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The Subversive Force of the Imaginary
Christianity as Radical Possibility in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur

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1. Introduction: Reading Habermas in the Light of Ricoeur

Jürgen Habermas has recently made some striking and, to many observers, surprising comments concerning the continuing relevance and non-exhaustion of certain key Judaeo-Christian religious insights.1 Habermas's recognition of the enduring relevance of these insights has led many of his readers, including myself, to re-evaluate the dominant assessment of his attitude toward religious tradition, and tradition in general, as one that is only or even primarily allergic.2 While this assessment underestimates Habermas's appreciation of the cultural contributions that religious traditions have made, it is still accurate to describe this appreciation as one that is ever careful to maintain a certain secular distance. For example, he persistently refers to the need to 'salvage' religious insights from parochial obscurity through a "neutralizing" or "secularizing" translation.3 For Habermas, the task of appropriating these insights through such a neutralizing translation is a uniquely philosophical one, and only such philosophical

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3 See "Faith and Knowledge," cited in note 1, 335-36: "Those moral feelings which only religious language has as yet been able to give a sufficiently differentiated expression may find universal resonance once a salvaging formulation turns up for something almost forgotten, but implicitly missed. The mode for nondestructive secularization is translation." For the adjective "neutralizing," see his "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World" in The Frankfurt School on Religion, cited in note 1: 309.
translation will be able to “convince the daughters and sons of modernity with good reasons” concerning the value and importance of these religious insights.⁴

Habermas’s increasingly appreciative, yet still ambivalent, relationship to religious tradition brings his readers right back to his debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer in the late 1960’s, and this also lends a renewed salience to Paul Ricoeur’s insightful response to that debate.⁵ Along the lines of Ricoeur’s intervention, and given Habermas’ recent emphasis on the enduring relevance of certain aspects of religious tradition, one might now profitably ask whether Habermas’s willingness to learn from and indeed appropriate the wisdom he finds in various religious traditions implicates him, however unwittingly or unwillingly, in the work of actively preserving and transmitting that religious heritage, or whether his desire for an as-yet unachieved secularizing translation succeeds in helping him maintain a secular distance from it. Put another way, has Habermas made room in his understanding of religious tradition in which one might spot a, dare I say, rather Gadamerian sense of indebtedness to that tradition? However one might eventually answer that question, it is clear that Habermas finds, and values, a reconciling potential uniquely housed in Judaeo-Christian religious traditions. I here contend that Ricoeur’s sustained engagement with the issues at the heart of the Gadamer-Habermas debate demonstrates how, short of providing a neutralizing translation, it is

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possible to critically appreciate the reconciling potential that religious traditions might continue to make available in our fractured times.

Perhaps Ricoeur's intervention in this debate is able to demonstrate such a possibility because his open identification with a particular Christian tradition gives him a different perspective from which to assess the relationship between criticism and religious conviction or commitment. At the very least, this identification makes him much less allergic than Habermas to the idea of belonging to a tradition per se. One gets the sense that, for Habermas, such belonging to and identification with a particular religious tradition goes one affirmative step further than the sort of translating appropriation he would recommend. For him, such identification would be insufficiently oriented to the goal of achieving mutual understanding, or, better, toward the ideal of a potentially universal, intersubjectively shared hermeneutic horizon that is anchored in "a transhistorical capacity for human communication." Yet, like Habermas, Ricoeur also affirms the importance of maintaining critical distance from one's traditioned background, as well as the importance of entering into authentic discursive relationships with those who do not share it. His position differs from Habermas's, however, in that he does not consider the simple fact of one's belonging to a tradition primarily as a potential barrier to this effort to be critical and communicative. Not only does such belonging not necessarily stand in the way of these abilities, for Ricoeur they are part and parcel of the

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6 Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 31. Calhoun also claims here that Habermas carries the normative expectation that judgments and decisions on matters of public concern should be reached by way of "reasoned discourse in which arguments, not statuses or traditions, [are] decisive" (2).

7 Of course, Habermas also recognizes the formative role played by the pre-theoretical lifeworld background of subjects engaged in communicative action, and I here border on being unfair to him in order to sharpen the contrast between his attitude toward tradition and Ricoeur's. See his Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System, A Critique of Functionalist Reason (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 400.
hermeneutic dynamics included in what I will here call "the work of belonging," an act of interpretation that includes no small measure of critical intellectual activity.

In what follows, then, I propose to explore the different temperament that Ricoeur exhibits with respect to the matter of belonging to a tradition, paying particular attention to the matter of belonging to a Christian religious tradition. In the following section (section 2), this exploration will examine how Ricoeur's unique contribution to a hermeneutics of belonging affects his understanding of tradition. In much the same way that Ricoeur discovers critical distanciation as a dialectical counterpart to belonging at its very heart, he also discovers innovation as the dialectical counterpart to the act of inhabiting any tradition. Through these dialectics of belonging and distanciation, and tradition and innovation, Ricoeur develops a provocative understanding of the possibility that emerges through the work of belonging to tradition (a possibility I will explore in section 3).

It is, finally, in and through the dialectics involved in our belonging to various traditions that we may tap into the "subversive force of the imaginary."\footnote{"Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," cited in note 5, 300.} When it comes to the activity of appropriating a tradition like Christianity, in particular, Ricoeur draws our attention to the transformative possibilities that can emerge through the work of belonging to such a heritage. In emphasizing the power of imagination in any such act of hermeneutic appropriation, Ricoeur encourages us to understand this work of belonging as that of embarking on a path that opens up a poetics of the possible. He does not satisfy himself, then, with encouraging Christians to consider what Christianity was or is for the sake of preserving it in any conservatistic sense, rather, he enjoins his fellow Christians to imagine what Christianity might become through a responsible, critical thinking that asks
what our world might need it to be.

2. The Work of Belonging: Distanciation and Innovation at the Heart of Tradition

Ricoeur's perceptive insights concerning the work of belonging emerge forcefully in his attempt to mediate between Gadamer's 'universal hermeneutics' and Habermas's 'critique of ideology'. In this mediation, Ricoeur shows sympathy for Gadamer's insistence that the issue of belonging has ontological priority over both the estrangement or alienation (verfremdung) that issues from the objectifying procedures of natural science, as well as (and this is Ricoeur's innovation) the 'critical distanciation' involved in ideology critique. In "Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue," Ricoeur addresses the "axiological problem" of the origin of human ethical value. Is such value discovered or created? In addressing the antinomy implied in this question, he finds it useful to examine the differing ways in which people relate to their cultural heritages. Every culture, he says, comes to us as a received heritage, "therefore as transmitted and carried by tradition." As beings formed by tradition, we never find ourselves "placed in the radical position of creating the ethical world ex nihilo. It is an inescapable aspect of our finite condition that we are born into a world already qualified in an ethical manner by the decisions of our predecessors.... In brief, we are always already preceded by evaluations beginning from which even our doubt and our contestation become possible." Before we can achieve any distance, critical or

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9 As Lambert Zuidervaart has pointed out to me, a description of Habermas's project as a 'critique of ideology' now sounds rather dated, in that since the early 1970's he has abandoned the method of ideology critique that he inherited from his Frankfurt School mentors like Theodor Adorno, and has instead adopted the "universal pragmatics" of his theory of communicative action. For a good account of this "universal pragmatics" see Maeve Cooke's *Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas's Pragmatics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 97.

otherwise, we must first accept the historical efficacy (wirkungsgeschichte) of a prior belonging—we must appreciate “the massive and global fact whereby consciousness, even before its awakening as such, belongs to and depends on that which affects it.”

The controversy involved in this appreciation, Ricoeur claims, appears when one grants to tradition “the authority of the past.” In so doing, Gadamer, says Ricoeur, no longer limits his understanding of tradition “to describing our dependence on the past as a fact,” but instead goes a step further and accords “a positive value to that dependence.” According to Ricoeur, we can adopt two different attitudes toward this accordance of authority and positive value to traditional dependence: “…this authority can appear to us in turn as a form of violence exercised against our thinking, which prevents us from advancing to maturity of judgment, or as a means of assistance, as a necessary guide on the pathway from infancy to maturity.” While Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics follows the latter path, Habermas’s theory of ideology “adopts a suspicious approach, seeing tradition as merely the systematically distorted expression of communication under unacknowledged conditions of violence.”

The debate between these two attitudes is of paramount importance for Ricoeur, for it concerns “the significance of the most fundamental gesture of philosophy”: “The gesture of hermeneutics is a humble one of acknowledging the historical conditions to which all human understanding is subsumed in the reign of finitude; that of the critique of ideology is a proud gesture of defiance directed against the distortions of human

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11 “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” cited in note 5, 281. See also Time and Narrative, Volume III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 227, where he argues that the ontological priority of belonging grants to tradition a “presumption of truth”: “By a ‘presumption of truth’, I mean that credit, that confident reception by which we respond, in an initial move preceding all criticism, to any proposition of meaning, any claim to truth, because we are never at the beginning of the process of truth and because we belong, before any critical gesture, to a domain of presumed truth.”
communication.” The terms of the debate, as Ricoeur finds it, seem to impose an impossible choice: “We are forced to ask whether doing philosophy is to assume a condition of finitude for which historicity, pre-understanding, and prejudice are the implications or if to do philosophy is to say ‘no’—to criticize in the strongest sense of the word, in the name of the future of freedom, anticipated in a regulative idea.” On these terms, the task of orienting oneself to the regulative idea of “an essentially political freedom of speech, guided by the limiting idea of unrestricted and unconstrained communication” requires that one first give up the work of belonging.

While denying that his aim is “to fuse the hermeneutics of tradition and the critique of ideology in a super-system which would encompass both,” Ricoeur nevertheless rejects the terms of this debate as framed. The reason for this rejection has to do with the fact that, in contrast to Gadamer’s polemics against the estrangement that results from hypostasizing the objectifying perspective of the natural sciences, Ricoeur recognizes a form of distanciation that plays a “positive and productive” role at the very heart of hermeneutical belonging. David Kaplan argues that one of the most important ways in which Ricoeur supplements Gadamer’s hermeneutics of tradition here is by substituting the notion of discourse for that of dialogue as the model of communicative understanding: “The crucial quality of distance is more clearly seen in discourse than in dialogue, making it impossible to overcome distanciation completely because the medium of understanding is always distanced from itself. In discourse the saying is distanced from the said, the text is distanced from the author, reader, and original context.

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14 “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” cited in note 5, 294.
and the world of the text is distanced from the lifeworld." In addition to these 'structural' forms of distanciation, in "Ethics and Culture" Ricoeur, following Habermas, also notices a political imperative at work in these forms of distanciation: "...we never receive values as we find things or as we find ourselves existing in a world of phenomena. It is only under the aegis of our interest in emancipation that we are stirred to transvaluate what has already been evaluated. It is this interest in emancipation which introduces what I call 'ethical distance' in our relation to any heritage."18

For Ricoeur, any act of appropriation, which is ultimately what the work of belonging amounts to, thus already presupposes a certain distance. Any reception through transmission of a traditional heritage is ultimately a hermeneutic act, akin to the interpretation of a foreign text. The hermeneutical problem is thus the very problem of appropriation: how to make one's own what was initially alien. For Ricoeur, the hermeneutical act of appropriation is not a 'taking' that would cancel this very distance, but rather an 'opening' of oneself that imaginatively enters into it. For this reason, distanciation is not simply a fact or a given, a merely quantitative phenomenon, but rather "a dialectical trait, the principle of a struggle between the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding." Distanciation is thus the ever-present "dynamic counterpart of our need, our interest, and our effort to overcome cultural estrangement." While we can never overcome such distanciation and estrangement in any absolute sense, we may do so provisionally: our acts of appropriation are capable of achieving a measure of success in overcoming the

aforementioned cultural estrangement and thereby bringing a foreign text or tradition into “a new proximity, a proximity which suppresses and preserves the cultural distance and includes the otherness within the ownness.”

Ricoeur claims further that this dialectic of distanciation and appropriation “may also be expressed as that of the tradition as such, understood as the reception of historically transmitted cultural heritages.” Here it is important to keep in mind Ricoeur’s threefold distinction in *Time and Narrative* between tradition, traditions, and traditionality. As Kaplan explains, *traditionality* refers to “the transmission of a past heritage, including the beliefs, practices and prejudices affecting its creation and interpretation.” Traditionality incorporates “a dialectic of innovation and sedimentation” that incorporates “an interplay of new creative interpretations of objects and events in the past, which themselves were once new creative interpretations of a previous heritage.” By *traditions*, Ricoeur intends a material concept that “refers to the particular content of what is handed down from the past, including all of the linguistic and symbolic elements that can be transmitted.” *Tradition*, finally, refers to “an orthodoxy that claims historical authority.” In the Gadamer-Habermas debate, Ricoeur finds no small amount of equivocation between the first and third conceptions of tradition, and it is only the first understanding that he wishes to uphold in his positive evaluation of the dialectic of distanciation and appropriation occurring at the heart of our reception of a tradition. In thinking about our reception of tradition, he would not have us understand “the inert

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transmission of some already dead deposit of material....” Instead, he would have us understand that reception in terms of traditionality, “the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity.”

For Ricoeur, such innovation only makes sense within the context of tradition: “Innovation remains a form of behavior governed by rules. The labor of imagination is not born from nothing. It is bound in one way or another to the tradition’s paradigms. But the range of solutions is vast. It is deployed between the two poles of servile application and calculated deviation, passing through every degree of ‘rule-governed deformation’.” Here Ricoeur refers to the interpretive freedom that always exists in what is ultimately a critical act of interpretation. According to him, one’s reception of tradition always “proceeds from the tension, at the very heart of what we call experience, between the efficacity of the past we undergo and the reception of the past we bring about.” That is, we are not simply passive victims of our cultural heritage, who lack any critical agency in, or responsibility for, the task of shaping how that heritage is to be received and passed along; we are also active receivers of that tradition, who in so doing may decide, within necessary and enabling paradigmatic constraints, what shape that tradition will receive.

At this point Ricoeur’s nuanced understanding of tradition comes to a critical head with Habermas’s understanding of tradition (as he finds it in the debate with

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23 Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, Volume I, cited in note 21, 68.
24 Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, Volume I, cited in note 21, 69. For a similar understanding of the dialectical relationship between tradition and innovation, in which the condition of possibility for innovation is the existence of certain reformable paradigmatic constraints, see Jeffrey Stout, Democracy and Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 77-85, especially 78-79: “...conformity to the norms opens up the possibility of novel performances, which have the dialectical potential to transform the practice, thus changing its norms.”
Gadamer). In the debate, Ricoeur reads Habermas to endorse a problematic form of distanciation that cuts itself loose from its mooring in a prior belonging that forms its condition of possibility. Ricoeur would here remind Habermas that people can only project their emancipation and anticipate an unlimited and unconstrained communication on the basis of the creative reinterpretation of their cultural heritage. Critique is never autarkic:

"...critique can be neither the first instance nor the last. Distortions can be criticized only in the name of a consensus that we cannot anticipate merely emptily, in the manner of a regulative idea, unless that idea is exemplified; and one of the very places of exemplification of the ideal of communication is precisely our capacity to overcome cultural distance in the interpretation of works received from the past. He who is unable to reinterpret his past may also be incapable of projecting concretely his interest in emancipation."  

For Ricoeur, Habermas's ideal of unconstrained communication will remain empty, and thus be unable to function as a regulative ideal with any critical force, unless and until it is applied in a particular situation. As Kaplan explains, this means that there is no theoretical solution to the antinomy of reason and tradition, but only "the practical mediation geared to recovering the past and projecting a better future."  

In the next section, I will examine the potential contribution that Ricoeur's understanding of the transmission and reception of tradition can make to a contemporary Christian's attempt at recovering the past for the sake of a better future.

3. Re-Interpreting the Past and Awakening a Hopeful Imaginary

Ricoeur claims that the condition of "being-affected-by-a-past" forms a dialectical pair

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27 David Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, cited in note 17, 40; See also "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," cited in note 5, 280: "...what is reasonable emerges only in the course of a dialogue between the spirit of innovation and the spirit of tradition."
with the intending of a “horizon of expectation.” That is, our hopes and expectations relative to the future inform and thus have repercussions on our reinterpretations of the past. One of these major repercussive effects, he suggests, is to open up “forgotten possibilities, aborted potentialities, repressed endeavors in the supposedly closed past.”

The same effect occurs in the opposite direction, which in fact is part of the same hermeneutic circle. For it is through our attempt to interpret a textual tradition inherited from a distant past that a space is created in which to subject our present reality to critical scrutiny, and thus imagine a better future. As Ricoeur argues: “The world of the text is therefore not the world of everyday language. In this sense, it constitutes a new sort of distanciation that could be called a distanciation of the real from itself.” For Ricoeur, such literary texts as narratives, folktales, and poems do not lack reference, but have a “second-order reference” which is discontinuous with that of everyday language: “Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be. Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations that literature carries out on the real.”

Here Ricoeur describes nothing less than “the subversive force of the imaginary,” in which “what is sought is no longer an intention hidden behind the text, but a world unfolded in front of it. The power of the text to open a dimension of reality implies in

28 “The Hermeneutic Function of Distanciation,” in From Text to Action, cited in note 5, 86. See also The Rule of Metaphor (London: Routledge, 2003), chapter 7, and especially chapter 8, section 5. Without substantially changing his mind on this central insight, Ricoeur nevertheless comes to problematize the language of “reference” in which he articulates it. See Time and Narrative, Volume III, cited in note 11, 158, where he argues that, with respect to everyday practice, fiction possesses the function of being “undividedly revealing and transforming”: “Revealing, in the sense that it brings features to light that were concealed and yet already sketched out at the heart of our experience, our praxis. Transforming, in the sense that a life examined in this way is a changed life, another life. Here we reach the point where discovering and inventing are indistinguishable, the point therefore, where the notion of reference no longer works.”
principle a recourse against any given reality and thereby the possibility of a critique of the real."\textsuperscript{29} In making this claim, Ricoeur specifically links the subversive power of critique to the imaginative power that may be unleashed when the appropriation of a textual heritage opens us to a horizon of expectation that is sufficiently robust to inspire genuine hope.

Because he makes this link, Ricoeur finds it necessary to connect Habermas's abstract ideal of an emancipation achieved through uncoerced, undistorted communication to a past memory which, in opening this very horizon of expectation, forms the condition of its possibility. Ricoeur makes this connection in the course of suggesting that Habermas, in his critique of Gadamer, does not succeed in freeing himself from indebtedness to tradition. On the contrary, says Ricoeur, he remains firmly ensconced within the tradition of \textit{Aufklärung}, which is still a tradition even though it emphasizes emancipation over recollection. In Ricoeur's words: "Critique is also a tradition. I would even say that it plunges into the most impressive tradition, that of liberating acts, of the Exodus and the Resurrection."\textsuperscript{30}

For Ricoeur, this most impressive tradition bears witness to a memory that is sustained through the transmission of a textual heritage, one that narrates a history of God's salvific acts in covenant partnership with humans. It is a story that inspires hope for healing and reconciliation in the face of a world rife with suffering and brokenness. According to Ricoeur, "the resurrection may be understood only through the memory of God's liberating acts and in anticipation of the resurrection of every human being."\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," cited in note 5, 300.
\textsuperscript{30} Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," cited in note 5, 306.
Through this promise of universal restoration and reconciliation, the texts of Ricoeur's predilection “deploy their world” and in so doing “poetically manifest and thereby reveal a world we might inhabit.”32 The world these texts reveal and invite us into is a world of hope in the midst of despair, in which life ultimately triumphs over death. It is the world that Jesus preaches as the coming “kingdom of God, which is inscribed in the naming of God by the prophets, the eschatologists, and the apocalyptics.”33 This is both the kingdom which Jesus announced to be already “among us” (Luke 17), and also the kingdom that will reach its culmination when God comes to dwell among mortals, wiping away every tear, ending death, as well as mourning and crying and pain (Rev. 21: 1-4).

To the extent that this narrative opens our horizon of expectation, it is already in some sense among us here and now, inspiring our imagination and initiative to critique and transform the damaged real in the direction opened by this hope.

Yet is the horizon of expectation opened by this tradition not rather sentimental and unrealistic? Does it not present us with a poetics of the impossible as opposed to a poetics of the possible? Habermas, for one, appreciates this horizon of expectation as something that has real political edge: “If the biblical vision of salvation does not mean simply liberation from individual guilt, but also implies collective liberation from situations of misery and oppression (and thus contains a political as well as a mystical element), then the eschatological drive to save those who suffer unjustly connects up with those impulses towards freedom which have characterized modern European history.”34

34 Jürgen Habermas, “Israel or Athens,” cited in note 1, 79. See “Naming God,” cited in note 31, 235, where Ricoeur also recognizes a political edge to his hermeneutic theology. Ricoeur is careful to insist, however, that he is not recommending a “political theology,” but rather a hermeneutical theology that opens to political practice without disturbing “the precious dialectic of poetics and politics.”
In addition, Habermas elsewhere claims that "the wish for forgiveness is still bound up with the unsentimental wish to undo the harm inflicted on others." This wish remains unsentimental, for Habermas, even in the face of what he describes as "the irreversibility of past sufferings—the injustices inflicted on innocent people who were abused, debased, and murdered, reaching far beyond any extent of reparation within human power." Here, Habermas poignantly asserts, "the lost hope for resurrection is keenly felt as a void."\textsuperscript{35}

Perhaps, then, the best way to describe the difference in attunement between Habermas and Ricoeur here is to read Ricoeur's work as presenting a struggle to maintain what for Habermas has become a lost hope. Like Habermas, Ricoeur recognizes human powerlessness in the face of past and present suffering, yet for him "the New Testament announces a power of weakness that needs to be dialectically articulated along with the weakness of power...."\textsuperscript{36} In marked distinction to Habermas, he therefore hangs onto the hope for resurrection conveyed in the texts of his predilection. For him, this is not so much a "lost hope" as an "excessive" one. It operates according to an "absurd logic" that is both irrational and rational: "Hope means the 'superabundance' of meaning as opposed to the abundance of senselessness, of failure, and of destruction." He further maintains that there are many practicable ways of living according to this hope, whether these are personal or collective, ethical or political. What all these different ways share is that they are "irreducible to a mere wisdom of the eternal present: they bear the mark of the future—of the 'not yet' and of the 'much more'; ...hope makes of freedom the passion for the possible against the sad meditation on the irrevocable."\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35} Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," cited in note 1, 333.
\textsuperscript{37} Paul Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," in Figuring the Sacred, cited in note 31, 206.
Both Habermas and Ricoeur recognize a void in our current reality, and both authentically desire its elimination in the form of a future reconciliation that sees an end to suffering and damage. While Habermas's thoughts on this score are tinged by elements of a "sad meditation" on the impossibility of any final reconciliation, Ricoeur's thoughts remain impassioned by an enduring promise which claims that one day the void beneath the world's suffering will be filled by God as the "one who comes." It is to this radical, seemingly impossible, possibility that Ricouer would have Christians orient their horizon of expectation, their hope, and their present action. He would remind Christians that their excessive hope is funded by a subversive imaginary that must refuse a damaged present in order to let its suffering speak. Whether we recognize any of this subversive imagination in contemporary Christian culture, especially in the West, is, to my mind, a question that ought to disturb today's searching Christian.