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Ricoeur on Truth in Religious Discourse: A Reclamation

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The fields of comparative theology and interreligious dialogue have largely presupposed the possibility of interreligious learning, but there have been few attempts to provide a philosophical framework for such learning. Utilizing the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, I argue that evaluations of religious truth should be understood holistically and contextually. In interreligious engagements, tensions are created in and questions are raised for one's own worldview. If one proceeds to imaginatively enter into another's worldview and finds resources there that enable one to alleviate those tensions and answer those questions, as well as make sense of one's reality in a broad way, then one may properly deem such beliefs to be true. Interreligious learning is thus construed as the recognition of truth that enables one to productively orient oneself to reality. The result is a provisional philosophical framework for understanding religious truth and interreligious learning.

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur, philosophical hermeneutics, religious epistemology, truth, imagination, interreligious dialogue, comparative theology

How is interreligious learning possible? The fields of comparative theology and interreligious dialogue both encourage interacting with other religious traditions in part to facilitate learning. Of course, the modes of engagement may be different: sometimes comparative theology is characterized as operating through textual study and interreligious dialogue is characterized as operating through direct communication.[1] And their

[1] See, for example, Francis X. Clooney, "Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue," *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 51–63. In the context of this essay, I will

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aims may be somewhat varied: comparative theology is explicitly and unapologetically theological—it engages with other religions in order to augment one's own knowledge of God—while interreligious dialogue may be undertaken for any number of reasons. But both fields assume that part of the point of such interactions is to learn from the religious other.

A cursory glance at the literature provides one with ample evidence for concern with the problem of learning. A leading figure in contemporary interreligious dialogue, Marianne Moyaert, signals the centrality of the problem of learning when she recently asked, "How do we enable a deep learning across religious traditions?"[2] Is it through the reading of texts or interreligious ritual participation? Catherine Cornille, another leading figure in interreligious dialogue, comments that "interreligious hospitality may become a source of genuine religious enrichment and transformation."[3] In other words, interreligious dialogue, in the form of interreligious hospitality, may be a fount of learning. Francis Clooney, a prominent comparative theologian, remarks that, despite the differences between comparative theology and interreligious dialogue, "in both comparative theology and in dialogue there is a serious learning from the other."[4] Yet, unfortunately, while the fact of learning is taken as an empirical fact, there has been little work done to lay out the philosophical framework for *how* such learning is possible. As Paul Hedges notes, while Clooney actively takes part in interreligious learning, "his theological method does not necessarily explicate the reasons as to how and why such new learning should be seen as possible, certainly not in philosophical terms."[5]

Accordingly, I would like to use this paper to take preliminary steps in exploring the philosophical underpinnings of interreligious learning. Under what conditions might a member of one religion come to see the religious resources of another as *true*? Historically, it has been thought that the only way to make sense of the possibility of such judgments is to abstract away from the concrete worldviews of individuals and to talk about a purported "view from nowhere" or "God's-eye view" outside of any particular worldview, where one can make assessments about truth based on "objective

use "interreligious dialogue" in the broad sense of engagement with the religious other, whether through texts or directly through conversation.

[2] Marianne Moyaert, "Ricoeur and the Wager of Interreligious Ritual Participation," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 78, no. 3 (2017): 174.

[3] See Catherine Cornille, "Interreligious Hospitality and Its Limits," in *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*, eds. Richard Kearney and James Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2011), 41.

[4] Clooney, "Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue," 54.

[5] Paul Hedges, "Comparative Theology and Hermeneutics: A Gadamerian Approach to Interreligious Interpretation," *Religions* 7, no. 7 (2016): 6.

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evidence," without relying on one's own worldview or current beliefs.[6] Otherwise, if one's judgments about truth are simply based upon one's own worldview, what one *already* believes, the fear is that such judgments would simply function as a feedback loop.[7] In other words, if the beliefs of one's own worldview provide the resources for making determinations about truth, then one will always, at the result of an investigation, ultimately decide that one's own worldview is the best one.[8] Seeing the beliefs of another as true—that is, learning from them—is therefore impossible. Or, if it is possible, it becomes a form of irrational conversion. Is it possible to *rationally* change one's mind about religious issues as a result of an encounter with the religious other, whether as the result of reading texts or through personal engagement? Is it possible to see truth in another's religion?

Rather than abstracting away from the lived, comprehensive, and complex worldview of the religious believer in order to understand learning processes, my goal is to push further into what we might call the religious believer's concrete mode of being. Increased contextualization, I believe, is the way forward for a flourishing religious epistemology. Better epistemology, I hope, will in turn produce more fruitful interreligious exchanges. I think that the groundwork for a philosophical account of interreligious learning can be found in the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur maintains that there is a cognitive element in religious belief—that is, Ricoeur thinks that religious belief has to do with *truth*. But for him, the pursuit of truth is not a matter of achieving a "God's-eye view" that is symptomatic of the more pernicious claims to truth historically found in interreligious encounters.[9] Ricoeur allows us to reclaim a view of truth grounded in existential concern: one encounters difficulties in one's own life or worldview and one reaches out to others for other and potentially better ways of thinking and living. If one finds resources there

[6] See William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 1–31, especially sections 5 and 6.

[7] The "feedback loop" language is Kuhn's. Indeed, he is dealing with a similar problem in the field of philosophy of science. See Thomas S. Kuhn, "Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice," in *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues*, eds. Martin Curd, J. A. Cover, and Christopher Pincock (New York: Norton, 2013), 106.

[8] Indeed, this is a standard criticism of any hermeneutic epistemology. See, for example, Habermas' discussion of this problem in "A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*," in *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, eds. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 335–63.

[9] In relating a personal story about Paul Ricoeur and the inescapable constraints of perspective and context, Richard Kearney comments, "The most important thing I learned from hermeneutic philosophy is that interpretation goes all the way down. … There is no God's-eye view of things available to us." See Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xv.

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that enable one to resolve these problems—to think better or live more abundantly—then one may say that one has uncovered truth and learned from the other. Ricoeur's understanding of truth comes from a position of humility; one only tries to learn if one recognizes that one *has* something to learn. Applied to interreligious dialogue—which is, I suggest, driven in part by a concern for truth—Ricoeur offers us a model of learning that is contextual, but not relativistic; comfortable with conviction, but still open to the religious other.[10] The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to take preliminary steps in developing the groundwork Ricoeur provides for thinking about interreligious learning and discovering religious truth.[11]

In what follows, I will analyze Ricoeur's notion of discourse, and specifically religious discourse, as a means for laying open new modes of being-in-the-world. I will argue that it is just this positive possibility of understanding and entering into a new mode of being-in-the-world that enables one to speak meaningfully about religious truth. Religious discourse can never claim absolute or certain knowledge of God, yet it attempts to name God through poetic forms of language. This naming or revealing of God calls us to reorient our lives; the ability of this orientation to redescribe reality productively, in a way that the self can make sense of the reality she experiences and live an abundant life, will be taken as indicating the truth of one's beliefs. Further, engaging in interreligious dialogue exposes a believer to alternative ways of orienting oneself in the world. If a new orientation is productive for the believer *from the perspective he or she already holds*, then that new orientation may be deemed to be true. In other words, a belief system is thus understood as true if it makes sense of reality as the believer finds it and draws one toward an abundant life. Perceiving a new orientation as in some sense better than what one already believes and adopting it as one's own may thus be understood as a moment of real learning for the believer.

I. Discourse and Metaphor

I begin with some reflections on discourse in general. This is an appropriate starting point, for Ricoeur states that "for a philosophical inquiry, a

[10] Here I find myself in broad agreement with Catherine Cornille. See her "Meaning and Truth in the Dialogue between Religions," in *The Question of Theological Truth: Philosophical and Interreligious Perspectives*, eds. Frederiek Depoortere and Magdalen Lambkin (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 137–55.

[11] I happily claim Ricoeur's proviso that the philosopher "insofar as he is a professional and responsible thinker … remains a beginner, and his discourse always remains a preparatory discourse." Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (London: Continuum), 437.

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religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of *discourse* … this kind of discourse does not merely claim to be meaningful, but also to be true."[12] This statement of Ricoeur's sets the tone for our inquiry: How can a religion's beliefs be said to be true in light of the fact that they cannot be verified in any straightforward sense? Ricoeur's answer to the question of how we come to see truth in religious language begins with this categorization of religious language as a mode of discourse. For Ricoeur "discourse always occurs as an event, but it is understood as meaning."[13] In spoken discourse this amounts to the human capacity to "point out" the thing we mean by speaking with public devices, proper names, demonstratives, and definite descriptions.[14] Because the event of discourse is understood as meaning, it must have the ability to transcend the ideal semiotic code of language in order to refer to a reality beyond itself: "With the sentence, language is oriented beyond itself. It says something *about* something."[15] It is the capacity of discourse to be "disquotational" that roots our words and sentences in reality.[16] Yet it must be kept in mind that it is because we find ourselves in the world, because we *orient* ourselves in various situations that we have something to say—language "refers to *what is*."[17] Indeed, discourse cannot fail to be about something; it would not be meaningful if it did not refer.[18] For Ricoeur, discourse always presupposes a shared topic or world.

Furthermore, just as discourse is referential in the sense that it refers to reality, to the world, it is also necessarily *self*-referential. The dual referentiality is essential to Ricoeur. It is because discourse always refers to reality and to a self that, as Henry Venema appropriately notes, the "act of understanding the meaning of discourse involves the appropriation of a dual reference: *a world and a self that could exist in that world.*"[19] In written discourse, as

[12] Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 35, emphasis added.

[13] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 70.

[14] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 16.

[15] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 78, emphasis in original.

[16] Paul Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 114.

[17] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 21, emphasis added.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 81, emphasis added.

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opposed to oral discourse, the dual referential function does not disappear, but is transformed. In spoken discourse the speaker's intention is the *sine qua non* of the discourse's meaning, but once discourse is fixed in writing, the text will go beyond the world and time of the author—the shared world of spoken discourse is eliminated. The uniqueness of written discourse is its ability to refer to a world, not present between interlocutors, nor within the text, but in front of it.[20] The collection of references in the text combine to create a space of meaning—a world created not by ostensive reference but by imaginative appropriation.[21] Ricoeur, like Gadamer, sees the act of interpretation as a dialectical process that occurs between the reader and the text. The self-referential function of written discourse involves the assimilation of the reader into its world as the reader imagines herself in the world via the act of appropriation (as opposed to the self in spoken discourse, the self that is speaking). Discourse, then, not only has to be about reality, but a reality *for* someone. The reader or hearer attempts to understand another's discourse via the imaginative projection of herself into that world. Thus, for the hearer, the world of the speaker becomes a possible world *for her*.

And yet this possible world created by written texts is not necessarily the surrounding physical world that can be ostensively referred to. If Ricoeur is claiming that written texts have the power to refer beyond ostensive, descriptive "pointing" with language, then how is this new form of reference to be considered possible? To answer this question, Ricoeur connects discourse to metaphor. Metaphor is central to Ricoeur's work and the topic of one of his most important works, *The Rule of Metaphor*. As a new possible world is birthed through the interaction of a reader with a text, it is apparent that some form of creativity must be involved. As Mario Valdés points out, Ricoeur wishes to "use metaphor as a paradigm for all creativity through language."[22] Because Ricoeur argues that religious discourse is a form of poetic

[20] Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 221.

[21] Appropriation, put simply, is the act of "making something my own." Ricoeur writes that *appropriation* is his own translation of the German term *Aneignung*, which means "to make one's own what was initially 'alien.'" See Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation," in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 89. For hermeneutic thinkers, the work of appropriation is the struggling against some distance, whether cultural, historic, or otherwise.

[22] Mario Valdés, "Paul Ricoeur and Literary Theory," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1995), 267.

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and creative discourse, the path ahead to understanding it lies through metaphor.[23]

The tradition of rhetoric has treated metaphor as a trope, a figure of discourse or a form of denomination or classification at the level of the word. By focusing on metaphor at the level of the singular word, rhetoric has been blind to the realization that "a properly semantic treatment of metaphor proceeds from the recognition of the sentence as the primary unit of meaning."[24] By emphasizing the sentence over the word, Ricoeur is calling attention to the fact that metaphor is an act of predication and that is only borne out at the level of the sentence.[25] This predication, as Ricoeur believes Aristotle rightly saw, is "an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars."[26] Ricoeur argues that "resemblance itself must be understood as a tension between identity and difference" in the predicative moment of metaphor; along with the stated "is" is an implicit "is not."[27] Because of his emphasis on metaphor at the level of the sentence, Ricoeur goes on to say that the tension that metaphor creates is not between two terms, but rather between two *interpretations of the sentence*—the literal and the metaphorical.[28]

Ricoeur uses the metaphorical phrase "mantle of sorrow" to illustrate his point. We can clearly see the implicit "is not" of the metaphorical phrase when we attempt to construe "mantle of sorrow" literally.[29] However, this observation of the literal "is not" of the statement clears the path for a metaphorical "is": the self-destruction of the literal interpretation "imposes a sort of twist on the words, an extension of meaning thanks to which we can make sense where *a literal interpretation would be literally nonsensical*."[30] There is tension created by the predicative impertinence of "mantle of sorrow"

[23] It is clear that Ricoeur himself thought of the metaphor as being the paradigm for understanding nondescriptive language: "I tried to demonstrate in *The Rule of Metaphor* that language's capacity for reference was not exhausted by descriptive discourse and that poetic works referred to the world in their own specific way, that of metaphorical reference. This thesis covers every nondescriptive use of language, and therefore every poetic text, whether it be lyrical or narrative. It implies that poetic texts, too, speak *of* the world, even though they may not do so in a descriptive fashion." Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 80.

[24] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 44.

[25] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 50.

[26] Ricoeur citing Aristotle's *Poetics* in *The Rule of Metaphor*, 32.

[27] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

[28] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52.

[29] Ibid., 50.

[30] Ibid., 50, emphasis added.

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because it is a "self-contradictory attribution,"[31] "in order to respond to the challenge issued by the semantic clash, we produce a new predicative pertinence, which is the metaphor."[32] Hence, metaphor is thus rendered by Ricoeur as "more like the resolution of an enigma than a simple association based on resemblance; it is constituted by the resolution of a semantic dissonance."[33] The act of understanding a metaphor is a particular resolution—a particular "unpacking"—of these conjoined and conflicting claims, none of which obviously have immediate priority or can be perpetually produced. There is no end to the possible renderings of a metaphorical claim. Because there is no end to the fleshing out of the metaphor, we might say that metaphor is the attempt to *name* what is not concretely *known*.

Ricoeur goes on to claim that the tension between the two interpretations—the literal and the metaphoric—"elicits a veritable creation of meaning."[34] The impertinence of the metaphor as interpreted literally calls for a new rendering, a novel interpretation at a metaphorical level that resolves the dissonance in the statement. The task of creating this new meaning is undertaken by imagination that involves "the apperception, the sudden insight, of a new predicative pertinence, specifically a pertinence within impertinence."[35] Yet, importantly, while the work is done by the imagination, the created meaning has cognitive value. Metaphor cannot be seen as simply an emotive ornament of discourse because it "tells us something new about reality."[36]

Ricoeur's discussion of poetic discourse (and as a subset, religious discourse), to which we will now turn, parallels his discussion of metaphor. Just as the metaphor is the creation of a new pertinence within the impertinence of predication, poetic discourse exemplifies what we may call an "impertinence of reference." The impertinence of reference, building on our discussion of discourse in general, will be to a world opened up between the text and the reader. This world, however, is not a straightforward mapping of the ostensive or descriptive world, but as a *possible* world into which the reader is invited to project herself. The possible world is the creation of a new pertinence within the impertinence of ostensive reference. There is a further subtlety, as I hope to draw out, that this possible world

[31] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 94. Ricoeur is citing Monroe Beardsley.

[32] Paul Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 124.

[33] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," 125.

[36] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52–53.

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into which the reader is invited, while not the immediate, descriptive world, is nonetheless a world that she may orient herself within, inhabit, and call her own.

II. Poetic and Religious Discourse

> "It is in the heart of our imagination that we let the Event happen, before we may convert our heart and tighten our will."[37]

Just as the meaning of a metaphor is created on the ruins of a literal interpretation, so is the meaning of poetic discourse (poetry, narrative, literature, etc.) to be found on the ruins of descriptive reference. The referential function of poetic discourse is begun by the impertinence of projecting the world of the text immediately onto the everyday world, calling for a new referential pertinence in a possible world created by the interaction of the reader and the text. Fiction and poetry can "intend being, but not through the modality of givenness, but rather through the modality of possibility."[38] Moyaert comments that the power "to interrupt what is familiar and to guide the reader into the realm of the possible is actually characteristic of all literary texts. Religious texts are, at least in this sense, no different from other literary texts. Literary texts are poetic texts, characterized by a power of world disclosure."[39] Yet, the world that is opened must be seen as virtual in the sense that it is not the world that can be referred to ostensively or descriptively. Here Ricoeur echoes the concern that Heidegger voiced but assimilates it in the light of poetic discourse: that theoretical, descriptive knowledge is contingent upon a more primordial being-in-the-world. Poetic discourse suspends the descriptive referential function of ordinary language, allowing for a form of reference that touches the world at this more fundamental level.[40] Through this indirect path, literary works open up a world in between the reader and the text, and Ricoeur asserts that this is a *possible* world—"it is the suggestion or proposal, in imaginative, fictive mode, of a world."[41]

Yet, insofar as this world is possible, it is virtual life *for us*. That is, poetic discourse opens up a possible way of living. By adopting the relational ontology of Heidegger, the dual referentiality of discourse crops up once

[37] Paul Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 245.

[38] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 43.

[39] Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 175.

[40] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 42.

[41] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 229.

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again—there is a possible world and there must be a self for whom that world is possible. But what is this world that shows up as possible for the self, and what does this world effect in the self? Poetic discourse points to "our many ways of belonging to the world"—possible modes of orientation, belonging to or rootedness in the world.[42] Indeed, Ricoeur notes that in the symbolic language found in literary works "[w]e are faced with some significations which do not speak of facts but which point indirectly, by means of the meaning of the meaning, to existential and ontological possibilities."[43] As the language of possibility implies, poetic discourse opens other modes of being beyond those that we currently own.

As I noted previously in the discussion of metaphor, seeing new pertinence within impertinence requires the "flash of insight" that belongs to the apperceptive work of imagination. I think it is possible now to see how, in an analogous fashion, imagination figures into the creation of a possible world as the pertinent referent of a literary text. The creation of models of reality in literature offers new ways of understanding the world we find ourselves in. Ricoeur suggests that "the image is not enclosed within the mind, that it has a distinctive intentionality, namely to offer a model for *perceiving things differently*."[44] Here we meet with an important concept in Ricoeur, that of a *redescription* of reality that is a function of productive imagination.

In his discussions of Aristotle's mimesis and philosopher François Dagognet's "iconic augmentation," Ricoeur argues that imaginative models for and of reality are productive in the sense that they do not simply copy reality, but rather tell us something *new and essential* about it. Through art of various kinds we "generate new grids for reading experience or for producing it."[45] Citing Nelson Goodman, Ricoeur claims that fictions and other symbolic systems "make and remake reality."[46] Because poetic discourse tells us something about reality, it has cognitive value—it "makes reality appear in such and such a way."[47] Again, "Poetic qualities, through their status as transferred, add to the shaping of the world. They are "true" to the extent that they are "appropriate," that is, to the extent that they join fittingness to novelty,

[42] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 222.

[43] Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 234.

[44] Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John G. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 292.

[45] Ibid., 293.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

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obviousness to surprise."[48] In other words, poetic discourse is cognitive because it claims "that *what is* is redescribed; it says *that* things really are this way."[49] Because this language is cognitive it can be debated, a model can be shown to be true or false, and there can even be progress in imaginative redescriptions of reality. The task of the model is, by means of fiction, to break down inadequate ways of understanding reality and make way for new, more appropriate redescriptions of reality.[50]

For Ricoeur, the imagination does not only produce redescriptions of reality for the reorientation of understanding, but it also has the capacity to reorient our ideas of how to live in the world. Indeed, for Ricoeur, the two are not separated, but are brought under one head in appropriating Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world." The possible world that is made manifest by discourse is a world in which the self can "project [her] ownmost possibilities."[51] That is, the world that is presented is a possible world for a subject—it provides the self with a world to inhabit, a way of finding oneself in the world and living in the world. Gert-Jan van der Heiden adds that "Understanding a literary text is … a way of discovering our own mode of being-in-the-world. … [I]t is the text that projects these new possibilities of being-in-the-world. To understand these possibilities is the genuine task of hermeneutic understanding."[52] The world that is presented in poetic discourse is presented as possibly being our own; one that we could appropriate and employ to productively orient ourselves in the world. For Ricoeur, then, poetic redescription effects a sort of epoché[53] of the real in order to "try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world. Imagination is this free play of possibilities."[54] The possible world that is created enables us to understand our utmost possibilities, and it serves as a call to a new way of orienting ourselves as beings that belong to that world.

[48] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 238.

[49] Ibid., 247–248, emphases in original.

[50] Ibid., 240.

[51] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 223.

[52] Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *The Truth (and Untruth) of Language: Heidegger, Ricoeur and Derrida on Disclosure and Displacement* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 85, quoted by Moyaert in *In Response to the Religious Other*, 176.

[53] The term "epoché" in this sense comes from the work of Edmund Husserl, where it was used to indicate a "bracketing" or a "putting aside" of the natural attitude (common, everyday existence) in order to let the transcendental structures of experience (which are ordinarily transparent) appear. In Ricoeur it takes on the nuance of bracketing the real in order to let "the possible" be.

[54] Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," 128.

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For Ricoeur, religious discourse, as a subset of poetic discourse, partakes in poetic discourse's ability to project a world and to create new self-understanding in the context of that world. In other words, it too offers modes of redescribing life and of finding oneself in that life—the "world of the text is what incites the reader, or the listener, to understand himself or herself in the face of the text and to develop, in imagination and sympathy, the self capable of inhabiting this world by deploying his or her ownmost possibilities there."[55] Again, imagination is the operative device in the appropriation of new worlds.

Yet, religious discourse also shares with poetic discourse its cognitive capacity. As such, it too is saying something about reality: "for a philosophical inquiry, a religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of discourse … philosophy is implied in this inquiry because this kind of discourse does not merely claim to be meaningful, but also to be true."[56] But to what kind of truth does religious discourse lay claim? Ricoeur asserts that it is less the truth of the scientist than that of the poet.[57] Like metaphor, a literal interpretation as reference to the world of simple descriptive facts is literally false, but that does not mean that Ricoeur believes that religious language is untrue or meaningless. Rather, as David Hall puts it, Ricoeur believes that:

> [t]he poetic gives rise to a dimension of meaning that is simply not available at the level of non-poetic, descriptive, apodictic, ordinary language expressions. The genius of religious discourse, a genius it shares with poetry in general, is its power of redescription … the religious, like the poetic, is revelatory because of this power.[58]

Because religious discourse does not refer to the world of empirical facts its truth criterion is not that of "verification or falsification but

[55] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 232.

[56] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 35.

[57] There is an important question to be asked here about whether Ricoeur is equivocating in his use of the word "truth." Is this remark an innocuous one, or is he subtly attempting to pull the wool over our eyes? I think Ricoeur is merely indicating a likeness between religious discourse and poetic discourse as avenues of revealing the "way things are" (cf. Heidegger's employment of *aletheia* in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 262. Ricoeur may have in mind here the interpretation of Heidegger, which leads to a plurality of "beings," that is, scientific, artistic, and so on. It seems to me, however, that these are various avenues of disclosing being—each with its own sphere, terminology, methods, certainly, but each nonetheless expresses various modes of specifically *human* being, which underlies each specific "branch."

[58] W. David Hall, "The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricoeur's Poetic Redescription of Reality," *Literature and Theology* 20, no. 2 (2006): 201.

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of manifestation."[59] Manifestation,[60] in brief, is "letting what shows itself be."[61]

Even though religious discourse has a cognitive element, one must always be sensitive to the genre of the language. Religious discourse contains, according to Ricoeur, a number of genres: narrative, prophecy, apocalypse, parable, prescription, hymn, and wisdom (at least, in the Abrahamic faiths, these are the dominant genres). Each of these genres tries to name God, and therefore reveal something about reality, but in different ways. Ricoeur emphasizes the "polyphonic" nature of the representations of God in religious discourse: "God appears differently each time: sometimes as the hero of the saving act, sometimes as wrathful and compassionate, sometimes as the one to whom one can speak in a relation of an I-Thou type, or sometimes as the one whom I meet only in a cosmic order that ignores me."[62] These various modes of understanding God cannot be conflated without a real loss of meaning, especially under a philosophical conception of God as "being." The name "God" says more than "being" because it presupposes the entire network of prophecies, narratives, and so forth. God is named in the intersection of these various forms of discourse:

> "God-talk," to use John Macquarie's phrase, proceeds from the concurrence and convergence of these partial discourses. The God-referent is at once the coordinator of these varied discourses and the index of their incompleteness, the point at which something escapes them … [to speak of God] is to open up a horizon that escapes from the closure of discourse.[63]

Although God can be named, God is perpetually outstripping these names; God can never be absolutely and fully known.

[59] David Pellauer, "Paul Ricoeur on the Specificity of Religious Language," *The Journal of Religion* 61, no. 3 (1981): 268.

[60] I think there is an important sense in which Ricoeur's employment of manifestation in relation to discourse is echoing Heidegger's: "Discourse 'lets something be seen' … : that is, it lets us see something from the very thing which the discourse is about. In discourse … , so far as it is genuine, *what* is said is drawn *from* what the talk is about, so that discursive communication, in what it says, makes manifest what it is talking about, and thus makes this accessible to the other party. This is the structure of the [logos] as [discourse]. This mode of making manifest in the sense of letting something be seen by pointing it out, does not go with all kinds of 'discourse'" (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 56). It is because discourse is a "letting-something-be-seen" by pointing it out that it can be true or false (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 56).

[61] Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 1–2 (1977): 25.

[62] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 41.

[63] Ibid., 45; see also Ricoeur, "Naming God," 227–28.

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As it is relevant to what I want to say in the third and final section of this paper, I want to focus on one particular genre of religious discourse—the parable. Because the purpose of this essay is to begin to develop the groundwork Ricoeur laid for interreligious learning, I think that examining what he has to say about parables has two notable advantages: first, Jesus used parables to teach, so they provide a natural avenue for seeing at least one way that religious discourse can be used to cultivate learning. And second, Ricoeur himself happened to be from the Christian tradition and that allows us to see what he says about Jesus' parables at a level of some specificity.

According to Ricoeur, Jesus uses parables to teach us about the "logic" of God as superabundance. Parables are "metaphor[s] of normalcy."[64] Under the pretext of normalcy, parables employ paradox and hyperbole as "limit-expressions" in order to redescribe reality and open our experiences "in the direction of experiences that themselves are limit-experiences."[65] Parables invariably lead to the result that the extraordinary is to be found, or better, to be brought into existence, in the ordinary. The parable presents the world of the day to day, but it is transfigured by the introduction of an extreme element—a paradox or a hyperbole. Ricoeur observes, "there is no parable that does not introduce into the very structure of the plot an implausible characteristic, something insolent, disproportionate; that is, something scandalous."[66] There is a disorienting aspect to the shock of the parable that Jesus utilizes—all parables "*dis*orient only in order to *re*orient us."[67] The upshot of this disorientation is to make an opening for the orientation first of the imagination, and then of our actions. The mode of existence to which we are called is what Ricoeur calls "the law of extravagance" or the "logic of superabundance."[68]

A ready example is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The portrayal of a Samaritan as a hero rather than the villain of the story is meant to be shocking or scandalous to the original hearers. Jesus' intent likely was to disorient his hearers first in order to reorient

[64] Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 57.

[65] Ibid., 61.

[66] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 229.

[67] Paul Ricoeur, "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 281. Cf. Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 244.

[68] See "Naming God" and "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God," in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred* on pages 229 and 282, respectively, as well as "The Hermeneutics of Symbols," in Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 57.

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them in a broader understanding of who the neighbor might be—an understanding that includes religious outsiders like Samaritans.[69] Importantly, Jesus uses his hearers' prior knowledge of the Scriptures and ethics (to love God and one's neighbor as oneself) as the basis for instantiating an extension of that ethic. Jesus' ethic is not *wholly* new—he challenges his hearers on the basis of things that they already know and believe—but it clearly indicates a broadening of one's awareness of the other. The movement from disorientation to reorientation parallels the learner's recognition of the difference but yet also, I would argue, the continuity between the old ethic and the new.[70] Here we see an illustration of how religious discourse redescribes reality and calls for us to reorient ourselves in reality—to instantiate a new way of thinking and therefore a new way of living. For Ricoeur, there are three moments in which this "conversion"[71] takes place: first, the disorientation of the Event,[72] then reorientation, and finally, adoption—acting accordingly.[73] Or in Ricoeur's poetic phrasing, "letting the Event blossom, looking in another

[69] I am certainly not implying that Jesus' view of the neighbor was novel to all Jewish thinkers of the time. But it likely would have been novel to those he is seeking to instruct—in other words, to those who need to learn the lesson.

[70] Without the continuity between the old and the new and the grounding of one's adoption of the new on what one already knows or believes, the rationality of such an adoption would be undermined. In other words, one's current knowledge or beliefs serve as the basis for evaluation of new ideas.

[71] The word is Ricoeur's. He writes that conversion "means much more than making a new choice, but which implies a shift in the direction of the look, a reversal in the vision, in the imagination, in the heart, before all kinds of good intentions and all kinds of good decisions and good actions" (see "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 241). In multiple places Ricoeur claims that extreme sayings like parables are directed more to the reorientation of the imagination than the will (see "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God," 281 and "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 245). The reorientation of the imagination first opens one to new possibilities; acting on the basis of the new vision comes second.

[72] Frequently in interreligious dialogue, the Event is an encounter with the discourse of the other whether through text or speech. But Ricoeur is clear that it may be any number of things. Linking the Event to the moment of "finding something" in Jesus' parables, Ricoeur comments that this simple phrase "encompasses all the kinds of *encounters* which make of our life the contrary of an acquisition by skill or by violence, by work or by cunning. Encounter of people, encounter of death, encounter of tragic situations, encounter of joyful events" (see "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 240). In all of these cases, "[s]omething happens. Let us be prepared for the newness of what is new" (see "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 241).

[73] Ricoeur uses the labels "Event," "Reversal," and "Decision" (see "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 241). The reader may note that there are two levels that mirror one another: Ricoeur offers these labels as naming three paradigmatic moments in the plots of parables themselves, but the thrust of the parable is to accomplish a similar transformation in the hearer.

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direction, and doing with all one's strength in accordance with the new vision."[74] When a hearer adopts the new orientation and new way of living (and at least begins to actualize a possible way of being-in-the-world), I think it is fair to say that they have learned from the parable.

III. Learning through Interreligious Dialogue: Religious Truth as Productive Orientation

My contention is that we can take the tripartite structure I have teased out of Ricoeur's analysis of parables—disorientation, reorientation, and adoption—and use it for making sense of learning via an encounter with the confessional discourse of another faith. First, there is the disorienting moment of the encounter with the religious other. Then, through confessional discourse—that is, when one speaks or writes about one's own beliefs[75]—the other offers the hearer or reader a way to reorient their understanding of the world by laying out a possible world. Finally, if the hearer or reader's orienting themselves in this possible world yields productive results—being able to make better sense of reality or being able to live more abundantly—then the adoption of those new resources (in whole or in part) may be said to constitute learning from the religious other. Of course, the three parts of learning are not necessarily discrete or temporally successive. Rather, they may be three moments or aspects of one complicated movement. Nevertheless, I will try to expand on each moment in turn.

Allowing oneself to truly encounter the religious other—whether through dialogue or reading texts—is to risk experiencing disorientation. If one enters into interreligious dialogue because one has preexisting questions that need answering, then the appropriate posture of humility in looking to another for help means that one is already open to being challenged and changed. After all, insofar as one believes that one's own worldview is the self-contained and final truth of the universe, one will not look outward. Yet, even if one does not enter into interreligious dialogue for help, encountering another faith tradition always involves an irreducible element of risk. In the simple act of communicating how they view the world, God, and other people from their perspective, the speaker challenges his hearers to see the world as he does. Indeed, the hearer is challenged to see the world that the speaker unveils as a possible world *for that person*. Confessional discourse offers new ways

[74] Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 241.

[75] One might link what I'm referring to as confessional discourse to Ricoeur's notion of "attestation," which, as he says, "belongs to the grammar of 'I believe-in.'" See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 21.

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of orienting themselves in the world and toward others—each of which are offered as potential ways of being for the hearer. Few authors, if any, have done more to highlight one's vulnerability in sincerely engaging with the religious other than Marianne Moyaert. Drawing on the work of Ricoeur, she suggests that when engaging with the religious other "[w]e are brought out of balance; we become unsettled. This is not necessarily a pleasant experience. One should recall the ambiguous nature of vulnerability: being affected can be experienced as positive and negative. Indeed, there is no need to romanticize being interrupted by the other—the other brings about a disturbance of order."[76] James Taylor adds that, for Ricoeur, "hospitable interreligious dialogue cannot be a facile, syncretistic exchange in which each religion would remain basically as it was but now more aware of what the others think. Rather, it must be a concerted process of intertranslation between the sacred texts, traditions, symbols and practices that make up each religion."[77] He candidly adds that "this religious exchange … will be costly."[78]

Indeed, a sincere encounter with the religious other can lead to cognitive dissonance, a change of beliefs, or to a loss of faith altogether. In encountering the religious other, we tend to find others who are intelligent and morally good people who sincerely hold beliefs that are different from our own. In their texts we may find solid moral teaching and a way of naming God that is novel, but strangely compelling. Unavoidably, these encounters create discomfort—one's sense of self, and one's understanding of God, indeed, one's worldview, is challenged. Frequently, this tension and disturbance is a mark of sincere engagement with another religious tradition. Discomfort frequently gives rise to or manifests itself in new questions: "How does this encounter change my view of God or of those outside of my faith?" or "Is it now tenable to believe that my religion is the sole and unique revelation of God?" or "Is it possible that this other religion too is offering a way of understanding or naming God?" These are challenging questions for any religious believer to deal with.

Yet, it is by disorienting us, by creating such tensions and discomforts, or by making us cognizant of something unaddressed or undeveloped in our worldview that the religious other also opens us to new truths about God, self, society, and the world we find ourselves in. In other words, in a

[76] Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 167–68. See too Moyaert's recent remark: "In a way, the text, or better still, the world projected by the text, is powerful and speaks to the reader and potentially challenges her" (Moyaert, "Ricoeur and the Wager of Interreligious Ritual Participation," 180).

[77] James Taylor, "Hospitality as Translation," in *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*, eds. Richard Kearney and James Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2011), 18.

[78] Ibid., 19.

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sincere encounter that produces discomfort, the religious other puts us in a position to learn something new. As philosophers have maintained all the way back to Socrates, if one thinks that one *already* has knowledge, then one will not seek new understanding. It is only when one recognizes the limits of one's understanding—indeed, when one recognizes one's own ignorance—that one will search in earnest. Put bluntly, it is only when one has questions that one is in a position to hear answers. Of course, questions, tensions, or cognizance of insufficiencies in one's religious worldview may preexist an encounter with the religious other. But even if an encounter with the religious other doesn't bring them into existence, it will magnify them and make them emphatic. Unfortunately, for many, it is only when one has encountered someone who thinks quite differently than one does that questions arise. In any case, the creation of questions, or frictions for and tensions within one's own worldview, while undeniably risky, fosters the positive possibility of learning from the religious other.

The second moment, reorientation, involves perceiving the possibility of new ways of thinking and living. The speaker offers new ways of being-in-the-world, and the hearer, by imaginatively participating in these possible ways of being—however partially or incompletely[79]—sees there new ways of finding oneself in reality from whose basis they might orient themselves and their choices.[80] As the noted ritual theorist Fred Clothey puts it, borrowing from Jonathan Z. Smith,[81] religious people are "map-makers," "for they use the forms of religion to provide orientation to that which is thought to transcend the forms."[82] Mapmaking is a useful metaphor in part because it conveys the idea that it is possible to orient oneself productively in reality

[79] At this point, the reader may wonder whether it is truly possible for an outsider to enter into and understand another's worldview. Unfortunately, because I don't have the space to defend it here, I can only briefly assert my own position. I reject the skeptical contention that entering into another's worldview (even partially) is impossible for an outsider. While I think that there may be a depth of understanding that is only possible for the believer (i.e., someone on the "inside") and is therefore inaccessible immediately to an outside learner, I don't think that this precludes provisionally or partially entering into another's worldview, which can then be made progressively more complete through time, empathy, careful study, practice, and imagination. Entering into another's way of thinking from the outside is not an all or nothing affair—one moves "little by little by approximations" as Ricoeur says. See Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 169.

[80] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 47.

[81] See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 290–91.

[82] Fred W. Clothey, "Toward a Comprehensive Interpretation of Ritual," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 2, no. 2 (1988): 152.

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and in one's relation to reality (in the broadest sense, including the supernatural) without having absolute knowledge or certainty about every single aspect of the mapped territory. The better the map is, the better the map will explain, take into account, and represent. Maps can be partial, however, and still be effective. A map of how to get to the White House from a nearby highway does not have to take into account or name every alleyway in order to get the job done. Likewise, a map in one's head does not have to be perfectly comprehensive in order to be effective—as, for example, when one receives simple directions in an unknown town. The point is that maps can orient us *productively* without being *exhaustive*, though a map that is more exhaustive than another map may be said to be a more complete representation of reality. Epistemologically, however, I think that insofar as religious discourse allows us to productively orient ourselves by creating maps of reality it may be viewed as *true*.

The map provided by religious discourse also lays out new possibilities of ethical action. Indeed, the lines between understanding and ethics blur at the limit of new possibilities of being-in-the-world because finding oneself in a world is to find oneself in a world full of others. Religious discourse, in reorienting us in the world in a new fashion, causes new things to show up to us in our experience of the world. In terms of our ethical orientation in the world, this might mean that people who had previously been on the periphery of our concern are now central. The adoption of a new understanding of reality leads to a new possibility of "[f]inding the other, finding ourselves, finding the world, recognizing those whom we had not even noticed, and those whom we don't know too well and whom we don't know at all."[83]

There is a dual result of mapmaking, then: the creation of an understanding of the reality that is mapped and the creation of an ability to navigate effectively in that reality. The conjunction of these two elements is what Ricoeur, in various texts, titles "revelation." Revelation, for Ricoeur, is the power of religious discourse (as well as any other discourse, in a broader sense) to make sense of reality by presenting us with possible modes of being-in-the-world. He writes:

> I believe that the fundamental theme of Revelation is the awakening and this call, into the heart of existence, of the imagination of the possible. The possibilities are opened before man which fundamentally constitute what is revealed. The revealed as such is an opening to existence, a possibility of existence.[84]

[83] Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 240.
[84] Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," 237.

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Or again, a religious text "is revealed to the extent that the new being unfolded there is itself revelatory with respect to the world, to all of reality, including my existence and my history."[85] It is the capacity of religious discourse to reorient the reader into new modes of being-in-the-world that such discourse can be said to be "revealed"; that is, insofar as the discourse *itself* is *revelatory*.

The result of a good map is the ability to make sense of things, to understand the reality that we find ourselves in. For the religious believer, mapmaking is often centered on a specific event, sometimes experienced personally, frequently simply testified to in a text. Employing Eliade's terminology, Ricoeur notes, as an example, that "for Christians, Golgotha becomes a new *axis mundi*"—it is the orienting Event of the community.[86] And again, "to every manifestation there corresponds a manner of being-in-the-world."[87] On this point Ricoeur approvingly cites H. Richard Niebuhr:[88]

> "Rational religion appeals to the direct intuition of special occasions, and to the elucidatory power of its concepts for all occasions." The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom. But from that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history. Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.[89]

From the starting point of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, for example, the Christian community goes about making sense of the reality they find themselves in. Their past, present, and future are reoriented in light of the event that makes every other event intelligible. This is essentially the project of religious mapmaking. It is taking the names of God and refiguring one's individual and communal narrative by the event of naming. It is here that we confront the confessional language of the religious community testifying to its understanding of reality: "That Jesus had been born in the fullness of time meant that all things which had gone before seemed to conspire toward the realization of this event."[90] The revelatory power of religious

[85] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 44. Cf. also see Ricoeur, "Naming God," 221.

[86] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," 66, italics in original.

[87] Ibid., 51.

[88] Paul Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 146.

[89] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 50. Niebuhr is citing Alfred North Whitehead.

[90] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 59.

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discourse allows for individuals and communities to refigure the whole of their reality and their modes of living in it.[91]

The line of thought that Ricoeur is here following comes close to the view of certain authors who believed that the world of art should "project a world with a peculiar logic of its own, which in turn 'illuminates the actual world, because it gives us a new point of view from which to inspect it.'"[92] But because revelation puts into place a multiplicity of previously unsorted beliefs, it is always recognized only *as revelatory* with reference to those previously held beliefs. Any account that the believer can give of her understanding of the world is therefore also confessional; it is necessarily given from the perspective of a believer. Niebuhr maintains that the religious believer "can proceed only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and *what we see from our point of view*."[93]

When encountering the confessional discourse of a religious other, whether as the result of dialogue or reading, one seeks answers to the questions one has. It is possible for members of one faith to come to see the resources of another faith as, in some sense, better than their own. It is important that "better" can be assessed in a variety of ways depending upon the particular question that the seeker wishes to have answered. However, a person may *recognize* the beliefs of the other religion to be an improvement in some relevant way. Perhaps the tensions in one's own worldview may be ameliorated or insufficiencies may be addressed by the resources offered in the other's worldview. This means that the person who undergoes the belief change realizes—*on the basis of the resources of her own worldview*—that this other religion's beliefs are better than what one already believes. New truth and new productive ways of being-in-the-world are therefore not identified by stepping *outside* of one's concrete mode of understanding the world,

[91] One might also note a point of connection here between this conception of revelation and Ricoeur's writings on narrative. The work of narrative is, according to Ricoeur, to create order and intelligibility from a mere succession of events. In creating a narrative, it is the plot that "transforms the events into a story" (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 66). Ricoeur writes that he "cannot overemphasize" (ibid.) the kinship between the activity of emplotment and Kant's notion of judgment wherein an intuitive manifold is brought together under a concept. As Leovino Ma. Garcia puts it, "The activity of emplotment (*mise-en-intrigue*) is a work or composition which takes together a series of events in order to form an organized unity. Emplotment brings about a synthesis of the heterogeneous." See Leovino Ma. Garcia, "On Paul Ricoeur and the Translation–Interpretation of Cultures," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 94 (2008): 79.

[92] Sanford Schwartz, "Hermeneutics and the Productive Imagination: Paul Ricoeur in the 1970s," *The Journal of Religion* 63, no. 3 (1983): 298. Schwartz is citing T. S. Eliot.

[93] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 21, emphasis added.

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but rather, one can only recognize *that* something is true or productive with reference to the beliefs that one already has. Alasdair MacIntyre explains that when a member of one tradition has:

> understood the beliefs of the alien tradition, they may find themselves compelled to recognize that within this other tradition it is possible to construct from the concepts and theories peculiar to it what they were unable to provide from their own conceptual and theoretical resources, a cogent and illuminating explanation—cogent and illuminating, that is, by their own standards—of why their own intellectual tradition had been unable to solve its problems or restore its coherence. The standards by which they judge this explanation to be cogent and illuminating will be the very same standards by which they have found their tradition wanting in the face of epistemological crisis … . In this kind of situation the rationality of tradition requires an acknowledgment by those who have hitherto inhabited and given their allegiance to the tradition in crisis that the alien tradition is superior in rationality and in respect of its claims to truth to their own.[94]

It is important to emphasize that it is on the basis of the resources of one's own worldview that one comes to be dissatisfied with the beliefs of one's own beliefs. And it is precisely these same resources that allow for a critique of one's religious beliefs, resulting (in some instances) that one sees these beliefs as false. Not only may these resources allow one to see one's own religious beliefs as problematic, but, by exposure to the religious other through their confessional discourse, one may begin to see the other's view as *true*.

I might mention in passing that I believe this understanding of learning also provides a way of thinking about rational belief change more generally: if the new belief were utterly alien, or incommensurable with the beliefs one currently holds, then there could be no preservation of rationality—any change of belief as the result of meeting the religious other would be irrational. But as the person who is undergoing the change in belief is able to discern for herself that the new belief is better—a move in the right direction—from her own concrete situation (and as a response to her own questions), this change in belief is rational. In other words, the change in belief is rationally explicable as a change from worse to better beliefs in a way that is relevant to the believer. It is only with reference to currently held beliefs—not some independent standard of rationality—that a rational change of belief is explicable. In other words, in order to see whether a change in belief is rational, one must first understand the question to which the new belief is an

[94] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 364–65.

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answer. If one finds that the other's beliefs answer questions to which one has, then a change of belief in response is a rational thing to do.[95]

But how does one know that this new way of thinking and living is the right one? How do we know we are learning and not being led astray? Here we reach the moment of adoption. Because the religious other's laying out potential ways of being-in-the-world is necessarily confessional, we need some way of evaluating what is offered to us: "testimony requires interpretation … . It needs to be tested … . We must always decide between the false witness and the truthful one."[96] That is, in hearing the testimony of another, there is a critical element; one must determine for oneself the veracity of the claims. While there is an evaluative element in the moment of reorientation, ultimately, the evaluation of a new way of thinking and of living is a matter of one's whole life—a step taken as much in hope as in belief. One is called by the act of testimony to:

> assume that this speaking is meaningful, that it is worthy of consideration, and that examining it may accompany and guide the transfer from the text to life where it will verify itself fully. … [h]ow do I avoid the famous circle of believing in order to understand and understanding in order to believe? I do not seek to avoid it. I boldly stay within this circle in the hope that, through the transfer from text to life, what I have risked will be returned a hundredfold as an increase in comprehension, valor, and joy.[97]

By adopting a certain orientation in the world, is the world more comprehensible, is my life fuller? Niebuhr writes, "[t]he kingdom proves itself to be the kingdom of God not only by its immediate worth but also by its instrumental value in leading to secondary goods, and revelation proves itself to be revelation of reality not only by its intrinsic veracity but also by its ability to guide

[95] Cf. MacIntyre's remark: "Upon encountering a coherent presentation of one particular tradition of rational enquiry, either in its seminal texts or in some later, perhaps contemporary, restatement of its positions, such a person will often experience a shock of recognition: *this* is not only, so such a person may say, what I now take to be true but in some measure what I have always taken to be true. What such a person has been presented with is a scheme of overall belief within which many, if not all, of his or her particular established beliefs fall into place, a set of modes of action and of interpretative canons for action which exhibit his or her mode of reasoning about action as intelligible and justifiable in a way or to a degree which has not previously been the case, and the history of a tradition of which the narrated and enacted history of his or her life so forms an intelligible part." See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 394; italics in the original.

[96] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 33.

[97] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 217.

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men to many other truths."[98] Kearney puts it this way: "The bottom line is: does the Other in the other bring more abundant life or not?"[99]

Through the revelation of confessional discourse one encounters a new way of understanding the world and oneself. But one cannot sit back and objectively consider the merits of one's own belief system standing against the merits of another. Rather, the only possible mode of rational evaluation for humans is for us to bring along the tools for evaluation that we have, the same that let us recognize weaknesses in our own systems and the virtues of another. Moyaert points out that this hermeneutic approach to understanding the other "is intellectually demanding: only by becoming deeply and holistically engaged in a tradition does it become possible to understand and evaluate a religious text of another tradition."[100] In order to understand, one must believe. Ricoeur formulates his hermeneutic circle as the following: one must understand in order to believe, but one must believe to understand.[101] One "buys in" and takes on the resources that are offered by one's interlocutor. In doing so, one must:

> quit the position, or better, the exile, of the remote and disinterested spectator, in order to appropriate in each case an individual symbolism. Then is discovered what may be called the circle of hermeneutics… . This circle is not vicious, still less is it deadly; it is quite alive and stimulating. You must believe in order to understand. No interpreter in fact will ever come close to what his text says if he does not live the *aura* of the meaning that is sought. And yet it is only in understanding that we can believe.[102]

Here Ricoeur introduces what he calls the "hermeneutic wager." The hermeneutic wager is the conscious entering of a hermeneutic circle—believing in order to understand. In throwing myself into a possible world I am wagering "that I shall have a better understanding of man and of the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings."[103] The wager is immediately transformed into the task of verifying itself by an increase in intelligibility, of "detecting and deciphering human reality," in short, an increase in understanding.[104]

There is always a leap of faith to be made in adopting, or even adequately understanding, a religious faith—one's own or another's—and it is not one

[98] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 74.
[99] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 182.
[100] Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 163.
[101] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 351.
[102] Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols," 45–46.
[103] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 355.
[104] Ibid.

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without risk. For the believer (Ricoeur uses a Christian as an example), faith "is the overthrowing of the guarantee, it is the risk of life placed under the sign of the suffering Christ."[105] There is no possibility of a demonstrative, universal proof with which to eliminate the element of risk. Rather, "[w]e wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; *verification is therefore a question of our whole life*. No one can escape this … I do not see how we can say that our values are better than all others except that *by risking our whole life on them we expect to achieve a better life, to see and to understand things better than others*."[106] Because nothing can be known with certainty about God, one must risk one's entire life in the hope that throughout the course of this life one can live in such a way as to be able to be a living testimony to oneself and others of the efficacy of the orientation that one has adopted.

I hope that once one begins to think in terms of this (admittedly incomplete) model of interreligious learning, one can see how it might be applied. I offer two illustrations that, given their nature as illustrations, can only be suggestive of how one might situate the various permutations of interreligious learning in the provisional philosophical framework I've laid out. The contextual view of rationality implicit in much of my argument indicates that how exactly one learns from other faiths will differ depending upon the learner and the issues he or she is struggling with. In other words, what I have offered is highly schematic, but I hope that it is therefore fairly flexible and might be filled out in various ways or developed in a number of different directions.[107]

Paul Knitter's *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* offers a number of particularly helpful examples of interreligious learning. Each chapter of the book has a tripartite structure: First, Knitter outlines a struggle that he has had with some aspect of his Christianity. Second, he "passes over" into Buddhism and explores the resources of that faith for addressing this particular struggle.

[105] Paul Ricoeur, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 288. Ricoeur is invoking Eberhard Jüngel.

[106] Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 312, emphasis added.

[107] As a philosopher, I tend to speak primarily in terms of beliefs. However, the problem that leads to learning from another faith need not be a cognitive issue—it could be rooted in any kind of existential concern. Yet the point remains that one doesn't learn—that is, judge the adoption of another's beliefs or practices to be better than what one currently has and adopt them—from a position of neutrality. One engages with the religious other not as a detached mind, but as a whole person with particular questions, problems, interests, and so on.

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Lastly, he "passes back" to Christianity to integrate and apply what he has learned from Buddhism to resolve his struggle.

For example, Knitter relates how he struggled with the relationship between Christian dogma and Mystery. The problem, he says, wasn't that the words of the creeds and dogmas didn't make sense—it was rather that they made "too *much* sense."[108] In other words, Knitter felt very keenly that religious language that is too clearly and definitively articulated puts God in a box, stifling God's inherent Mystery. Yet language plays a pivotal role in Christianity, where there seems to be a desire to rationally articulate every aspect of faith. "Passing over" into Buddhism, Knitter discusses the place of language in Buddhism, which is quite different from its central place in Christianity. In the words of Zen Buddhism, "the finger is not the moon."[109] The purpose of a pointing finger is to guide attention *beyond* itself to something more important. Thus, by analogy, to get caught up on the particular formulations of religious dogma is to treat the finger as more important than the Mystery to which it is pointing. Further, Knitter reminds us that getting attached to a particular doctrinal formulation, for Buddhists, would be anathema to the project of pursuing enlightenment. For the Buddhist, words don't save, they can only point the way.

"Passing back" to Christianity, Knitter properly connects what he has learned from Buddhism to the *apophatic* or "negative theology" tradition in Christianity. As he tells us, the opportunity to learn from Buddhism has served as an important occasion to retrieve figures that have been pushed to the periphery in the Christian tradition—especially those in the mystic tradition. Yet, according to Knitter, "it's been more than only a retrieval. It has been for me not just a matter of pulling out of my Christian closet the mystical mantles that were covered with dust but already there. I've also been able to *add to* the mystical wardrobe of Christianity. What I've added has 'fit' what was already there, but it is also something really new."[110] In this case, what "fit" but is also new informs Knitter's position that the symbolism pervading religious language is "meant to change our lives, not fill our heads."[111] In other words, for Knitter, religious language is supposed to facilitate personal transformation, not to pin down precisely what God is. Not surprisingly, this belief undergirds the entire project of the book, allowing Knitter to be flexible about how he understands Christian doctrine if those doctrines stifle

[108] Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), 54, emphasis in original.

[109] Ibid., 61.

[110] Ibid., 15, emphasis in original.

[111] Ibid., 71.

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experiencing God or living an abundant life. In each instance, however, what Knitter gathers from Buddhism are the resources to resolve particular difficulties in his own worldview. In so doing, he appears to see those resources—from his own perspective—as better than what he already possess, recognizing them as possessing truth. The learning process culminates in Knitter's adoption of those recourses as his own.

Another example of interreligious learning may be gleaned from Richard Kearney's *The God Who May Be*. A pervasive theme throughout Kearney's work is the rejection of the onto-theological God, the God of theodicy, who operates as a kind of puppet-master behind the scenes of history. Such a God, he maintains, is no longer plausible after the horrors of the twentieth century—most especially the Holocaust. So here is a problem: How do we reconcile faith with the existence of such horrendous suffering? As the traditional theodicies are no longer believable for Kearney, he draws from a number of different resources, both philosophical and religious, for a new way of naming God that resolves this particular problem.

In a powerful passage, Kearney reflects on Rashi's (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac) commentary on Exodus 3.[112] In contrast to the ontological "I am who I am" translation of God's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 3:14, common to traditional Christianity, Rashi reads the passage as "I shall be what I shall be."[113] Rashi presents God not as an omnipotent puppet-master, but as a relational God who covenants with his people—promising to be with them in their experiences rather than controlling their destiny from behind the scenes. This version of God, very different than the metaphysical conceptions of God popular in the Christian tradition, opens the door for Kearney to reconceptualize God as a God of possibility—as a God "who neither is nor is not but may be."[114] This radical refiguring of God enables Kearney to approach the problem of suffering not from the angle of metaphysics and theodicy, but instead as an injunction or a call to ethical action—to work with God to bring about the kingdom of God: "By choosing to be a player rather than an emperor of creation, God chooses powerlessness. This choice expresses itself as a self-emptying, *kenosis*, letting go. God thus empowers our human powerlessness by giving away his power, by possibilizing us and our good actions—so that we may supplement and co-accomplish creation."[115]

[112] See Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 25–29.
[113] Ibid., 25.
[114] Ibid., 1.
[115] Ibid., 108.

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From the perspective of someone struggling to understand how to reconcile faith in God with the problem of suffering, the view of God as one relating to creatures in a covenant rather than controlling or determining the course of history may be initially disorienting. It may cause them to question quite a bit about their theological presuppositions. But it also may eventually become revelatory for them—they may identify this way of viewing God and the world as true. The resources Kearney finds in reading Rashi may allow the learner to make sense of the world in a way that they judge to be better, from their own perspective, than what they had before. In exposing oneself to the religious other in this way, one does take a risk—one gives up trying to save one's faith by refusing to admit that one doesn't know. Yet in giving up this false sense of security, one may in fact save one's faith:

> In thus exposing ourselves to the Gods of the other traditions we take the risk of dying unto our own. And in such instants of kenotic hospitality, where we exchange our God with others—sometimes not-knowing for a moment which one is true—we open ourselves to the gracious possibility of receiving our own God back again; but this time as a gift from the other, as a God of life beyond death. In losing our faith, we may gain it back again.[116]

In both cases, we can see how from the perspective of the believer, there was a problem, a new orientation offered by a religious other, the new orientation being deemed as better than what one already believed, and finally an adoption of that orientation as one's own.[117] What these examples make emphatic,

[116] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 181. One might note that Kearney is here picking up on the paradox in Christianity that Ricoeur was so fond of: namely, that he who will save his life will lose it while he who is willing to lose his life will save it. See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 45, 49–50.

[117] Interestingly, Ricoeur, who defined his Christianity as "A chance transformed into destiny by a continuous choice" (see Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, 62, and Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, 145), and who talks readily about adherence and commitment, also seemed, toward the end of his life, to be reaching out to other faiths for resources for dealing with beliefs in his own tradition that he finds problematic (like the commitment to individual survival of death and the "juridicizing" view of Jesus' redemption as sacrifice of one for another before a vengeful God [*Living Up to Death*, 71]). He comments, "I want to seek in extrabiblical traditions encouragement for *another* way of speaking" (*Living Up to Death*, 72). For him, responsible learning from the religious other means "*study* and a transformation in the depth of the contents of belief" (*Living Up to Death*, 67). One can only speculate about what fruit Ricoeur's search would have produced had it been able to continue, but there are some inklings in his *Living Up to Death*. There Ricoeur says he wants to explore the "the implications of confidence in God" (42) while preparing for death, especially in light of his desire

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I think, is that one cannot discover religious truth in a detached attitude and one cannot pronounce objective judgments about that truth from a "God's eye view." Rather, truth is discovered in relation to an existential concern. For Ricoeur, the ultimate instrument of "verification," if one chooses to call it that, is one's own life. In undertaking such a process of verification, one makes a leap, but the leap is neither blind nor irrational. The risk of imaginatively entering into another belief system is rational because one recognizes the tensions, inconsistencies, or insufficiencies in one's current belief system. Moreover, once one enters into a new belief system, and orients oneself in it, one is in a position—even if only provisionally—to evaluate its truth. One may find there resources that one's own belief system does not offer. It may provide the wherewithal to answer the unsolved questions arising from one's own worldview. When it does, when religious beliefs make sense of the world around one, and help one orient oneself within it, this is precisely what, I submit, we may call true learning, and indeed, true revelation: "Revelation means … that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible."[118] I would add that revelation occurs, not when all of one's old beliefs are cast off, but when some new thing comes and puts them in their proper place. It is, I think, this better orientation in the world toward self, others, and God that allows one to properly call religious claims true. And when it is the religious other who allows us to find this orientation, then I think it may be truly said that we have learned from them. In finding and recognizing new truth, we have an instance of interreligious learning.

to dismantle "the make-believe of survival" (41) and suggests that perhaps Buddhism can help answer this question and serve as a corrective to his views on identity (49). Renouncing a desire for continued existence is, he suggests, part of the preparation for death. Ricoeur was looking for a way to hold together "detachment" as regards his own death with "confidence in God's care" (49). Yet, when he seems able to practice detachment from a desire to continue to exist and simultaneously give himself up to trusting in the care of God, "a hope other than the desire to continue existing arises" (44). And this is tied into the paradox of losing one's life in order to save it (see 45, 49–50).

[118] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 50.

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