

Introduction

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Who are you, dear reader? How would you tell a stranger the story of your life and your life's work? And how would you put together the pieces that are invariably strewn about our fragmented lives? Families, jobs, communities—including worshiping communities—historical events that cannot be ignored. . . . All these and many other pieces, all of which are already complicated in their own right, would have to be weighed and, if the narrative were to have any coherence, fit together. This book is a collection of relatively brief attempts by major theological thinkers of the last several decades to do just that. That is to say, this book compiles intellectual autobiographies, which in every case are also theological autobiographies. All of the writers who have been asked to contribute are major thinkers in theology, biblical studies, and religion from the second half of the twentieth century up to the present day.

Some of these contributions appeared earlier in some form in the “Theological Autobiography” forum of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, and others have appeared elsewhere in print. Others still are newly commissioned for this book. The earliest of the autobiographies was first published over a decade ago. Some of the submissions have been updated to take into consideration later developments. Some of the submissions have changed because their writers have changed their mind about who they are and what they have achieved. And some have been left as they first appeared, perhaps as a kind of monument to the *in medias res* character of all theological thinking.

For most major theological figures of the twentieth century there are ample biographical resources. Someone interested in Barth, Bonhoeffer, or von Balthasar has many places to which they might go in order to find out the basics of these theologians' life and thought. But this is not the case for many other theological luminaries of recent years. Thus readers may find in these pages the only source in print of basic life contours and intellectual trajectories. Whether one finds the interpretation offered of each theological self “convincing” matters little when seeking to find out the basics.

Recent years have witnessed increasing attention being given to the categories of narrative and story.¹ Voices as varied as those from postliberal theologies,² interreligious dialogue,³ and evangelical mega-churches⁴ have highlighted how important narrative can be for understanding and articulating the gospel and the God to which it points. The editors of this book

believe that narrative is important not just for interpreting theology, but also for interpreting theologians. After all, as E. H. Carr once argued in *What Is History?*, before studying history, one should study the historian. When a theologian is forced to piece together differing contexts, to note how particular theological content relates to a given context, and to give a narrative arc to theological development over time, the reader can eavesdrop as autobiography takes on the form of theo-graphy.

OBJECTIONS TO AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Some have loudly objected to the practice of reflecting theologically by means of reflection on oneself and one's life. James Wm. McClendon, for example, in his influential book *Biography as Theology*, implicitly equates autobiography with self-deception.⁵ He admits that there may be a place for theological autobiography as a starting point for others to then correct its excesses and tendentious biases. Yet when he writes that "we must hear from others' experience as well as our own, and must examine self-told stories by external as well as internal light," one gets the impression that the self-told story would not have been necessary at all.⁶

It is true that some people lack the capacity to stand back far enough from their own thoughts, actions, and past to gain the perspective needed for an accurate portrayal of things "as they really are." Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell invoke the example of Christopher Columbus never quite having understood where he had been on his travels, and what he had really done.⁷

Another form of criticism comes from Martha Nussbaum, who singles out biography and autobiography precisely as examples of literature that *do not* lead to a deepening of empathy, and thus are less satisfactory for developing an ethic of care. All they do is show us things as they happened. Poetic language, or works of fiction, on the contrary, show us how things *might be*. Thus a great novel is more likely to enhance a reader's imagination, and lead to a deepening of his or her ability to consider alternative futures, and thus to act ethically. Autobiography could conceivably supply a similar imaginative impetus, she reasons, but it would do so only to the extent to which the autobiography resembled fiction.⁸

Others object to autobiography as a theological genre not because a person cannot be expected to be fair when telling one's own story, but because the story remains about oneself, and does not say anything truthful about God. Consider, for example, the German Lutheran Johannes von Hofmann, whom Karl Barth called "the greatest conservative theologian" of the nineteenth century.⁹ Von Hofmann sought to take as seriously as possible the site of revelation for the understanding of revelation itself. He used the term

Tatbestand, which means something like “present factual situation,” to name the state of affairs in which a self encounters God. Since each self has a unique history, intellect, and imagination, the theologian will have to pay attention to the situation of each person to whom God reveals Godself. For this reason, von Hofmann’s thinking was dismissed by some of his peers as “Ich-theologie”¹⁰ (a theology only of the *self*), the scorn in which appears to us to be, at best, a bit fishy.

Despite these objections, we see value in the task of narrating one’s life and work for many reasons. No one writes or thinks without starting *somewhere*. No theology or philosophy can absent itself from the claims of particularity; all are necessarily perspectival and therefore culturally conditioned. The best that we can hope for, then, is for a theology that speaks from somewhere to as wide an elsewhere as possible, and from one time to as many times as imaginable. The craft of autobiography, it seems to us, will assist us in this kind of contextual theology.

POSSIBILITIES FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography promises to further theological development on several fronts. One of the deepest problems for theology done in light of modern philosophy (and to some extent, even ancient philosophy) is the difficulty of navigating the chasm between subject and object. Posed decisively by Descartes, the subject-object problem has cast a long shadow over modern philosophy. It set the terms for epistemology, constricting how one could think about “knower” and “thing known.” It also set the terms for ethics: Which actions are “objectively” moral and which are purely subjective caprice? Yet in autobiography, the subject becomes the object. In the task of reflecting on one’s life one contextualizes, relativizes, and makes comparisons and decisions. The thinking, acting, living subject becomes, temporarily, fossilized. She is transferred to paper, so to speak, and becomes a thing that can be contemplated and considered like the other objects in the world. Roger Haight’s contribution to this volume is especially perceptive in exploring the possibilities for overcoming the subject/object divide that autobiography presents.

But autobiography is not only useful in illuminating the self. Theological autobiographies are not just statements about a theologian, but are also genuine vehicles for theological reflection. In discerning patterns of continuity and change in one’s intellectual development, new ground is broken. In reflecting on oneself, God is illumined, too. Patterns are detected and important influences named, which is another way of saying that divine providence is articulated. An etymological root links weaving (from *texo*, as in “textile”) and text.¹¹ An autobiography narrates not just a text *about* a self, but in activating memory and subjecting it to scrutiny and critique, it narrates a self. Humans

are narrative beings, as Paul Ricoeur has elegantly and forcefully shown.¹² And one of the characters in the story must be, however indirectly named, God. God is setting and protagonist, and sometimes perceived antagonist. God's actions within the world necessarily imply a kind of narrative, since our experience of them is folded into the story of God's redeeming love for the world.

Experience itself comes as a narrative. Stephen Crites published an influential essay in 1971 called "The Narrative Character of Experience."¹³ Crites argues that whenever we do or undergo something, that acting or undergoing has a certain "style" that is not reducible to moments of time. A photograph of any experience inevitably distorts it because who we are and what we are doing only become clear over the course of time. Consciousness, he writes, "grasps its objects in an inherently temporal way" and that temporality is inherently narrative.¹⁴ In order to make sense of experience and of the self that experiences, all we can do is pay attention to how their stories are told. Though not dependent on Crites's analyses, Alasdair MacIntyre has been especially successful in showing how the unity of one's life can only be seen in an examination of the stories and traditions in which one finds oneself located.¹⁵

The 2011 epic film *Tree of Life* offers a profound—if oblique—example of the importance of narrative context for making sense of experience. In that film a middle-aged man named Jack is shown brooding over the difficulties his past conveys to his present. Disaffected and free-floating, Jack cannot shake the memories of his deceased brother and their shared rocky childhood, as well as numerous other tragic losses and moral missteps. Glimpses into and vignettes from that childhood pepper the film's opening scenes. But then director Terrence Malick moves in a totally different direction. Juxtaposed against this very personal, very particular sliver of life on Earth, Malick shows breathtakingly cosmic sequences of the development of the universe, from the Big Bang to unicellular life to the dinosaurs and beyond. Critics and interpreters rightly will differ about how best to make sense of Malick's interspersions of the macrocosmic and the microscopic. But one inevitable consequence of the move is that Jack becomes able to cope with the difficulty he had been undergoing. Rather than floating about unmoored, he now sees his own life in cosmically wider perspective, and is able to move forward—in the end to a kind of blessedness and peace.

Rooted as they are in our experience of God in the church and world, those peculiar creations we call "doctrines" inevitably take form in just such a narrative setting. Soteriology, for example, has a fundamentally narrative structure. A narrative, reduced to its bare essentials, requires that there be two states of affairs, and that there be a move from the one to the other. Consider, then, the narrative of soteriology. Any articulation of a soteriology presupposes that there be a state of deprivation or corruption (sin) and a state of fullness or completion (salvation).¹⁶ The story of Jesus, told with its

significance, bridges the gap from the one to the other, supplying the needed narrative impetus. One could make a similar case for the internal logic of the doctrine of the Trinity. The procession of the Son from the Father is eternal, and thus does not originate in time, but the very terms “Father” and “Son” do not make sense abstracted from a narrative framework.¹⁷ We could not imagine what the Trinity could possibly be like without stories of Jesus, the one on whom he called as Father, and the Advocate for us we daily experience.

THEOLOGICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Christian autobiographical reflection has a long history. Augustine’s *Confessions* must be regarded as its origin and, frankly, its high point. In this text Augustine manages not only to reflect on his life but also to take great strides forward theologically. The work functions on numerous levels. It is, chronologically, an account of his conversion from neo-Platonism to Christianity. Logically, it is a prayer to God that illumines both the one praying and the one to whom he prays. Theologically, it is a meditation on all manner of important topics, including the Trinity, time and eternity, creation, sin and redemption, and the nature of the church.

The medieval period saw numerous attempts at sustained theological interpretation of one’s own life. These life stories stand in marked contrast to the dominant theological style of the day, which preferred dialectic and syllogism to narrative. Margery Kempe (c. 1373–1438) dictated what may be the first autobiography ever written in English, completed around 1438. She describes her life as a pilgrimage, and the tale is generously seasoned with accounts of her pilgrimages to various holy sites in Europe. Her difficult pregnancy, and the spiritual torments she felt in its aftermath, offer Kempe the occasion to wonder aloud about the mode of God’s presence in one’s life, the meaning of suffering, and the role of the church in mediating God’s grace. She may have used as a model the writings of Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–1416), whom Margery met and with whom she spoke. Norwich never wrote a full autobiography, but her theological and spiritual writings frequently presuppose, and often mention, specific personal experiences Julian sought to understand and interpret. Luther and Calvin were rarely autobiographical, but not long after their writings revolutionized theology in Europe, it became commonplace to read serious autobiography. People as different as Menno Simons (1496–1561) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) reflected in depth about their lives and God’s presence, or absence, in it.¹⁸

The contributors to this volume thus stand in august company. Some of these autobiographies have the Augustinian pattern of conversion. Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, describes his relatively secular, agnostic youth, which was interrupted by a profound experience of the presence of God.

After that, everything was different. Ernst Käsemann, too, found that he had to divide his life into “before and after.” Other contributions, such as Gerhard Forde’s and Rosemary Radford Ruether’s, have the character of an intensification of long-held beliefs. Still others, like Marilyn McCord Adams’s and Nancey Murphy’s contributions, appear as genuine pilgrimages to destinations that seem to have been utterly unforeseeable, much as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe saw their lives. Harvey Cox, like Rousseau in his *Confessions*, takes with utter seriousness the absence of God in a devastated culture.

None of the autobiographies in this volume speak only about their writer. Each in some way illumines God. And each in its own way invites us—and helps us—to detect in the narrative whole of our own lives the presence and nature of the Holy.

NOTES

¹An important protest against this emphasis can be found in Keith Yandell, ed., *Faith and Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²For instance, Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), and William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

³For instance, C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984).

⁴Rob Bell’s Mars Hill Church titles the statement of faith on their website “Narrative Theology,” marshall.org/believe/about/narrativetheology.

⁵James Wm. McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 165.

⁶*Ibid.*, 167.

⁷Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, “Self-Deception and Autobiography,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 2, no. 1 (1974): 99–117.

⁸Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), especially ch. 1. An illuminating critique can be found in Ole Martin Skilleås, “Knowledge and Imagination in Fiction and Autobiography,” *Metaphilosophy* 37, no. 2 (2006): 259–76.

⁹Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1973), 610.

¹⁰Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols., trans. Theodore Engelder (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950–53), 1:6.

¹¹On this and related matters, see James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Olney examines autobiography in Augustine, Rousseau, and Samuel Beckett. He is also justly recognized for the notion that an autobiography, no matter how brief or insufficient, is a kind of metaphor for the self. He develops this argument in *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

¹²Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 140–68.

¹³*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 3 (1971), 291–311. This article is anthologized along with many helpful related texts in L. Gregory Jones and Stanley Hauerwas, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁵“The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition,” is chapter 15 of his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007): 204–25.

¹⁶On this, cf. Michael Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” in *Modern Theology* 2, no. 2 (1986): 145–57.

¹⁷It should be clear that the doctrine of the Trinity, which is necessarily narrative, is not the same as the Trinity, which is eternal, and thus non-narrative. Francesca Aran Murphy’s recent protest in *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) seems repeatedly to miss this point.

¹⁸Menno Simons is regarded as the father of the various Mennonite sects. An engaging interpretation of his memoirs can be found in Derek C. Hatch, “Autobiography as Theology: Menno Simons’s ‘Confession of My Conversion, Enlightenment and Calling,’” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81, no. 4 (2007): 515–29.