READING BY THE LINES.
PROPOSAL FOR A NARRATIVE
ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUE IN
EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY

SUMMARY

This paper proposes a method of reading narrative interviews (and other texts). The focus is on the different story lines a narrator uses and weaves together to construct his or her personal narrative. The analysis combines qualitative and quantitative elements to discover the narrative structures. The method of reading is presented and illustrated using one interview from my research project on religious dynamics in male victims of sexual abuse (see appendix for a description).

Within the field of empirical theology, the narrative approach is a promising one. As I will try to show, it offers possibilities for a systematic understanding of religious dynamics, while staying close to the religious individuals we study. Far from claiming it to be the only or even the best approach, I nevertheless believe narrative theories and method offer a unique contribution to the field. Before proposing a method of reading, however, I will first highlight some advantages of a narrative approach, outline my version of narrative theory, and discuss some methodological issues.

1. Introduction

In recent years, an upswing of interest in narrative can be observed in many scientific disciplines. Closest to empirical theology are biblical and systematic theology, ethics and philosophy on the one hand, and psychology on the other. In psychology of religion and practical theology efforts have been made to study religion from a narrative perspective. This includes such diverse themes as moral development, religious education, religious coping, mass media, fundamentalism, pastoral care, homiletics, community development, faith development and religious identity.

Besides authors explicitly employing a narrative perspective, many scholars using different concepts and terms can be understood as working in the same theoretical field or, at least, their work could easily be fitted into a narrative framework. This would include those taking a hermeneutic
approach, role theorists and researchers working with the legacy of Sundén, attribution theorists, personal construct theorists, some object-relations and self-psychology theorists, and many more. This suffices to prove the extensive use of a narrative perspective (and the like) in a variety of disciplines and fields. For me it suggests the value of exploring the use of narrative a bit further, in the direction of analysis in empirical theology.

1.1 Why narrative?

Empirical theology, closely connected both to the human sciences and to the other disciplines of theology, would benefit from taking a narrative turn for at least the following five reasons.

First, as Patton (1994) argues, it creates the possibility of interaction with biblical theology, through a fresh understanding of Boisen’s famous phrase of the ‘living human document’. Whereas earlier this term was used to accentuate the contrast between dead texts and living people, narrativity underscores the parallels of written texts and meaningful human action (Capps 1984). This connection invites empirical theology to employ methods and insights from biblical theology and to explore the relation with human documents.

Second, a narrative perspective can serve as a meta-theoretical framework. It may help us understand the connection between theology and social sciences and the discussion of contesting approaches within both worlds (cf. Browning 1987). In differing theories and approaches the underlying story lines can be discerned, with their implicit normative assumptions (like faith development, religious maturity, pathology). Because of this meta-theoretical character, and the growing body of literature on narrative psychology, narratively oriented studies in cultural anthropology, theology and more, a narrative perspective has a strong potential for interdisciplinary communication and research.

Third, taking a narrative turn involves a hermeneutical stance, in which the individual biography and religious construction are valued over general descriptions and statistical averages. From a theological point of view, such an approach is called for if we want to do justice to voices of the oppressed and the unheard (Metz 1977), and if we want to acknowledge the religious individual. From a social scientific point of view it is warranted, given the situation of a more and more fragmented and plural society. Individuals construct their own mosaic of elements from various religious traditions and world views.

Fourth, a narrative approach has the advantage of proximity to the object of investigation. Where people are inclined to talk and interact in a narrative mode, probing a narrative theory and method for our research is useful.