God is Not a Story

Realism Revisited

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Introduction: Spectacle

1. *God is Not a Story*

An architect once told me that his colleagues habitually avoid certain shapes because they are more difficult to draw in a computer. Computer design is slanted toward the use of angular lines. An academic theologian can sympathize with the predicament. In the effort to conform Christian imagination to Christian doctrine, the curves and ovals which we glimpse in the divine realm are often bent into right-angles. Narrative theology intends to do something indispensable—to make theology less conceptual and more imaginative, that is, less theoretical and abstract, and more biblical. It seems to recognize Newman's injunction that Christian assent is 'real' and imaginative before it is 'notional' or conceptual.[1] Narrative theology is so called because it wants to use the biblical stories themselves, not a computer generated metaphysics, to speak of Christian faith and the Christian God. This seems a counter-weight to our twenty-first-century world, in which the abstract geometries of virtual reality seem to condition not only the media of Christian preaching and teaching, but the message.

Many Christians have come to consider that the fullest and most immediate way of speaking about the Triune mystery is, as a brilliant young theologian puts it, '*to tell the story of God*'.[2] Narrative theologians are those who do so methodically and systematically. This seems to us to entail that God *is* a story. Why should describing the relations between God and humanity as a 'story' implicate one in *equating* God with a story? It does so because the driving force of narrative theology, the method itself, slides into the place of content or subject matter. That is the thesis of this book, and this introductory chapter gives the argument *in nuce.*

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[1] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 31, 59, 76, 87, 108–14, and 122.

[2] David Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 29.

Narrative theology originally saw itself as picking up where the practice of meditating on scriptural *types* had left off, after the seventeenth century. The first narrative theologians admired this imaginative practice because it leads one to Scripture, and leaves one there. What they dislike about much modern theology, conversely, is that it offers a metaphysical substitute for Scripture. One could 'think well' in Rahner's 'categories', George Lindbeck avers, 'while remaining Biblically illiterate'; conversely, 'narrative and typological interpretations enabled the Bible to speak with its own voice'. Biblical revelation is not our invention, but comes to us, and when a theology leads us away from Scripture, into some 'deeper' conceptuality, it not only 'translates the scriptural message into an alien idiom', as Lindbeck puts it, but literally loses the biblical touch, or drifts away from the sense of being touched by another which one can receive in hearing the Bible. For the Patristics, like Irenaeus, and for twentieth-century theologians who returned to the early Christian sources, like Henri de Lubac, Jean Danielou, or Hans Urs von Balthasar, the biblical 'types' and images matter because they express what the biblical revelation is as a whole: the existential reality of God's encounter with human beings. Revelation is where reality is most inescapably real. George Lindbeck construes the significance of biblical typology somewhat differently. For Lindbeck, it's not so much the substantial *content* which the colourful types convey that matters, but rather typology as a *method* of reading the Bible. 'In the early days,' he says, 'it was not a different canon but a distinctive method of reading which differentiated the church from the synagogue. ...a certain way of reading Scripture (viz. as a Christ-centered narrationally and typologically unified whole in conformity to a Trinitarian rule of faith) was constitutive of the Christian canon and has...an authority inseparable from that of the Bible itself.'[3] Biblical types or images can be imagined as a set of icons or pictures possessing a redoubtable reality quotient, but they can also be conceived as *picturings*. For narrative theology, Scripture is, not a picture, but a picturing, the rule-governed process by which reality is construed.

Narrative theologians use visual metaphors to construct a story of God and humanity. Stories come in many genres, such as epic, tragic, or comic. The story told by narrative theology belongs to the genre of melodrama. 'God's story' is a melodrama. The word melodrama conjures up the image of a corsetted heroine crying out to be unhanded from a caped villain named Oswald. But, 'Movies begin as Victorian theater.'[4] Nineteenth-century

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[3] George A. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Post-Liberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp. 211–12 and 204.

[4] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 93.

melodrama had the idea of movies before the requisite photographic equipment was invented. The technologies which served the popular stage included 'machinery... designed to move the action along at top speed, by an elaborate device of stage grooves enabling one scene to succeed another by the opening of the shutter-like screens, so that the action proceeded by a series of... "dissolves." '[5] In the 1820s, audiences of French melodrama were treated to sunsets, shipwrecks, and erupting Mount Etnas. Melodrama did not just happen to use exciting spectacle: it differs from 'classical theatre' in that pictures replace the 'word'. Melodrama 'transform[s] the stage into plastic tableau, the arena for represented visual meanings'.[6]

Aristotle felt that the heart of a drama is not its language: 'the poet', he said, 'must be more the poet of his stories or Plots than of his verses'.[7] But Hegel seems to us nearer the mark in observing that drama 'is the highest stage of poetry and of art generally', because 'speech alone is the element worthy of the expression of spirit'.[8] The reason he gives is that language is the vehicle of contemplative thought. As Louise Cowan puts it,

The tragic hero suffers not in silence but in the most opulent and expressive language the world has known. From these cries arising in the center of the soul, the secret dwelling place of language—in a darkness corresponding to the [tragic] abyss—bursts the poetry that raises human suffering to the level of contemplation and, to a stunned and gratified audience, conveys the liberation of tragic joy.[9]

Aristotle ascribed six features to drama: plot (*muthos*); the depiction of moral character; verbal expression; quality of mind; scenery, *ophthis*, that is spectacle, the costumes and stage-equipment; and music (for the choral odes).[10] The total ensemble was deemed to drive the audience to 'pity and terror'. But 'the terrifying stage appearance of the Furies in Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* and *Eumenides* that caused women to give birth prematurely is not an example of the kind of terror Aristotle means'.[11] What triumphed in nineteenth-century melodrama and achieved the height of its potential in cinema is *ophthis* or visual spectacle. In this respect, the *Oresteia* has a curious counterpart in *Jaws*: 'When Dreyfus first sees the full size of the shark, his

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[5] Robertson Davies, *The Mirror of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 18.
[6] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 46–7.
[7] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b28–33.
[8] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. II, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 1158.
[9] Louise Cowan, 'Introduction: The Tragic Abyss', in Glenn Arbery ed., *The Tragic Abyss* (Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003), p. 18.
[10] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a1–15.
[11] Robert S. Dupree, 'Aristotle and the Tragic Bias', in Glenn Arbery (ed.), *The Tragic Abyss* (Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003), p. 33.

face goes blank . . . he backs away. This would be one of Spielberg's first awe-and-revelation scenes.' The scene in *Jaws* was 'effortless storytelling and turned the film into an epic. At *Jaws*' first previews, a man ran from the cinema. Spielberg thought he hated the film but in fact he was scared.'[12] When the audience experiences Dreyfus' terror at the size of the monster with which he must grapple, the film has delivered its desired effect.

Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* contends that a key motivation to modern philosophy has been 'the problem of evil'.[13] The melodramatic maximalization of the visual aims at unveiling an ethical enigma: not just 'What cloud envelopes Coelina's birth?' or 'How has Eliza been led into bigamy?' but, through the disclosure of the agent of these villainous designs, 'the triumph of virtue' in a world darkened by 'no shadow' of 'moral ambiguity'.[14] Such a message is adapted to a visual medium because of the clarity of *looking*. Melodrama lives on in movies—the villain still wears a cape, but his name is Darth Vader. I shall claim that narrative theology is movie-like. One thinks of counter-examples, from the films of Robert Bresson, who said he tried ' "to suppress what people call plot" ', to the New Wave cinema of the 1960s. But the sequels to New Wave were hugely popular 'B-movies' like *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, each of whose directors was 'a master storyteller' and 'a graceful reinvigorator of closed romantic realism'.[15] So, taking a leaf from cinema theorist Noël Carroll, I shall refer, not to *films* or to cinema, but to 'movies', productions of 'what might be called Hollywood International'.[16] 'Most Hollywood films' aspire to the movie version of melodrama, that is, to 'closed romantic realism', called 'closed because these films . . . create worlds that do not acknowledge that they are being watched and the actors behave as if the camera isn't there'.[17] I do not say narrative theology is *cinematic*, I say it is movieish.

The presence of Christ to us in narrative theology is like that of a screen actor to a movie-viewer. The screened 'self' is both product of a collective imagination and delivered to one. This analogy undermines personality, or so I shall argue in the second chapter. In Chapter 3, on arguments for the existence of God, I try to show that the manner in which narrative theologies invite us to intuit the existence of God is like the way a director edits out whatever distracts our attention from the film's driving questions. Such

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[12] Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film* (London: Pavilion, 2004), p. 382.
[13] Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 6.
[14] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 43.
[15] Cousins, *The Story of Film*, pp. 251 and 381.
[16] Noël Carroll, 'The Power of Movies', *Daedalus* 114/4 (1985), 79–103, p. 81.
[17] Cousins, *The Story of Film*, p. 67.

defective arguments exacerbate the problem of evil: our fourth chapter will tease out the way in which this produces a melodramatic perspective on the relation between God and vulnerable humanity.

2. Two Types of Narrative Theology: Story Barthianism and Grammatical Thomism

In keeping with the emphasis on due process in Western political and academic culture, recent interpretation of ancient and modern theologians has tended to foreground their method rather than the assertions which they make. That is, it has selected one factor amongst a favoured theologian's positive affirmations, and presented this not only as a counter-cultural criterion against which political practices can be assessed but as the authentic theological method. Since he suffered much in his lifetime, the posthumous reputation of Henri de Lubac presents a striking example of this. In the period around the Second World War, Henri de Lubac composed a trilogy, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (1944), contending that atheism cannot be fully humanist, *Surnaturel* (1946), about the natural human desire to see the supernatural God, and *The Discovery of God* (1956), which draws on human desire so as to defend the existence of God. And yet, contemporary responses to de Lubac, both positive and negative, take the 'natural desire' as a proposal for how to practise theology, rather than as a paradoxical affirmation about what human beings are. Some even view the 'de Lubacian method' as one which rules out argument for God's existence.[18] Or again, positive and negative descriptions of Joseph Ratzinger's thought explore his 'Augustinian' methodology, rather than what he has to say about God and human beings. One can even find narratological accounts of the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Bernard Lonergan has affirmed that, 'When the classicist notion of culture prevails, theology is conceived as a permanent achievement, and then one discourses on its nature. When culture is conceived empirically, theology is known to be an ongoing process, and then one writes on its method.'[19] If that is the case, then our theological culture is thoroughly empirical. So, when I speak of the focus of narrative theologians on the *methods* of Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas, I do not intend to claim that either of these two thinkers had an especially methodological outlook. What I shall call 'story Barthianism' and 'grammatical Thomism' are ways of

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[18] Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 14–15.

[19] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), p. xi.

thinking about Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas in which method becomes the very content of their theology.

In the expressions 'story Barthianism' and 'grammatical Thomism', 'Barthianism' and 'Thomism' refer to *principles* which narrative theologians have considered these writers to yield, not to historical figures or texts. Our typology relates to certain types of Barthian*ism* and Thom*ism*, not Barth and Thomas. Although I may be compelled to compare the 'isms' with the texts of the Swiss Calvinist and the medieval Dominican, I shall do so as little as possible, or only so as to show how content has been expended for method. My aim is not to show that narrative theologies are in or out of line with Thomas' or Barth's writings but that, far from bending theology back to the shape of biblical revelation, they intensify the angular rationalism to which contemporary theology is culturally prone. This book is less interested in their kinship to Thomas or Barth than in the analogy between their conception of divine life and revelation as a process of understanding, and the life of movies.

Nicholas Lash remarks that, 'critical scrutiny of the tales that we inhabit, while drawing its criteria from the narratives themselves, first focuses on the ethos, way of life, or project which is shaped and generated by the tale'.[20] Many Thomists of the last generation would agree: the primary manifestation of Christian theology is the Christian way of life—Christians *doing the story*. Christians don't originally believe a set of propositions, they inhabit a peculiarly biblical narrative world. For the grammatical Thomist, 'all human action is speech, including the speech-acts themselves'.[21] Pure-blooded historical readers of Thomas Aquinas can debate whether these opinions can be found in the *Summa Theologiae* or whether Ludwig Wittgenstein was the Dominican's most astute commentator. But some of our contemporaries have extracted a few principles from Thomas' method and developed them into something new, a 'grammatical Thomism'.

The 'family resemblance' amongst members of the Yale School of post-liberal theology, such as Hans Frei (1922–88), George Lindbeck, and David Kelsey, comes back to their shared interest in Karl Barth. Lindbeck christened their project as 'post-liberal' in order to call attention to their mutual rejection of the efforts of liberal theologians to find common ground with extra-Christian rationality. For post-liberalism, 'the *biblical* narratives provide the framework within which Christians understand the world' without 'assuming some

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[20] Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 7.

[21] Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, p. 99.

universally acceptable standard of rationality'.²² Such a means of parting the ways with theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Bultmann has its roots in Barth's own disavowal of liberalism. Historical scholars may point to differences between the work of the Yale School and the rounded doctrine of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. But my claim is that some methodological principles found in Barth's texts have taken on a life of their own within Barth*ian* story-theology.

3. What is Narrative Theology?

David Ford may have coined the phrase 'God's story'. In *Barth and God's Story*, he describes how, from the second edition of the Romans *Commentary* onwards, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are used by Barth to dis-join Christian revelation from human 'religion'. The God of the crucifixion and resurrection narratives is 'no longer someone that Christians can assume they have in common with other people'. The consequence is that 'God is to be described only through that story': the knock-on effects of Barth's reading of Romans are spelled out at some length in his *Church Dogmatics*.²³

There was something broadly similar in the orientations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Catholic neo-scholasticism, Calvinist orthodoxy of the same period, and nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism. All of them took the first stage of theology as philosophical, as an apologetic which is intended to speak the same language or share the same ground with non-Christians. It is as if, for these apologetic theologies, Christians shared some living space with non-believers, but their territory also goes much further. Barth is rejecting this when he affirms that the biblical story covers *all* of the ground and the *only* ground on which our faith in Jesus Christ rests. George Lindbeck's proposal that 'it is the religion instantiated in Scripture which defines being, truth, goodness and beauty' is a Barthian one, because it wants to make us acknowledge that 'being, truth, goodness and beauty' are not general ideas understood in the same way by Christians and non-Christians alike. Because they are understood in different ways by the two groups of people, being, truth, goodness, and beauty are taken to be different objects. In Lindbeck's theology, 'the text . . . absorbs the world, rather than the world the text' because the text is conceived as the tissue of *revelation*. To affirm with

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²² William Placher, 'Postliberal Theology', in David Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, vol. II (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), p. 117.

²³ David Ford, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in the Church Dogmatics* (Frankfurt, Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 1985), p. 21.

Lindbeck that 'Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the Scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories'[24] is to deny, with Barth, that one could have one foot on the 'common ground' of natural metaphysics and one foot in revelation: both feet in or both feet out! The desire of early modern Christians for 'elaborate apologetics sprang from rejecting the overarching story, for now the biblical stories had to be fitted into *other* frameworks of meaning'.[25] Thus, in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), Hans Frei created an historical apologia for story Barthianism. He invited us to believe that, once upon a pre-modern time, the question of whether the Bible is 'true' 'never arose', because what the world was, and the story the Bible tells, simply coincided.[26] It was only from the seventeenth century onwards, with apologists for the historical truth of the Gospels, like John Locke, that Christians attempted to align the biblical narrative with a wider frame—to show that evidences external to the Scripture correlate with the text. Narrative theology contends that we make the biblical story less, and not more, believable by attempting to prove that it conforms to some other reality, such as that described by historians or biological scientists.

If we find it theologically repugnant to describe the world in extra-biblical categories, it will be still more so to speak of God in extra-curricular fashion. Richard Bauckham remarks that 'Greek philosophy…typically defined divine nature by means of a series of metaphysical attributes.'[27] Catholic neo-scholasticism, Protestant orthodoxy, and liberal Protestantism used the tools of philosophical theology in speaking about God and about the Trinity. For example, they drew on notions such as simplicity or transcendence or immateriality—they used metaphysics, and somehow brought this metaphysic to bear on the Christian God. This can make it look as if the biblical characterizations are larded in as an after-thought. A well-known neo-Thomist was heard to remark that he had finished his book on God and now he needed only to put in some scriptural quotations. That is what Barth suspected the moderns, Protestant and Catholic, were up to, and this is why he decided to develop a doctrine of God extrapolated from biblical revelation alone. If we want to know 'who God is', the right response comes, not from philosophical metaphysics but rather, Barth says, from Scripture, and '"in the form of narrating a story or series of stories"'.[28]

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[24] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 118.

[25] Ibid., p. 52, my italics.   [26] Placher, 'Postliberal Theology', pp. 117–18.

[27] Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (London: Paternoster Press, 1998), p. 8.

[28] Ford, *Barth and God's Story*, 152.

It is important to this method that the scriptural revelation is not something other than God but an elementary articulation of God's being. Barth observes that, 'If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e., God, then the first thing we have to realise is that this subject, God, the revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect.'[29] One consequence of this is that one cannot speak of God *metaphysically*. What we must aim at, instead, is *description*. The methodological principle at work here is that, on the one hand, all knowledge of God is through Christ, and, on the other, in Christ, God reveals *Himself*; Christ is the 'science' or knowledge of God, revealed.

From the seventeenth century on, Calvinist exponents of Protestant orthodoxy and early modern scholastics, such as Leibniz, had their apologetic work cut out for them by men who attributed the problem of evil to the character of God as exposited by Christian believers. For the French ex-Calvinist Pierre Bayle, a God who '*predestines*' men to damnation is not a good God. How could God predestine some to salvation and others to damnation? Bayle himself considered that 'Manichaeism' was the 'most reasonable' hypothesis for a philosopher who observed the admixture of good and evil in our world.[30] Wanting to retort that the problems of predestination and eternal damnation are beyond our ken, Calvinists developed the doctrine of the *decretum absolutum* or *decretum generale*—God's ultimate ruling, which is incomprehensible to us.

Karl Barth disapproved of this Calvinist manoeuvre. He saw it as insinuating that, back behind the God described by Scripture, there is an impenetrable reservoir of darkness, out of which loom apparently arbitrary decrees. For some, the ejection of the concealed *decretum absolutum* is at the heart of Barth's theology of revelation. As Barth would have it, turning the Calvinist theology inside-out, *Christ*, the revelation and exposition of God to humanity, *is* the *decretum absolutum*. Jesus Christ is 'the type of all election'[31]—that is, he *is* predestination. There is no God back behind this revelation of God in Christ, no done-deals or secret decrees. It is in and through Christ, eternally elected by the Father, that 'God moves toward the world'. 'In the strict sense,' therefore, 'only He can be understood and described as "elected" (and "rejected"). All others are so in him, and not as individuals.' But, if we 'would know who God is, and what is the meaning and purpose of His Election…we must look only upon and to the name of Jesus Christ' in whom all others are 'enclosed': He is 'God's decree' 'all-inclusively'. The Father's election of Christ is a free choice of love, involving his entire being:

[29] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2nd edn., trans. G. W. Bromley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), p. 296.
[30] Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 19.   [31] Ford, *Barth and God's Story*, p. 74.

this means that 'the choice actually made must be regarded as a *decretum absolutum*'. There is no God back behind the revealed God, 'no such thing as Godhead in itself. Godhead is always the Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But the Father is the Father of Jesus Christ . . . There is no such thing as a *decretum absolutum*. There is no such thing as a will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ.'[32] In developing this thesis, 'Barth "actualizes" the doctrine of God; . . . he achieves a radical integration of *Deus in se* and *Deus revelatus*; . . . there is nothing to be known of God "above," "behind," or "beyond" revelation.'[33] Christ and revelation are made to coincide so as to rule out a concealed divine will to save and to damn. One motive for making Jesus Christ the sole and entire revelation of God is to rule out a 'God behind God' and thus to exclude the idea that God is 'merely a tyrant living by his whims'.[34] The answer to the theodicial dilemma produced by dual predestination is divine transparency.

4. Some Hints at an Historical Context for Narrative Theology

Narrative theologians object to the practice of trying to ground the truth of theology in a 'world' outside itself, in, for instance, some historical or scientific case. When the historical truth of Scripture was defended by biblical inerrantists against historical criticism, says Lindbeck, 'the narrative meaning collapsed into the factual and disappeared'.[35] It is easy to get tangled up in spatial metaphors like 'biblical world' or 'common ground', and forget that there are not actually two separate worlds or territories, that of scientists or historians, and that belonging to the Bible. Nor do Barthians think there are. The 'worlds' to which they refer are mental paradigms or methods of construing and categorizing evidence, as, for instance, those pertaining to history and to theology. Their objection to the correlation of Scripture with factual evidence is that it is methodologically unsound, a theological category error, to put history and theology in the same epistemic or methodological 'space'. Likewise, when Denys Turner objects to the criticisms of evolutionism by contemporary creationists on the grounds that the latter 'are . . . playing the *same* game'[36] as their atheist foes, his disapproval does not relate to faults

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[32] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2: *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, J. C. Campbell, Iain Wilson, J. Strathearn McNab, Harold Knight, and R. A. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), pp. 26, 43, 54, 95, 100, and 115.

[33] Ford, *Barth and God's Story*, p. 137.

[34] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 25.

[35] Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, p. 209.

[36] Denys Turner, *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM Press, 2002), p. 8.

in whatever evidence the creationists may have to display, but to their playing theology by an empirical, scientific *method*. The overlapping of different methods is dissonant, to grammatical Thomist ears, because, just as different games have different rules, so different methods are different rationalities. Although a *Barth*ian follows Barth and a *Thom*ist Thomas, one point of commonality between these two types of narrative theology is the degree of significance accorded to method. Both tend to equate the question of whether theology should use the same methodological criteria as non-theological disciplines like history and physical science with that of whether theology links up with the referents of these disciplines, such as historical facts and physical objects.

It is no good gesturing toward a general preference for method in narrative theologies: one has to refer this back to the specific, founding texts which generated and disseminated this impulse, such as David Burrell's *Aquinas, God and Action* or Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*. One may shed a little light on a text by contextualizing it. Situating the text and the author need not be reductionist ('he comes from *there*, and that explains it'), especially if one's purpose is not to compare one text with another, but both with the exigencies of theology. Reminding ourselves of which issues and which movements were uppermost when narrative theologies came to birth is intended to help us understand them better, not to prove anything about the value of their conclusions.

Lindbeck tells us that his early interest in philosophy and theology was 'prompted by reading Gilson and Maritain', spreading to 'doctoral work in medieval philosophy and theology'.[37] One of Lindbeck's earliest articles was a review of Étienne Gilson's big book on Duns Scotus, defending Scotus against the existential Thomist's strictures.[38] If the Barthians were reading not only Barth but also the medievals, it does not presume too much to propose that Protestant and Catholic narrative theology has a shared intellectual context. If, in the seventeenth century, when irenicism was not high amongst the theological virtues, Calvinist orthodoxy and baroque scholasticism ran along parallel lines, it is unlikely that, in the 1950s and 1960s, when grammatical Thomism and story Barthianism were conceived, there was no inter-Christian cross-fertilization. Some of their common ground was laid out within Thomism. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were Thomists of many stripes: strictly philosophical Thomists, neo-Thomists, like Maritain, existential or Gilsonian Thomists, whose influence was beginning to wane, and transcendental Thomists, at that time in the

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[37] Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, p. 4.
[38] George A. Lindbeck, 'A Great Scotist Study', *The Review of Metaphysics* 7/2/26 (1953), 422–35.

ascendant. There were also, as Lindbeck notes in an article-length version of his doctoral thesis, proponents of a Thomas who had 'affinities with Neo-Platonism which have previously largely been ignored'.[39] Moreover, with the relaxation of Thomist orthodoxy amongst Catholics after the Second Vatican Council, Augustinianism came out of the closet. Where might one situate the elders of the narrative tribes amongst these schools?

It is easier to locate the historical links between Barth's own method and the practice of story Barthians than to refer grammatical Thomism to '*the*' method practised by Saint Thomas. It is clear that Barth's own theological epistemology includes an assertion that all knowledge of God comes through faith. It is less obvious what Thomas' method was: as a theological meth-odologist, he has been presented as everything from an evidentialist to a fideist. Whereas, as a modern, Barth was self-conscious about his theological method, the pre-Cartesian Dominican was not. He may have used different methods in his opuscules, his Bible commentaries, his commentaries on Aristotle, and his *Summa Theologiae*. Although the title may seem to make the content plain, it was a subject of some controversy in the early twentieth century whether the *Summa Theologiae* is, throughout, a work of *theology*. Étienne Gilson argued that the philosophical portions of the *Summa* like the 'Five Ways' excel as *philosophy* because the author drew on biblical, revealed insights to illuminate philosophical problems. Gilson called the metaphysics of the *Summa* 'Christian philosophy'. Strictly philosophical Thomists would not have this. Fernand van Steenbergen contended that the latter term is 'meaningless'; a philosophy cannot be 'Christian', only 'true or false'.[40] The issue was not just one of method, but also of content. Gilson claimed that, by dint of divine revelation, something new comes about in human history, a new grasp of the reality of existence. By telling Moses that his name is 'I am', Gilson argued, God's own self-revelation gave a new turn to the philosophical understanding of the world common to Christian reflection. One should not bandy the word existence or *esse* about lightly: as one existential Thomist noted, in a riposte to Lindbeck's précis of his doctoral thesis, it is 'not precisely the existence of the existent' which judgement affirms, but simply 'the *existent*'.[41] The claim which Gilson

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[39] George A. Lindbeck, 'Participation and Existence in the Interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas', *Franciscan Studies* 17 (1957), 1–22 (Part I), and 107–25 (Part III), p. 116.

[40] Fernand van Steenbergen, 'La II Journée D'études de la Société Thomiste et la Notion de "Philosophie Chrétienne" ', *Revue Neo-Scholastique de Philosophie* 35 (1933), 539–54, pp. 446–7. I give a longer account of the 'Christian Philosophy Debate' including the question of the *newness* of Christian revelation in *Art and Intellect in the Philosophy of Étienne Gilson* (Columbia, Mo.: Missouri University Press, 2004), ch. 6, 'Christian Philosophy'.

[41] Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, 'Existence and Esse', *New Scholasticism* 50 (1976), 20–45, p. 26.

made for Christian philosophy was that, where philosophy has regarded itself as not just *distinct* from revealed theology but as a wholly *different* enterprise, it has drifted away from particular existents, and into essentialism. Since Lindbeck's thesis is intended to show that Gilson's 'essentialist–existentialist dichotomy is not a useful category of historical interpretation for those who are not Thomists',[42] and that schemas other than that of the existential judgement are superior, one may take it that he was not of the Gilsonian school.

Jacques Maritain was not enthusiastic about Gilson's idea of 'Christian philosophy' as a deployment, by a philosopher, of biblical type scenes, like that of God's giving his name to Moses. He tended to consider that making revealed faith this intrinsic to reason deprived the Christian's philosophy of its rational foundations. He also differed from Gilson in claiming that a metaphysician can have an *intuition* of existence. As against this, Lindbeck notes that the idea of an intuition of existence has no basis in Thomas' texts. David Burrell also disavows the notion of a 'superior insight or…intuition of being'. Like Lindbeck, he sees no point in Thomists 'crediting' Thomas '(and themselves) with an insight into the very act of existence which he nowhere claims nor confesses'.[43]

A condition of a philosophy being *true* is that it is reasonable, and speaks to reason. The possession of a rational method was central to neo-Thomism. The realist elements in it are counter-balanced by a stress on epistemology. Rationality is viewed as a condition of referring to the real. Alongside the school of 'critical realism' of which Maritain was the greatest exponent, there emerged forms of 'transcendental Thomism', in the writings of men like André Hayen, Joseph Maréchal, Bernard Lonergan, and Karl Rahner. The critical realists had aimed to respond to Kant: the transcendental Thomists sought to engage Kant on his own ground, by making rationality, in Kantian terms, the 'transcendental condition' of knowledge, the criterion of being or reality. Although the torch-bearer of transcendental Thomism in Europe was Rahner, the man who set the agenda for North American Thomists in the 1960s was Bernard Lonergan. In *Insight*, Lonergan had described being as 'the objective of the pure desire to know', relocating this property of reality as a 'notion' within 'the immanent, dynamic orientation of cognitional process. It must be the detached and unrestricted desire to desire as operative in cognitional process.' For Lonergan, then, the grounding 'presuppositions' of

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[42] Lindbeck, 'Participation and Existence', p. 107.
[43] Ibid., p. 19; David Burrell, *Aquinas, God and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 47 and 51.

a metaphysic are 'not a set of' ontological or existential 'propositions but the dynamic structure of the human mind'.[44]

   Transcendental Thomism was rather too heavy a metaphysical burden for anyone who wanted to make a contribution to the analytic conversation amongst Anglo-Saxon philosophers in the late 1960s. But one could retain Lonergan's interest in dynamic process whilst replacing his transcendental metaphysics with 'grammar'. One could translate the one into the other by refining Lonergan's interest in the orientation of mental acts, their dynamic thrust, into a Wittgensteinian conception of human notions as some-thing done or lived through. Lonergan's conviction that 'our primary concern is not the known but the knowing'[45] could become a reflection on the structure of thought as it emerges into language. There is at least one phrase in Lonergan's *Insight* with which every scholar who knows the period is familiar: '*Thoroughly understand what it is to understand*, and not only will you understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood but also you will possess a fixed base, an invariant pattern opening upon all further developments of understanding.'[46] It is not far-fetched to imagine a transference of this desire to 'understand what it is to understand' into Burrell's programme for a Thomism which looks less to ontological 'relation' than to a dynamic 'relating' to reality, by human speakers. 'Could it be', he asks,

that the discipline to discriminate manners of beings in the forms of our discourse will prepare the inquirer...to recognize traces of God? These manners of being will not be found within our discourse; no descriptive feature of our world can pretend to be a trace of the creator. But some may be found in the ways we relate discourse to the world. ...we cannot express this relation;...it were better called a relating than a relation. Yet we can become more aware of doing than relating, or...of living it. ...[L]ogic and grammar can assist in this coming-to-awareness...This awareness has come to be called (since Kant) a critical or transcendental attitude: it consists of becoming aware of how things as we know them bear traces of the manner in which we know them. ...All of these represent ways of relating oneself to oneself and the world. The awareness can finally be exploited to acknowledge an unknown which bears no traces at all of our manners of knowing.[47]

   Building on the features of Maritain's 'critical realism' which are developed systematically within Lonergan's transcendental Thomism, and thinning the element of contentual realism further, the next generation, the gram-matical Thomists, affirmed that Thomas' discussion of how to name God is

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[44] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957), pp. 348, 354, and 508.

[45] Ibid., p. xviii.   [46] Ibid., p. xxxviii, my italics.

[47] Burrell, *Aquinas, God and Action*, p. 53.

a 'meta-linguistic'[48] exercise, concerned not with naming *God* but with *naming* God. Before he began to meditate *The Nature of Doctrine* in the late 1970s, Lindbeck had undergone 'ten years of teaching medieval thought at Yale (mostly in the philosophy department)'. He remarks that this book's 'grammatical or regulative understanding of doctrine has patristic roots retrieved with the help of' the transcendental Thomist, and 'Canadian Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan'.[49] An observation concerning Lindbeck's idea of doctrines applies equally well to a grammatical Thomist's idea of the meaning of propositions about God: if '*they are in some sense assertive, their referents are words*, like sentences in a grammar book describing grammatical forms'.[50] Although story Barthianism may owe more of its method to Barth than grammatical Thomism does to Thomas, neither would have been possible without transcendental Thomism.

The very expression *narrative* theology sounds like a method which could engage in dialogue with the deepened sense of human persons as *historical* beings which has been with us since the early nineteenth century. A 'plot' seems analogous to a history—Aristotle treats the two in the same chapter of his *Poetics*. But in relation to the Church, the Trinity, and even eschatology we will find that narrative theology draws back from engagement with the temporality of human events. This strikes us as one of the clearest areas of cross-over from Thomism to narrative theology. Despite its trenchant belief in the referential character of truth, mid-twentieth-century Thomism was not well-placed to defend the historicity of Scripture. Some might put this down to the Aristotelian element in Thomism. In matters of history, highly Aristotelian Thomisms have been inclined to prefer the 'truth of reality' to the 'reality of truth'.[51] Aristotle regarded tragedy as more philosophical than history,[52] because, whereas the historian deals in arbitrary contingencies, things which really did happen, the craft of the tragic poet turns such contingencies into 'calculable, intelligible possibilities'. Aristotle's definition of the art does not fit those tragedies in which mortals are seized by daemonical powers operating in a way that matches no probability calculus. Michelle Gellrich asks how it can be, 'if tragedy' really 'is distinguished from history by virtue of its elimination of the indeterminately contingent', that many

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[48] Ibid., p. 12.   [49] Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 4 and 197–8.

[50] Jay Wesley Richards, 'Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*', *Religious Studies* 33 (1997), 33–53, p. 40. For a defence of this assertion about grammatical Thomism, see below, Chapter 2, section 2.

[51] Xavier Zubiri, *Nature, History, God*, 2nd edn., trans. Thomas B. Fowler (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), p. 45. Zubiri does not invent the distinction in relation to Aristotelico-Thomism.

[52] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b5–10.

such plays present suffering 'arising from forces irrationally and unpredictably bearing in on humans from outside their intelligible universe?'[53] The world of Greek tragedy is logicality itself by comparison with the even stranger world of scriptural history, in which factual event and the mysterious power of God combine forces. Thomists could have learned to live with history by developing the thesis that the most creative moments of Western philosophy have been those in which, aligning itself with Christian revelation, it has drawn on God's historical, revelatory acts—but, aside from existential Thomists like Frederick Wilhelmsen, they largely chose not to take Gilson's suggestion seriously. An allergy to history is the main legacy of Thomism to narrative theologies—including that of Robert Jenson.

5. Robert Jenson: Story Thomism

Lindbeck prefers to treat typology as a reading practice, a skill in noting correlations between images, or as a method for constructing the canonical Scriptures, over seeing types as forms in which reality is present. He comments that, when the Christians put together their Bible, the 'writings which proved profitable in actual use among the people were the ones which were included in the canon'.[54] As Lindbeck understands it, verbal meaning is more immediately linked to *use* than to correspondence. He argues that, 'the proper way to determine what "God" signifies . . . is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly'.[55] Thus the contents of the Christian doctrines, such as the material set out in the Nicene Creed, are not primarily realities taken to 'correspond' to the words of the Creed, but rules to be followed. For the narrativist, the Creed does not primarily define what or who God is, but gives Christians rules to follow in how to synthesize and practise the Christian faith. Lindbeck defines narrative theology as a 'rule theory' which bases Christian doctrine neither in experience nor in the reference of its propositions to God:

[Rule theory] . . . does not locate the abiding and doctrinally significant aspect of religion in propositionally formulated truths, much less in inner experiences, but in the story it tells and in the grammar that informs the way the story is told and used. . . . a religion . . . is . . . a categorial framework within which one has certain kinds of

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[53] Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 115.

[54] Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, p. 205.

[55] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 114.

experiences and makes certain kinds of affirmations. In the case of Christianity, the framework is supplied by the biblical narratives interrelated in specific ways (e.g., by Christ as center).[56]

For a 'rule-theory' of doctrine, exhibitions of doctrine like the Nicene Creed do 'not make first-order claims' about reality, but, are, rather, 'second-order discourse about language (like grammatical rules) which govern what can and cannot be said, but do not themselves make positive assertions'.[57]

Our common-sense intuitions about reality become ingrained in the way we speak. The soundest aspect of the ordinary-language philosophy of the 1950s was its attention to how we use words. Conversely, the most recondite aspect of 'cultural-linguistic' theology is the way it overrides what words like 'creed' and 'doctrine' mean in the vernacular. Since Lindbeck's 'move requires abandoning the assertive quality of doctrines', '[d]octrines *are*, strictly speaking, *talk about talk*'. One philosopher complains that,

rule theory... seems to deny what almost everyone assumes the Creed and Definition—and the doctrines therein—are: claims about God and Christ. This definition of *doctrines*... doesn't capture what nearly everyone *means* by the word. ... this view of the authority of the Creed... has to deny what its formulators explicitly believed they were doing. ... The bishops seem to have been under the impression that they *were* making *positive assertions* about God in their credal formulations. ... Lindbeck applies the mantra that *use governs meaning*... selectively... For surely one of the *functions*, one of the *uses* to which we put language is to assent to belief in certain propositions, notions or perceived truths. Why does *this* use not govern meaning as well?... what if one of the *uses* of language is to make reference to things that are extra-linguistic?[58]

Many narrative theologians would argue that the use of the metaphor of 'story' in their theology does not automatically imply that God *is* a story. They would say that the metaphor of 'story' relates to the methodology, the means of approaching the subject of theology, not the content itself—*God*. They believe that it's only a few over-the-top theologians like Robert Jenson who take the method so literally as to identify God with a story. However, we are apt to use language to speak *about* things, to make 'first-order' affirmations. Even when we speak of the weather, we want to affirm something real, and our use of language has a metaphysical or substantive trajectory, although what we say is nothing very metaphysical, or substantive. The metaphysical impulse

[56] Ibid., p. 80.

[57] Richards, 'Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*', p. 35, citing Lindbeck, p. 19, on the Nicene Creed.

[58] Richards, 'Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*', pp. 40 and 47–8.

of language fulfils its natural desire to touch reality in the supernatural revelation of reality to us by Scripture. When this primary ordering is inverted into 'talk about talk', the 'first-order' or referential use of language does not disappear: rather, swallowing its own tail, the 'God' to which we long to refer becomes the story itself. 'God's reality', the narrativist Ronald Thiemann says, 'is *intrinsically* related to Christian belief and practice, if Christian beliefs are true.'[59]

Some narrative theologians are offended by Jenson's affirmation that 'God's nature... is the plot of his history.'[60] Admirers of Hans Frei such as George Hunsinger have argued that Jenson is no Barthian, but a Hegelian.[61] It is sometimes proposed that the great difference between *post*-liberal, Barthian theology and liberal theology is that the former retrieved the Three-Personed God from marginalization at the hands of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who deposited the Trinity in an appendix to *The Christian Faith*. A century before Barth wrote his *Commentary* on Romans, Hegel had lodged the same complaint against Schleiermacher. For the German Romantic, Christianity is the 'consummate religion': 'This absolute religion', he says, 'is the *revelatory* [*offenbar*] religion... it is also called the *revealed* religion—which means... that it is revealed by God, that God has given himself for human beings to know what he is.' Christianity is characterized, above all other religions, by the idea of the '*Deus Revelatus*, or the self-revelatory God'.[62] As Cyril O'Regan notes, Hegel 'takes it as evident that the fact that God is disclosed is not accidental to God's definition' but 'is central to it':

For Hegel, the *Deus Revelatus* is narratively enacted and, as such, is constrained by properties endemic to all narratives. ... He also suggests that the *Deus Revelatus* submits to a trinitarian construal. In doing so, Hegel brings the theologoumenon of the Trinity to the center of theology in a way unparalleled in modern Protestant thought. ... Narrative articulation is made subject to trinitarian form, and trinitarian articulation is narrative articulation. It is... because of the narrative constitution of the Hegelian Trinity that... it differs crucially from the classical view.[63]

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[59] Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 81.

[60] Robert W. Jenson, *God After God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 171.

[61] George Hunsinger, 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: A Review Essay', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55/2 (2002), 161–200, p. 175.

[62] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III: *The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, J. M. Stewart and H. S. Harris (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 252.

[63] Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return In Modernity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 66–7, 45, and 21.

If Jenson's thought proves on close inspection to be more redolent of Hegel than of Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth, then why call it 'story Thomism'? The reason is that Jenson's own thought does not emerge from systematic use of German Romantic philosophical theology, but from a synthesis of the principles at work in grammatical Thomism and story Barthianism. An introductory sketch of his thought looks somewhat like the Wittgensteinian 'duck-rabbit', since one must constantly turn 'from the one hand' (to the grammar) 'to the other' (to the *Deus ipse narrativus*). From the 1960s, one of Jenson's concerns has been the public meaning of Christian language, and the question of how we identify a name for God. Like the grammatical Thomists, he draws on Wittgenstein and on Austin's notion of performatives to fill out the first question; with the Barthians, he affirms that we get our name for God from God. By the late 1960s, the American Thomist schools had begun to interpret Aquinas' idea of 'God talk' as referring, not to a *real* analogy of creaturely and divine things, but to the *logic* of our language for God. Jenson assumes, with the grammatical Thomists, that the *meaning* of our language about God is a function of its use. He wants to appropriate both the idea that, for Thomas Aquinas, the primary aspect of *analogical* 'God-talk' is that it refines upon how we use language, *and* what he calls 'Thomas' insistence on the informative character of theological utterances'. Jenson is determined to avoid the Christian's 'retreat from speech in the public language, with any who may listen, to the safely private communication of sectarian language', 'the withdrawal from public responsibility for sense and nonsense'.[64] Grammatical Thomists and story Barthians have called Jenson to account for not seeing that the God he seeks is present in Thomas' own thought, but not for his interpretations of Thomas' idea of religious language or for his reading of Thomas' Five Ways as a reflection on how Christians talk about God.[65]

They would be unlikely to criticize him on those grounds. For what sustains Christian theological language with a grammatical Thomist like David Burrell is a primitive drive to know God. Thomas' 'philosophical grammar', Burrell says, is aimed at 'making explicit what a religious life implies'; such an 'activity can also be considered as a quest for God'; Thomas' purpose is 'to sketch some points of contact between grammar and a religious way of life'; 'knowing how to respect the grammatical difference which logic demands for discourse *in divinis* . . . requires the disciplines . . . associated with

[64] Robert W. Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For: The Sense of Theological Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 63, 97, and 9.

[65] George A. Lindbeck, 'Review Essay: Robert Jenson, *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw In Ecumenical Theology*', *Pro Ecclesia* 3/2 (1994), 232–8; for Jenson on the 'Five Ways' see Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For*, pp. 66–71 and below, Chapters 3 and 5.

religious living and practice'.[66] This is an *Augustinian* reading of Thomas, one which places his 'procedure', not in proximity to Aristotle and thus regarding faith and reason as distinct, but rather, as Lindbeck puts it, 'closer…to that of the so-called "Augustinians" ',[67] and hence tending to assimilate faith and reason. Although one should hesitate on any grounds to call Jenson an Augustinian, he finds that

theological utterance is a language activity justified by a certain character of human life: its directedness to a goal beyond it. …this language activity is not, for Thomas, merely descriptive of man's final goal. It is a language, a doctrine, that man must have in order to attain this goal. It is a language by whose use man is given his transcendence…There is…a hint here of a language activity other than… describing…an activity which is a doing…and in which what is creatively posited by the utterances is the final meaning of the life of the speaker.[68]

Building both on the notion of language found amongst Wittgensteinian Thomists and Yale postliberals as performative, something whose base line is praxis, and on Burrell's notion of linguistic activity as having a transcendental trajectory, Jenson sees that this entails that the warrant and foundation of our talk about God is *eschatological*. Quoting Thomas' statement that theology draws its faith-knowledge of God from 'the knowledge which God has *and the blessed*' Jenson affirms that:

When and if we attain the fulfilment of our existence, that event will justify or falsify the articles of faith, and so all theological utterances. We can…say of theological language,…as it is used by Thomas, that it is eschatological, and in a double sense …: 1) it is a language by the speaking of which transcendence is posited; 2) its sentences are verified or falsified by the eschaton.[69]

Jenson exhibits his typical imaginative insight when he argues, with reference to Thomas' Five Ways, that, 'all our theological utterances, including those we can know by nature, are in their *use* a function of our yearning for the fulfilment of the biblical promises'.[70]

He shows equal biblical insight, in affirming that, if it is just our own human yearning for God that is at the basis of what we say about God, then the 'analogy-logic' at work in the grammatical Thomas Aquinas 'can only be labelled "epistemological works-righteousness" '.[71] If humanity's drive for God is at its base and foundation, if human language is intrinsically and

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[66] Burrell, *Aquinas, God and Action*, pp. 6, 35, 67.
[67] Lindbeck, 'Participation and Existence', p. 20.
[68] Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For*, pp. 59–60.
[69] Ibid., p. 62, quoting Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I. q. 1, a. 2, his italics.
[70] Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For*, p. 74.   [71] Ibid., pp. 93–4.

autonomously impelled God-ward, then human speech about God is, of course, a human work. Here the 'other hand' shows its claws. Jenson remarks that Karl Barth's '*Kirchliche Dogmatik* is an enormous attempt to interpret all reality by the fact of Christ',[72] and he finds this territorial footing in Barth's thought significant for his own theology. As in story Barthianism, so for Jenson, we can talk about God because God has first spoken, drawing us into his story. Jenson's own theology can be labelled 'story Thomist' because his epistemological method is Barthian and his narrative takes place in the preached-environment of the biblical story, and yet the content is the same set of questions as figure in grammatical Thomism. These questions, such as how we speak about God, reflect methodological concerns. The principle, 'God *is* a story' is set to work the moment one equates one's method of knowing God—such as Scripture—with God as such. As Gilson remarked, 'Whoever sticks a finger into the machinery of the Cartesian method must expect to be dragged along its whole course.'[73] The 'Cartesian' element in all narrative theologies is that method is their starting point. Or in other words, *Grammaticus begat Narrativus begat Deum narrativum.*

  Barthian theology aims to build its metaphysics on biblical description. One feature of the content of Barth's theology can be added to take us from theology as description of God's self-revelation to theology as *narrative* description. This is Barth's replacement of the old metaphysical category of *substance*—unsuited to storytelling—with that of *time.* Citing Barth's positive assertion that, with God, 'Being does not include eternity but eternity includes being', Richard Roberts has argued that, for Barth, the 'category of time can be said to constitute a surrogate for "substance", as exploited in traditional theology'. As Roberts reads him, Barth's God is not *pure* being, but pure temporal 'duration'. His eternity is, as it were, not the negation of temporality but its absolutization.[74] Barth thus created what Ford calls a 'descriptive metaphysics in support of the overarching story'. And so, 'the stage is set for defining the Trinity in terms of relations discovered in the biblical narratives. ... Barth looks to the relation between Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost as the expression of the relations within the Trinity.'[75]

  [72] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I: *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 21.

  [73] Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauk (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 48.

  [74] Richard Roberts, 'The Ideal and the Real in the Theology of Karl Barth', in Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes (eds.), *New Studies In Theology*, vol. I (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 166, citing Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1: *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J. L. M. Haire (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 610.

  [75] Ford, *Barth and God's Story*, pp. 139 and 152.

Exegetes of the contents of Barth's theology are unlikely to agree on whether Jenson's 'storification' of the Triune God is built on the *Church Dogmatics*, or, conversely 'departs from Barth on one crucial issue, God's being in Time', drawing his interest in the 'future' from Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Carl Braaten.[76] Both in *God After God*, and in an early autobiographical essay, Jenson indicates that reading Barth both stimulated and frustrated his desire to '*narrate* the crisis in which God will be the End'. Whilst Barth had tried 'to find a way to keep hold of the proclamation's narrative content', nonetheless, 'in identifying eternity as Jesus' time, Barth retained too much of the traditional understanding of eternity; and the identification therefore constantly threatens to draw Christ off and back into a Calvinist place "before all time"'. Whether or not he promoted a renascent sense of divine temporality in Barth, there is a sense in which the *storification* of God is more important to Jenson than relating God to history. Simon Gathercole has argued that Jenson's Christology actually has an '*atemporal*' basis.[77] Cyril O'Regan observes that Hegel's attribution of 'process' to God does not necessarily

reduce the divine to time and history, even if it is, in fact, crucial to Hegel's ontotheological proposal that the divine be seen in a much closer relation to time and history than traditionally conceived. What the positing of process does imply is that, at an infrastructural level, the divine is plot, story, or narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.[78]

This might be said of Jenson, too. The *new* element which Jenson adds to story Barthianism, the element making for the perfect theological movie, is the temporal art of music (and not only for the choral odes). Our sixth chapter describes how such a cinematic portrayal of God lends itself to a modalistic idea of the Trinity. Jenson is paralleled in his cinematization of the Trinity by one grammatical Thomist, Herbert McCabe. What is at stake is an essentialist or conceptualist idea of the three Persons, rather than an excessively historical perspective.

6. Why the Movie Parallel?

Some scholars, such as the redoubtable Paul Molnar, have criticized narrative theology on the grounds that it ought to have set itself a different objective to

[76] Christopher Wells, 'Aquinas and Jenson on Thinking about the Trinity', *Anglican Theological Review* 84/2 (2002), 345–82, pp. 354–5.

[77] Simon Gathercole, 'Pre-Existence, and the Freedom of the Son of God in Creation and Redemption: An Exposition in Dialogue with Robert Jenson', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7/1 (2005), 38–51, p. 47.

[78] O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*, p. 30.

the ones it has, such as the creation of a genuinely God-centred theology.[79] It is difficult for a theology to be God-centred if, like movies, it presents 'the doing of an image, not the image of a doing'.[80] Our argument will be that narrative theology does not achieve its own most valuable aim of reinstating the imaginative and biblical basis of theology. It does not obey the curves of the narrative of salvation history. In order adequately to respond to the images of this revealed history, one needs to know or understand this image, but also to respond to it in love—because the mystery which the God-given image expresses is love. We will argue that, in place of such loving assent, narrative theologies offer a pre-verbal machination of the reality, providing the materials for an abstraction of essence, not for the concretization of an image. Since such cognitive acts do not set the perceiver free to love another as another, narrative theologies substitute a methodology for the personal love of God.

What is the purpose of drawing aesthetic perceptions into theology? What good does it serve when Barth, for instance, uses a theologian's aesthetic insight to notice that there is something *analogous* to space and time in the biblical God, or when he uses the image of the prodigal son's departure into a far country to reflect upon the procession and mission of the divine Son?[81] The images are an indispensable reminder to Christian theology that our God is, as Bauckham rightly says, not a metaphysical *what* but a *who*.[82] The authentically Christian function of imagination in theology is to remind us that God is three persons united in *love*. The Bible images are 'done' by a divine act of love. This is imaginative dynamite, and all great theologies have been captivated by the image of the divine as three *persons* united in love. If the movie parallel is accurate, we may be forced to concede that the story theologians do not make the biblical images an iconostasis of the personal and loving God.

We draw an extensive comparison between narrative theologies and movies in order to point up the way in which narrativism 'technologizes' our approach to the sacred images of Scripture. We are making 'technologizing' a metaphor for methodologizing. Russell Hittinger argues that, when it operates within a 'technology', a 'tool is no longer an instrument, but rather the measure of the humane world'. That is, he says,

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[79] Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue With Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2002).

[80] Frederick D. Wilhelmsen and Jane Brett, *Telepolitics: The Politics of Neuronic Man* (Plattsburgh, NY: Tundra Books, 1972), p. 31.

[81] See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), ch. 14, 'Jesus Christ, The Lord as Servant', sect. 59: 'The Obedience of the Son of God'.

[82] Bauckham, *God Crucified*, p. 8.

Modern technologies are not only 'labor saving' devices. A labor saving device, like an automated farm implement or a piston, replaces repetitive human acts. But most distinctive of contemporary technology is the replacement of the human act; or, of what the scholastic philosophers called the *actus humanus*. The machine reorganizes and to some extent supplants the world of human action, in the moral sense of the term.

As with our idea of the cinematization of theology, these objections to technology are 'not aimed at the tool per se' but rather at a 'cultural pattern in which tools are either deliberately designed to replace the human act or at least have the unintended effect of making the human act unnecessary or subordinate to the machine'.[83] It takes a 'human act' to respond to the contents of the biblical images. A methodology is a technique. What matters to method are the protocols, prescriptions and proscriptions which enable it to 'do the image'. The technique is abstracted from the 'image of a doing'. It is because the technology divests the human act of its human spontaneity and freedom that it is loveless. This human freedom is, we shall argue, analogous to the divine freedom. The human act is most fully itself in responding to the divine act in kind. Is it really like what we know of how human persons manifest themselves to one another to state, with some story Barthians, that, because *all* of God is revealed in Jesus Christ, that revelation is not the expression of a mystery? Is it comparable to how we know human persons to affirm with the grammatical Thomists that, because we do not know God's essence, God is essentially unknowable? Or are both propositions more akin to the objective auto-projection of a machine than the self-giving of a person? In the 1940s, Karl Barth challenged Hans Urs von Balthasar to make Catholic theology speak more existentially, that is, more Christocentrically. The last volumes of the *Theo-Logic*, written 30 years later, affirm that, 'if the self-giving of the Father to the Son, and of both to the Spirit corresponds . . . to God's intimate essence, this . . . can itself be . . . only love'.[84] The biblical 'image of a doing' expresses the divine love.

In much traditional theological aesthetics, as for instance, when Thomas Aquinas compares God to an architect, the *artist* functions as an analogy for the divine maker. With what sort of analogy to the divine maker does the artist as movie-director supply us? Or, what notion of God do we perceive when we consider divine revelation as analogous to the creativity that goes into movie-directing? Although subjective decisions go into the

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[83] Russell Hittinger, 'Technology and the Demise of Liberalism', in *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003), p. 251.

[84] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. II, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 136.

editing of film, nonetheless, the process of reproducing photographic images is one which eliminates the subjective eye of a human viewer. In photography and in the cinematic art, Bazin says, 'for the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. . . . All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence.'[85] If God creates like a camera captures reality, he does not do so as a person who loves, but like a machine, for 'Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, . . . by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.'[86]

Like a human painter or sculptor, the biblical God makes with his *hands*. The crucial difference between cinematography and the other visual arts is that the movie-director has no hands. 'Photographs are not *hand*-made; they are manufactured.' The 'material basis of the media of movies (as paint on a flat, delimited support is the material basis of the media of painting) is . . . *a succession of automatic world projections*'.[87] If that is an appropriate analogy for the biblical God, then, when He speaks the world into creation, the words can hardly be said to flow from a free gift of love. It will follow that *language*, the basic media of narrative theology, has its own objective existence, detached from the making hands and voice of a personal Author. It may even follow that Story becomes the maker of God.

What happens here, via the process of collective imagination which movies replicate, is something like the divinization of thought process which goes on amongst the great nineteenth-century German Idealists. No-one who is interested in the *aesthetics* of theology can affect to have learned nothing from the Romantics, for it was Hegel who restored the ancient recognition that 'art' is as important to humanity as philosophy and religion, and that poetry is a form of knowledge. Bainard Cowan writes that Hegel's

word *Verweilen*—tarrying, enduring, dwelling—contains much of what in Hegel's philosophy is congenial to art and the tragic. *Verweilen* is his word of choice for denoting process and experience as ineluctable dimensions of the truth. It hence implies . . . the dynamization of the essential, a process with the making of the thinking subject as an active, even heroic, principle.[88]

We aim to include *both* the negative and the positive sides of that 'dynamization' of truth and reality in our comparison of movies and theatre, that is, to

[85] Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, p. 10.
[86] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 23.   [87] Ibid., p. 72.
[88] Bainard Cowan, 'Tarrying with the Tragic: Hegel and his Critics', in Glenn Arbery ed., *The Tragic Abyss* (Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003), pp. 41 and 44–5.

get at what Aristotle meant when he said that what the dramatist imitates
'are *actions*'.[89] If it was Hegel who reminded modern theologians to look for
curves and ovals in theology, perhaps this imaginative thinker should be
drawn into our theological conversation. Bearing in mind that 'it is too late to
baptize Hegel',[90] I shall engage him in ecumenical dialogue in the final chapter.
Whether secular or biblical, it is not imagination that matters, or the use of an
'imaginative method', but what it is given to imagination to see. What the
imagination, or the heart, sees is love.

[89] Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre: A Study of Ten Plays. The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 8.

[90] O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*, p. 237.