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Is "Narrative" Really a Panacea? The Use of "Narrative" in the Work of Metz and Hauerwas*

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The category of narrative or story has received much attention in recent discussions of Christian theology and ethics. Indeed, the theme of narrative is so popular today that a virtual cottage industry of academic scholarship has grown up around the discussion of this theme.¹ This essay adds to the growing literature on the topic of narrative, but my intention is not to contribute to the substantive debate on this topic. Rather, this paper raises a more preliminary question: why has the notion of narrative suddenly become so much discussed as a category of theological and ethical reflection? The answer, I suggest, is that the category of narrative appears to be almost a panacea for the ills afflicting contemporary theology and ethics. In particular, the category of narrative appears to address problems arising from the tenuous cognitive status of Christianity in the modern world. One of the major objectives of this paper, then, will be to see how, and to what specific ills, narrative is a putative remedy.

To accomplish this objective, I will rehearse one account of the problems besetting contemporary Christian thought, that set out by Jeffrey Stout in his book, *Flight from Authority*.² Stout's presentation of the contemporary problematic is very helpful in explaining the predilection for narrative in current discussions. Briefly summarized, what Stout argues is that, as a result of the breakdown of the traditional category of

* I would like to thank John P. Reeder, Jr., and the two anonymous readers for *The Journal of Religion* whose suggestions were both extremely helpful and much appreciated.

¹ For a review of some of the growing literature on the topic of narrative, see George Stroup, "A Bibliographical Critique," *Theology Today* 32, no. 2 (July 1975): 133-43, as well as Stroup's *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981). See also the October 1983 thematic issue of *Interpretation*, vol. 37, no. 4.

² Jeffrey Stout, *Flight from Authority* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

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“Narrative” in Metz and Hauerwas

authority, and with the introduction of the modern conception of probability, Christian believers were, and are, faced with the following dilemma: either they reformulate their beliefs in a way that is compatible with modernity — in which case the beliefs inevitably lose their distinctiveness — or they positively celebrate the paradoxical nature of the beliefs — in which case the beliefs remain incomprehensible and hence socially irrelevant in the modern world. I suggest that the prevalence of the category of narrative, in recent Christian ethics in particular, may be accounted for by the fact that it seems to be almost perfectly suited to negotiate the dilemma set out by Stout.

To lend force to this suggestion I will examine the place of narrative in the work of two contemporary Christian ethicists, Johannes Metz and Stanley Hauerwas. Although these writers represent different religious traditions, both rely in significant ways on the category of narrative in their work. What I hope to show is that, in both cases, the appeal to narrative is intended to resolve the sorts of difficulties introduced by Stout: both Metz and Hauerwas are concerned to revitalize Christian faith, both want to make it once again socially relevant, and both are adamant that it retain its distinctiveness. That both should also place such a heavy emphasis on the concept of narrative I will argue is not coincidental.

This paper, then, will examine the use of the category of narrative in the work of Metz and Hauerwas. The burden of the paper will be to show both that Metz and Hauerwas share a vision of narrative and of its place in addressing the problems raised by Stout *and* that Metz and Hauerwas decidedly do not share a vision of the specific normative implications of the Christian narrative(s). The agreement between Metz and Hauerwas highlights the attractiveness of the category of narrative in confronting long-standing problems in theology and ethics, while their disagreement underscores some of the new problems that the use of narrative raises for theology and ethics.

The paper itself is divided into essentially four parts. The first part sets the stage for a discussion of the place of narrative in the work of Metz and Hauerwas by reviewing the account Stout gives of what he calls the “dialectical situation of contemporary theism.” Metz and Hauerwas are then taken up in turn, and an attempt is made to show that, despite the differences in terminology and emphasis, both are wrestling with essentially the same problems and that both rely on narrative as a crucial problem-solving tool. The fourth section notes some of the direct correlations between the work of Metz and Hauerwas and in conclusion identifies some of the problems both must face if they are to make narrative a viable category of Christian ethics.

The Journal of Religion

THE DIALECTICAL SITUATION OF CONTEMPORARY THEISM

There are many different stories that could be told of the history of Christian thought in the modern world. One of the merits of that recounted by Jeffrey Stout in his book, *Flight from Authority*, is that it helps uncover the reasons for the current appeal of the concept of narrative. According to Stout, our current problems have their roots most deeply in the soil of seventeenth-century thought and, in particular, in the emergence of a decidedly modern conception of probability. The significance of this development is found in the departure it represents from the previous conception of probability. Prior to the introduction of statistical and evidential criteria for assessing a proposition's truth, probability essentially consisted of approval by authority, whether in the form of an appeal to the right persons or to the right books. And this meant that even the most paradoxical beliefs were considered highly probable so long as they had the right imprimatur. Thus, the introduction of the new probability changed the religious situation drastically. For with this introduction, the connection between probability and authority was broken. And this in turn meant that the religious believer was left with the unenviable task of attempting to supply new reasons for believing that the central claims of theism, claims that no longer seemed inherently probable, were indeed more probable than not. As the title of Stout's book intimates, it is this flight from authority and to the new probability that is both characteristic of modernity and determinative of the Church's precarious position in the modern world.

With this flight from authority, Stout suggests, Christian believers are confronted with an uncomfortable choice: either they attempt to revise their beliefs in an effort to meet the new criteria of truthfulness, or they cling to traditional beliefs, however improbable these beliefs may appear. Unfortunately, says Stout, both options have deleterious consequences. To choose the first course, that of revision, requires abandoning or recasting any beliefs too paradoxical to be made probable. The problem with this response to modernity is that the more one abandons or recasts, the less like traditional theism the revised faith becomes. Alternatively, not to revise would appear to consign theism to the margins of public life, for an unreconstructed theism will appear too improbable to be taken seriously by modern culture. Hence, in the modern world, Christianity is faced with the problem of how to escape this dilemma: indistinctness or irrelevance. To attempt to revise the faith threatens to make it indistinctive; not to revise the faith threatens to make it irrelevant.

Now Stout is very good indeed at showing the way in which the movement of Christian thought from Deism to neoorthodoxy seems trapped in dialectical tension between these two poles. Although I cannot reproduce Stout’s account in any detail, it is worth looking briefly at his depiction of several moments of this dialectic. The first centers around the figure of Kant.

According to Stout, Kant’s writings are impaled on one horn of the dilemma that menaces every modern attempt to defend Christian faith, that of irrelevance. Because Kant recognized the seriousness of Hume’s challenge to the Deist attempt to make theism probable, Kant sought to avoid probabilistic arguments for theism. By doing so he avoided the danger to which Deism succumbed, namely, the other horn of the dilemma—lack of distinctiveness. Still, he could not make religious faith socially relevant. Kant could not maintain the relevance of Christian faith, says Stout, because he pursued a strategy of separation: by declaring religion to be an improper matter for theoretical speculation, Kant created a formidable wall between Christian belief and the intellectual life of the culture. It was a wall, says Stout, that insured that religious life would be an essentially private rather than public affair.

The second figure whose work illustrates the dangers facing any attempt to find a place for theism in the modern world is Hegel. According to Stout, nothing better illustrates the dialectical situation of contemporary theism than the situation of Hegel and his followers. In Stout’s view, Hegel saw clearly the problems involved in the strategy of separation pursued by Kant (and Schleiermacher), and thus Hegel argued that “only by restoring to Christian theism its cognitive dimension and by taking seriously precisely those paradoxical doctrines that make it seem distinctive to secular thought could it retain a role of *any* centrality in modern culture.”³ Whereas the Deists had jettisoned the hard paradoxes of Christian faith as improbable, and while Kant had softened them with reductive interpretations, “Hegel was prepared to treat them as the essential truths of religious consciousness. Religious consciousness attempts to say in symbols and stories what ordinary consciousness cannot say in more direct fashion.”⁴ Hegel’s system, then, was an attempt to provide an interpretation of the hard paradoxes that made them both comprehensible and a matter of public faith. Thus, Hegel, perhaps better than anyone else, understood the dilemma confronting modern theism and he resolutely sought to address it.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

The Journal of Religion

But, says Stout, if we find in Hegel's work the clearest recognition of the difficulties facing theism in the modern world, we have in the fate of Hegelianism a dramatic illustration of the near impossibility of successfully negotiating these difficulties, even when they are recognized. Indeed, Stout thinks that it is impossible. "Hegel, it would seem, had attempted the impossible. Neither philosophical thought nor practical activity could be both completely secular *and* completely religious. Religion could not be both distinguishable *and* thoroughly integrated."⁵

Moreover, the work of Hegel's successors attests to this fact. For no one seemed capable of steering the middle course Hegel had sought. And, once off course, there were only two options: shipwreck on the rocks of irrelevance (e.g., Kierkegaard) or shipwreck on the rocks of indistinctiveness (e.g., Feurbach and Marx). This is why Stout endorses Karl Löwith's claim that Marx and Kierkegaard "pose the 'exclusive' choices of post-Hegelian Christianity."⁶

This, then, is Stout's sketch of the dialectical situation of contemporary theism. What we must consider at this point is the possibility that the concept of narrative offers an alternative to these two bleak choices. For what I want to suggest in the next two sections of this paper is that it is precisely the apparent ability of the concept of narrative to resolve Stout's dilemma that makes it such an attractive category of contemporary Christian thought. In other words, an appeal to the category of narrative would seem to maintain both the distinctiveness and the relevance of Christian faith.

NARRATIVE IN THE WORK OF JOHANNES METZ

We can begin to track the connection between Stout's problematic and the use of the category of narrative in recent Christian thought by focusing on the work of Johannes Metz. In both *Faith in History and Society*⁷ and in an earlier work, *A Theology of the World*,⁸ Metz appeals to narrative as one of the central categories of Christian thought. Thus, an examination of these two works is helpful for understanding the place of narrative in Metz's thought. As we will see, for Metz narrative serves to resolve problems very much like those raised by Stout.

Now it may at first appear misguided, if not simply confused, to attempt to find a place for Metz in what is essentially an account of the history of Protestant thought in the modern world. Yet, if we turn to Metz's work, we find Metz himself describing the context of his thought

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Johannes Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980).

⁸ Johannes Metz, *A Theology of the World* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969).

in a way that echoes Stout’s discussion. Consider, for example, the following list of subheadings to a chapter designed to set the stage for his own constructive position: “The Crisis of Tradition,” “The Crisis of Authority,” “The Crisis of (Metaphysical) Reason,” and, finally, “Religion in a State of Crisis.” Moreover, when we turn to the sections themselves, we discover that there is more than surface resemblance here; the crises are genuinely similar. Metz argues, for example, that one of the results of the Enlightenment—from which all these crises spring—was the breakdown of the unity between religion and society, a breakdown that put Christian theologians in the novel position of having to make a case for the relevance of the Christian faith. In fact, says Metz, endorsing a view set out by Peter Berger, as the split between religion and society grew wider, the churches were faced with two options.

As socially plausible structures of Christianity, the churches can either try to adapt themselves to the definitions of reality made by the surrounding world or strengthen their own positions as cognitive minorities with regard to the world around them. There are, however, considerable difficulties involved in both these alternatives for the inner structure of Christianity. The first alternative threatens the spiritual content of Christianity. . . . The second alternative is in collision with the Christian churches’ understanding of themselves that has existed since the time of Constantine as institutions that are involved in many different ways with society as a whole.⁹

Now these two options are essentially those identified by Stout, and Metz seems to imply that the consequences of adopting either option are those highlighted by Stout as well: irrelevance or lack of distinctiveness. Metz goes on to point out, for example, that the history of Catholic thought during this period is not without representatives of both of these strategies. On the one hand, says Metz, there is the response of neoscholasticism, which effectively created a “neoscholastic ghetto,” in which the Church attempted to remain isolated from contemporary historical and philosophical concerns. The unfortunate consequence of this response to the challenge of the Enlightenment was social obscurity. On the other hand, when, in the form of the “new theology,” the Church attempted to adopt itself to “the definitions of reality made by the surrounding world,” the result was what Metz calls the privatization of theology. According to Metz, with the efforts of theologians such as Karl Rahner to accommodate “the autonomy of reason and the world,” the practice of faith was reduced to a “timeless decision” of the autonomous individual. Unfortunately, says Metz, on this view, religion ceases to be crucial in the social construction of the person and

⁹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, p. 155.

The Journal of Religion

comes, rather, to be understood as a boutonniere, so to speak, chosen by the autonomous and solitary individual who is already nearly fully dressed.

Now if we step back from Metz's characterization of these two responses to the challenge posed by the Enlightenment, we can see that Metz has posed essentially the same dilemma as Stout: erosion of the content of faith (lack of distinctiveness) or social obscurity (irrelevance). What is interesting here is that Metz clearly sees himself as trying to find a *via media* between these two unacceptable options. Moreover, it is clear that Metz sees this middle way as paved by the concept of narrative. For Metz, appeal to the concept of narrative allows us to take seriously the cognitive challenge modernity poses to Christian faith without making Christianity either irrelevant or indistinctive. To see how narrative functions in this way we must turn to Metz's discussion of the concept of narrative.

Unfortunately, Metz does not provide a systematic account of what he means by narrative, the narrative structure of theology, or a narrating faith. Still, we can begin to see what Metz means by narrative by noting that on one level, when he talks about the need for a narrative form of theology, he means to do nothing more than to highlight the storytelling character of the Christian community. We must remember, he writes, that Christianity "has, from the very beginning, not been primarily a community interpreting and arguing, but a community remembering and narrating with a practical intention."¹⁰ And it should be noted that both of these elements are central to his understanding of narrative. Both the opposition of narrative to reasoning and argumentation and the connection between narrative and practical action are crucial.¹¹

Moreover, both of these points are connected to problems raised for the Church by the phenomenon of secularization. For example, Metz's preference for storytelling to argument seems to be born of the conviction that Christian faith can only be made intelligible to the modern world if it is presented in a nontheoretical way. This is why he says that we must learn to recognize the fact that stories of conversion, exodus, and the like are not simply "dramatic embellishments of a previously conceived 'pure' theology"¹² but rather form the "basic structure" of theology. Unfortunately, this is not something that liberal theologians have realized, and the result has been an attempt to adjust the theoret-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹¹ "Opposition" is probably too strong here, for Metz does say that every story involves reasoning and argument. The point, however, is that there is a very large difference in perspective between these two foci of theological thought.

¹² Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, p. 51.

ical content of faith in a way that makes it more acceptable to contemporary believers. In fact, we have already seen one consequence of this failure to appreciate the unavoidably narrative structure of theology, namely, the new theology’s emphasis on the moment of private decision. But, according to Metz, this sort of “existentialist theology” cannot but fail because “a purely argumentative theology which conceals its origins and does not make this present again and again in narrative memory inevitably leads . . . [to] the extinction of the identifiable content of Christian salvation.”¹³ We need to break the “spell” of the idea of a total reconstruction of the faith based on abstract reason and to realize that christological knowledge “is not handed down primarily as a concept” but in the stories about Christ.¹⁴ Our consciousness, Metz argues, is inextricably “entwined” in stories, and thus our identity is always formed by “narrative identification.”

This is why the emphasis on narrative, for Metz, is so closely tied to the notion of practical action and why he argues that the picture of a solitary and autonomous individual assenting to the rationally reconstructed propositions of faith is so misleading. In both cases, the reason is that the stories that shape the individual must be thought of as defining the very identity of the subject and cannot be conceived as a “superstructure” that gets added “onto an already formed identity of the subject.”¹⁵ Thus, ideally, the Christian story “enters deeply into the basis of existence” and hence leads directly to action. Further, since the stories themselves are essentially practical (i.e., stories about God acting for people), it is even possible to talk about the “primacy of praxis” in Christian theology. But the important point is this: only when we acknowledge that the structure of human consciousness is necessarily narrative will we recover the view that religion is the expression of a primary need. Only then will we abandon the notion that we must first argue and reason about religious concepts before asking about religious practice.

At this point we can perhaps best get clear about how, for Metz, narrative functions to resolve some of the difficulties facing contemporary Christian thought by stepping back and characterizing Metz’s use of this category in terms of Stout’s account. If we do this, I think it is possible to argue that Metz’s position is in some ways a variation of Kant’s. Like Kant, Metz argues that the truthfulness of Christianity cannot be demonstrated in a purely speculative way. Like Kant, he believes that we must approach the faith through practical reason. Unlike Kant,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

The Journal of Religion

however, he does not believe that the stories of the Christian faith are merely moral allegories to be discarded with the arrival of a purely rational faith. Paradoxically, Kant had made Christianity irrelevant by substituting the question, What ought I to do? for the question, What can I know? Unfortunately, because for Kant the answer to the first question can be discovered without recourse to Christian faith, Christianity became irrelevant. Metz, by contrast, does not substitute questions of practical reason for questions of theoretical reason, but he does suggest that theoretical questions about what I can know are directly related to questions of practical reason. Moreover, according to Metz, the narrative structure of human consciousness and the narrative structure of biblical faith insure that human praxis cannot be determined by Kant's purely rational faith. Human praxis is itself story bound.

The category of narrative thus helps to overcome the difficulties in Kant's account because it allows Metz to talk about the connection between religion and practical reason without reducing the one to the other. On the contrary, if there is any reduction here, it is of practical reason to narrative. For, as Metz makes clear, it is the story that conditions moral action, not the need for practical action that conditions the story. Moreover, Metz's emphasis on narrative also allows him to second Hegel's endorsement of the necessarily communal nature of the Christian religion, without forcing him to support this commitment with an elaborate metaphysical schema in which the stories are shown to have a place. Taken simply as stories that still have life-transforming potential, the biblical narratives are intelligible, relevant, and distinctive. They are intelligible because they continue to have the power to shape and direct lives. They are relevant because such stories are intimately connected to practical social action, and they are distinctive because they are not just any old stories, but stories about the Christian God that cannot be reduced to any universal human message without loss of content.

NARRATIVE IN THE WORK OF STANLEY HAUERWAS

If we turn now to the work of Stanley Hauerwas, we will see that the category of narrative functions for Hauerwas much as it does for Metz. That is, for Hauerwas, as for Metz, narrative is an attractive theological category, for it points to a way around the dilemma highlighted by Stout.

The first thing that should be noted about Hauerwas's discussion of narrative is that, in contrast to Metz's treatment, it is systematically developed in response to what is identified as a mistaken (Enlighten-

“Narrative” in Metz and Hauerwas

ment) view of moral objectivity. Indeed, Hauerwas tells us that he focuses on the related categories of narrative and character as a way of developing an account of moral experience that does not suffer from the distorting effects of what he calls the “standard account” of moral rationality. Since narrative is to serve in this corrective role, we can begin by identifying the problematic features of this standard account. According to Hauerwas, there are at least three essential ways in which the standard account distorts the nature of our moral experience: it (1) places “unwarranted emphasis” on individual decisions in “quandary” situations, (2) fails to account for the importance of moral notions other than principles and rules, and (3) alienates the moral agent from his or her interests and passions.

Now as anyone who is at all familiar with his work knows, Hauerwas lays the blame for these distortions largely on Kant and, in particular, on Kant’s view of moral objectivity as involving a quest for universality. As Hauerwas sees it, modern moral theory has been engaged in a futile attempt, initiated by Kant, “to secure for moral judgments an objectivity that would free such judgments from the subjective beliefs, wants and stories of the agent who makes them.”¹⁶ Part of the explanation for this attempt, of course, is that moral philosophers have been gripped by a scientific ideal of objectivity and have thus sought to escape any suggestion of partiality. Unfortunately, says Hauerwas, this attempt to free reason from the concerns of particular individuals and communities has obscured the narrative character of our existence, including the moral aspects of our lives. Indeed, this preoccupation with the nonnarrative account of rationality has led directly to the problems listed above, for it has led moral philosophers to concentrate their attention on only one part of our lives—that concerned with moral decision making—as if this part were unconnected to the whole. This, in turn, has resulted in the illusion that our moral experience can be understood on the basis of rules and principles unconnected to our interests and life plans. Thus, Hauerwas argues that we must recover a narrative account of rationality if we are to overcome the problems besetting modern moral theory.

The significance of all this for our purposes is that, according to Hauerwas, the problems facing modern moral theory are connected to problems confronting contemporary Christian ethics. To see the connection we need only attend to Hauerwas’s account of the origin of Christian ethics as a self-conscious activity. In Hauerwas’s view, this is

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p. 16.

The Journal of Religion

a rather recent development, dating roughly from the nineteenth century. Thus, he writes,

The preoccupation with Christian ethics as a, if not the, central enterprise of Christian theology is primarily a legacy of Protestant liberalism. As the central Christian beliefs came under increasingly successful philosophical and historical challenges, an emphasis on the moral significance of those beliefs seemed to offer a strategy to save their meaningfulness. Therefore, Christian ethics, as a self-conscious endeavor, represented a retrenchment to secure some meaning, if not truth, for religious belief. The moral implications of the doctrines of God, Jesus, and reconciliation appeared to be the nail on which the continued viability of Christianity could hang.¹⁷

Once again we see highlighted a theme identified by Stout's problematic. For what Hauerwas is suggesting is that one response to the challenge posed by the flight from authority was to substitute ethics for theology. This, as we have seen, was the response endorsed by Kant. But just as Metz rejects this Kantian move, so too does Hauerwas. The problem with this strategy is that, when combined with a nonnarrative view of moral rationality, it inevitably leads to a reductionistic account of religious belief. It does so because the whole point of the standard account is to arrive at rules and principles that are universally applicable. Thus, any religious belief justified by appeal to the canons of this account will necessarily be stripped of its distinctiveness. "The 'moral kernal,' as Hauerwas puts it, will not "seem to require the 'religious' claims associated with it."¹⁸

It will come as no surprise to learn that what Hauerwas suggests ought to be done here is to abandon the standard account of moral rationality and to reintroduce the category of narrative as central to Christian ethics. What may be surprising is to discover what the upshot of doing so is, namely, an account of Christian ethics that appears designed to avoid what Stout has identified as the two great contemporary dangers: irrelevance and lack of distinctiveness. And, indeed, this seems to be what Hauerwas intends. He says, for example, that the nineteenth-century theologians were right to argue that the truthfulness of Christian convictions "resides in their practical force" but wrong to think that this meant justifying them by reinterpreting these beliefs in a way that made them universally acceptable and applicable. In fact, according to Hauerwas, attention to the narrative character of these convictions helps one to see that they do not need to be reformulated in order to be intelligible to the modern world. Thus, in *Truthfulness and*

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Tragedy, he writes, “To emphasize the story character of the gospel . . . is a way to remind us of the inherently practical character of theological convictions. For Christian convictions are not meant to picture the world. They do not give a primitive metaphysics about how the world is constituted. Rather the gospel is a story that gives you a way of being in the world.”¹⁹ This is why Hauerwas says that his work “implicitly involves a critique of a great deal of contemporary theology” and, in particular, that which, “seeks to uncover the meaning of Christian ‘symbols’ or ‘myth.’”²⁰ Such a theology attempts to make Christian beliefs intelligible apart from their practical application, and, yet, because the meaning of Christian convictions is inseparable from their practical implications, this is precisely what cannot be done. Any reductionistic theology is therefore averted.

Moreover, this emphasis on the practical force of narrative also suggests why the refusal to reinterpret the doctrines of the Christian faith does not lead to a Kierkegaardian irrelevance. It does not because accepting narrative as a central category of Christian ethics is to express a “categorical preference for story over explanation as a vehicle of understanding.”²¹ And, if we are not concerned about explanation, then we need not worry about “translating” the narratives of Scripture in a way that would allow them adequately to describe the modern world. On the contrary, what we will be concerned about is their ability to change the world, for this, says Hauerwas, is what the biblical stories were meant to do. Understanding the stories is thus inseparable from making them our own, and this means allowing these stories to shape the ways in which we both perceive the world and relate to it. Thus, for Hauerwas, the Christian stories do have a cognitive dimension, for they provide categories for structuring our existence in the world. But these categories are not representational; they do not picture the world and are not meant to explain it. Far from ending the dialogue with the modern, secular world, then, the Christian theologian is called to show that the stories of the Christian faith continue to offer a distinctive and truthful way of perceiving and relating to the world.

CORRELATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Thus far, we have seen that the notion of narrative is central to the work of both Metz and Hauerwas and that in both cases there is a connection between this reliance on narrative and the existence of a certain

¹⁹ Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, p. 73.

²⁰ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 2.

²¹ Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, p. 34.

The Journal of Religion

set of problems facing contemporary theology. But how is the work of each writer correlated to that of the other? This is a question we have not yet examined directly but which we must take up in this section of the paper. Since I have argued that their mutual reliance on narrative is not coincidental but the result of a response to similar concerns, there ought to be substantial overlap between the two. Noting this overlap should be a useful way of reinforcing my thesis.

There are, I think, three particularly important areas of intersection between the work of Metz and that of Hauerwas, all related to a focus on narrative. The first is an emphasis on the social location of the individual. Both, as we have seen, resist the Enlightenment emphasis on the rational, autonomous individual who seeks abstraction from the particularities of historical existence. Both Metz's polemic against the "timeless decision" of the individual, which he says relegates religion to the status of an afterthought, and Hauerwas's emphasis on the importance of community, as securing the holism absent in the standard account of moral rationality, are attempts to recover a view of the self that is socially, as opposed to individualistically, oriented. And in both cases, there is a clear connection here to the notion of narrative. We saw Metz saying, for example, that human consciousness is unavoidably entwined in stories and that man's identity is always shaped by narrative identification. But Hauerwas is equally clear: "Our argument put in traditional terms is that the moral life must be grounded in the 'nature' of man. However, that 'nature' is not 'rationality' itself, but the necessity of having a narrative to give our life coherence."²² For both men, then, there is an important connection between the category of narrative and the view of human nature that informs their theological and ethical position. And whether it is the former that leads to the latter or the latter to the former, the important point is that narrative serves as a crucial category for both.

The second point of overlap was also implicit in my earlier discussion, and it is this: for both writers there can be no strong distinction between theory and praxis. This is why for both Metz and Hauerwas theology cannot be distinguished from ethics as a separate discipline. Hence Hauerwas's comment that he is "uneasy" with the description of his work as "ethics" rather than "theology." Similarly, we find Metz describing his work as "practical fundamental theology" to emphasize that there can be no genuine theology that is not practical. Again, in both cases, the connection with narrative is present; for both see an emphasis on narrative as a move away from theory and to practice. As Hauerwas puts it, "The primary function of narratives by contrast to

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

explanatory schemes [is] to relate us to the world, including our plans for modifying it.”²³ With this, Metz would certainly agree.

We come, then, to what is probably the most significant area of overlap between Metz and Hauerwas; unhappily, it is also the most problematic. It involves their respective accounts of the truthfulness of Christian convictions, and, in both cases, it is essentially a pragmatist one. We have seen, for example, that Hauerwas claims that the intelligibility and truthfulness of Christian convictions resides in their practical force and that, according to Metz, the intelligibility of Christianity cannot be justified theoretically but only practically. It is Hauerwas, however, who most explicitly states the connection between this account of truth and the narrative structure of Christian belief. In *A Community of Character*, he writes: “The necessary interrelation of narrative and character provides the means to test the truthfulness of narrative. Significant narratives produce significant and various characters necessary for the understandings and richness of the story itself. Just as scientific theories are partially judged by the fruitfulness of the activities they generate, so narratives can and should be judged by the richness of moral character and activity they generate.”²⁴ That this is also Metz’s view, there can be little doubt. Indeed, anticipating responses to his position, Metz himself raises one of the most telling objections to this account of truth. He writes: “What, in other words, is the position of truth in a practical fundamental theology? Is truth in this context not simply made subordinate to praxis? Is truth not re-interpreted as relevance? And does this re-interpretation not simply conceal . . . what really happens, namely the liquidation of the concept of truth, insofar as a truth that is oriented towards praxis is no longer truth?”²⁵ Now I do not think that either Metz or Hauerwas satisfactorily answers this objection, and although I want to say more about this shortly, for now the interesting thing to note is that their answers turn out to be so similar. Indeed, the resemblance is so remarkable that it is worth setting their answers side by side. The first passage, then, is from Metz; the second from Hauerwas.

It is only if truth is previously conceived as correlative with pure reason or theory or as the result of absolute reflection that this objection to practical fundamental theology and its supposed attitude toward truth can be sustained.²⁶

²³ Ibid., p. 36.

²⁴ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 95.

²⁵ Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (n. 7 above), p. 59.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 60.

The Journal of Religion

Under the spell of Kantian accounts of rationality, there lingers the fear that if we recognize the historic nature of our moral convictions we will have to acknowledge them as arbitrary and possibly even false. But such fear is ill founded, as there is no other basis of moral convictions than the historic and narrative-related experience of a community.²⁷

What we can now appreciate is that for both Hauerwas and Metz an appeal to the category of narrative is an effort to redress the cognitive crisis highlighted by Stout without abandoning claims to truthfulness. To the question, Which claims of Christian faith are true in the modern world? Hauerwas and Metz answer in unison that it is those that generate a significant praxis. To the objection, But this pragmatic theory of truth is not a solution to the cognitive problems facing Christian thought but a rejection of them, Hauerwas and Metz again reply in unison that to believe thus is to accept a moribund epistemology. Once this mistaken epistemology is abandoned, they argue, pragmatism will appear unobjectionable.

Yet, I think it can be argued that, even on their own terms, there are serious questions that can be raised about the adequacy of these respective accounts of truth. For while both Metz and Hauerwas agree about the narrative structure of Christianity, and while both agree that the truthfulness of the Christian story is to be measured by its practical consequences, they disagree dramatically about what those consequences are. Since this is of some importance for assessing the adequacy of the category of narrative in Christian ethics, I want to spend the final section of this paper examining how these two very similar accounts of the role of narrative in Christian thought result in two very different normative ethical positions.

Once again the initial impression is one of resemblance. Both Metz and Hauerwas talk about the connection between narrative and a renewed emphasis on the Christian community, both highlight the practical implications of the memory of Jesus' death and resurrection, and both insist that Christian social action involves the imitation of Christ as revealed in the biblical narratives. Here, however, the resemblance ends, for, if we look more closely at what each says the upshot of following these prescriptions will be, we may well feel that they are reading different stories. For Metz, the result is a life committed to near revolutionary social action; for Hauerwas, a life given to a sort of sectarian pacifistic witness. How then, do we account for this difference?

The best way to answer this question, I think, is to take a look at how the category of narrative is related to the normative position with which it is associated. In Metz's case, this means examining the relation

²⁷ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (n. 17 above), pp. 98-99.

between what he argues are the three basic categories of a practical fundamental theology: memory, narrative, and solidarity. According to Metz, solidarity is the central category of Christian praxis and involves “the idea of the possibility of all men becoming subjects in the presence of God.”²⁸ But this notion, while central, is also vague and must be given a more determinate sense. And this is where memory and narrative come in. As Metz puts it at one point, “Memory and narrative only have a practical character when they are considered together with solidarity and solidarity has no specifically cognitive status without memory and narrative.”²⁹ The picture that emerges, then, is that of Christian praxis being shaped directly by the memory of the life and death of Jesus made available by the narratives of the Christian faith. And Metz is quite explicit about what that memory yields; it is, he says, “a specific *memoria passionis*” that is at the same time a memory of freedom. It is thus a “dangerous memory,” and the stories through which it is mediated are “dangerous stories.” They are dangerous because they introduce the “remembered freedom of Jesus into modern society” and demand that we make Jesus’ allegiance with the oppressed and rejected our own. The stories, in other words, call for and make possible solidarity with the oppressed in the form of direct social action on their behalf. This is why, in *A Theology of the World*, Metz characterizes his position as one of “militant eschatology” and says that “the *terminus a quo* of the Christian mission should be the secular society.”³⁰ For Metz, the biblical narratives relate the story of Jesus and the promises he made to the oppressed and downtrodden, promises that the story calls us to honor by working for their fulfillment.

To get a sense of how wide the gap is here between Metz and Hauerwas, we need only look at several representative passages from Hauerwas. They show that, for Hauerwas, the *terminus a quo* of the Christian mission is not secular society but the Christian community.

For the service that Christians are called upon to provide does not have as its aim to make the world better, but to demonstrate that Jesus made possible a new world, a new social order.³¹

Though this book touches on many issues it is dominated by one concern: to reassert the social significance of the church as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself. My wish is that this book might help Christians rediscover that their most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in scripture.³²

²⁸ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, p. 229.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³⁰ Metz, *A Theology of the World* (n. 8 above), p. 96.

³¹ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 92.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

The Journal of Religion

The problem, it seems, is that there is more than one story to be told, and Metz and Hauerwas would indeed seem to be telling and listening to different tales. We can see this by simply contrasting the central themes of their respective stories. As we have seen, for Metz the predominant theme is that of the promise of freedom and liberation from the burdens of economic and social inequality; for Hauerwas, however, the central motif is the notion of life as gift. According to Hauerwas, this is what the biblical narratives provide, namely, an understanding of the world as ruled by powers other than violence and death. "Because," says Hauerwas, Christians "have the confidence that Jesus' cross and resurrection are the final words concerning God's rule," they are freed to trust, rather than fear, others, including their oppressors. It is here, then, that Hauerwas most clearly diverges from Metz. For while Hauerwas says that "interpretation does not preclude action," he also says that the first and most important responsibility of the church is to provide "categories of interpretation that offer the means for us to understand ourselves truthfully, e.g., we are a sinful yet redeemed people."³³ This is why Hauerwas says that the Christian stories do not offer us a resolution of life difficulties or a strategy for such a resolution. Rather, they offer us a way of understanding ourselves and the world in terms of which such difficulties are insignificant.

That this could not be further from Metz's view should by now be clear. Yet what are we to make of this? At the very least, I think it ought to highlight the concerns I raised about the account of truth that both Metz and Hauerwas associate with the category of narrative. For whatever similarities the two exhibit in discussing the importance of narrative as an epistemological category of Christian thought, when it comes to recommendations for practical action, the category of narrative by itself appears to play almost no role at all. Indeed, it neither helps to explain nor to justify the normative position of either Metz or Hauerwas. It fails to explain their positions because there is no substantive moral position entailed merely by appeal to the category of narrative. Yet there appears to be no way to argue for this substantive content since, on the terms set out by Metz and Hauerwas, the only argument available is one based on the practical consequences themselves, and these will, of course, depend on the substantive content that we are trying to justify. The fact that Metz and Hauerwas diverge so sharply when applying the category of narrative normatively signals a serious problem. For if the truthfulness of the Christian story is to be judged by its practical consequences, and these consequences are as varied as Hauerwas and Metz's writings would suggest, how does an

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

“Narrative” in Metz and Hauerwas

appeal to narrative establish the truthfulness of Christian convictions, even on pragmatic grounds?

Both authors appear to assume that, because members of the Christian community share a common story, they will share a common praxis. But this fails to account for the variety of moral patterns derived from this story. Indeed, we have seen that the praxis embraced by Hauerwas is very different from the praxis embraced by Metz. Nor is this a problem merely for Metz and Hauerwas. It is a problem for anyone who wants to appeal to the place of narrative in the moral life. In fact, this divergence between Metz and Hauerwas highlights a fundamental problem for anyone assigning narrative a central place in theology and ethics: when we have endorsed a preference for story over explanation and argument, what do we do when our stories conflict? Or again: if two interpretations of the same story diverge, how do we resolve this conflict? The best that Metz and Hauerwas seem to offer in response is that we should test our stories or our interpretations by their practical consequences. But for the reasons given above, this test appears impossible to apply. There is no substantive moral view entailed merely by appeal to the general category of narrative, and any appeal to an actual narrative will require interpretation. Thus, the fact that Metz and Hauerwas diverge so sharply in their respective interpretations of the Christian narrative should leave one less than sanguine here.

Still, there are limits to the possible interpretations of a story, even a narrative as rich as the Christian story. For this reason, Hauerwas and Metz can perhaps claim that an ethic based on the Christian story is distinctive. I suppose, too, that there is merit to their suggestion that, if one does not treat Christianity as a primitive metaphysics but as a story with life-transforming potential, Christianity will remain relevant in the modern world. But avoiding Stout's dilemma, irrelevance or indistinctiveness, is not the same as securing truth. We must remember that this dilemma itself is generated by the apparent improbability of Christian convictions in the modern world. The root problem, then, is one of truth. And failing to give an adequate account of the truthfulness of the Christian narratives is every bit as fatal as making Christianity either irrelevant or indistinctive.