

# Introduction: Religious Stories We Live By.

R.Ruard Ganzevoort

In: R.R. Ganzevoort, M.A.C. de Haardt & M. Scherer-Rath (eds.) *Religious Stories we Live by. Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*. Leiden: Brill 2013, 1-17.

---

The normal human being, you may have observed, has a passion for autobiography. You have it yourself. If you deny it indignantly, that means merely that you have it in its more passive form. I have told you something that you resent because it does not tally with the story about yourself that you tell yourself.

This poor uncomfortable creature is continually doing its best to make a plausibly consistent story of its behaviour both to itself and the social world about it, and to be guided by that legend so as to escape an open breach with its environment. The urgency we are under to pull ourselves together and make an acceptable account of ourselves finds its outlet in these yarns about religious experiences and consistent love that we force upon one another at every opportunity.

– H.G. Wells, *You Can't Be Too Careful* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1941: 110–111).

For some time now, scholars in a variety of disciplines have become interested in narrative approaches. Researchers and theorists in theology and religious studies are no exception. Although not a prominent theme until the 1970s, narrative has always been a topic in religion, if only because of the narrative material involved in especially biblical studies. The narrative turn in the study of religion reflects an important observation: human beings tell—indeed: live—stories that invite and serve them to see the world in a certain way and act accordingly. And they do so in close interaction with the stories of a religious tradition that offer possible worlds, created through narrative and portrayed in stories and symbols, rituals and moral guidelines. In one way or another human stories are connected with stories of and about God or gods. Liturgy and rituals embody and re-enact narratives from the spiritual tradition, allowing contemporary congregants to join in with their own life stories. Pastoral counseling and spiritual care focus on those individual stories as they connect with traditions. Religious education shares the stories of a tradition to help new generations build a repertoire of potentially meaningful narratives. Religious conflict is likewise a conflict about powerful stories and possible worlds. Hegemonic and subaltern voices, central and marginal stories, docile and critical listeners constantly meet, merge, or clash. This is the case today, but it is also the case in church history or even in the wide array of stories in the Bible.

If we would trace the narrative turn in theology and religious studies, we would encounter many influential writers and thinkers. In the past three or four decades narrative has become a central theme in all fields within theology, religious studies, and adjacent disciplines. Philosophers like Paul Ricoeur (1995) and Richard Kearney (2001), biblical scholars like Hans Frei (1974) and Walter Brueggemann (1997), literary theorists like Mieke Bal (1985), systematic theologians like Edward Schillebeeckx (1979), David Tracy (1981), and Sally McFague (1982), ethicists like Stanley Hauerwas (1983) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), cognitive scientists like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) and Jerome Bruner (1986), psychologists like Theodore Sarbin (1986) and Kenneth Gergen (1994), pastoral theologians like Charles Gerkin (1984), and many others have contributed to the awareness that narrative may in fact be a central concept if we want to understand human existence and religious traditions.

In a sense, this was not a new approach but rather a reappropriation of what had been known for long. This wide-spread interest in narrative, however, takes many different guises, defined not only by the various disciplines and their methodological preferences, but also by different schools of thought within disciplines—see for example the debate between the Yale and Chicago perspectives on narrative in biblical theology or the collection of practical theological approaches to narrative in Ganzevoort (1998 ed.). This easily confuses anyone who wishes to understand what is central in narrative approaches and what is incidental. One of the main distinctions is between approaches that focus on narrative form and approaches that take a narrative perspective (Ganzevoort 2011). Narrative forms are paramount in the field of religious studies and theology. Stories abound in the holy books of different traditions (albeit to a different degree). They are also prominent in the religious practices of historical and contemporary religion. For that reason, many have engaged in developing analytical tools and instruments to understand the content, meaning, and function of all these narratives. From narrative exegesis (Powell and Wright 1993) to autobiographical interviewing (Josselson and Lieblich 1995), there are a variety of techniques and methods to account for the narrative nature of the material we are studying. These methods and techniques may aim at objectifying particular readings of a text, or instead acknowledge the intrinsic subjectivity, as is the case in the international project on intercultural reading of the Bible Through the Eyes of Another (De Wit, Jonker, Kool, and Schipani 2004), in which bible reading groups exchanged their interpretations of a biblical story.

We can, however, apply a narrative perspective even when we are studying material that does not have a distinctly narrative form. A narrative perspective considers the construction of meaning and thus also the construction of religious meaning to take place in the encounter between the human mind and an external reality. These meanings are structured narratively so that we experience life in story-like forms, as philosophical theologian Stephen Crites (1971) wrote in his seminal paper “The Narrative

Quality of Experience.” We live our lives from day to day, but we understand our life as if it were a story. Our collective identity, history, and religious tradition are likewise structured as stories. Even non-narrative forms (like creeds, commandments, buildings, garments, hierarchies) can be interpreted in this narrative perspective.

The central notion here is that meanings are not fixed or defined by something intrinsic to the facts or texts. Instead meaning is attributed in the act of reading the text or approaching an external reality. This places the reader center stage. The main question becomes how individuals and communities construct their stories in conversation with other ‘readers’, incorporating that which presents itself as ‘real’ and aiming at the construction of a consistent and meaningful story of the self. The reader thus creates his or her own story vis-à-vis self, others, and ‘reality’. This process of narrative construction of a story can thus be seen as a negotiation of possible meanings.

In this narrative perspective, special attention is given to the stories of the marginalized. If indeed readers negotiate the meanings of a situation in relation to their own life view and to what their context (audience) expects from them, then marginalized people can (and perhaps should) be empowered to share their stories and be heard. Narrative approaches have often served to create space for subaltern voices and unheard stories as a critical counterweight to hegemonic stories. Religious traditions and hierarchies have thus been challenged by for example the stories of personal experiences of women (Neuger 2001), people of different colors (Andrews 2002), victims of sexual violence (Ganzevoort 2001, 2002), or gay and lesbian believers (Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman 2011; Kundtz and Schlager 2007).

Fundamental to our understanding of how narrative and meaning emerge is the concept of the mimesis or representation of the external reality in our mind and knowing, as Ricoeur (1984–1988) has elaborated. Building on a range of philosophers from Aristotle to Gadamer, he identifies three dimensions of this mimetic representation. First, there is a ‘world behind the text’, consisting of the context, events, and background of the narrator (be it a biblical writer, contemporary individual, group, and so on). Ricoeur calls this the prefiguration. Second, there is a ‘world of the text’, the texture of carefully interwoven elements that together create a sense of meaning. In Ricoeur’s terminology, this is the configuration. Third, there is a ‘world in front of the text’, the proposal of a possible world for the reader to live in, inviting her or him to respond. Here he speaks of refiguration. This triple mimesis describes how we come to understand our life and world and also how we relate to the texts from a spiritual tradition.

These three dimensions of mimesis relate to rather different approaches in the narrative study of religion. Studies of the prefiguration of any text or for example ritual behavior (Ricoeur considers the model to apply to meaningful action as well) seek to define the meaning of that text or action by looking at

the background and intentions of the narrator or actor. Studies of the configuration decide upon the meaning based on the content and structure of the text or action itself. Studies of the refiguration look at the ways in which the audience receives and responds to the text or action to assess its meaning. All three dimensions are valid contributors to the web of meanings and neither of them determines the final meaning. For that reason research projects would ideally combine two or three of these dimensions. That way we would also start to comprehend what happens at the intersections of individual life stories and canonical stories of the tradition.

### **About This Volume**

Anyone who glances through the variegated field of narrative approaches in theology and religious studies immediately discovers not only how wide-spread they are, but also that it is rather uncommon to encounter conversations across disciplinary borders. Biblical scholars scrutinize the biblical texts but the combination with studies of the reception by readers is quite rare. Systematic theologians deconstruct and construct the content of stories but they tend to focus less on prefiguration and on refiguration. Both focus less on actions, which are more at the heart of practical theology and the social scientific study of religion. It is not often that these diverse narrative approaches across disciplines are brought together.

The aim of this volume is to embark on that conversation. Scholars from the Netherlands Research School for Theology and Religious Studies (NOSTER) contributed examples of their narrative investigations in philosophy of religion, biblical studies, systematic theology, religious studies, practical theology, and history of religion. Several of the chapters explicitly include a description of narrative approaches in that discipline. Case studies and integrative texts together offer building blocks for a more comprehensive discussion of narrative approaches in theology and religious studies.

The first three chapters break the ground for our interdisciplinary conversations. In his opening chapter, philosopher Edwin Koster explores the rationality of religious stories. He sets out by discussing the features of stories in their claim to represent knowledge and/or understanding. Being both history-like and fiction-like, stories refer to a world out there and at the same time construct a world. Truth claims in stories are primarily existential truth claims: the reader understands the world of the text from the perspective of her or his own world and vice versa. Koster finally discusses the character God in religious (or specifically: biblical) stories. He concludes that God is not a coherent character in these stories and thereby eludes rational consistency. It is precisely this feature that shows the transcendence of the character God and captivates the readers.

James Day, scholar of human development and psychologist of religion, discusses the psychological underpinnings of narrative approaches. He takes

his starting point in the question what religious truth may mean in a narrative-constructionist perspective. He claims that this perspective need not lead to explain religion away, but may in fact help us to appreciate religion's truth claims in relative rather than ultimate terms. As a psychologist, Day connects these insights with Piagetian and Kohlbergian theories of postformal stages of development and shows how new models of cognitive complexity elucidate the development and function of religious narratives. People functioning at postformal stages experience truth questions as non-dichotomous, as multi-perspectival, rather than dichotomous. They are more pre-occupied with the consequences of casting one's life in a particular imaginative frame or set of practices than with the content of specific beliefs, affirmations, and doctrines. This fosters religious tolerance, which raises the question how we can promote postformal development.

Building on his research in empirical theology and pragmatic philosophy, Chris Hermans discusses the epistemological ramifications of the notion of weak rationality in the study of narratives of the self. There is a path between absolute truth claims and relativism. Hermans draws on psychology, cognitive sciences, literary theory, and philosophy to develop this pragmatic notion of weak rationality. More than some other contributors, he distinguishes between theology and religious studies because of the different epistemic communities in which they operate. His chapter then shows the differences between foundationalism, (post)positivism, constructionism, and pragmatism in the study of religion. The differences are apparent in the type of theory of religion, the type of rationality, the type of knowledge, the type of reasoning, and the methodology.

### *Biblical Studies*

Following these three introductory chapters, the reader will encounter a section on biblical studies, more specifically Old Testament. After all, this is a tradition full of stories. Dorothea Erbele-Küster offers a description of the role of narratology in biblical studies. She shows how narrative approaches were developed from the 1980's onward with initially a specific focus on the aesthetic. Since then there has been a strong input from literary theories, feminist criticism, and eventually computer-assisted text analysis. Erbele-Küster goes on to discuss the role of the narrator in biblical stories, the relation between text and reader (including postcolonial and feminist reading), fictionality, ethics, and identity. Her conclusion reminds us of Edwin Koster's chapter: the gaps and interruptions in the biblical stories invite the reader to an encounter with the transcendent.

Wim Weren focuses on intertextuality in his analysis of José Saramago's novel *Cain*. This novel takes the story of Cain and Abel as a starting point and proves to be fruitful material to reflect on the question how texts use and rework older texts and in doing so reinterpret the roles of the characters and the chain of events. This touches upon the fundamental question how stories from the religious tradition are read, interpreted, and reinterpreted. Should one ask

for criteria to assess whether such a reinterpretation is valid, Saramago's novel invites us to do so on moral grounds rather than on dogmatic ones. Weren concludes that like the voice of Abel's blood that continues to cry out, Saramago's novels will continue to call for justice.

In the next chapter, Marieke den Braber posits that we have no access to the intentions of the writer (see my earlier notes on prefiguration). Therefore, establishing the meaning of the text in the exchange between text and reader becomes highly subjective. She proposes a synchronic method that minimizes the risk of subjectivity. In the terminology used in this introduction, this method focuses on the configuration of the biblical text. Den Braber applies this method, Functional Discourse Grammar, to the story of Joshua 6. Although this highlights several important aspects of the text, she concludes that major issues are left out. These include biblical theological comparisons, ethical questions, and also the differences between the available versions of the text. Most importantly, the reception of the text and thus of its rhetorical effects by ancient or present readers is absent. An analysis of the configuration alone does not suffice to grasp the full meaning of the text.

Klaas Spronk adds to the reflection by focusing on a contextual reading of Judges 19. Can the gruesome story of this 'gang rape' have liberating powers? Feminist readers have objected to this devastating story, this 'text of terror' (Trible 1984). Spronk tries to overcome easy defenses of the story by looking closely at the context of the first readers. He claims that stories in the book of Judges probably have Hellenistic backgrounds, collected and reshaped to reflect the search for a collective identity in a post-exilic era. Judges 19 speaks of the dissatisfaction with religious leaders and the need for a good leader/king/messiah. From the perspective of the modern reader, it becomes important that the concubine asserts more autonomy than expected in those days. The dreadful events that unfold not only illustrate the lack of leadership, but also question whether the choices of the concubine should not have been respected in the first place. This allows present-day readers to see a seed of liberation in this story of oppression and abuse.

Willien van Wieringen concludes this section with a chapter on the women in the Samson narratives. She returns to the syntactic level. By looking at all the characters that play a role in the story, we may overcome limitations of Mieke Bal's narratological focus on the narrator's text. Analyzing the entire cast of characters sheds light on the meaning of the story as a whole. The little sister in Judges 15 does not fit a standard narratological category but nevertheless plays a role in the story.

### *Empirical Studies*

The next section in this book focuses on empirical studies in (practical) theology and religious studies. Like biblical studies, these fields have a strong history in acknowledging the narrative shape of religious practices. Co-editor Michael Scherer-Rath focuses on personal stories and the (religious) identities people construct through those stories. He shows how narrative identity and

the interpretation of tragic contingency are key elements in a narrative perspective and how narratives serve people to make sense of their otherwise contingent and therefore epistemically unstable existence. Narrative reconstruction, Scherer-Rath claims, is a creative, cultural, and social act. This relates to three forms of contingency, allowing for new meanings of the self and the world we live in, fostered and shaped by our social relations. Empirical research focusing on life stories seeks to tap into these processes of (re-)construction, but is itself also a new layer of constructions, involving the contingency of the respondent, the contingency of the specific context, and the contingency of the researcher. Scherer-Rath makes the awareness of complexities in empirical narrative research concrete by identifying specific methodological decisions that merit attention.

Marjo Buitelaar brings home these methodological issues by portraying her research on the narrative construction of identity among Muslim women. Working with the underlying narrative theory of the dialogical self (Hermans and Kempen 1993) that Scherer-Rath alluded to as well, she sets out to show the great variety of meanings that religious practices like wearing a headscarf may carry for the individual, navigating the waters of fashion, piety, and politics. Buitelaar dissects the voices and I-positions in these stories and the interior and exterior dialogues and negotiations. She shows how these women may resort to religious stories from their tradition to reconcile the contradictory voices they encounter. These stories, however, are not applied directly, but reappropriated and reconstructed. The religious stories we live by are constantly retold and renegotiated.

In a similar effort to understand the narrative identity processes, Toke Elshof interviewed three generations from each of ten Roman-Catholic families. Her analysis follows semiotic methods of the Paris School, focusing on text-immanent subjectivity (see the parallel discussion in biblical studies in the chapter by Den Braber). These methods also allow for proper attention to the embodied character of interview material, a dimension that sometimes lacks in narrative approaches. Elshof shows how language itself—the material of narratives—is culturally and relationally embedded. She describes the embodied nature of the stories in four dimensions. The ‘prosodic’ dimension, or the shape given to the act of speaking, reveals for respondents awkwardness to speak about God, and, instead, centers on speaking to God. The ‘thymic’ dimension, or the way the text speaks about the body, shows clear differences between the generations, moving from an ecclesiastically governed body to the body as the center of relations. The ‘ritual’ dimension in the text, or the ways the bodily praxis refers to a transcendent reality, shows how religious rituals invoke much wider relations to others and the world than the non-religious rituals that mostly focus on family members. Here, again, generational shifts are noteworthy. The final, intentional dimension of bodily religiosity concerns religiously motivated action that proves to be connected to narrative programs attributed to God. The semiotic analysis of

the narratives thus uncovers traces of three super-individual structures in the individual stories: the family, the generation, and the institution.

With his colleagues, Jos van den Brand offers an analytical instrument for the reconstruction of the interpretation that is found in life stories. With this instrument, they try to differentiate between worldview-specific influences in the life story and the personal interpretations the narrator includes in the construction of the story. This is needed, they claim, because contemporary life stories are less monolithically determined by the worldview tradition a person is raised in. Building their model on narrative studies and personality psychology, they focus on the creation of meaning attributed to important events. These meanings emerge from the confrontation of an existential event with ultimate life goals. The elements of this model can be assessed and analyzed through qualitative interviews and other methods, as Van den Brand et al. show, while allowing theorizing on religion without being limited to one specific worldview tradition.

### *Systematic Studies*

The third section deals with systematic theology. Although narrative approaches have been proffered here as well, they seem to be more at odds with central assumptions of the discipline than is the case in other disciplines in theology and religious sciences. Luco van den Brom offers an introduction to narrative approaches in systematic theology. His starting point is the Cartesian differentiation between scientific argument and religious narratives. The latter may serve to convey some truths to the common people, but abstract and conceptual philosophical language is the way to uncover the truth behind the story. Frei (1974) described this as the eclipse of biblical narrative and set in motion a movement of revaluing the function of narrative. Van den Brom shows how narrative functions to make sense of living and to communicate meanings and starts to map some forms of narrative theology. Telling stories can be used as primarily a form of communicating faith and theology, but it can also become a way of innovating and remythologizing for contemporary use in liturgy and doctrine. A final issue regards the ontological status of the world narrative refers to: sometimes theologians take canonical stories as 'reality depicting' and advocate a realist position in narrative theology, while others see them as suggesting appropriate ways of apprehending and dealing with reality.

Anne-Marie Korte shows how this plays out when systematic theology engages with real life stories of people. Building on a research project on pastors working in urban ministries, she focuses on the journal entries of one of these pastors and asks: How do personal stories of pain and survival become a rhetorical practice of public engagement? How should these stories be told, heard and read to have this effect, and who takes the initiative? What role do theologians—trained in social analysis and theological reflection—play in this process? Do religious imagery and frames of reference have a special place? She answers these questions by reading the journal in three



different layers: as a reportage of significant life events in the neighborhood where the pastor works, as a literary creation, and as a passion narrative.

Co-editor Maaïke De Haardt similarly attempts to integrate everyday life and systematic theological reflection. She does so by focusing on visual popular culture, notably the film *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel 1987), one that has received quite a few theological interpretations. Usually there is a tendency of (over-)interpreting the film as Eucharistic. This canonical interpretation is too hasty, according to De Haardt, and does no justice to the concrete images and practices. Instead, De Haardt focuses on the role and meaning of food and on aesthetic sensibility. On the level of the practices of belief, the God-language of much systematic theology, with its concepts, its struggles, its models and its dogmas, including such distinctions as transcendence and immanence or sacred and profane, does not make much 'sense'. We need theological interpretations not of an unknown distant or transcendent 'God' but of polysemic and polyformic senses of divine presence in the everyday world.

### *Historical Studies*

The fourth and final section is devoted to historical studies of religion. Arguably stories have always been a central element here. Marit Monteiro, Marjet Derks, and Annelies van Heijst take the lead in their chapter on the changing narratives of religious orders and congregations over the past few decades. They ask specifically why the recently massively emerging stories on sexual abuse are almost completely absent from existing historiographies and what this absence tells us about the perspectives guiding historical research. Part of the answer lies in the fact that religious communities themselves are commemorative communities, actively involved in the historiographies. Through their histories, they construct and reconstruct their collective narrative identities that guide them through present and future. These processes of self-historicizing have helped to shape a collective memory that does not necessarily match their factual history.

Working with Kearney's (2001) notion of 'imagined community', John Exalto provides a parallel description of a protestant narrative community, that of Reformed Pietism. This community adheres to an experience-oriented, conservative Calvinism for which conversion was a central theme that shapes and authorizes specific stories and constructions of identity. The autobiographies of members are valuable material to reconstruct the processes of interpretation and reappropriation. The community tests, corrects, and supports certain narratives of its members and disqualifies others. The community itself likewise shapes and reconstructs itself through these stories.

Joep van Gennip directs our attention to the role of the audience to which narrative are targeted. His case study regards the 17th century's Jesuit polemical writings. These writings were important to support the development of the Catholic constituency in a predominantly Protestant society. The controversial and apologetic publications strengthened the

Catholic identity of the reading community. The strategies used depend heavily on the purported audience. Some were written for Calvinist readers, other publications targeted Mennonites, or the Catholic people themselves. Some publications are only directed to Mennonites at face value, hiding their real critique of the hegemonic Calvinist public church for reasons of security.

Angela Berlis portrays another example of such conflicting story-telling between individual, community, and society. Her research, focusing on a material object rather than texts or ideas, highlights the reinterpretation of a relatively well-known narrative following new historical sources, thereby also pointing to the fact that there are always narrative gaps in historical material that elicit conjectures and reconstructions by the historians. Her case study involves the death of a religious Sister in 1872. As a result of her protests against the papal dogmas of the First Vatican Council, Sr. Augustine was removed from her position as Mother Superior. She died a few months after and was buried without her habit, which was interpreted by some as her disqualification as a religious sister and by others as an inevitable result of her *de facto* excommunication; clothing her body with the habit in the coffin could have implied her submission to the new dogmas. The question remains whether the habit was a symbol of disciplining or of religious authenticity and identity? This analysis of narrative constructions of events like these also shows the importance of body, gender, and agency, not unlike the topics addressed in the chapter by Marjo Buitelaar.

The final chapter by Liesbeth Hoeven brings us back to the cultural domain, just like Maaik de Haardt. Hoeven studies the role of religion in cultural performances of commemoration, notably the artwork and texts by Charlotte Salomon before she was deported to and killed in Auschwitz. Salomon explicitly describes life as a theatre and invites to the reconstruction of her life through images, words, music, and voice. In this way, she sought to create a clear distance between herself as a subject of her own life and herself as the author who told her own history. Based on the interpretation of Salomon's art, Hoeven discusses how such memorials ('*Lieux de memoire*') can have a symbolic religious and redemptive function for societies trying to negotiate the atrocities of their history, turning traumatic, disruptive memory into constructive narrative. Salomon's artwork *Leben? Oder Theater?* claims the plurality of narratives and pleads against a monologue culture, of which Auschwitz was the consequence.

## **Reflections**

This volume thus brings together narrative approaches from various disciplines in theology and religious studies. It is neither exhaustive nor balanced in the perspectives and in the religious traditions that appear in the book. Exceptions notwithstanding, the chapters are dominated by mainstream Western Christian narratives, which also means that religious studies

approaches are somewhat less explicit, although many 'theological' contributions are closer to a religious studies perspective than to a confessional theological one. The aims here were less ambitious than offering a full survey. We wanted primarily to foster the unfortunately rare conversation between the various theological and religious studies disciplines on the use of narrative approaches, which may contribute to a new convergence and coherence in this scholarly domain.

The conversation in this volume at least leads to the following reflections. First of all, there is not just one narrative approach; there is a wide variety of perspectives that take seriously the narrative character of much of our experience and of religious traditions. Some of the chapters in this volume focus more on the narrative forms found in religious texts and practices. This is especially the case in the section on Biblical Studies, but there are examples in every section. In other chapters the focus is more on the individual subjectivity and group authority, notions belonging to a narrative perspective that can also be applied when studying non-narrative forms. It may come as no surprise that these two levels of narrative approaches (form versus perspective) at occasions bring along different methods. The very detailed and systematic analysis found in some chapters in the Biblical and Empirical Studies sections may indicate that these two have a longer history of methodological reflection on the narrative quality of their material. In a sense, this may be more challenging for especially systematic theology as Van den Brom points out. It is significant that the two case studies in this section serve primarily to critique taken for granted approaches in the discipline (focusing on the abstract, generalized, absolute).

Second, given the fact that no other direction was given to authors than the request to focus on the narrative dimension of existential and religious phenomena, it is promising to note that there are in fact clear parallels and connections between the various disciplines. This might indicate that narrative approaches to the study of religion may function as integrative for the field as a whole. For starters, the sometimes controversial relation between theology, religious studies, and the social scientific study of religion seems less problematic in this collection. Admittedly, the debate on these disciplinary differences is often flawed, rhetorically masking a struggle on academic status, scarce resources, and personal affiliations. That being said, there are—gradual—differences between theology and religious studies, the first usually being more confessional and the second more comparative, the first more from inside a tradition and the second more from outside, the first more accepting of religious truths and the second more agnostic. In a narrative approach, however, these differences evaporate at least to a degree. The awareness that religious traditions contain narrative layers, interacting with each other and inviting readers to connect the stories of the divine with stories of their own existence, neither allows for the absolute truth claims as may have been harbored by the most confessional of theologians, nor for the distanced objectivism of the most armored of religious studies scholars. The

chapters of this volume show that there is a constant interference of 'emic' and 'etic' interpretations, truths and critiques.

Third, the parallels within and between various disciplines in theology and religious studies may serve to overcome unnecessary gaps and conflicts. If indeed our common interest is in the construction of ultimate existential meaning in relation to the sacred (or however one wants to put it), and if the material we study is always a hodgepodge of stories, interpreting, disputing, appropriating one another, then the fundamental approaches of these disciplines are more convergent than they sometimes may have seemed. This is especially the case if we forego the traditional sequential relation in which Biblical Theology explains what the 'sources' tell us, Systematic Theology clarifies the 'truths', Historical Theology adds the weight of 'traditions', and Practical Theology shows how to apply this to church 'practices'. Inasmuch as this traditional sequence has long been rejected, we have not been too successful in developing a new integrating paradigm. Narrative approaches might serve to do that. We find narratives and narratively structured practices in the texts of the tradition's sources, in the history of a faith community, in the conceptual frameworks they use to make sense of their existential position in relation to the world and to the divine, and in their praxis. All these narratives are connected and contested, and the task of theology and religious studies is to understand these narrative worlds and foster communication between them. This parallels the insight of Henning Luther (1992: 13), drawing on Schleiermacher:

Academic theology is not needed for the maintenance of faith of individuals. She is needed, however, to make the pluralization, conditioned by the individualization of religion, communicatively fertile, i.e., to prevent that no understanding is possible anymore between the manifold subjective approaches to religion.

A more consistent narrative perspective in theology and religious studies could foster more convergence in the disciplines.

Fourth, a central issue in many contributions in this volume regards how stories of the religious traditions and individual stories interact. Some chapters look at how readers' interpretations may contribute to our understandings of texts, other contributions look at how they appropriate the texts in their own narratives and practices. Conflicts and convergences appear immediately. It is intriguing to contemplate why this specific interaction has attracted relatively little research attention. There are obviously philosophical musings, not least in the work of Paul Ricoeur (1995). And there are interesting contributions, for example from the Intercultural Bible Reading project (De Wit et al. 2004), the psychological analysis of hearing sermons (Schaap-Jonker 2008), or the possible meanings of psalms of individual lament in pastoral care (Aalbersberg-van Loon 2003). But to date, such projects have not mounted up to an integrative and systematically and empirically corroborated theory of the interplay of traditional and individual

stories, probably because the interdisciplinary conversations within theology and religious studies are few and far between.

Fifth, the contributions in this volume live up to the expectations raised by the history of narrative approaches in their attention for the struggle between the stories of hegemonic and subaltern voices. The narrative dimension is not an interest-free zone where stories are constructed in absolute freedom. Instead, the power of authorities and dominant groups has to be navigated by marginalized groups and individuals for whom it is not self-evident that their story will be accepted. Such conflicts over the legitimacy to tell one's story in specific ways are found in several of the chapters, not coincidentally often related to gender. One of the strengths of a narrative perspective is that it starts from the concrete and specific narratives of real people to challenge the abstractions and absolutes that always serve to bolster the authority of the hegemonic group. A narrative approach in theology and religious studies serves well to deconstruct these structures and create the liberating space where stories are "heard to speech", as feminist theologian Nelle Morton (1977) described it.

Sixth, if we are to develop encompassing models of narrative in the study of religion, we may deduce from the various cases studies in this volume and elsewhere that the fundamental dynamics of the construction of a story are found in two dimensions. The first regards the questions what the events in our life and world mean to us and how we can build a somewhat coherent but at least meaningful story from the elements that present themselves to us. This is the dimension of emplotment that immediately implies issues of ontology and reference. The second dimension regards our relation to the audience for which we are to perform our life according to the story we are developing. This is the dimension of enactment that immediately involves questions of plausibility. These two dimensions of narrative identity are closely related to the most existential and religious questions.

Obviously this volume does not exhaust the variety of narrative approaches or the themes that require attention. In a sense we are only beginning to cross the disciplinary boundaries in bringing into conversation narrative approaches in theology and religious studies. Many issues remain unresolved, including the normative debate about narrative and religious truth claims, the ethical complexities of narrative and power, and the methodological challenges regarding the epistemic quality of narrative. This volume was not meant to treat all those issues systematically. Its value lies in the juxtaposition of narrative approaches from a variety of disciplines in theology and religious studies, revealing promising common ground as well as fundamental issues for further debate.

## References

- Aalbersberg-van Loon, C. (2003) *De derde en de vierde stem. Een onderzoek naar het functioneren van Psalm 31 en 139 in het pastoraat*. Gorinchem: Narratio.
- Andrews, D.P. (2002) *Practical Theology for Black Churches. Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Bal, M. (1985) *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Brueggemann, W. (1997) *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Bruner, J.S. (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Crites, S. (1971) "The Narrative Quality of Experience." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, 391–411.
- Frei, H. (1974) *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. (2001) *Reconstructies. Praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar de verhalen van mannen over seksueel misbruik en geloof*. Kampen: Kok.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. (2002) "Common Themes and Structures in Male Victims' Stories of Religion and Sexual Abuse." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 5(3), 313–325.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. (2011) "Narrative Approaches." In: B.J. Miller-McLemore (ed.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 214–223.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. (1998 ed.) *De praxis als verhaal. Narrativiteit en Praktische Theologie*. Kampen: Kok.
- Ganzevoort, R.R., M. Van der Laan, and E. Olsman (2011) "Growing Up Gay and Religious. Conflict, Dialogue, and Religious Identity Strategies," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14 (3), 209–222.
- Gergen, K.J. (1994) *Realities and Relationships. Soundings in Social Construction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gerkin, C.V. (1984) *The Living Human Document. Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Hauerwas, S. (1983) *The Peaceable Kingdom. A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Hermans, H.J.M., and H.J.G. Kempen (1993) *The Dialogical Self. Meaning as Movement*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Josselson, R., and A. Lieblich (1995 eds.) *Interpreting Experience. The Narrative Study of Lives. Volume 3*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Kearney, R. (2001) *On Stories*. London: Routledge.
- Kundtz, D.J., and B.S. Schlager (2007) *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Lakoff, G., and M. Johnson (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Luther, H. (1992) *Religion und Alltag. Bausteine zu einer praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. Stuttgart: Radius.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- McFague, S. (1982) *Metaphorical Theology. Models of God in Religious Language*. London: SCM Press.
- Morton, N. (1977) *Beloved Image. Feminist Imagining: Seeing and Hearing A-New*. Manuscript. American Academy of Religion.
- Neuger, C.C. (2001) *Counseling Women. A Narrative Pastoral Approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Powell, M.A., and N.T. Wright (1993) *What Is Narrative Criticism. A New Approach to the Bible*. London: SPCK.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984-1988) *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1995) *Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.

- Sarbin, T.R. (1986 ed.) *Narrative Psychology. The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. New York: Praeger.
- Schaap-Jonker, H. (2008) *Before the Face of God. An Interdisciplinary Study of the Meaning of the Sermon and the Hearer's God Image, Personality, and Affective State*. Münster: LIT.
- Schillebeeckx, E. (1979) *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology*. New York: Crossroad.
- Tracy, D. (1981) *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad.
- Trible, P. (1984) *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- De Wit, J.H., L. Jonker, M. Kool, and D. Schipani (2004 eds.) *Through the Eyes of Another. Intercultural Bible Reading*. Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies.