INTRODUCTION

RELIGIOUS STORIES WE LIVE BY

R. Ruard Ganzevoort

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.


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 and 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 Ganzvoort (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 (Ganzvoort 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