

## Narrative practice and Christian belief

*A review of Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith by Alexander, I. & Cook, R. (Eds.) (2008)*

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Training in counselling occupies an important place in the preparation of priests, pastors, and missionaries. During recent years, the question of potential usefulness and the risks of a narrative approach in pastoral work are coming to the forefront. How it is possible for a believer to apply a postmodernist approach to their own life and the lives of others? Is it possible for a counsellor who believes in God to work with a client who doesn't, to respect her position and not turn the counselling into an attempt at conversion? Is it possible for a client who believes in God to be sure that they will be able to talk with a narrative practitioner about the matters of importance to the client about their spiritual path and spiritual experience, about their relationship with the story described in the gospels, and with the church? Could the client be sure that they will be listened to, spoken to in their preferred language, and that the most important part of their life will not be ignored or pathologised?

According to the authors of different chapters of this collection of papers, the main difficulty faced by believers who study narrative practice is that the Christian faith means believing in the truth, that is path and life, whereas the postmodernist approaches refuse to apply the criterion of 'trueness/falsehood' to any descriptions of the world. But does that mean that narrative practice is, so to speak, "from the Devil", and a good Christian would wisely choose to place themselves as far from it as possible, and this approach will, a priori, be of no use to them? Does it mean that narrative practice will inevitably destroy the basic tenets of the

faith of the Christian, throw them into the abyss of doubt and, therefore, make them more susceptible to all kinds of temptation?

Or perhaps we could pose the question differently. What is there in the narrative approach that may help the Christian to stand more firmly in their faith? Is there anything in narrative approach that might help the Christian to live in accordance with their values and ideals, and to follow these in their relations with people? Is it possible to acknowledge the plurality of possible descriptions of reality, and at the same time to be true to one's own inner subjective experience of truth?

Is Christianity itself a dominant discourse, or is it a marginalized one? Perhaps it might be worthwhile to speak about "Christianities" and this might open a possibility to perceive what exactly is dominating and oppressive about it, and what is marginalized and rebelling against the oppression?

The most difficult questions for a believing person who starts to study narrative practice are the questions about 'self' and 'God'. Where does our preferred identity come from? Do we believe that it is 'disclosed' to us or that it is 'constructed'? What is 'the divine spark' in the person? Is it the possibility of becoming? Or is it agency? And how important is it actually for us to come to a clear and definite answer to all of these questions?

The intended audience of the book itself, and of this review, consists of people who already have some basic knowledge of a narrative approach. Thus narrative terms, concepts and practices are referred to, but not described in detail.

## **Narrative Therapy and Narrative Theology**

The 'narrative turn' happened not only in social sciences and humanities, but also in theology. John Meteyard (2009) describes this in his article included in this book. He starts with a statement that the interest in narratives of people whose faith is based on the Christian story is not at all surprising. But for narrative theologians, not all stories are of the same 'weight' and importance; most believe that there is a difference between everyday narratives and the divinely-inspired stories represented in the Bible. This position comprises the main difference between narrative therapy and narrative theology.

Meteyard presents the ecumenical, cultural-linguistic theory of George Lindbeck (1984), which suggests that we should understand the texts of the Scriptures as an interpretative framework for Christian communities that leads to the development of doctrines, which in turn serve as the foundation for the development of discourses, positions and practices accepted within those communities. The identity of the Christian is developed within the context of the encounter of the person with the Christian story, within the context of multiple retellings and witnessing, in a supportive community, of the becoming story of the person in relationship with God. For the Christian, biblical stories are the truth. They are always potentially present in situations of decision-making and in life predicaments in which the Christian person finds himself. Therefore, in counselling with Christian clients, the counsellor should appeal to these stories. But in what way could narrative practice be helpful in such situations?

Meteyard suggests that Christian clients, when telling about their predicaments within the context of counselling, should be asked questions such as, "What story from the gospels does

your situation remind you of?” and then offered the opportunity to assume a witnessing position in regard to this story from the gospels, focussing especially on what was Jesus feeling, saying, doing and representing in that situation.

For people who, for example, may be experiencing difficulties in their marriage, such an approach is far more alive and convincing than an approach based upon a dry and scholastic presentation of “the position of the church in regard to marriage and chastity”. Also, instead of asking, “What is the Church teaching us in regard to that?” Meteyard suggests that we ask, “Is there anyone in your congregation who has faced similar predicaments? What are your ideas and feelings about the way in which they solved their problem? What would you like to do in the same way in your situation, and what would you like to do differently?” Narrative theology, in contrast to other more propositional approaches to Christian ethics, reminds us that there are as many different solutions to moral dilemmas as there are believers. From the point of view of Hauerwas (1981), such differences are worthy of celebration, because they allow us to continuously expand our understanding of how it is possible to live in many different circumstances and still be true to our Christian story.

## **Epistemology and deconstruction**

Irene Alexander (date and include in refs) writes that, in studying narrative therapy, Christian counsellors aspire to follow Jesus, who criticized the dominant discourses of his time, including the religious ones (p.1). She refers to the book, “*Who is afraid of postmodernism?*” (Smith, 2006), in which the author analyses how important it is, while reading the Bible, to understand in what way its text was formed under the influence of the contemporary cultural and historical context.

Some authors of the chapters emphasize that one of the main questions of narrative practice is epistemological: “How do we know what we know?” Postmodernism doesn’t deny the existence of things as such but states that, in any description that we make of things, we do so by means of language and language is a product of the cultural and historical context. We can thus never be sure that our description precisely represents the things and events in the world. Following Foucault, we can argue that social prescriptions impact the construction and meaning-making of the experience of spirituality and religion to the same extent as they impact the construction of experience of sexuality and of illness. Questioning the ideas that we took for granted at some point in the past, we can filter out what it is in our beliefs that belongs to the world, what parts of our ideas of Christianity are results of the influence of the contemporaneous cultural-historical context and the forms of power relations that are established in it (the hierarchical culture of the church, gender roles, and so on). We make meaning of the experience of the sacred that we encounter in our lives, as of any other kind of experience, by means of languaging or storying it. The issue that is faced by a believer who has learned deconstruction is how to stop oneself from deconstructing everything? What is to be deconstructed, and what is to be left intact (for a while)?

A narrative approach gives us tools to more accurately know ourselves and what we know. It also gives us tools to be able to listen to another person’s story without being sceptical or making judgment. In counselling, we can never assume that the other person shares our worldview. Rather, it would be prudent to assume that any other person’s worldview is radically different from ours in some aspects. Therefore, while working with this person, the counsellor should be as considerate and careful as when working with a representative of a

different culture. To achieve this, it is very important to develop one's own reflexivity and awareness of one's own cultural-historical context, and to present transparently this context (and the limits of perception and understanding associated with it) in interactions with the other person.

In one of her articles, Irene Alexander tells about her experience of service in a mission in a third-world countries. She recounts how useful it was for the missionaries to try to deconstruct some of the taken-for-granted ideas about faith and religion, to try to understand where some of the religious practices originated from, and to try to answer for themselves the question: "Did Jesus teach this?"

Richard Cook writes that Jesus was a radical who protested against the dominant prescriptions of the Pharisees in defining the experience of spirituality. He voiced alternative ideas and practices of freedom, belonging, equality, respect and sincerity. He called for the 'reinstatement of subjugated knowledges' which, in the case of Jesus, was the knowledge of personal, liberating, compassionate and accepting God (p.43). Irene Alexander writes that Jesus, whom she read about in the gospels, constantly challenged authority, questioned interpretations that authoritative experts considered to be sacred, and constantly honoured and acknowledged the poor, the marginalised and the powerless (p.69).

Lex McMillan emphasises that narrative practice can be, at the same time, both liberating and frightening. Liberating for those who are positioned in society in such a way that they have no voice and are not able to exercise agency; and frightening for those who are afraid of losing the privileges provided by the established, taken-for-granted power relations. McMillan tells about feelings of fear and unease he experienced when he thought that postmodernist approaches invited him to deny the existence of God. He coped with these fears and uneasiness by following a recommendation from the book by Middleton and Walsh (1995): "When in doubt, immerse yourself in reading the Bible as the non-discussable, canonic basis of our faith" p. ??). Middleton and Walsh argue that deconstruction can be dangerous for two reasons. First, some people deconstruct everything in their sight and eventually find themselves in a space with no foothold at all and this might bring extreme levels of anxiety or aggravate other symptoms. Secondly, some people can come to the awareness that they are complicit, more or less deliberately, in committing oppression and violence in the world. They might not be ready to embrace this awareness, and then they might become overwhelmed and paralysed by the feeling of guilt. Deconstruction helps to understand that any kind of 'unity of sameness' is brought about by violence.

## **Re-memembering, God's place in the 'club of life', co-authoring and community**

For Irene Alexander, the narrative approach confirmed what she had already known: that a Christian person is "in the world, but not from the world", that his/her duty is to question existing cultural practices and to seek a different kingdom. She became even more convinced that the Christian faith is about relationships with God, and not about following a particular doctrine. "Knowing me better than I know myself", God is the only witness to some aspects of my life. It is possible to say that, for a Christian person, God is the paramount member of the 'club of life', and the relational identity of the Christian is co-created primarily in this relationship. Alexander writes that, for her, it is impossible to conceive of a person as the

'primary author of one's life story'. She argues that the person's story is always co-authored in the relationship with God and is never authored solely by the person herself. Pembroke (2005) argues that narrative therapy is always a 'tripartite' approach. Three parties are always present in some way: the person in the centre, the counsellor, and the 'supportive third', no matter what form the latter may take.

Throughout the book, the authors reiterate that Christianity is the path of re-membering Jesus in people's lives. Irene Alexander writes, "Our God is a God who knows sorrow, grief, betrayal and death, and yet has turned these into a story of love, grace, joy and life. He is the God of the Alternate Story" (p.117). Su Fenwick and Michele Youngs, who work with children, tell that in some unique outcomes, in the manifestations of the absent but implicit, they "see 'God's fingerprints' on someone's life" (p.187). They say that the work of a Christian counsellor is always a three-way partnership: "My role as a counsellor is finding out what God is up to here and trying to be part of that. That sort of moment when the child tells the crux of what's behind whatever is happening, to me that's a God moment! So it's asking God, *What change are you bringing about in this child's life? How can I be part of facilitating that? How can I create an environment in which that can happen?*" (p.188).

In their articles, Richard Cook and Lex McMillan focus on the fact that God is One in three faces and that the human being, created as the image and likeness of God, is therefore not a monolithic personality, but a community in him/herself. Regarding the narrative approach, Cook sees that this particular approach which puts in the centre the notion of 'community' (and not of 'isolated individual'), opens up special opportunities for working with a person as a likeness of God. Cook finds it very appealing that, in order to understand a person's life, one should look not 'inside' into some internal structures, but 'outside', into the meanings of culture.

In her article, Nicola Hoggard Creegan discusses the issue of the freedom of will and of the sole responsibility of a person. She notes that liberation from sin and thus, to a significant extent, liberation from cultural conditioning, is impossible as a solitary endeavour. It is the congregation, the parish, the church community that allows the Christian to stand strong and to move in preferred direction despite the constant influence of all kinds of temptations and distractions.

## **Experience of personal failure and externalization**

Like any other cultural norms, Christian rules and regulations prescribing what it means to be 'a real person' and 'to live a decent life', can turn into a normalising measure, against which a person compares herself and discovers multiple shortcomings. These kinds of comparisons can be all-encompassing: for example, how often the person goes to church, what kind of clothing he wears, how often she reads the gospels, whether he prays each time 'with full commitment', those with whom she interacts, what school he sends his children to, and so on. The saddest thing is that people sometimes are absolutely convinced that this kind of 'normalising gaze' is God's gaze. This leads to experiences of worthlessness and guilt, and sometimes it happens that people feel that they are 'unworthy as Christians'. The modern cultural prescriptions that encompass both the secular, 'lay' and the religious context, state that 'a real person' is successful, happy and free from suffering and inner torment, and this leads some people to think that they will never be able to 'deserve God's goodwill'.

Irene Alexander suggests that, when people use the words of Jesus for surveillance and policing of themselves and others, this is a clear example of modern power as described by Foucault: “Have we heard this statement [of Jesus] as the Pharisees would have - and try and make more rules? Or have we heard it with the ears of those in the grip of modern power and tried to self-evaluate to higher levels of performance? These possible responses need to be unpacked further since our understanding of what this means is the key to our conception of the telos of our faith” (p. 83). Richard Cook gives an example of the way in which using the map of working with the sense of personal failure (this map was developed by Michael White) helps the person to understand what kind of relationship with God the person would like to have. Would she like to be a friend of Jesus, his servant or his slave? Not fitting into requirements can turn into a point of entry into the space of freedom and this reminds the authors of the articles that a Christian is “in the world, but not of the world”.

Externalisation, separation of the person from the problem, is a linguistic practice and a stance that has been present in the language of the Church for a very long time. It is externalising that allows us to ‘separate the sin from the sinner’ and to postulate the possibility of ‘withstanding temptation’. Externalisation allows us to acknowledge the existence of temptation but not to identify with it, and instead to look for ways to take a stand against it, for instance, by recruiting the help of other people or forces (angels, saints, God) and joining with them. Externalisation allows one to break out from under the pressure of cultural conditioning and to enter a space of greater choice, greater freedom. Sometimes Christians tend to ascribe to God the responsibility for human actions leading to justice and healing. Such an approach weakens people, dispossessing them of the faith in their God-given agency.

## **Power, humility and partnership in the counselling relationship**

Working in a narrative approach is often conducted as co-research. That means, as a joint exploration of the steps the person is already taking in his/her movement towards greater freedom and greater agency and also a joint exploration of preferred ways of moving forward. Narrative therapists and community workers aspire to make most transparent the power relations that are inherent in their work. A primitive view of power likens it to a substance of finite and measurable size, quantity or volume. This view suggests that, when formerly powerless people obtain power, they take it from those who had it before. According to this view, sharing power doesn’t bring any profit to those who have less of it as a result. Irene Alexander makes parallels between the way Jesus related to power, and the way relationships of partnership and accountability are built in narrative practice. She writes, “Power which releases a person to their own choices with ‘as little domination as possible’ is influence, empowerment or *power to*. This is the power that transforms” (p.84) and creates “[the] different kingdom... kingdom which is about choices and ethics and a heart towards other people rather than power-over” (p.87). For Alexander, the partnership in counselling and therapy, when the person seeking consultation takes the expert stance in regard to her own life, and the consultant takes the de-centred but influential position, is an example of being-in-God, of accepting one’s own imperfections, of humility and acceptance of the other person.

Richard Cook conducted a study to find out how learning narrative therapy influences students of a theological university, their identities and their attitudes toward their practice. All the future pastors who took part in the research noted that they became more aware of power relations, both in their interaction with the parish and with their friendship network and loved ones. In their counselling practice, their clients became less dependent on counsellors, the work

became more of a partnership, and this reduced the burden of responsibility on the pastor-counsellor. Many respondents also stated that it was appealing for them that, when working in a narrative approach, they may be not fully confident that their position is the right one, and yet still be helpful to those who request counselling.

## **Narrative practice and the emergent churches**

Throughout the history of Christianity, there were always 'small churches' and communities, created and maintained by people who aspired to express their faith, to support each other and to create their own local culture. Dan Carson (2005) argues that, in the age of postmodernity, such communities or 'emergent churches' are the most fitting to these social-historical circumstances, embodying new forms of realisation of the church's mission, new forms of community and of worship. Usually the emergent churches aspire to overcome the dualism of the modernist split of the world into 'sacred and profane', 'body and spirit', 'male and female', 'leaders and followers', 'faith and action', 'individual and collective', 'evangelism and social action', 'theology and ethics', 'public and private' and so on. These communities also strive to step beyond the limitations of the idea that the church consists of particular people, a particular place, and particular time(s). For the members of the emergent churches, church rather means a way of life, a kind of rhythm and movement. Different emergent churches are united by the wish to identify with the life of Jesus, to accept the mission of creation of alternative, counter-cultural, transformative communities that are anti-institutional and anti-individualistic, based upon the practices of service and forgiveness. The ideal of these churches is the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. These churches acknowledge the differences of experience – the mystical, the fluid, the narrative, the common and the participatory. Richard Cook argues that narrative practice, especially narrative work with communities, is one of the best possible ways of conducting the meetings of such emergent church communities, facilitating discussions, and looking for ways of embodiment of the preferred ideals in everyday life. Cook describes four tentative plans for such meetings.

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