

Ricoeur on myth and demythologising

**Author:**Gert Jacobus Malan¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Research Project****Registration****Project Leader:** E. van Eck**Project Number:** 2400030**Description:**

Dr Gert Malan is participating in the research project, 'Socio-Cultural Readings', directed by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

Corresponding author:

Gert Jacobus Malan, gertmalan@telkomsa.net

Dates:

Received: 08 Apr. 2015

Accepted: 21 Nov. 2015

Published: 08 July 2016

How to cite this article:

Malan, G., 2016, 'Ricoeur on myth and demythologising', *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a2998. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.2998>

Copyright:

© 2016. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Since Jean Paul Gustav Ricoeur's passing away in 2005, there has been a significant international resurgence of interest in his work. Coming to grips with the sheer extent of Ricoeur's publications on a variety of subjects can leave one thoroughly perplexed. This is also true when investigating his views on myth and demythologisation. Numerous of his publications expound from various perspectives his insights on myth and its interpretation. This investigation proposes to bring together Ricoeur's extensive contributions on myth, its interpretation and demythologisation in order to present them in condensed form. This will pave the way for a future follow-up study to compare Ricoeur's perspectives to Bultmann's demythologisation program and consider combining their contributions for theological hermeneutics.

Introduction

Since his passing away in 2005, there has been a significant international resurgence of interest in Jean Paul Gustav Ricoeur's work, as is attested by a cascade of articles and books, Ricoeur study groups and well-attended international Ricoeur conferences, as well as an online Journal for Ricoeur Studies (Stiver 2012:ix-x). Coming to grips with the sheer extent of Ricoeur's publications on a variety of subjects can leave one thoroughly perplexed (Pellauer 2007:1). This is also experienced when investigating his views on myth and demythologisation. Numerous of his publications expound from various perspectives on his insights on myth and its interpretation. This investigation proposes to bring together Ricoeur's extensive contributions on myth and demythologisation and present them in condensed form. The following study will compare Ricoeur's perspectives to Bultmann's demythologisation program and consider combining their contributions for theological hermeneutics.

Theological hermeneutics and Ricoeur's life and work fused in a natural way. Ricoeur (1913–2005), raised by French Huguenot grandparents, by age 17 was already confronting an inner conflict between faith and reason, as the strong appeal of philosophy threatened his religious faith. Roland Dalbiez, his philosophy teacher, urged him to confront his fears, thus setting Ricoeur on the road to becoming one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century with a teaching and writing career of almost seventy years. Ricoeur's work included significant intersections of varied areas of philosophy, as well as religion, literature, psychoanalysis and sociology, prompting the apt description of his career as 'a hermeneutical life' (Stiver 2012:1–2; see also Lowe 1985:vii; Wallace 1995:2–3).

Both Bultmann and Ricoeur were renowned hermeneutical exponents of the twentieth century and Ricoeur took a keen interest in Bultmann's demythologisation program. The concept of myth and the necessity for demythologising were important to them both, as Ricoeur ([1968] 1980)¹ aptly illustrates:

At first glance, demythologisation is a purely negative enterprise. It consists in becoming conscious of the mythic clothing around the proclamation that 'the [reign] of God has drawn near in a decisive fashion in Jesus Christ'. In this way, we become attentive to the fact that his 'coming' is expressed in a mythological representation of the universe, with a top and a bottom, a heaven and an earth, and celestial beings from up there to down here and returning from down here to up there. To abandon this mythical wrapping is quite simply to discover the distance that separates our culture and its conceptual apparatus from the culture in which the good news is expressed ... Demythologisation, far from being opposed to kerygmatic interpretation, is its very first application. It marks the return to the original situation, namely that the Gospel is not a new Scripture to be commented on but is effaced before something else because it speaks of someone who is the true word of God. Demythologisation then is only the inverse side of the grasp of the kerygma. (p. 57–58)

Like Bultmann, he advocates the necessity of demythologising and views the ancient mythological worldview as a false scandal which hides the true scandal of the cross (see also Bultmann 1967

1. Ricoeur's 'Preface to Bultmann' was first published in the French publication of Bultmann's book *Jesus, mythologie et demythologisation* and was later published in English as part of a collection of Ricoeur's essays on Biblical interpretation.

[1941]:48; Ricoeur 1973a:465). Demythologising the mythical worldview is legitimate, urgent and unavoidable. He regards Bultmann's demythologising as dissolving the false scandal in order to reveal the true scandal. The necessity of demythologising, which he calls a 'deciphering', is a consequence of our irreversible cultural estrangement from the ancient mythological cultural vehicle. He describes demythologisation as a purification of the mythical cosmology from its mythological vestments, resulting in a re-interpretation that we can believe. In this sense, we are in a hermeneutical circle, the nature of which Bultmann forcefully understood as more than a psychological circle, but rather a methodological one, being ruled by the question *Worauf hin?* [Towards which?] (Ricoeur 1973b:212).

In his 1973 essay, translated into German for *Evangelische Theologie* as *Die Hermeneutik Rudolf Bultmanns*, he concurs with Bultmann's view that the mythological worldview becomes a false *Anstoß*, which obscures the true *Anstoß* of all time, Jesus Christ. He purports to render a correct understanding of Bultmann's hermeneutic by placing demythologisation within the framework of the hermeneutical circle as the exegetical method by which faith and reason interact as text and exegete meet. Bultmann's recognition that cosmological mythological terms become demythologised as anthropological terms in the letters of Paul and the eschatology of John's gospel, which shows that God's future has already begun through Jesus Christ, puts the kerygma on a higher hierarchical plane of imparting existential meaning than mere cosmic mythology and apocalyptic eschatology. Ricoeur views this hierarchy as the key for correctly understanding Bultmann's demythologising program (Ricoeur 1973a:465, 468).

Bultmann's hermeneutic has developed from a theological base, appropriating Heidegger's existential philosophy, while using the *Religionsgeschichtliche* definition of myth and applying Hans Jonas's demythologising strategy developed for Gnostic cosmology to the New Testament texts (Bultmann [1941] 1967:26–27, [1952] 1965:180, 191–195; see also Hamman 2013:201–216; Perrin 1969:18–32, 70–81). Ricoeur departs from philosophy, moving from phenomenology to symbolism and narrative, developing an existential hermeneutic for interpreting religious texts (Stiver 2012:9–17; Wallace 1995:2–15). There are marked differences in Bultmann and Ricoeur's views on myth and their methods of demythologisation. These will be extensively discussed in the future paper I mentioned above, and will only receive cursory notice in this study.

Myth

Myth is not understood by Ricoeur as simply a false story nor as an explanation in the modern sense of the word (Pellauer 2007:34). Ricoeur defines myth in various ways according to the context in which the term is applied, be it phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, the interpretation of religious texts, narrative analysis or politics, showing his insight in myth's polyvalence. Initially, in his effort to interpret myths from a philosophical viewpoint, he focused on the functions or effects myths have, especially regarding symbols as expressions of human existence. Ricoeur (1967) states:

To understand myth as myth is to understand what the myth, with its time, its space, its events, its characters, its drama, adds to the revelatory function of the primary symbols. (p. 162)

He explains the threefold function of myth as embracing humanity in one ideal history, narrating a movement from beginning to end; thus imparting orientation, character and tension to our experience; and lastly trying to get at the enigma of human existence, namely the discord between the fundamental reality of man as innocent, and the actual modality of man as defiled, sinful and guilty (Ricoeur 1967:165). As myth points to a connection between our essential reality and our actual historical existence, almost in terms of a concrete temporal universal truth whose narrative form cannot be reduced to a concept, it has an ontological bearing. Viewed in this way, myths are revelatory, disclosing the human condition we all share and can thus have a transformative effect on those who attend to them. No myth is ever fully adequate to what it signifies, causing a multitude of myths to arise (Pellauer 2007:39).

Myth and symbol

A paradigm shift to symbol

Earlier in his career, Ricoeur used myth in the context of symbols. This coincides with his initial phenomenological approach developing into an ontology of the self, following the publication of *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*. For *The Symbolism of Evil*, he explored the symbolism of evil in the Hebrew Bible. This paradigm shift to symbols led him to study symbols in Sigmund Freud's work, then to metaphor, and finally to narrative. His work sparked off and contributed to a similar paradigmatic reconsideration of the nature of language in the Bible and theology in the second half of the twentieth century (Stiver 2012:61). In this regard, his insights on myth are invaluable.

Symbol and myth

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur related symbols to myth, which he defined as a certain kind of narrative that portrays meaning through a story of origins. He placed significant stress on his conviction that myth cannot be reduced or even fully translated into prosaic form and systematic conceptual thought. An important insight of Ricoeur is that symbols are not only explained by literal language, but also by other symbols. Furthermore, he then proceeds to explore how these symbols are taken up in myths, for example, the biblical myth of the fall and the Greek myth of tragedy. In *Fallible Man*, he shows that these myths reveal that evil befalls us, but also that people's wrongful choices are a result of their 'servile will', which he describes in existential terms as the 'unavailability of freedom to itself (Stiver 2012:66–67)'.

Regarding the relationship between symbol and myth, one should take note of Ricoeur's observation that 'symbol gives rise to thought'. This phrase, borrowed from Kant, is used repeatedly in *Fallible Man*. He relates this idea, as Kant does, to the radicality and irrationality of evil (Stiver 2012:67–68).

Myth as bearer of possible worlds

Ricoeur and Kearny (1978:112–118) chose a thought-provoking title for the publication of the transcript of Kearny's interview with Ricoeur on myth, namely *Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds*. This very apt title and the dialogue transcript show that Ricoeur's view of myth coincides with Peter Berger's *symbolic universe* which legitimates peoples' actions in the social sphere (Berger 1973:18–19; Berger & Lückmann 1975:111). It is also synonymous with Bultmann's *mythological worldview* as a framework of reference for peoples' actions revealing '... ein bestimmtes Verständnis der menschliche Existenz (Bultmann [1952] 1965:183; see also Malan 1998:83–84, 178–181)'. Ricoeur refers to the ancient three-storied cosmology as 'a system of regions and localities where the destiny of beings is deployed' (Ricoeur 1973b:210). This worldview did not constitute a scandal for ancient people, but became one for modern man, clouding the real scandal of the cross. He calls it 'a false scandal of a cultural vehicle which is no longer ours' (Ricoeur 1973b:211; see also Ricoeur 1973a:465).

Myth as symbolic structure for social dynamics

Ricoeur views myth as part of the hidden imaginary nucleus that determines and rules the distribution of transparent functions and institutions such as the politics, economics and law of any culture. As such, Ricoeur (1967:5) stated that 'myth relates to the events that happened at the beginning of time which have the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men today'.² Ricoeur explains that myth forms the matrix of distribution, which assigns the above-mentioned functions their different roles in relation to each other, other societies, the individuals who participate in them and nature, which stands over and against them. The ratio of distribution thus varies from one society to another, causing the differences in cultures. It is in this hidden kernel that we must situate the specific identity of a culture, because it is here that we find its foundational mytho-poetical nucleus. Stated differently:

Beyond the self-understanding of a society there is an opaque kernel which cannot be reduced to empirical norms or laws ..., it cannot ... be explained by some transparent model because it is constitutive of a culture even before it can be expressed and reflected in specific representations or ideas... By analysing itself in terms of such a foundational nucleus, a society comes to a true understanding of itself. (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:112)

Contrasting his view with Levi-Strauss's approach to societies without history, Ricoeur emphasised that societies have a specific historical component. The development of societies is both synchronic and diachronic, meaning that the distribution of power functions contains a historical dimension. Societies thus have simultaneous institutions (synchronism) and a process of historical transformation (diachronism). Any hermeneutic is characterised by a panchronic approach, including both synchronic and diachronic aspects. It is important to understand that the foundational myths of societies also have this twofold characteristic: they represent a simultaneous system of

²Kearny uses this citation from Ricoeur in *Symbolism of Evil*, according to the 1978 transcript of their interview.

symbols which can be structurally analysed, but they also have a history that keeps the myths alive through processes of interpretation and re-interpretation. Thus, myths are, like the societies they ground, both structural and historical (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:13).

In much the same way as Berger and Lückmann (1975:114–120) show that symbolic universes are especially important in clarifying marginal experiences like death and loss, Ricoeur speaks of boundary situations such as war, suffering and guilt, which cause fundamental existential crises, causing societies to return to their foundational myths. In this way, myths show people's capacities and reasons for surviving, for being and continuing to be what they are. Because it is possible for myths to be perverted, myths cannot be viewed naively, but the content of each myth needs to be analysed critically to understand the basic intentions that animate it. 'Modern man can neither get rid of myth, nor take it at face value. Myth will always be with us, but we must always approach it critically' (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:114).

Myth as materialistic explanation (alienation)

Myth can also serve as an alienation of this symbolic structure for social dynamics when myth becomes reified and is misconstrued as an actual materialistic explanation of the world. In this regard, it is important to note that Ricoeur views the literal interpretation of myth as a misinterpretation, because myth is essentially symbolic.

It is only in terms of such misinterpretations that we may legitimately speak of demythologisation: not concerning its symbolic content but concerning the hardening of its structures which cannot stand the shock of the logos. (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:116)

To his mind, Bultmann confused the two concepts of myth because he ignored the complexity of myth. Bultmann's demythologising of the three-storied worldview is in Ricoeur's view a literal interpretation of myth and thus a misinterpretation. Ricoeur is of the opinion that Bultmann does not realise that there is a symbolic as well as pseudo symbolic or literal dimension to myth, and that demythologising is only valid in relation to this second dimension (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:116).

The universality and myth

On the universality of myths, Ricoeur sees foundational myths not as universal but as tailored for a specific community, just like languages. Just as languages are translatable, so are myths, giving them a horizon of universality that allows them to be understood by other cultures. In this way, the horizons of myths exceed the political and geographical boundaries of their communities and the territorial limitations set by politics, emigrating and developing in new cultural frameworks (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:116). Ricoeur traces the supranational quality of myths to either a pre-historical layer from which all particular 'mythical nuclei' might have emerged or the finite myth-making powers of the human imagination that ensures a frequent recurrence of

similar archetypes and motifs. Ricoeur calls this dimension of myth, which transcends the foundational aspect, the 'wisdom dimension', making up a body of truths valid for all mankind. This potential of myth to exceed the limits of a particular community transforms it to 'the bearer of possible worlds' (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:117), from which the title of the publication was deduced.

Ricoeur hopes for a 'recreation of language'³ as language has lost its potential to create possible worlds, as language is fragmented geographically and across the different academic disciplines. Hermeneutics refers the different usages of language to different regions of being, such as the natural, scientific or fictional. Hermeneutics is also concerned with the permanent spirit of language, namely its capacity to open up possible worlds. This disclosure of new and unprecedented worlds is the *recreation of language* Ricoeur hopes for (Ricoeur in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:117–118; also Pellauer 2007:25–26).

Myth and narrative

Muthos and mimesis

Ricoeur uses myth in different ways that overlap in meaning but can be clearly differentiated. In the context of narrative analysis, he endorses Aristotle's five narrative pillars, of which *muthos* is the first pillar. In this sense, myth, as the common form of early narrative, was the storyline or plot (Ricoeur 1974:108; see also Ricoeur 1992:143). Over time, mythic narrative developed two branches, namely historical and fictional. Although Aristotle originally linked *muthos* to tragedy, the meaning of *muthos* as plot has endured. *Mimesis*, the second narrative pillar, is the imitation of an existing plot and a metaphor for reality. Together, *muthos* and *mimesis* form a transformative action 'plotting scattered events into a new paradigm' and a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous leading to a creative redescription of the world so that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold' (Ricoeur 1977:40–48; see also Duffy 2009:27).

Muthos and logos

Still within the context of narrative and poetics, Ricoeur's understanding of myth relates to Aristotle's views on *muthos* and *logos* as described in his *Rhetoric and Poetics*, but with a difference: Ricoeur re-integrates these two domains, which have been divided by Aristotle, in such a way that *logos* is subsumed by *muthos* (Theodorou 2005:130). Regarding poetic plot forms, Ricoeur shows that tragic poetry conveys a message through *mimesis*'s signifying power, or the refiguring of human moral action in the plot, leading him to define *muthos* as giving a tragic poem structure and purpose, because the fundamental trait of *muthos* is its character of order (Ricoeur 1977:41, see also Ricoeur 1974:108–119). *Mimesis* thus shares the character of *muthos*, since *mimesis* is the underlying structure of *muthos*, which does not merely copy human experience in plot forms, but transforms the meaning of experience (Theodorou 2005:131).

3. In answer to Kearny's question as to the meaning of Ricoeur's statement in *The Symbolism of Evil*, that what animates his research on myth is not 'the regret for some sunken Atlantis' but 'hope for a re-creation of language' (Kearny in Ricoeur & Kearny 1978:117).

Muthos, mimesis and metaphor

A very important correlation which Ricoeur notes is that between metaphor, *muthos* and *mimesis*. The main quality of metaphor is its mimetic ability to imitate and reinterpret reality. By rethinking the narrative pillars of *muthos* and *mimesis* at work in metaphors, the heart of reality is brought to expression as a new world is generated (Duffy 2009:72; see also Ricoeur 1977:288–289). A following paper on the relationship between myth and metaphor will scrutinise this aspect in more depth, as well as their ideological and utopian potentialities (Duffy 2009:72–75).

Narrative, time and myth

Narrative is never able to totalise time completely as it always works with beginnings and endings. Even historical consciousness is always starting over because it is in essence a temporal form of understanding and self-understanding. The sense of being in time remains problematic, more like a mystery than like a problem we can solve. It is as if we were inside a gigantic windowless room that we have never been outside of, of which we have no idea that there is an outside, or if we do have such idea, the very effort to think of it as 'outside' inevitably must lead us back to myth or some kind of poetic language to express this (Ricoeur 1988: 261; see also Pellauer 2007:84).

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is used in the Heideggerian nuance of the fundamental task of thought, namely to deconstruct cultural constructs, thus posing the question of false consciousness (Ricoeur 1973b:204; Stiver 2012:23, 25, 29). Viewing the work of the three 'masters of suspicion', Marx, Nietzsche and Freud together, Ricoeur arrives at a hermeneutics of suspicion, a new critique of culture (Stiver 2012:135–144; Wallace 1995:6–7). Ricoeur (1973b) defines *suspicion* as:

... the act of dispute, exactly proportional to the expression of false consciousness. The problem of false consciousness is the object, the correlative of the act of suspicion. Out of it is born the quality doubt, a type of doubt which is totally new and different from Cartesian doubt. (p. 206)

Deconstruction as demystification

Demystification departs from a doubtful consciousness as critique of culture and moves towards a new method of deciphering appearances as masked consciousness in order to unmask hidden relations which connects ideology to the phenomena of domination (Ricoeur 1973b:206). In this way, the relation between ideology on one side, and domination and submission on the other side, which is coded in religious language, is decoded and revealed. What starts as a negative unmasking enterprise, concludes in positive affirmation, as man, freed by the necessity of knowledge, re-appropriates his substance by mastering alienated forces and thus enters into transparency, which is the end of false consciousness. As Ricoeur (1973b) puts it:

... to know the moment when what man says is equal to what man does, and when his work is truly equal to his being. And in this kind of equation between being human, doing, praxis, and speaking, there is no longer ideology. (p. 208)

Deconstruction as demythologisation

Demythologisation as critique of culture: Demythologising forms the second part of Ricoeur's deconstruction, namely as internal critique of religion, which he views as unavoidable and urgent. To him, Bultmann's quest is only completely understood from the external problem of cultural estrangement. There is a certain irony to be noted in the process of the initially strange kerygma eventually becoming enculturated and finally has to deculturated, as the cultural vehicle imposed its own law on the kerygma, as for example its mythological conception of the world. Although not a scandal for ancient people, it has become a false scandal for modern man, as it is not the true scandal of the cross. This is not only true for the worldview, but also for the cultural frame of reference it imposes, causing cultural expressions: Jesus' signs become miracles; his divine origin is expressed by the virgin birth and his resurrection by empty tomb statements. These cultural expressions become folly for modern people replacing the true folly of cross and resurrection necessitating demythologisation (Ricoeur 1973b:209–211).

If we are always equally far from the folly of the Cross, if it is no more believable today than it was for ancient man, what has become irreversible is our cultural estrangement from a cultural vehicle which is, for us, to a great extent mythological. In this regard the work of Bultmann is perfectly legitimate, to dissociate the true scandal from the false scandal. To demythologise is to dissolve the false scandal in order to have the true scandal, the original scandal, revealed to all. (p. 211)

Demythologisation as restoration: It is important to note that, in the field of narrative analysis, Ricoeur emphasises that demythologising of symbols results in a *second naïveté*. Furthermore, he associates myth with symbol. With regard to great religious symbols, Ricoeur (1967) states that

... the dissolution of myth as explanation is the necessary way to the restoration of myth as symbol. Thus the time of restoration is not a different time from that of criticism; we are in every way children of criticism, and we seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative ... [D]emythologisation is the irreversible gain of truthfulness, intellectual honesty, objectivity. (p. 350)

Ricoeur illustrates his point arguing that the creation stories of the Bible are 'incorrect' as historical accounts, but only after digesting this shocking realisation can they be reinterpreted as powerful symbols of creation. Ricoeur stresses that rehabilitation of symbol occurs only after critical thought realised a certain disengagement, which has dissolved the symbols' apparent function of explaining the cosmos. Only then emerges symbol's deeper function of transforming and interpreting human existence, resulting in the second naïveté. Ricoeur (1967) describes the *second naïveté* as a 'Copernican Revolution' in which

... the being which posits itself in the Cogito has still to discover that the very act by which it abstracts itself from the whole does not cease to share in the being that challenges it in every symbol. (p. 356)

Second naïveté, the notion of religious consciousness which religious symbols once again permit, happens after a time of disengagement when critical thought burns away the apparent function of the symbols of explaining the universe so that their deeper function of transforming and interpreting human being can once again operate (Sawicki 1984:325; see also Ricoeur 1967:350).

Another process Ricoeur identifies, which he calls 'symbolic signification', to my mind, also results in demythologising, or at least demystification. Ricoeur (1967) explains symbolic signification as

... not two significations, one literal and the other symbolic, but rather a single movement, which transfers... [a participant] ... from one level to the other and which assimilates him to the second signification by means of, or through the literal one concluding that symbol assimilates rather than apprehends a resemblance. (pp. 355–356)

In this case, symbol is again restored by shedding literal meaning when some things are assimilated to others resulting in us being assimilated to what is signified.

Thus, it is only through rigorous critical examination that symbols regain their meaning-making power, which empowers them to be experienced again and again. This is not an easy process. It is a slow cognitive pilgrimage through the desert of criticism, not always resulting in the *second naïveté* for all who embarks on the journey (Ricoeur 1967:350; Sawicki 1984:325–326).

Deconstruction as destruction and reinterpretation

Ricoeur's hermeneutic of suspicion reaches a turning point with his application of destruction, which he views as a positive aspect, because it is a destruction of what destroys the radical question conveyed by the mythological language of another time. This destructive force is the assurance of modern man, which must be destroyed to arrive at a recollection of meaning. Ricoeur describes destruction as '... another kind of suspicion, but a suspicion with respect to ourselves, with respect to those who suspect what is suspected' (Ricoeur 1973c:213).

Destruction is necessitated by the forgetting of the initial question in the ancient language as a result of cultural distance. It is therefore a struggle against our own alienation in relation to the existential challenge the question once presented. Destruction in the sense of recollection of meaning is a turning point because it is the true task of hermeneutics. Our alienation from the initial question is the product of secularisation's two pronged onslaught. Firstly, the extension of rationality to all levels of reality causes universal objectification and leads to an expulsion of the cosmic sacred, the psychic sacred out of our consideration and our language. The once mysterious is reduced to the problematic (see also Lowe 1985:xi). Secondly, the autonomy of man as agent of his own history causes man to view the world as the realm of the explainable, the manageable and the universally available, where we take responsibility for our destiny and exercise

domination. The age of science becomes a way of existing and technology becomes a way of viewing the world and thus the axis of our existence, representing a new ontological regime. These two phases of secularisation happens within ourselves, not outside of us. It is at the heart of our culture, which it fundamentally defines, causing a life on the surface, the hollowness of our existence (Ricoeur 1973c:213–215).

Destruction calls into question the process of secularisation and the presuppositions of modern man and his culture, in order to restore the interval of interrogation in which the existential question of the by-gone era can again have meaning (Ricoeur 1973c:216).

Ricoeur proposes a certain pre-understanding consisting of three directions for the struggle against secularisation. Firstly, he suggests a philosophic anthropology, which he approaches with a phenomenological and existential style. For example, a critique of science should not criticise the results of science, but should understand how scientific understanding influences how people comprehend their existence in the world (Ricoeur 1973c:216).

Secondly, the question of humanity as a whole should be re-established, namely explaining the forces at work in humanity. This question has already been articulated from various angles, for instance evil and salvation was interpreted differently by the Church Fathers and Karl Marx. Immanuel Kant on the other hand, suggested 'having, power and worth' as man's great motivations, which qualifies man's being (Ricoeur 1973c:217–218; see also Ricoeur [1960] 1985:106–125).

Thirdly, the level of language should be explored with a view to restore and recreate a language that is convenient to describe existing as an individual in this world, and to pursue an historical quest in a humanity that seeks to become whole. Language should be understood not as one function among others, but as the semantic aspect of all functions, for instance of having, power and worth. Ricoeur concurs with Humboldt that 'man is language' and proposes that it is precisely in this 'being-language' that we should be fundamentally questioned, which should result in the language of the existential and the historic. This language should be '... appropriate to the kind of imagination which expresses most characteristic existential possibilities' (Ricoeur 1973c:218–219).

With this stated pre-understanding, Ricoeur moves further along the road of restoration of meaning, suggesting the next two stages should be the task of validation (justification) and the task of arbitration. By validation he means the justification of modern people still using symbolic language. Symbolism should be shown to be an appropriate language, correct, pertinent and adequate because by its double meaning it releases signification and explores existential possibilities. By means of symbols' oneiric, cosmic and poetic functions symbols generate a semantic structure: an immediate material or physical sense which intends an existential sense. The power of double meaning operates in such a way that we do not dispose of this language, but it disposes of us (Ricoeur

1973c:220–221). Validation recognises the multivocality of symbolic language: it says more than what it says, says something other than what it says, thus creating new meaning with. In effect, multivocal significations causes one meaning to create another meaning, and as the process repeatedly unfolds, shows that symbolic language have an inexhaustible semantic charge, unlike univocal technical and logical language which signifies very precisely, as it is necessary that a meaning remains identical all the time throughout an argument (Ricoeur 1973c:221).

Arbitration suggests that there is a profound unity between destroying and interpreting. Throughout the process of cultural and ideological destruction, there is an intense listening act taking place, trying to hear a more original and primal word. This interpretation act is the driving force of hermeneutics. In this context of the semantics of symbol, Ricoeur explains that the explicative function of myth is secondary and the symbolic function of myth is primary. That is why Ricoeur subordinates the problem of myth entirely to the problem of symbol. In this way, it becomes possible to distinguish the false rationality of myth and its symbolic expression. Therefore, demythologisation works on the level of myth's false rationality in its pretext to explain. Having eliminated myth's explicative function, we must also liberate the symbolic function, which Ricoeur calls 'saving the myth'. The Adam myth of Paradise lost, for instance, has the existential function of permitting us to read human history through the hero of culpability, resembling the hero of tragedy (Ricoeur 1973c:222–223).

Concluding remarks

The compilation of Ricoeur's insights on the definitions and functions of myth and the spectrum of interpretative possibilities he proposed, supplied from various perspectives, ranging from phenomenology to symbolism and narrative analysis, places his understanding and application of demythologisation in a useful frame of reference. From this synopsis, a future comparison and possible merger of Bultmann's demythologisation program can be made in a meaningful way.

Possible suggestions for comparison between Ricoeur and Bultmann's perspectives from this study are:

- definitions of myth
- myth as comprehensive frame of reference (mythical worldviews)
- literal or materialistic interpretation of myth as alienation
- symbolic interpretations of myth
- existential interpretations of myth
- development of existential language for translating mythical language and worldview
- myth as symbol
- the relation between myth, symbol and ritual
- mythology as symbolic structure for social dynamics
- myth as narrative in terms of narrative analysis: existential possibilities.

Aspects from Ricoeur's contributions to be considered for a possible broadening of Bultmann's approach to demythologisation:

- wider scope of definition for myth
- accommodating symbolic language and viewing myth as symbol
- placing demythologisation within the broader framework of deconstruction alongside demystification and destruction
- the role of myth in narrative and narrative analysis of myth
- social relevance of existentially interpreted mythology.

Such comparisons and possible merger could be meaningfully facilitated from the vantage point of the sociology of knowledge with its extensive terminology and comprehensive frame of reference, especially through the work of Berger and Luckmann (1975) on social and symbolic universes.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Berger, P., 1973, *The social reality of religion*, Harmondsworth, Penguin. Berger, P. & Luckmann, T., 1975, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Bultmann, R.K., [1941] 1967, 'Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentliche Verkündigung', in H.W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma und Mythos, Ein Theologisches Gespräch*, 1. Band, pp. 15–48, Herbert Reich, Hamburg-Bergstedt.
- Bultmann, R.K., [1952] 1965, 'Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung', in H.W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma und Mythos, Ein Theologisches Gespräch*, 3. Band, pp. 179–208, Herbert Reich, Hamburg-Bergstedt.
- Duffy, M., 2009, *Paul Ricoeur's pedagogy of pardon. A narrative theory of memory and forgetting*, Continuum, London.
- Hamman, K., 2013, *Rudolf Bultmann: A biography*, transl. P.E. Devenish, Polebridge Press, Salem.
- Lowe, W.J., 1985, *Introduction*, in Ricoeur, P., [1960] 1985, *Fallible man*, transl. C.A. Kelbley, Fordham University Press, New York.
- Malan, G.J., 1998, 'nHerwaardering van Rudolf Bultmann se ontmitologiseringsprogram in die lig van die kennisosiologie. Die "dag van die Here" in 2 Petrus as voorbeeld', PhD. thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Pellauer, D., 2007, *Ricoeur: A guide to the perplexed*, Continuum, London.
- Perrin, N.R., 1969, *The promise of Bultmann*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Ricoeur, P., 1967, *The symbolism of evil*, transl. E. Buchanan, Harper & Row, New York.
- Ricoeur, P., 1973a, 'Die Hermeneutik Rudolf Bultmanns', *Evangelische Theologie* 33, 457–476.
- Ricoeur, P., 1973b, *The critique of religion*, transl. R.B. DeFord, Union Seminary Quarterly Report, Vol. XXVIII(3), pp. 203–212.
- Ricoeur, P., 1973c, *The language of faith*, transl. R.B. DeFord, Union Seminary Quarterly Report, Vol. XXVIII(3), pp. 213–224.
- Ricoeur, P., 1974, 'Metaphor and the main problem of Hermeneutics', *New Literary History* 6(1), 95–110.
- Ricoeur, P., 1977, *The rule of metaphor*, transl. R. Czerny, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Ricoeur, P., [1968] 1980, *Essays on biblical interpretation*, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA.
- Ricoeur, P., [1960] 1985, *Fallible man*, transl. C.A. Kelbley, Fordham University Press, New York.
- Ricoeur, P., 1988, *Time and narrative*, Volume 3, transl. K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL.
- Ricoeur, P., 1992, *Oneself as another*, transl. K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Ricoeur, P. & Kearny, R., 1978, 'Myth as the bearer of possible worlds', *The Crane Bag* 2(1&2), 112–118.
- Sawicki, M., 1984, 'Religion, symbol, and the twenty-year-old Demythologizer', *Horizons* 11(2), 320–343.
- Stiver, D.R., 2012, *Ricoeur and theology*, Philosophy and Theology Series, Bloomsbury, New York.
- Theodorou, S., 2005, Rethinking the relationship between *Mythos* and *Logos*: Paul Ricoeur's conception of *Lexis* as Metaphor, *Dialogue and Universalism* 3, 129–136.
- Wallace, M.E. (ed.), 1995, 'Introduction', in P. Ricoeur, *Figuring the sacred. Religion, narrative and imagination*, in M.I. Wallace (ed.), transl. D. Pellauer, pp. 1–32, Fortress, Minneapolis, MN.