Narrative Approaches

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Although in some sense narrative approaches in practical theology have been developed only recently, one could claim that there is a long and intrinsic history of their relationship. Religious practices that form the core material for theological reflection in practical theology are often directly related to narratives. In one way or another human stories are connected with stories of and about God. Liturgy and rituals embody and re-enact narratives from the spiritual tradition, allowing contemporary congregants to join in with their own life stories. Pastoral counseling and spiritual care focus on those individual stories as they connect with traditions. Religious education shares the stories of a tradition to help new generations build a repertoire of potentially meaningful narratives. And even when practical theologians focus on popular cultural, they look for the stories of meaning in and beneath the cultural practices. Sometimes of course the connections are far from harmonious. Critical contributions from subaltern voices challenge the narrative hegemony of dominant groups and their interpretation of the religious tradition by offering the stories of personal experiences of women (Neuger 2001), people of different colors (Andrews 2002), or gay and lesbian believers (Kundtz and Schlager 2007). In a sense, theological reflection on religious practices has therefore always been reflection on the convergences, confluences, and conflicts between the myriads of stories.

As this chapter shows, there are at least three dimensions in narrative approaches. The first uses narrative forms in practical ministry and religious communication (like preaching and pastoral care). The second involves empirical analysis and deconstruction of religious subjectivity that is inherent to narrative. The third empowers marginalized voices by creating an audience for their stories. These three dimensions blend together and make it impossible to render a simple description of narrative approaches. To sort through the complexity, this chapter will first describe the narrative turn, showing philosopher Paul Ricoeur's influence and tracing narrative developments both outside and within practical theology. Then I address key issues in narrative research, offer a

formal model for using narrative analysis, and conclude with analysis of strengths and critiques.

The Narrative Turn

Of course, awareness of the narrative dimension of tradition and practice is not new but can indeed be found throughout the ages, for example, in the *Breviloquium of* thirteenth-century theologian Bonaventure:

Because the mind is more moved by examples than by argumentation, by promises more than by reasoning, by piety more than by definitions: therefore the Scriptures should not apply the defining, analyzing and concluding form, to prove certain qualities of a certain something, as is done in other sciences. It had to have its own forms, which, according to the different emotions, would affect the inner in different ways; so that if someone is not moved by commandments and prohibitions, he would be touched by narrated examples, and if this person is not moved by them, he would be touched by the mercies shown to him; and if someone would not be moved even by this, at least he would be touched by wise admonitions, by true promises, by terrible threats, so that he would at least be encouraged to piety and praise of God.

Even though Bonaventure lists narrative as just one shape in which scripture reaches the heart of people, his fundamental distinction parallels the two modes of reasoning outlined by US cognitive psychologist and educational theorist Jerome Bruner (1986), an early champion of the so-called narrative turn. One is the logical or paradigmatic mode which seeks to convince by arguments and truth; the other is the narrative mode which seeks to convince by lifelikeness. The first (argument) transcends the local and particular by identifying the absolutes or the general, the second (narrative) locates experience in time and place and focuses on the particular. This narrative mode, as Bonaventure understood, is the mode of scripture. It is also the central mode in studying religious practice. Scholarly practical theological attention to narrative thus has to account for alternative ways of knowing besides rationalist positivism. Practical theologians often do not aim for general, objective, and absolute knowledge, but develop local, particular, and in a certain sense subjective understandings.

Notwithstanding narrative's long history, the systematic development of narrative approaches in general and of narrative approaches to religious practices in particular is much more recent, like practical theology itself. The narrative turn is evident in many disciplines in the social and human sciences since the second half of the twentieth century; it has also become a central perspective across the field of theology and religious studies

(Ganzevoort et al., in press). Arguably the most important influence in this turn is Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy. For practical theology, two related ideas have been central in developing narrative approaches. The first regards the narrative structure of how we understand and live our lives; the second is that meaningful action and identity can be interpreted as "text."

The idea of a narrative structure of our understanding and experience implies that we organize our experiences in storylike forms, as philosophical theologian Stephen Crites (1971) wrote in his seminal paper "The Narrative Quality of Experience." We live our lives from day to day, but we understand our life as if it were a story. Our collective identity, history, and religious tradition are likewise structured as stories. This is a matter of "mimesis" or representation of the external reality in our mind and knowing. Building on a range of philosophers from Aristotle to Gadamer, Ricoeur (1984–1988) identifies three dimensions of this mimetic representation. First, there is a "world behind the text," consisting of the context, events, and background of the narrator (be it a biblical writer, contemporary individual, group, and so on). Second, there is a "world of the text," the texture of carefully interwoven elements that together create a sense of meaning. Third, there is a "world in front of the text," the proposal of a possible world for the reader to live in, inviting her or him to respond. This triple mimesis describes how we come to understand our life and world and also how we relate to the texts from a spiritual tradition.

The idea that meaningful action can be understood as a text has facilitated the application of hermeneutical theories and methods to the realm of the social sciences and human practices. A narrative approach then can be used not only to analyze and interpret narrative, verbal forms (like life stories, sermons, or biblical texts), but also human actions, including rituals, congregational exchanges, and so on. Actions can be considered as texts in that they consist of an "author's" meaningful communication to an "audience." Like the text, the action becomes relatively independent from the author and the original setting, and becomes open to reinterpretation by the audience. Similarly, identity can be understood as a narrative structure, that is, the person's reflective interpretation of himself/herself. Identity thus is not some essential quality that needs to be uncovered, but the story one tells about oneself for a particular audience.

If narrative approaches are not limited to common textual forms, we need an open-ended working definition of narrative like the following: narrative includes all forms of representation of real or fictional situations in a time sequence. This sequence connects events into patterns of causality, desirability, development, and meaning.

These Ricoeurian notions contributed to the narrative turn, moving away from a modernist view of knowledge as the direct representation of an objective external reality. Instead, knowledge, discourse, and action are seen as social constructions, interpretations of the world and ourselves that try to make sense of that reality while engaging with others who form the "audience" for our stories. When we tell our life story, or when we retell and re-enact the stories of our religious tradition in liturgy, we are actively negotiating what to include and how to frame it in such a way that it will communicate with our audience. The central dimensions of a narrative approach therefore regard the relation with that which is given (reality, the facts in one's life course, tradition) and the relation with those for whom one tells this story (significant others, the wider world, God).

This implies a strong and positive attention to the narrator's subjectivity. Instead of taking stories as mere "windows" that enable us to "see" the reality about which they speak, we expect stories to be part of an ongoing dialogue in which the narrator engages with her or his audience. Every story functions to establish, maintain, change, or end the relationship with the intended audience (Day 1993). The first question to ask for any given story therefore is not "What does this story tell me about the external reality?" Nor is it: "What does this story tell me about the speaker's mind?" Instead, the first question is "What does this story tell me about the relation this speaker has or wants to have with the audience, human and divine? What does he or she try to accomplish with this story?" A narrative approach then sees practices and stories more as performative than as representative.

Narrative Contributions from Outside Practical Theology

Narrative approaches in practical theology make use of many contributions in theology and in the social and human sciences. It is not the intention of this chapter to chart all those sources, but rather to highlight the variety by pointing to a few significant starting points for further exploration.

In theology, Yale Divinity School has been a seminal place for developing a narrative approach. Scholars like H. Richard Niebuhr, Hans W. Frei, and George Lindbeck stressed the narrative nature of biblical stories over against a tendency to reduce the text to general and rational propositions. Their postliberal approach moves beyond the rationalist, individualist, and romantic focus of liberal theology and returns to a focus on narrative, tradition, and community. Christian faith is the language of a community of which the depth grammar is described in its doctrines. Ethicists like Stanley Hauerwas took this notion and elaborated on it in their own field.

Other scholars with similar concerns include Edward Schillebeeckx and Walter Brueggeman. Many (maybe most) biblical scholars nowadays work with narrative approaches, without necessarily buying into a thoroughly narrative perspective.

A second obvious and important source is found in literary theories. A turning point here is the work of literary theorist Northrop Frye. His structuralist approach to narrative led him to identifying standard, archetypical patterns in stories, recognizable not only in modern literature, but also in the Bible and in Greek drama. Cultural theorist Mieke Bal and others have called for more critical readings (e.g., feminist), for example, by asking not only who is speaking, but also who is not speaking. More recently, practical theologians have drawn upon Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, especially his notion of the polyphonic author.

A third source is offered by psychological theories and psychotherapeutic approaches. Kenneth Gergen has become the spokesperson for a radical social constructionism that accounts for (inter)subjectivity. He has also developed a narrative theory that focuses on the motives of a story's character in the story's development. Theodore Sarbin, John Shotter, Dan P. MacAdams, and others have worked on what they call "narrative psychology," taking the story as a root metaphor for understanding human action and psychological functioning. From that notion, Michael White and David Epston have developed models for narrative therapy that have served many therapists as well as practical theologians. Their approach does not ask whether stories are true or not, but whether the stories one tells make it possible to live one's life. The aim of therapy then is to deconstruct stories that are limiting and to construct new and viable stories. A new and promising field is that of narrative gerontology with a strong interest in spirituality (Kenyon et al. 2011).

Finally, narrative approaches have given voice to marginalized groups. Scholars with a feminist, postcolonial, queer, or otherwise critical perspective often work with narrative approaches to highlight the value of local stories that challenge the dominant logic of an oppressive society. Building on cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin, Johann Baptist Metz and subsequent liberation theologians worked on theological methods that are deeply rooted in praxis, and more specifically in the personal stories of the marginalized and the "dangerous stories" of tradition that reflect them. In some ways Metz's views are close to the Yale School and mainstream narrative theology in Europe, but Metz and his followers stand out for their commitment to subaltern voices.

Narrative Approaches in Practical Theology

Since narrative approaches have always been part of theological reflection on religious practice (the perspective we now call "practical theology"), we should not be surprised that there are in fact different narrative perspectives. The most classical perspective takes the scriptural tradition's narrative shape as the starting point. Narrative regards only the form that we should use for adequate religious communication. It does not necessarily imply a social constructionist view of knowledge, or involve critical social analysis. In fact, many more conservative strands in Christianity show an extensive use of narrative in their publications without making it much more than the effective vehicle to convey traditional religious views.

Modern practical theology, however, usually works from the premise that form and content are interrelated and that a narrative approach changes the view of knowledge and truth. Several practical theologians have developed concrete and specific approaches for the various disciplines within the field.

In pastoral care and counseling, Charles Gerkin (1984) offers a strong and convincing contribution with his book *The Living Human Document.* With this notion, taken from Anton Boisen's work in the early twentieth century, he describes how the persons we encounter in pastoral care are storytellers, trying to make sense of events in their lives. Combining a language of force (as found in psychodynamic and Marxist models, for example) and a language of meaning, Gerkin outlines a hermeneutic mode of pastoral counseling. He works explicitly with narrative concepts like plot, tone, and role, offering a philosophically grounded structure for pastoral work that he elaborates into working models in later publications. Later examples are Chris Schlauch's (1995) understanding of the role of narrative in "faithful companioning," Andrew Lester's (1995) analysis of "future stories" in his study of hope in pastoral care and counseling, and Julian Müller's (1999) application of narrative therapy in pastoral counseling.

In the field of homiletics, the focus on narrative has been made explicit in the so-called "new homiletics." Breaking away from propositional preaching, writers in this current see preaching as a transformative event, using performative language and metaphors. Not every sermon will use stories, but the narrative process serves as the undergirding structure. Mainstream homiletic introductions by David Buttrick and others show a preference for narrative approaches, a challenge taken up by explicitly narrative and practical contributions on narrative homiletics like Eugene Lowry (2001) and many others. Within this movement, there are

obviously major differences. John Wright (2007) stays close to the Yale School's focus on community building through narrative, whereas Cas Vos (2005) and others used Umberto Eco's notion of the "open work of art" to describe the sermon: There is no fixed meaning but instead a narrative metaphorical space in which the hearer connects what is offered in the sermon with her or his life story to find points of meaning.

Even though narrative approaches seem best developed in homiletics and pastoral care, there are promising contributions in other practical theological fields as well. Anderson and Foley (2001) connect the field of pastoral care with worship by looking at the intersection of stories and rituals as two of the most powerful modes of transformative communication. Early on, Thomas Groome championed narrative approaches in his view of religious education as "shared Christian praxis." Heinz Streib (1991) and Nicola Slee (2004) focus on narrative in faith development. And James Hopewell (1987) and Charles Gerkin (1986) have presented narrative approaches to congregational studies. Unfortunately, the full potential of narrative approaches is yet to be unpacked in these fields.

The central ideas in these different contributions hinge on the question of how human stories and the story of/about God interact. We can observe three positions that are sometimes used strategically, sometimes taken as theologically normative (Ganzevoort 2010). In the first position, the stories of God as found in the Bible express the human stories. They give words to what we know or feel, thus validating our experience. This happens for example when we read a psalm of lament with people who are suffering. Through this expressive mode, our human stories are lifted up *coram Deo*. In the second position, the stories of God confront our stories and critique our life. This prophetic style challenges us to reconsider our stories, offering guidance, warning, or comfort. In the third position, the stories of God offer an open space where we can bring and reflect on our own stories, without being pushed in one direction or the other. This evocational approach builds on the idea of narrative as an open work of art. The sermon (for example) should not convey one specific message, but create the space where listeners can find their own message.

Narrative Research and Practical Theology

A final topic in surveying narrative approaches in practical theology is the burgeoning field of narrative research. Many practical theologians show a preference for qualitative, biographical research, but they differ in the degree to which they reflect the different dimensions of narrative approaches mentioned throughout this chapter. Some use narrative

methods to describe and improve practical ministry and religious communication, without necessarily challenging existing praxis. Others use narrative research as an analytical and deconstructive tool, accounting for the narrator's subjectivity and the story's location in relationship to the audience. Still others see narrative research as a way to allow marginalized stories and voices to be heard, firmly placing their practical theological endeavor in the tradition of liberation theology.

Even when narrative researchers in practical theology differ with regard to these choices, they have to reflect on the nature of their narrative material. Two fundamental questions are at stake, one epistemological, the other ethical.

The epistemological question has to do with the view that narratives are interpretations of an experienced reality in relation to a specific audience. The question then is whether we see an interviewee's stories as windows through which we can access the historical truth and/or the interviewee's inner mindset or whether we see them as time-, place-, and relation-specific. If we take the latter position, narrative research is limited in its capacity to unveil external facts, but it has high potential to uncover the processes of giving meaning to life experiences through life stories. This implies, however, that the interviewer–interviewee relation is constitutive for the narrative data gathered, and the researcher should reflect explicitly on that relation.

The ethical question has to do with questions about which stories are foregrounded and which stories are downplayed and denied. Obviously this is the case for every research project, but in a narrative approach subjectivity is central. This means that the choice of participants defines the kind of results the researcher will get. It is an ethically relevant decision whether to include the powerless, the outsider, and the marginalized or to focus on the dominant group. The narrative researcher should be aware that research is not an objective analysis of reality, but another "narrative" (re)construction that bolsters or challenges the participants' stories. Inasmuch as the researcher engages with the field, he or she becomes a player changing it and supporting some participants' narratives over against others.

A Narrative Model

For further elaboration of narrative approaches in practical theology, it is helpful to offer a formal model, building on the various perspectives surveyed here. The model identifies six dimensions that may be used for research, analysis of verbatim pastoral conversations, sermons, and so on. The first four regard the story's configuration or the way the narrator tries

to make sense out of his or her experiences by constructing a plausible story: structure, perspective, tone, and role assignment.

The first dimension is *structure*. It describes the selection of and the sequential connection between the elements included in the story or stories. The narrator uses a time sequence to present the story elements in a specific order, which may or may not be chronological. Through this presentation order, the story creates its own time. Retrospection of the past and anticipation of the future are used for interpreting the present. The structure can be highly coherent or consist of loose fragments. Through causal, temporal, or thematic connections, story lines emerge. This process can be called *emplotment*.

The second dimension is *perspective*. It regards the stance from which the author chooses or is forced to construe his or her story. The perspective taken constitutes the selection and interpretation of events. This dimension allows us to analyze critically the effect of the narrators' position (including gender, age, ethnicity), their respective interests and needs, and the division of power in enforcing a particular perspective upon the interaction.

Tone describes the overall affective charge of the story, based in part on the question whether the protagonist gets closer to reaching her or his aims. The classical story genres (comedy, romance, tragedy, irony) are defined by a different tone. Tone is also a crucial feature to assess levels of hope and commitment.

Role assignment is the last dimension of the story's configuration. It describes the way the author attributes specific roles to himself or herself, and to other characters in the story (e.g., hero/heroine, caregiver, victim). Through this assignment, he or she construes a constellation of roles serving the maintenance or enhancement of the narrative structure and the author's identity. The conflicts and complementarities between the roles are important features of the narrative process.

Besides these four dimensions of the story's configuration, the last two dimensions regard the relation with the audience. One of these is *relational positioning*, the processes through which the narrator uses his or her story to establish, maintain, shape, and conclude relationships. A narrative approach to social and religious interaction sees actions and stories as performative rather than representative. The central question is what the narrator wants to accomplish in the relation by telling the story.

The final dimension is *justification for an audience*, or how the author accounts for his or her life in front of significant others. This account or justification is judged by criteria for legitimacy and plausibility the audience holds, which may differ from one audience to another. The

audience's constellation therefore determines the number and consistency of stories needed for justification. Often narrators refer to normative or "canonical" stories to render their own story more plausible.

These six dimensions of the narrative process are not atomizable elements, but are mutually dependent and inclusive. Each particular structure, perspective, or audience implies specific configurations in other dimensions. The dimensions are useful in offering a number of ways to observe and analyze the narrative process. They can also help to reflect on specific (religious) practices.

Evaluating Narrative Approaches

To conclude, I will briefly address some promises and critiques of narrative approaches. The first promise is that it creates the possibility of interaction with biblical theology, through a fresh understanding of Boisen's famous phrase of the "living human document." Whereas this term was earlier used to accentuate the contrast between dead texts and living humans, narrativity underscores the parallels between written texts and meaningful human action. This connection invites practical theology to employ methods and insights from biblical theology and to explore their relation with human documents.

Second, a narrative perspective serves as a metatheoretical framework. It helps us understand the connection between theology and social science and the discussion of contesting approaches within both worlds. In differing theories and approaches the underlying story lines can be discerned, with their implicit normative assumptions. Because of this metatheoretical character, and the growing body of literature on narrative in social science, there is a strong potential for interdisciplinary communication and research.

Third, taking a narrative turn involves a hermeneutical stance, in which the individual biography and religious construction are valued over general descriptions and statistical averages. From a theological point of view, this is called for if we want to do justice to the voices of the oppressed and the unheard, and if we want to acknowledge the religious individual. From a social scientific point of view it is warranted, given the reality of a more and more fragmented and plural society. Individuals construct their own *bricolage* of elements from various religious traditions and worldviews.

Fourth, a narrative approach has the advantage of proximity to the practices we study. Where people are inclined to talk and interact in a narrative mode, probing a narrative theory and method for our practical theology helps us avoid theoretical alienation. Even if one does not share

the presupposition that the entirety of human life and experience is structured narratively, the human practices we observe involve a narrative discourse.

As for critiques, narrative approaches run the risk of becoming too cerebral, verbal, and cognitive. This chapter has tried to work with a broad understanding of narrative to include rituals, practices, and physical and emotional movements. Even then, the model itself is more on the level of words and meanings, which may give undue preference to verbal knowledge.

A connected critique is that narrative approaches show limited attention to power issues and vested interests. Although this may certainly be the case in naive interpretations, this chapter has shown that a narrative approach may serve well to highlight power dynamics rather than hide them.

The third critique is that narrative approaches forgo normativity issues, especially in accepting human subjectivity and assuming human stories as equally normative as biblical stories. The various narrative approaches differ from one another, but the narrative turn indeed brings about a revaluation of human subjectivity. Honoring subjectivity is, however, not necessarily less normative; a narrative analysis of practices can – and should – uncover the hidden normativity within these practices and in relation to the tradition in which they are embedded.

How one values these promises and critiques will depend on one's preference for a specific narrative approach and one's theological perspective. Regardless of scholarly differences, however, it seems plausible to assume that narrative approaches will remain an important perspective in practical theology. They offer a different approach to religious knowledge and a fresh way to analyze practice.

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