely in this seeming double-identity. This way, we will be able to flesh out the ethical imperative to assume the narrative of the faith through testimony, a theme constantly alluded to throughout this study, and which will constitute a religious identity that is at once committed to one's own tradition, while at the same time maintaining this hospitable trust relationship with the Other.

At the heart of Ricoeur's anthropology is the distinction between *idem*-identity (identity as sameness) and *ipse*-identity (identity as

selfhood), borne out of his hermeneutic analysis of identity within the nexus of temporality.⁶⁹ In terms of *idem*-identity, we can speak of identity as sameness as referring to “the identification with particular Christian norms, values, doctrines, biblical texts, rituals, and the like.”⁷⁰ This dimension of identity characterizes and constitutes our actions and values.⁷¹ Identity as sameness can therefore be said to be the identity that is formed by the different levels of meaning within a particular religious tradition. I can say that I am a Christian because I follow a certain tradition that speaks of particular values and norms. Thus, we can speak of *idem*-identity as an affirmation of nominal identity, that is, identity by association. It is also through sameness that a person can be reidentified as time passes by.⁷²

Iipse-identity, on the other hand, speaks of the assumption of such an identity by continually choosing to be this particular identity and not some other form of identity. It is through the notion of self-constancy that we can understand identity as selfhood in a more meaningful manner: “self-constancy is for each person that manner of conducting himself or herself so that others can count on that person. Because someone is counting on me, I am accountable for my actions before another.”⁷³ Identity as selfhood, therefore, speaks of the continuous struggle to stay the same despite the changes “to which the religious person testifies despite the changes.”⁷⁴ Identity as selfhood therefore preserves the dynamism of one’s identity at every moment of the formation of that particular identity. It is also in *ipse*-identity that we find a home for what Ricoeur would call testimony: the moment of self-understanding that one’s life is reoriented according to the narrative of the faith through interaction with the said tradition. In this sense, “In the narration believers testify to the way in which they attempt to bring up God in their lives, where they experience and encounter God.”⁷⁵ In short, it is with the choice that one will stay true to this particular tradition – and hence, to stay true to the event of revelation – that we can speak of an identity that testifies. And because we locate the testifying identity within the nexus of *ipse*-identity, we can also say that this choice is never a choice to be complete, but rather, to be continually constituted by and enriched by one’s tradition by choosing it continually.⁷⁶

So we can say that it is indeed possible to speak of one’s religious identity as being committed to one’s own tradition while being hospitable toward the religious Other precisely because (1) the narratives that I inherited from my tradition enjoin me to assume a hospitable ethic, and (2) in choosing to stay faithful to the religion by assuming the narrative of hospitality – that is, by opening up to the Other – I remain faithful to my own tradition. In this sense, I can only become faithful to my own commitment if I testify it to others. But what does “testifying” consist in? As we have seen, one of the primary modes of refiguring one’s action according to the narrative of the faith is the very act of narrating itself.⁷⁷

This narrative act is the moment of establishment of the trust relationship between the self and his or her interlocutor: “When I testify to something I am asking the other to trust that what I am saying is true. To share a testimony is an exchange of trust. Beyond this we cannot go. Most institutions rely fundamentally on the trust they place in the word of the other.”⁷⁸ Thus, testimony lies at the heart of religious identity: to speak of the trust between self and other, such that it mirrors the trust relationship – indeed, this is the Covenant relationship – between the divine and mortals.

Challenges and Possibilities

Of course, what we have attempted to sketch is not without its limitations: (1) surely when one speaks of imagination, the idea that this imagination is arbitrary is not far behind; and more seriously, (2) we are operating under the assumption that this Other – whoever it may be – will cooperate. At the heart of this challenge, therefore, is the fidelity to one’s faith conviction, a conviction that cannot but be interpreted by the Other in different ways. This goes at the heart of the matter: how do I maintain my commitment to my faith if the very structure – imaginative discourse – that gives rise to this particular commitment is always in danger of arbitration? Furthermore, how do I stay committed to this particular conviction even if the Other denies my hospitality? Thus, the central problem is one of the continuity of one’s religious identity despite the fragility of the hermeneutic structures that we have mapped out.

Certainly, there is no way to avoid this aspect of imagination because of the embeddedness of the agent according to his or her own contextual frame, such as the emotional dispositions we might assume once we enact the imaginative act as “these have been shaped by relationships with others and by our social situation and cultural context.”⁷⁹ In that sense religious identity is always a *fragile* identity because it is constituted by the believing and interpreting community (the second hermeneutic circle) that may or may not grasp the historical contingency and the narrative characteristic of the Scriptures they interpret. In this sense we can speak of human action as being conditioned by such frames – their reasons for acting and ultimately their reason for actually leading a life get constituted by their context.⁸⁰ To be sure, essential to the hermeneutic commitment to religion is the abandonment of any kind of certitude as regards the correct interpretation of the revelatory event.⁸¹ In this sense, imaginative discourse is truly prone for misuse and misinterpretation, and it is the characteristic of imagination to open up this plurality of interpretations. This is the reason why Ricoeur and Kearney, among others, would speak of a responsibility towards history, to “respect the reality of the past.”⁸² That there is a testimonial responsibility towards the past – and of course knowing how the meaning of events and objects

change through time by undertaking the hermeneutic analysis – is a responsibility that must be assumed by the agent in the face of the other.⁸³ Thus, we can speak of testimony not only as a responsibility for the Other, but also a responsibility to *respond properly* to the other by respecting history. In this sense we see the necessity to know the history of the tradition and how the structures of interpretation operate within the tradition. Thus, we heed Ricoeur's suggestion as regards the dangers of hermeneutics: "Understanding and explication without application are not interpretation."⁸⁴ Imagination must always have a respect towards history, and therefore, of context and of contingencies. And even if history itself is a product of interpretation that continually gets reinterpreted according to the present context of the believer, it must be emphasized that the originary ground of interpretation for religion – the Divine – exceeds any form of closed interpretation. This therefore needs one open to narratives other than one's own religion. And from what we have discussed so far, this plunges to the heart of religious identity: hospitality to whomever other than myself. The demand of hermeneutics, therefore, is to seek out narratives other than my own in order to be faithful to one's own identity, through the medium of imagination.

Such a stance also robs the agent of any kind of *assurance* that the religious other will respond properly; if we are to follow the hermeneutic methodology we have employed, then we should also abandon all certainty that the Other we are speaking of will, properly speaking, be also responsible toward the agent. Such is the limit of any hermeneutic: there is absolutely no way to predict what the Other will do. Thus we see that the narratives we have analyzed called for openness towards this Other precisely because a responsible stance towards the Other cannot include the possibility of subsuming this Other within our own categories. Concurrently, it is also impossible to speak of a neutral plane where the Other can be evaluated according to seemingly-neutral categories: "the more demanding challenge is to work within and between the living traditions – not to seek to extract from them some supposedly timeless ethical essence, but to enable them to 'reread' their own stories and to learn from one another."⁸⁵ It will definitely be difficult; but needless to say, and as Volf claims, it is also within the Judeo-Christian tradition – as we have seen in our analyses – that there lies an ethical imperative to "embrace" this Other, just as the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition embraces those who reject him, risking a re-adjustment of one's identity "in light of the other's alterity."⁸⁶ There is no solution around this aporia, and it is the task of this religious identity to testify despite the difficulty in doing so: "There is certainly something profoundly enigmatic here: have we saved our lives when we have lost them?"⁸⁷ – For it must be admitted that "doing the impossible" (Mt 19:26) is actually constitutive of our religious identity.

While it is true that there is no assurance of complete fidelity regarding one's religious identity, the dynamism of the hermeneutic structure of identity as constituted by the Other calls the believer to always assume hospitality, despite its difficulty. Furthermore, there is also no complete assurance that imaginative discourse can ensure fidelity to the tradition simply because imaginative discourse is a natural hermeneutic tendency of the human person. What we can hold on to, however, is a commitment to history, and this commitment can only be assumed by encountering other narratives.

Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that not only is it possible to have an understanding of religious identity by staying committed to one's own tradition and simultaneously opening up to the religious other, but that it is actually part of the tradition to encounter and work with this religious Other, despite the clear difficulty in doing so, given our context and times. One can discern such a responsibility for the Other when we undertake a hermeneutic analysis of the tradition, focusing on the interaction between text and reader through the mediation of imaginative discourse. Imagination, in this sense, charts out the possible refigured actions that the agent can undertake, creating a possibility for the agent to choose his or her identity according to the call to testify to the religious tradition. In this dialectic between idem- and ipse-identity, we find the call to responsibility, embodied in the trust relationship that is engendered with the Other in every act of narration, and in doing so, establish a concurrent relationship to the event of revelation itself. Needless to say, there is a fine line between violence and embrace, given the radical fallibility of the human person. It is then the task of our religious identity to look at the tradition hermeneutically and discern the different planes of meaning and how they move within their own historical contexts, in order to build this relationship of trust to the Other, who is forever outside our grasp. In this sense, we can now speak of hope

Notes:

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¹ Vatican II Council, *Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, par. 2, accessed 18 September, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

² Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 161.

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³ Michael Barnes, S.J., *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration on Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 17.

⁵ Marianne Moyaert, "Absorption or Hospitality: Two Approaches to the Tension Between Identity and Alterity," in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, ed. Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 64.

⁶ Moyaert, 75.

⁷ As a point for further studies, this analysis can also provide a framework where other traditions and religions can explore their own understanding of religious identity as informed by their respective texts.

⁸ West, "Personal Identity: Practical or Metaphysical?," in *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, ed. Kim Atkins and Catriona Mackenzie (Madison Ave., New York: Routledge, 2008), 56-57.

⁹ West, 73.

¹⁰ West, 59.

¹¹ To be sure, the linguistic element is just one of the many ways by which we can speak of the medium between tradition and believer. This particular medium was chosen insofar as the other media are themselves articulated within a linguistic plane: it is through language that we can speak of structures, such as ideologies, power structures, and other social structures of legitimization. The linguistic medium was also chosen because, following Ricoeur, symbols and signs – evident in religious practices – are articulated within this plane.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 53.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70, No. 1/2 (1977): 1-2.

¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 23.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation", 1-2.

¹⁶ Dupuis, 97.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation", 2.

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn,"* trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky and Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 138.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 128.

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God", in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 218.

²¹ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 132.

²² Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 132-133.

²³ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 133.

²⁴ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 133.

²⁵ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 134.

²⁶ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 134.

²⁷ Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation", 16.

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²⁸ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," 138.²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 86.³⁰ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", 86.³¹ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 135.³² Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 135.³³ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 135.³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "From Proclamation to Narrative", in *The Journal of Religion* 64, No. 4 (1984): 511.³⁵ Jean Greisch, "Testimony and Attestation," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: SAGE Publications, 1986), 85.³⁶ Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", 145-146.³⁷ Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation", 3.³⁸ Ricoeur, "Naming God", 223.³⁹ Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation", 16.⁴⁰ Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation", 17.⁴¹ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", 86.⁴² Ricoeur, "Naming God", 227.⁴³ James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 153.⁴⁴ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", 86.⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of a Narrative", in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991), 23.⁴⁶ Fodor, 191. To be sure, what makes it intelligible as a narrative structure is the very structure of temporality; that is, a narrative takes place in the passage of time. This is the reason why time plays such an important part in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. But for our purposes, it is enough to speak of time in terms of identity, and not merely in terms of narratology.⁴⁷ Fodor, 191.⁴⁸ Catriona Mackenzie, "Imagination, Identity, and Self-Transformation", in *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, ed. Kim Atkins and Catriona Mackenzie (Madison Ave., New York: Routledge, 2008), 125.⁴⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "Imagination in Discourse and in Action", in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 177.⁵⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation", in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 61.⁵¹ Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of a Narrative", 26.⁵² Ricoeur, "Imagination in Discourse and in Action", 178.⁵³ Dupuis, 323-324.⁵⁴ Barnes, 187.⁵⁵ John Chryssavgis, "Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Interfaith Dialogue: Mystical Principles, Practical Initiatives," in *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of "A Common Word"*, ed. Waleed El-Ansary and David K. Linnan (Fifth Avenue, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 88.

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⁵⁶ John Chryssavgis, “Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Interfaith Dialogue: Mystical Principles, Practical Initiatives”, 88.

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, “From Proclamation to Narrative”, 505-506.

⁵⁸ Dupuis, 47.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity”, in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991), 198.

⁶⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Imagination, Testimony, and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricoeur”, in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney (New Fetter Lane, London: Routledge, 1999), 17.

⁶¹ Ricoeur, “Imagination, Testimony, and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricoeur”, 17.

⁶² Moyaert, 85.

⁶³ David Rasmussen, “Rethinking Subjectivity: Narrative Identity and the Self,” in *Paul Ricoeur: the Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 1996), 166.

⁶⁴ Rasmussen, “Rethinking Subjectivity: Narrative Identity and the Self”, 166.

⁶⁵ Richard Kearney, “Narrative Imagination: Between Ethics and Poetics,” in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 1996), 183.

⁶⁶ Charles E. Reagan, “Personal Identity,” in *Ricoeur as Another: the Ethics of Subjectivity*, ed. Richard A. Cohen and James I. Marsh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 15.

⁶⁷ Mackenzie, 140.

⁶⁸ Kearney, 184.

⁶⁹ Reagan, 13.

⁷⁰ Moyaert, 79.

⁷¹ Moyaert, 79.

⁷² Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 165.

⁷³ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 165.

⁷⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 138.

⁷⁵ Moyaert, 82.

⁷⁶ Moyaert, 82.

⁷⁷ To be sure, we have also spoken of other ways of relating to this religious other, like being in community with and for them through peace-building and community-building initiatives. For the sake of the argument and because including these ways will necessitate a separate study in itself, I have chosen to focus on the act of narration. We can also see that in focusing with this particular way in relating to the Other, we keep abreast with our insistence on the narrative unity of the structures we have laid out hermeneutically.

⁷⁸ Ricoeur, “Imagination, Testimony, and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricoeur”, 17.

⁷⁹ Mackenzie, 138.

⁸⁰ Cheshire Calhoun, “Losing One’s Self,” in *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, ed. Kim Atkins and Catriona Mackenzie (Madison Ave., New York: Routledge, 2008), 206.

⁸¹ Smith, 48.

⁸² Kearney, 177.

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⁸³ Ricoeur, "Imagination, Testimony, and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricoeur", 16.⁸⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Practical Praxeology, Hermeneutics, and Identity", in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 304.⁸⁵ Barnes, 248-249.⁸⁶ Volf, 110.⁸⁷ Ricoeur, "Practical Praxeology, Hermeneutics, and Identity", 313.**References:**

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