God and Story in the Church and in Doctrine:
the relationship between systematic theology and 'everyday' theology

Paul S. Fiddes, Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Oxford

1. Telling the story of God

Narrative theology:
(1) NT = speaking about the mystery of the triune God by telling the story of God, of which the basic outlines are to be found in the Bible.
(2) This is claimed to release both Scripture and Christian doctrine from a restrictive framework of cultural presuppositions:
(a) the biblical story is allowed to speak on its own account with the voice of revelation; (b) doctrine, witnessing to revelation in the story, is disconnected from religion and philosophical limitations.

The problem with narrative theology:
(1) It seems to rule out any role for stories outside scripture (e.g. novels, drama, 'real life') in the making of Christian doctrine. Meaning is located in the usage of a *specific* language, which is the language of scripture.
(2) It assumes a self-enclosed isolation of cultures, where recent cultural theory has stressed open borders between them.

A proposal:
(1) To develop narrative theology in a way that is inclusive of non-biblical narratives, including stories from the community of the church (past and present), from the surrounding culture which interpenetrates the church, and from the way that people inhabit all these stories.
(2) Thereby to take seriously the response of all people, through story, to the self-disclosing presence of God in the world.
(3) Thus to make doctrine through holding 'inductive' and 'deductive' movements in reciprocity, including drawing on 'everyday theology'.

2. Objections to any kind of narrative theology

(1) Objection: The method of narrative theology can become its content. 'Telling the story of God' easily becomes God *as* a story, losing the realism of God over against us and dissolving God into a narrative.
But God is a story in the sense that God 'happens' in the interweaving relations that we call 'Father,' 'Son' and 'Spirit'. God's making room for us in God's self is 'real', but best told in the form of a story.

(2) Objection: A story is a distancing device (esp. in film), so that the Christ of narrative becomes an image without contact.
But stories draw us in to participate in them, and the story of the Trinity draws us into God while respecting mystery.

(3) Objection: Primary theology becomes human living of the story, and talk about God becomes a secondary activity.
But we can never separate the story of the Trinity from everyday human life, since God desires to be committed to the world.

(4) Objection: narrative is impersonal and suppresses 'I-Thou' relations between people, between people and a triune God, and between persons in God.

But the story of the triune God is about relations that surpass human 'I-Thou' relations, while enhancing them.

3. A case-study: 'Text and Story'

(1) A practical exercise bringing together a biblical story (Acts 8:26-40), a story from church history (Mojola Agbebe), contemporary stories (black and Asian women seek employment) and the stories of the participants.

(2) Aim: to enable young people from a mainly West African heritage to find their identity as Christians in modern society,to overcome their social alienation and recognize their gifts of leadership.

4. Story and the making of Christian doctrine

(1) By being drawn into the stories, participants were doing 'everyday theology'.

(2) Academic/systematic theology enables people to notice, and to resolve, contradictions between the beliefs they 'espouse' and 'operate' with in their their everyday theology – e.g. beliefs about salvation.

(3) Doctrine must be made in collaboration with all those searching through their own stories for clues to human flourishing: this is because all participate in the story of the triune God.

(4) Thus 'everyday theology' based on story shapes church doctrine:

    (a) Stories can influence the *selection* of theories and images in the making of doctrine;

    (b) Stories can assist the *connection* of beliefs into doctrines;

    (c) Stories can give doctrine *relevance* for the present day.

(5) A final example: 'naming' in Scripture and the experience of these young people.

Bibliography

Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth-Century and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976)

David Ford, *Barth and God's story : biblical narrative and the theological method of Karl Barth in the "Church Dogmatics"* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981).

George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984).

Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story. Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambrdge University Press, 1999).

John Barton and Gerhard Sauter, *Revelation and Story. Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984).

Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology: Guides to Theological Enquiry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

Paul S. Fiddes, 'Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 11/1 (January 2009), pp. 3-23.

Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?' in Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 13-35.

Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story. Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins/Fontana: 1971).

Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. IV. The Action*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994).