One of the significant forces shaping contemporary theology may be described as the shift from reason, especially as understood by the Enlightenment, to the imagination. This post-modern shift appears in the current interest in the symbolic and the narrative in theology. While these two are clearly related — symbols often being part of a narrative — they are distinct, and perhaps best seen as the double foci of an elliptical discussion.

Without denying such a relation, this essay simply concentrates on the narrative, but occasionally indicates analogous questions regarding the symbolic. In view of the recent publication of anthologies such as *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, the more specific task of the essay is to draw an introductory map of narrative theology, covering both the theology of narrative and the use of narrative in theology.1 Thus, it will neither discuss the historical development of narrative theology nor the systematic thought of its major proponents nor cover the sizeable corpus of its literature; rather it will focus on its critical issues, indicating its interesting points as well as its rough edges. The essay concludes with a postscript from a Third World perspective.

Such an approach is actually called for by the nature of narrative theology itself. One cannot at this point speak of narrative theology as a theological movement the way ‘dialectical theology’ or even Latin American liberation theology is. Instead what one finds are individual thinkers who saw the importance

---

of narrative. Furthermore, one notices the great diversity among those who have thus turned to narrative. There are names as disparate as McAfee Brown and Novak, Metz and Wiggins, McClendon and MacIntyre, Lash and Hauerwas; in fact, all those mentioned are each associated with some other philosophical or theological school. Yet in spite of this diversity, one discovers their underlying concerns to be very similar to each other's. To speak then of narrative theology, as this essay does, means to recognize both the diversity among the theologians and the similarity of their concerns.

1. THE APOLOGY FOR NARRATIVE

At a time when the producers and consumers of theology are keenly aware of market fads in the theological enterprise, it becomes necessary for any new set of ideas or vocabulary to prove itself. Narrative theology has not been exempt from this demand; and this has led to good, because apart from the matter of acceptability, it has challenged narrative theology to stand on its own ground.

Different questions have been posed to narrative theology, but behind them lies one central issue: why narrative theology? This issue involves, more specifically, providing a basis for using the concept 'narrative' in theology at all. On their part, narrative theologians have faced the issue with great forthrightness, and given answers from their particular perspective.

In examining these answers, one finds that the current theological interest in narrative is usually justified in either of two ways. The first argues that human experience itself has an essentially narrative quality. The best example of this kind of justification is Stephen Crites' article, appropriately titled "The Narrative Quality of Experience." Here he proposes that "the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative," and that "narrative quality is to experience as musical style is to action." These seemingly abstract proposals carry

the important implication that human identity is closely tied up with narrative:

A man's sense of his own identity seems largely determined by the kind of story which he understands himself to have been enacting through the events of his career, the story of his life.³

This too is what is outlined by Ricoeur's article written after *Time and Narrative* — what he refers to "the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function."⁴ It makes sense then to say that the human person is his or her story, and vice versa.

Support for such an assertion has been obtained by narrative theologians from both anthropological and philosophical sources. Anthropology shows humans to be invariably storytelling animals, relishing the crude folktale as well as the grand epic. It is therefore no surprise that narrative theology frequently turns to examples from traditional cultures:

The study of traditional folk cultures has also made us aware that there is more to narrative form than meets the eye (or the ear), and at least it raised the question whether that may also be true even for a culture as fragmented, sophisticated, and anti-traditional as ours. For within the traditional cultures there have been stories that were told, especially on festive occasions, that had special resonance. Not only told but ritually re-enacted, these stories seem to be allusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told, because they live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of the celebrants.⁵

On the other hand, modern philosophical analysis provides narrative theology, not so much examples of the role of narrative as a theoretical ground for its importance. Using a different vocabulary, it makes the useful point that being human involves historicity or temporality. With this point made — whether

⁵. Crites, "Narrative Quality," 294-95.
through the analysis of Dilthey, Heidegger or even Wittgenstein — narrative theology takes the narrative and considers it under this light. As Edgar V. McKnight says, “narrative hermeneutics utilizes the fact of universality and historicality, the fact of the fundamental structure of the mind and the historicality of man, the fact of the generality and necessity of narrative and the singularity of narrative.”

This then has been one way narrative theology has justified itself — by appealing to the essentially narrative quality of human experience. In making this particular assertion, it draws support from the examples of anthropology and the analyses of philosophy.

The other way narrative theologians have argued for the importance and usefulness of the concept ‘narrative’ has been to turn to religion itself. It basically calls attention to the unavoidable fact that the normative scriptures for the Jewish and Christian theologian are narrative. There is here no denial of the non-narrative sections of scriptures, but simply an affirmation of the centrality of narrative. Weinrich, for instance, has the following to say:

Whole sections of the texts canonized as the Bible, like many other oral and written texts of Christianity, are stories. The Bible does of course include in both Old and New Testaments texts of a different character, laws, moral precepts, rules of hygiene, letters of exhortation, and expressions of praise and thanksgiving, but it is certainly no exaggeration to say that the most important texts, the ones most relevant to religion, are stories.

Herein lies the other justification for narrative in theology — its abiding presence and importance in religion.

Having noted the place of narrative in scriptures, narrative theologians develop the argument further by drawing its implications for faith as well as theology. Here Bausch proves himself to be most eloquent:

For we must remember that the gospels are a response to a very bewildered first generation of Christians who were suddenly bereft of the presence of one who held them together, healed their rifts, and moved their spirits. They were desperate for comfort, for some kind of contact with Jesus. So they did what we would do — and do at the death of a parent or friend: they sat around the table and asked the original witnesses to tell them once more the stories and deeds of Jesus. And in the telling, as in all good stories, they sensed his presence again. The spirit of Jesus was rekindled. And this wasn't hard to do for the witnesses. There was so much to tell and Jesus was in fact a fascinating person. So the stories began — and so did the faith.  

If such is how the Spirit enkindles faith, then theology itself must take it to heart; otherwise, “if the category or narrative is lost or outlawed by theology as pre-critical, then real or original experiences of faith may come to lack objectivity and become silenced, and all linguistic expressions of faith may therefore be seen as categorical objectivizations or as changing symbols of what cannot be said."  

This relationship of faith and theology to narrative has been expressed positively by TeSelle in the following way:

What ought theology to make of this? Obviously a great deal. To see belief not as a set of beliefs but as a story, an experience of coming to belief, means that theological reflection ought itself to be shaped by the story, to take to itself, both in form and content, the story.  

This same insight has been echoed by many narrative theologians. McClendon, for instance, believes that narrative is “a means of expression uniquely suited to theology.” Stroup, to take another example, declares that “narrative may suggest a new understanding of the relationship between the doctrines of

9. Ibid. 85.
Christian faith, Scripture and experience.” One could multiply examples of how theologians see their task in relation to the importance of narrative in religion, but such is not necessary; it is enough to have seen how narrative theology justified itself on the basis of the importance of narrative in religion.

As narrative theologians conceive it then, the apology for narrative rests on a double foundation: the essentially narrative quality of human experience, and the abiding centrality of narrative in religion. It is evident from the work of these theologians themselves that this foundation contains a solid core, that it has proven to be valid and fruitful.

This is not, however, to say that there is no room for further thought. In fact, one can indicate two specific areas related to the double foundation of narrative theology which need greater clarification.

The first involves the essentially narrative quality of human experience and its implication regarding the relationship between narrative and human identity. There can be no doubt that because human experience is narrative, then who one is arises from one’s narrative, and vice versa. And yet, one has to recognize that people with different narratives are able to understand each other. Narrative theology as such needs to be able to account for this.

This need takes on an urgency in the light of the different theologies of liberation. Carol P. Christ, for example, applies the basic insight of narrative theology concerning the relationship between narrative and human identity to feminism:

Women’s stories have not been told. And without stories there can be no articulation of experience . . . The expression of women’s spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women’s stories. If women’s stories are not told, the depth of women’s souls will not be known.

Much in the same way that Christ relates narrative theology to women’s concerns, James Cone does it with regard to the

race issue:

If someone asks me, "Jim, how can you believe (the claims of Black Theology)? What is the evidence of (their) truth?" my reply is quite similar to the testimonies of the Fathers and Mothers of the Black Church: let me tell you a story about a man called Jesus who was born in a stable in Bethlehem...14

Feminist and black theologies are simply two examples of the development of the basic insight that narrative and identity are integrally related.

Without judging the validity of their concerns, one can, and must raise the question how people of different narratives can understand each other, or to use the words of Robert McAfee Brown, how "the dialectic of similarity and dissimilarity between the story I am being told and my own story" takes place.15 This is an area that narrative theology needs to work out further.

The other area in narrative theology that requires clarification involves the nature of the normative narratives in religion, especially in Judaism and Christianity. Narrative theologians correctly emphasize the continuing and central presence of narrative in both Jewish and Christian scriptures. As a result of this emphasis, they insist on the relevance of 'narrative' as a category in theology. Thus far, there can be no question about their position. One must, however, continue by asking to what extent narrative theology faces the issue of the historicity of scriptures.

In describing scriptures, narrative theology has opted to use 'narrative' or 'story' instead of 'history'. In so doing, it has liberated itself out of the bind that many 19th and 20th century theologians found themselves in, namely, the quest for the so-called historical Jesus. Stroup, for example, discusses the issue thus:

For the theologian, the issue here is whether those narrative that express human experience, particularly "religious experience," are

necessarily historical, or whether, as some believe, their significance
is not their historicity but the reality that they depict. Furthermore,
it has occurred to some theologians that historical criteria may not
be the most appropriate for evaluating every narrative, and that the
"truth" of a narrative is not necessarily its historicity.\textsuperscript{16}

One can easily grant Stroup’s point, and still validly ask how
narrative takes into account some of the historical claims related
to scriptures. One cannot simply dismiss history as a totally
irrelevant category without violating the very nature of Judaism
and Christianity.

Some narrative theologians have, in fact, not dismissed history
as a category. But on the other hand, they have identified it
with narrative in religion so closely that it becomes "religious"
or "salvation" history. To do so would be to revert back to a
"theology of salvation-history" in the mode of Wright — a
position that has been criticized by Childs for being unclear
whether the religious message "resided in the biblical text itself,
in a phenomenon ‘behind’ the text, or in some combination of
text plus event."\textsuperscript{17} James Barr, another critic of Wright, states
outright that "the ‘historical’ acts of God make sense only
because they are set within a framework of conceptions, stories
and conversations which cannot be expressed by any normal use
of the term ‘history’."\textsuperscript{18} However, even with this, the need for
greater precision remains.

The two areas in narrative theology that require further
thought are not really unique to narrative theology. They are,
in fact, the same ones addressed to those theologians who see
the primacy of the symbolic in both human experience and
religion: (a) how does one understand one’s own as well as
other’s religious symbols? and (b) how can the symbolic take
the historical into account? That these same questions arise is
a clear indication of the relationship between the narrative and
the symbolic.

\textsuperscript{16} Stroup, "Critique," 136.
\textsuperscript{18} James Barr, \textit{Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments}
Moreover, one with an historical perspective realizes that these questions are not recent discoveries of contemporary theology; rather they appear as the fundamental questions of theology since the 19th century and even the present. Their formulations may have been different with Schleiermacher or Kierkegaard, with Schweitzer or Herrmann, with Troeltsch or Richard Niebuhr; but the basic concerns remain the same: understanding and history, both in terms of the human and the religious. That this is so is sure vindication for the apology of narrative theology. It shows that the concept ‘narrative’ is itself useful for theology.

II. ‘NARRATIVE’ AS A PROPER THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT

In spite, or perhaps because, of the questions it has generated, the apology for narrative has succeeded in showing that ‘narrative’ is a useful concept in theology. As concept, it calls attention to the centrality of stories in both human experience and religion. However, a second issue arises in connection with its proper theological nature. Granting its usefulness, one can still ask what, as concept, it refers to more precisely.

The concept ‘narrative’ is not originally from theology but literature, and therefore, it would be helpful to trace its roots in literary studies. As a literary concept, narrative refers to the specific form of a piece of literature as well as to the actual history of how such a form has been used. In other words, it refers to literary form and tradition.

Thus, to say of a literary piece that it is narrative is to answer the question, “How is it shaped?” And here one employs other related concepts such as ‘plot’ or ‘character’ to identify a narrative or even to distinguish one kind from another. Moreover, a literary piece stands in relation to a particular literary tradition which consists in the historical development of that literary form. Put in another way, to describe the literary tradition within which a given narrative belongs is to answer the question, “How was such a narrative produced?”. For example, to call Marquez’ Cien Años de Soledad a novel is to express that it has some common characteristics with Fielding’s Tom Jones and Canetti’s Die Blendung, and also that it stands within the tradition of the novel
in Spanish. Literary form and tradition then — far from being simply categories for classification — are meant to be cues that orient a reader as to how to regard a particular literary piece.

In some cases, it is fairly easy to determine the literary form and tradition of a given piece; in others, one needs to be almost a specialist. In both, however, the process takes place in the same dialectical fashion. The reader does not judge first that a particular piece of literature is narrative, and then proceed to understand it. Rather s/he recognizes it to be narrative as s/he understands it. Narrative, as a literary concept then, is oriented towards meaning.

This basic insight is echoed in narrative theology, and rightly so, as narrative theology is very much in conversation with literary studies. The study of Scholes and Kellogg, for example, has become an important foundation for narrative theology. Furthermore, some narrative theologians completely take over particular schools of literary criticism and transpose them to theology.

There is no doubt some validity in this transfer of methodology, as the narrative theologians also deal with specific narratives. In fact, the narrative theologian must undertake this literary study of the narratives that s/he is dealing with. However, one must also take into account that the narratives that the theologians are dealing with are ‘religious’ — however one defines the term.

This question becomes most acute in the case of narrative theologians who have employed structuralist and existentialist categories. To illustrate, one can quote Calloud’s analysis of the temptation story:

In the text, Jesus is the figure of the category of choice — he chooses to be such and such. He chooses who he will be (including Son of God) and the mode of this existence. This total freedom is the direct opposite of the satanic perspective: “If you are the Son of God . . .” Jesus deliberately establishes himself in the process

of signification and not in the immobility of the signified.\textsuperscript{20}

Such an analysis sheds some light on the story, which others have not shown. However, it appears to reduce ‘Jesus’ simply to ‘the doer of the action’ or some other structuralist category. One can also raise an analogous question with regard to narrative theologians who have been influenced by existentialism and who “take the mundane story of Jesus . . . as the metaphor of all human movement.”\textsuperscript{21}

Perhaps the issue can be expressed more sharply thus: is ‘narrative’ even in theology simply a literary concept, i.e., a way of arriving at the meaning of some story? And of course, the counter question is: does it not rather go beyond this by recognizing the specifically religious nature of narratives in theology?

Of the narrative theologians, it is Hauerwas who boldly addresses this issue. He begins by calling religious narrative as one which a particular community considers so. Underlying this seemingly facetious statement is the essential reality that religious narrative creates and is created by community — a relationship which he names “the political dimension of narrative.”\textsuperscript{22} In this, he echoes Ricoeur who describes religious literature as “originary modes of discourse through which the religious faith of a community comes to language.”\textsuperscript{23}

By taking this step, narrative theology puts the weight of the word ‘religious’ not on the narrative itself but on its relation to the community. This provides the conceptual bridge through which narrative becomes a properly theological concept.

Inasmuch as the relationship to the community is what constitutes the religious nature of narrative, then the discussion no longer stays on the level of meaning. Narrative as a literary category already supplies the way to meaning. Presuming this,


\textsuperscript{21} TeSelle, \textit{Parables}, 125.

\textsuperscript{22} Stanley Hauerwas, “The Moral Authority of Scripture,” \textit{Interpretation} (July 1982) 356.

what is now at stake is how the narrative functions within the community. Put in more traditional language, it is now a matter of the truth of religious narrative.

That there is truth in religious narrative is an assertion that narrative theologians share with other theologies. However, they reject the way in which its truth has been construed, especially in any fundamentalist fashion. Such a fundamentalism can take either a historicist or authoritarian form. In one, the truth of the narrative supposedly lies in its exact description of how events happened, as in what is currently passed off as “scientific creationism”; in the other, in its authoritative formulation of dogmas, like the naive view of the divine institution of the sacraments. It is this second form that Michael Novak practically caricatures in the following passage:

What counts is not the experience which occasioned the insight, nor the moment (if one has occurred) of conversion, nor the altogether individual, unique, and contingent details of autobiographical narrative; no, what counts, in the rationalist self-image, is that the mind be conformed (1) to universal principles, (2) to general rules of evidence, and (3) to clear and distinct concepts accessible to any inquiring and adequately disciplined mind.24

While not all narrative theologians would agree with this description, all would refuse to put truth exclusively in terms of the general and conceptual.

Instead narrative theology often locates truth in the orderliness of religious narrative; the word that Hauerwas and Burrell use is ‘rationality’.25 This refers to the inner coherence and dynamism of religious narrative as one listens to it. Thus, it is not a characteristic of the narrative itself apart from the community, but that power that carries the listener along. To use the terminology of Greenberg regarding the Exodus, it is for the Jews

"the orienting experience by which all of life and all other experience could be judged and oriented." This is how religious narrative functions normatively for the community — not through an abstracted principle, whether moral or religious, which can then be applied to other situations. Rather it invites the individual member and the community to enter into the inner flow of the narrative, and it is in this process of following the rationality of the narrative that one discovers its truth.

Here narrative theology has arrived at that point where 'narrative' is a properly theological concept. It is no longer simply a concept describing a literary form and tradition. Neither is it a plain recognition of the centrality of narrative in both human experience and religion. As a theological concept, it asserts that narrative is the privileged access for the community to truth. In this manner, narrative theology shows that the concept 'narrative' is truly theological.

There remains, however, even with this discussion certain specific areas for further reflection. The first concerns the rather sharp distinction that narrative theology makes between the meaning of religious narrative, and its significance for the community. By using the concept of narrative on the level of literature as its basis, its understanding of meaning is tied to that level. On the one hand, there is an advantage to taking this position, as it makes the meaning of the narrative accessible through various methodologies, and therefore, open to everyone. In other words, it maintains that religious narratives are subject to the same analysis as other narratives. On the other hand, one cannot make the distinction between meaning and significance too sharp; otherwise, the religious significance that the community attaches to the narrative loses any basis in its meaning at all.

It is perhaps safest to say that there is actually a dialectical relationship between meaning and significance in the religious narrative. Nevertheless, narrative theology should articulate the nature of this relationship more precisely.

Another area that narrative theology needs to discuss is its

relationship with other theologies. It is understandable that one finds a certain polemic tone in narrative theology. Being a newcomer to the theological scene, it first had to mount an apology for itself; and to a certain extent, this meant a critique of some of the established ways of doing theology. However, even more fundamental than this relationship to other theologies, narrative theology has to dialogue with what is traditionally known as "systematic theology." Surely it is on solid ground in its critique of a systematic theology that has lost any contact with its narrative roots.

Based on its centrality in both human experience and religion, as well as its status as a properly theological concept, narrative cannot but be a privileged category in theology. After all, the earliest creeds are invariably narrative in form, and many theological terms like "Son of God" or "Virgin Birth" are rooted in religious narrative. Yet the task of relating these terms in terms of consistency and coherence cannot be avoided. Thus, narrative theology needs to be involved in this task of retrieving systematic theology.

Both areas of concern — the relation between the meaning of a religious narrative and its significance for the community, and the role of narrative theology in retrieving systematic theology — are related, as is apparent in the spirited discussion between Hartt, Crites, and Hauerwas.27 Hartt asserts that too much theological investment has been put in story to the detriment of truth; thus, it runs the risk of historical-moral relativism and being unable to find "the truth-bridge from tradition-community-history to actuality."28 In response, Crites and Hauerwas clarify their positions, while insisting that the emphasis on narrative does not exclude the kinds of concerns Hartt represents. This exchange has sharpened the problematic

27. The discussion which originally appeared in the March 1984 issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion has been reprinted in Hauerwas and Jones, Why Narrative?: (a) Julian Hartt, "Theological Investments in Story: Some Comments on Recent Developments and Some Proposals," 279-92; (b) Stephen Crites, "A Respectful Reply to the Assertorical Theologian," 293-302; (c) Stanley Hauerwas, "Why the Truth Demands Truthfulness: An Imperious Engagement with Hartt," 303-10; and (d) Julian Hartt, "Reply to Crites and Hartt," 311-19.

that remains the task of narrative theology. Hartt’s final reply expresses it succinctly:

In the end the question is not whether it is possible to unite narrative history with an ontological schematism, and with such a miraculous instrument overcome the intellectual doubts and moral profligacy of a pagan world. Nor is the question whether an ontological schematism can somehow emerge as the real meaning of Story and Proclamation. I suggest that the main question in these exchanges is something like this: Is not the existential project of Christian life and character like what William James proposed in thinking of verification as making-true?29

That there are such questions is not a discredit to narrative theology; rather it is a sign of vibrant and searching thought. In drawing its introductory map of narrative theology, this essay has hopefully caught a glimpse of this thought, of its enlightening concerns as well as its darker edges.

A POSTSCRIPT

The rise of narrative theology and the very questions it has engendered appear twice as interesting from a Third World perspective. There is the interest in the on-going discussion of critical issues on the theoretical level, but also the practical awareness of the difference between the Third World and the Western context of most of narrative theology. Unlike the post-modern West, much of the Third World has not undergone the same historical experience that involved the breakdown of Christendom, the scientific and technological revolutions, the rise of critical reason, and the process of modernization — the very context that, many point out, led to the eclipse of narrative. In contrast, narratives and narrative traditions are realities in many Third World situations, and they continue to grow with the changing times. A case in point is the thriving pasyon tradition in lowland Philippine Christianity which, since the eighteenth century, has provided the language for religious experience and

social change. Thus, it has even been suggested that as a result of this, biblical narrative is best read with Third World eyes. It is in the light of this continuing persistence of narrative that a Third World perspective has much to contribute to the on-going discussion on narrative theology. Aside from its participation in the theoretical discussion, its cultural context puts it in a singular position of articulating the practical wisdom contained in its long experience of living in narrative. Perhaps some of the critical questions regarding narrative theology will find some light there.
