

Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative

The Creative Tension between Love and Justice



W. David Hall

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SUNY series in Theology and Continental Thought

Douglas L. Donkel, editor

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*The Creative Tension between
Love and Justice*

W. David Hall

State University of New York Press

Cover art: Kelli Williams, *Deeply*, 1991,
acrylic on paper, (17.5 x 15).

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Kelli Williams
Marketing by Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hall, W. David (William David), 1965

Paul Ricoeur and the poetic imperative : the creative tension between love and
justice / W. David Hall.

p. cm — (SUNY series in theology and continental thought)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-7143-2 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Ricoeur, Paul.
2. Ethics. I. Title.

B2430.R554H35 2007
194—dc22

2006101100

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In memory of Harold Lee Watts

1949–1994

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Acknowledgments

Many hands and minds have contributed to this project, more than I can name explicitly. Several deserve special mention, however. First I should thank Carole Blair who made me first read Ricoeur as an undergraduate majoring in rhetoric at California State University, Sacramento. I owe a tremendous debt to William Schweiker whose oversight and often painful, but always constructive criticism was instrumental in bringing to fruition the dissertation that grounded this book, and to David Klemm and David Tracy who served as readers on my dissertation committee. I also want to thank Bill Schweiker for continued friendship and encouragement in bringing the book itself to fruition.

While at the University of Chicago, I benefited greatly from the insights of peers and teachers, among them Eric Bain-Selbo, Chris Gamwell, Paul Griffiths, Michael Johnson, Kevin Jung, Robin Lovin, Chuck Mathewes, Joe Petit, Rick Rosengarten, Kristin VanHeyningen, John Wall, Darlene Weaver, and Brent Wilmot. Special thanks go to Kristine Culp who made my return to Chicago after a brief hiatus easy, and who has served at various times as employer, teacher, critic, mentor, and valued friend. Special thanks are also due to Elmer Almachar, Paul Dehart, and Mark Wolf whose companionship kept me sane and alive through graduate school and whose insight and criticism made me a better thinker. There are surely too many others associated with my time at Chicago who helped along the way for me to be able to adequately thank all.

I have benefited from insightful and supportive colleagues in my time at DePaul University and Centre College who deserve mention. Special thanks to Jeff Carlson who first hired me as an adjunct instructor at DePaul and to Frida Furman who offered me my first full-time position. Jim Halstead's mentorship and dedicated friendship were instrumental in making me a teacher and scholar (and, I hope, a better human being). Centre College has been a place where I have

been able to flourish as a teacher and a scholar. I am especially indebted to Rick Axtell, Rob Colter, Brian Cooney, Ruben Dupertuis, Beth Glazier-McDonald, Tom McCollough, and Milton Scarborough for critical insights and personal friendships, and to John Ward whose support, both moral and financial, as academic dean of Centre College has been steadfast. Two people have had an important hand in the editing and preparation of this manuscript, Kristin Henze and Zeke Goggin.

Finally, I must acknowledge my family whose influence on the completion of this project is immeasurable. My parents, Gary Hall, Peggy and Don Allan, and Harold Watts provided a safe and loving environment to grow up in. This was often not adequately appreciated, but it is now and I hope they are proud of their work. Most importantly, my love and thanks to Sarah and Lilli who make everyday worth getting out of bed.

Chapter One

Introduction

But I think our question—and we understand it better after Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—is: what is man? Do we know man better than we know God? In the end, I do not know what man is. My confession to myself is that man is instituted by the word, that is, by a language which is less spoken *by* man than spoken *to* man. . . . Finally, what constitutes our answer to the apology of Necessity and resignation is the faith that man is founded, at the heart of his mythopoetic power, by a creative word. Is not The Good News the instigation of the *possibility* of man by a creative word?

—Paul Ricoeur, “The Language of Faith”

Paul Ricoeur’s publications spanned nearly six decades from the latter half of the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first. His *oeuvre* crossed an unbelievable range of scholarly topics and philosophical perspectives that included existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, hermeneutic theory, theories of metaphor and symbol, narrative theory, and political philosophy. His influence on the contemporary philosophical scene is immense, even if the recognition for this influence is not as explicit as one might like. Given the breadth and texture of his career, any attempt to provide a coherent account of Ricoeur’s corpus seems folly. Nevertheless, functioning under the adage “nothing ventured, nothing gained,” this book attempts to provide such a coherent and reasonably comprehensive account.

The overarching argument of this endeavor is that Ricoeur’s religious writings offer an important context for interpreting his philosophical project. His

project (provided that there was only one project, as opposed to a multitude of them as many have argued and as Ricoeur himself frequently seemed to imply) became more theological in character as he directed attention more explicitly toward ethics at the end of his career. This theological turn was most profoundly manifest in what Ricoeur called “communal ethics in religious perspective,” at the heart of which resides a creative tension between the ideals of love and justice. This focus on the creative tension between love and justice was a late manifestation, and Ricoeur’s articulation of it was spread out among a series of seemingly disconnected and occasional articles that were usually addressed to other topics. While this dimension of his work received very little systematic attention, it is my claim that it ought to be viewed as a central feature of his overall project. This creative tension between the ideals of love and justice reaches its highest pitch and greatest level of productivity in the confrontation between the ideas of autonomy and theonomy, the centerpiece of which is the love command, particularly as this is understood by Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. The love command lends an imperative structure to the ideal of love that opens it to moral judgment in general and ideals of justice in particular. However, the imperative structure of the love command is not reducible to a moral imperative in the Kantian sense. Rather, the love command employs a poetic use of the imperative that draws its meaning from a surrounding matrix of biblical symbols, metaphors, and narratives.

There are many reasons to suggest that this creative/tensive structure of the poetic use of the imperative provides an important perspective on Ricoeur’s later writings and on his thought in general. At the level of epistemology, the structure of creative tension runs throughout Ricoeur’s philosophy. He always relied on the creative tension released by bringing together apparently incompatible positions to make his points. Creative juxtapositions of existentialism and phenomenology, reflexive philosophy and Nietzschean genealogy, and Aristotelian and Kantian ethics were among his most fruitful explorations. He argued that theology and religious discourse function in a similar way relative to philosophy: biblical symbols, metaphors, and narratives offer a sort of poetic resolution to philosophical impasses that defy speculative resolution. This notion of poetic resolution is significant for understanding how Ricoeur believed theological discourse in general *means*. Theology is figurative discourse; or, more accurately stated, biblical texts are poetic texts, that is, figurative linguistic structures that are productive as much as expressive of meaning.

This epistemological analysis opens onto an ontological one. A significant organizing theme that arose early in Ricoeur’s work was a sort of creative tension between activity and passivity that resides at the heart of human agency. This creative tension takes many forms, from the reciprocity of the voluntary and involuntary structures of will and action, to the voluntary servitude of the

will in moral fault, to the structure of summons and response in his analysis of moral conscience. This active-passive structure takes on a deepened sense when touched by theological and biblical expressions which poetically configure ideas as diverse as the origin and end of existence (creation and eschaton) and the presentation of a voice that summons the individual to responsible selfhood in the theological interpretation of moral conscience. Biblical symbols, metaphors, and narratives open dimensions of the meaning that are not accessible at the level of pure philosophical speculation.

At the level of ethics, the creative tension at the heart of Ricoeur's ontology of selfhood appears at a higher register under the aegis of responsibility. Like the theme of activity and passivity, the moral dimensions of selfhood emerged quite early in Ricoeur's thought. The problems of affective fragility and moral fault undergirded his earliest work. More importantly, however, he located a fundamentally moral dimension of capable agency in the ability to keep one's promises. What begins as an aspect of self-constancy—my capability to project initiative into the future by remaining true my word—takes on ethical and moral overtones once the idea of promising is introduced into the interpersonal world of interaction. Promising is not simply a matter of remaining true to myself but also one of keeping fidelity to another; someone expects me to follow through on my promise. Thus, selfhood is opened to a range of moral determinations that are characterized in a broad sense as responsibility. Once again, the poetic matrices of theological discourse and biblical textuality fund a deepened sense of these moral dimensions of selfhood. I previously cited the place that a theological interpretation of moral conscience played in Ricoeur's thought. To this, one can add such expressions as the covenant that establishes the relationship with a liberating God, and particularly, the love command that is constitutive of selfhood both ontologically and morally.

My central claim that theology and religion are important to Ricoeur's philosophical project as a whole entails four basic presuppositions that may be open for debate. For reference, I list them in ascending order of importance. First, I argue that Ricoeur's *oeuvre* can in fact be reasonably and responsibly interpreted as a single coherent project. While his ideas evolved and moved in a number of different and new directions over the course of fifty years, there were several general concerns that guided and continued to direct his thought. Second, Ricoeur never completely left the phenomenological method that was centrally important to his early thought. While his project took a decidedly linguistic and hermeneutical turn, the structure of phenomenological method continued to work beneath this turn. Third, Ricoeur's project is fundamentally a philosophical anthropology; his concerns ultimately lay in the question of the identity of self-reflective agency, whether through the lens of reflexive philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory, or narrative. Finally,

and perhaps the most disputed assumption, is that a closer relationship existed between Ricoeur's philosophical explorations and his religious thought than he typically admitted. While he outlined a number of points of approach between philosophical and theological discourse, his overall tendency was to hold the two at arms length from one another. My claim focuses on the possibility that several fundamentally religious themes are located throughout Ricoeur's thought, and that the influence of these themes becomes most pronounced at the level of ethical concern. I will expand on these presuppositions in situating my interpretation.

Situated Reading

Among other things, this book is intended as a *critical constructive interpretation* of Ricoeur's *oeuvre* with particular emphasis on uncovering the importance of his theological explorations for interpreting his philosophical project as a whole. I am not interested only in what Ricoeur wrote, but in what his writings tell us about what it means to be human. His philosophy can be viewed as a singular project which is centrally concerned with this question of human meaning. Having said this, it should be noted that I am not attempting to offer the *one true account* of Ricoeur's corpus. By placing this limit on the project, it may seem that I am hedging my bets, if not resorting to blatant cowardice. However, I believe this is not the case for several reasons.

First, the scope of Ricoeur's thought is so vast and so varied that the one true account, if there is such a thing, may remain forever elusive. This limiting factor is compounded by Ricoeur's continued evasion in offering self-appraisal of his work; this is particularly the case with regard to the effect of religious sentiment on his philosophical project. For example, in an interview Ricoeur claimed the following:

I am very committed to the autonomy of philosophy and I think that in none of my works do I use any arguments borrowed from the domain of Jewish and Christian biblical writings. . . . But if someone says, "Yes, but if you weren't Christian, if you did not recognize yourself as belonging to the movement of biblical literature, you would not have been interested in the problem of evil or, perhaps, in the poetic aspect in the broadest sense, or the creative aspect of human thought." Well, to this objection, I make all the concessions one wants by saying that no one knows where the ideas which organize oneself philosophically come from. . . . Certainly, a reader could be much more sensitive than I am to the secret religious motivation in my work.

What I claim, what I argue forcefully, is that this motivation is always put in parentheses in order to allow the formation of philosophical arguments which are aimed at all rational beings capable of discussion, no matter what their position on the question of religion.¹

Ricoeur claimed again and again that the author is not the best interpreter of his/her work, nor the best judge of its motivation or significance. This may seem as if he gives the reader *carte blanche* to interpret the text however s/he sees fit and in the interests of any ideological stance s/he wishes to advance. Once again, I believe this is not the case; Ricoeur would most certainly argue that there are more or less adequate interpretations, more or less *responsible* readings of any text, his own no less than others.

The question of adequate, responsible interpretation raises a second justification for the limits I place on my project. Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy was profoundly influenced by the criticism of romanticist hermeneutics advanced by Hans Georg Gadamer. Ricoeur himself became one of the most outspoken advocates of the need to move hermeneutical enquiry away from the search for authorial intention. Thus, the creative potential for meaning resides not in the search for the authorial genius "behind" the text, or in the attempt to know the author better than s/he knows him/herself, as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey would have argued. The creative potential for meaning is opened by the engagement of the reader with the text, the *sense* of the text, and the *world* that the text presents "in front of" itself. That is to say, the text is an autonomous source of meaning, which is constantly open to new engagements, new interpretations, and *new appropriations of meaning*.

Once again, however, the notion of textual autonomy does not give the reader *carte blanche* to bend interpretation in any direction s/he wishes. Rather, the text is a *structure* that guides interpretation and imposes its own limits on the scope of legitimate interpretation. If the movement away from romanticist hermeneutics has consigned scholars to the realm of the conflict of interpretations, the conflicts are not unadjudicable, even if adjudication is always tentative and never final; the structure of the text itself allows one to argue the merits of more or less adequate interpretations, more or less responsible appropriations, more or less *convincing* readings. My desire in this book is to offer an adequate, responsible, and reasonably comprehensive interpretation of Ricoeur's thought. My intent is to be guided by his writings, though not uncritically, in articulating the relationship between his hermeneutical philosophy of the self, that is, philosophical anthropology, and his theological interests, particularly regarding the problem of evil, biblical configurations of creation and redemption, and the commandment to love one's neighbor.

As I previously claimed, my interpretation is situated around four basic presuppositions about Ricoeur's philosophy. The first three of these presuppositions principally concern the philosophical reception and interpretation of Ricoeur's work. The fourth focuses specifically on the theological dimensions of his work. Thus, I will situate my reading under separate headings.

Philosophical Orientations

My first assertion is that Ricoeur's writings can be interpreted as a single, coherent collection that spans from his early phenomenological orientation to the work he completed at the end of his life. In this vein, Charles E. Reagan, citing a private conversation with Ricoeur, stated:

I recently asked Paul Ricoeur if we would ever see the promised *Poetics of the Will*. . . . He told me that either there would be no *poetics* of the will, or that his work on metaphor and narrative constituted it. Then he asked me, "Do you hold me to completing a plan I made when I was a very young man, some thirty-five years ago?" The whole of Ricoeur's work is more the result of the twistings and turning's of a journey than the completion of an architectonic drafted many years ago. At the end of each of his major works, he lists the unanswered questions, the unsolved problems, the new directions which will occupy him in the next work. This does not mean that there are not certain themes which are fairly constant in his work.²

These themes, around which Ricoeur's thought cohered, are in many respects the basis of the three remaining presuppositions that orient my interpretation. Before moving on to discuss these other presuppositions, however, I want to pause and note a possible point of disagreement with Reagan's assessment concerning Ricoeur's original architectonic and proposal for a *poetics of the will*: I suggest that Ricoeur did not abandon the notion of a poetics of the will, but rather, that this project is an exceedingly complex one that has of itself introduced the twistings and turnings of a journey into his work.

My second presupposition is that Ricoeur never completely left the phenomenological method that governed his initial systematic works. Ricoeur long held a connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology serves to direct hermeneutics to the question of meaning in general and away from the mind of the author; by the same token, hermeneutics serves to "liberate" phenomenology from an idealistic epistemology. But my interpretation seeks to do more than situate Ricoeur within the trajectory that leads from Husserl to Gadamer; in orienting this interpretation, I am placing myself in league with a group of commentators on Ricoeur, most notably Don

Ihde, who argued that Ricoeur pushed phenomenology itself into the realm of hermeneutics. Ihde argues:

Ricoeur's application of phenomenology to language or his transformation of phenomenology into hermeneutics finds its justification in a need to elaborate concepts *indirectly* and *dialectically* rather than directly and univocally. Out of the whole range of linguistic "sciences," Ricoeur chooses to address himself to a certain set of symbolic structures (and myths) by which man may better understand himself. This indirect route via symbol and through interpretation constitutes the opening to a hermeneutic phenomenology.³

Therefore, Ricoeur's overall project should be viewed as a *hermeneutic phenomenology*; by this I mean, a philosophical exploration of the *interpretive encounter with phenomena*. This encounter is interpretive because objects of perception, thought, etc., rise to meaning in linguistic and cultural expressions that *mean* more than they *say* and, therefore, demand interpretation.

Once again, however, I wish to pause and note a slight divergence between my understanding of Ricoeur's project and Ihde's. He tends to divide Ricoeur's project into two broad orientations: structural phenomenology, indebted to Husserl, and hermeneutic phenomenology, beginning, generally speaking, with the analysis of symbols in *The Symbolism of Evil*. I, on the other hand, want to hang on to Ricoeur's own threefold division of *eidetics*, *empirics*, and *poetics* of the will. This is a divergence more than a dispute; I think the difference in divisions is a matter of different emphasis on the degree to which the "structural" orientation of Husserl's method remains a key aspect of Ricoeur's hermeneutical expansion of phenomenology. A hermeneutics of figurative discourse is inextricably tied to Ricoeur's account of the structure of the will.

My third presupposition is that Ricoeur's project is most adequately thought of as a *philosophical anthropology*. This is certainly the least disputed of my presuppositions, and I will not treat it at length here. Suffice it to say, Ricoeur's project has always been concerned about the nature of the self, and more particularly, with the capable self. Ricoeur's accounts modified and deepened with the introduction of different perspectives and methods, but the emphasis on human capability remained the constant in his thought. However, the emphasis on human *capability* raised another set of issues that became progressively more important in Ricoeur's corpus: those of ethics and morality. For this reason, Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology must also be recognized as a *moral anthropology*. The ethical and moral questions surrounding the issue of selfhood will become the central concern of the second half of this book. In addressing the last of my presuppositions I turn directly to theological issues.

Theological Issues

My final assertion was at one time disputed, but has become progressively less so. I argue that it is possible to locate a much deeper connection between Ricoeur's philosophical writings and his religious and theological writings than he himself typically assigned. I am by no means alone in my interest in Ricoeur's religious thought. In fact, few other philosophers have garnered as much attention from theologians and scholars of religion as Ricoeur has. And the various engagements with the religious and theological dimensions of Ricoeur's thought have yielded various conclusions. I want to begin by surveying a portion of the field of religious and theological approaches to Ricoeur's thought before I situate my own reading.

Few scholars of religion or theologians have taken interest in Ricoeur's early phenomenological works, unlike philosophers, who have been especially interested in the place of this work in Ricoeur's corpus. While mention is made of these works in nearly all treatments from the perspective of religion and theology, few make it a central issue.⁴ For obvious reasons, Ricoeur's later work on symbol, metaphor, and narrative tend to be the principal interest of religious and theological treatments. This is somewhat unfortunate, however, because Ricoeur's later turn to the hermeneutics of symbols and metaphors, and to narrative theory are of a piece with his early presentation of a poetics of the will, as I hope to show over the course of the proceeding studies. Additionally, it is not always clear whether theological appropriations of Ricoeur seek to advance a theological understanding of Ricoeur's ideas or use Ricoeur to advance a separate position that is more or less consonant with his ideas. Dan Stiver, for instance, seems less interested in articulating Ricoeur's positions than in reforming a vision of Ricoeur that can be appropriated in the service of defending contemporary evangelical Christianity.⁵ John Wall adopts the structure of Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* to explore the idea of a human creative moral capacity, but does little to tie this structure to the rest of Ricoeur's *oeuvre*.⁶ Others attempt to remain closer to Ricoeur's own ideas; my own project follows in the steps of these latter approaches.

Religious and theological treatments can be divided, without too much oversimplification, into two primary camps. On the one side are positions that are interested in Ricoeur for purposes of Christian apology. That is to say, these perspectives see Ricoeur's work as possessing valuable resources for exploring a specifically Christian identity and for defending an "orthodox" view of Christianity in what they label the postmodern situation.⁷ On the other side are positions that explore Ricoeur's work for the poetic and redescriptive opportunities that he presents for the study of religion and theology in a context that is not exclusively Christian.⁸ One is tempted to label these two camps conservative/evangelical and liberal/progressive, but this *would* be an oversimplification.

Rather, I will call these two approaches to Ricoeur's religious and theological thought the *apologetic* and the *poetic*, respectively.

An abiding interest among apologetic appropriations of Ricoeur's thought is his relation to what has often been called the New Yale Theology, indebted to the theology of Karl Barth and represented by contemporary figures Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.⁹ While Frei has criticized Ricoeur for making the Biblical narrative subservient to philosophical speculation, many apologists argue that Ricoeur's thought need not be interpreted so.¹⁰ However, while these thinkers appear to believe that Ricoeur's ideas can be redeemed, they criticize Ricoeur himself for taking a too poetic approach and/or for relying too much upon philosophy at the expense of a more robust account of distinctly Christian sensibilities. For instance, Kevin VanHoozer complains that Ricoeur's metaphorical treatment of the resurrection, as well as other aspects of Christian doctrine, does not sufficiently account for the Christian understanding of the new being initiated by the Christ event: "It would appear that for Ricoeur, the resurrection power is more a matter of metaphorical than historical reference. It is the metaphor—an event of discourse rather than history—that saves by redirecting our imagination and refiguring our existence."¹¹ As such, Ricoeur presents the resurrection as a poetic event that reveals an existing, though hidden, possibility for new life, rather than the historical event that makes new life a novel ontological possibility. James Fodor questions the relative priority that Ricoeur gives philosophy over theology:

Are hermeneutical or methodological questions capable of being displayed independently of the particular texts in question or are they internal to the practices of biblical exegesis, commentary, exposition, and proclamation? That is, in what sense does describing the Bible as a poetic, metaphorical text significantly illuminate its function as the Word of God? Indeed, if the Bible is just one more instance of a poetic text, perhaps even the most central text in the Western world, how might a Ricoeurian hermeneutic account for its specificity, especially its distinctive truth claims?¹²

In all cases, the concern is whether or not Ricoeur's reliance upon philosophical hermeneutics and characterization of the Bible as a species of poetic text effaces Christian distinctiveness and biblical authority. This line of questioning has real teeth; Ricoeur clearly wanted to preserve the distinctiveness of the Bible, even as he described it as a species of poetic text and compared its re-descriptive capacities to those of literary fiction. But the real question is whether such claims to distinctiveness are warranted given the general shape of Ricoeur's thought.

The very aspects of Ricoeur's thought that the apologists find so troubling are what those in the poetic camp find of such value in his thought. David Klemm and William Schweiker point to the multiplicity of perspectives, and to Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics of the biblical texts in particular, as the most salient aspect of his thought:

In some of the writings in which he interprets the biblical word, Ricoeur critically appropriates the Word of God theologies that dominated dogmatic and ecclesial theological reflection earlier this century; in other such writings, he appears to approach more current forms of narrative theology. . . . That we have always already been "spoken to" means for Ricoeur that we do not have cognitive clarity concerning who or what the human being is, since to be human is in part to be constituted by what is spoken to us. Moreover, the hermeneutics of text and the various explanatory methods an interpreter uses in examining religious symbols and myths do not exhaust the possible import of these discursive forms for understanding the human condition. In fact, they provoke further detours of interpretation on the way to understanding the truth of the ambiguity we are. That truth, it seems, is bound up in the Word spoken to us.¹³

Richard Kearney speaks approvingly of Ricoeur's insistence that belief pass through the critical gaze of philosophical criticism. In Kearney's estimation, this critical gaze is necessarily entailed in Ricoeur's presentation of biblical myths as a species of poetry: "In maintaining a poetical fidelity to the great (and small) myths of tradition, we retain a questioning attitude. Without fidelity we become disinterested spectators of a cultural void; without questioning we become slaves to prejudice. If myth is to remain true to its promise, it must pass through the detour of critical enlightenment."¹⁴

My approach will fall squarely within the camp that finds the most promise in exploring the poetic possibilities of Ricoeur's religious and theological writings. Not only do I find apologetic appropriations of Ricoeur's work suspect, I argue that they attempt to place restraints upon those dimensions of his thought that offer the most potential for human liberation in light of the biblical texts. Indeed, I agree with David Klemm's assessment that it is important "to remove the constriction Ricoeur places on religious discourse." The point is not to defend the uniqueness of the Bible, but to explore what it reveals about the human condition. "Religious discourse," Klemm continues, "in the nature of the case is not merely biblical discourse, but any instance of language, which drives thinking and experiencing to the limits by means of limit expressions."¹⁵ Thus, the criticisms of apologists such as VanHoozer and Fodor, that