David Tracy has accurately described the basic task of the systematic theologian as hermeneutical: “the reinterpretation of the tradition for the present situation.”¹ Not only is the Christian existentially situated within, and even constituted by, the meanings, values, and relationships of a particular religious tradition (as each human being is necessarily so situated in and constituted by a tradition),² but the Christian is also ultimately committed to that tradition as the mediation of the knowledge and experience of God’s definitive revelation of salvation in Jesus Christ. Thus, the systematic theologian, prompted by this faith in the saving meanings of his or her tradition, rejects the sterile alternatives of mere repetition of the tradition as practiced by the traditionalist or the unreal rejection of the tradition by the “autonomous reason” of the Enlightenment thinker, and engages in interpretation which is

a mediation of past and present, a translation carried on within the effective history of a tradition to retrieve its sometimes strange, sometimes familiar meanings.³

2. This “ontology of consciousness exposed to the effects of history” (as Ricoeur translates Gadamer’s idea of wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein) asserts that “consciousness, even before its awakening as such, belongs to and depends on that which affects it” — i.e. tradition. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981) 70-71, 74.
3. Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 99.
While, as with the interpretation of classics in general, the interpretation which the systematic theologian practices ultimately aims at "explicating that mode-of-being-in-the-world, that way of looking at reality which the texts express," this goal can only be satisfactorily arrived at by way of two "privileged routes by which understanding is developed into interpretation," namely "textual exegesis and critique of ideology." The first "route" takes seriously the historical and linguistic nature of the texts of tradition, as well as their autonomy as texts. Put another way, it recognizes both distance and distanciation. Insofar as the texts or classics of the tradition are historical products, the "false scandal" of their being expressed in the "available believable's" or "cultural vehicle[s] which . . . [are] no longer ours" must be overcome by "explanatory" historico-critical methods of exegesis, which attempt to bridge the cultural distance between text and interpreter. Insofar as the texts are produced via a process of "distanciation via expression" which renders the texts relatively autonomous of "the author, the initial situation of discourse and the original addressee," literary, structuralist, and semiotic methods, which provisionally treat texts as "wordless and authorless object[s] . . . [in order] to explain the text in terms of its internal relations" are valid and helpful.

7. Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 129.
10. Cf. Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 117-18, 122; also Ricoeur, "What is a Text?" 152-57. Note that, for Ricoeur, this "prescinding" from the referents of the text is a provisional step toward interpretation. The analogous relationship between language as system (langue) and its units, on the one hand, and the text and its component units of language, on the other, justifies the search for a purely intratextual structure. On the other hand, it cannot be forgotten that discourse is more fundamentally related to language as speech (parole) than to language as system, and therefore, it is necessary to restore the text to "living communication" so that it culminates in an appropriation of the referent of the text.
This first "privileged route" however, must be followed by a second: that of the critique of ideology. It is this second "privileged route" that will be the focus of this paper. That theological method is hermeneutical, and that it necessarily involves the critique of ideology, are widely accepted ideas — almost commonplaces — among theologians today. The primary resource, however, from whose ideas on ideology this paper will draw, will not be a theologian, but a philosopher (albeit one who has also written more explicitly on matters theological). This choice of consulting the thought of Paul Ricoeur on the nature of ideology and ideology-critique, acknowledges that his ideas have, in fact, been the foundation on which many theologians have built, and might, therefore, be seen as a modest attempt at ressourcement. Drawing then on a limited number of Ricoeur’s essays, this paper will present his understanding of the following: first, the nature and functions of ideology; secondly, the possibility of the critique of ideology; thirdly, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and the particular ideological critique that is relevant to religion and theology; and finally, the limits and insufficiency of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," particularly in the theological task of reinterpreting the Christian tradition.

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF IDEOLOGIES

While Habermas, following Marx, understands ideology as "the systematic distortion of communication by the hidden exercise of force," Ricoeur takes a broader, less exclusively


12. Tracy, of course, is the most obvious example of a theologian for whom Ricoeur is dialogue-partner, and indeed, teacher. Similarly, Schillebeeckx’s understanding of ideology presented in his lecture “The Theological Understanding of Faith in the Year 1983” (as summarized by John Bowden) suggests an indebtedness to Ricoeur’s broader conception of ideology. Cf. John Bowden, Edward Schillebeeckx: In Search of the Kingdom of God (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 136.

pejorative view of ideology, which ultimately arrives at a point of virtual agreement with the Habermas position, but which does not start out from it. As shall be seen later, it is this broader perspective that allows Ricoeur to speak more realistically about the possibility and the limits of the critique of ideology.

Ricoeur sees ideology functioning on three distinct but interrelated levels. First and primarily, ideology functions as a socially integrative force by fulfilling the social group's need for an image or representation of itself: it provides social identity. Ideology at this most basic level of an image of a social group, its relations and orientations is constitutive of any and every social group: it is "constitutive of social existence."14 It represents to succeeding generations the impetus, meanings, values of the founding event of the group. Because of its integrative function, it presents and encodes a simplifying, schematic and justificatory vision of the group, the world, history, tending to idealize the group; and thus, might be said to have a "doxic character," which means that

the epistemological level of ideology is that of opinion, of the Greek doxa; or if you prefer Freudian terminology, it is the moment of rationalisation. Hence . . . nothing is closer to rhetoric — the art of the probable and the persuasive — than ideology.15

As a result too of its integrative function, ideology tends to be "operative and not thematic,"16 presupposed, lived and thought "from" and "within," rather than "about," and thus is open to the possibility (though not the necessity) of dissimulation. Finally, ideology as integrating schema tends to have a conservative force, an inertia, that resists change, unorthodoxy, all that is alien to or threatening to its simplified, schematic vision.

As most groups involve relationships of power, however, this more neutral concept of ideology as integrating symbolization gives way to a second, more evaluative concept of ideology:

16. Ibid. 227.
ideology as legitimation of power. When the integrating function of ideology is used to justify relationships of domination by certain sub-groups within the larger group, certain features of ideology as integration are heightened, particularly the last two of non-transparency and inertia.

Thus, a third, properly pejorative level or concept of ideology — that of Marx and Habermas — is arrived at: ideology as distortion, as inversion. In order to legitimate and perpetuate certain relationships of power, the symbolic constitution of a group may be so distorted as to promote an unreal view of life and reality:

... the activity of real life ceases to be the base and is replaced by what men say, imagine and represent. Ideology is the error which makes us take the image for the real, the reflection for the original.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus, ideology at this level can be rightly referred to and described by terms borrowed from psychoanalysis:

\textit{illusion} as distinct from error, \textit{projection} as the constitution of a false transcendence, \textit{rationalisation} as the subsequent rearrangement of motivations according to the appearance of a rational justification.\textsuperscript{18}

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

As the celebrated Gadamer-Habermas debate demonstrates, hermeneutics and the critique of ideology appear at first to be mutually opposed, utterly unreconcilable projects. On the one hand, the hermeneutic philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer has rehabilitated prejudice, authority, and tradition from the negative appraisals of the Enlightenment by its development of an "ontology of consciousness exposed to the effects of history" which leads to a "critique of critique"\textsuperscript{19} — including the critique of ideology. Ricoeur summarizes this ontology and this critique thus:

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 230.
\textsuperscript{18} Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," 84.
\textsuperscript{19} Ricoeur, ibid. 71.
... a human being discovers his finitude in the fact that, first of all, he finds himself within a tradition or traditions. Because history precedes me and my reflection, because I belong to history before I belong to myself, pre-judgment also precedes judgment, and submission to traditions precedes their examination. ... If therefore we cannot extract ourselves from historical becoming, or place ourselves at a distance from it in such a way that the past becomes an object for us, then we must confess that we are always situated within history in such a fashion that our consciousness never has the freedom to bring itself face to face with the past by an act of sovereign independence.\(^\text{20}\)

On the other hand, the critical theory proposed by Habermas and the Frankfurt school judges this hermeneutical assessment of tradition as fatally forgetful of the fact that all knowledge is linked to "interests" and that therefore, tradition is not simply a heritage of meanings that must be actualized and interpreted. Rather, it is the "place par excellence of distortions and alienations,"\(^\text{21}\) alive with conflicting interests, infected with the hidden violence of ideology that attempts to protect and perpetuate interests of domination under the mask of pure, disinterested knowledge. Thus, what is needed is not hermeneutics but the critique of ideology: an unmasking of these systematic distortions of thought through "explanatory" methods analogous to those of psychoanalysis, which attempts a genetic ‘‘reconstruction’ of the processes of ‘desymbolisation’’\(^\text{22}\) which gave rise to the repressive violence of ideology. Finally, the interest that motivates such a critique is an emancipative one, that of the construction of a future of "unlimited and unconstrained communication,"\(^\text{23}\) freed from the distortions of violence and oppression. Thus, the "utopian horizon" of the critique of ideology seems to contradict hermeneutics, which "in contrast appears to renew the philosophies of reminiscence."\(^\text{24}\)


\(^{21}\) Ibid. 155.

\(^{22}\) Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," 85.

\(^{23}\) Ibid. 87.

\(^{24}\) Ricoeur, "Ethics and Culture," 159.
Ricoeur, however, unlike Gadamer, sees the possibility, and indeed, the necessity of integrating the critical "moment" of ideology critique in the practice of the hermeneutics of tradition, if this hermeneutics is to fulfill its program. For him, the irreplaceable contribution of the Heidegger-Gadamer tradition of hermeneutics is its "going back to the foundations" which resulted in its unsurpassed description of the "ontological structure of understanding"; unfortunately, for various reasons, the "return route from ontology to epistemology" has not been attempted to satisfaction by this philosophy, and thus methodological issues, including the need for critical, explanatory methods to arrive at understanding, have been neglected. This distrust of method has been aggravated in Gadamer's case by his suspicion of any method that claims to speak from a point of "objective, scientific distance" from the tradition, after the fashion of the Enlightenment and its untenable view of the "distance" and "objectivity" possible to science.

Ricoeur, while similarly rejecting this unrealistic Enlightenment view of distance, argues for an understanding of distance and distanciation that does not only not contradict the hermeneutic ontology of belonging to a tradition, but is in fact, a necessary aspect of this belonging. It is this distance and distanciation that makes critical methods possible.

First, while one recognizes that one belongs to a tradition, is influenced even on a pre-rational level by its texts and their efficacy through history, and can thus never attain a position of complete objectivity with regard to them, nevertheless the texts themselves are distant temporally and culturally. It is their very "otherness" that constitutes historical consciousness, for "without the tension between the self and the other, there is no historical consciousness." Thus, "to interpret is to render near what is far"; and thus hermeneutics needs explanatory methods, which include the quasi-psychoanalytic methods of ideology-critique. In short, it is possible to conduct a critique of ideology of texts.

27. Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 111.
Secondly, if the goal of hermeneutics is not the Romantic ideal of comprehending the author's intention, or "the world behind the text," but rather opening oneself up to the world of possibility unfolded "before the text," then distance is once again involved, and the critique of ideology made possible. In the first place, since the world opened up by the text is "the mode of the possible, or better of the power-to-be," then the distance between the possibility of the world of the text and the reality of the everyday world "implies in principle a recourse against any given reality and thereby the possibility of a critique of the real." In other words, it is possible to conduct a critique of ideology of the realities of the everyday world. In the second place, in order to understand this world of possibility offered by the text, the interpreting subject must practice a certain distanciation from his own subjectivity; must make himself open, expose himself to the world of text, rather than project himself onto it. " Appropriation of the proposed worlds offered by the text passes through the disappropriation of the self." In this case, this distanciation from oneself allows a critique of the ideologies of the interpreting subject.

In other words, if interpretation is best described as a "conversation," between the subject with his or her pre-understandings, self-understandings, and concrete "real" world, and the world of possibility offered by the text; and if distance, therefore, is a necessary presupposition and integral part of the process of conversation, then the critique of ideology of both the text and the interpreting subject is possible. Thus, Ricoeur concludes that "the critique of ideology can be incorporated, as an objective and explanatory segment, in the project of enlarging and restoring communication and self-understanding." It is not,

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. 94.
31. It is in his decisive inclusion of a critique of the ideologies of the interpreting subject and not just of the text or the tradition — in other words, his inclusion of a dimension of self-critique — that Ricoeur appears to surpass Habermas, overcoming the real danger of the critique of ideology simply degenerating into new forms of ideology.
32. Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 111.
pace Gadamer, an impossibility for the hermeneutical project; nor is it, pace Habermas, a completely separate project, for indeed, the critique of ideology cannot truly "fulfill its project" if it does not "incorporate a certain regeneration of the past, [and] consequently, a reinterpretation of tradition."³³ This dependence of critique on tradition, and therefore, on hermeneutics, will receive fuller treatment later.

THE "HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION," RELIGION AND THEOLOGY

Ricoeur believes that the relationship between general philosophical hermeneutics and regional hermeneutics like theology can be conceived as a "mutual inclusion."³⁴ While, at first glance, theological hermeneutics may appear to be a mere "application" of the principles of general hermeneutics, a closer look reveals that the specificity of theology’s texts and tasks involves not just an application but a transforming appropriation of these principles:

Only the specificity of the task of interpreting these specific texts will require that theological hermeneutics ultimate encompass philosophical hermeneutics and transform it into its own organon.³⁵

The specificity, therefore, of the texts of theology requires a specific form of ideology-critique, based on and motivated by a specific Christian understanding of emancipative "interest" and the emancipated future. Ricoeur, for his part, concretely suggests that the specificity of religion as the concern of the texts of theology demands that the "external critique" of religion classically articulated by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud be incorporated by theology as "an instrument of internal critique"³⁶ in the form

³⁵. Ibid.
³⁶. Ibid. 19.
of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that results in "demystification." 37

In a sense, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that Ricoeur suggests as a task for theology is a broader concept than "the critique of ideology." "Ideology" more strictly refers to distortions of thought that are connected to domination, whereas the problem the hermeneutics of suspicion confronts is the more comprehensive problem of the "false consciousness" that is "a dimension of our social discourse," 38 which includes, but is not limited to, ideology. For Ricoeur, the term "false consciousness," though Marxist in origin, can be applied "usefully" as well to the "genealogies of ethics in Nietzsche, and the theory of ideas and illusions in Freud." 39 These three "masters of suspicion" might be said to have engaged in a "general exegesis of false consciousness" 40 in religion. Marx critiques religion as ideology justifying unjust domination, encouraging submissiveness and promoting passivity in the face of oppression. Nietzsche critiques religion and its values as "distortions whose intention it is to replace a strong will to power with passivity, resentment, and self-abnegation...[nothing more than] negations of life." 41 Freud critiques religion as compensation for and escape from fears, inhibitions, frustrations.

The task of theology then is to reject the reductionism present in these analyses, but to accept these views as critiques that faith must "pass through" in its effort at interpretation for its own authenticity and truth. Ricoeur writes:

This kind of harsh critique has to be assumed with all of its strength. It has to be interiorized to the point where it not only affects the institutionalized forms of Christian faith, but the functioning of its basic models (God as king, a father, a judge...) and the inner disposition of the believer to rely on submission rather than on

38. Ibid., 214.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
imagination.42

As has been said, the goal of such a critique is "demystification," which might be understood as a clarification of origin: for example, one says one is a victim of mystification when one discovers that a letter one has received was not, in fact, sent by the person one believed to be its origin.43 In a similar fashion, the hermeneutics of suspicion confronts both the text and the interpreting subject with his or her everyday world to discover and decipher the presence and workings of false-consciousness, in order to clarify that these distortions do not have their origin in the kerygma, and must therefore be rejected. Demystification, then, is simply another word for "iconoclasm, the fight against idols, that is against the gods or the God of men," in the name of the true God: "to smash the idols is to let the symbols speak."44

THE LIMITS AND INSUFFICIENCY OF A HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

It is safe to say that the possibility and the necessity of the critique of ideology and the hermeneutics of suspicion are generally accepted and even presumed in theological and other academic circles today. What has, however, become more and more evident, is the distressing phenomenon of a critique of ideology and a hermeneutics of suspicion "gone haywire": that has either critiqued ideologies and illusions only to replace them with new ideologies and illusions, or has reduced the entire tradition to ideology and illusion, and thus, not surprisingly, concluded in a wholesale rejection of the tradition. This, Ricoeur points out, is tragically evident in the development of world-wide Marxism:

Just as religion is accused of having justified the power of the

43. Ricoeur, "Critique of Religion," 213.
44. Ibid. 219. For a clear example of a theologian directly confronting the masters of suspicion, rejecting their reductionisms, but attempting to use their analyses toward demystification, see Hans Küng, Does God Exist?: An Answer for Today (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 189-339.
dominant class, so too Marxism functions as a system of justification for the power of the party as the avant-garde of the working class and for the power of the ruling group within the party... The paradox is that Marxism after Marx is the most extraordinary exemplification of his own conception of ideology.45

A recent issue of a popular magazine reports the same phenomenon at work in the world of literary criticism, in a series of examples that would be uproariously comic, if they were not so real, and therefore so seriously alarming:

All literature is, whether writers are conscious of it or not, political... Shakespeare's "Tempest" reflects the imperialist rape of the Third World. Emily Dickinson's poetic references to peas and flower buds are encoded messages of feminist rage, exulting clitoral masturbation to protest the prison of patriarchal sex roles. Jane Austen's supposed serenity masks boiling fury about male domination, expressed in the nastiness of minor characters who are "really" not minor. In "Wuthering Heights," Emily Bronte, a subtle subversive, has Catherine bitten by a male bulldog. Melville's white whale? Probably a penis. Grab a harpoon!46

In the world of theology, the rejection of the Christian tradition as hopelessly patriarchal and the subsequent institutionalization of "goddess worship," on the part of some feminist theologians comes to mind immediately as an obvious instance of uncritical critique resulting in reductionism and reverse domination. It is crucial, therefore, to balance Ricoeur's understanding of the possibility and necessity of ideological critique with his understanding of its limits and insufficiencies. Only then can the hermeneutics of suspicion be a constructive instrument for theology and other hermeneutical disciples; only then can it truly serve emancipative interests.

Three interrelated points can be made. First, Ricoeur's understanding of the critique of ideology demands a relinquishment of the illusion that ideology-critique is a science, speaking from a "non-ideological place... comparable to Euclid's geometry

and to physics and cosmology of Galileo and Newton.”47 His understanding of ideology as primarily an “unsurpassable phenomenon of social existence, insofar as social reality always has a symbolic constitution,”48 makes it abundantly clear that every person has an ideology as part of his or her belonging to a tradition, a culture, a society. There is no point of absolute objectivity from which one can judge the ideologies of a tradition; thus Ricoeur’s insistence noted above that the dialogue of interpretation must include a self-critical analysis of the ideological conditioning of the interpreting subject and his or her everyday world. In particular, theology must include

a destruction of what destroys, a de-construction of the assurances of modern man . . . to preach is not to capitulate before the believable and the unbelievable of modern man, but to struggle with the presuppositions of his culture.49

Secondly, Ricoeur’s understanding of distanciation as the condition for possibility of the critique of ideology demands a recognition that this positive distancing presupposes a prior and inescapable belonging to a tradition, and that therefore the critique of ideology is done, “not outside or against hermeneutics, but within hermeneutics.”50 Whatever distortions may be present in the tradition, it must be asked, for example, where the emancipative interest motivating the critique originates, if not in the tradition as well. Is there not also a “tradition of emancipation”? For the Christian, in particular, is not precisely “the root of faith . . . somewhere near that point where Expectation springs forth out of Memory?”51 The theologian cannot forget that

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. Perhaps there would be no more interest in

48. Ibid. 231.
50. Ricoeur, “Science and Ideology,” 244.
emancipation, no more anticipation of freedom, if the Exodus and the Resurrection were effaced from the memory of mankind... In theological terms, eschatology is nothing without the recitation of acts of deliverance from the past.\textsuperscript{52}

Finally, for Ricoeur, the critique of ideology and the hermeneutics of suspicion, important as they are, are but the negative phase of destruction preparatory to the more significant positive phase of interpretation. Destruction and interpretation are profoundly united: hermeneutics struggles against the idols ultimately in order to be free to truly listen to the “more original and primal word.”\textsuperscript{53} In other words, the critical gesture is not the final gesture; and to stop at critique is to abort the total process of interpretation.

As Ricoeur insightfully points out, even the “idol-smashing” negative critique of religion of the “masters of suspicion” is only the shadow side of a vital positive affirmation. Their impassioned struggle against what they believed to be the ideology and illusion of religion is ultimately a struggle for \textit{reality} and the refusal to flee from its harshness and difficulty, a “sort of celebration of the liberating power of necessity.”\textsuperscript{54} The “ultimate core” of this

destructive hermeneutic... is not \textit{suspicion}, the reduction of ideologies and illusions, but the affirmation of man in the recognition of necessity; \textit{amor fati}! love of fate, said Nietzsche. ... man, they say, must come to love necessity — to love fate — to love things as they are...\textsuperscript{55}

But for the religious person, for the theologian, this “ascetics of necessity”\textsuperscript{56} cannot be the last word, the ultimate affirmation. Having embraced necessity through critique, the theologian must then move to the more significant question of \textit{possibility}, and turn to the tradition for worlds of possibility it offers to men

\textsuperscript{52} Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” 99-100.
\textsuperscript{54} Ricoeur, “Critique of Religion,” 218.
\textsuperscript{55} Ricoeur, “Language of Faith,” 237.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
and women who, though bound by, are not limited to, necessity. And indeed, for Ricoeur, “the imagination of the possible” is “the fundamental theme of Revelation”: “Is not the Good News the instigation of the possibility of man by a creative word?” Thus, the hermeneutics of suspicion of the theologian must give way to a hermeneutics of affirmation.

CONCLUSION

Ricoeur’s nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the critique of ideology presents a cogent, coherent program for the systematic theologian as hermeneut of the Christian tradition. It persuasively grounds critical, “demystifying” endeavors, but asks too for the constant correction of self-critique, for the continued love and appreciation of the Christian tradition’s riches of meaning, and the overriding desire to actualize (rather than critique) that tradition in the interpretation of its worlds of possibility for the men and women of today.

Perhaps all that can be offered by way of critique of Ricoeur is the suggestion that the themes of suffering and praxis be more decisively inserted into his general understanding of critical hermeneutics. For, in the final analysis, is not the most telling reason for the necessity of the critique of ideology and the hermeneutics of suspicion the realization that these distortions of thought are not merely harmful on the level of thought, but in the reality of the violence and suffering they perpetuate in the real lives of untold numbers of human beings in today’s world? Is it not true that the memory of past suffering preserved in the tradition can be just as profound a motivation for the critique of ideology as the memories of emancipation and the visions of the future it holds? Finally, is it not crucial that interpretation not simply end in the disclosure of meaning, but in the promotion of praxis; that the worlds of possibility retrieved by the theologian from the tradition be offered to Christians today, not simply as promise and gift, but as challenge and task?

57. Ibid. 237-38.