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Narration in Religious Discourse: The Example of Christianity

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1 Definition

Narratives of various kinds can be found in religious discourse, constituted by a religious content or at least by a religious context. A *religious content* can appear in one or more of the following forms: 1) a character presented directly or indirectly as religious or non-religious in regard to his/her identity, character traits, opinions, experiences, emotions, behavior, personal appearance, social context, knowledge, duties, wishes or intentions (e.g. a monk, an atheist, a believer); 2) a "supernatural" being (related to a religious belief system) as part of the narrative world; 3) direct or indirect references to religious texts, beliefs, rituals, places or buildings within character or narrator discourse. A *religious context* in communication is conveyed through sender, message and receiver: 1) religious context of the sender: s/he is a believer or has a religious background; 2) message: the narrative is used to convey a religious message; 3) (intended, historical, empirical) receiver: s/he is a believer or a skeptic.

2 Explication

Either a religious content or a religious context must be established to define religious discourse whereas the latter criterion is more general. "Narration in religious discourse" does not necessarily refer to a narrative with a religious content such as supernatural beings, as might be thought. Empirically speaking, those narratives are a small part of the corpus. Much narration in religious discourse has no religious content but is constituted only by its religious context (religious sender, application or receiver). Narratives like Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35) or a pastor telling a joke in a sermon are secular even though they form part of religious discourse. Therefore, "narration in religious discourse" ranges from biblical narratives to a story that a church member tells his pastor at a birthday visit. Accordingly, there are no literary features that are typical for all kinds of religious narration.

Nevertheless, common sorts of religious narration can be grouped together. One sort of religious narration concentrates on a specific *event* (e.g. conversion narrative, miracle story; see event II in Hühn → Event and Eventfulness [1]) which is often interpreted as an act of God; another frequent kind of religious narration focuses on *application*, as when a character serves as a role model for good or bad behavior, belief in God, etc. (e.g. parables, many biblical narratives, saints' lives). To consider the context is crucial to add some of these narratives to religious narration. An outstanding example for this is the biblical book of Esther, which does not mention God a single time but effectively celebrates God's providence when being read by an informed audience. For an overview of important religious narrative genres, see Mauz (2009a) on conversion narrative, narration in sermons, prayers and Gospel narratives.

3 History of Narration in Christianity and its Study

This article concentrates on the study of religious narration as studied by several sub-disciplines of academic Christian theology: Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology. These three fields of study encompass a *historical*, *thematic* and *empirical/contemporary* approach to narration in Christianity. (For narratology in Islamic studies, see e.g. Conermann ed. 2009; for narratology in the science of religion, see e.g. Brahier & Johannsen eds. 2013; in the Jewish religion, e.g. Sternberg 1985.)

3.1 Narratives in Biblical and Related Writings and Their Study

3.1.1 Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Roughly speaking, more than half of the Hebrew Bible consists of narration: Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, Moses and the exodus from Egypt, etc. It is not possible to describe Old Testament (OT) narration in general. However, some narrative techniques are rather typical: in OT narratives, biblical characters often serve as *role models* in regard to belief, behavior and experiences. Character perspective and direct discourse are used widely. Through the use of these techniques, the narrator builds up empathy even for sinners like Cain, David or Jonah. By adopting the main character's perspective, the reader becomes immersed in the story and witnesses God's grace or punishment. The narrator is nearly invisible and normally does not comment directly on the behavior of the characters (except in Judges and 1–2 Chronicles, for example), which is therefore left to the

reader (see Judges 19:30) who is told the consequences of this behavior. In some passages, God is presented as speaking to single characters like Abraham, Moses, Elijah and other prophets. Belief in God and a life according to God's commandments leads to God's blessing in the form of victory over enemies, security and wealth. Suspense and surprise are therefore mainly generated by the unpredictable behavior of the characters, not by God. Only in the book of Job is the connection between deeds and consequences severed. Fantastic narration instilling suspense and awe of God is also found in OT narrative, but remains marginal in relation to the full corpus. Most stories are assumed to be received by the reader as factual narration. In general, the main intent of OT religious narration is to encourage the reader to live according to God's commandments. A fundamental challenge for OT narration is how to relate human deeds and God's will. God's providence does not determine the sequence of events fully, but leaves ample space for surprising behavior and sins committed by the characters. But in the end the reader learns that through human behavior God has acted out his will and fulfilled his promises (see Genesis 50:20 as an emblem for all patriarchal stories).

Regarding the study of OT books, classical scholarly research concentrated on textual criticism, source criticism, tradition history, form criticism and redaction criticism (the so-called historical-critical method). Since the 1970s, hermeneutical approaches from other textual sciences have stirred up controversy. Some scholars dismiss the source questions and insist on asking what the "final," canonical text means. Most OT scholars, however, are not familiar with narratological theory (see the critical analysis of narrative research on the books of Samuel by Andersson 2009). Even so, the interdisciplinary bridge is taking form. Thus Sternberg (1985) presents a broad study of point of view, gap-filling, temporal discontinuities, proleptic portraits of characters and repetition in the Hebrew Bible while some newer studies of OT texts apply the narratological categories of Bal or Genette. Schmitz (2008), for example, describes perspective and narrative voice in 1 Kings 13 and 22, showing that OT authors can create complex effects through the use of perspective that leave it to the reader to determine which of the opposing characters' points of view are true. General narratological theory can also be found in several studies (see the research report in Vette 2010 and the online bibliography compiled by RRENAB 2013).

3.0.1 New Testament

The canonical books of the New Testament (NT) include the narrative of the life of Jesus (the "Gospel") in four versions (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in which Jesus often acts as an intradiegetic narrator, as in the parables; the book of Acts, which narrates the history of early Christianity, especially Paul's travels; and

the Apocalypse of John, a proleptic narrative of the heavenly realm and forthcoming events.

The unknown authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are usually seen as redactors of the Gospel of Mark using an additional source of Jesus's sayings, named "Q." The Gospel of John relates much special material. Religious narration in the Gospels serves as an example of the biography of a religious founder. The rendering of this biographical story employs various narrative categories and devices. Regarding plot, the Gospels can be described as tragedy in which the main conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities from the very beginning (see e.g. Mark 2) escalates into the crucifixion of the protagonist at the end. The speed of narration slows down noticeably as the crucifixion approaches (the Gospels have thus been described as "passion narratives with an extended introduction"; see Kähler 1892: 33). Only the resurrection does not fit into the tragedy pattern. The Gospels also add reports of the protagonist's birth giving the life of Jesus an adequate beginning and echoing ancient biographical narration. – As to the temporal perspective, there is some proleptic narration in that Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection three times.

With regard to the order of events, the Gospels differ (see Luke 1:3, which nonetheless insists on the factuality of the narrated) because scenes are often grouped thematically by the redactor. Many scenes can be understood without their literary context as a result of oral transmission over decades prior to being committed to writing. A typical Gospel scene consists of four steps: 1) Jesus travels and encounters a person; 2) action or question of the person; 3) miracle or saying of Jesus; 4) reaction of the people. Knowing this formula, the religious reader thus anticipates an outstanding event after step 2 (e.g. a miracle by Jesus), but s/he is curious as to *how* the miracle will be accomplished. In this sense, the Gospels' eventfulness is not created by the fact that God is acting (which meets the reader's expectation), but by uncertainty as to how and when God will act.

Regarding perspective, there are only a few inside views of the protagonist Jesus (e.g. Matthew 9:36; Luke 9:44). More important is that the reader's empathy is focused on the disciples who accompany Jesus and that the reader will identify with them. Adopting the point of view of the disciples, the reader witnesses the sayings, conflicts and miracles of their master. By choosing the "disciple perspective" (the Gospel of John also includes the perspective of minor characters, see Culpepper 1983), the Gospel authors intend for the reader to believe in Jesus as the Son of God (explicitly John 20:30–31) in the same way the disciples did.

More specific studies of NT narration began in the 1970s. Some of these early studies adopted linguistic, structuralist and semiotic theories such as the theories of

Propp and Greimas (e.g. Patte & Patte 1978). In contrast, the “New Literary Criticism” opposed historical criticism, being mostly a paraphrase of the NT in its final, canonical form in accord with the practice of “close reading.” The first adaptions of narratology to NT narration in a stricter sense were Rhoads and Michie (1982), Culpepper (1983) and Kingsbury ([1986] 1988). Culpepper (1983) discusses point of view, narrative time, plot development and character (Jesus, God the Father, the disciples, the Jews and minor characters) as well as irony and symbolism in the Gospel of John. These books established a relatively solid metho-dological approach within Gospel research and have had a wide influence in English-speaking scholarship. This narratological approach has been coined “narrative criticism” by analogy with the other exegetical methods of interpretation.

Interestingly, narrative criticism did not find its way into German-speaking scholarship. In the 1990s, reception aesthetics (esp. the works of Iser) came into vogue among German biblical scholars. NT parable study adopted literary studies early in the 1970s. Since the turn of the millennium, there have been several studies on the Gospels and Acts from a more decidedly narratological approach (e.g. Rose 2007 on Mark 1, based on Genette) describing the “new” approach of narratology for use in NT interpretation (e.g. Eisen 2006 on the book of Acts; Finnern 2010 on Matthew 28). Aside from Ebner and Heininger (2005: 57–130), there are few textbooks in German NT exegesis that include narratological categories. Although not a textbook in the strict sense, Finnern (2010) aims at serving as “handbook for narratological biblical interpretation” (440). It concentrates on a broad range of narratological issues in both literary and biblical studies with regard to the analysis of setting, plot, characters, point of view and intended reception of a narrative.

3.0.2 Other Early Jewish and Early Christian Writings

In addition to narration in the canonical Hebrew Bible/Septuagint and NT texts, there are other narratives of a similar religious and cultural origin which normally refer to biblical narratives and amplify them freely. This sort of paraphrase often uses a narrative gap within the biblical story for dealing with actual theological and ethical questions of the addressees. Regarding Hebrew Bible/Septuagint texts, these are e.g. the Book of Jubilees, Ascension of Isaiah, Life of Adam and Eve, 1 Henoch, Joseph and Aseneth, or Liber antiquitatum biblicarum.

Narration subsequent to the NT is vast, which can be seen from the manuscripts that have survived including apocryphal Gospels, apocryphal Acts and apocryphal apocalypses. They are intended to fill narrative gaps, legitimate (Gnostic) theological positions and satisfy a craving for sensation. For example, the Gospel of Peter (probably 2nd cent. AD) describes the passion and resurrection of Jesus in a more dramatic way, speaking through the first-person narrator Peter. In regard to

pseudonymous religious narration, there is a question as to whether the ancient author sought to deceive his addressees about his identity or took on the guise of an unreliable narrator, a well-established practice in literary narration. The second possibility is that these apocryphal writings are a form of fantastic and even grotesque narration aimed at entertaining the reader (e.g. little Jesus creating birds from clay in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas). Although there is a broad range of this kind of religious narration, very few studies of these texts from a narratological point of view exist. (For an overview of early Christian narratives after the NT, see Markschies & Schröter eds. 2012.)

3.1 Narratives and Their Study in Systematic Theology

The interest Christian theology ("dogmatics") has taken in narratology is less practical—biblical exegesis is concerned mainly with its usefulness for text analysis—than theoretical: what does it mean for human existence and theological language about God and revelation that religious interpretations of life are mainly narrated? Of special importance is the term "narrative theology," coined by Weinrich (1973) in reference to "the crisis of religious language." Its main thesis is that Christianity "lost its narrative innocence" when it encountered the Hellenistic world (1973: 331) and began to prefer argument ("Logos") over myth, even though from its origins, Christianity has been a "narrative community." For the purposes of theological discourse, narration is thus in need of being rediscovered. For a good overview of the debate on "narrative theology" in German protestant theology, see Mauz (2009b). Also in this context, the emerging discussion about "narrative ethics" in theology must be mentioned (e.g. Hofheinz et al., eds. 2009). More recently, Schneider-Flume (2005) has sought to renew the practice of "narrating dogmatics." It raises once again the age-old question as to what form is appropriate for speaking about God: by narration or by arguments and abstract concepts such as sin, justification, providence? To further this discussion, it may be helpful to look at specific narrative texts to determine how they convey theology and ethics. In this sense, Rose (2007) presents his investigation of "theology *as* narration" in the Gospel according to Mark. Finnern (2010: 224–42, 429–38) shows how a reader's theology (i.e. his/her mental model of God or, more generally, beliefs about theological topics) and ethics (i.e. attitudes toward persons and attitudes toward narrated qualities and behavior) are shaped by narratives, based on the narrator's beliefs and attitudes (2010: 179–83, 378–89). On this basis, it is possible to draw correspondences between theological notions and narratological concepts: e.g. the concept of providence corresponds to "finally motivated" narration or to a coincidence plot. This may be due to the fact that it comforts the reader to know that there is direction in life. "Sin" as a concept is illustrated by a narrative where a specific behavior of a character is finally punished by God. Alternatively, the

character is accused by God or by a prophet guided by the spirit of God (and therefore has the same evaluative point of view): e.g. the anger of Moses about the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). “Justification” is narrated paradigmatically, as in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), where the reader’s empathy for the second son during the progress of the story enables him to share his final relief when experiencing the unwavering love of the father.

3.2 Narratives and Their Study in Practical Theology

Practical Theology is concerned with current forms of Christian religious practice. As a field of study, it includes the following: 1) Christian education; 2) Christian preaching (“homiletics”); 3) Christian counseling (“pastoral care”); 4) church services (“liturgics”). To these classical fields of research can be added 5) everyday Christian living and 6) Christianity and (mass) media. In all of these fields, narration plays a crucial role, as it will become clear below.

1) *Christian Education.* Narration in religious education is very widespread. Especially younger children need stories to understand. Biblical stories are re-narrated by teachers but also in teaching materials such as illustrated Bibles for children. Here, the selection, presentation and ethics of biblical stories is interesting to analyze. Despite the enormous potential of narratology for the study and practice of religious education, references to narratological theory in Christian pedagogy are rare. Yet some studies do adopt narratological theory such as Scholz and Eisenlauer (2010), which integrates Labov and Waletzky’s model into Bible didactics. They show that classifying biblical texts into abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda helps to understand the text and initiate discussion among students.

2) *Christian Preaching.* A sermon is a special type of discourse with a religious content, normally referring to a biblical text and usually delivered during church services. Sermons are a highly institutionalized form of discourse and have a long history of study. There are three aspects of preaching that relate to narration: a) preaching *about* (biblical) narratives; b) preaching *as* narrative, i.e. re-narrating a biblical text employing first-person narration, internal focalization, direct discours, free indirect discourse, etc.; c) narratives *within* preaching (“sermon examples”). However, the theory of preaching in Christian theology (“homiletics”) has no specific tradition of studying narration or narrative theory. There are some small passages on narration in the better-known volumes on preaching. Recently, a new approach to homiletics has emerged known as “dramaturgical homiletics” (Nicol [2002] 2005). This approach argues for the necessity of narration and draws parallels between sermons and movies. Meinhard (2003) is one of the rare voices in homiletics who

adopts categories such as focalization for analyzing narrative sermons.

3) *Christian Counseling.* Narratives in Christian counseling can be found on both sides of communication: narratives of the *client* and narratives of the *counselor*. Narratives of the client include religious biography, accounts of traumatizing events, reporting of experiences between two sessions, etc. The counselor narrates his own experiences or other (possibly biblical) narratives which run parallel to the client's situation and offer another view of the world, of oneself, of others, of God or of potential actions (see Peseschkian 1979). A special case of religious narration is a funeral sermon when the life of a deceased person is recounted by a pastor, priest or deacon together with "comforting words." There is a good deal of empirical research within pastoral care studies on Christian counseling discourse, including narration (e.g. Hauschild 1996). Some researchers thematize narration on the side of the client (i.e. biographical aspects) while others focus on how helpful the counselor's narration might be. But in general, research in pastoral care and Christian counseling is only seldom concerned with narration.

4) *Church Services as Theater.* Liturgy employs narration in the form of theater characterized by dramatic events, a setting such as a medieval church, characters/actors (pastor, priest, altar servers) and the audience (the congregation). Consequently, character constellations, movements on the "stage" or triggering of the congregants' expectations, emotions, suspense, etc. can be analyzed as theater. Moreover, liturgy refers to narration by evoking the Christmas story, the story of the passion, etc. in accordance with the liturgical year as well as various events commemorated during regional feast days. All in all, it can be said that liturgy is inseparable from narration. The study of church services ("liturgics") has not embraced narratology yet in its stricter sense although there is near unanimity in current scholarship that church services resemble theater performances (see the overview of Meyer-Blanck 2011: 374–87).

5) *Narratives in Everyday Christian Religious Discourse.* In addition to education, sermons, church services and counseling there is also religious narration in daily life. Many classifications of religious topics in everyday narration are possible according to the type of narrative (biographical events, news events, etc.), typical communication situations or intent (to evangelize, demonstrate, seek appreciation, etc.). Among the four main forms of oral narration (Fludernik → Conversational Narration – Oral Narration [2]), spontaneous oral narration is most relevant in this context. With the empirical turn brought in by practical theology, everyday life has also come into the focus of research in recent years. Practical theology has been reconceptualized as the "theory of lived religion" understood as perception, examination and formation of religion in everyday life (Streib 1998). There has also

been some influential research on religious milieus. However, these studies do not deal specifically with everyday narratives or with narratology.

6) *Narratives in the Media Relating to Christian Belief.* In addition to individual religious narration is mass media religious narration. Besides televangelism, numerous TV series, movies, novels, comics, etc. are characterized by religious contents, references or contexts. These works, with their religious aspects, are mainly studied by the respective scholarly disciplines. In addition, Christian religious communication in the mass media has been analyzed (Schultze & Woods eds. 2008). In conclusion, while there is a broad range of studies on contemporary mass media narration with religious aspects, a bridge between this research field of practical theology and narratological methods has still to be built.

4 Topics for Further Research

(a) Religious narration in biblical and related writings: Although awareness of narrative techniques and narratological analysis is growing quickly within OT scholarship, there remain numerous gaps in research. Perhaps due to the lack of an accepted method of narrative analysis, research on single OT books has been isolated. A comprehensive narratological analysis of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament narration, including the “writings” and deuterocanonical books, with regard to setting, plot, characters, perspective and reception is still missing. The same is true for NT research. Further work is required in the area of methodology to formulate commonly shared methods for textual analysis.

(b) Religious narration in systematic theology: In systematic theology, narratological analysis of religious texts and narratological reformulation of theological terms could help to clarify discussion about “narrative theology.”

(c) Religious narration in practical theology: To date, practical theology in general is unfamiliar with narratology although researchers do deal with the study of narration in various forms. One example is religious education: here, narratology could be helpful for the critical study and development of narrative teaching materials so as to analyze the morals of children’s bibles, for example. Second, the question as to how freely a biblical story can be re-narrated could be answered more specifically from a narratological point of view. Third, the many forms of involving children in stories such as “godly play,” “bible theater” or “bibliologue” can be evaluated. Fourth, biographical narration by children could come into focus on a methodical basis. Fifth, research about moral education through narratives could be enriched by narratology (Phelan → Narrative Ethics [3]).

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