

THE NARRATIVE TURN

Thirty Years Later

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Why Not All Who Cry Narrative Are Blessed

My first position was in the Department of Bible and Christianity at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, in 1968. I had never lived in the Midwest, much less in a Mississippi river town. One of the first things I noticed about Rock Island is no one drank at home. They drank at the local bar that was usually right around the corner. To walk into any of those bars after work in the late afternoon was to discover a community of people who had been drinking at the same bar for the last thirty years. Anyone who might wander into one of these bars who was not a regular was immediately identified as not belonging.

If you lived in the Quad-Cities area you often heard a story that nicely suggests the sociology of these bars. It seems a stranger, probably someone from Saint Louis, wandered into one of these bars. He walked up to the bar, ordered a beer, but then was struck by the fact that no one in the bar was talking to one another. He stood there staring into his beer when suddenly one of the men shouted out "43." The place erupted in a

gale of laughter. Then it got quiet again. After some minutes another patron shouted "16" with the same uproarious result. This pattern continued for some time which led the stranger to ask the bartender what was going on.

He explained that this group of folk had been coming to this bar for so long they had come to know one another so well that rather than tell the same story over and over again, they had just numbered them one through a hundred. It was explained that this saved a lot of time and in no way inhibited the pleasure they found in hearing an oft told tale. The stranger allowed (in the midwest they "allow") and he thought this was a terrific idea and desiring to join in, asked if he could tell one. The bartender shrugged, gesturing "why not." The stranger waited a few minutes and then shouted, "36." No response at all. Chagrined, he turned to the bartender who said, "Boy, you sure can't tell them."

I begin with this story because you probably ought to begin a lecture about stories with a story. But more important, I fear that the current celebration of the importance of narrative may lead us to believe that every time we shout "story!" we can assume we know how to tell one another stories or why stories are important. Moreover, I fear that if in fact we speak and act as if we know more about the significance of stories than we do, I am partly to blame. I was there, so to speak, at the beginning. I published my first article with "story" in the title in 1973 in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. That article, "The Self as Story: A Reconsideration of Religion and Morality from the Agent's Perspective," became the fourth chapter in my first book, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*, which was published in 1974.¹ The rest, so to speak, is history: which means I am often identified as a "narrative theologian."

I hate the idea I am a "narrative theologian." I hate all qualifiers to theology other than "Christian." Any qualifier other than "Christian" suggests that someone is trying to highjack Christian theology for their peculiar set of interests or that they are trying to provide a theory about theology that is more determinative than first order theological claims.

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). The 1974 edition was published by the small South Bend press called Fides Press. I like very much that my first published book was published by a press that needed all the faith it could muster just to stay in business.

As I will explain below, I also dislike the description "narrative theology" because it can suggest that theology is more concerned with narrative than with God. So I am going to use this opportunity to say what I take to be the role of narrative in theology by calling attention to how I understand the connections between the various ways I used appeals to the importance of narrative in my own work.

However, I first want to indicate what I regard as some of the unfortunate developments that the return to narrative has had. I am particularly concerned with how some have used the rediscovery of narrative to further an apologetic strategy on behalf of Christianity, that is, the attempt to make Christianity intelligible in modernity. I am thinking of those who like to quote Elie Wiesel's, "God made man because God is a lover of stories" in the interest of calling attention to the unavoidability of stories.² The suggestion is then made that as long as stories are unavoidable, why not try this story Christians tell about our understanding of ourselves. After all we all need all the stories we can get, and some of the best stories can be found in religious traditions. This way of selling the importance of stories is sometimes accompanied by a disdain for doctrine or theology because those activities allegedly kill the liveliness of stories through conceptual and analytical investigation.

What bothers me about this way of calling attention to the importance of stories is that it is but a disguised form of the well known strategy of Protestant liberalism that tries to find some "connection" in human experience that can make sense of Christian claims. The result is usually some reductive account of the Christian faith that identifies a "core" or "essence" about what is really important about what we believe as Christians. Appeals to narrative become a way to say that everyone, whether they know it or not, has some faith perspective, that is, a fundamental attitude to the world that cannot be shown to be true or false, but that we cannot be without. That apologetic strategy, a strategy that remains an ongoing temptation particularly in a time when Christianity is in decline, is one ironically I had hoped calling attention to the narrative character of Christian convictions about the way things are might challenge. I did so because good stories defy summary.

² I use this quote in an essay in honor of Hans Frei called "The Church as God's New Language" which now appears in my book, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living In Between* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 47-66. This book was originally published by the Durham NC press, Labyrinth, in 1988.

At least one of the difficulties I had with the appeal to narrative in service to an apologetic task is that in an odd way it resulted in an underwriting of the modern stress on the sovereign self. It did so because what became important is that you become the teller of the tale you need. So the focus, often unacknowledged or unrecognized, was on the agent prior to the story. So the sovereign self still reigned, only now that self took the form of a story. In this respect I think it is not unimportant that many, such as George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, who were among the first to direct our attention to the narrative character of existence had been influenced by Wittgenstein. From Wittgenstein they had learned that we are spoken before we speak. This means that to call attention to the significance of word and stories is just the beginning not the end of the work that must be done if we are to investigate the world that is opened to us through the stories that tell us.

It is not clear to me that any of us know what we are talking about when we describe the time in which we allegedly live as "postmodern." But if postmodernity names the time, as Gerard Loughlin suggests, when people recognize they are "not the sovereign of their stories" then there is some connection between the emphasis on narrative and postmodernism.³ But unlike many who are said to represent postmodernism those, like Lindbeck and Frei, have no intention of giving up questions of whether stories are truthful or untruthful. As Loughlin puts it:

Christian truth has never been a matter of matching stories against reality. It has always been a matter of matching reality-stories against the truth: Jesus Christ. For the Christian Church it has always been a life-story that comes first, against which all other things are to be matched. This life-story is what "truth" means in Christianity. Nor is this a matter of making up the truth, because it is the truth that makes up the story. The story is imagined for us before it is re-imagined by us: the story is given to us.⁴

Those attracted to narrative theology as an apologetic strategy may seem to agree with Loughlin because they often emphasize the importance of stories in the Bible. There is no question that much of the content of the Bible is in the form of stories. Moreover, I think it is true that the Bible is best understood as a complex story with many subplots which

³ Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

⁴ Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, 23.

resist any overly simple telling.⁵ It is, of course, also the case that the Bible contains material that is not primarily narrative in form. I would want to argue, though (and I think it undeniable) that those forms of literature in the Bible – e.g. the psalms, the wisdom literature, and the more discursive books of the New Testament – are unintelligible apart from the story of God's call and care of Israel and the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

So I do not in any way mean to demean the significance of the narrative character of the Bible, but I think it is a mistake to try to do theology by basing the Work theology is meant to do on a literary type.⁶ Again the problem is how such a move reproduces the habits of Protestant liberalism. The narrative character of the Bible, for example, is used to underwrite a generalized anthropology that delivers insights about the human condition. Of course there is nothing wrong with having insights about the human condition. But insights, even about the human condition, are a dime a dozen. People seldom, and rightly so, are willing

⁵ A. Katherine Grieb uses the helpful metaphor of "nesting" when she suggests that Paul's argument in Romans "in defense of God's righteousness is constructed on a series of stories nested within the one great story of what God has done for Israel and for the Gentiles in Jesus Christ." *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), ix. Grieb argues that "Romans is not a theological treatise on either faith and works or predestination. Instead it is a sweeping defense of the righteousness of God, the covenant faithfulness of God 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek', a phrase Paul repeats several times at the beginning of the letter and demonstrates in the logic of his argument.... The story of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ is at once the story of (1) God's sovereign renewal of the created cosmos, (2) God's redemption of humanity from universal bondage to Sin and Death, and (3) God's reconciliation of Jew and Gentiles (which involves both God's faithfulness to Israel and the keeping of God's promise for the Gentiles). It is critical to discern the *apocalyptic* framework in which the story appears: creation groans with expectation (Rom. 8: 22) as Paul and his communities live out the script of the end time; they are players in the last act of God's apocalyptic drama of salvation, a story that began with creation and the fall and continues through Israel's history up to the present moment." (p. xxiii). Nothing has been quite as important as the freeing of Paul from the terms set by debates in the Reformation.

⁶ Too often I fear appeals to narrative as the characteristic of the Bible ironically have the effect of separating the stories of the Bible from the text of the Bible. This has the effect of spiritualizing the Bible by failing to see the significance of the bodily character of the text. David Dawson has written brilliantly about this by showing how "in Origen's view salvation requires a radical transformation of body, but it cannot entail its replacement, even as an allegorical reading requires deepening and extending, but not replacing the text's literal sense. Transforming the body through reading the literal sense can be compared to transforming the body through ingesting food." *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 65. Dawson notes that Origen will argue that Scripture is "itself a sacrament like the Eucharist. Christ the lamb is still the Word, that Word is found in Scripture, and eating the Word refers to the interpretation of Scripture. In his *Treatise on the Passover*, he writes 'If the lamb is Christ and Christ is the Logos, what is the flesh of the divine words if not the divine Scripture.'" (p. 71)

to risk their lives or even make a small sacrifice on the basis of an "insight."

Because these apologetic strategies became so identified with the appeal to narrative, I simply quit writing about the importance of narrative for theology.⁷ That I did so does not mean I thought what I had said about the importance of narrative in my earlier work was mistaken. Of course I think I now could provide a clearer account than I did then of why I think it important to call attention to the narrative character of Christian convictions. But I have increasingly become convinced that more important than talking about narrative as a category in itself, we are better advised to do theology in a manner that displayed what we had learned by discovering the unavoidability of the narrative character of Christian convictions. After *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which I believe is my most complete account of why it is important to recognize the narrative grammar of Christian convictions, I seldom have written directly about narrative qua narrative.⁸ Rather I have thought it more important to do theology in a manner that displays the narrative form of the Gospel. After all recognition of the necessity of narration for any account of our lives does not save. God saves.

I think I know why I no longer call attention to the "importance of stories" or attempt any endeavor that might be called "theorizing about narrative"; but I wish I knew why another thinker who is responsible for calling attention to the importance of "narrative" for practical reason no longer writes about narrative. I am, of course, referring to Alasdair MacIntyre. In *After Virtue* narrative was the crucial category in MacIntyre's account of the moral life. In his work after *After Virtue*, tradition seems to have replaced narrative as the hub around which MacIntyre's position revolved. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre had argued that narrative is required for any account of our actions which attempts to

⁷ I think the last thing I wrote on narrative qua narrative is the "Introduction" to the book I edited with Greg Jones called *Why Narrative?: Readings and Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). Actually to say the "Introduction" is the last thing I wrote on narrative would be stretching the truth. Greg wrote most of what appears there. My "writing" basically consisted of our conversations about what the "Introduction" should say. I still think the essays in this collection remain the best available and certainly anyone wanting to begin to think about these issues should begin with this book. The book continues to be available through Wipf and Stock Publishers in Eugene, Oregon.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

show the connection between shorter and longer term intentions.⁹ MacIntyre argued that narratives provide the linkage between our actions because our very concept of an intelligible action is more fundamental than the concept of an action. Accordingly he argued that human actions in general are but enacted narratives in which agents are at best but co-authors of their own narrative. The narrative of our lives is but part of an interlocking set of narratives embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.¹⁰ Accordingly there is a close correlation between personal identity and practical reason. Both are finally best displayed as the enactment of ongoing narrative(s).

MacIntyre's account of action and why narratives are required to make connections between what we do and do not do was very similar to the kind of analysis I had tried to develop in *Character and the Christian Life*, which was published in 1975. Indeed for reasons very much like those given by MacIntyre, I was led to see why the account I had given of human action in *Character and the Christian Life* was inadequate exactly because at that time I did not have the concept of narrative, and in particular MacIntyre's account of an intelligible action, as part of my repertoire.¹¹ So it was extraordinarily important for me to see MacIntyre confirm some of the hunches I had begun to have about the importance of narrative. But then MacIntyre has not returned to this account of the importance of narrative in his latter work.

I am not suggesting that simply because he does not develop this account of narrative in his subsequent work MacIntyre has changed his mind about what he had to say about narrative in *After Virtue*. Yet it is interesting that in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* as well as *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* he seems to think it much more important to develop an account of tradition. Of course, in *After Virtue* he had already begun to explore why any account of rationality requires a tradition understood as a "historically extended, socially embodied argument" about the goods that constitute that tradition.¹² It may well be

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 208.

¹⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 218, 221.

¹¹ I discuss this in a new "Introduction" to *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). The "Introduction" originally appeared in the 1985 second edition of the book.

¹² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

that MacIntyre's intellectual agenda in his later work simply does not require him to return to his earlier account of narrative; but it nonetheless remains quite interesting that narrative no longer has the central focus for him it had in *After Virtue*.

I have wondered if one of the reasons for MacIntyre's reticence to draw attention even to the narrative character of tradition might be that if MacIntyre were to develop his account of the importance of narrative, he would not be able to talk about the importance of narrative qua narrative. Instead he would have to talk about a narrative which might well force him to develop his thought in ways that would require him to be something else than a philosopher. That "something else" I think is theology which is the subject that MacIntyre has spent a life lifetime avoiding. But I am a theologian. Moreover, I think it is not accidental that if we are to understand the significance of narrative, such an understanding is only available through theological reflection.

In the Beginning

"In the beginning" is where any account of the narrative character of Christian convictions must begin. Actually that is not quite a strong enough claim. "In the beginning" is where any account must begin to show why a narrative is constitutive of any account that would tell us the way the world is. This is the heart of the argument I developed in my Gifford Lectures, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*.¹³ There I argue that if it were possible to prove the existence of God, then we would have evidence that the God Christians worship does not exist. If we could prove God, then a necessary relation between God and God's creation must exist; but that is exactly the kind of relation that cannot be shown to exist.

Christian theology insists that there is never a question about God's existence. Only God exists, which means only in God are existence and essence one. Only God, therefore, can act without loss. That only in God are essence and existence one Aquinas thought to be the metaphysical implication of "In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth." The Christian claim, therefore, that God created *ex nihilo* is the

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

metaphysical expression necessary to account for why we know ourselves and our world by the story told about ourselves and our world in the Bible.¹⁴ It is contingency all the way down, which means the only way we have to know God and ourselves is by the connections made possible by truthful stories and, in particular, the story that begins, "In the beginning."¹⁵

Accordingly, David Burrell argues that the distinction between God and the world is unlike any other distinction we might employ because we distinguish God from everything else in a way that God is the source of all there is. This means that God cannot be placed over against the universe as though God were on par with those things in the universe we need to distinguish from other things. God cannot be so situated because God did not create from lack, but rather creation manifests the gratuity of God's love – a love that cannot be used up. So we cannot distinguish the creator from creation as if God were one item among others. Accordingly God alone exists by necessity, but the necessity is not the Aristotelian "could not be otherwise" but rather God "could not not be." "God alone exists 'by right', as it were, being 'necessarily existent in itself', whereas existence 'comes to' everything else."¹⁶ This is why our knowledge of God and ourselves is analogical, so that the analogies are tested and extended through the stories we are taught by those who have rightly learned to worship God rightly.

Though this understanding of God is usually put in ontological terms of "being," it is crucial to see that Aquinas's understanding of being is about action. God's being is his activity.¹⁷ Which means we, perhaps,

¹⁴ For my exploration of the theme of creation *ex nihilo* see the essay on Iris Murdoch, "Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get through Them If God Does Not Exist?" in my book, *Wilderness Wandering: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 155-70.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty is quite right to maintain the "contingent" character of language, selfhood, and community in his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Christians have no reason to deny that "our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids." (p. 16) But there is the question whether the description "contingent" can do much work on Rorty-like grounds. Thus one can always ask, "Contingent to what?" If it is all contingent, do we learn anything by calling it all contingent?

¹⁶ David Burrell, *Friendship and Ways to Truth* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 94.

¹⁷ This is Burrell's central contention in his *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

understand better what Aquinas is about when he makes the ontological point in terms of happiness. He says,

Since happiness signifies some final perfection; according as various things capable of happiness can attain to various degrees of perfection, so must there be various meanings applied to happiness. For in God there is happiness essentially; since His very Being is His operation, whereby He enjoys no other than Himself. In the happy angels the final perfection is in respect of some operation, by which they are united to the Uncreated Good: and this operation of theirs is one only and everlasting. But in men, according to their present state of life, and final perfection is in respect of an operation whereby man is united to God: but this operation neither can be continual, nor consequently, is it one only, because operation is multiplied by being discontinued. And for this reason in the present state of life, perfect happiness cannot be attained by man.¹⁸

Thus, as John Milbank has insisted, "in the beginning" was an act of "original peace." As I noted above only God can act without loss, which means creation is not an alien act. In Milbank's terms, "Christianity recognizes no original violence." Accordingly peace is not the suppression of difference but rather is the "sociality of harmonious difference."¹⁹ We were created by peace, making it impossible for us not to long for peace. But such a peace is not that secured by insuring that change does not threaten order, but rather by our being made participants in a community in which our activity matches our desires. Accordingly peace is but the name given to a life of virtue in which what we do is not different than what we are. Such a life in this life, of course, is known only through hope.

Milbank draws an implication from this understanding of creation that I think has not been appropriately appreciated for its importance. He argues that narrative is a more basic category than either explanation or understanding, because narrative is the mode of comprehension that allows us to understand not only ourselves but all that is. Explanation – the mode of science that assumes the material sphere of our lives is only governed by efficient causation – turns out to be unable to account for

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 3, 2, 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981). This is, I think, Thomas's way to say that in this life we will never get the story of our lives straight.

¹⁹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 5. As Milbank puts it late in *Theology and Social Theory*, "creation is therefore not a finished product in space, but is continuously generated *ex nihilo* in time." (p. 425)

itself on its own terms.²⁰ Understanding – the attempt to account for ourselves by positing a spiritual domain of meaning – results in endless deferment that hovers "like ectoplasm above the surface of material reality."²¹ When explanation and understanding are assumed to be the only modes of comprehension, the result cannot help but finally be nihilism in which all that remains is the will to power.²² Please note Milbank is not denying that explanations and understanding may not have an appropriate use in particular contexts. What is being denied is that explanation and understanding are our only or primary modes of rationality.

The alternative to explanation and understanding is descriptions made possible by truthful stories. Descriptions, however, turn out to be extraordinary discoveries that demand constant reappropriation if we are not to be misled by our speech. For example, Christians are tempted to turn the description, sin, into an explanation or understanding that makes sin but a manifestation of a "deeper reality." In like manner we often assume that fundamental moral descriptions, e.g., courage or murder, require a theory to sustain their meaning. But descriptions do

²⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 264. For an account and critique of science quite similar to Milbank's see John Lukacs, *At the End of an Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Lukacs argues that science itself confirms that reality cannot be comprehended in terms of cause to effect for no other reason than that subatomic particles cannot be described by "essence" or "matter" but rather exist only as an event (p. 110). Lukacs notes the "fundament" of science is "mechanical causation" which means three things: "First, that the same causes must – always and everywhere – have the same effects. Second, that there must be an equivalence between the force of cause and that of its effect. Third, that the cause must always and everywhere precede its effect." (p. 113) Yet Lukacs observes that this kind of causality cannot make sense of human life nor the lives of the most complex organism of the universe (p. 114).

²¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 267. Dawson underscores Milbank's point in an analysis of Eric Auerbach's work. Dawson notes that Auerbach did not think a figural reader needs to invoke the term "meaning," that is, he wanted to resist the notion of doubleness that the search for meaning seems to imply. To ask for the meaning of a word too often implies that the existence of the word is inadequate. In contrast Auerbach "underscores the reality of figure and fulfillment as entities in the world of space and time, and by 'meaning' he refers to the interrelationship of such real things, rather than some strange mental 'thing' with an existence all its own apart from that relationship. Auerbach is suspicious of meaning precisely because it so easily claims for itself a right of independent existence that belongs only to historical persons and events." Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*, 87.

²² Though there is no necessary relation between the critique of foundational epistemologies and an emphasis on the importance of narrative, I think it is not accidental that many who find they cannot avoid some account of the narrative character of practical rationality also tend to be anti-foundationalist. They do so because they realize there is no place to start to think or to ground what we think in some place different from what we think. Rather they come to realize we can only begin and end in the middle.

not require a theory. Rather, we learn how they work and the kind of , people we ought to be to sustain such descriptions by the practices and correlative narratives for a people to explain their way of life to themselves and others.²³

The Christian narrative stands in contrast to explanation and understanding just to the extent that Christians offer descriptions that are unintelligible if our very existence does not come as a gift. Such an account cannot pretend to offer an unprincipled "universality," a universality that only hides the violence necessarily perpetrated in the its name, but can only offer the reality of a people who have learned to live peaceably in a world of violence. In Milbank's words, "instead of a peace 'achieved' through the abandonment of the losers, the subordination of potential rivals and resistance to enemies, the Church provides a genuine peace by its memory of all the victims, its equal concern for all its citizens and its self-exposed offering of reconciliation of enemies."²⁴

That the church is able to offer such a peace has been made possible by the life of the one we call Jesus. For it is in his life we believe we rightly see the end that was "in the beginning." That story, the story of Jesus, we also believe is the story of the church. Again as Gerard Loughlin puts it:

The story of Jesus Christ continues in the story of the Church, and is thus not ended; or as Frei has it, that the stories of all are included in the story of Christ, so that the end of this story is the end of all stories. The story of Christ continues in the story of the Church because the Church is precisely constituted as the continuation of Christ's story. Christ leaves so that the Spirit may come to lead the Church in "a little while" to Christ. Everything given to Christ is given to the Church (John 17: 7-8); and the Church is sent out "into the world" (John 16: 7-24). The Church is the community that tells Christ's story by being itself the continuing story of Christ; embodying the story of Christ in the circumstances of its day.²⁵

²³ For the best account we have of description see Charles Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). As Pinches puts it, "any act, in virtue of being a human act, already has a narrative home which means that any description of a human action already has begun the process of embedding the thing done in a narrative." (p. 218) Of course some acts take many years to discover their appropriate description or descriptions. For example, the recent destruction of the World Trade Center may well have been an act of terrorism, but whether that description will be adequate remains to be determined.

²⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 302.

²⁵ Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, 84. The importance of narrative for christological reflection is simply beyond the focus of this paper. Barth's refusal to separate the person and work of Christ set

That is the story that Christians believe is not only true but also saving. Indeed without that story we believe that the world could not have a story. For there is no world if there is no church. So our very ability to say "In the beginning" is made possible because we are able to say, "We have seen the end." That is what it means to say that the universe is adequately understood only if it is understood eschatologically. There was a beginning because there is an end. We were not created for no purpose, but rather for the glory of God. That alone is the story of stories.

Telling the Story in Modernity

The argument to this point (if that is not to give what I have tried to do a far too exalted compliment) has tried to show why the attempt to show the unavoidability of narrative entails massive theological and metaphysical claims. Perhaps better put: the appeal to narrative is the primary expression of a theological metaphysics and is, therefore, an unembarrassed claim about the way things are.²⁶ If it could be shown, for example, that there could be a satisfactory account of existence that did not entail a narrative, then we might have evidence that what Christians (and I suspect, Jews and Muslims) believe about the way things are might be false. Accordingly we are some distance from those that would emphasize the importance of stories because of the charms of some stories. I do not think charming stories are to be despised; but charm, as is well known, can be a hiding place for the most destructive vices, not the least being the inability to distinguish between truthfulness and lies.

However, I suspect the significance of the return to narrative is best appreciated in ethical and political terms and, in particular, the peculiar challenges of modernity. I have a well deserved reputation for "modernity bashing," but often those who criticize me for using a hammer when a scalpel is called for fail to attend to my central concerns. Those

the stage for christological reflection that takes seriously Jesus's life and teaching as constitutive of the kingdom of God He was.

²⁶ I think it is no accident that three of the most compelling accounts of Christian theology in recent time stress the significance of narrative. See, for example, James McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1, 2, and 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986); Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Exploration in Christian Life and Doctrine* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

concerns have been quite simple. It has been my contention that modernity names the time that tried to forget we are timeful beings.²⁷ In other words modernity was the attempt to "start over" in a manner that left behind the gifts of the past. Interestingly enough, the development of the modern discipline of history was one of the ways modernity specialized in a determined mode of forgetfulness. The past could be forgotten through history by the attempt to show that, "what happened" was explained by antecedent conditions. History, in short, too often is our attempt to turn the past into a number.

The forms of thought often associated with the Enlightenment are usually identified as the source as well as justification of this attempt to begin anew. Immanuel Kant is, I think, rightly seen as the most articulate thinker of this extraordinary project. Kant's work, like that of most of those associated with the Enlightenment project, is complex – making any generalization about what ways he does and does not suggest a decisive break with the past hard to determine. However, my primary interest has never been in laying blame at the feet of any one figure, but rather to understand the stories that are living through us that are difficult to name because to name them means we are already in a transition to other stories.²⁸

America names for me sets of some of the most powerful stories that grip our lives. If you ask "Why America?" my only answer is that is where I am stuck. Yet it is also the case that America, perhaps more than any other country, exemplifies the ambitions of the Enlightenment. It

²⁷ I put together the essays in *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* because I thought they provided an interesting investigation of timefulness. Of course that exploration was primarily undertaken through analysis of others, which meant what I thought I was trying to do was not as evident to my readers as it was to me.

²⁸ John Lukacs suggests that we are at the end of modernity in his *At the End of an Age*. In a wonderful paragraph that begins his account of modernity, he observes "modernity" is a shorthand for "the Bourgeois Age (which) was the Age of the State; the Age of Money; the Age of Industry; the Age of Cities; the Age of Privacy; the Age of the Family; the Age of Schooling; the Age of the Book; the Age of Representation; the Age of Science; and the Age of an Evolving Historical Consciousness." He then observes that except for the last two "all of these primacies are now fading and declining fast." (p. 15) Lukacs by no means thinks that everything about the modern age is bad. He notes we are healthier than ever before, large populations live in relative comfort, and every state proclaims it is a democracy. Yet he thinks that the contradictions within the modern project have led to its own demise. Lukacs argues that the way forward will require historical thinking by which he means not the work that historians do, but rather the recognition of the historicity of all our knowledge (Yet he notes the historian Dante or Shakespeare is not yet among us). (p. 83)

does so for complex reasons, not the least being the assumption that America names a virgin land in which people could begin anew no longer encumbered by the hierarchial habits of the old world. I have always thought no better example of the American ambition could be found than John Rawls' account of the original position.²⁹ Equally important, of course, is that America is a capitalist country. No system is more antithetical to memory than capitalism. As Milbank observes "the capitalist system is, in itself, indifferent to attachment to location and to the content of articular customs and traditions; it imparts no sacrality either to place or to hierarchical modes of rule."³⁰ Liberal political arrangements coupled with capitalist systems conspire to produce a timeless people whose memories are at best formed by nostalgic sentimentalities.

Thus my oft made claim is that modernity names the time that produces people who believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they had no story. This story is, of course, a creation story but now we become self-creators. The self, however, that is so created is one incapable of being habituated in the practices necessary to sustain a life of virtue. I am not suggesting that liberal political theory or practice is devoid of any account of the virtues, but rather that any such account but replicates an account of human action shaped by explanatory paradigms that make "me" different from what I do.³¹ Thus cynicism

²⁹ It is a story in itself to document how Rawls' account of the original position in *A Theory of Justice* has mutated through his subsequent work. Yet I think it is not hard to see how the device of the original position continues to inform his understanding of international relations in his *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). In that book Rawls denies that his account of a "realistic utopia" is ahistorical. Thus people will "depend on the facts of social conduct as historical knowledge and reflection establish them: for example, the facts that, historically, political and social unity do not depend on religious unity, and that well-ordered democratic peoples do not engage in war with one another." (p. 16) Rawls' animus against religion is nowhere more evident than in this book. For example, he observes "not to be overlooked is the fact that Hitler's demonic conception of the world was, in some perverse sense, religious." (p. 20)

³⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 273.

³¹ For example, John Rawls suggests that liberal conceptions of politics "require virtuous conduct of citizens, the necessary (political) virtues are those of political cooperation, such as a sense of fairness and tolerance and a willingness to meet others half-way." (p. 15) Rawls no doubt thinks other virtues might well be important, but they are not "political." Yet the very distinction between political and non-political virtues begs the question of whether any polity does not require, for example, the virtue of honesty or courage if the political system is to have any chance of being at once truthful and non-violent. Certainly Aristotle would have found Rawls' distinction between political and non-political virtues incoherent. Even on his own grounds one wonders if Rawls's extraordinarily "thin" account of the virtues necessary to sustain his liberal polity would be sufficient.

becomes the central virtue of modernity, insuring that I can always stand back from my activity in order to make it possible for me to disavow who I am.

If the church is in fact a community determined by a counter story to the story that we story ourselves, I have suggested the church cannot help but appear as a counter politics to the politics of the world. I am, therefore, accused of tempting Christians to withdraw from the world and abandon their responsibility to work for relative justice. I confess I often am tempted to withdraw, but there is no place to which we can withdraw. Christians are, after all, surrounded. However, we can in the meantime draw on God's good patience to be a patient people in the world so that the world may know that the story goes on.

Christians trained by such a patience might well discover that in this or that place and in this or that time they share much with their non-Christian brothers and sisters. The world may well try to live as if there are no stories, or at least there are no true stories, but such a life is impossible. Indeed the problem for most in our time and place is not that they have no story, but that too many stories – stories reduced to numbered shorthand – possess our lives, making it impossible to live out any story well. Therefore I suspect Christians can do nothing more important than take the time in a world that believes time is in short supply to listen to the stories others tell and in so hearing gain fresh ears to hear and live the story we believe makes us participants in God's life.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to argue against the use of narrative as an apologetic strategy in fulfilling the demand of modernity. The author offers a critical appreciation of the use of narrative for theological reflection. Narrative is by itself not the foundation of theology, but a literary type conveying Christian convictions. The disadvantage of the description "narrative theology" is exaggerating the importance of narrative rather than God. The author emphasizes the conceptual and analytical dimension of stories. He disagrees the reduction of Christian claims into general experience in which the truthfulness of Christian faith is being neglected. He questions the use of narrative for apologetical purpose. He uses Alasdair MacIntyre as an example that the concept of narrative is replaced by tradition in the later stage. On the other hand, he agrees with John Milbank that narrative is a more basic category than either explanation or understanding, because narrative reveals not only our self-understanding, but also the understanding of reality. In conclusion, he affirms that the theological and metaphysical claims of narratives are still valid for modernity.

Abstract by Benedict H. Kwok

撮 要

本文質疑利用敘事作為護教策略，以滿足現代主義要求的做法，認為這並不可行。作者對以敘事作神學反省的做法，抱審慎認可的態度。敘事本身只是帶有基督教認信的文學體裁，而非神學基礎，「敘事神學」這描述的缺點是誇大了敘事的重要性，甚至比上帝還重要。作者強調故事的概念及分析層面，不同意把基督教宣信還原為普遍經驗，因這忽略了基督信仰的真實性，他更質疑是否應以敘事護教。作者舉麥堅泰的例子，指出他後期仍以傳統概念取代了敘事概念。另一方面，作者同意米爾班克的說法，認為敘事是比解釋或理解更基本的種類，因為這顯示著我們對真實的理解，而不單顯示出對自我的認識。總的來說，作者肯定敘事的神學及形而上意義，認為這從現代主義來說仍是有效的。

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