

Chapter 1

Narrative Theology as a New Approach to Theology

What do we mean by the words ‘narrative theology’? It will be useful, right at the beginning, to attempt an answer. A narrative theology is one that starts not with abstract first principles, but with a particular story; it is inductive rather than deductive. The story it examines is found, or ‘embodied’, in a community’s tradition, and is usually taken to sum up or encapsulate the community’s beliefs about itself, the world and God. Moreover, the story is rooted in the community’s particular experience of itself, the world and God. This is in contrast to the approach that begins with abstract first principles that are assumed to hold good for all times and places. Such first principles, taken to be self-evident, either divinely revealed, such as the precepts of the decalogue, or philosophically based, such as Kant’s categorical imperative, will tend towards universal truths and exceptionless norms; however, narrative theology, anchored in a particular community and its tradition, may be more modest in scope and may well imply that universalism is a mirage.

Neither of these approaches is new: in fact the deductive and inductive approaches are as old as theology itself, and St Thomas Aquinas was aware of this when he wrote his manual for beginners, the *Summa Theologiae*, which provides a useful illustration of the distinction between the two paradigms outlined above. In the first question of the *Summa*, he asks if Christian theology be a science.¹ Indeed it is not, he tells us, because it deals with individual persons and events such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whereas a science does not deal with individual cases but with general and universal principles.² However, this view is advanced only to be disproved by the rest of the *quaestio*. Sacred doctrine, Thomas concludes, is not principally concerned with individual cases, but rather bases itself on divine revelation. Individual cases have value only as illustrations.³

From this it seems clear that at the start of the *Summa* Thomas chooses a deductive course and not an inductive one. Yet we can but notice the two contrasting approaches: on the one hand, theology is about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a history lived out by individuals, recorded in a story that is considered normative by future generations; but on the other hand, theology is based on a timeless divine revelation; this latter is the foundation that Thomas chooses. But there is a third possibility that Thomas does not consider, and which might be considered the nub of narrative theology: it can be argued that divine revelation, rather than being seen as a set of abstract

¹ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, quaestio 1, art. 2.

² *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 2, ad 2.

³ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, resp 2.

principles, ought to be seen as an event and understood as a narrative: in other words, the story of Exodus, the subsequent story of the Chosen People, the story of Jesus, his death and resurrection, these are the substance of divine revelation. Furthermore, it is precisely through narrative that God reveals himself to us, and narrative is his chosen means of communication. This would mean moving individual stories from the category of useful illustrative examples to the very heart of theology itself.

In discussing the question of theological language, Thomas is aware that once we posit that God speaks to us in revelation, this raises a problem as to how we speak of him.⁴ All language is our own, and thus even theological language is human language. But must the content of that language then be exclusively human, not divine? Can God be comprehended within human language if he is to remain God? This conundrum has also troubled narrative theologians. Can God be a story, or be in a story? If all is story, then is God himself and theology too just another story among many? One encounters a contradiction: once God becomes a character in the drama, then he ceases to be the creator of the drama. It is important then to remember that if God is an actor in the drama, then it is not in the way other characters are, for he must remain distinct from the drama and somehow above it. This implies that narrative theology, if it is to remain theology, must not collapse into some sort of religious literary theory; but nevertheless it can, with due caution, draw on what is termed literary theory.

In his consideration of theological language, Thomas asks whether we should use metaphor and symbol as part of theological language. Narrative theology would certainly suggest that we should. But Thomas's answer is different. He thinks not. Symbol is appropriate to poetry, 'the most modest of all teaching methods'.⁵ Again he says that symbol and metaphor obstruct our understanding of the divine in that they are human.⁶

On the questions of metaphor and symbol, narrative theology takes the opposite view. Poetry, symbol and metaphor are indeed human constructs, but they represent our deepest appropriation of reality, the way we make it our own. Poetry about God may represent our most profound understanding of God and at the same time his most enlightening revelation of himself. We should remember that the Psalter is a collection of poems, written by human beings, and that at the same time it reveals God to us. What emerges here is another basic claim made by narrative theology – that symbol and metaphor, the stuff of story, are not barriers to revelation but rather the language of revelation itself. Thomas will merely admit that symbol and metaphor are useful in giving bodily likeness to spiritual things, which may help the ignorant, though in passing he does admit too the surely important point that people of their very nature like 'representation'.⁷ But a narrative theology insists that these things are not merely useful, but intrinsic to theology.

⁴ See *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 9, and also I, 13, 9 and I, 33, 3 for a discussion of theological language.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 9, 1.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 9, 2.

⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 1, 9. resp. 1.

In short, narrative theology relies on a different paradigm: the human story is the meeting place between men and women and divine revelation, and not something that can be considered the opposite pole to revelation. A narrative theologian would never talk of ‘figurative disguising’;⁸ though they would agree with Thomas that we speak of eternity only after the manner of temporal things⁹ – though the narrative theologian would justify this in a different way.

So narrative theology presents a contrasting approach to the more deductive theology of the *Summa*. But just how will narrative theology be a different sort of theology? If we adopt a narrative approach, instead of an arguing from self-evident or divinely revealed first principles, will it mean that we will never arrive at conclusions that are exceptionless? Instead of a universally valid moral theology must we content ourselves with merely a set of rival theologies based on competing narratives nourished in particular communities and traditions and which are unintelligible outside the contexts of those communities and traditions?

An example may illuminate this point: H.T. Engelhardt, whose work will be discussed in Chapter 4, claims that Catholic opposition to abortion in all cases is not truly based on a universalist and abstract approach as it claims (such as human rights theory or the Kantian categorical imperative) but on the theological belief that life starts with conception, which, he claims, of its nature is not a belief that can be shared with unbelievers. This theological belief is incarnated in liturgy, as illustrated by the feasts of the conceptions of Christ and the Virgin being celebrated nine months before their respective birthdays. In other words, belief about the sacredness of life is based on a narrative (the stories of Jesus and Mary), nurtured in a tradition (the liturgy) and a community (the Church).¹⁰

There are three points worth making here. First, if Engelhardt is right, it means that the abstract and universalist argument which is so often presented as the argument against abortion is in fact an illusion, an attempt to disguise the ‘real’ reason for the belief, which is a narrative reason: in other words our moral reasoning is narrative by nature, deny it if we can. Secondly, this narrative reasoning may seem arbitrary: what has the nine month gestation of Jesus and the Virgin got to do with the licitness or otherwise of abortion? Why should that particular detail in that particular story be taken as normative? Thirdly, this argument would only register in the consciousness of a person who frequents the liturgy of the Church, in other words, who lives the life of the Catholic Church in its fullness: thus, morality is not simply a matter of belief, it is a matter of praxis, of lived tradition. This explains why, according to Engelhardt, Catholic opposition to abortion makes little sense to those outside the Catholic tradition, even though it is couched in supposedly secular and philosophical (that is to say, non-theological) terms, claimed to be accessible to all people of good will.

These three points may give us an insight into what is meant by tradition, and the nexus between community, tradition and narrative. Tradition can be understood

⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 1, 9, resp 2.

⁹ *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 13, 1.

¹⁰ Hugo Tristan Engelhardt, Junior, *Foundations of Bioethics* (second edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 p. 277, note 1.

as the furniture of the mind that is shared by a community and which makes their conversation possible. That is to say, tradition is the shared language that makes communication possible, or more accurately, it is the shared understanding of language that makes communication possible. Because words take their meaning from context and from the way they are used historically, a particular tradition can be understood then as the shared cultural understanding that binds a community together. To give an example: the simple word ‘law’ means something very particular in the Jewish tradition, as do the words ‘covenant’, ‘promise’ and ‘election’. The meaning of each of these words is embedded in the story of the Exodus. Someone outside the tradition, and outside the story of the Exodus, may well use the word ‘law’ in a rather different sense, for not only our use of language, but also our understanding of it, is moulded by tradition, the community in which we live, and the story of which we are a part. Thus our very thought processes, our way of reasoning, and our way of expressing ourselves, are moulded by tradition. We write and think in the shadow of what has gone before us, and what we have received from our forebears. Saint Augustine, as we shall see, writes as one who has imbibed the very language of the Bible as well as the language of various Latin writers, especially Virgil. He conceives his life in the *Confessions* as a Biblical drama and also at times as a Virgilian drama, for both the Bible and Virgil have provided him with the means of expressing himself; and at least some understanding of both is necessary if we are to understand him. In this sense, tradition can be best understood by the English word ‘mindset’ – all those inherited presuppositions that go together to inform our thinking and our self-expression, and which lie deep within us all.

But tradition can be understood in a wider sense as well. Augustine, thanks to his classical education, can engage with both Porphyry and Cicero: they are very different to him, but they live in his world. But at the same time Augustine goes beyond both these authors, using them and developing their ideas. Tradition should, therefore, be understood not just as the shared presuppositions that bind together people like Porphyry, Cicero and Augustine (all of whom can be grouped together in a certain sense, as sharing a culture) but as something more, an approach that is always open to development and restatement in ever greater degrees of clarity or otherwise (for traditions can become moribund), which make rational conversation possible even across the generations. A shared tradition implies dialogue with the authorities of the past, and the possibility of progress, a continuing rational conversation; by contrast, encountering an alien tradition means that one is faced with the opposite of dialogue, sheer bafflement, unless one is able to enter that alien tradition, in which case, it becomes no longer entirely alien.

Mention of ‘the authorities of the past’ suggests that the person within the tradition regards certain aspects of the tradition as authoritative. This aspect of tradition may make traditional thinking, or better, thinking in a traditional context, antipathetic to many. While many authorities may be engaged with in a critical manner (Augustine attacks but also respects Porphyry) others may be beyond criticism (Augustine does not put Paul in the same bracket with Cicero.) This of course raises the important point of how we justify our choice of authorities: the answer may well lie in the symbiosis we find between authority and tradition, and the fecundity of the tradition

that flows from a certain author (or authority). But what must be avoided is the idea that the invocation of authority somehow renders rational discourse redundant.

The idea of a continuing tradition implies that the authorities of the past are not fossilized but are sources of continuing understanding. We return to Shakespeare or the Bible because these are sources whose meaning can never be comprehensively exhausted by a single reading. They transcend simple categorization. The narrative is always open to further explication and exploration and is constantly being enriched by a return to the sources of authority. Thus even these authorities are not beyond criticism in the sense of being beyond fruitful discussion.

In contrast to the idea of a living tradition that engages us at every level, the deductive morality that is presented as a set of disembodied rules, or as a purely intellectual pursuit, is an impoverished morality. Any serious morality, even if it is a set of conclusions from first principles, however intellectually rigorously they may be reached, asks for an assent that can be confused with obedience to the authority that has reached these conclusions. By contrast the morality that comes to us as narrative is asking for a different and more broadly conceived mode of reception. Those who hear the story, as opposed to abstract principles and precepts, are asked to understand the story in a fuller way, using not just their reason but also their imagination. Narrative theology is to be understood by the whole person, as members of the community and tradition in which they find themselves, and above all to be grasped through the liturgy, in which the community comes together as such. In other words, narrative theology starts with a different and indeed more broadly based form of epistemology. However, one must be wary too: does this mean that those who stand outside the community in which the narrative has its home can have no real understanding of the beliefs of the community? Are such beliefs incommunicable, a narrative that makes no sense outside its particular setting?

So, narrative theology may well involve a gain – a turn to a more incarnational, existential and lived morality; but at the same time it may involve a loss: the loss of the idea of universally valid moral truths.

What emerges here are two problems for narrative theology. First, if all moral beliefs are rooted in narrative, tradition and community, which provide their justification, this means that right and wrong are relative terms; what may be right for Catholics in Italy may not be right for nomadic tribes in the Maasai Mara, as both groups live by totally different narratives that reflect their utterly different social and cultural settings. And secondly, there emerges the even more important question, that of justification: to what extent and how exactly does a narrative work when we claim that a certain narrative is our reason for acting in such a way? To what extent does a narrative provide a form of rationality? Or are we saying that morality is not really rational at all, but rests upon some other basis?

These are the questions we will be tackling in the following pages. If we turn to narrative theology, must we abandon all claim to universal truths? And to what extent is narrative the basis for ethical language? Let us now examine these questions in greater depth.

Narrative Moral Theology: Particular or Universal?

Ever since the time of Kant, there has been a strong presupposition that what is morally binding is also universal; and conversely, what cannot be universalized cannot be considered morally binding. This is the nub of Kant's categorical imperative. We see this reasoning reflected in the history of moral theology in the Catholic Church, even when the Kantian method is left behind: scholastic moral theology aims to establish, as a Kantian might put it, moral norms that are exceptionless and eternally valid, which do not rely on either consequences or circumstances for their validity, but are valid whatever the consequences or the circumstances. The evil of certain prohibited acts is seen as intrinsic to the act itself and not dependent on the circumstances surrounding the act. By contrast, what is immersed in historical circumstance is not seen as having universal significance. The universal and the particular are seen as being at opposite ends of the spectrum.

From this point of view, narrative can be of little interest or value. Indeed, it may be thought of as very dangerous, threatening the universal claims of morality. St Thomas Aquinas identifies the decalogue given on Mount Sinai with the universally valid natural moral law,¹¹ accessible to all through the unaided use of human reason. But a narrative theologian would see the decalogue, and all the accompanying laws in Leviticus, as the crystallization of a lived history, a tradition, nurtured in a particular community (the Chosen People) at a particular time. In stressing the particularity of the Sinai covenant, the narrative theologian could rightly point out that the covenant applies to the Chosen People alone, though its import is clearly of wider significance. One would also want to put the decalogue in its proper context: the fruit of a personal encounter between the Chosen People and God. But does this mean that the decalogue is only of interest to those who are firmly within the tradition of the Jewish people? Surely it is of wider significance.

Let us now tease out the idea that we wish to pursue, keeping this example in view to help us. Without necessarily denying the universal claim of moral theology, one can nevertheless add the following proviso: morality is best understood, perhaps is only to be understood, not as naked and abstract principles, but as part of a story: hence, the Law given on Mount Sinai only makes sense as part of the story of Exodus. The context of the story is essential to the meaning of the moral norms embedded in the story; it is not something added on to the moral norms, not a mere frame, but an essential part of their meaning. Furthermore, the process of abstraction might well kill the true meaning of the moral principles embedded in the story. The story itself is rooted in time and place and in the history of a community, a people. In other words it is impossible to understand the decalogue without understanding as well the history of the Chosen People. Not only our moral theology, but the people itself are constituted by the story: in other words, the Chosen People are chosen and indeed a people because of the Exodus experience. Their identity depends on the frequent and regular remembrance of the story as foundational: hence the annual re-enactment of the Passover, which re-tells the story in liturgical form. The story is thus not just a historical curiosity but a living reality, perpetually full of meaning for them. If the

¹¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I II, 100, 1.

story were to become moribund or disappear, through a moral failure to live up to it, the people would cease to be a people. What emerges here, then, is the unbreakable link between community and story. This applies, we argue, to the Chosen People, but it also applies to Christians, who are constituted as such by the story of the Paschal Mystery, recalled in the Eucharist. There are other communities too who are constituted by other moral stories, celebrated in other forms of remembrance, enshrined in other traditions.

Not only are the people constituted by a story, but so too does their mode of moral reasoning come into existence. In other words, it is through the telling of the story that we discover our ethical power of speech: it gives us the capacity to form, or rather discover, an ethical language. This means that in the narrative of the Eucharistic institution we not only discover the foundations of our community, but also we discover our ethical language as Christians. The words ‘Do this in memory of me’ may contain the fundamental moral imperative for Christians – and these words cannot be understood outside their narrative context. Thus we see that a moral norm, couched in the language of ‘Do this...’ comes to us as an integral part of a narrative. The precept of charity cannot be understood outside the context of the Paschal mystery. The conclusion must be then that every moral norm, to make sense, must be presented as part of the narrative of which it forms an integral part. The ethical normative statement cannot be truly conceived outside the narrative: this union between the two is essential and not accidental.

Narrative theology claims that ethical insight is in the story by which a community lives. To the question ‘Why are we doing this?’ or ‘Why ought we to do this?’ the answer will be contained in the traditional story that constitutes the heart of the community’s identity, rather than simply an argument based on abstract principles. This approach to theology will have considerable ramifications and implications in the way we view human society, the individual members of that society, and indeed the way we see experience and discover meaning. Story or narrative becomes the central paradigm for all of these. Society is that which coalesces around a shared narrative. Experience itself will be seen as having an essentially narrative quality. Human beings as individuals will see themselves as the living embodiments of a particular story, and as tellers of stories, and part of a wider living tradition. And this tradition will be rooted in history, grounded in particularity.

But these assertions raise further questions. How exactly can a community ‘own’ the story, let us say, of Passover? Perhaps through re-enactment. In which case, how can people re-enact events that took place millennia ago? What is done is done and can never be redone. One cannot simply re-enact something through the sheer force of will alone. What needs to be developed is a careful theory of how people make stories their own, and this will depend on an investigations into the way stories work, and the relationship they have to their hearers or readers.

Leaving this aside, we have said that narrative is grounded in particularity. However, if the particular is the starting place for moral experience, and if moral norms come to us through and in narrative, how do we discover the claims of universal morality in our particular setting? Are the two mutually exclusive? If not, what is the relationship between universal moral truths and the narrative setting in which they are discovered? For if experience is particular and rooted in time

and place, and morality is narrative by nature, does this mean that moral norms are rooted in time and place too and can perhaps never rise above the particular? If this were the case, then the narrative of each community, though there may be coincidental similarities, is essentially independent of all others, and we could only make particular statements about morality and never general and universal ones. Nothing that could be said could hold good for more than one community, as all moral statements will be confined to a basis of meaning defined by the narrative of which they are part.

If ethical language is seen to be rooted in narrative, community and tradition, this may well mean that it will be unintelligible, or at least only partially intelligible, to those outside that community and tradition, unless of course we can find a way of 'translating' it from one tradition to another. This may be fraught with difficulty: can we really translate the essential norms of Catholic Social Teaching into Marxist terms? And even if we can, ought we to attempt it? Might the attempt be counter-productive? And indeed it does seem that the problem of translation is insurmountable: the laws in the Book of Leviticus do seem unintelligible to us, though to an Orthodox Jew, bred in that community and nourished in that tradition, they make, no doubt, perfect sense. But can this perfect sense be expressed in the language of another tradition? Or is it untranslatable, because the languages of different traditions are radically incommensurable; unless of course one can prove that Christians are able to 'translate' Leviticus into their own tradition without destroying its meaning? But if this attempt at translation proves impossible or self-defeating, are we left with the conclusion that there can be no morality, only moralities in the plural, and moral pronouncements must necessarily be modest in scope and give up their pretensions to universality?

Narrative Theology and Ethical Language

The mood of the postmodern age may well answer these questions that we have raised with a resounding yes. Whilst the Enlightenment presented us with an all-embracing and comforting narrative of an ordered universe, the present age, that of post-modernism, tells us that all is fragmented. In other words, we have come from the world of this narrative:

Once upon a time there were people who lived on rafts upon the sea. The rafts were constructed of materials from the land whence they had come. On this land was a lighthouse in which there was a lighthouse keeper. No matter where the rafts were, even if the people themselves had no idea where they actually were, the keeper always knew their whereabouts. There was even communication between people and keeper so that in an absolute emergency they could always be guided safely home to land.¹²

¹² John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval, Towards a Theology of Story* (second edition, Sonoma, California: Eagle Books, 1988), pp. 25–6.

To the world of this narrative:

There is no lighthouse keeper. There is no lighthouse. There is no dry land. There are only people living on rafts made from their own imaginations. And there is the sea.¹³

This parable raises questions, as it is meant to. Its very neatness alerts us to the fact that we continue to be beguiled by the idea that there is one narrative and a common ethical language to which all can subscribe. We wish for a lighthouse, we long for a lighthouse keeper, though it has to be admitted that these desires do not necessarily prove that such things exist. They may be illusions, objects of wishful thinking. However, the first story makes sense, while we can seriously question whether the second narrative is indeed a narrative at all, for it raises questions about the nature of narrative: is there such a thing as a nihilist narrative, or an absurdist narrative? Or does the very existence of narrative prove that the world is not an absurd place? What does our ability to construct narratives tell us not only about ourselves but also about the objective world in which we live? If we are able to make stories (and stories are human creations after all, but not, importantly, human creations *ex nihilo*) does this not tell us something about the world, namely that it is capable of being shaped, formed, made intelligible? But this leaves us with a further question: how do we judge which narratives make sense and which do not? What is the criterion of sense that we use?

If there is a criterion of meaning that is common to all narratives and undergirds all narratives that make sense, then there is more to narrative theology than accepting fragmentation and mutually incomprehensible narratives. If there were no common core of rationality, and no common tongue, then each particular community could do no more than retire into its tradition and give up all attempts at dialogue with others, quite abandoning any conception of truth as universal and accessible to all. We would each be condemned to stick with our imaginary raft. However, few communities in practice wish to do this; Judaism, though grounded in particularity, sees itself as a light to the nations. And the fact that the story of Judaism somehow makes sense – to those within the tradition, but also to those outside it (though clearly in different ways) – should alert us to the fact that narrative is *per se* rational and not purely arbitrary. We may be in doubt as to how we are to judge the rationality or otherwise of a narrative, but we can be sure that some standard of rationality, which is nevertheless historical, exists. The argument about whether some story makes sense or not is not a senseless argument. We cannot maintain that all stories are *per se* nonsense: the very fact that we tell stories and on the whole listen to them willingly points to the opposite. They do make sense. Stories, narratives, point to the fact that the world itself is an intelligible place. In other words, the existence of narrative points to the existence of a common rationality in so far as all narratives share certain features, and thus to the possibility at the very least of a common language for ethics that makes sense and is not absurd. The fact that narrative is not absurd means there is a presumption too that ethics is not absurd. But this non-

¹³ Crossan, p. 28.

absurdity of narrative is something that has to be proved through detailed argument and examination of the way stories work.

That there is a common language and rationality to all narratives is expressed, though not in these exact words, by Stephen Crites in an important article that may be considered foundational for the study of narrative theology.¹⁴ Crites sees experience in itself as having a narrative quality: in other words, just as stories connect events through the causality of plot, in life too we find that events are connected as opposed to being merely arbitrary. There is a basic intelligibility to experience. More than this, Crites maintains that the phenomenon of narrative is pre-cultural, in that it is common to all cultures and all language groups, while maintaining too that this is a very hard thesis to prove. But the fact remains that all people tell stories, and that stories can transcend time, place and historical setting.

What Crites points to is the suspicion (which has to be proved, if proof be possible) that narrative language, and thus ethical language too, contains a transcendent element to it: in other words the narrative of a particular community, grounded in tradition and lived history, does at the same time have universal implications for all, and there is therefore a means of expressing universal truths, or perhaps truths that tend to universality, through particular narratives. If narrative is a universal phenomenon – and it does seem that there never was a time when people did not tell stories in order to express meaning and moral meaning too, and that there are stories that transcend culture and history – then it must be capable of expressing universal truths. This contention will be at the heart of the final chapters of this book.

Thus what this book aims to show is that narrative theology, or a theology that uses narrative to find its ethical language, does not necessarily condemn us to the ghetto of sectarianism. Though narrative starts in a community with a shared history, embodied in a tradition, it goes beyond history and tradition to something of universal significance. Furthermore, though we may agree that abstract language that claims to be the language of pure deductive reasoning has its limitations, and that the universalist conclusions it reaches may be more apparent than real, it does not follow that to embrace narrative as the paradigm in theology is to turn one's back on reason and take refuge in an arbitrary choice. It is true that I choose a narrative (or possibly a narrative chooses me), but there are usually grounds for this choice beyond the accidents of culture and birth, and there are usually ways of justifying this choice both to myself and others. It would be very odd if this were not so, for it would be exceedingly difficult to hold some beliefs to be foundational without also being able to give reasons for these beliefs. Narrative fundamentalism is a tiring and trying paradigm which does violence to the capacity of human beings to think. It is inherently unstable, being always prone to the assaults of reasonable doubt. But narrative itself is a form of reasoning rather than an alternative to reasoning.

However, one needs to devise an explanation of how narratives can transcend time, place and culture and rise from the particular towards the universal. Because certain narratives have a universal appeal, the search for universal moral truths may not be as fruitless as the search for the Holy Grail or the unicorn. But this will

¹⁴ Stephen Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39, 3 (1971): 291–311.

depend on an analysis of how narrative works and what its connexion is to the world. It will also have to rely on a trustworthy philosophy of the transcendence of language.

Here is the crux: how does a narrative relate to the real world? Is the raft on which we are floating an imaginary construct? Does the word imaginary mean the same thing as having no corresponding reality in the world, as being not the case? If narratives are fictions, does this mean that they are not true, or does the word fiction (from the Latin *ingere*, to make) point to a different type of truth, perhaps a deeper truth than the objective truth, so called, of science? Narrative theology may be leading us to different models of epistemology; and it is certainly asking us to recognize that all stories are true, in that all stories contain truth. Stories are human creations, of course, but human creations can be effected with reference to the Creation: indeed they can only be effected thus. The world of the author (Latin *auctor*, maker) be it ever so fantastical, always bears some relation to our own world, from which the raw materials of authorship and fiction are taken. No one ever creates from nothing.

Summing Up

Let us now try to sum up the main thrust of the argument. Moral theology is best understood as a narrative enterprise, because the language of narrative and the language of morality have much in common. A narrative presents us with a coherent and accessible story, through which we as a community and as individuals come to understand truths about ourselves and our communities and the rules through which we live. It constitutes our identity to a greater or lesser degree and enshrines that which we believe about the world. Narrative sees life as a continuum, lived over a lifetime, and that the part is not to be understood except as in the context of a wider whole. Likewise all moral norms are embedded in the same assumptions: that decisions are made by acting people, taking account, indeed formed by, their pasts, and looking to their futures; moral norms cannot be properly understood as a series of punctiliar or atomic acts, unconnected to character, and the environment that forms character, but like all experience it is narrative by nature. However, it must not be overlooked that narrative, which is a human thing, and which starts rooted in lived experience, tends towards eternal and universal truths. It is rooted, but it is not confined. For narrative language itself often has a transcendent import to it, as does narrative human experience. Thus it is a mistake to assume too stark a polarity between the particularity of narrative and the universal import of abstract rationality. However, narrative is always where we will begin, though it is not necessarily always where we will end, for under certain conditions it may be able to reach universal truths.

In examining narrative further, it will be useful to look at it from four particular points of view. First of all, we will examine the view that narrative is indispensable: that is to say that every position is a narrative position, and that even statements that seem to rely on abstract reasoning are in fact disguised narratives. Furthermore, to make sense of any statement, we have to see it in its narrative setting, we have to

examine the narrative of which it is a part. The point of view from which we do this will not of course be one of the purest impartiality, for we find ourselves to be part of a narrative: so in order to understand a statement, not only do we have to recognize that it forms part of a narrative, but we also have to recognize that we ourselves form part of a narrative. This recognition is a necessary precondition of our being able to take any argument further.

Our second point of examination shall be the question of the narrative quality of experience, to borrow the phrase first used by Stephen Crites. Human experience is narrative by nature: that is to say that it has a connected quality to it; our actions and our intentionality suppose pasts and suppose futures. Life is a continuum, as opposed to a collection of individual moments that have no connexion with each other. Narrative enables us to join the dots. Arguments are carried on as narratives, sometimes as traditions over many generations. Such arguments are developed in communities of thinkers, never in isolation.

Thus we can speak of tradition as a socially embodied narrative – our third point. Every tradition, that is every argument that proceeds over the generations, takes place in a community in which the narrative has its home; the narrative sustains the community (be it church or city state or any human association), and the community sustains the narrative. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two. No narrative exists in a vacuum, and no community can be sustained without a narrative that holds it together. A society that has no common core of shared values will not prosper, but be riven by continual strife.

Finally, we need to examine in what way narrative is a rationality, a form of reasoning, as opposed to an alternative to reasoning. Do we adopt a narrative because reason has failed, or do we adopt a narrative because it represents for us the summit of reason? If the Enlightenment project has failed, does this mean that we are forced to take refuge in some sort of decisionism or fideism? What we will need to examine is the way narrative encapsulates a form of reasoning rather than substitutes itself for any reasoning at all. And if this is so, we should be able to see some way for rival narratives to communicate between themselves.

These four points for examination will form the substance of our next three chapters where we will look at the phenomenon of narrative through the eyes of Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and H.T. Engelhardt, Junior.