

“This exciting collection of essays demonstrates the great vitality of a hermeneutically conscious, critical, and self-critical Catholic theology and its rich resources for inspiring renewal and transformation in both church and society.”

—Werner G. Jeanrond  
University of Oxford

“‘Third naïveté’ is the red thread woven throughout this strong collection of contributions to the next step in theological hermeneutics. Informed by an intense dialogue with continental philosophy and critical theory, the authors make a strong appeal for a new kind of critical consciousness needed to recontextualize the best of our theological tradition for today. *Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence* calls for combining the creative interpretative power of imagination of Paul Ricoeur’s second naïveté with a less naïve awareness of the ‘disturbances and dislocations that saturate contemporary culture.’ A must-read for all involved in the renewal of theology and Church.”

—Dr. Lieven Boeve  
University of Leuven  
Belgium



# Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence

*Hermeneutics, Critique,  
and Catholic Theology*

*Edited by*

Anthony J. Godzieba  
and Bradford E. Hinze



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# Introduction

*Anthony J. Godzieba and Bradford E. Hinze*

Behind every important development in Catholic doctrine and practice since the beginning of the modern period have been debates about the interpretation of Christianity's classic texts and traditions and their ideological and practical implications. Over the past century there have been breakthroughs in retrieving the origins of beliefs and practices, recovering the rich, myriad, and multifaceted literary forms, and recognizing the ways these venerable traditions have been received, applied, and negotiated in the lives of diverse audiences with their contrasting worldviews. This volume sets out to analyze the most recent developments in this ongoing history of critical theological interpretation.

The chapters here originated in a three-year seminar (2013–15), held as part of the Catholic Theological Society of America's annual convention, which examined central issues of hermeneutics and ideology critique in Roman Catholic theology. The original essays have been revised for this volume.

Our authors have all been influenced by certain central figures in continental philosophy who have shaped the discussion and debates about hermeneutics and critical theory in Catholic thought during the second half of the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first. Four major figures whose work shaped the development of philosophical hermeneutics are Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans Robert Jauss, all of whom have influenced more than two generations of scholars. One group of critical theorists who have been recognized for their interrogation of the arguments and assumptions of philosophical hermeneutics are identified with the contributions of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, most notably Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and

Jürgen Habermas. Another group, associated with French phenomenology and post-structuralism, includes such diverse figures as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Luc Marion. These lists could be extended, but for our purposes we want to acknowledge that the authors in this volume have all been influenced by some of these figures as they have negotiated debates about the meaning of the hermeneutic circle, the impact of pre-understanding and prejudice in interpretation, the categories of understanding, explanation, and application, and the roles of power, ideology, and distorted discourse in understanding and communicating the faith.

The contributors to this volume are not solely or primarily philosophers, but are theologians—in this case, Catholic theologians—who have wrestled with this heritage of continental philosophy but have explored its ramifications in one way or another in areas of theology. As a result, the contributions in this volume are certainly not to be evaluated solely or primarily in view of their particular use of this philosophical heritage, but rather in view of how they have contributed to the advance of “faith seeking understanding” in the light of these continental formulations. Overall, the authors suggest an approach that might be termed the practice of a “third naïveté,” one that blends deeply contextual interpretations with a critical theological analysis of the roles of history, culture, power, and grace in church and society. Our title, *Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence*, suggests a way of interpreting these overlapping aspects in a productive way. We will come back to both of these phrases in a moment.

Readers may be asking important questions at this point: Why did theologians turn to these continental philosophers as resources in the first place? What specific theological areas required new resources? For an answer, we need to look briefly at the modern context of Catholic theology, most especially the shift from a logic-driven, propositional, and juridical theological method to diverse methods more attuned to historical consciousness, rhetorical persuasion, narrative, and aesthetics.

During the nineteenth century, theological questions concerning the interpretation of Scripture and tradition were posed in polemical terms against Enlightenment thinkers (especially their arguments on behalf of “natural religion”) and against Protestant theology (es-

pecially its emphasis on *sola Scripture* and its later turn to subjectivity and to experience as a locus of religious truth), and in political terms regarding issues of the church's contested relationship to the state. How did this polemical frame of mind that marked the thought of "the long Catholic nineteenth century" express itself? It did so in the guise of the neoscholastic theological method that governed Catholic interpretation of Scripture, tradition, and doctrine for almost a century. The approach of the neoscholastic theological manuals was syllogistic in style and deductive in argumentative form. It was a rigid, objectivist methodology employed as a defensive apologetic that for the most part refused the nineteenth-century retrieval of historical consciousness and the hard work of interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

Already during the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, a shift was occurring.<sup>2</sup> Theologians began to take historical consciousness seriously when questions regarding the historical development of Catholic doctrines began to be raised. The fundamental question was momentous: how can one bring together the absoluteness of divine truth as revealed in various doctrines and the clearly observable historical development that these doctrines had undergone? How can one have identity and difference, continuity and change? The roots of the theological turn to history reach back to the pioneering work of Johann Sebastian Drey, Johann Adam Möhler, Franz Anton Staudenmaier, and Johann Baptist Hirscher (often identified as members of the Catholic Tübingen School) and John Henry Newman.<sup>3</sup> The first theological topics to feel the force of this turn were

<sup>1</sup> For more detailed discussions of the fate of neoscholasticism within Catholic theology, see Mark Schoof, *A Survey of Catholic Theology 1800–1970*, trans. N. D. Smith (1970; reprint, with new epilogue: Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007); Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007). A sketch of neoscholastic theological method and its extrinsicist character is provided by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology: Task and Methods," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 1–78, at 20–26.

<sup>2</sup> See Bernhard Welte, "Zum Strukturwandel der katholischen Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Auf der Spur des Ewigen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), 380–409.

<sup>3</sup> See Bradford E. Hinze, "Roman Catholic Theology: Tübingen," in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, ed. David Fergusson (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley

revelation, scriptural interpretation, and the character of tradition, and much of the controversy was clustered around the topic of doctrinal development.<sup>4</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, historical and hermeneutical debates expanded to other areas such as Christology, ecclesial reform, and the reform of the liturgy. Needless to say, by the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, neoscholasticism's ahistorical dogmatism was revealed as having failed to account for the rich historical sources and diverse cultural issues that informed the church's texts, traditions, and developing beliefs, leading to its collapse as the default Catholic theological method (as well as the collapse of its classical metaphysical framework).<sup>5</sup> Later in the century a much wider range of "disputed questions" joined these other topics on the table for debate: the social and political issues raised by political and liberation theologies; the shift to a world church and the concomitant emerging engagement with non-European cultures; the decentering of Eurocentric theology itself; interreligious dialogue; the impact of secular worldviews and cultural pluralism on the church's mission of evangelization. In the wake of these issues, Catholic theologians turned to the resources afforded by continental philosophy, especially hermeneutics with its insights into history and tradition, and critical theory with its insights into ideology and emancipation, in order to discern how Christian discipleship can maintain any sort of identity and connection with its origins in the midst of incessant historical and cultural changes, indeed what the theologian David Ford has called the "multiple overwhelmings" of the contemporary world: the massive cultural, scientific, technological, economic, political, social, intellectual, and religious transformations that have fragmented much of contemporary experience and identity.<sup>6</sup>

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Blackwell, 2010), 187–213; Nicholas Lash, *Newman on Development: A Search for an Explanation in History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).

<sup>4</sup>This is Mark Schoof's suggestion; see his *A Survey of Catholic Theology*, 157–227.

<sup>5</sup>See Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 1–5, where he calls attention to "the breakdown of metaphysics in their classic form" as having had "the most momentous consequences" for contemporary theology (3). In light of the continental philosophers mentioned at the outset, it should be clear that the critique of metaphysics, with its effects on contemporary theology, is a crucial topic. While not our focus in this volume, readers should be aware that it stands in the background of a number of the essays here.

<sup>6</sup>David Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

And so the answer to the question “why did theologians start using hermeneutics and critical theory?” is both simple and complex: because (to use David Tracy’s phrase) the plurality and ambiguity inherent in history and culture—in which Christian life is embedded—forced the issue.<sup>7</sup> Neoscholastic method allowed very limited room for the rhetorical work of metaphor and narrative, the creative imagination, and constructive criticism. By the opening sessions of Vatican II, confidence in this method’s power came to be replaced by a more historically attuned and rhetorically capacious approach to interpretation in theology. More recently, especially in light of the traumatic events taking place both around the world and in the Catholic Church, more penetrating questions have been raised about the earlier “innocence” assumed in the interpretive work of theologians.<sup>8</sup> The kernel-and-husk metaphor that described earlier theological uses of hermeneutical reasoning—suggesting that the successful reinterpretation of a Christian truth (the essence or “kernel”) for a new generation or a new culture meant simply the replacement of the outdated cultural expressions (the form or “husk”) with more relevant ones—was shown to be naïve on its face. “Essences” are never graspable *per se* but always historically and culturally situated; “essence” and “form” are mutually conditioning. The complex layerings and interweavings of Catholic faith claims with the fraught cultural contexts in which they are practiced and pondered have impelled contemporary Catholic theologians to be more hermeneutically and critically attuned. Especially since Vatican II, it has been obvious that if Catholic theology is to fulfill both its immediate task to “give an accounting [*apologia*] for the hope” that presently motivates believers (1 Pet 3:15) and its long-term mandate to be “faith seeking understanding” (Anselm, *Proslogion*, preface), it needs to be—and indeed has become in many cases—an ensemble of theologies that are richly interdisciplinary. The chapters in this volume give ample evidence of that theological intentionality and that richness.

<sup>7</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., the famous imagery used by Pope John XXIII in his opening address to the Second Vatican Council: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the formulation in which it is clothed is another” (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesiae* §15, trans. Joseph A. Komonchak, <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2012/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf>, 4n4; in this note, Komonchak translates the original Italian which differs slightly from the Latin version in the main text).

Part I presents essays discussing the “State of the Questions” regarding hermeneutics, critical theory, and theology over the past fifty years.

- *Sandra Schneiders* (chapter 1) discusses the factors that have shaped biblical hermeneutics immediately before and after the council, such as the 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the theological *ressourcement* (return to the sources), and Catholic biblical scholarship’s rapid resituation in the larger secular academy. Today, Catholic biblical scholarship is polarized between a “magisterial fundamentalism” and a fascination with methodological experimentation. She argues that the fields of biblical scholarship and theology need each other both to neutralize the extremes and to maximize their contribution to the academy and the Church.
- *Francis Schüssler Fiorenza* (chapter 2) compares the earlier phase of the discussion between Gadamer and Habermas regarding hermeneutics and critical theory (characterized as searching for the “mountain peaks” or single unifying points of meaning) to the more recent approaches pursued by Charles Taylor and William E. Connolly (using Michel Serres’s metaphor of a “crumpled handkerchief” with multiple folds) to emphasize the fundamental non-linearity of interpretation. He shows how these discussions pertain to the interpretation of Vatican II, the inadequacy of a translation model of hermeneutics, and the more radical challenges raised by postcolonialism and critical theory.
- *Robert Schreiter* (chapter 3) discusses the theological import of intercultural hermeneutics, which is provoked by border-crossings between distinct cultures. He explores intercultural theological hermeneutics that is attentive to inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and comparative theology. He concludes by arguing for a hermeneutics of globality, justified not only by reflections on Trinity, Incarnation, and Holy Spirit, but also by revisiting the relation of nature and grace.
- *John Thiel* (chapter 4) surpasses the post–Vatican II conservative-liberal divide by appealing to the interpretive category of aesthetics. He distinguishes two sensibilities toward the beauty of the Catholic tradition, which give rise to differing understandings of

the theological task. First, a classical aesthetics of tradition privileges the sense of sight; second, a developmental aesthetics of tradition values the sense of hearing. He emphasizes the need for each style to recognize the Catholic beauty which the other style finds compelling, thus appreciating “the rich unity of the Church that only appears in the wholeness of the traditions,” beauty that each Catholic sensibility grasps in its own limited way.

The essays in Part 2 deal with “Disputed Questions” facing theology today.

- *Dominic Doyle* (chapter 5) traces a significant hermeneutical shift in Catholic interpretations of secularism from a portrayal of dialectical opposition (exemplified by Bernard Lonergan) to the diagnosis of internal disjunctions (exemplified by Charles Taylor and Michael Buckley). Doyle responds by arguing that “dialectic” can be retrieved to avoid oppositional triumphalism and to include the insights of this new “disjunctive” hermeneutic, as illustrated by a reconsideration of the theological virtues as not only transformative of secular culture but also a corrective within the church.
- *Fernando Segovia* (chapter 6) argues that biblical studies should provide an eschatological vision for a world in which liberation, justice, peace, and dignity are desperately and relentlessly sought. He assesses three chronological phases in biblical studies: the first associated with historical criticism (from the nineteenth century through the early 1970s); the second identified with literary criticism and sociocultural criticism (emerging around the middle 1970s); and the third marked by the introduction of ideology critique (late 1970s to the present). He analyzes each phase for their interpretive visions, theological visions, and attitudes toward theological readings. In dialogue with the critical work of his colleagues Wayne Meeks and Carolyn Osiek, Segovia supports and extends their call for biblical studies to address the critical questions of our time and be a public and engaged force in the world.
- *Andrew Prevot* (chapter 7) considers whether the “Catholic fondness for hermeneutics” has functioned as a shield “against the full force of ideology critique.” He proceeds in three moves. First,

he shows that Catholic theology does not need to rely on external modalities of critique since it has its own internal resources for negative dialectic and critical theory, as found in prophetic, apocalyptic, ascetical, and mystical elements of Catholic theology. Second, he argues that Catholic theologians “safeguard the radical unity of negative dialectics and doxological hope which much critical theory compromises.” Third, he proposes an approach combining negative dialectics and doxological hope that “challenges the self-appropriating subject of hermeneutical philosophy and theology” and safeguards the integrity of theology by means of both “a more pervasive critical negativity and theocentrism.”

- *Ormond Rush* (chapter 8) considers how the *sensus fidei* (*Lumen Gentium* 12) provides a hermeneutical category for individual believers and the church as a whole. In diverse cultures and contexts, believers “make sense” of their faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is fundamentally through their exercise of this capacity that the Spirit mediates the church’s ongoing dialogue with God throughout history, provoking new horizons of understanding God’s otherness. Rush explores the epistemological authority of these local applications of the Gospel, the role of local theologians in bringing such intuitions to systematic expression, and the obligation of local bishops both to attend to their people’s lived faith and to bring their local perceptions to bear on the teaching of the universal church.

The essays in Part 3 are not interested simply in proposing future questions for theological hermeneutics and ideology critique, but in actively “Rewriting the Questions” in light of rapidly changing cultural contexts.

- In three steps, *Judith Gruber* (chapter 9) advances the argument that “theology lives up to its own normative foundation only if it is done as radical critique.” First, the impetus for critique is found in the contested relationship between knowledge and power. Second, critical theory “uncover[s] Christianity’s complicity with hegemonic power” and at the same time provides a resource for surfacing “counter-hegemonic strategies” at the heart of the Christian tradition. Third, once theology operates as radical cri-

tique, its task is to subvert oppressive, hegemonic narratives “so that that the church can be a faithful representation of God’s salutary self-revelation in the historical event of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.”

- *Susan Abraham* (chapter 10) examines the social theorist Walter Mignolo’s “decolonial hermeneutics” and compares it with postcolonial theory. She argues that Mignolo, in attempting to do “better theory,” instead essentializes cultural borders. In postcolonial theory, especially in the work of Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, cultural borders are more fluid and porous. Spivak’s strategies emphasize Derridaean *différance* rather than differences in culture or identity. This subtle point of difference between Mignolo’s and Spivak’s work is the occasion for a feminist sacramental Catholic theology. Abraham defends a more deconstructive approach and sketches a postcolonial theological hermeneutics. Liberation, she concludes, “has to be political—that is, it has to result in the liberation of gendered bodies and their sacramental potential.”
- *Anthony Godzieba* (chapter 11) extends Gadamer’s trinity of understanding, interpretation, and application into a “performance hermeneutic” in order to account more adequately for the simultaneous unity and diversity in Christian life and in the church. He advocates a model of musical performance-over-and-in-time rather than textual interpretation. This provides a richer way of grasping the truth of the kingdom of God in practice, and also a way to push back against contemporary culture’s social acceleration, which drains experience of its temporal depth and dilutes the necessary eschatological heart of salvation.
- *Bradford Hinze* (chapter 12) explores the promises of dialogue as advanced in modern Catholic ecclesiology and continental philosophical hermeneutics. He describes the Catholic repudiation of a paternalistic and polemical approach to the church’s communication in favor of a dialogical approach, which is portrayed as operative at multiple levels in the life of the church. This is followed by an analysis of the dialogical character of hermeneutics as advanced by Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Jauss in terms of a dialogue with authors, texts, and readers. He concludes by

exploring how the classic biblical motif of lamentations functions in various literary settings to identify the limitations of dialogue, while providing a venue and process for the purification and differentiation of the aims and objectives of dialogue in hermeneutics, in the church, and in civil society.



When taken together, the positions in this volume represent what we would characterize as a “third naïveté” in the history of Catholic theology. By using this term, we are borrowing and extending Paul Ricoeur’s famous hermeneutical insight first presented in 1960 in his work *The Symbolism of Evil*.<sup>9</sup>

Ricoeur concluded that work with a chapter titled “The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought,” asserting that “beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.”<sup>10</sup> He summarized the gains and hopes offered by his approach to symbols and mythic narratives as a grand detour through discourse developed by philosophical hermeneutics leading to “a creative interpretation of meaning,” and argued that these gains require “patience and rigor” in employing the critical functions associated with hermeneutics and ideology critique.<sup>11</sup> In what became a signature distinction, Ricoeur proposed that we cannot go back to a “primitive naïveté”—that is, the “immediacy of belief” that can read meaning directly from religious symbols—since the modern person has already gone through the journey of critical thought. Instead, what we can aim for is “a second naïveté in and through criticism. In short, it is by *interpreting* that we can *hear* again.”<sup>12</sup> In the attitude of second naïveté, we again become aware of “the vital relation of the interpreter to the thing about which the text speaks directly

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, vol. 2: *La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960); ET: *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). Note that 1960 is also the date of the first appearance of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1960]).

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 349.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

or indirectly,"<sup>13</sup> and thus reclaim an encounter with religious truth that at the same time is more aware of the inescapable historical and discursive mediations in which these truths are interwoven.

In the period after Vatican II, Ricoeur's formulation proved helpful to many Catholic theologians. It offered a way of practicing theological interpretation and critique that was challenging and productive: that is, a way of being *simul criticus et fideles*, doing theology that was able to engage various forms of contemporary critical thinking without evacuating the truths expressed in Catholic faith claims.

What we wish to suggest, however, is that times have changed. The "weight of reality" (Ignacio Ellacuría) and the flow of history over the past fifty years—with its possibilities for human flourishing as well as its terrifying and dehumanizing aspects—have made it necessary that theology be done from the point of view of a *third naïveté*, one that is intensely aware of the disturbances, differentiations, and dislocations that saturate contemporary culture. Can one still believe when shifting power valences create dilemmas that are never completely resolvable? Can one still hope when power and ideology challenge our discernment of the presence of God's grace in the world? Our authors give strongly affirmative responses and point out the hard work that needs to be done. Hermeneutics and critical theory remain necessary and fundamental for Catholic theology. At stake is nothing less than how the good news of God's salvation can be grasped and lived today. We have intended that this volume provide a trustworthy map and compass for negotiating these compelling debates and challenging options.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., citing a passage from Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1952), 211–35; ET: "The Problem of Hermeneutics," in *New Testament and Mythology, and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 69–93.



## PART 1

# **State of the Questions**



## CHAPTER 1

# Biblical Hermeneutics Since Vatican II

*Sandra M. Schneiders*

After several frustrating attempts to fulfill my assignment for this volume, I decided that trying to summarize the status of biblical hermeneutics since the Second Vatican Council was like trying to build a three-masted tall ship under full sail in a Classic Coke bottle. So I have abandoned any attempt to treat the matter historically, or according to personalities, or by classification of theories. Instead, I am going to try something much more modest, namely, to place a few sets of pegs in the wall on which discussion materials can be hung, in order to supply some common vocabulary and a repertoire of concepts that will facilitate further thought and discussion.

### **Three Factors That Shaped Biblical Hermeneutics Since Vatican II**

Three factors have decisively shaped post-conciliar biblical hermeneutics. One occurred before the Council, one spanned the Council from preparation to aftermath, and one developed in the wake of the Council. It is hard to overstate the importance of the first, namely, the publication in 1943 of Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.<sup>1</sup> The encyclical was certainly not revolutionary in content,

<sup>1</sup>Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (September 30, 1943), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_30091943\\_divino-afflante-spiritu.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html).

at least by today's standards, and reinforced virtually all the restrictions and caveats of Pope Leo XIII's 1893 encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*,<sup>2</sup> especially the assertion of the supreme control by doctrine as promulgated by the *magisterium* over scholarly biblical interpretation. But *Divino Afflante Spiritu* opened a new era in Catholic biblical scholarship by recognizing the importance of using certain contemporary methods, especially form criticism, in the interpretation of Scripture. This was one of those recognitions of fact, like that of heliocentrism, that can never be effectively reversed and that is bound to expand in significance. *Divino Afflante Spiritu* thus began the still uncompleted liberation of Catholic biblical scholarship from the dogmatic shackles clamped upon it at the Council of Trent and reinforced by subsequent Vatican documents and actions until Pius XII's encyclical. There is still a tendency among the guardians of orthodoxy in the Vatican to start with magisterial formulations and judge biblical work in terms of its conformity to and defense of such propositions and to equate "traditions" in the sense of long-held opinion or practice with "Tradition" in a credibly theological sense. A major example of this was the refusal of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its 1976 declaration *Inter Insigniores*, which attempted to "close" the discussion of the possible ordination of women, to recognize the carefully grounded and qualified finding of the Pontifical Biblical Commission that the New Testament evidence by itself did not preclude the ordination of women.<sup>3</sup> But at least in principle, the virtual total imprisonment of biblical scholarship in anti-modernist obscurantism was undermined by *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

Catholic scholars have gone well beyond anything Pius XII authorized or probably would have approved, and post-conciliar documents

<sup>2</sup>Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (November 18, 1893), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_18111893\\_providentissimus-deus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18111893_providentissimus-deus.html). For a good brief treatment of these two most important Vatican documents on Scripture in the modern period within their respective historical contexts, see Raymond E. Brown and Thomas Aquinas Collins, "Church Pronouncements," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 1166–74.

<sup>3</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter Insigniores* (October 15, 1976), [http://www.vatican.va/roman-curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/re\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19761015\\_inter-insigniores\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman-curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/re_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html).

such as the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993) have recognized, albeit timidly, the need for contemporary Catholic biblical scholarship not only to make use of modern critical methods but to engage the agenda of modernity itself.<sup>4</sup> This agenda was pushed forward most recently by the Pontifical Theological Commission's document, "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church" (2014) by the recognition that faith is, first of all, a response to revelation rather than to theological formulations.<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis has underlined this important principle by his repeated exhortations to pastors at all levels of the Church to preach the Gospel, not the Catechism.

The second factor shaping post-conciliar biblical hermeneutics was the emergence, mainly in francophone Europe during the decades preceding Vatican II, of what was first pejoratively called *la Nouvelle Théologie*. The leitmotif of this intellectual movement, which actually undergirded and found expression in so much of the Council's work, was *ressourcement*, or the rooting of the conciliar renewal in a "return to the sources." These life-giving sources were Scripture, the patristic tradition, which was itself pervasively and profoundly biblical, and the liturgy, which was originally totally shaped by Scripture. *Nouvelle Théologie* was not an espousal of archaism or primitivism, much less of anachronistic approaches to biblical interpretation. It was an affirmation of the non-negotiable centrality of the Bible as Scripture in the faith and life of the Church. It was a promotion of the proverbial "living faith of the dead against the dead faith of the living."

One of the major effects of this biblical renewal in all areas of the Council's work was the reclaiming by the baptized of their identity and dignity as "the people of God" and their mission as the Body of Christ in the world. A major need of this rejuvenated people was nourishment by the living Word of God in Scripture. It is interesting that a presiding metaphor in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, which was one of the most contested in the Council's experience and was only passed at the end of the very last

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (April 23, 1994), [http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC\\_Interp.htm](http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp.htm).

<sup>5</sup> International Theological Commission, "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church" (2014), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html).

session, was that of the “table of the Word,” deliberately paralleled to the table of the Eucharist.<sup>6</sup>

The Council Fathers, with the exception of the tiny minority who held out to the very end for a two-source theology of Revelation that would have effectively left Scripture subject to the magisterium (the final vote to pass the Dogmatic Constitution was 2,344 to 6), recognized and were determined to end the four-hundred-year biblical fast that had been imposed on God’s people in the wake of the Council of Trent. This holy people, spiritually emaciated by scriptural starvation, was finally to be fed and their thirst slaked. By means of new translations, the Word was to be taken out of the deep freezer of an incomprehensible ancient language in which it had been assiduously preserved from “contamination” by “private interpretation,” sumptuously prepared by knowledgeable preachers and musicians rather than served up in the pious mush of irrelevant “ferverinos,” and joyously consumed by a famished community, not once in awhile on special occasions, but daily if possible, always on the Lord’s Day, and especially on the Great Feasts and in the context of the celebration of all the Sacraments. The baptized were to become deeply familiar with the whole of Scripture, not just Matthew 16:18.

The enthusiasm of the post-conciliar church for Scripture was a major impetus for the development of Catholic biblical studies in the immediate aftermath of the Council. The Council had called the church’s pastors to a responsibility for which they were largely unprepared by pre-conciliar seminary education, namely, to preach the Gospel well, in the vernacular, daily, and to incorporate it into the life of the church at every level and in every venue. Lay people themselves were clamoring for biblical education. Rather than a dry trek through an inventory of proof texts, biblical education of seminarians and newly minted lay ministers now involved serious, adult study of the Bible as Scripture, and that required professors of Scripture who were capable of providing such education. Demand was creating the supply

<sup>6</sup> See, esp., Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), ch. 6, sec. 21, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html). This chapter is especially important in its insistence on the centrality of Scripture in every aspect of the life of the Church. For the story of *Dei Verbum*’s trajectory in the Council, see John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 276–89.

and Catholic biblical scholarship leaped ahead, not without missteps and occasional crashes, but ahead nonetheless. And, of course, once a critical mass of the people of God began to learn what Scripture really had to say about church, the spiritual life, mature morality in the exercise of a free conscience, God, Jesus, and the call to discipleship and ministry, there was no way that the attempt to squeeze them back into their pre-conciliar pews was going to be, finally, successful. Nor were scholars who were learning to interpret the text according to the canons of the modern academy going to re-assume their dogmatically controlled catechetical identities and functions.

By the time the retrenchment began under the papacy of John Paul II, with its “creeping infallibility,” suppression of “dissent” and expansion of loyalty oaths, re-imposition of the pre-conciliar clericalist and misogynist ethos in seminaries, and punitive treatment of theologians who attempted to engage pastorally with the real issues of the people of God rather than simply enforce discipline, it was really too late to re-embargo the Word of God. The thirty-year trek in the theological desert that ended with the election of Pope Francis certainly dampened the biblical renaissance that had begun in the period before the council, that blossomed during the Council, and that had flourished for a decade or so after it. But it did not succeed in reinstating among either biblical scholars or the laity who had tasted the fruits of their research the pre-conciliar biblical famine that the Council had ended.

The third factor shaping post-conciliar Catholic biblical scholarship emerged very quickly after the Council. Catholic biblical scholarship was rapidly resituated in the larger secular academy. Many of those who would become the best Catholic biblical scholars of the first post-conciliar generation were being trained not only in the great theological faculties of Europe (e.g., Paris, Louvain, Tübingen, Oxford, Cambridge, the Pontifical Biblical Institute, the École Biblique in Jerusalem) but also in the great research universities in this country (Johns Hopkins, Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Duke, Emory, the University of Chicago, and elsewhere).<sup>7</sup> The seminary, even with its

<sup>7</sup> For example, the three editors of *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, were examples of the ecclesially committed scholars who received excellent modern biblical educations in the immediate aftermath of the Council and went on to prepare not only the laity but successive

post-conciliar curriculum revised to centralize Scripture studies and with the recognition that Scripture was the soul of all theology (*Dei Verbum* 24), was no longer the only place to study the Bible, and there was general recognition that those who would teach Scripture in the seminary or Catholic universities and colleges needed doctoral-level preparation, much of which was, at first, available primarily only outside Catholic institutions in this country.

Immersion in the secular academy, often followed by active participation in professional societies that were not exclusively Catholic or even religious (such as the Society of Biblical Literature), exposed Catholic biblical scholars to the dynamics that were convulsing higher education in the 1960s and after. Increasingly, the religious sciences were being studied ecumenically and inter-religiously, and often enough even without explicit religious commitment on the part of professors or students. Interdisciplinarity was emerging as the hallmark of late modern and post-modern higher education. Women and other marginalized populations were being admitted for studies and, eventually, joining faculties bringing perspectives to biblical scholarship that had been simply non-existent for the first two millennia of the Church's engagement with the biblical text. These newcomers were bringing questions and answers that the establishment had no categories for handling. But once again, attempts to defend the academy against this novelty or to re-establish the patriarchal or hegemonic *status quo*, though painful, were ultimately futile.

The first and perhaps most noticeable effect of the relocation of Catholic biblical study and teaching from the enclosed confessional seminary into the mainstream of intellectual life in the centers of higher learning, was the methodological explosion within the discipline. Developments in secular historiography, archaeology, philology, literary studies, sociology and cultural anthropology, politics and economics, the physical sciences, linguistics, art, comparative literature, and aesthetics were increasingly seen as highly relevant to biblical interpretation, and their employment a source of new and exciting paths into heretofore unimagined realms of meaning and relevance. As members of marginalized groups, especially women, discovered

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generations of biblical specialists who would keep the conciliar approach to biblical scholarship alive in the decades from the Council to the election of Francis.

that the Bible was not entirely liberating for them but, conversely, had functioned powerfully in the legitimation of their oppression in family, society, and Church, ideology criticism emerged.<sup>8</sup> As biblical scholars fanned out into these different fields and began to apply their findings in the task of interpreting the biblical texts, a wide range of new approaches, new forms of criticism, and new methods of exegesis emerged that went considerably beyond the classical historical and theological approaches of the pre-conciliar period. Of particular importance were literary methods such as narrative criticism, which was especially enriching because so much of both testaments is, in fact, narrative; a renewal of the engagement between biblical interpretation and spirituality which had been in abeyance since the Middle Ages; and the ideology criticism which became an important resource for liberation theologies of all kinds, from feminist to racial and ethnic, from first world to third world.<sup>9</sup>

A conundrum was developing during this time that would eventually lead to an engagement of biblical studies with philosophical hermeneutics: the more different methods refined and extended the quest of biblical scholars into the history of the biblical texts, the further away from the texts' message and meaning they got. Historical criticism has a built-in propensity for eternal regress. The answer to every historical question poses a new question about the even more remote history. But the whole point of studying sacred (that is, canonical) texts, as opposed to purely historical ones, is to "translate" these religiously normative texts into the lives of the people for whom they are religiously normative. "Translation" in this sense is not merely a linguistic transaction between different languages. It is an existential

<sup>8</sup> I have discussed this issue at considerable length as well as supplying some examples of feminist interpretation in Sandra Schneiders, "A Case Study: A Feminist Interpretation of John 4:1-42," in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 180-99; Schneiders, "John 20:11-18: The Encounter of the Easter Jesus with Mary Magdalene—A Transformative Feminist Reading," in *What Is John? Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 155-68. For a more comprehensive study of the problem of patriarchal biblical language and imagery for God in the Bible as a whole, see Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> I have treated this development at greater length in Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, esp. in chs. 4-5.

transaction between worlds. The question for the interpreter of a normative and authoritative sacred text (that is, a text regarded not merely as an historical record but as Scripture) is always and primarily not just what did this text mean to those who produced it, nor even what does this text mean in the abstract, but what does this text mean for the believing community in the present? In other words, the challenge is how to get the interpretive project going forward into the present and future of the community rather than simply backward into an ever-receding past.

### Three Mediating Triads

Let me turn now from this rapid overview of factors influencing the development of biblical hermeneutics in the post-conciliar period to three other sets of pegs I want to set into the wall of our hermeneutical reflection. Each of the three sets has three pegs each. I hope these sets of interrelated concepts will help clarify later discussions.

The first triad is one that no one seems to be able to trace to its actual originator, although most scholars probably encountered it, implicitly or explicitly, in the writings of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.<sup>10</sup> (Some biblical scholars, especially the “new historicists,” do not like it at all, but I think it is more clarifying than any alternatives I know.) It is the inter-related categories of the “world behind the text,” the “world of the text,” and the “world before or in front of the text.” This is a heuristic schema, not a description of physical, historical, geographical, sociological, cultural, or any other kind of entity in the real world.

The world *behind the text* refers to what *produced the text*. There are at least two categories of such factors: first, the events (historical or meta-historical) to which the texts purport to refer (e.g., the exodus, the exile, the life and ministry of Jesus, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the experience of it by of the first disciples, Paul’s ministry, the foundation of the early church); second, the agents who/which putatively or actually produced the text (e.g., Moses, the Deuteronomist,

<sup>10</sup>The most succinct treatment of this topic (although not explicitly under these three headings) is Paul Ricoeur’s small *chef d’oeuvre*: *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

Matthew's community, Paul or pseudo-Paul, an anonymous or pseudonymous redactor, or an oral or textual tradition). Notice that talking about the "world behind the text" does not involve any implication that a named event or agent ever happened or even existed. That is a different question. It means the researcher is choosing to investigate how, why, when, where, by what agency, etc., this text came to be, and that involves raising questions about all the theories or claims that can help give a plausible explanation of or answer to that question. This is the type of investigation that is usually subsumed under the collective heading of "historical criticism" and makes use primarily of historical methods. The historical critic will disassemble, deconstruct, analyze, compare the text with other texts and sources of historical data in the effort to elucidate its genesis and trace its development. This is essentially a diachronic process.

The world *of the text* refers to what *has been produced*, that is, to the literary entity in its integrity, e.g., this particular epic, psalm, gospel, pericope, parable, etc. Using primarily literary methods, both synchronic and diachronic, the investigator attempts to establish the nature or type or genre of this textual entity as it now stands, how it works linguistically and rhetorically, how it affects or intends to affect its audience. The primary interest is not who wrote it, when, where, and so forth, or even necessarily what it means in some singular or discursive way, but how it operates on its reader to produce meaning, which is virtually always multivalent. The literary critic works with the text as it now stands rather than with hypothesized earlier forms or editions—that is, with the final form of the text, and how readers, past and present, respond to it regardless of how the text came to be. For the literary critic the meaning is *in* the text, not behind it. Literary criticism is essentially a synchronic process.

The world *in front of* the text refers to what the *text produces* when text and reader interact. As we will see, this is the sphere of hermeneutics and it feeds into theological reflection, spirituality, pastoral engagement, social commitment, liberation theology, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I address these topics at some length in reference to the Fourth Gospel in Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2003), esp. part 1, chs. 1–4.

In the actual work of biblical interpretation more than one of these areas is likely to be investigated and the results critically combined, but the interpreter is usually primarily concerned with one or the other.

Any serious biblical study is going to involve, in differing degrees and combinations, the categories of a second triad: exegesis, criticism, and interpretation which correspond roughly to historical, literary, and hermeneutical approaches. Exegesis, a term which was once thought to cover the whole scholarly enterprise of biblical interpretation, is actually primarily an effort to establish “what the text actually says,” regardless of whether that is factually accurate, whether it is true, whether the exegete agrees with it, even whether it is moral or helpful, etc. The classical tools of historical criticism are the most useful for this task, but literary tools such as structural analysis, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, and so on are also useful and important. One of the major developments in post-conciliar biblical work has been the realization that exegesis is not synonymous or coterminous with interpretation. One cannot interpret a text until one knows what it says, but one can know quite well what it says without knowing what it means. (Parenthetically, this can be a hideout for an ecclesiastically threatened biblical scholar who says, “This is what responsible exegesis shows this text to be saying. Don’t ask me whether it is true or what its implications are for the ordinary believer or how it does or does not relate to doctrine or magisterial positions.”)

Criticism, which is an effort to analyze and evaluate the text’s content in relation to the reader, that is, its meaning in and of itself, usually finds literary or sociological or psychological methods most useful. Again, criticism can be appreciative, highly reserved, or even practiced as rejection. The point is not the biblical scholar’s reaction to what the text says or means but ascertaining how this text operates in relation to its readers or hearers. Thus, a feminist biblical critic might want to know whether John 20:1-18 actually presents Mary Magdalene as an apostle in the technical, theologically significant sense of the term, and (regardless of whether there ever was a Mary Magdalene or whether she did or said what the text presents her as doing and saying) how the answer to that question can be substantiated from the text, whereas an historical critic might be using the same passage in relation to its analogues in Matthew and Luke to determine whether the tomb was really empty on Easter morning.

Finally, interpretation, the full flowering of the hermeneutical project, which is an effort to assimilate the/a meaning of the text, involves the personal and transformative response of the reader or the reader's readers to what the text says and means. One's response may be positive or negative, accepting or rejecting, perplexed or challenging or argumentative or exhilarating. But the act of interpretation involves the reader personally with the text's meaning. Interpretation is the heart of the hermeneutical enterprise. It is where exegesis and criticism terminate in transformative appropriation.

In short, exegesis asks what the text says; criticism asks what the text means; hermeneutics engages the reader, individual and/or community, in the ongoing transformation that is required when one inhabits the text as Word of God.

In the period immediately following *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Catholic biblical scholars reveled in the real, albeit limited, freedom to do actual exegesis, to really raise the question of what the biblical text says rather than starting with dogmatic answers and trying to find proof texts in the Bible to support those answers. Exegesis was the focus of their efforts, and historical criticism was seen by many Catholic biblical scholars at that time as the totality of the scholarly project. They left questions of meaning and implication to pastors or activists. In the wake of the Council, however, they became interested in the variety of critical methods that opened the text in exciting new ways for the life of the individual believer and the Church community. More synchronic methods such as semiotics, structuralism, and then deconstruction were investigated. Even more exciting approaches in the later post-conciliar period were literary methods, such as narrative criticism, and social scientific and psychological analysis. Most recently, praxis-oriented liberationist approaches such as ideology criticism and forays into the relationship between the biblical text and spirituality, social justice involvement, inter-religious dialogue, and the new cosmology have emerged. But as scholars saw how diverse were the results of this wide variety of critical methods, they found themselves increasingly aware of the necessity of finding some way to determine the validity of their interpretations and to adjudicate among conflicting results.<sup>12</sup> The issues were not purely technical or methodological. It

<sup>12</sup> I take up these hermeneutical questions in some detail in Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 157–67.

is not necessarily the case that if one applies a method appropriately the resulting interpretation is valid. Scholars were beginning to see that different interpretations of the same text might be equally valid, that is, well-grounded in the text and methodologically justifiable, but not (or not equally) relevant or meaningful. The issue was not purely methodological or even epistemological. The issue was hermeneutical. Hermeneutics is the global enterprise of interpreting texts as meaningful and transformative of persons, social structures, intellectual commitments, and so on. Hermeneutics allows texts to transform “world,” the imaginative reality constructions within which individuals and communities live, and thereby the readers who inhabit those worlds.

Not many biblical scholars were willing to engage this philosophical enterprise. Most were not philosophically trained, and, like many older scholars who had grown up intellectually in the over-specialized academy of the first half of the twentieth century, interdisciplinarity was intimidating. A “scholar” was, by definition, someone who had mastered his (and it was virtually always “his”) field and respectfully left to other specialists things that were not part of his own specialization. But the intellectual world was changing. The days of total mastery of a single defined field, or even the existence of a methodologically defined “field” that was totally distinct from other fields, were over, if indeed such a situation had ever really existed.

Some twenty years ago, with a brashness that befitted and exposed my inexperience in regard to the conventions of the modern academy, I suggested in writing, to the combined vehement denials of some and shocked recognition of others in biblical scholarly circles, that we Catholic biblical scholars had become experts on how to do what we did without realizing that we did not really know what we were doing.<sup>13</sup> In other words, we had become highly proficient in the use of current exegetical and critical methodology but lacked a coherent hermeneutical theory to explain or justify our critical choices, exegetical practice, or even our interpretive success, to say nothing of how our approach to Scripture and its results fit into a coherent theology of revelation. There were a few of us, still unestablished enough in our fields to know that this was in fact the case and that biblical scholars had to venture into the philosophical thicket of theoretical hermeneutics just as we were venturing into the methods of

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 (the comment had already appeared in the 1991 edition).

non-biblical fields such as literature, the social sciences, ideological analysis, and aesthetics. Biblical scholars had lived their way into and had to find their way through the problematic relation between validity of investigation (guaranteed by method) and meaningfulness of interpretation (truth).

The whole problematic was symbolically captured in the title of what was perhaps the most important book on the subject in the last half of the twentieth century, Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, which, in fact, was really an attempt to challenge and reverse the accepted relationship between these two terms. According to Gadamer, method does not, as the high priests of the Scientific Revolution and then the Enlightenment would have us believe, control our access to truth nor determine the validity of our engagement with it. Rather, the hegemony of method is actually an obstacle to the search for truth, because it defines (and thereby limits) truth rather than using method to facilitate the quest for truth.<sup>14</sup> If one's method of investigation is a ruler, and that method is allowed to determine what questions can be asked and what answers are valid, only longitudinal measurements will count as truth. But if the most significant dimensions of the object of investigation far exceed linear measurement, then the hegemony of method rules out the real quest for truth. It is hard to exaggerate the radicalism of this proposal in an Enlightenment epistemological context. However, it has been generally recognized as valid even by those who do not fully subscribe to Gadamer's theory as a whole.

Hermeneutics, as applied to "texts" broadly understood, is the theory and practice of the complex process by which a text, through its engagement by interpretation, gives birth to understanding or life transforming appropriation of meaning. Hermeneutics, in other words, is critical to biblical scholarship's facilitation of the Bible becoming Scripture, that is, truly revelatory in and for the believing community. It is the bridge from "pure" exegetically based biblical criticism to preaching, to theology, to spirituality, to social commitment—indeed, the bridge from understanding our self and our world to changing them. The most important theorist of hermeneutics, writing at the

<sup>14</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960); ET: *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2006 [based on the 5th German ed., 1986]).

same time as Gadamer, was Paul Ricoeur, who produced an enormous corpus on the subject but whose theory of discourse under the conditions of inscription (i.e., textual discourse), which underlies his theory of biblical interpretation, is available in his small but dense work *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*.<sup>15</sup>

In the last quarter of the twentieth century these two philosophical giants, neither of whom was a theologian or exegete by *métier* but both of whom were intensely interested in the role of texts in the human enterprise, especially those texts held sacred in societies, laid out the parameters of the hermeneutical project in which the field remains engaged. Gadamer attempted to develop an ontology of understanding, and Ricoeur a phenomenology of language, especially written language, that is, textual discourse. Together they provide, in my opinion, a theoretical model of what is involved in knowing when we interpret the Bible as Sacred Scripture, as the canonical revelatory text of the people of God. Scholars can and do disagree about the explanatory success of the particular theories of Gadamer and Ricoeur, and they have been much expanded since their first appearance. But these two scholars laid out the challenge to biblical studies to engage fully the task of developing an adequate hermeneutical framework for biblical interpretation, one that takes full account not only of exegetical and critical methods but also of the historical, literary, theological, and spirituality dimensions of the project. Such an integral theory of biblical interpretation is the *sine qua non* for achieving fully the task that the Council bequeathed to the biblical academy, namely, laying the table of the Word of God for the nourishment of the people of God in their task of transforming the world which God so loved as to give the only Son.

### **Where Are We Today?**

So, where does this leave us? Catholic biblical scholarship today is polarized by, at one extreme, a Tridentine literalism that leans toward oppressive magisterial fundamentalism and, at the other extreme, a fascination with methodological experimentation, often for its own sake, that flirts with exoticism or even nihilism. In between are most

<sup>15</sup> See note 10.

serious biblical scholars who are doing yeoman service in and for the church in the quest for learning and faith, or indeed, a learned faith. We would be more effective, in my opinion, if we were more willing to risk deeper forays into hermeneutics in the strict sense of the word. This is the meeting ground between biblical scholarship and theology, which remains something of a “no man’s land” when it could and should be the arena of fruitful mutuality. The two fields need each other both to neutralize the extremes and to maximize their contribution to the academy and the Church.