

The Mediating Role Of Narrative In Inter-Religious Dialogue: Implications and Illustrations from the Philippine Context

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There has been a recovery of the significance of narrative in our personal and social experience and in our conceptualization of this experience. This recovery is found across and within disciplines and paradigms of inquiry. For example, historiography has recognized more explicitly that narrative is its basic literary form. Other social sciences have described human agency and action within the framework of narrative. And for those involved in the study of different religious traditions and their encounters with each other, the concept of narrative has enriched the way scriptures and divine engagement in the natural world and human history have been understood.

This essay is based on this fundamental development, and has a twofold aim: (a) to provide a theoretical foundation for the importance of narrative as a mediating concept in the relations between different religious traditions, and (b) to draw out its implications for and illustrations from inter-religious dialogue in the Philippine context where narratives continue to play significant social roles.

LEVELS OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Dialogue has been generally accepted as the appropriate way different religious traditions should relate, and is present on different levels. As the Third Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA III) of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) states, 'Since the religions, as the Church, are at the service of the world, interreligious dialogue cannot be confined to the religious sphere but must embrace all dimensions of life' (Rosales and Arevalo 1997:120). Prominent levels of dialogue occur in the realm of religious faith and doctrinal belief as well as in what is commonly referred to as the dialogue of life.

In terms of dialogue on the first level, comparisons of faith and belief systems have been made to establish homologies or family resemblances. For instance, the earlier work of Aloysius Pieris sought to show how Buddhism and Christianity are similar in certain tenets (Pieris 1975). He later sought to describe them as one in their soteriological core (*'communicatio in sacris'*), though this core experience is expressed differently in the community's collective memory found in traditions, practices and beliefs, and in its interpretation in philosophical, theological and exegetical schools (Pieris 1988; Tschiggerl 1997).

Related to this dialogue on the level of faith and belief systems have been efforts within each religious tradition to account for the value and validity of other traditions vis-à-vis their own. This is perhaps most crucial in Christianity which does not only make universal truth-claims traditionally expressed in exclusivist language, but also insists on faith in the unique status of Jesus Christ as the sole mediator of salvation. Thus Christian theologians such as Jacques Dupuis have tried to formulate a theology of religions which lays the groundwork of dialogue with other religious traditions. Another example is Roger D. Haight's *Christ Symbol of God* (1999) which offers an interpretation of Christ's uniqueness without ruling out the possibility of other mediations.

Much as there is undoubted value in inter-religious dialogue on this level, its limits for furthering dialogue are also apparent. There is a certain degree of incommensurability between different religious faith and doctrinal belief systems. The matter of institutional politics within each tradition also makes such a dialogue often difficult, if not practically impossible. On account of this, some have proposed inter-religious cooperation and work rather than dialogue as a way of proceeding. This proposal is clearly based on what is perceived as a cul-de-sac in negotiating differences on the level of faith and belief systems, especially if particular religious traditions do not accept others as equal dialogue partners.

This emphasis on inter-religious cooperation and work naturally leads to the other prominent level of dialogue, that of life. Most emphatically articulated by the FABC and its various offices, the dialogue of life highlights how people from different religious traditions can live with and learn from each other as neighbors: 'The more basic dialogue is the dialogue of heart and mind. This leads to the dialogue of life and action to jointly tackle social evils' (Eilers 1997: 25). Such an approach is particularly urgent in Asia which is characterized by the presence of different religious traditions existing side by side, belonging to the same civil society and national

community, facing the identical challenges of poverty, injustice and globalization.

While this dialogue of life has been generally accepted as a necessary way of proceeding and has even proved fruitful in particular instances, the need for clarity in doctrinal positions remains an *a priori* condition for long-lasting inter-religious collaboration. Hence the ever-present tension between proclamation and dialogue in the encounter between different religious traditions. This is suggested in the carefully-worded statement of the FABC Consultation on Muslim Presence in Asia:

Here we reaffirm that dialogue and evangelization are by no means incompatible, but at the same time dialogue must never be made a strategy to elicit conversions. Bearing witness to our faith in Christ, by life, deed and word is what we mean by evangelization or proclamation, and this should inspire and direct all our individual and communitarian activities, including our relation with people of other faiths or of no faith at all (Rosales 1997: 167).

The statement further recognizes that 'in Asia, both terms ['mission' and 'evangelization'] often connote a sense of cultural superiority, disrespect for beliefs of others, and colonial chauvinism' (*Ibid.* 168).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE

Without diminishing efforts at dialogue of life as well as on the level of faith and belief systems, I propose that another level of dialogue among religious traditions could be mediated through the different narratives of these traditions.

This is fundamentally based on the current apology for narrative. In an earlier essay, I noted the two main justifications for the current interest in the category 'narrative' (1992). The first 'argues that human experience itself has an essentially narrative quality' and support for such an assertion comes from both anthropological and philosophical sources:

Anthropology shows humans to be invariably storytelling animals, relishing the crude folktale as well as the grand epic...Using a different vocabulary, [modern philosophical analysis] makes the useful point that being human involves historicity or temporality.(50f)

Since the publication of this essay, more extensive apologies for narrative have appeared to develop the anthropological or philosophical foundations (e.g. Eslinger 1995; Cook 1997; McKenna and Cowan 1998) or to construct particular narrative theologies (e.g. Goizueta 1992, Coleman 1999 and Comor 2000).

The second justification for narrative comes from its extensive presence and profound valuation in many religious traditions. This has led many theologians like Stroup to state ‘that narrative may suggest a new understanding of the relationship between the doctrines of Christian faith, Scripture and experience’ or like TeSelle to insist that ‘to see belief not as a set of beliefs but as a story, an experience of coming to belief, means that theological reflection ought itself to be shaped by the story, to take to itself, both in form and content, the story’ (Francisco 1992: 53f).

Presuming this centrality of narrative, one can now highlight two qualities of narrative that are of great consequence in inter-religious dialogue. These concern the integral links of narrative to identity and relationality.

The first important quality of narrative focuses on its relation to the formation of identity, both personal and social. We make sense of our existence through the stories that we tell. Paul Ricoeur in his three-volume opus *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1986, 1988) has among others masterfully shown how narratives enable us to enplot the different events in our lives. This is also true for groups, communities and societies whose social bonds are established and nourished through their shared narratives. And this is nowhere truer than the case of religious traditions, especially those that construe some authoritative or canonical status to their scriptures.

This relation between narrative and identity, which lies within the interior depths of the community, is externalized in human life and action. As Schweiker notes, ‘any narrative conveys a story, of course. And different communities, whether religious or not, employ stories to shape their identity, express their fundamental belief about the world and human life, and structure their experience (1990: 89).’ But this externalization is not simply superficial but based on what has been referred to as the mimetic, i.e. imitative, quality of the relation between narrative and identity.

Without a detailed rehearsal of Schweiker’s analysis based on Hans Georg Gadamer and Ricoeur, one only needs to highlight his insight that narrative is precisely able to shape identity and its expression in human praxis because they ‘mimic’ one another:

Narrative presupposes familiarity with human action, with the shape of character and the norms for the judgment of behavior. Narrative also transforms this understanding..To understand a story is ‘to comprehend at the same time the language of ‘doing’ [*faire*] and the cultural tradition which precedes the typology of plots.’ (111)

Thus the resulting common identity is ‘won through interpretation,’ ‘hardly static or even stable,’ but ‘a continual task’ as a result of an inner dialectic of agent/action established at the heart of narrative.’(119f) Moreover, this identity is neither essentialist with its basis in an abstract and a priori concept of nature, nor modernist or post-modern with its foundation in an alienated consciousness, but one woven with the threads of concrete human action and shared tradition.

This first quality of narrative is significant for inter-religious dialogue because of its application to religious identity. As an identity born out of narrative, religious identity is linked to religious praxis through mimesis. Thus whatever narrative is privileged by the religious community becomes the very heart of spirituality, ethics and action; and how its members live and act derives from such a narrative. The formation of this narrative identity then is truly a continual task which remains open-ended.

However, this connection between narrative and identity needs to be clarified for those religious traditions with a central focus on ‘self-emptying’ meditation and a non-substantive view of the self such as Buddhism. One may argue that such practices of meditation still involve dynamic processes in which the individual journeys in silence, and that therefore such experiences can be said to have a narrative quality.

Of greater import is the place of narrative in the non-substantive view of the self-integral to these traditions—an issue which Peter D. Hershock addresses in the case of East Asian Buddhism (1994). He explores ‘relationality rather than individuality as ontologically basic’(687) and narration as ‘foster[ing] the timely—that is, dramatic—interpenetration (*t’ung*) of all things,’(691), and arrives at a view of personhood as ‘a centerless field of dramatic interplay’(690). In technical language, the person is seen as ‘the intimately ongoing articulation of an originally ambiguous ‘nature’—a process of disambiguation that is not only both irreducibly karmic and nonlocal, but an improvisationally achieved correlate of narrative virtuosity’(685). Thus even for such traditions focused on ‘the dissolution of self’(685), the role of narrative remains central, though in a discourse ‘not of a piece with narrative models of the self like that recently proposed by Paul Ricoeur’(692).

The second quality of narrative, its close link with relationality, is equally important for inter-religious dialogue. Narratives, it has been suggested, mediate human communication and mutual understanding.

The basis for this claim lies in the open-ended nature of narratives. Narratives tell a succession of events connected not by the chronologic of time but the rationality or logic of enplotment. And while the dynamics of

such a logic leads to some ending in the sequence of events, the stories never attain full closure.

In fact, what gives narratives their profound and long-lasting power is their open-endedness, allowing stories to be continued either through application to different circumstances or their re-enactment and ability to be added on to. As Loughlin writes regarding Christian scriptures,

The order of the narrative can be different from that of the story; the narrative duration is nearly always different from the story's duration; the narrative can tell many times what happened only once, and tell once what happened many times...(1996: 62)

He further continues to say that 'the story of Jesus continues because no human story is isolated, entire unto itself'(82).

This formal quality of narratives to be open-ended provides the foundation for the mediating function of narratives in inter-religious dialogue. Because narratives as such cannot attain full and final closure, then religious narratives can always be read in other contexts and in fact coexist with a plurality of narratives when 'the dialectic of similarity and dissimilarity between the story I am being told and my story' takes place (Brown 1975: 166).

One can use the analogy from ordinary human experience where individuals come to an understanding of each other, not through biographical facts or scientific data about each other, but by telling each other's stories. And the most profound bonds of relationality and understanding come when individuals have become part of each other's stories.

In the same manner, telling each other's religious narrative offers a way toward mutual understanding and collaboration. In the context of the nature of narrative vis-à-vis identity and relationality, one may be able to describe inter-religious dialogue as a dialogue of narratives, containing its own rationality, though different from the doctrinal, and related to cooperation in praxis.

DIRECTIVES TOWARDS THE MEDIATING FUNCTION OF NARRATIVES

Narratives have always been present and played important roles in many religious traditions. These narratives, both oral and written, exist and function on various levels within these traditions such as communal rituals or personal pious practice. Some are authoritative or canonical texts construed as scriptures; others are developments of these fundamental texts; and still others are life stories of individuals, be they officially venerated as exemplary men and women or simply ordinary members.

Because of the roles narratives play within the different religious traditions, they are crucial in the formation and development of religious identity for the community as well as individual members. As mentioned above, this identity is unavoidably narrative. Thus the role of narratives in religious traditions cannot be overemphasized, and it is in recognition of this role that the mediating role of narratives in the relations between different religious traditions becomes an important resource for inter-religious dialogue.

A discussion of these narratives within each religious tradition is beyond the scope of this essay. However, certain directives may be proposed regarding the mediating role of narratives in inter-religious dialogue.

First, there is need for greater recognition and in many instances, faithful recovery of the narrative dimension in the canonical texts of religious traditions. The Abrahamic religions have clear narrative roots, but their histories have often suppressed the narrative in favor of the dogmatic or legal. Hans Frei's conclusion that the eclipse of biblical narrative in the 19th century obscured Christian thought and praxis applies analogously to other religious traditions (1974). For instance, though the Islamic Qur'an is construed differently than the Christian Bible and while the prevailing Islamic hermeneutic is legal, the Qur'an contains narrative sections which could be read in terms of a narrative of surrender to Allah. Religious communities must then recover the narrative substance within their canonical traditions, if they are not to fall into extreme forms of religious fundamentalism and dogmatism.

Second, religious communities could promote lives of holy men and women as concrete instances of how religious faith is narratively inscribed in personal and communal praxis. The Christian tradition of commemorating and celebrating lives of saints offers a way of understanding Christianity different from and even more basic than the study of doctrinal beliefs. The Muslims' valuation of the Prophet's life in the *hadith* or their pilgrimage to burial sites such as Mu'niuddin Christ's in Kashmir expresses their recognition of lives lived under divine will (Edwin 2001). In calling attention to the exemplary lives of revered men and women, the moral norms of each religious tradition takes on flesh-and-blood reality and escapes reduction into a rigid set of rules. Hauerwas' narrative ethics is a prime example within the Christian tradition of how narratives mediate ethical decision and action (1977).

Third, religious communities could encourage its members to express their spiritual journeys through stories. Spirituality is often described in terms of pious practices or external discipline, but if understood as the

concrete relationship between the transcendent and the individual, it finds natural expression in the stories people tell about their lives. Religious praxis thus becomes the narrative of how individuals and communities live out their faith in everyday life.

One then sees the mediating role of these forms of religious narratives. Through the focus on and exchange of their narratives, be they canonical, hagiographic or experiential, inter-religious dialogue takes a further step toward understanding and cooperation. The narrative focus on scriptures and hagiography liberates religious traditions from doctrinal fundamentalism and moral legalism. Members of different religious traditions encounter each other, not through rigid belief-systems or simple coexistence, but through the narratives of their lives and the stories they are part of. This could lead to an understanding of each other irreducible to conceptualizations and to cooperation in praxis open to the possibility of being interwoven as a shared story.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

The relations between Christians and Moslems in the Philippines have been grave and urgent long before the September 11 attacks and the subsequent 'war against terrorism.' Like many such relations in other regions in Asia and elsewhere, they have had a muddled and even violent history involving economic, political and cultural forces often complicated by the involvement of foreign powers. This has resulted in the formation of various groups in Philippine society today, some advocating total warfare against Moslems and others the creation of a separate Moslem state. Thus the resolution of specific issues such as landownership, political self-determination and social equality is made even more difficult within the problematic state of Philippine national politics. As a recent study appropriately entitled *Making Mindanao* indicates, 'communal identity and economic change [are] derivative of a single process—the pattern of state construction and transformation' (Abinales 2000:15).

Nevertheless, analysts from both religious tradition—Peter Gowing (1988), Kenneth Bauzon (1991), Cesar Majul (1973) and Michael Matsura (1984) to name a few—generally agree on cooperation and dialogue as crucial to peace between Christians and Muslims, however this is politically structured. Christian and Moslem peace advocates such as the Bishops-Ulama Conference have worked within their respective communities and with each other against armed violence and towards genuine harmony.

It is within this context characterized by turbulence yet struggling for peace that experiences on the local level illustrate the mediating role of narratives in inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

Various narratives related to different religious traditions exist in Philippine society today as a consequence of historical experience. Traditional religious narratives before Spanish colonization have been preserved among some tribal groups who continue to tell folktales and to chant indigenous epics during ritual feasts and events. Francisco Demetrio's overview of Philippine epics shows how their narration of heroic deeds provides legitimacy and valuation to the particular tribe's ethos and way of life (1979: 10-12). Contemporary attitudes, beliefs and practices of indigenous people often find representation in such narratives. With the pre-Spanish entry of Islam through traders from different parts of Asia, such narratives began to incorporate Islamic elements.

But due to the majority status of Christianity in the Philippines, the dominant religious narratives are those of the Christ story—its canonical form from the Bible and its popular form in the vernacular *pasyon* tradition. Before the recent translations of the Bible into the vernaculars, the popular form of chanting and later of dramatizing the Christ story during Holy Week has functioned like an epic in lowland communities. It makes the Christ story available as foundational narrative and enables Christians to appropriate this story as their own (Ileto 1979). For instance, an historic event in contemporary Philippine society like the 1986 EDSA [Epifanio de los Santos Avenue] People Power Revolution has been construed as an appropriation of the Christ story.

In the pluralistic situation of the southern island of Mindanao where these different narratives exist, one finds illustrations of how particular narratives has played a mediating role. First, some narratives have incorporated elements from different religious traditions or even fused with each other. Second, new stories have been told to promote harmony between religious communities. Finally, the narratives of different groups have been shared in order to support local peace initiatives.

First, some narratives played a mediating role by incorporating elements from different religious traditions. This took place with the entry of Islam and Christianity in indigenous communities. As mentioned above, extant tribal epics often manifest Islamic influence. Even the two lowland epics that have survived, *Biag ni Lam-ang* [Life of Lam-ang] of the Ilocanos and *Ibalon* of the Bicolos, contain Christian elements (Demetrio 1979: 13). This incorporation in the epics expresses the integration of new religious traditions in traditional tribal society.

A more significant instance of this first way is found in the earthy version from a Mindanao tribe of the Adam-and-Eve story discovered by researcher John Young (2000). Told him by a Moslem informant, its plot is actually a fusion of the Bible and Q'uran stories set within a traditional literary form:

Adam was first created but being lonely tried intercourse with the earth, the plants and other creatures bringing about their destruction. God's spirits complained and thus God put Adam to sleep and created Eve out of his rib. After Adam and Eve had carnal knowledge, a foul smell enveloped the world, and so God's spirits complained again. So God ordered them to purify themselves by washing.

Some elements of this folktale clearly come from the Genesis account (2, 4-25) in the Bible—how God created Adam first and then Eve from his rib to be his partner. Other elements such as the presence of God's spirits and the injunction for ritual washing come from Islamic sources, both the Q'uran itself and *tafsir* and *hadith* literature which often fused 'the lore contained in local traditions current in the Arab peninsula in the period of Jahiliya' (Kister 1988: 83).

The fusion of these different elements in this folk narrative suggests the relative harmony between Christian and Moslem within the local community. In fact, the informant told Young that this narrative indicates the 'common [*pare-pareho*] origin of all.'

Second, some narratives have been created to document or promote peace between different religious communities. This is illustrated by a folk legend from the Binukid tribe in the Tikalaan area of Central Mindanao (Demetrio 1994:29-30). The story tells of a peace-pact called by the new *datu* [local leader] of Tikalaan. He invited the Christian Capitan Pedro Tayagbong of Lambagowon (now Cagayan de Oro), two Moslem leaders of Dodsaaan and Maguindanao respectively, and another *datu* from Tagoloan. Each leader was invited to the *Tampuda ho Balagon* [Cutting of the Vine Branch] feast and asked to bring a carabao and a symbolic gift. The Christian brought the Bible, one Moslem the Qur'an and the other a durian fruit, one traditional leader a *balagon* vine and the other a white chicken. They put the holy books and durian into the earth and sprinkled them with the chicken's blood, while Capitan Pedro addressed them with these words:

My dear brothers, this is the solemn moment when we pledge loyalty to, and harmony with each other. Whoever among us would prove false to this peace-pact through any act of treachery, let him beware for he will

suffer the same fate that the balagon now suffers. The vine is then cut and buried with all the symbolic gifts.

This legend is retold until today, and a durian tree now stands in Tikalaan as a tree of friendship. Demetrio comments on how the narrative has continued to promote social harmony in Central Mindanao:

My friend and colleague, Dr. Nagasura Madale, assured me that the same tradition is preserved by the lake dwellers of Lanao del Sur. Here we can see that the five tribes of Central Mindanao considered themselves related to one another. Central Mindanao is considered by all of them as 'their place'(1994:30).' Moreover, the narrative relates social harmony with a cosmic sense of the earth: 'The earth itself, as the wide, pervasive support of all forms of existence, was participant to the peace-pact when they dug a hole in it (1994:31).'

The third way narratives could play a mediating role involves the sharing of stories between Christians and Moslems. One such example reported by Sylvia Jopillo (2002) took place at the peace camp of the St. Vincent Academy students in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. Its background was the 'all-out war' policy which President Joseph Estrada established in response to the dramatic kidnappings in Mindanao in early 2000. Military conflict came to Lanao del Norte, and so many members of the 23 Moslem families in Kauswagan sought refuge in the Moslem communities of Marawi and Zamboanga. When the level of military conflict decreased, the families returned home and their children went back to school amid great anxiety and tension on both sides.

In October 2000, the peace camp focused on the exchange of stories between the Christian and Moslem communities. The oldest members of each community were invited to tell their stories. Ina Faraola, a Muslim mother of 10 children, talked about their early settlement by the river and their difficult lives as farmers and fisherfolk. Tata Joven, the oldest in his 70s among the Christians, narrated how they arrived years later and settled close to the Muslim community. Both Moslem and Christian communities lived in harmony, each making friends with others and worshipping at their mosque and chapel. Tata Joven became the first principal of the village elementary school where both Christian and Moslem children studied. This local harmony was destroyed with the intrusion of the national conflict between the martial law regime of President Marcos and Moslem insurgents. Armed paramilitary groups from the outside such as the Ilagas and the Barracudas brought violence into Kauswagan.

After the stories of Ina Faraola and Tata Joven, other Christians and Moslems including a former student who joined the Moro Islamic

Liberation Front narrated their own experiences. The impact on the students from both religious traditions was great. They realized that harmonious relations existed before in their village and were then able to discuss with each other areas of ignorance and misunderstanding. At the end of the camp, they were convinced about the possibility of peace, at least in their village.

It is noteworthy that these three illustrations of how narratives could play a mediating role between members of religious traditions take place at the local grassroots level. This indicates that it on this level that the possibility of inter-religious cooperation and peace take root first. In his most recent essay entitled 'Vernacular Peace: Research Agenda on Indigenous Peace Strategies,' Albert Alejo, Mindanao anthropologist and peace advocate, suggests paying attention to, among others, biographies and folktales:

People are less moved by principles than examples...We therefore need more biographies of individuals who exemplify the struggle for peace in their own way...If we are intent on promoting peace in education, we would need local folktales, both traditional and improvised, that we can reproduce as children's stories (2001:213).

Such a strategy based on the mediating role of narratives, when taken in conjunction with other forms of inter-religious dialogue, opens up the hope for lasting peace and shared justice between Christians and Moslems in the southern Philippines.

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