Normativity of the Future

Reading Biblical and
Other Authoritative Texts
in an Eschatological Perspective

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with

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privilege, interpreting the signs of the times in the light of the gospel and the gospel in the light of the signs of the times, and welcoming the wisdom of the gospels and new questions for the transformation of the world. As we have tried to demonstrate in this paper, it is possible to understand "scrutinizing the signs of the times and ... interpreting them in the light of the gospel" in an eschatological perspective. We are convinced that this use of *Gaudium et Spes* 4 is in keeping with the way it opened the windows of the church forty years ago.

Texts That Create a Future
The Function of Ancient Texts for Theology Today

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"The way in which we anticipate the future defines the meaning the past can have for us, just as the way in which we have understood the past and the way in which our ancestors have projected the future determines our own range of possibilities" (Georgia Warnke).[1]

The relationship of the present to the past is constitutive for Christianity and many other religions. In the religious context of the earthly Jesus, texts of the past which have come to us as "Old Testament" played a decisive role. They were consulted to explain the present and to anticipate the future. The authors of the texts that have been handed down to us as the "New Testament" made ample use of their Bible to make sense of the Jesus event. They saw continuity between what the texts of the past had been saying and what they understood to be the significance of Jesus. Many texts of early Christianity were preserved, copied and handed down. They were read and reread, commented on and discussed. They had a central place in the life of Christian communities, in their liturgy and prayer, in their preaching and teaching. In a gradual process certain texts gained a special status and eventually a canon of sacred books was formed. In addition to the canon, the oral traditions that were handed down since the time of the apostles continued to play a role. Throughout the centuries the Christian communities also developed their own oral and written tradition. In the Christian tradition, the works of the generation of theologians and preachers that followed the New Testament era were often held in high esteem.[2] Their writings were

[1] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987) 39.
[2] See, e.g., Pope Leo XIII who says in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of 1893: "The Holy Fathers 'to whom, after the Apostles, the Church owes its growth -- who have planted, watered, built, governed, and cherished it', (39) the Holy Fathers, We say, are of supreme authority, whenever they all interpret in one and the same manner any text of the Bible, as pertaining to the doctrine of faith or morals; for their unanimity clearly evinces that such interpretation has come down from the Apostles as a matter of Catholic faith. The opinion of the Fathers is also of very great weight when they treat of these matters in their capacity of doctors, unofficially; not only because they excel in their knowl-

seen by many as the authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures. For the largest part of the history of Christianity the importance of the texts of Scripture and tradition, their binding authority and normativity for their own contemporary life was never an issue. The assumption that texts of the past had significance and even authority for the present was taken for granted. In fact, the very topic of this paper would have been unthinkable. For people of the twenty-first century, and especially for theologians trained in theology in the post-Enlightenment period, however, the question of the role of the past for the present is one of the most penetrating and unsettling questions. We shall approach this topic in three steps. First we shall try to understand the shifts in Western societies and especially in theology that caused the link between the present and the past to become problematic (1.). Second we shall analyze a representative selection of attempts to bridge the perceived gulf between the present and the past (2.). Finally we shall develop our own hermeneutical approach which we call "Normativity of the Future" as our way of understanding the impact of the past on the present (3.).

1. The Gulf between the Present and the Past

The very topic of this paper presupposes a profound change in the attitude of Western culture toward the past. While it is impossible to give a specialized account of these changes, we need to review the broad lines in order to gain the necessary background for what follows. Before this change our topic was not an issue, because the texts of Scripture and tradition were not primarily perceived as texts of the past, but as containers of timeless eternal truths ("perennialism"). In an approach where the authoritative texts are understood to contain eternal truths, a potential gulf or gap between the present and the past is of no relevance, since the focus is on a deposit of propositional truth which is revealed once and for all.[3] Insofar as there was an awareness of the past, the relationship between the present and that past was facilitated by a lack of historical

edge of revealed doctrine and in their acquaintance with many things which are useful in understanding the apostolic Books, but because they are men of eminent sanctity and of ardent zeal for the truth, on whom God has bestowed a more ample measure of His light. Wherefore the expositor should make it his duty to follow their footsteps with all reverence, and to use their labours with intelligent appreciation" (14).

[3] See, e.g., Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985) 36-52.

consciousness and by an unquestioned respect for tradition. One implication of the lack of historical consciousness is the absence of historical investigation and consequently a lack of historical knowledge. As a result people were inclined to project their own world into the world of the past. Such an anachronistic procedure was also supported by the fact that there was more continuity and change happened only very gradually. The uncritical respect and esteem people used to have for traditions of the past also implied a strong sense of oneness with the past.

This harmonious relationship with the past decisively changed as a result of the Enlightenment and the concomitant movements of thought and practice. Hans-Georg Gadamer has the following to say about the Enlightenment's attitude toward the past and texts of the past:

> In general, the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason. Thus the written tradition of Scripture, like any other historical document, can claim no absolute validity; the possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that reason accords it. It is not tradition but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority. What is written down is not necessarily true. We can know better: this is the maxim with which the modern Enlightenment approaches tradition and which ultimately leads it to undertake historical research. It takes tradition as an object of critique, just as the natural sciences do with the evidence of the senses.[4]

By prioritizing reason, the Enlightenment caused a distanciation from authoritative texts of the past and from tradition in general. Critique and suspicion replaced blind obedience to the authority of tradition. The emancipation from traditions which were called into question by reason resulted in the claim of the autonomy of human thinking. The critique of tradition led to an intensification of historical research. The study of history fostered the development of the historical situatedness of the objects of research and the growth of historical consciousness of the subjects of research. Comparative historical studies relativized the absolute claims of tradition by bringing to light how traditions had changed over time. The Enlightenment was not opposed to tradition on principle, but insisted that the traditions which could not stand up to the test of human reason needed to be abandoned for the sake of human liberation.

The changed attitude toward tradition implies that people do not so easily move back and forth between the past and the present. Coupled

[4] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272.

with the Enlightenment belief in progress, the critique of tradition led to a sense of superiority with regard to the past. Traditions are abandoned for the sake of development and progress. Before the Enlightenment Scripture and tradition were seen as containers of eternal truth and were therefore seen as transcending their historical situation. Historical research of the post-Enlightenment period discovered the historical situatedness of the text, but at the same time (ironically) assigned to the interpreting subject an objective, neutral observer position. As a result of all these shifts a deep gulf developed between past and present which was perceived as impossible to cross without a bridge.

The implications for theology were far-reaching. Gradually the historical-critical method was introduced in all its subdisciplines. History became the central category of theology. From now on everyone who asked a theological question was first subjected to a more or less complete historical overview of the answers. While the Enlightenment approach had intended emancipation from oppressive traditions, the historical research which it fostered nevertheless in many regards favoured a normativity of the past, albeit a past which had been vindicated before the tribunal of reason. The conviction of an unbridgeable gulf between the present and the past resulted in a division of labor in the discipline of theology. The historical subdisciplines exegesis and church history were assigned the task to concentrate exclusively on the past of the Christian community focusing on the written sources and studying the texts of the past as texts of the past. The systematic and pastoral disciplines were expected to provide theological theory for the present building on the results of the historical disciplines. In the day to day practice of theology this ideal expectation met with serious obstacles. As the historical-critical researchers inescapably brought their own past and present to the so-called objective practice of their discipline, they rarely arrived at unanimous results which could be the basis for their colleagues of the systematic and pastoral disciplines to build on. Moreover under the guise of historical-critical methodology and claiming that they were exclusively concentrating on the past, exegetes and church historians implicitly and unconsciously did some of the work assigned to their colleagues of the systematic and pastoral disciplines. On the other hand, systematic and pastoral theologians often got disillusioned with the work of historical criticism and turned to other human sciences for support. The gulf between present and past was mirrored in the gulf between historical and systematic subdisciplines in the theology.

2. Attempts to Bridge the Gulf between the Present and the Past

As we saw above, since the Enlightenment the link between the past and the present could no longer be taken for granted. A deep gulf was seen as separating the two from each other. But this by no means implies that the two were seen as totally unrelated. It means, however, that deliberate efforts are needed at building bridges between the present and the past. A great variety of bridges has been built and will be briefly surveyed in what follows.

Before looking at the various types of bridges we first need to turn to the extreme positions which oppose the idea of a bridge. Strict historical critics often claim that they study the documents of the past purely for their own sake. They study the past exclusively to come to know more about the ancient world. This almost ascetical restriction is meant to ascertain the scientific objectivity.[5] Any link with the present is feared to mar the scientific value of their work with subjectivity and to compromise the disinterested nature of their endeavour. If at all, a link with the present could at most be made in a second phase of their study often called application. Moreover there are positions which deliberately reject bridging the gulf between the present and the past based on the conviction that past texts carry a predominantly and irredeemably harmful message to which contemporary readers should not be exposed. We are thinking here, for instance, of radical feminist rejectionism (Mary Daly). Its proponents consider the biblical tradition to be irredeemably patriarchal and blow up all the bridges that might connect them with it.[6] At the other end of the spectrum we also encounter positions which oppose the idea of a bridge, but now from the perspective of the present or perhaps even more accurately from a perspective of timelessness. Here we refer to the various kinds of synchronic approaches (e.g., Biblicism,[7] structuralism, some types of narrative criticism) which all have in common that they do not consider the historical situatedness of a text either bracketing it temporarily or denying its relevance completely. While for the previous positions a bridge between the present and the past was not possible since present and past were seen as different planets, here a bridge

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 297: "This was ... the naive assumption of historicism, namely, that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity."

[6] See Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible," 97-99.

[7] We avoid here the term "fundamentalism" because of its manifold uses and abuses in recent usage of the word.

is not needed as the distance between the past and the present is collapsed into a timeless artificial construct of a decontextualized now.

In the post-Enlightenment hermeneutical discussion these extreme positions were rather exceptional. The larger part of scholarship continued their attempts to determine how the past could continue to have a role for the present. In the spirit of the Enlightenment the focus was on the authority of tradition and on the rational discernment between acceptable and unacceptable traditions. We shall first turn to those positions which implicitly continued to accept the virtually unquestioned authority of those traditions which they considered acceptable based on their respective hermeneutical approaches. The first such approach is revisionism. It holds that in the tradition we need to distinguish between a theological kernel and a historical shell. While the time and situation-bound wrappings are seen as irretrievably past and potentially marred by sin, the theological core of the tradition is accepted as timeless eternal truth.[8] Therefore they see the task of interpretation in separating the kernel from the shell and presenting the decontextualized kernel for recontextualization in the present. A similar hermeneutical strategy is used by positions that identify a kind of "canon within the canon." They identify a central theme within a tradition, e.g. liberation from oppression and slavery as in liberation theologies, and neglect or reject everything in the tradition that is not in keeping with it.

The second approach is reconstructionism. This approach accepts unquestioning authority only for "the great deeds of God in history,"[9] especially Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. The way the biblical tradition relates these events is influenced by both grace and sin. It is the task of the interpreter to reconstruct the salvation-historical events on the basis of our fragmentary evidence and of imagination.[10] Reconstructionism has in common with revisionism that there is no real attempt to bridge the present and the past, since it is assumed that the reconstructed salvation-historical events have more or less the status of unchanging eternal truth which is not part of the past and therefore needs no mediation to the present.[11]

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[8] Strictly speaking revisionism does not need a bridge between the present and the past. For concerning the irretrievable part of the past their position is similar to rejectionism, and with regard to the theological kernel they return to the pre-Enlightenment position of perennialism (see above, 92).

[9] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 60.

[10] A prime example is found in Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*.

[11] See Didier Pollefeyt & Reimund Bieringer, "The Role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered: Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005) 117-139, esp. 121-124. See also in the present volume, 377-402, esp. 382-385.

The real challenge to hermeneutics is the question whether, and if so, how historically situated texts of the past can be understood beyond their original context and how they can have meaning and significance in the present.[12] These issues were of primary concern to romantic hermeneutics whose proponents, according to Gadamer, understand "homogenous human nature as the unhistorical substratum,"[13] i.e., as the bridge between the present and the past. This enables people to transpose themselves into the mental life of others.[14] Ricœur aptly characterizes the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey as "a hermeneutic that subsumes the understanding of texts to the laws of understanding another person who expresses himself therein." This hermeneutic enterprise is therefore "fundamentally psychological" because its ultimate aim is "not *what* a text says, but *who* says it."[15] This is also evident from the oft quoted programme of romantic hermeneutics "to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself."[16]

Heidegger's *Being and Time* marks a notable shift away from romantic hermeneutics. In his essay "The Task of Hermeneutics" Ricœur compares Heidegger's position to that of romantic hermeneutics:

> It is therefore not astonishing that it is by a reflection on *being-in*, rather than *being-with*, that the ontology of understanding may begin; not *being-with* another who would duplicate our subjectivity, but *being-in-the-world* ... The question of the *world* takes the place of the question of the *other*. In thereby making understanding *worldly*, Heidegger *depsychologizes* it.[17]

For Heidegger the element of continuity between the past and the present that makes understanding across the centuries possible is not the human *psyche*, but our being-in-the-world. This being-in-the-world is a being-thrown ("Geworfensein") which precedes everything else, is shared by every human being without exception and is the condition of possibility for situation, understanding and interpretation. Understanding a

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[12] Similarly the approach we call perennialism needs to face questions such as: How can "eternal truths" be understood by, be meaningful for and mean the same thing to people of different periods in history? These issues have, however, not occupied the hermeneutical discussion.

[13] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 290.

[14] See Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 59: "Every *human science* – and by that Dilthey means every modality of the knowledge of man which implies a historical relation – presupposes a primordial capacity to transpose oneself into the mental life of others."

[15] *Ibid.*, 62.

[16] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik*, ed. H. Kimmerle (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959) 56.

[17] Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 65-66.

text is for Heidegger not finding a sense that would be contained in it nor ttansposing ourselves into the mind of its author, but unfolding "the possibility of being indicated by the text."[18] It is our own being-in-the-world as projected being that enables us to recognize and unfold the new possibilities which the text projects for us.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer intends to rehabilitate authority and ttadition.[19] He calls into question the basic presuppositions of Enlightenment and romantic hermeneutics, namely the claim that there is a gulf between the present and the past.

> Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome ... In fact the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us.[20]

No bridge is needed, according to Gadamer, since present and past are solidly connected by the process of tradition and by historically effected consciousness ("wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein"). The ongoing process of tradition mediates constantly between past and present.[21] Texts do not exclusively belong to their authors and the situations into which they speak originally, but they transcend their original situations and potentially belong to everyone independent of time and space.

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[18] *Ibid.*, 66.

[19] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 277-285.

[20] *Ibid.*, 297.

[21] According to Gadamer the ongoing process of tradition is coming about by a continuous fusion of horizons. "In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value" (*ibid.*, 306). Ricœur's comments on the "fusion of horizons" helps to clarify its significance: "Another index of the dialectic of participation and distanciation is provided by the concept of the *fusion of horizons* ... For according to Gadamer, if the finite condition of historical knowledge excludes any final synthesis in the Hegelian manuer, nevertheless this finitude does not enclose me in one point of view. Wherever there is a situation, there is a horizon that can be contracted or enlarged. We owe to Gadamer this very fruitful idea that communication at a distance between two differently situated consciousnesses occurs by means of the fusion of horizons, that is, the intersection of their views on the distant and the open ... This concept signifies that we live neither within closed horizons nor within one unique horizon. Insofar as the fusion of horizons excludes the idea of a total and unique knowledge, this concept implies a tension between what is one's own and what is alien, between the near and the far; and hence the play of difference is included in the process of convergence" (Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 73).

> Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his otiginal audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.[22]

The concept of historically effected consciousness describes another way in which the past and the ptesent are closely linked. Contemporary readers of ancient texts are linked to those texts before they ever come in contact with them if their own traditions and communities are part of the history of effect of that text, if their own traditions were at least partially shaped by that text. "*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition*, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated."[23]

Gadamer also identifies a specific category of texts in which the distance between past and present is transcended and which he calls "the classical."[24] "What we call 'classical' does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant mediation it overcomes this distance by itself. The classical, then, is certainly 'timeless,' but this timelessness is a mode of historical being."[25] The classical cannot be fully grasped in a diachronic nor in a synchronic approach. Rather it needs an approach which we could call "metachronic," one that respects the fact that the classical, while fully rooted in a historical situation, transcends it and is able to be recontextualized in new times and places. The classic itself becomes a bridge between its original world and the many worlds of the readers.[26]

Ricœur continues in the line of the new insights of Heidegger and Gadamer, in many regards relying on their insights and joining them in critiquing romantic hetmeneutics. Like Gadamer Ricœut acknowledges

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[22] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296. See also *ibid.*, 290: "Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author."

[23] *Ibid.*, 290.

[24] *Ibid.*, 285-290. "This is just what the word 'classical' means: that the duration of a work's power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited" (290).

[25] *Ibid.*, 290.

[26] The classical is "a historical phenomenon that can be understood solely in terms of its own time. But understanding it will always involve *more* than merely historically reconstructing the past 'world' to which the work belongs. Our understanding will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world, and correlatively, that the work too belongs to our world" (*ibid.*).

that without distanciation there is no text and that distanciation is not an obstacle to understanding, but rather constitutive for any interpretation.[27] Ricœur carefully analyzes the differences between (oral) discourse and (written) text. He arrives at conclusions that are very similar to what Gadamer calls "the classical."

> An essential characteristic of a literary work, and of a work of art in general, is that it transcends its own psychosociological conditions of production and thereby opens itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different sociocultural conditions. In short, the text must be able, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, to "decontextualize" itself in such a way that it can be "recontextualized."[28]

In earlier publications Ricœur called this phenomenon which is a consequence of the fixation of texts in written form "the surplus of meaning."[29] Another important change in written texts is "the abolition of the ostensive character of reference."[30] In its place comes a second-order reference which Ricœur calls "a proposed world." Relying heavily on Heidegger, Ricœur describes the task of interpretation as

> to explicitate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text ... what must be interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities. That is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to this unique text.[31]

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[27] Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 84: Distanciation "is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as writing ... it is the condition of interpretation." See also *ibid.*, 76: "The dominant problematic is that of the text, which reintroduces a positive and, if I may say so, productive notion of distanciation. In my view, the text ... is the paradigm of distanciation in communication. As such it displays a fundamental characteristic of the very historicity of human experience, namely, that it is communication in and through distance." Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth,TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) 44: "Interpretation, philosophically understood, is nothing else than an attempt to make estrangement and distanciation productive."

[28] Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 83. See also *ibid.*, 83-84: "In contrast to the dialogical situation, where the vis-à-vis is determined by the very situation of discourse, written discourse creates an audience that extends in principle to anyone who can read."

[29] See Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 45-46.

[30] Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 85.

[31] *Ibid.*, 86. See also Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, edited, translated and introduced by John B. Thompson (Cambridge/Paris: Cambridge University Press/Éd. de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981, repr. 1990) 176-181, 177: "The nature of reference in the context of literary works has an important consequence for the concept of interpretation. It implies that the meaning of a text lies not behind the text but in front of it. The meaning is not something hidden but something disclosed. What gives rise to understanding is that which points toward a possible world, by means of the non-ostensive references of the text. Texts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orienting oneself in these

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For Ricœur the ultimate goal of the interpretation of texts is self-understanding. At the same time he sees the need of a distanciation of the self to itself, a need to critique the illusions of the subject. "The critique of ideology is the necessary detour that self-understanding must take if the latter is to be formed by the matter of the text and not by the prejudices of the reader."[32] Ricœur borrows the expression "the matter of the text" from Gadamer and uses it synonymously with "the world of the text" or "the proposed world." Critique of ideology is needed according to Ricœur to help readers overcome their own illusions to allow them to be formed by the alternative world which the text projects and offers to the readers as a new possibility. In this final point, Ricœur differs from his predecessors who did not integrate critique of ideology into their hermeneutics.[33]

It was our aim in this second section to analyze some major post-Enlightenment attempts to bridge the gap between the past and the present. In the course of our discussion it became clear that some approaches do not really bridge the gulf, but rather try to work out ways that would allow them to dismiss the historical aspects and to accept the eternal truths. Those who truly face the problem take different directions to solve it. Romantic hermeneutics proposed a psychological solution placing the continuity in the encounter between two subjects, namely the ability of the readers to transpose themselves into the psyche of the author. Heidegger rather saw the continuity in ontological terms, namely in the shared condition of being-in-the-world as being-thrown. For Gadamer it was rather the ongoing participation in the process of tradition that assured the continuity between past and present. Finally Ricœur considered the "world of the text," the proposed world which the text projects to be the bridge between present and past. While Ricœur is critical of those approaches which understand interpretation as trying to grasp the soul of the author of a work, his own position can be called psychological insofar as he conceives hermeneutics as self-understanding.[34] This brings us to our third step in which we shall present our own

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worlds. In this way, disclosure plays the equivalent role for written texts as ostensive reference plays in spoken language. Interpretation thus becomes the apprehension of the proposed worlds which are opened up by the non-ostensive references of the text."

[32] Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 88.

[33] Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Developments and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 74: "Ricœur's hermeneutics represents the first effort in hermeneutics to integrate critical concerns into interpretation theory proper."

[34] This is evident in a number of quotations from Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 87: "the text is the medium through which we understand ourselves;" "we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works" and 88: "to understand is to understand oneself in front of the text;" the *self* is constituted by the 'matter' of the text."

approach which we develop in continuation of the trajectory which we have presented so far.

3. The Future as the Bridge between the Present and the Past

In the discussion of the role of the past for the present, the future has been conspicuously absent. In our own approach we shall take a careful look at the future in order to see how the present and the past are connected. Texts can be seen as functioning in relation to three worlds, the world *behind* the text, the world *of* the text and the world *before* the text.[35] We shall develop our own approach in dialogue with how texts are related to each of these worlds.[36]

A text comes about in a particular world. This is the world in which the (real) author and the original intended readers live. The historical-critical method essentially means studying ancient texts as part of their original historical context. This method focuses on the authors of the texts. In order to understand the authors of texts, we need to study the world in which they live, by which they are formed, informed and trans-formed. From the perspective of the text, the world in which the authors lived is the "world behind the text." Texts belong to a historical context, a situation. Each text has its own horizon. Texts always say what they say from a certain historical (social, personal) perspective. They do not tell us "what happened" but someone's perspective on "what happened." In as much as texts can be seen as windows to the past, the glass in the window is always coloured or the glass is slightly convex or concave changing to a degree what you see through it. The historical dimension includes all spheres of human life. In this approach the emphasis is on "information."

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[35] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 438-453; Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative 1* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 52-82. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991) uses these three worlds as the titles of three chapters of her book (chs. 4-6), but she never seems to discuss these concepts as such or indicate their origin in scholarly discussion. The expression "the world of the text" plays an important role in Ricœur's hermeneutics, as we have seen above, 100.

[36] For earlier articulations of this approach see the essays of part 1 of this book as well as Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt & Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, "Wrestling with Johannine Anti-Judaism: A Hermeneutical Framework for the Analysis of the Current Debate," *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt & Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville, KY/London/Leiden: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 3-37.

Many academic approaches to texts in the fields of theology have been and still are exclusively interested in the world behind the text. As we saw above, the historical-critical approaches content themselves with studying a past text as a past reality and to leave it at that. Recent hermeneutic discussions have, however, pointed out that interpreters cannot abstract from their own situation and their own horizon which is not contemporary with an ancient text.[37] Thus any reading of an ancient text is in and of itself a bridging of the distance between the present and the past. But how does such a bridging work? What makes it possible?

Do we assume that the historical context is only a shell which hides a core of timeless truth which speaks to people independently of their contexts or horizons? When we ask "what contribution, if any, patristic sources can make to contemporary ethical discussions," as post-Enlightenment theologians we have been taught by our historical-critical formation to explore the specific contexts in which the patristic authors wrote, and it is important to ask to what extent those contexts are able to be translated into the contexts into which CST speaks. For such translation work we are inclined to look at the parallels and the differences between the two contexts. The question is, however, what we actually expect to translate. Do we assume that the text of the past contains something like a timeless truth which, disembodied from its original context, can be reincarnated in a contemporary context? Such a dualistic way of conceiving the relationship between the context and the meaning of a text or between the time-immanent and the time-transcending aspects of texts seems problematic, since it does not take the historicity of the human condition seriously. History is reduced to being the clothing of the actors on the stage of life. We need to look for alternatives.

According to romantic hermeneutics this bridging implies the capacity of contemporary persons to transpose themselves into the psyche of the ancient author and thus presupposes a psychological continuity between human subjectivity throughout the centuries. Gadamer, on the other hand, sees our connection with the past as the result of an ongoing fusion of horizons which is at the heart of the process of transmitting tradition. Understanding is participation in this ongoing process of tradition. These two positions offer important building blocks for our approach, but they do not suffice.

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[37] See Richard S. Briggs, "What Does Hermeneutics Have to Do with Biblical Interpretation," *Heythrop Journal* 47 (2006) 55-74, 69: "the self stubbornly refuses to keep out of the way."

For texts are not only part of the historical context/world of their genesis, they also transcend this world. One dimension that enables them to transcend their place and time bound context and to have a function in new contexts, is their literary dimension. In so far as they are literary they create their own world, the world of the text, with its own time, space, plot, actors, language etc. Historical approaches have been called diachronic, since they study a text as it was composed, intended or interpreted "through time." Literary approaches are synchronic, i.e., they are studied independently of historical issues.

Texts follow certain conventions in the way they are written depending on their literary genre. Literary-critical approaches study texts as literature. The focus is no longer on the author, but on the text itself. Any text whether it is a historical study or a novel is to a higher or a lesser degree "fiction." Any writer needs to make a selection of the material (cf. also story time and story place) that is presented, put it into a certain sequence and suggest a certain causality between the events. Texts have a perspective (e.g., I-narratives, third person narratives), a plot, laws and rules as well as actors/characters (heroes and villains). There is also narrative time and place. In and through the way the texts express their message, they are holding up a mirror to their readers in which they can have a deeper insight into the fundamental realities of their life and life in general. Even literary genres of texts that have no direct historical basis (like a parable) can convey a deep wisdom. In this approach the emphasis is on "confrontation," i.e., "confronting us with ourselves and our existential questions.

Gadamer points to a category of literature called "the classical" which is "significant in itself and interprets itself" and therefore speaks to its readers directly independent of temporal or spatial distance.[38] Gadamer does not explain which qualities of "the classical" enable it to have such universal appeal. Ricœur is convinced that written texts in general have a "surplus of meaning" in comparison with the spoken word,[39] namely that written texts have meanings that transcend their author's intention and the limitations of their original context. More specifically, as we have seen above,[40] Ricœur is convinced that in texts of fiction and poetry we encounter a second-order reference, namely the world of the text or a projected world which enables these texts to transcend time and space. This

[38] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 285-290, esp. 289. See above, 99 including notes 24 and 26.

[39] See above, 100 including note 28.

[40] See above, 100.

decisive insight of Ricœur will be the starting point of our own approach which we develop primarily in view of the world before the text.

Religious texts (understood in the broadest sense) are not only part of the historical context of their composition nor can they be restricted to their literary dimensions. They transcend both their original historical settings and their character as literature. They not only originate in a certain world (which enters the text through the author), they not only create their own internal worlds (through their literary qualities), they also transform the world before them into a new world. Texts project future worlds as alternatives to the existing worlds in which we live. Thus they are not only directed toward the past and the present, texts also have a future dimension.[41] It is this future utopian dimension which makes literary texts attractive and potentially subversive inspiring people to change the existing world according to the new world which the text projects. We can call this future dimension the dream or the vision which the text proposes explicitly or implicitly. It is not impossible that the future dimension of a text is in contradiction with aspects of its past and/or present dimensions.

The historical approach is mainly concerned with the authors and their worlds, while the literary approach mainly focuses on the text. The future approach pays special attention to the readers, the communities of readers/traditions formed by the text and the world that is envisioned. It is also concerned with the effect the text intends to have or in fact has on them. In this approach the emphasis is thus on the transformative qualities of the text. Interpretations that focus on the world before the text are neither diachronic nor synchronic, but rather "metachronic." We mean by this term that they are rooted in the past and formed by the present, but transcend ("meta") both of them into the future. While the historical approach sees texts as sources and the literary approach considers them as resources, the future approach sees (religious) texts as symbols, even sacraments. Such texts are not only witnesses to an absent reality of the past, or simply resources to draw on for our individual growth.[42] They are also and primarily an encounter of the reading community with unspeakable mystery. The religious text is not a dead fossil

[41] While we assume that all classic texts to some degree have past, present and future dimensions, we acknowledge that the emphasis varies greatly depending on the literary genre of a text.

[42] Here we differ from Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 167 when she says: "The ultimate objective of reading is enhanced subjectivity" or "the existential augmentation of the reader." A similar individualist position was already espoused by Ricœur. See above, 100-101.

of past life, nor a self-help book to enhance present life, but an invitation, even a summons to participate in building a better world for full life of all creatures. The text is thus not only a window which provides access to information about the world behind the text. The religious text is also more than a mirror in which, by looking at the world of the text, we are confronted with ourselves. Religious texts are icons, windows into the mysterious reality of the future which God has in store for all of creation.

Christians spontaneously connect the revelatory dimension of religious texts with the past or with a timeless dimension of the text. Religious texts have often been seen as revelation of God insofar as they are faithful accounts by reliable eyewitnesses of God's action in the world in a past event (e.g., the Exodus or the raising of Lazarus). Historical and literary criticisms have, however, seriously challenged this view. They have called into question that biblical books were written by the person (eyewitness) who is claimed by the book itself (e.g. the Deutero- and the Trito-Pauline letters) or by tradition (e.g., John, son of Zebedee as the author of the gospel of John) to be the author. Moreover in some cases it has proved impossible to establish the historicity of certain key events of the Bible (e.g., the Exodus, the raising of Lazarus). Consequently theologians have looked for revelatory dimensions in the literary character of the texts. Even though a story (like the raising of Lazarus) may not be historical, it can still contain a theological message which can be accepted as revelatory. Revelation not only happens through the eyewitnesses or through exact historical accounts, but also through the plot of a narrative which was constructed by a later writer, through the stylistic beauty of a second generation text or through the faith witness of a later Christian community.

But revelation not only happens in the past and present dimensions of the text. Perhaps primarily the revelation of God happens in the future dimension. From a Christian perspective we call this future dimension eschatological. Religious texts are revelatory foremost because and in as much as, by the working of the Holy Spirit, they have the ability to propose God's dream for the world.[43] This eschatological perspective

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[43] See Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 96-97: "In this way ... is placed the proposal of a world, which in the language of the Bible, is called a new world, a new covenant, the Kingdom of God, a new birth. These are realities that unfold before the text, unfolding to be sure for us, but based upon the text. This is what can be called the 'objectivity' of the new being projected by the text. ... If the Bible can be said to be revealed, this is to be said of the 'thing' it says, of the new being it unfolds. I would then venture to say

implies that Jesus' first coming set in motion the realization of God's dream for the world. In the time before his second coming, Christians are called to continue this work and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to participate in bringing about God's dream for the world. The most important roles of the Bible are to put before us the vision of this alternative world and to provide the motivation and inspiration for people to get involved in it.

In the future-oriented hermeneutics which we propose, texts of the past have meaning in the present and the future because they are always already, at least partially, involved in creating the world they propose. The inherent future dimensions of the text are a "living" bridge between the past and the present, one that is constantly made, unmade and remade. Texts are constitutive for forming the communities that read them and live by them. Understanding texts means understanding oneself before the texts, as Ricœur and Schneiders have pointed out. However, we need to complement the spheres of psychology and individualism with a communitarian and praxis-oriented perspective. Understanding also means that a community understands its identity in the process of its participation in realizing the vision of its foundational texts.

Speaking about the reference of literary works, Ricœur uses the Heideggerian expression "being-in-the-world," but also "world of the text," "proposed world" and "world in front of the text." This apparently deliberate ambiguity calls for some clarifications. The ability of texts to offer their readers new possibilities of being-in-the-world is rooted in their literary capacity of creating their own text-immanent worlds. This can be meant by "the world of the text" which some prefer to call "the world *inside* the text." We would, however, seriously misunderstand Ricœur, if we were to think that this is all there is to it. The reference of literary works is not purely text-immanent to an imaginary idealistic or utopian world, but also a text-transcendent world which is a real possibility and which the text has already begun to assist in becoming real.[44] Here again

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that the Bible is revealed to the extent that the new being that is in question is itself *revealing* with respect to the world, to all of reality, including my existence and my history. In other words, revelation, if the expression is to have a meaning, is a feature of the biblical *world* ... we stated that the world of the literary text is a projected world, one that is poetically distanced from everyday reality. Is this not the case par excellence of the new being projected and proposed by the Bible? Does not this new being make its way through the world of ordinary experience, despite the closedness of this experience? Is not the power of projection belonging to this [projected] world the power to make a break and a new beginning?"

[44] Cf. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 167: "It is important to realize that the 'world the text projects' is not the imaginative, fictional world of the work, for example, the land

we need to avoid the pitfalls of individualism. For the world of the text to become world before the text, we need the participation of the reading community and its creational and cultural context.

From a theological point of view the proposed future world is an eschatological reality. Text-immanent and text-transcendent dimensions therefore need to be complemented by a reality that breaks into our world from outside. For Christian believers the proposed world is not just a new possibility, but a gift from God, not primarily a projection, but the in-breaking of God into the world.[45] The alternative world is not of our own making, but a new creation. It is God's vision or dream for the world. In our eschatological hermeneutics the Holy Spirit has a central place in the process of interpretation.[46] Through the working of the Holy Spirit the in-breaking of God's future, the realization of God's dream for the world is realized. The Holy Spirit enables persons and communities to participate in the realization of this dream. This requires openness and receptiveness.[47] The Holy Spirit thus assures the continuity between the

of Oz or the inn to which the Good Samaritan took the victim of the robbers. The fiction is the vehicle that carries the reader into a possible alternative *reality*. This is precisely the dynamic of the parable" and 168: "To really enter the world before the text ... is to be changed, to 'come back different', which is a way of saying that one does not come 'back' at all but moves forward into a newness of being. From the genuine encounter with the true in the beautiful one cannot go home again."

[45] Elsbernd & Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times," 80: "We see 'signs of the times' as places where the in-breaking of God's future into the world can occur. As such they are constitutively eschatological. The new epochal developments in our world are not just that, but they are at least potentially the tangible representations of how God enters into this world and moves it toward its final destination." See also Hans-Joachim Sander, "Die Zeichen der Zeit erkennen und Gott benennen: Der semiotische Charakter von Theologie," in *Theologische Quartalschrift* 182 (2002) 27-40.

[46] See Elsbernd & Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times," 55-56. Cf. the question of Briggs, "Hermeneutics," 65: "has Ricœur secularized biblical imagination by turning the power of appropriation of biblical narrative over from the Holy Spirit to the creative imagination?" While this question is to the point, we may not overlook that there was a nascent awareness of the need for the "spirit" in the hermeneutic process in Ricœur's work, albeit a spirit with a small s. See Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 63 where he says in relation to Dilthey: "But the claim that this hermeneutics of life is history remains incomprehensible. For the passage from psychological to historical understanding assumes that the interconnection of works of life is no longer lived or experienced by anyone. Precisely therein lies its objectivity. Hence we may ask if, in order to grasp the objectifications of life and to treat them as givens, it is not necessary to place speculative idealism at the very roots of life, that is, ultimately to think of life itself as spirit (*Geist*). Otherwise, how can we understand the fact that it is in art, religion, and philosophy that life expresses itself most completely by objectifying itself most entirely? Is it not because spirit is most at home here?"

[47] See Elsbernd & Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times," 82: "Authoritative texts which explicitly deal with the future are threaded through with visions, longings, desires, hope, Spirit and imagination. Raising consciousness to the Spirit's activity, keeping alive longings, invigorating hope, investigating how norms flow from visions

revelatory potential of the ancient text which as Gadamer's notion of effective historical consciousness has taught us is never completely past and the inbreaking of God's future.[48]

As we saw above,[49] Ricœur acknowledges the need of a critique of ideology to be part of interpretation. According to him critique of ideology is to counteract the prejudices and illusions of the interpreter. From a theological point of view we not only see the need of debunking prejudice and illusions, we also have to take into account the effects of human sinfulness on the endeavour of hermeneutics.[50] Since Scripture is word of God in word of humans,[51] it is to be expected that human sinfulness has left its traces in Scripture. Many pages of Scripture have as their main concern to show how "God writes straight with crooked lines," how despite human sin God succeeds in realizing God's dream for humanity.[52] "In determining what in a text is sin-filled and what is grace-filled we propose the following criterion: inclusivity that makes possible a future for all."[53] This criterion of inclusivity is the content of God's dream for the world. Insofar as this criterion points to a norm and in as much as inclusivity is still to be realized, we speak of "normativity of the future."

> By bringing the two seemingly contradictory terms "normativity" and "future" together, we deliberately create a dialectic tension which invites us to reassess the meanings of both terms. In the expression "normativity of the future" both "normativity" and "future" no longer simply carry their usual meaning, but "normativity" gains a dynamic dimension from "future" and the future is reined in by the concreteness of normativity.[54]

In this hermeneutical approach texts that are obviously marred by human sinfulness are not to be banned from the books in which they

and studying their impact on people's lives are constitutive tasks of the normativity of the future approach. Fostering such openness to the in-breaking future is a significant contribution of normativity of the future to social transformation."

[48] Cf. the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: "But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written (*eodem Spiritu quo scripta est*), no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out" (DV 12). The translation is taken from Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 120.

[49] See above, 101.

[50] See Elsbernd & Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times," 45-46.

[51] See *Dei Verbum* 11-12.

[52] See, e.g., Gen 45:5: "And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

[53] See Elsbernd & Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times," 60.

[54] *Ibid.*, 53-54. In this volume, 58.

appear, but the interpreters are challenged to find in these very texts the inclusive vision of the future that is its explicit or implicit horizon.[55]

In this eschatological hermeneutic the task of the reading community with regard to the ancient text is not to repeat it, to reenact it as if it was a script for their lives. Nor is their task to find its timeless core to recontextualize it. In a very real sense the past text has passed and cannot be resuscitated. Perhaps one could say that the text does not have intrinsic, but paradigmatic value. This means that the reading community has the task of reading and internalizing the ancient text as the first chapters of a chain novel of which they have to write the next chapter.

> Suppose a novel were being written through the efforts of many authors working serially rather than in collaboration. One received the first three chapters of the novel and had been asked to write the fourth chapter. In order to help create a good novel, it would be necessary to pay careful attention to the plot and to the established characterizations, among other things … In short, when deciding how to continue the novel, one's choice would depend on how well it 'fit' with the preceding chapters as a whole *and* on how well it articulated substantial insights, from one's own lights, about human experience.[56]

4. Wealth and Poverty in Light of Divine Providence: Reading a Sermon of Theodoret of Cyrus in a Future Perspective

In the last part of this study we shall give an example of our future-oriented hermeneutical approach. We shall use it to interpret the sixth of Theodoret's ten discourses or sermons on divine providence.[57] Born around 386 in Antioch,[58] Theodoret became bishop of Cyrus in Syria in 423. He was a leading theologian of his time and a prolific writer. He was a prominent figure in the Nestorian and Eutychian controversies. His work consists of exegetical, apologetic and dogmatic writings. His book

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[55] For an attempt to apply this approach to John 8:31-59 see Bieringer, Pollefeyt & Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, "Wrestling with Johannine Anti-Judaism," 28-37. See also in this volume 110-116, as well as part 2, 117-402.

[56] See Cady, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," 445. Cf. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003) Oration 6, 9., 9: "a new chapter has been added to the stories of old."

[57] Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Divine Providence*, trans. by and annotated by Thomas Halton, Ancient Christian Writers, 49 (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1988) 73-87: Discourse 6: "That Wealth and Poverty Both Have Their Uses in Life."

[58] See *ibid.*, 1 for references to the discussion concerning the date of his birth.

De providentia is an apologetic work written during the so-called "cold war" years between the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) and consisting of ten sermons or discourses "probably delivered before a well-educated audience in Antioch."[59] To situate these sermons historically Thomas Halton says:

> The great extremes of wealth and poverty that prevailed in Antioch in the time of St. John Chrysostom and Theodoret, the extent of slavery, and manifest wickedness of many of the prosperous, gave the question of divine providence a special topicality and urgency. The skeptical had a ready breeding ground for arguments denying the existence of providence and the good-living poor were hard put to see how God could be provident and yet allow such anomalies to continue.

This apologetic-homiletic context needs to be kept in mind when interpreting *De providentia*. Theodoret intends "to convince primarily by arguments from reason and concrete experience."[60] After trying to prove divine providence from the physical order in the first sermons, beginning with the sixth sermon, Theodoret focuses on the moral and social order.

The sixth sermon is entitled "That wealth and poverty both have their uses in life" and tries to convince those who are "complaining about the inequalities of life."[61] Theodoret tries to answer three objections which are formulated as questions: first "Why are sinners wealthy and the virtuous poor?" (§§4-16); second "Why are riches not distributed among all men equally?" (§§17-35) and third "Why do the majority of the wealthy live immoral lives?" (§§36-41).

For our topic it is important to know that by the age of 23 Theodoret had given his entire heritage to the poor and become a monk. In Letter 81 to the consul Nomus, Theodoret describes his attitude toward possessions as a bishop:

> In so many years I never took an obol or a garment from anyone. Not one belonging to my household ever received a loaf or an egg. I could not endure the thought of possessing anything save the rags I wore. From the revenues of my see I erected public porticoes; I built two large bridges; …[62]

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[59] István Pásztori-Kupán, *Theodoret of Cyrus*, The Early Church Fathers (London/New York: Routledge, 2006) 18. For a discussion of the date and place see Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Divine Providence*, 2-3.

[60] *Ibid.*, 7.

[61] Discourse 6, §3. We follow the translation and paragraph division of Thomas Halton (see n. 57).

[62] *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, III, 277. See also *Sources Chrétiennes*, 98, 196.

We now turn to the first objection which points to the riches and abundant blessings of the sinners and to the poverty of the virtuous as a proof against divine providence. Theodoret answers this objection by focusing on virtue as "the supreme blessing" (§6). According to him wealth is "the enemy rather than the friend of virtue" (§9). On the other hand Theodoret claims that "poverty is a help to the good life, and the only sure road to perfect virtue" (§11). Nevertheless Theodoret does not see wealth as intrinsically evil, rather he maintains "that wealth and poverty, like raw materials or instruments, are given to men by the Creator and that with these, men, like sculptors, either fashion the statue of virtue or strike the figure of evil" (§15). However, Theodoret is convinced that virtuous rich people are the exception whereas the virtuous poor are many.

Theodoret's apologetic reflections are driven by the conviction that every person is called to happiness, good fortune and supreme blessing. This is the inclusive horizon of this text. No one is *a priori* excluded from this blessing, neither poor nor rich persons. Through the acquisition of virtue, it is open to everyone. Theodoret invites his audience neither to scoff at poverty, nor to slander wealth (§15). The major problem with Theodoret's answer is that he downplays the seriousness of the problem of poverty that his opponents address. They speak about people who "are short of the necessities of life; ... live in squalor and dirt; ... are hounded down to earth, treated with violence, trampled in the mire, and forced to put up with countless hardships of a similar nature" (§4). It is not acceptable to romanticize such abject poverty which in the described extreme forms leaves little room to acquire or practice virtue. Theodoret oversimplifies by opposing poverty and wealth as if there was only one type of poverty and one type of wealth. There are, however, many types of poverty and wealth, and what Theodoret says about "poverty" and "wealth" as such only applies to a few forms of them, namely extreme wealth and moderate poverty.

With his moral romanization Theodoret runs the risk of legitimizing the social status quo and the excessive wealth of some as well as the abject poverty of others. This tendency reaches its climax in the statement "What we maintain is that wealth and poverty... are given to men by the Creator" (§15), thus giving all forms of poverty and wealth divine legitimation. Thus he covers up that some forms of wealth and poverty are the result of injustice, of stealing and robbing in all its overt and covert forms, and thus not God's doing, but the doing of sinful human beings who turn against God and God's desire for all. In this way Theodoret's

words are ideological, serving the selfish interests of the powerful. They ignore or deny that true happiness, even if it stems from a virtuous life, needs a certain amount of "wealth" to meet the necessities of life.

Theodoret's answer to the second objection ("Why are riches not distributed among all men equally?") is equally beset with ideologies which defend the rich against the poor. Theodoret's most basic ideological assumption is again that God is the one who allots wealth and poverty. Then the text compares God's allotting wealth and poverty to the body and its many members (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-30): "I would like to ask a man such as they why has the Creator not given the same faculty to all the members of the body, ...?" The way Theodoret uses the body-members metaphor is highly problematic. While Paul's text is about giving one type of gift to one and another type of gift to another, Theodoret applies the text to God giving gifts (wealth) to some and little or nothing (poverty) to others. The ideological abuse of the metaphor is obvious. In so doing, Theodoret actualizes a dangerous potential of the body-members metaphor. In extra-Biblical texts this metaphor was often used to legitimize the *status quo* of social inequality.[63] Exegetes are, however, convinced that in 1 Cor 12:12-30 Paul avoids this danger.[64] While Paul uses the metaphor to stress the equality of the members, Theodoret uses it to legitimate the inequality.

Theodoret even stretches his argument to the point of claiming that life would be impossible, if wealth were distributed equally. To prove his point, Theodoret points to everyday experience as self-evident proof of his position.

> Who would lead the oxen under the yoke to plow, renew the land, sow the seeds, reap the grain when it sprouts in full bloom, deliver it to the thresher and separate the chaff, if poverty did not spur him on to toil? ... If all were equally well-off, nobody would ever be another person's servant. One of two things would happen. Either everybody would eagerly take to every kind of work through necessity, or we would all perish simultaneously through lack of the necessities of life (§§22-23).

[63] Andreas Lindemann, "Die Kirche als Leib: Beobachtungen zur ,demokratischen' Ekklesiologie bei Paulus," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 92 (1995) 140-165, 143: "In den genannten Textbeispielen dient das Bild vom Leib und den Gliedern jedenfalls primär der Bestätigung und Verfestigung einer bestehenden gesellschaftlichen und politischen Ordnung und deren Verteidigung gegen Kritik."
[64] See, e.g., *ibid.*, 164: "In der paulinischen Rezeption und Explikation des Bildes befinden sich die Glieder des Leibes in einer vollständigen wechselseitigen Abhängigkeit und Gleichheit."

In this way of reasoning we encounter an author who is totally caught up in the social order of his own time and cannot think beyond it. All his line of reasoning or rather his self-evident experiential wisdom proves is that the type of social order Theodoret knows would collapse, if there were no poor. But even here it is not abject poverty that is needed but rather unequally distributed wealth where some have more than others, but where no one is suffering from extreme poverty. Indirectly Theodoret admits this by his rhetorical strategy in §21: "You are very indignant, however, because all men are not swimming in riches, do not live in grand houses…" In fact, as we pointed out before, his opponents had not postulated extreme wealth for all, but had castigated the extreme poverty of many. Theodoret continues his line of argument by arguing that God "has given the earth as a foundation common to all" (§25). With regard to the basic realities of birth (§§26-28) and death (§§29-30) all are created equal. While these observations are basically correct, they cover up the inequalities which nevertheless exist between rich and poor in these basic areas of life, and by covering up, they give the impression that after all it is not all that bad that the poor are poor. We only mention one example: infant mortality is much higher and life expectancy is lower among the poor than among the rich.

Despite these ideological distortions, we do not consider Theodoret's sermon hopelessly locked up in its own time and dangerous for the cause of justice. In what follows we shall analyze the world this text projects. Implicitly the text frequently assumes a world in which everyone is well. Even when the text is stating "If there were equal provision of wealth, the result would be that all would face annihilation" (§23), the basic assumption is that no one should be annihilated. The text takes great pains to show that after all the poor are well off and in some ways better off than the rich. Even if this runs the risk of romanticizing poverty and of covering up that the poor are getting a bad deal, it nevertheless reinforces that they should all be well.

Another strategy of Theodoret is, as we have seen above, to emphasize that despite the differences in poverty and wealth, basically everyone is equal seen from the perspective of creation (§§25-30). It will not take much to discover in this basic equality the dream of God for all and to use it against the unequal distribution of poverty and wealth. This will be supported by the realization that the equality with regard to creation is God's doing whereas the unequal wealth distribution is human doing. Here one dimension of the text, namely the stress on the basic equality,

needs to be used to debunk the other, namely the legitimation of social injustice.[65]

At the end of his sermon, Theodoret briefly answers a third objection, namely "Why do the majority of the wealthy live immoral lives?" Here he stresses the free will which God has give to all. He reiterates that the "Creator … placed at man's disposal poverty and riches like raw materials" (§37). Here for the first time he shows evidence of his awareness that riches are not only a gifts from God, but can also be the result of increasing them "at the expense of other people's misfortunes" (§37). This awareness is in strange tension with all the other places in the sermon where wealth and poverty are "given to men by the Creator" (§15) and "everything that happens" is to be regarded "as coming from the providence of God" (§42). On the other hand Theodoret moves away for a moment from romanticizing poverty and admits that some "have learned evil doing while living in poverty" (§37). However, immediately after this he adds an extended section in which he tries to illustrate that God "gave health to the poor as their special portion" (§38). In a fairy tale-like idealization Theodoret claims that what good living conditions, doctors and medicine cannot achieve for the rich, divine providence achieves directly for the poor. "Nature satisfies his needs and takes the place of doctors when he is ill" (§41). In this way he covers up the fact that many poor people die because of the lack of healthy living conditions and adequate medical care. Once again Theodoret's text transcends its own exclusionary tendencies which belittle the suffering of the poor and make it look as if their plight was not all that bad after all. The self-transcendence of the text is found in the implicit horizon which unmistakably means that God wants the poor to be blessed with good health and happiness.

The significance of Theodoret's sermon for us today is not primarily to satisfy our curiosity about the past, nor to provide eternal truths which survive the time-bound dimensions of the text. Rather in dialoguing with the ancient text of Theodoret, we respect the irreducible otherness which we encounter in it, both in terms of its witness of the past and its projection of the future. At the same time in the dialogue we go beyond reconstructing the past by engaging the future dimension of the text in writing the next chapter of the chain novel. While trying to be very

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[65] Cf. the example of "All men are created equal" in the American Declaration of Independence and its being read as "All are created equal." See Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 175-176.

respectful of Theodoret's past text, we as persons from a different age cannot but bringing his text into our own time and interacting with its potential of creating a future in which the dichotomy of abject poor and excessively rich is overcome in a community of love.

Conclusion

In this paper we have wrestled with one of the decisive questions of Christianity today, namely the role of the past and more specifically past texts for the present. We tried to show that the question itself and the way we formulate the question already imply important hermeneutic assumptions. We were mostly concerned about the fact that the way the question was formulated excluded the future. It has proved to be rather naïve to think that one could rid the world of evil by severing it from its roots in the past. It is, however, equally naïve to think that one could protect the world from evil to come by fearfully repeating the past. Some hermeneutic approaches seem to think of texts of the past the way dualistic anthropology conceives the human person. They assume that at the death of a text the immortal soul, its eternal truth survives while the mortal body, the time bound aspect, is buried and in later centuries the same eternal truth can be reincarnated in new historical contexts. The hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricœur have taught us that it is not a matter of reincarnating ancient texts. Interpreting ancient texts is rather more like conceiving new life, i.e., composing new texts in which the interpreter plays the role of an author. Interpretation is part of the movement from generation to generation, part of the process of transmitting tradition from age to age. The element of continuity in this movement is the dream of God for an inclusive community mediated by the Holy Spirit. The struggle to understand texts of the past is a commitment to the realization of the promise, the hope and the continuing discoveries of what it means to be human.

PART 2

THE PRACTICE OF
THE "NORMATIVITY OF THE FUTURE" APPROACH