

‘Scripture Grows with its Readers’: Doctrinal Development from a Ricœurian Perspective

1 Introduction

In one of his last books, *Thinking Biblically*, Paul Ricœur wrote:

The first effect of reading is to confer an autonomy, an independent existence on a text, which thereby opens it to subsequent developments and subsequent enrichments, *all of which affect its very meaning*. In light of this, we would like to recall the wonderful saying of Gregory the Great...: ‘Scripture Grows with its Readers.’¹

This claim from France’s most renowned Protestant philosopher might seem counter-intuitive. How can Scripture’s meaning ‘grow’? How can what a text says be affected by its readers? Yet Ricœur is addressing a phenomenon with which all of us are familiar: the way in which a new cultural context can give rise to surprising new interpretations of any text, not all of which are immediately considered wrong.

The tension between innovation and preservation lies at the heart of questions concerning both the *nature*, and the *legitimacy*, of what been called “doctrinal development,” viz. the idea that doctrine unfolds gradually through the course of history and thus has an irreducibly historical dimension. The question of doctrinal development is fundamentally *hermeneutical*, asking how the fullness of revelation in Scripture can be faithfully ‘extended’ to speak to new situations it did not originally address.

Most contemporary accounts of doctrinal development consider the Catholic John Henry Newman (1801-1890) to be its first major advocate, but the concept can in fact be traced further back to the Protestant Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who is also the founder of modern hermeneutics, not by coincidence.² Nonetheless, while the twentieth century has witnessed a flourishing of discourse on doctrinal development in Catholic circles, non-Catholic theologians have largely regarded it with more suspicion.³

¹ André LaCocque and Paul Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xi. Italics mine.

² John E. Thiel, ‘Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Schleiermacher’s Theological Encyclopedia: Doctrinal Development and Theological Creativity’, *The Heythrop Journal* 25, no. 2 (April 1984): 142–57.

³ See e.g., H Ashley Hall, ‘The Development of Doctrine: A Lutheran Examination’, *Pro Ecclesia* 16, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 256–77; Daniel J Lattier, ‘The Orthodox Rejection of Doctrinal Development’, *Pro Ecclesia* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 389–410; Andrew Louth, ‘Is Development of Doctrine a Valid Category for Orthodox Theology?’, in *Orthodoxy & Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Valerie Hotchkiss and Patrick Henry (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005). The absence of enthusiasm for doctrinal development in Orthodox and Protestant circles may be because the idea of development legitimates a dialectic of change and continuity in doctrine through history; but not every Orthodox is convinced of the legitimacy of change, nor does every Protestant recognise the need for continuity.

This essay aims to articulate a Protestant-ecumenical account of doctrinal development with the help of Ricoeur. What makes it Protestant is that it sees Christian revelation exclusively in terms of Scripture. What makes it ecumenical is its goal, which is to widen into a recognition of the need for both the voice of tradition and the unity of the church. I will propose a way of understanding doctrinal development that – it is hoped – will serve as an ecumenical bridge between Protestant concerns for *sola scriptura* and Catholic/Orthodox reliance on the normativity of tradition. This bridge, I argue, relies on the work of Ricoeur, not so much due to his confessional Protestantism as to the distinctiveness of his hermeneutics. Although philosophical hermeneutics' applicability to doctrinal development has been much discussed,⁴ the value of Ricoeur's hermeneutics to clarify both the necessity and the value of doctrinal development has not so far been identified. This essay presupposes that philosophical hermeneutics has a valuable contribution to make to uniquely theological concerns, and that such a contribution does not undermine the distinctiveness of Christian revelation but rather supports it in the role of *ancilla theologiae*.

What follows is a journey through five elements of Ricoeur's hermeneutics that elucidate doctrinal development from a *sola scriptura* perspective. First, Ricoeur breaks with the Romantic tradition for which Authorial Intention is the exclusive fullness of meaning; instead, he sees the meaning of a text as a product of author and reader together. Second, Ricoeur breaks with structuralism for which meaning is fixed and timeless, independent of author or reader; rather, to understand a text for Ricoeur is not only to identify timeless patterns in it, but also to make it one's own in a unique life-situation. Third, with Gadamer Ricoeur recovers the value of an *interpretative tradition*, seen no longer as obscuring the text's true meaning, but as enabling it. Ricoeur goes beyond Gadamer in sustaining the value of the critical distance given by our historical standpoint, not to undermine the tradition, but to enrich it with an ever growing pool of interpretations for every new reader belonging to it. Fourth, Ricoeur distinguishes between diversity and conflict of interpretations, arguing for a "logic of probability" rather than the possibility of any scientific verification. Fifth and finally, Ricoeur gives us clues for seeing both dogma and a centralised authority as a necessary component of any ecclesial community.

2 Beyond Authorial Intention: How the Reader Produces Meaning

First, the meaning of Scripture cannot grow if it is fixed by the author's intention. But for Ricoeur, a text's meaning is not fully determined by what the author meant when they wrote it. While authorial intention remains an essential component of meaning so far as it can be known, the reader also contributes a share for a Ricoeurian hermeneutic model.

⁴ See e.g. Drew Phillip Morgan, 'Hermeneutical Aspects of John Henry Newman's Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine', *Horizons* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 223–42; Thomas Carr, *Newman and Gadamer: Toward a Hermeneutics of Religious Knowledge* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

This claim puts Ricoeur at odds with the prevalent hermeneutical theory of modernity that began with nineteenth-century Romanticism, primarily in the figures of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. Reacting against the timeless, ahistorical account of reality they saw in the Enlightenment, the Romantics overlapped with what is now called the “rise of historical consciousness,” which, writes Wolfart, is “characterized by the recognition that things change over time and that this change is fundamental or essential rather than superficial or apparent.”⁵ Because words and ideas change in meaning, Schleiermacher saw that “misunderstanding results as a matter of course,” and this signals, for him, the birth of hermeneutics.⁶ Our awareness of the cultural distance between an ancient text and its modern reader gives rise to the need for a contemporary interpretation.

Romanticism fought, however, on terrain already determined by Enlightenment concerns for universality, certainty, and objectivity. The rise of scientific positivism at the end of the nineteenth century put the humanities under enormous pressure to justify their validity in scientific terms. Hermeneutics needed objective criteria to determine a single, univocal meaning of a text in a scientifically verifiable way. Dilthey found this criteria, says Ricoeur, in “the idea of intentionality and of the identical character of the intentional object.”⁷ Thus to interpret a text meant to “transpose oneself onto another” – to go behind the text to the intentions of its author.⁸

Ricoeur does not deny the essential role played by authorial intention. The author’s “intention ... [is] not to be excluded from hermeneutics,” he tells us.⁹ His criticism of the Romantics is rather that they assign the *complete* meaning to the author’s intention without remainder, which, for Ricoeur, is neither *possible* nor *desirable*. It is not *possible* because we can never eliminate our own finite perspective to obtain a neutral, objective ‘meaning’ to a text, even if that meaning is restricted to what the author meant: “to adopt the other’s point of view while forgetting one’s own, is that not objectivity? Yet nothing is more disastrous than this fallacious assimilation.”¹⁰ You can never see the world through another’s eyes. But nor is it *desirable*. A text, argues Ricoeur, is not there merely to convey the author’s subjective intentions, but to communicate something about the world which transcends the horizon of both author and reader. The text *says something* and it is the *something* which matters, the meaning of which the author’s intention contributes to but does not complete.

⁵ Johannes C. Wolfart, “The Rise of the Historical Consciousness”, *Religion Compass* 3, no. 1 (January 2009): 88.

⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 23.

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 75.

What, then, does complete the text's meaning? To answer this, Ricœur asks us to look closely at what is presupposed by the very need for interpretation: the text's *duration*. While verbal dialogue takes place at one moment in time, a text carries its message into a future context where the author is no longer present. "The peculiarity of the literary work," he writes, is

to transcend its own psycho-sociological conditions of production and thereby to open itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in socio-cultural contexts which are always different. In short, the work *decontextualizes* itself ... and is able to *recontextualise* itself differently in the act of reading.¹¹

Meaning, then, is not complete until it is realised in contemporary understanding, where the world opened by the text is grasped in its implications for today. The legal procedures around a court case are a helpful example of how this works. Every lawyer knows that the judge's decision about how to interpret the law is not merely a recovery of what the law always originally meant, but a creative act which gives the law a new meaning it did not previously have. That is why trainee lawyers need to know, not only the original wording of a law, but also the history of cases in which the law was applied, because such cases affect the law's meaning.

Ricœur's break with authorial intention can provide an understanding of doctrinal development that does not conflict with *sola scriptura*. Many Protestants are suspicious of dogmatic developments because they seem, by very definition, to go "beyond what is written" in a manner condemned by the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 4:6). Lindbeck expresses this concern when he writes, "the sixteenth-century view of the relation of Scripture to creeds and confessions has become untenable as the result of advances in historical studies and awareness. The Church's doctrines are developments which 'go beyond' Scripture; they have what look like novel elements in terms of objective historiography, they clearly are not simply distillations of biblical teaching. Consequently their status has become questionable[.]"¹² Ashley Hall even goes the other way, seeing the necessity of doctrinal development as a reason for abandoning *sola scriptura*: "In evaluating the status of doctrine—that is, the question of proper development and corruption—*sola scriptura* is an inadequate standard."¹³ But this kind of 'going beyond' Scripture is simply not a problem from a Ricœurian point of view, if we remember that for Ricœur the meaning of a text is jointly produced by author and reader. Even the original audience of, for example, a New Testament epistle, went "beyond" it in a narrow sense, by contributing their unique perspective and situation to the text's meaning. As an example, the "novelty"

¹¹ Ibid., 101.

¹² George Lindbeck, 'The Problem of Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology', *Concilium* 1, no. 3 (January 1967): 65. Lindbeck offers his own solution to this problem later in the article: "It is quite impossible to deduce the *homousion* from Scripture, yet, given the way in which the question was formulated, this provided the only possible concretely available answer which was consonant with Scripture" (ibid., 68).

¹³ Hall, 'The Development of Doctrine', 276.

in the Nicene Creed is simply a result of seeking to understand Scripture from the perspective of the fourth-century cultural context, as Craig Blaising has argued in detail.¹⁴ Novelty does not disqualify it as a *potentially* correct interpretation, although whether it is *actually* correct is a separate question. I suggest then, that a Ricoeurian take on *sola scriptura* is that it prohibits any dogmas that are not *anchored* in Scripture as their basis and origin.

This definition also helps clarify the importance of the *history of interpretation*. Churches which base their reading of Scripture exclusively on authorial intention, on the other hand, would have little need to know the history between the writing of Scripture and their own time. Their doctrinal ‘development’ would be more like scientific progress, where the history of interpretation is irrelevant because all that matters is the aggregate of results considered true in the present, past ‘dogmas’ having no authoritative weight.¹⁵ It is highly unlikely that such churches would rediscover the Trinity, for example, every generation on their own merits, since Trinitarian doctrine depended on unique external pressures which compelled a similarly unique response. Our actual experience of these kinds of churches is that they either believe uncritically in the Trinity, or that critical examination re-opens the ancient conciliar debates anew as if they had never happened. These stories thus lead to a kind of discontinuous repetition like the amnesiac in the movie *Memento*, who can never remember anything that happened more than five minutes ago and is thus doomed to an unconscious identical repetition of the same action over and over again.

3 Beyond Timeless Structures: How Understanding is an Event

Second, the meaning of Scripture cannot grow if it is made rigid and inflexible by purportedly atemporal doctrines. Although French structuralism is not the impetus for such a hermeneutic, there are many instructive parallels between the two. Because Ricoeur engaged extensively with structuralism, I will use it as an analogy for a theology according to which doctrine is regarded as infallible, decontextualised and certain truths that yield the timeless ‘grammar’ of Scripture. But just as authorial intention does not fully capture a text’s meaning, neither, in Ricoeur’s view, do structuralist analyses which ignore the historicity of human understanding.

Structuralism is, in Ricoeur’s view, the direct opposite of Romantic hermeneutics, denying *all* meaning to the author’s intention and placing it instead in the hands of an abstract and ahistorical set of structures, to be discovered by means of equally abstract and timeless rules.¹⁶ The goal of structuralism was to find common patterns in texts, building

¹⁴ Craig Blaising, ‘Creedal Formation as Hermeneutical Development: A Re-Examination of Nicaea’, *Pro Ecclesia* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2010).

¹⁵ A number of free Evangelical denominations, while not formally taking such a position, can foster a culture which tends in this direction. Especially where they engender a feud between the disciplines of “biblical studies” and “systematic theology,” proponents of the former may, in a manner parallel to the hard sciences, consider only the “latest exegesis” relevant to biblical interpretation. The history of interpretation then becomes little more than the history of errors from which we have now freed ourselves.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 140.

a system of principles which can help explain any new text that arises. Noticing that every sentence is a sequence of words, none of which is original to the sentence, they extended this insight to see every text as a series of sentences which form a structure repeated elsewhere in other texts.

As with Romantic hermeneutics, Ricoeur is not opposed to the positive insights of structuralism, calling it “perfectly legitimate ... as long as it remains conscious of its conditions of validity and thus of its limits.”¹⁷ His problem is not with the dimension of meaning it uncovers, but that it rules out all other dimensions of meaning and claims totality for itself. Structuralism sees a text as only another example of the timeless structures of language. Structuralism’s lack of semantic reference restricts it to the realm of *scientific analysis* without penetrating to the question of the relation of a text to the historical human experience out of which it arises: “It is because there is first something to say, because we have an experience to bring to language, that conversely, language ... refers to *what is*. ... If language were not fundamentally referential, would or could it be meaningful?”¹⁸ When we read a text we expect to be told something about the world, not just something about language: “If reading is possible, it is indeed because the text is not closed in on itself but opens out onto other things.”¹⁹ The analogy of words/sentences does not follow to sentences/texts, in Ricoeur’s view.²⁰ With sentences we enter a different world which properly belongs not just to syntax but to *semantics*, of meaning in reference to objects outside language. Language becomes real at its moment of use in history to convey a particular message about the non-linguistic world. But to do so it must connect with the existential self-understanding of the reader who lives at another moment in history.

There is nothing wrong with doctrines that guide future readers in interpreting Scripture, as long as they do not close themselves to future reinterpretations. As William Reiser says, “Dogmas emerge from contexts that are themselves historical, cultural, advancing, conditioned.”²¹ Just as Scripture is both written and read from concrete historical circumstances, so also with dogma. “If the scriptures,” Lash writes, “are a relative statement of truth, this is even more obviously the case with dogmatic definitions.”²² But Lash cautions that the relative nature of dogma does not mean that “in twenty years’ time, it will become untrue”; rather, “it is to say, with Rahner, that ‘all human statements, even

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 39.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 21. Italics mine.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 158.

²⁰ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 7.

²¹ William Reiser, ‘An Essay on the Development of Dogma in a Heideggerian Context: A Non-Theological Explanation of Theological Heresy’, *The Thomist* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1975): 473.

²² Nicholas Lash, ‘Dogmas and Doctrinal Progress’, in *Doctrinal Development and Christian Unity*, ed. Nicholas Lash (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 13.

those in which faith expresses God's saving truth, are finite. By this we mean that they never declare the *whole* of a reality."²³

The lesson Ricœur took from his engagement with structuralism is that *the historical nature of both text and reader cannot be ignored* if what we seek is not merely a text's atemporal grammar but its referential (even existential) meaning. The historically situated side of dogma must be taken seriously if it is to be made relevant to a new generation belonging to a different historical situation. Jean Greisch summarises Ricœur's insight like this: "Interpretation could be compared to drinking. A text which, one way or another, is not transformed into a source of living water, capable of transforming ('refiguring') our lives more or less profoundly, is not worth being read and interpreted."²⁴

A church that based its interpretation of Scripture on unchangeable doctrines would have *continuity* but no *development*. It could never see innovation as anything other than corruption of the true meaning of Scripture. Curiously, for this approach it would become unnecessary for anyone to read Scripture in the present. Scripture would be *always already interpreted*, its meaning formulated into a rigid set of doctrines which Christians would need only memorise like a multiplication table. This kind of hermeneutic ignores the final step needed to make the meaning of Scripture something that connects with the living situation of the reader.

"Traditional formulations," observes George Lindbeck, "when repeated unchanged in unprecedented situations take on different, sometimes radically different, meanings. Instead of protecting or transmitting the faith once for all delivered to the saints, they may in fact betray it."²⁵ As an illustration of this principle, consider Vatican I's interpretation of Romans 1:20 (repeated in the 1910 "Oath Against Modernism"), that "God ... may be certainly known by the natural light of human reason."²⁶ Without passing judgment on the appropriateness of this interpretation for its own context, we can say that by the time of Vatican II it was judged to be no longer appropriate, shifts in philosophical culture having made it misleading, and the Oath Against Modernity was dropped as a requirement for Catholic clergy.²⁷

4 Beyond Gadamer: How Critique is Part of Tradition

Romanticism and Structuralism placed Scripture and tradition in opposition to each other, forcing an exclusive choice between them. While Gadamer overcomes the

²³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴ My translation: Jean Greisch, 'Lire, interpréter, comprendre: Vers une herméneutique philosophique de la religion', in *Paul Ricœur: Poetics and Religion*, ed. T. L. Hetteema, Joseph Verheyden, and Pieter Vandecasteele (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2011), 33.

²⁵ Lindbeck, 'Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology', 66.

²⁶ "*Deum ... naturali humanæ rationis lumine ... certo cognosci posse*" (Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, chapter 2). Translation by Henry Edward Manning, *Petri Privilegium: Three Pastoral Letters to the Clergy of the Diocese* (London: Longmans, Green, 1871), 195.

²⁷ Tad Szulc, 'Pope Said to Cancel Antimodernist Oath', *New York Times*, 18 July 1967.

opposition between Scripture and tradition, because he rejects the standpoint of critique, the ‘newness’ of interpretation cannot be, for him, a *growth* of meaning, only a personal appropriation of the tradition in a way that leaves it unchanged for anyone else. In contrast to Gadamer, Ricoeur overcomes the further opposition between ‘critique’ and ‘belonging’ by making the tension between them the very motor of interpretation that allows the meaning of Scripture to grow.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics is motivated at heart by a recovery of *belonging to a tradition* and a rejection of *autonomous critical distance*. His number one adversary is the autonomous spirit of Enlightenment thought, mediated through the objectifying epistemology of scientific method. Insofar as Romantic hermeneutics based itself on Enlightenment principles, it presupposed a historical distance from the texts it wanted to interpret, a distance which it claimed to overcome by applying the right critical method. But in Gadamer’s view, our distancing from the past is not an unavoidable fact, but a result of our choice to abandon tradition in an attempt to stand on our own two feet. Gadamer sees ‘critical method’ as the *problem that creates distance*, rather than (as with Romantic hermeneutics) *the solution that overcomes it*.

But critical distancing is impossible for Gadamer. It relies on the idea of a consciousness making judgments independent of its own perspective or place in history – in short, a God’s-eye-view of the world, an absolute or neutral perspective. But in practice no historian seems able to achieve this. Historians like Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) saw the goal of interpretation as the “extinguishing of the self,” by which he meant the suppression of all subjective bias, point of view and prejudice, by which means alone one can understand the past as it “really was.” But Gadamer points out:

Even in those masterworks of historical scholarship that seem to be the very consummation of the extinguishing of the individual demanded by Ranke, it is still an unquestioned principle of our scientific experience that we can classify these works with unfailing accuracy in terms of the political tendencies of the time in which they were written.²⁸

Thus, for Gadamer, we are fooling ourselves if we think we have eliminated all our prejudices, biases, and presuppositions and come to understand a historical text neutrally as it “really was.” Future historians will see the log in our eyes to which we were blind, just as we saw the speck in the eyes of past historians. It is impossible to distance ourselves from our past in order to view it objectively, because there is no Archimedean point outside of history from which to make an ahistorical, objective judgment: in short, “history does not belong to us; we belong to it.”²⁹

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 6.

²⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 278.

Second and more importantly, for Gadamer critical distancing is undesirable. Even if we could “extinguish the self” and eliminate all our prejudices, this would render the text a lifeless irrelevant object for us. “Nothing destroys more the very sense of the historical enterprise than this objective distancing,” says Ricœur expounding Gadamer, because “the text, thus treated as an absolute object, is thus divested of its claim to tell us something about something.”³⁰

Prejudices are desirable, says Gadamer, for two reasons. First, our prejudices are part of who we are in our deepest nature, giving us our orientation in the world, the perspective from which we survey all that we see. “The prejudices of the individual,” Gadamer tells us, “far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. ... If we want to do justice to man’s finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate prejudices.”³¹ This does not imply that prejudice is always good, simply that not all prejudice is bad. Second, prejudices are founded on our belonging to a culture and tradition. They are given by our education, our upbringing, long before we begin to critically reflect on them. Without these prejudices we would neither *be* nor *know* who we are. The text we seek to interpret only has value for us insofar as it connects to our “self,” the concerns, questions and indeed *prejudices* that we bring to the text which come from our own historical situation.

For Gadamer, Romantic hermeneutics presupposes the Enlightenment “prejudice against prejudice,”³² seeing prejudice as nothing more than an unfounded judgment. By attempting to eliminate prejudices, Romantics alienated themselves from their tradition. But distancing, far from being the solution, is instead the problem for Gadamer – a posture brought about by our attempt to emancipate ourselves from tradition in the name of universal reason. The text only comes to life and acquires meaning insofar as it connects with the existential questions of its readers, which come from their tradition and form part of their “prejudice.”

Ricœur’s own insights are (performatively) more a development than a critique of Gadamer. For Ricœur a certain measure of ‘critique’ or ‘distancing’ is not only possible but intrinsic to the process of interpretation. Distancing and belonging are not exclusive alternatives but are actually bound together in a never-ending dialectic out of which new interpretations arise. Let us follow Ricœur’s reasoning step by step.

The major advance Gadamer makes over Romanticism and structuralism is the recognition that the meaning of a text is never fully determined. As Gadamer puts it, “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the

³⁰ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 75.

³¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

³² *Ibid.*, 273.

whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. ... Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.”³³

But Gadamer fails to see that *the very thing that makes understanding productive is the distancing he so vehemently attacks*. This is because he has conflated two types of distance, according to Ricœur: the unchosen distance of our place in history and the chosen distance of our scientific method. “Distance is a fact; placing at a distance is a methodological attitude,” says Ricœur.³⁴ The *fact* of our historical distance from the text is our distinctive standpoint which gives us unique insight into the meaning of the text.

In fairness, Gadamer is not wholly unaware of the positive role of distancing. At one point he acknowledges it, saying that “temporal distance ... lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. ... Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, ... but new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning.”³⁵ However, as Ricœur observes, Gadamer does not explain *how* temporal distance makes interpretation productive because all he can see in distancing is the arrogance of autonomous critique and the lifelessness of scientific objectifying method.

Ricœur’s solution is to see ‘critical distancing’, like ‘belonging’, as both unavoidable and desirable: unavoidable because we begin from a different place in history whether we like it or not; desirable because is only by means of cultural difference that the meaning of a text extends beyond its original context. Our unique place in history is the source of new interpretations, because it gives us a distinctive point of view which unveils fresh meanings that previous generations did not see. Thus distancing is not a problem to be overcome, but “a positive component of being for the text; it characteristically belongs to interpretation, not as its contrary but as its condition.”³⁶

Ricœur shows how every new age brings forth new questions and a new life-situation from which the text is read. The readers from this new life-situation have a new perspective on the text and are thus enabled to find things in it that nobody had found before. And because the meaning of the text belongs not to the author alone, but is produced by both author and reader together, a new reader with a new perspective brings a new meaning to the text that it did not previously have. Thus the meaning of the text grows (develops) in the most real sense.

Of the hermeneutic methods we have surveyed so far, only Ricœur’s sees both *tradition* and historical *distance* as positive. This is because only for Ricœur can there be multiple interpretations of a text that do not compete with or contradict one another. Tradition is

³³ Ibid., 296.

³⁴ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 74.

³⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298.

³⁶ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 91.

problematic for Schleiermacher and structuralism, irrelevant at best and a distorting influence at worst. Historical distance is problematic for both Schleiermacher and Gadamer: for Schleiermacher because it gives rise to misunderstandings; for Gadamer because it alienates us from the tradition which is the wellspring of meaning. Only for Ricœur do we belong to the tradition by joining our own unique interpretation to it, not as a rival but as a complement. We participate in the tradition, but in a non-identical way.

A church that followed Gadamer's hermeneutic would see Scripture and tradition, not merely as *inseparable*, but as *identical*. Recognising that each new generation must discover the meaning of Scripture afresh for itself, it would still condemn innovative interpretations as foreign to the spirit of the tradition. Only two options would be available for the modern reader: interpret Scripture in your own way but also in a way consonant with the tradition, or pretend to have a critical standpoint outside the church tradition from which to judge it. But in the latter case you would be deluding yourself because your very critical faculties have been shaped and trained by the tradition, so your critique can only be a war of the branch against the tree.³⁷

Critique-from-within is impossible for Gadamer, because the tradition alone is normative. But for Ricœur, the tradition itself has an element of critique-from-within: "Critique is also a tradition. I would even say that it plunges into the most impressive tradition, that of liberating acts, of the Exodus and the Resurrection."³⁸ To illustrate this, consider the renewed approaches to Christian-Jewish relations by almost all ecclesial bodies in the wake of Auschwitz. It was almost universally recognised that Christians needed to re-evaluate their supersessionist language and re-read the New Testament with more careful attention to the thoroughgoing Jewishness of its context and presuppositions.

Ricœur's hermeneutics, on the other hand, can hold in tension belonging and critique, continuity and change, celebrating both old and new interpretations as equally valid, able to *distinguish* but not *separate* Scripture and tradition. Indeed, such a church not only *can*, but *must* experience doctrinal development, because it is of the very nature of interpretation that new meanings are found in every new age and culture. A Ricœurian hermeneutic does not let interpretation become a free-for-all where anything goes, because it retains the importance of authorial intention as a 'regulative idea'. But from this foundation it can branch out into never-ending new interpretations, because the meaning of Scripture is a combination of the author's intention and the reader's understanding. Ricœur has taught us not to be afraid of diversity of interpretations, to see it as something

³⁷ In light of this, it is perhaps not entirely a coincidence that Gadamer has had a warm reception from the same Orthodox theologians who have made a point of rejecting the concept of doctrinal development, Louth being a key example. See Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), in which Gadamer features prominently; and 'Is Development of Doctrine a Valid Category for Orthodox Theology?', where Louth denies the legitimacy of doctrinal development for Orthodox theology. See also Zdenko Širka, 'Horizons of Human Understanding: Gadamer and Modern Orthodox Hermeneutics in Dialogue' (Unpublished doctoral thesis: Prague, 2015).

³⁸ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 100.

not to lament but to celebrate, a result not of our fallen sinfulness but of our created finitude, by which each of us reflects a unique aspect of the glory of God. When each new reader of Scripture brings their perspective to the community, they allow all of us to grow in our understanding of Scripture.

5 Beyond Pluralism: How to Arbitrate Conflicting Interpretations

Having established that Ricoeur's hermeneutics enables the growth of the meaning of Scripture, it remains to distinguish between positive and negative ways in which meaning may grow.

"I have never hidden the belief," Ricoeur says, "that a pluralism of interpretation constitutes not a vice but a richness for biblical hermeneutics."³⁹ Instead of lamenting the multiplicity of interpretations of Scripture, Ricoeur celebrates the diversity of viewpoints that enrich everyone's understanding. The text is always "open to an indefinite number of readers and, therefore, of interpretations."⁴⁰ For Ricoeur, writes Greisch, "the Bible ... is an 'open work' in the sense [that] its reception is always a creative process, and, in this sense, unfinishable in principle."⁴¹

But celebrating the plurivocity of meaning is not enough. Not all diversity is good because not all interpretations are correct. However much one may celebrate, for example, the number of possible sermons on Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, such plurivocity does not rule out the possibility of sermons that betray the truth of that parable.

To see Ricoeur as an 'anything goes' relativist is to miss a crucial element of his thought. "If it is true," he writes, "that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. ... The text is a limited field of possible construction. ... It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them, and to seek for an agreement."⁴² Again: "a text is a finite space of interpretations: there is not just one interpretation, but, on the other hand, there is not an infinite number of them. A text is a space of variations that has its own constraints."⁴³ The plurality of interpretations, therefore, is not unlimited even if it is always open. It extends *in one direction only*, the "direction which [the text] opens up for thought."⁴⁴

How, then, do we discriminate between enriching plurivocity and simple misinterpretation? Nobody who is misinterpreting Scripture thinks they are doing so.

³⁹ Paul Ricoeur, 'Reply to David Stewart', in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Hahn, vol. v. 22, The Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 448.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 31–32.

⁴¹ My translation: Greisch, 'Lire, interpréter, comprendre: Vers une herméneutique philosophique de la religion', 17.

⁴² Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 213.

⁴³ Paul Ricoeur, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario Valdés (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 496.

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 161.

Their interpretation is simply what Scripture seems to be saying from their current standpoint. Moreover, due to the historical situatedness of every reader of Scripture, there is no ‘absolute standpoint’ detached from history from which to arbitrate between conflicting interpretations.

Ricœur addresses this problem by offering “procedures of validation” by which conflicting interpretations may be evaluated. He prefers the term ‘validation’ because ‘verification’ implies a level of final certainty that is not available. To explain how validation occurs, Ricœur turns to a lawcourt analogy. Validation “is an argumentative discipline comparable to the juridical procedures of legal interpretation.”⁴⁵ He goes on:

The procedures of validation have a polemical character. In front of the court, the plurivocity ... is exhibited in the form of a conflict of interpretations, and the final interpretation appears as a verdict to which it is possible to make appeal. Like legal utterances, all interpretations ... may be challenged.⁴⁶

“Only in the tribunal,” he concludes, “is there a moment when the procedures of appeal are exhausted.” But the finality of the tribunal is connected to its authority for the state, to which there is no equivalent in philosophy. Never in academic debate “is there such a last word.”⁴⁷

There may, however, be an equivalent in theology.

6 Beyond Individualism: How the Community Interprets Together

Fifth and finally, when a Ricœurian hermeneutic is applied to the history of dogma, we shall see that *sola scriptura* is not incompatible with the idea of irreversible dogmatic decisions, considered as interpretations of Scripture that have a finality for a particular church tradition.

At this point we transition from philosophy to theology, from interpretive categories available to any text, to categories which presuppose an ecclesial reading context. Key to this transition, for Ricœur, is the communal nature of the church, which has “rules of reading that are not at all the same as those that govern the manner in which philosophers read other philosophers.”⁴⁸ This is due to the “structuring role performed by the ecclesiastical community life, which has no equivalent in philosophy.”⁴⁹ Where *philosophical* hermeneutics deals with the conditions of text-interpretation in an endless academic debate where there is never a final decision, *theological* hermeneutics serves the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 215.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ricœur, ‘Reply to David Stewart’, 449.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 448.

church, a concrete community with its own tradition, and with particular conflicts that have a practical impact on communal living.

The communal nature of the church also gives it a dimension analogous to that of a nation state. In the case of conflict, academic (rational) debate can shift people's perspective and enlighten them to the error of their thinking, but there remains a residue of disputes which cannot be resolved by reason and argument alone. Any community that wishes to remain both united in the present and continuous in the future must have a juridical process which may be trusted by the community to resolve disputes when rational argument has found no solution. Without such trust, the juridical process has no authority and will not prevent the community from fragmenting, because those whose interpretation is ruled against will simply leave the community.

"The 'power of deciding'," says Will Cohen, "is the element of doctrinal development that is missing from the examples of contemporary ecclesiology we have seen."⁵⁰ Dogma, seen this way, is *the ecclesial community's decision to take Scriptural interpretation in a certain direction*, a juridical ruling that arbitrates between two conflicting interpretations of Scripture, exalting one as necessary and excluding the other as unacceptable. Dogma thus develops the same way a nation's framework of law develops: through the cumulative growth of legal rulings which set a precedent for future interpretations. The Nicene Creed, for example, can be seen as a juridical decision to lay down guidelines for interpreting Scripture. These guidelines, far from being a burden or a restriction, are a gift to future generations to help them avoid repeating the same interpretative mistakes, but only if the guidelines continue to be trusted by future generations.

But is dogma a final and irrevocable decision? Is there such a thing as a 'tribunal' in the church? Can future theologians never find that a dogmatic decision was mistakenly made?

Lindbeck's answer to these questions is a clear negative. "The *sola scriptura*," he says, "forbids the formal attribution of irreversibility to even the most necessary dogmatic developments."⁵¹ All dogma must be in principle subject to revision. Even if the church is "morally certain" of a doctrine, it "cannot transpose its moral certainty regarding this or that of its teachings into a juridical, dogmatic declaration of infallibility."⁵² Instead, all dogma must always be "tested by Scripture and thus kept open to review, revision or perhaps even repeal. This is true ... because the Church may be led to see that in the light of new perspectives on revelation that it was actually in error, even in the original circumstances, in making this or that dogmatic decision."⁵³

⁵⁰ Will Cohen, 'Doctrinal Drift, Dance or Development: How Truth Takes Time in the Life of Communion', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 2 (April 2018): 221.

⁵¹ Lindbeck, 'Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology', 69.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 67.

Lindbeck makes it seem as if nothing could be simpler than the church being “led to see” that its former dogmatic decisions were misinformed. But does this not subtly imply that the contemporary (or future) church possesses a superior rational vantage point, from which it may critically assess the beliefs of past generations? And is this not to tip the balance in favour of “critique” over “belonging” in a way that both Ricœur and Gadamer would see as unwarranted? Let us remember that for Ricœur, interpretative conflict is only resolvable by means of “probabilities” and not scientific certainties. The church of the future is just as historically situated as the historic church whose dogmas it rejects, and no absolute (human) arbitrator exists who might judge in favour of one viewpoint over another. Since there is no ahistorical standpoint from which to arbitrate, all interpretation of Scripture contains an element of faith in the Holy Spirit’s guidance, first in the writing of Scriptural texts, then in their canonisation, and finally in their interpretation. The only choice an individual can make is who he or she believes the Holy Spirit is guiding in interpreting Scripture.

I suggest that if a historical council has laid down a dogmatic definition, then that definition must be seen as irrevocable *for any future members of that particular church tradition*. This in no way implies that such dogma is certain, infallible, or any of the other hard non-hermeneutical words one might be tempted to call it. Nor, as Lindbeck suggests, does it “deny that there is no objective guarantee regarding the rightness of any of the human aspects of the Church.”⁵⁴ On the contrary, it is precisely the absence of an objective guarantee that is the lesson of Ricœurian hermeneutics. To belong to a particular church (be it Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, or even a free-church denomination with less history) means to put faith in the interpretative guidelines (at least, the non-negotiable ones) it has laid down in its tradition, and to trust that it had reasons to do so even if those reasons are not rationally clear to everyone in the present day.⁵⁵ If someone should choose to trust their own contemporary interpretation of Scripture against the interpretation offered by the tradition, they are at liberty break away and start a new community, thus inaugurating a new tradition unburdened by the errors of the dogma with which they disagree. The only lesson Ricœurian hermeneutics would teach them is that their choice has nothing to do with acceptance or rejection of *sola scriptura*. Their interpretation of Scripture is no more objectively verifiable, and no less a faith-wager, than the choice to submit to the traditional interpretation and remain continuous with the existing community.

I suggest further that historic dogmas alone are not sufficient to guarantee a unified development. A new interpretation may arise which is seen by some members of the community to be an aberration, and by others to be in perfect continuity with the past. If the community’s interpretation is going to *develop* without *dividing*, and if rational argument has failed to bring about a consensus (as Ricœur predicts it will, if only

⁵⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁵ This does not mean that the church can never reverse *any* doctrinal position, only one that is raised to the level of dogma.

occasionally), then the community will need a living, contemporary arbitrator – either an individual or a committee – trusted to endorse a new doctrinal position, reject it, or permit a diversity of viewpoints on behalf of the whole community. As we saw in the case of past dogmatic decisions, there is no objective guarantee that such a new doctrinal position is the correct one; if there was, then no arbitration would be necessary in the first place. Those who disagree with the arbitrator’s decision, again, are free to break away and start a new community – as the Old Catholics broke from Roman Catholicism after Vatican I and the Sedevacantists after Vatican II⁵⁶ – or they can submissively assent to the decision and remain part of the traditional community. Both options – dissenting or submitting – are innovations which extend the meaning of Scripture into the present day, and both require faith, either in the superior judgment of the dissenters’ own interpretation or in the authority of the central arbitrator’s interpretation. Ricoeurian hermeneutics teaches us that neither innovation nor faith in something external to Scripture can be avoided: both are the natural and inevitable result of the passage of time, the emergence of a new context, and the insufficiency of reason to arbitrate in all cases. In such instances the choice is not between objectively verifiable faithfulness or unfaithfulness to Scripture, but between the division and discontinuity of dissent, or the unity and continuity of development.

7 Conclusion

At the heart of Ricoeur’s methodology is the dialectic between ‘belonging’ and ‘critique’, which can be understood theologically as the dialectic between *faithfulness* and *innovation* in doctrine, between old and new interpretations of Scripture, and ultimately, the dialectic at the heart of the process of doctrinal development. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics makes doctrinal development possible because it celebrates diversity of interpretations without giving way to pluralism, and allows old and new readings of Scripture to sit alongside one another in mutual dialogue and enrichment. This allows us to see doctrinal development as *the growth of the meaning of Scripture*.

We have seen how Ricoeur’s hermeneutics allows for Scripture to ‘grow’, through development in its meaning. Ricoeur gives us the tools to open a text to multiple valid interpretations, and to celebrate such multiplicity rather than lament it. The meaning of Scripture truly grows and develops in a colourful diversity of interpretations, each of which mutually enriches and deepens the others for the benefit of the whole community. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics shows the continual openness of Scripture to new interpretations along what Ricoeur calls a “‘trajectory’ that has its origin in the text itself,”⁵⁷ Development is only possible insofar as there is continuity in the interpretative tradition, and continuity can only be safeguarded by means of dogmas, interpretative guidelines whose normativity continues to be trusted by the community. Dogmas help distinguish between acceptable

⁵⁶ Granted that in these non-Protestant examples faithfulness to Scripture was not the central concern, but rather continuity with tradition, they nonetheless illustrate what is at stake when developments occur that are not seen the same way by all.

⁵⁷ LaCocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, xii.

diversity in interpretation and unacceptable deviation, restricting the interpretive scope of a text to a particular trajectory and enabling continuity with past conclusions.

Ricœur's approach has the potential to build ecumenical bridges between seemingly intractable ecclesial positions on the relationship between Scripture and doctrine. For Catholics who might be suspicious of the potential restrictiveness of *sola scriptura*, I have tried to show that it need not be restrictive at all, but can lead to a continuous and flourishing development. For Protestants who might be suspicious of dogma, new or old, as supplementary to Scripture, I have tried to show how all interpretation is supplementary by its very nature, and that this is to be celebrated rather than lamented.

"Developing is ... characteristic of my work," says Ricœur. "I would compare this to the optics of a camera, which gradually brings out details more and more clearly from an initially larger, obscure picture."⁵⁸ Perhaps Ricœur's philosophical career is a miniature model of the trajectory of the Christian community, as its foundational text becomes ever more clearly understood in a process only to be completed at the eschaton.

⁵⁸ Tamás Tóth, 'The Graft, The Residue, And Memory: Two Conversations with Paul Ricœur', in *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricœur's Unstable Equilibrium*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński (Toronto: Hermeneutic Press, 2003), 646.