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In Conversation With the Past?  
Ricoeur, Theology, and the Dynamics of History

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*1. Introduction*

One of the tasks of philosophy of religion consists in the critical examination of current religious concepts. As part of this task, I will examine the concept of conversation in theology, focusing on the idea of a conversation with the past.

As a starting point for this examination, we need a definition of the notion of conversation. For the moment, I leave the field of theology aside and turn to a recent encyclopaedia of rhetoric. According to the lemma concerned, conversation may be defined as 'the art of keeping company, which is devoted to the physical and mental representation of oneself, in contact with others'.<sup>1</sup> I use this definition as a starting point for our examination, because it summarizes in a few words some notions that we, intuitively, associate with conversation. Of course, conversation has to do with talking, with dialogical interaction. However, a conversation is open to more than two participants, and hence we should not limit conversation to the pattern of dialogue preliminarily. Furthermore, a conversation has a distinctively temporal structure. A conversation may be deepened; it may lose momentum, or become stronger. A conversation is a linguistic relation, developed in time. Conversation is also more than the exchange of linguistic messages; it is an art, it is a praxis that can be developed. Moreover, conversation is more than an exchange of words. It is just as much a matter of body language. Even more fundamentally: conversation has to do with the representation of ourselves to others, and the representation of others in our world of living. All these facets are summarized in the definition above.

The question for systematic theology is whether this notion of conversation occupies a place in theology. By examining the idea of a conversation with the past, I intend to make a contribution to this question. This goal might raise some questions. For it seems obvious that there is a place for conversation in theology. There is, at least, a pressing need for dialogue and conversation, as opposed to violence. As the many religious conflicts nowadays demonstrate, conversation is highly desirable. It is not only desirable; there are even good reasons to assume that conversation is a necessary notion for theology, as the many case-studies of this conference attempt to show.

Still, there is a need for critical examination of this issue. I consider the widespread use of the notion of conversation as an argument for consideration. Every accepted notion is open to critical and systematic examination. My contribution to such an examination does not consist of a mere conceptual analysis. I will rather proceed by focusing upon the aspect of representation. Our definition uses representation as a main characteristic of conversation. Conversation is representation in relationships; it has to do with the art of keeping company. Consequently, our examination should focus upon the possibility of keeping company and establishing a relation of representation. To this end, I submit the field of history, as an area of thought in which the possibility of representation and company is put to the test. History is pertinent to our question, because it does not exclude the possibility of conversation a priori, but also shapes our awareness of the difficulties of keeping company. Though a conversation

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<sup>1</sup> '...die Kunst des Umgangs, die sich der körperlich-geistigen Repräsentation des Selbst im Kontakt mit dem bzw. den anderen widmet', K.-H. Göttert, 'Konversation', in: Ed. GERT UEDING, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik Bd. 4*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1998, 1322-1333, p. 1322.

does not need complete understanding, there must be a certain common ground, to which the conversation partners can refer. On the one hand, such a familiarity may be supposed to exist in one's past, the tradition to which someone belongs. On the other hand, one may doubt whether any familiarity exists in a conversation with the past. For how can one be in touch with something that is, by definition, not present?

This dilemma forms the subject matter of this paper. We will first consider some arguments for and against the possibility of a conversation with the past (§ 2). Once these arguments are presented, we turn to the field of philosophy of history, as treated in a recent book by Paul Ricoeur (§ 3). The materials of this book will lead us to a final section on conversation and theology (§ 4).

## 2. *In conversation with the past: arguments pro and con*

In favour of the notion of a conversation with the past, one could argue that such a conversation is both desirable and necessary. Conversation with the past is highly desirable, especially after events of war and terror, when the question arises as to what we can learn from the past. Every commemoration of war expresses: never again. Such use of history is a matter of formative education.<sup>2</sup> We may learn from the faults and errors of the past for our present and future political decisions. One may demand from political leaders a certain predilection for the past. If one should learn from the past, there must be an intense exchange. Conversation with the past is, for a large part, an instructive discourse. Reading historical sources and talking with witnesses broaden the individual memory into a collective memory.<sup>3</sup> The contribution of such witnesses is an edifying experience, highly needed, especially in the formation of youth.

We can go even one step further by stating that conversation with the past is not only desirable, but also necessary; one cannot escape communication with history. An entire current of historicism has given us at the very least the conviction that history is more than an illustration of general insights. History does matter. We are in our lives, as W. Schapp put it, 'entangled in histories'.<sup>4</sup> Schapp comes to this insight from a Heideggerian approach. When being has a history, the human being reflects this character and is full of stories and history. This perspective replaces the traditional, metaphysical perception of being and nature. Thus, it becomes essential for recent postmodernism that there is 'nothing but history', as the title of a book by David Roberts puts it.<sup>5</sup> We cannot surpass the bonds and dynamics of history in any supra-historical structure or conception. In other words, history determines our nature and identity.<sup>6</sup> To a large extent we are formed by what the past has brought to us. History also provides a wide spectrum of role models, alternative forms of behaviour and patterns of experience. Paul Ricoeur once spoke of narrative as a 'laboratory of forms'.<sup>7</sup> A narrative provides us with possible forms of behaviour that we can explore by reading, more than we could do by our own living. History is part of narrative, in this respect. It offers patterns of action by which we can be shaped and transformed.

Despite this intertwining of history and human existence, we can raise many arguments against the notion of a conversation with the past, as well. I note three areas of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. KONRAD REPGEN, 'Vom Nutzen der Historie', in: AMALIE FÖSSEL, CHRISTOPH KAMPMANN, *Wozu Historie heute? Beiträge zu einer Standortbestimmung im fachübergreifenden Gespräch*, Bayreuther historische Kolloquien 10, Köln, Böhlau, 1996, 167-183.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. MAURICE HALBWACHS, *La mémoire collective*, Paris, PUF, 1968, 36-37.

<sup>4</sup> WILHELM SCHAPP, *In Geschichten verstrickt*, Wiesbaden, Heymann, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> DAVID D. ROBERTS, *Nothing But History. Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. HERMANN LÜBBE, 'Identität durch Geschichte', in: LÜBBE, *Geschichtsbegriff und Geschichtsinteresse. Analytik und Pragmatik der Historie*, Basel/Stuttgart, Schwalbe, 1977, 145-154.

<sup>7</sup> PAUL RICOEUR, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, 139.

problems. The first has to do with a general crisis in philosophy concerning the possibilities of representation. How can we conceive 'real presences' in our culture, which has become weary with over-extensive metacriticism? It is clear that new ways should be sought to overcome these problems of metacriticism.<sup>8</sup> Especially in theology, this problem is a critical one.<sup>9</sup>

A second field of problems relates to the idea of history. In 1992, for example, Francis Fukuyama formulated his insight in 'the end of history'.<sup>10</sup> His argument leaned heavily on the insights of earlier philosophers like Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard. With their sharp deconstructions, they have exposed the impossibility of any ideology-free view of history. What the postmodernists have revealed is the impossibility of establishing ends in history. History has no end. At most it has ends. Or perhaps the singular history is wrong itself. There are only many histories with many ends. If we may question the possibility of representation in our first area of problems, we are now confronted with the question whether there *is* something to be represented. Do we have the possibility of conceiving history as our partner in conversation, when there is no singular concept of history with a clear goal?

A third problem relates to the notion of conversation. This notion meets the same critical approach of postmodernists as the notion of history.<sup>11</sup> The notion of conversation rests upon at least three assumptions. First, conversation or dialogue has to do with intentional speech; but it is precisely the use of intentional meaning in speech that may be fundamentally deconstructed as an arbitrary act. Second, conversation is a form of oral discourse. Hermeneutics and deconstruction have taught us to be suspicious of the supposed directness of oral communication. At least there are good reasons to separate oral and written discourse. One can even posit the primacy of written discourse in regard to oral discourse. However, the live presence of a speaker in words and in body disappears in written discourse. Third, conversation depends upon an idea of mutuality. Again, it is deconstruction that has brought into hermeneutics the creative function of ruptures and the far more intricate kinds of relation that govern meaning. Dialogical philosophy has appeared to be a naïve notion that cannot stand the test of critical analysis. Conversation is not so immediate and innocent as it might seem at first sight. How can we then conceive of any 'keeping company', except in a derived sense? If the notion of conversation can be maintained only with the help of analogies and derivations, we should at least look for other notions that are more suitable, and perhaps even drop the possibility of direct company altogether.<sup>12</sup>

Even if one does not accept post-modern criticism, there are good reasons to maintain that conversation is at least an unworkable notion for philosophical analysis. This is John Searle's contribution to the subject matter as a philosopher of language. As regards speech act analysis, the notion of conversation cannot be approached in a satisfactory manner.<sup>13</sup> The main problem for any speech act analysis is that the response to a speech act within a conversation cannot be explained from the intention of the initial speech act alone. We need to refer to the conversational context. However, this leads to an infinite order of regression. This regression can only be stopped by assuming an unintentional background, which lies outside the capacity of speech act analysis. I note that speech act analysis already falters at the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. GEORGE STEINER, *Real Presences. Is There Anything In What We Say?*, London/Boston, Faber & Faber, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. L. BOEVE, L. LEIJSEN (EDS.), *Sacramental Presence In A Postmodern Context*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, Peeters, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the last Man*, London, Hamilton, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the article of LIEVEN BOEVE in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Against the basic idea of, e.g., HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1990; WAYNE C. BOOTH, *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> JOHN SEARLE, 'Conversation', in: JOHN R. SEARLE ET AL., *(On) Searle on Conversation*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1992, 7-29.

regressive movement of conversation. This is to say nothing of the progressive movement of conversation, which seems to lie completely outside the realm of speech act analysis, but is such an essential component of conversation. If conversation is a philosophical reality, then we may conclude that it is rather a phenomenon beyond analysis than a notion to be used as a conceptual model.

Our hesitation concerning the notions of history and conversation makes us reluctant to posit the idea of a conversation with the past. So many questions arise in connection with the two words, all centred on the idea of representation. For how can the past be represented? One can speak with older people as witnesses of times past. However, one speaks to persons in the present. At most, these persons symbolise the past. They make present a former reality. Strictly speaking, this is not a conversation with the past; it is a conversation with present persons, who manifest traces from the past. Only the traces are present, not the acts of speakers from the past. How can we have a mutual relation to someone or something (a text, an archaeological source) that is not present itself? We can develop some mutual relation to a text. Gadamer's idea of a fusion of horizons between text and reader is based upon such a relation. However, as readers, we only approach a present text, or a present archaeological finding. The past only achieves a sense of presence through interpretive acts. These acts establish a presence in the present, with which we can keep company; but we can only imagine that we reach the past through this company. The original speakers or agents have disappeared from our imaginative company and we miss the mutuality to them that is essential for a real conversation.

I can only imagine the idea of conversation as an analogical notion. However, the question arises then whether there are other notions to be put forward, which simply better conceptualise the intention of relating human beings in the present to the meaning of the past. There are many such notions. My relation to the past can be viewed as looking in a mirror. The mirror of the past is a common metaphor, which does not possess the connotations of mutuality and presence implied by the notion of conversation, while it does express the close-knit connections of past and observer.<sup>14</sup> Another possibility is the idea of remembrance.<sup>15</sup> The past can be remembered in the present. Related to this notion is the metaphor of traces of the past that must be found and valued by remembrance in the present. A fundamentally ethical aspect is attached to the idea of remembrance. Remembrance becomes a task, a duty of reordering, re-membering the traces that have been dispersed.<sup>16</sup> One could also present the notion of an inheritance that comes from the past to present heirs.<sup>17</sup> Such models displace a clear awareness of a relation to the past, without the problems of the idea of keeping company. We commemorate, because the persons to be remembered do not live anymore. We receive an inheritance, only because the testator has passed away and is not present anymore.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. F.R. ANKERSMIT, *De spiegel van het verleden. Exploraties I: Geschiedtheorie*, Kampen/ Kapelle, Kok Agora/ Pelckmans, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the position of remembrance in culture in OTTO GERHARD OEXLE (ED.), *Memoria als Kultur*, Veröffentlichungen des Max Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 121, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995; J. ASSMANN, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühern Hochkulturen*, München, Beck, 1992. For remembrance as a subversive notion: WALTER BENJAMIN, 'Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen,' in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1965, 78-94; for theology JOHANN BAPTIST METZ, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, Mainz, Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> EDITH WYSCHOGROD, *An Ethics of Remembering. History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others*, Religion and Postmodernism, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., in the philosophy of ERNST BLOCH. Cf. the collection of his *Religion im Erbe. Eine Auswahl aus seinen religionsphilosophischen Schriften*, München/Hamburg, Siebenstern, 1959, and esp. the preface of JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, 7-14. Recently, H.J. ADRIAANSE, 'After Theism,' in: HENRI KROP et al. (eds.), *Post-theism. Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, Leuven, Peeters, 2000, 33-61, p. 44-59.

Now, when such excellent alternative notions and metaphors are available, the idea of a conversation with the past might fade into the background of philosophical and theological interest. Nevertheless, something may be said in favour of the idea of a conversation with the past. However, we should not look for a clear model of interaction to be applied, but rather for some inherent traits in history. At this point, philosophical analysis receives a new function, in describing a dynamic that otherwise remains hidden from view.

### 3. Ricoeur: *Memory, history, oblivion*

I commence a philosophical search for the dynamic of conversation with history by turning to a recent book of Paul Ricoeur: *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.<sup>18</sup> This book is suitable for our search because Ricoeur shows a refined sensitivity into the many layers of philosophical interest into history. There are at least three levels of thinking in the philosophy of history. I will go through these levels and mention the possibilities of conversation in them.

Ricoeur starts his treatment of a philosophy of history with a phenomenology of remembrance. It seems to be a general feature of human existence to grasp the past by remembering. The phenomenological questions that Ricoeur raises concern the 'what?', 'how?', and 'who?' of remembering. In examining the 'what?' of remembering Ricoeur comes upon the large gap between past and present. The idea of representation is a fundamental problem. The past cannot be made present sufficiently. Concerning the 'how?' of remembering, Ricoeur discusses a wide repertory of mnemonic devices developed in human culture. These devices, however, also show the danger of remembering. Memory is abused for all kinds of political aims.<sup>19</sup> There is a large distance between present and past, and any forced use of mnemonics increases that distance rather than establishes a firm connection between the two. This conclusion leads Ricoeur once more to the importance of inquiring into the 'who?' of remembering. At this point, Ricoeur is faced with the dilemma of individual and collective memory. What has the primacy in remembering: the individual or the collective? Ricoeur introduces a third notion: the neighbour. The category of the neighbour forms an intermediate level between individual and collective. It is on this level that a human being is confirmed in his or her existence.<sup>20</sup>

This is also the point where our interest into a conversation with history takes hold. The questions as to what? and how? only stress the distance from the past and the abusive attempts of surpassing that distance. The question as to the who? of remembering leads us to a certain reciprocity. The remembering subject must be confirmed in his or her identity as remembering agent. This is fulfilled in contacts with neighbours, who have the ability to address the remembering subject in his or her essence. This reciprocity comes close to our notion of conversation.

There is however, another level in the philosophy of history, in which the pendulum switches to the side of distanciation. This is the level of historiographic epistemology. From the field of testimony we turn to a field of notions like representation and truth. The 'historical operation', the act of the historiographer, is, as these word-fields show, very different from the act of remembering. It is an operation with different aims, namely the aim of documentation, explication, and, finally, representation.<sup>21</sup> While the first two steps receive most of the historians' interest, the methodological *pièce de résistance* is given in the notion of representation. Here lies the frequently hidden claim of a historian that his methods allow him to deal with hard facts. When Ricoeur places representation as a third step, after the

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<sup>18</sup> PAUL RICOEUR, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, L'ordre philosophique, Paris, Seuil, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> There are many places in the book where Ricoeur shows his aversion to public commemorations with a political view, e.g., *La mémoire*, 110-111, 532-535 (following Pierre Nora).

<sup>20</sup> RICOEUR, *La mémoire*, 161.

<sup>21</sup> A tripartition of history by Michel de Certeau.

operations of documentation and explication, it may be clear that the idea of representation has lost any connotation of primary, directly accessible facts. Rather than using the term representation, Ricoeur turns, consequently, to the word *représentance*, 'representation by replacement'.<sup>22</sup> Representation is an act of replacement, *lieutenance*. As such, it does not deal with bare facts, but rather with a narrative framework. The historian displays a certain representative tendency, which marks his or her work.

I must admit that I see few possibilities for conversation in this representative tendency. Clearly, history cannot deal with bare facts; it is a triple act, unfolded in a horizon of representative tendency. This situation asks for an explicative model like conversation. For conversation has to do with an intention, a tendency of representation over against others, as our initial definition put it. However, as regards the level of epistemology, I see rather the wish for a conversation-like model than the possibility of grounding the notion of conversation.

Ricoeur turns to a third level, the hermeneutical level that considers the possibilities of understanding behind the historiographic act. Here we enter the realm of the historical condition of human existence. Ricoeur uses elements of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in order to describe the existentials of this historical existence. He brings in an emphasis of his own by contradicting any tendency to totalization on this level. The fundamental term of this part is oblivion. Oblivion is a regretful circumstance; sometimes it has the form of enforced amnesia, but there is also a form of happy forgetfulness, which forms a counterpart to the claims of memory. Thus, the historical act is placed between the poles of memory and oblivion. Their interaction constantly determines the possibilities and limits of history. The notion of oblivion undermines the ideal of communication. The historian constantly encounters the fact that he or she must communicate extremes from history that simply are too harsh for words. Dark events like 'Auschwitz' cannot be put to words, yet they still need to be told. They are, as Ricoeur puts it, not transmittable, but that does not imply that they should be not speakable.<sup>23</sup> However, other modes of speaking must be sought. Ricoeur calls them the optative mode, or the eschatological mode. Between the poles of remembrance and forgetfulness, the historical speaking is bereaved of its naiveté, and is forced to search other languages, in a tempered mode of speaking, *sotto voce*.

This tempered mode of appeasement finally leads Ricoeur to the subject of forgiving. Forgiveness as such is not the object of the historian's interest. Ricoeur is, using an analysis of Derrida, very sceptical about the possibility of forgiveness. One cannot shape a 'politics of forgiveness'. Still, an agent can be called to account for his deeds. Moreover, he or she may be addressed on account of his or her identity behind the acts committed. As for Ricoeur, that final address is the only way to forgiving. Speaking about agency must be left aside in order to address the issue of regeneration. An agent of evil deeds must be disassociated from his or her deeds to become another person. A voice from the past must address the agent on a basic potentiality: 'tu vaux mieux que tes actes', you are worth better than your deeds.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, this is not a simple manner of forgiving. But, given the impossibility of forgiveness as an act that restores former deeds, it is the only way out of revenge and exasperation.

I refer to the communicative aspect of forgiving here. Ricoeur presents forgiveness as a matter of an address to an agent. There is no simple dialogue with the past, but there comes a voice from history that addresses a human being concerning capacities that go deeper than his or her deeds. That comes close to an idea of conversation. However, it is a conversation without an imperative mode. It is a deep voice, behind the horrible acts of the past. It is a voice that only sounds in an optative mode. It is, in other words, a horizon to which our

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<sup>22</sup> RICOEUR, *La mémoire*, 359-369.

<sup>23</sup> RICOEUR, *La mémoire*, 584.

<sup>24</sup> RICOEUR, *La mémoire*, 642.

speech orients itself, without actual fulfilment. It should not even be realised as a normal speech act. If history speaks to the heart, it cannot be ordered, manipulated into a politics of forgiveness. It necessarily has to remain a communicative address at a distance. However, it is an address that so strongly asks for a response, that I cannot do other than relate the word conversation to it. We can view it, in other words, as a 'conversational move', a communicative address that asks for response.

If we should envisage a conversation with the past, it is on this fundamental level of addressing an identity beyond common agency, only. This is, to paraphrase Ricoeur, a non-transmittable range, but not a range without speaking – and not without a move towards conversation, either, we add. What is more, we have now reached a conversational move that is necessarily without present aspects. Only this form of conversation, as a voice from the dark, not to be reached, can offer a real contact with the past as past, without presence in the present.

#### 4. Conclusion: theology and the conversation with the past

It is interesting to note that, once Ricoeur treats the possibilities of a speech of forgetfulness and of forgiving, all kinds of biblical allusions emerge. Throughout the book, we read of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, 1 Corinthians 13, or of remembrance and of forgiveness and repentance in the Abrahamic religions. The mode of historical speaking, once history is brought under the pole of forgetfulness, is alluded to as an eschatological mode. This brings us to the question of how theology relates to the problem of conversation and history.

I know of one major theological proposal that accounts for both the possibilities and the limits of the notion of conversation in theology.<sup>25</sup> I mean David Tracy's presentation of conversation as a model for theology in *Plurality and Ambiguity*.<sup>26</sup> For Tracy the model of conversation expresses the conviction that the essence of a human being as an interpreting being, emerges in questioning. 'We learn to play the game of conversation when we allow questioning to take over. We learn when we allow the question to impose its logic, its demands, and ultimately its own rhythm upon us.'<sup>27</sup> We can converse with other people, but also, and this is the kernel of Tracy's hermeneutic, we can converse with texts. 'In conversation we find ourselves by losing ourselves in the questioning provoked by the text.'<sup>28</sup> The most challenging conversation is given in interaction with the classical texts. Religion, as living with the classics, is, for that reason, the ultimate test of any hermeneutic. Thus, for Tracy, conversation is not a by-product of another interpretive move, but is essential for hermeneutics, both philosophical and theological. Tracy confronts this idea of conversation with the situation in culture as it is sketched by the postmodernists in words like plurality and ambiguity.

In his confrontation of conversation with these notions, the subject of history also comes up. For Tracy, the question of history is a form of most radical ambiguity.<sup>29</sup> He believes that the model of conversation can stand up to the test of history, even with all the forms of ideology-criticism that he is aware of. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the word

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<sup>25</sup> In this section, I pass over the proposal of WOLFHART PANNENBERG, 'Sprechakt und Gespräch', in: *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck, 1983, 351-365. Cf. the volume of KARLHEINZ STIERLE, RAINER WARNING (eds.), *Das Gespräch*, Poetik und Hermeneutik, München, Wilhelm Fink, 1984, 65-76. Pannenberg translates Gadamer's idea of successful conversation in interpretation to the act of conversation itself. A successful conversation gives way to a sense of wholeness, which transcends the intentions of the speakers. For Pannenberg, this transcendent move is a religious dimension of speech, an idea for which he is dependent upon Schleiermacher.

<sup>26</sup> DAVID TRACY, *Plurality and Ambiguity. Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, San Francisco, Harpers & Row, 1987.

<sup>27</sup> TRACY, *Plurality*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> TRACY, *Plurality*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> TRACY, *Plurality*, 66.

conversation itself hardly occurs in the chapter on history. When it occurs, it is in connection with the topic of interaction with the classics of a tradition. However, there is more to history than dealing with classical texts. Tracy does not provide us with insights into how to interact with past events and experiences. The past and history remain a form of otherness with which Tracy cannot adequately deal. For Tracy the consequences for interpretation of this otherness are put totally at the side of the interpreter. It is his or her identity that has to be transformed in order to understand the past. Ricoeur's model of thinking history is more radical, in this sense that it also turns to history itself. Another voice in history has to be sought, another mode of speaking that comes history itself.

It is remarkable to notice that Tracy's book ends with a chapter on religion and hope. Ultimately, it is in the horizon of religious hope that fundamental meaning is created. This comes close to what Ricoeur writes on the eschatological mode. In my opinion, however, Ricoeur is more aware of the consequences of speaking from this mode on the possibilities of a conversation with the past. History is not a radical example of a cultural situation that can also be met in other forms of plurality and ambiguity. History is the phenomenon of ultimate otherness, which continuously puts traces of representation into human existence.

The dynamics of remembrance and forgetfulness that follow from the representative urge in history determine the possibilities and limits of the notion of conversation. Especially in theology, we should take these possibilities and limits seriously. The ultimate goal of theological thinking, as appears on account of the subject of history, is not a matter of enlightenment and emancipation, as Tracy likes to have it.<sup>30</sup> The task of theology is to search for a language of otherness in the phenomena of human existence and culture, using the symbols and experiences of the field of religion. The subject matter of a conversation with the past makes up the field *par excellence* to fulfil this task.

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<sup>30</sup> TRACY, *Plurality*, 80.