

The Relationship between Philosophy and Theology in the Recent Work of Paul Ricoeur

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Ricoeur is known as a reader of the Bible. Throughout his philosophical career he has fairly continuously published lectures on biblical texts and thoughts on implications of biblical faith. However, he has insisted permanently on a sharp distinction, even separation between his personal conviction and his philosophical thinking. Philosophy is, in his view, based on argumentation only and, so to speak, remains within the limits of reason alone. This “agnosticism” and the claim that his thinking does not require any attitude—positive, negative or even indifferent—of the reader towards biblical religion has again expressively been stated in the introduction of *Oneself as Another*.¹ But then, what is Ricoeur’s philosophical motivation for reading the Bible, where does his special interest in biblical texts come from and of what does the particular way consist in which he is dealing with these texts?

In his recent work—surrounding and following *Oneself as Another*—Ricoeur gives some substantial hints concerning the role of religion, in particular biblical faith, with regard to a philosophical understanding of the self. An investigation interested in the role of theology, however, encounters the difficulty that Ricoeur only rarely takes theological discourse as a distinct way of religious expression into consideration—for reasons we will inspect in a moment. Our inquiry of the relationship between philosophy and theology in Ricoeur’s recent work therefore has to examine a triangle, namely Ricoeur’s concept of philosophy, his understanding of religion and his philosophical interest in it, and on this background, the possible idea of theology.

1. Ricoeur claims that his philosophy is based on argumentation alone and does not “assume any commitment from the reader to reject, accept or suspend anything with regard to biblical faith” and then holds that “this asceticism of the argument, which marks, I think, all my philosophical work, leads to a type of philosophy from which the actual mention of God is absent and in which the question of God, as a philosophical question, itself remains in a suspension that could be called agnostic” (*Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 24; “OA”). We will have to come back to this characterisation.

I will do this in four steps. First, I will briefly outline Ricoeur's general idea of philosophy and the kind of its concern for religious language as they appear from his earlier writings on the philosophy of religion. This will reveal a rather negative understanding of theology. Then I shall come to *Oneself as Another* and the last Gifford lectures which were not included in this book. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur develops a phenomenology of the self that serves, in a certain way, as a system of coordinates for the self-understanding of the religious subject in biblical faith. This means, we are asking for the philosophical implications of the biblical way of existence and the concrete self that is referred to. Here, the phenomenology of conscience and its religious reinterpretation play an important role. In the third part of my paper, I will try to analyse the ethical effect of the biblical model of existence which Ricoeur suggests in the idea of "loving obedience" that creates a dialectical tension between love and justice. This idea also leads to the relationship of moral autonomy on the one hand and the profound feeling of dependence of the religious self on the other hand. Finally, I will state some questions from a theological viewpoint concerning the role of argumentation within faith and questions about theology as a genuine function of religious self-understanding.

I. Philosophy and religion in Ricoeur's earlier work

Some publications ranging from the late seventies to the early eighties will allow us to answer the question about Ricoeur's philosophical understanding of religion and also, by contrast, to get an impression of Ricoeur's attitude towards theology. We will also get a general idea of his philosophy of religion which, I think, remains principally valid and directs the orientation of the much more developed thoughts on religion in the later work.

Ricoeur defines his own philosophy as "reflexive philosophy" in the shape of "phenomenological hermeneutics."² As reflexive philosophy it deals with the understanding of the self as the subject of operations like wanting, knowing, valuing, etc. Ricoeur's fundamental conviction is that reflexive self-understanding is only possible by means of detours around the evidence of the self's worldly existence, i.e. by interpretative appropriation of the actions, signs, symbols and texts of which the self is the author. So Ricoeur's position embraces first the basic insight of phenomenology that conscience is essentially intention towards something and that it can only be understood by analysing its intentionality. He combines this with hermeneutics in the double sense of an interpretation theory of (mainly written) expression and of an exis-

2. For the following see "De l'interprétation," in *Du texte à l'action* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986) 11–35, 25–35.

tential analysis of the self that belongs to a world before it is separated from the world by objectivation. Since the seventies, one main focus of Ricoeur's philosophy is the interpretation of texts, poems, novels and also biblical texts in their different literary genres. Phenomenological hermeneutics investigates the semantics of poetics and metaphor in the perspective of the poetic power of language. What Ricoeur calls "poetics" is not a specific literary genre, but precisely the non-descriptive reference of the poetic discourse, a reference of second degree to a world in which I could live and in which my unique possibilities could be realized. Interpretation is then a kind of reflexive philosophy because the confrontation of the world of the text and the world of the reader enables the interpretative appropriation of the structure of being of the self. From this perspective, the structure of text has a revealing function toward the structure of existence of the self.

Biblical texts and religious language in general are in Ricoeur's view examples of poetic discourse. Their kind of reference is not the description of facts but the imagination of a life world in which, as is specific for religious language, the reference to "God" plays a central role.

We have now enough elements to summarize in four theses the general characteristics of Ricoeur's philosophy and its attitude towards religious language.

1. *Philosophy is reflection on human experiences.* Experience is articulated in language and composed and fixed in texts which are the principal objects of investigation of this philosophy. The aim of reflexive philosophy is the self-understanding of the subject as the author of acts of existence made objective through fixation in literary/linguistic works. Objectification in texts is the precondition for an interpretative re-appropriation as self-reflection "by detour." Reflexive philosophy as phenomenological hermeneutics inquires into the kind of being-in-the-world that the textual structure of the work projects and the kind by which this hypothetical mode of existence challenges the reader's way of living, or, to put it in Ricoeur's terms, "refigures" his being-in-the-world or his view on his life-world.

2. *Philosophy is essentially related to non-philosophy.* Philosophy has no given object, but determines autonomously the point of departure where its thinking starts, and it is part of philosophy to justify this. The sources of philosophizing, however, are not philosophical. Philosophy reflects on experience, be it scientific, ethical, aesthetic, religious or whatever. As experience it is outside of philosophy and precedes it.³ In discourses which articulate experiences, philosophy analyses the intended sense, aware of the fact that this sense is not independent of its form of linguistic expression and therefore

3. See "Philosopher après Kierkegaard," *Lectures 2. La contrée des philosophes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 29–45, 34.

cannot totally and without reduction be translated into the conceptual and argumentative discourse of philosophy. In texts of fictional literature, philosophy is interested in the original way of projecting a model of existence, a hypothetical life-world.

3. *Religious texts belong generally to poetic texts, and their effect of re-figuration must be understood accordingly.* Religious texts, or biblical texts to which Ricoeur refers more often, speak of a specific experience, namely religious experience, characterised by its specific reference to "God." The intention of Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics is not to examine if there is something like genuine religious experience, but to analyse and reflect the idea of being-in-the-world of a discourse which makes reference to an experience in which "God" plays a decisive role.⁴ The specific attention of philosophy to religious discourse is based on the assumption "that this kind of discourse is not senseless, that it is worthwhile to analyze it, because something is said that is not said by other kinds of discourse—ordinary, scientific, or poetic—or, to put it into more positive terms, that it is meaningful at least for the community of faith that uses it for the sake of self-understanding or for the sake of communication with others exterior to the faith community."⁵

4. With regard to *theology* it has to be said in the end that its discourse lacks everything that makes original religious discourse so interesting for philosophy. A religious discourse that philosophy could be interested in plays on a level beneath that on which theoretical propositions concerning the existence of God, Gods nature, essence and so forth are made. With regard to religious discourse, the "speculative discourse" of theology is derived and secondary. Ricoeur judges that "the philosopher can hardly discover or learn much from a level of discourse organized in terms of philosophy's own speculative categories, for he then discovers fragments borrowed from his own discourse and the travesty of this discourse that results from its authoritarian and opaque use."⁶ Ricoeur deplores the onto-theological contamination of Christian theology making it insensitive for the sense of the genuine biblical project. In consequence, the philosopher's partner for a debate is not the theologian, but the informed believer interested in understanding himself better through a better

4. See the article "Naming God," *Figuring the Sacred*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 217–35.

5. "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Figuring the Sacred*, 35–47, 35. Ricoeur states that "... nothing is said—either pro or con—concerning the controversial notion of religious experience, whether we understand experience in a cognitive, a practical, or an emotional sense. What is said is only this: whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression."

6. "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 74–75.

understanding of the texts of his faith, perhaps with some help from the exegete.⁷ Generally, Ricoeur is reserved with regard to a philosophical speculative theology which he suspects to trespass the limits of knowledge, and so he concludes: "For the philosopher, to listen to Christian preaching is first of all to let go (*se dépouiller*) 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."⁸

II. The structure of the believing self according to the biblical model

Oneself as Another is a sort of *summa* of Ricoeur's philosophy.⁹ The hermeneutic of the self he develops here is a thorough and dense *relecture* and systematically advanced condensation of his reflexive philosophy. Even if *Oneself as Another* goes along without any relation or even allusion to biblical faith and to the religious self it nevertheless serves as conceptual grid for the important studies in philosophy of religion published afterwards, as we will see. It is not the place here to depict or discuss the theory of the self of *Oneself as Another*. I confine myself to outlining the central idea and will then go on to the final Gifford lectures that have not been included in this book. In a series of studies on the question "who," who is the subject of speech acts, of action, of a narrative identity and, finally, who is the author of morally ascribable and imputable action, the conception of self, of ipseity as Ricoeur says, is more and more enriched. The selfhood of the self is conceived by means of detours around the different dimensions of its expression resumed as "action" in the most fundamental sense. The reflexive understanding of the self reveals the essential role that the other plays in the phenomenology of selfhood. The manifold dialectic between self and other is constitutive for ipseity. The last study of *Oneself as Another*, called "ontological," is a speculative rereading of the totality of the traits selfhood gained throughout its course. Now the categories of sameness and otherness are applied to the phenomena of selfhood. This ontological study reaches its dramatic threefold climax in the constitutive dialectic of same and other in the phenomena of the self and the other person, the self and the other in guise of one's own body or "flesh" (*chair*), and finally the other internal of the self, namely the phenomenon of conscience in the sense of *Gewissen*. In the end, Ricoeur does not reduce the phenomeno-

7. See *ibid.*, 75. Ricoeur sticks to this also more recently, see Paul Ricoeur, André La-Cocque, *Penser la bible* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998) 14.

8. "Naming God," *Figuring the Sacred*, 223.

9. This is Ricoeur's own evaluation, see *Le juste* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995) 13.

logical plurality of figures of the other to one principle of otherness. Ending with one of his famous aporias, Ricoeur refuses to identify speculatively the cause of being affected of the self with the other person, with Freud's immortal ancestors, or with the other that is God. This final suspense marks in Ricoeur's opinion the limits of philosophical discourse.¹⁰ But it is also, as I shall argue, the condition for different cultural interpretations by which this general definition acquires concrete shape in a life-world.

Beyond the refusal to fixate the other through identification, *Oneself as Another* claims the fundamental structure of selfhood within which the testimony (attestation) of the self, of self-constancy, as the mode of being of the self is constitutively related to the injunction, to the call of the other of the self/as the self.

It is precisely the structure of call and answer that Ricoeur's phenomenology finds in religion. However, we have to be aware of the kind of relation between his study of phenomenology of religion and the theory of *Oneself as Another*.¹¹ Ricoeur does not develop a universal phenomenology of religion as such. Insisting on the difficulty of a universal religious phenomenology that remains an idea in the Kantian sense, Ricoeur confines himself to the phenomenology of one specific, namely biblical religion, and to some of the different patterns that emerge from it. The structure of call and answer Ricoeur discovers in biblical faith is an attempt, an interpretation of the hermeneutic process which takes place between one given institution, let it be called the word, tradition, or scripture, to refer to its complex hermeneutic status, and the self in front of this institution. As a polyphone collection of scriptures the

10. "Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does my debt to them constitute my very self, or God—living God, absent God—or an empty place. With this aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end" (OA 355).

11. The studies on phenomenology of religion were originally part of the 1986 Gifford lectures but have not been included in OA. The first of these "twin lectures" had the title "Le soi dans le miroir des Ecritures" (see OA 23) and is apparently unpublished. However, there are publications that seem at least to contain some of its thoughts: At the end of "Expérience et langage dans le discours religieux" (in Paul Ricoeur, *A l'école de la phénoménologie*, présenté par Jean Greisch [Paris: Beauchesne, 1995], 159–79) a note designates it as the penultimate Gifford lecture. The first part of this article has been published again as "Phénoménologie de la religion" in *Lectures 3: Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994) 263–71, where a note of the editor (263) names "L'enchevêtrement de la voix et de l'écrit dans le discours biblique" (*Lectures 3*, 307–26) as its continuation in the Gifford lecture. This last text has no intersection with "Expérience et langage," so that we cannot but presume that both of these reflect more or less the thoughts of this lecture. The last Gifford lecture is published as "Le sujet convoqué. A l'école des récits de vocation prophétique" in *Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* 28 (1988) 83–99. I refer to the translation "The Summoned Subject" in *Figuring the Sacred*, 262–75.

Bible represents the structure of call and answer in many shapes. The biblical pillars of Law, narration and wisdom form a web of mutual reference, of dynamic and challenge which can, in relation to a community, be described as a multiple hermeneutical circle.¹² The community interpreting the Scriptures is also interpreting its self-understanding, i.e., while interpreting we are ourselves interpreted. Adopting Northrop Frye's expression of the Bible as the "Great Code," Ricoeur points to the biblical texts as literature that forms a coherent symbolic field by means of internal structuration and cross reference. Obviously, this requires a structural reading sensitive for the symbolic and metaphorical sense generated by what Ricoeur has determined as "poetic" language.¹³ As a metaphorical, poetic discourse the Great Code has the power to rouse the listener's and reader's desire to understand himself and herself in the figures, in the kind of characters it projects. The hermeneutical circles of word and scripture, scripture and tradition, written tradition and cultural and conceptual mediation reach their climax in front of the self: here their importance becomes an existential quality. In the phase of refiguration the biblical project proposes a model of existence that calls the reader to orientate her being by reinterpreting herself according to this model. This is the Great Code's structure of call. In contrast to adherence to a philosophical school that can be argued for—at least up to a certain degree—religious belief operates on another level. Ricoeur holds that we lack a criterion to determine which existential choice is right¹⁴ and that, on the other hand, it is not rational argumentation that makes us believe. Most often it is due to contingent circumstances or mere chance which religion or confession we happen to be brought up in. However, contingency can be transformed into a kind of continuous choice by means of the sense that emerges in the course of a life from self-understanding in religious terms, or, as Ricoeur likes to say, contingency becomes a destiny.¹⁵ We will have to come back to this from a theological point of view.

After scrutinising the structure of call according to which a self can understand his or her mode of being, we have to consider the responding self: which self responds to the biblical call? Ricoeur sketches a cluster of models showing a "family resemblance" which he assembles under the label of the

12. Cf. "Expérience et langage dans le discours religieux," 164–67.

13. Cf. *ibid.*, 168f.

14. "... the mode of Christian life is a wager and a destiny, and those who take it up are not led by their confession either to assume a defensive position or to presume a superiority in relation to every other form of life, because we lack criteria of comparison capable of dividing among rival claims" ("The Summoned Subject," 263).

15. "Such is the existential circle: a contingency transformed into destiny through a continued choice. The believer's wager is that this circle will not be vicious but indeed supportive and vivifying" ("Phénoménologie de la religion," 271, my translation).

“summoned subject.”¹⁶ Ricoeur takes the religious self as a responding self back to the figure of the prophet. The internal variety of the biblical scriptures allows for a diversity of possible figures.¹⁷ As basic model Ricoeur defines prophetic vocation which provides the first type of the pattern of the responding self. It shows clearly the call of God addressed to a single person, the constitution of the prophet through the divine mandate, his isolation from the community as well as his mission to it, and finally the answer of the prophet to the vocation, embracing reactions like obedience, resistance or desperation.¹⁸ Ricoeur follows: “However singular each call may be, it does not begin unless it is followed by something. Thus it belongs to the essence of prophetic speech in its pain to conjoin an exceptional ipseity to a traditional community. Through this conjunction, the prophetic I is ‘established’ and ‘commanded.’” He concludes that he sees “in this figure of a ‘summoned subject’ a paradigm that the Christian community, following the Jewish community, could make use of to interpret itself.”¹⁹

In the line of the summoned subject Ricoeur then investigates the figure of Christ according to Pauline interpretation as a model for christomorphic existence as well as its effect on Christian spirituality in the tradition of the “imitation of Christ.” Another line of tradition can be characterised as a process of internalisation, from the Augustinian concept of the “inner teacher” up to the “testimony of conscience” as the “most internalized expression of the responding self.”²⁰ I shall treat the latter in greater detail because the concept of conscience will allow an important insight into Ricoeur’s understanding of the relationship between the phenomenology of religion and his theory of the self in *Oneself as Another* from which these studies have been separated. So we have to come back to the justification Ricoeur gives for this division right after the analysis of conscience as a religious paradigm.

In the history of the ethical tradition, with Kant and Hegel conscience attained the position of an autonomous moral authority within the self. From an ethical point of view, the autonomy of conscience is indispensable. Thus, a reinterpretation of conscience in the light of a religious structure of call and answer seems to incur the danger of falling back into an extrinsic determination of conscience and of being accused of heteronomy. Keeping this important question in mind for the following part of my presentation, I shall first turn to Ricoeur’s concept of conscience which opens, as he holds, “new possibilities of interpretation for the dialogic structure of Christian existence,

16. See “The Summoned Subject.” The quoted expression “family resemblance” which refers to Wittgenstein is on p. 262.

17. See “Expérience et langage,” 176–77.

18. See “The Summoned Subject,” 264–66.

19. *Ibid.*, 267.

20. *Ibid.*, 271.

without for all that breaking the cord that ties this figure of the responsive self to the first figure we have considered, that of the ‘mandated’ self of the narratives about the prophetic call.”²¹ The religious or theological reinterpretation of conscience presupposes the philosophical interpretation of this phenomenon. Two points of the more comprehensive phenomenology of conscience in the tenth study of *Oneself as Another* (see 341–55) are essential. Conscience is first a structure of calling within the self and to the self, it is a “voice that care addresses to itself.” Second, conscience must in the first place be understood as a phenomenon of testimony, prior to accusation in terms of bad conscience: “through conscience, the self bears witness to its ownmost power of being before measuring *and in order to* measure the inadequation of its action to its most profound being.”²² On the level of the phenomenon of conscience, the difference of good and bad is related to action as the being of the self and the measuring of actual acting to the deepest potential of one’s own existence. Here a line could be drawn to the desire for a good life together with the other in just institutions that is at the centre of Ricoeur’s ethical theory—ideas that cannot be developed any further here. It is important to highlight the neutrality of the phenomenon of conscience with regard to a religious interpretation on which Ricoeur insists. It is the call of the self that calls the self; on this dialogical intimacy of self and conscience, the “response of the prophetic and the christomorphic self is grafted.” By the interchange of two movements, “on the one hand, the call of the self to itself is intensified and transformed by the figure that serves as its model and archetype; on the other side, the transcendent figure is internalized by the moment of appropriation that transmutes it into an inner voice.”²³ The religious paradigm of grace and justification that is constitutive for the Christian existence presupposes quasi transcendently the structure of conscience as call and answer as basis for the biblical model of the summoned self. Without conscience as anthropological presupposition, the idea of “justification by faith” would be marked by radical extrinsicism.²⁴

After this sketch of elements of a Christian model of existence we need to address the question of the epistemological status of these philosophical reflections on religion and their relationship to the theory of *Oneself as Another*. First, I think that these studies are philosophical, i.e. neither theological nor religious. They owe their character of philosophical investigations to the fact that they examine the reality of a religion, its expression and self-understanding from a point of view that neither needs to decide, nor even to ask the question whether the “God” they refer to exists or not, nor whether a

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., my emphasis.

23. Ibid.

24. See *ibid.*, 272.

concept of God makes sense or not. The philosophical phenomenology of religion does not need to share the credo of the believers whose conscience it investigates. The only precondition is methodological and consists of the willingness to analyse the structure of religious expression “with imagination and sympathy” but under suspense of a believing (or unbelieving we add) engagement.²⁵ This does not make it a “religious philosophy”—if something like this is conceivable. So what about the reason Ricoeur gives in the introduction of *Oneself as Another* for the separated publication of the last Gifford lectures? He writes that the main reason for splitting them off has to do with his “concern to pursue, to the very last line, an autonomous, philosophical discourse.”²⁶ Ricoeur refuses to ascribe religion a “cryptophilosophical” function, just as he denies philosophy any “cryptotheological” potential. Religion does not furnish a response to questions philosophy cannot answer. In his studies on religion, Ricoeur does not present belief in God as solution to open questions. On the contrary, religion does not at all answer questions; it responds to a call and not to a question, as I have shown. Also the religious self, understanding himself/herself in a relation of call and answer formed by the biblical paradigm, does not “crown” the self of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy. The religious model of being under the title of the “summoned self” certainly picks up what the theory of *Oneself as Another* says about the self as called and as responding but in the manner of a recapitulation in culturally contingent terms.²⁷ I think that Ricoeur considers religion as a symbolic grid according to which the self-understanding of the concrete subject realizes the general structure of which *Oneself as Another* has established the theoretical conception. If I am right then the reason for not integrating the studies on the religious self is rather—despite a more pragmatic decision in order to avoid a certain hasty and problematic reception—to be seen as a distinction between the general and the particular.

III. Love and justice, or obedience and freedom, or religion and ethics: ethical implications of the religious self

I can only briefly address the effect on ethics of the biblical mode of existence. Ricoeur asserts in the introduction to *Oneself as Another* that biblical faith does not alter the meaning of predicates like “good” and “obligatory” as these are applied to action. He then refuses to accept something like an exclu-

25. See “Phénoménologie de la religion,” 268; “L’encevêtrement,” 307; see also Peter Welsen, “Ethik-Politik-Religion. Anmerkungen zu Paul Ricoeurs ‘Lectures’” in *Phänomenologische Forschungen* NF 1 (1996): 123–42, 139.

26. See OA 24.

27. See OA 25 and “The summoned subject,” 262–63.

sively “Christian ethics” but pleads for a common morality that is, from the perspective of the believer, placed in the context of an “economy of the gift.” The belonging to an economy of the gift is of “metaethical” nature and does not change the content of morality—if faith made good what otherwise would be bad—but it affects the position of the self towards morality. The label of the new perspective is love, namely a love that is “tied to the ‘naming of God.’”²⁸ Although “love” is “metaethical” it certainly intends action. However, it does this not by overruling morality and moral norms but by creating a dialectic with morality which leads (in the best case, we should admit) to a practical decision in a single moral situation. In the small booklet “Love and justice,”²⁹ Ricoeur confronts the orders of religion and morality. The concept he proposes for the ethical effect of faith consists in the first moment in a disproportion between love, as the attitude of faith toward action, and justice, here understood as a general term for the moral rule. In the second moment, a practical mediation is attained. This needs some explanation.

According to Ricoeur, the moral notion of justice is marked by a logic of equivalence that requires the equality of parts, be it the equal distribution of roles and tasks, advantages and disadvantages in society, or, just compensation in penal law. In its centre is the formal idea of a mutual disinterest of the members of society which allows each party to pursue its interests to the same extent as to every other.³⁰ On the other hand, the logic of love does indeed not ask for equivalence and equality but in contrast inspires generosity and abundance. Apparently love is not concerned with what is due to everybody in a society full of conflicts but with the beloved other and knows literally neither bounds nor moderation.³¹ However, we have to look a bit closer to discover what is characteristic for love as a religious attitude that belongs to the economy of the gift. We have learnt that Ricoeur sees the religious self as “summoned self.” The central idea of biblical faith is perhaps expressed in the double commandment that summarises both Torah and prophets: “You shall love the Lord your God . . . and you shall love our neighbour as yourself.” From the moral point of view this is a very peculiar commandment. How can love be commanded? Indeed, there is something scandalous about the idea of understanding it as a Kantian imperative. But Ricoeur proposes to understand the commandment of love by love’s own discourse, that of the Song of Songs. Then the discourse which God addresses to the people or to an individual appears as a dialogue between the lover and the beloved and the “commandment

28. OA 25.

29. First published as bilingual book *Amour et justice/Liebe und Gerechtigkeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990); ET “Love and justice” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 315–29.

30. See “Love and justice,” 322–23.

31. See *ibid.*, 316–17.

that precedes every law is the word the lover addresses to the beloved: 'Love me!'" Now the commandment of love loses its apparent character as imperative and is accepted as the supplication of the lover to be loved as well. Or, as Ricoeur puts it, "this is a commandment that contains the conditions for its being obeyed in the very tenderness of its objugation."³² From a point of view in the tradition of the Enlightenment and of modern morality, the religious self as "summoned self," the feeling of absolute dependence that marks religious conscience, to belong to the economy of the preceding gift, all this seems to be the opposite of the modern claim for autonomy. Ricoeur's thesis is however that an understanding of theonomy as "loving obedience" does not contradict autonomy but, after questioning its tendency to autosufficiency, sustains its effective realization in finite human existence.³³ The aphorism "love obliges" condenses the idea of theonomy as loving obedience that combines the reciprocity of love with the obligation for obedience. The religious sentiment of dependence and the obedient relation to God has to be seen in accordance with the commandment of love.

Thus, to belong to the economy of the gift means that before all that it can do or give the conscience of faith has already received. The biblical self is affected by the gift of God, it is called by the loving God and his or her answer follows the logic of superabundance that is "Since it has been given you, give . . ."³⁴

To sum up the relation between religion and morality according to Ricoeur, he sees a tension although it is not without a practical mediation. As the mode of being of the summoned self, religion is far more than ethics, it is an existential attitude with a fundamentally dialogic structure whose principle is love and whose logic is superabundance. However, it becomes practical in a responsible way only by means of a mediation through justice. The ethical effect of love results from reorientation by disorienting the normal way of moral judgement. And if moral judgement is rational, then the ethical impact of religion is mainly on imagination, and imagination challenges morality.³⁵ Much could be said about the relationship between religion and morality and how the dialectic tension works exactly and what the consequences for a concept of theological ethics would be.³⁶ I will instead touch on another problem in my short final part.

32. Ibid., 319.

33. See "Théonomie et/ou autonomie," *Archivio di filosofia* 62 (1994): 19–36, 26–27.

34. See "Love and justice," 325.

35. See also "Théonomie et/ ou autonomie," 32.

36. See my article "Von Liebesgebot und Goldener Regel zu einer Verhältnisbestimmung zwischen theologischer und philosophischer Ethik? Überlegungen im Anschluß an die Ethik von Paul Ricoeur," in *Interdisziplinäre Ethik. Grundlagen, Methoden, Bereiche*, ed. Adrian Holderegger and Jean-Pierre Wils (Freiburg i. Br.: Universitätsverlag Herder, 2001), 124–47.

IV. Some remarks from a theological point of view

It seems to me that Ricoeur understands the Christian faith in sum as a conviction in the precise sense this term has in the ninth study of *Oneself as Another*. In a conviction the self testifies the historical constancy of its being a responsible self. My conviction is something I cannot live without, it contains what I have experienced and approved as good in my life, an idea of the good I can project myself into and which faces also the moral claims that others have on me. Conviction is the moral face of self-constancy, it articulates the very personal ideal of a good life in the situation of decision when self and other ask for a morally responsible, equitable action. Faith is a conviction in the sense of the way in which the self testifies its being. It is a culturally mediated realization of the phenomenological structure of the self which needs a further mediation to become practical. This mediation works by the confrontation with reason represented by the moral rule and ends in a reflective equilibrium between both the particular, historical conviction and the universal, rational moral imperative. The dialectic “back and forth” between historical experience, or conviction, and universal principle, or reason, amplifies the internal intelligence of both of them, though in different perspectives. Conviction learns its universal sense, the universal rule its particular dimension. Here is also one of the rare places where Ricoeur writes about the task of theology: The task of both theology and philosophy is, he says, to discern in compromise formulas how the application of the idea of justice mediated by love in common life adopts “the secrete discordance between the logic of superabundance and the logic of equivalence. It is also their task to say that it is only in the moral judgement made within some particular situation that this unstable equilibrium can be assured and protected.”³⁷ If this concession of a role to theology quite parallel to that of philosophy is not merely due to the fact that is has been made in a speech to a theological public it means that Ricoeur sees theology as discerning force. Its object is the same as that of philosophy, namely common morality, and the function is also the same, discernment and

and my own *Ethische Identität und christlicher Glaube. Theologische Ethik im Spannungsfeld von Theologie und Philosophie* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2002).

37. “Love and justice,” 329. Ricoeur goes so far as to assume that if the commandment of love were not an unspoken presupposition in the social interpretation of justice, a perverse interpretation that makes justice an instrument of those who are able to pursue their interests would prevail. But because the commandment of love is a part of the cultural deposit, of the convictions of Western society, it does in fact influence the interpretation of justice through the reflective equilibrium established between the theory of justice and our every day convictions. This entails the question of the systematic place of “love” in his ethical theory which I cannot pursue here.

constructive contribution to the morality of a society, but it is rooted in the realm of religious conviction and comes, so to say, from the other side, compared to philosophy.

It is true that this interpretation of faith as conviction which I would like to draw from Ricoeur accentuates the ethical relevance, “ethical” understood as concerning the good and the obligatory. But in this wider sense the way of existence in which the self realises and understands itself is an ethical question, even if theology has often named it spirituality. I can only suggest but cannot go into what the effect of the style of existence of faith could be on the ethical understanding of the “good” and the “striving for a good life.” Could it be that the belief of belonging to an economy of the gift has an effect on the idea of the good, accomplished life and its relation to suffering?

The interpretation of Ricoeur’s understanding of faith as conviction allows in my view to understand theology as the reflective dynamic in faith itself. This works in the following way: The dialectic of conviction and of moral universality works on the grounds of rational argumentation. More exactly, it is a back and forth movement between the force of the argument and the imagination of narratives, experiences, parables and so on brought forward by conviction. I cannot see that there is a sharp frontier between argumentation and the narrative way of conviction. If the narratives did not make the conviction intelligible by the sense they convey how could they have an argumentative effect? And if argumentation as rational as it could be had no experiential sense how could it be convincing? On the other side, I am not so sure as Ricoeur seems to be that religious language, the language of faith does not argue.³⁸ Is religious language always and only metaphoric, narrative and poetic, but never arguing? Already in the Bible the distinction between argumentation and poetic language is not that sharp. I think that argumentation is—in changing historical guise, however—an original expression of faith, as original as the other forms of expression. Consequently, I would like to understand theology as a function of religion, representing the specific cultural shape of its reflexive and deliberative force. All the more in a cultural context like ours where argumentation plays an important role argumentation is the form also a religious conviction takes when it goes public and takes part in the discussion on what is good and what is just in communal life and its institutional conditions. The strong motivation, however, to do this and the orientating and imaginative force comes from the ground of conviction, from faith. It is an

38. See “*Théonomie et/ou autonomie*,” 27 where Ricoeur opposes the argumentative discourse of justice to the non-argumentative of love: “. . . l’amour qui n’argumente pas mais se déclare . . . la justice se reconnaît d’abord au sein de l’activité communicationnelle par la confrontation entre des prétentions et des arguments . . .”; see also “*Expérience et langage*,” 168 and 170–71.

enablement in the sense of a turn of existence that makes the capacity for morality in every self a real force which can be acted upon.³⁹ Let me end with the impression that Ricoeur's philosophy invites one to rethink the theological foundation of the capable self in ethical and "hyperethical" terms.

39. See "Théonomie et/ ou autonomie" 34–35; "A Philosophical Hermeneutics of Religion: Kant," *Figuring the Sacred*, 75–92.