Mass Media, Myth and Narrative Religious Education

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The narrative approach is one of the most promising for religious education. Therefore, we need to deal with the serious challenges to the narrative approach, as we find them in Neil Postman's, Günther Anders', Roland Barthes' and Jean-François Lyotard's critique of mass media and of narrativity, since these challenges threaten the very basis of narrative interaction. Is the concept of narrative identity antiquated in a mass media culture? Re-reading the theories of narrativity and narrative identity, especially the texts of Paul Ricoeur, but also lines in Anders', Barthes' and Lyotard's works, could lead us to perceive and value the subversiveness of narrative. Narrative identity invites selfhood and subjectivity, particularity and pluralism, subversiveness and difference. I propose to take these ideas as guidelines for narrative religious education in times of mass media revolution.

ENTANGLED IN STORIES: ARGUMENTS FOR A 'NARRATIVE TURN' IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

We are witnessing a growing awareness of the role of narratives. Indeed suggestions for a 'narrative turn' are proposed for various scientific disciplines. An important contribution to understanding the role of narratives in religious education is found in narrative theology. Understanding the church as 'community of remembering and storytelling' would imply significant changes in the ways we design theology and religious education (Metz 1977). From narrative theology, but also from other disciplines, a more comprehensive narrative perspective could emerge.

This is suggested by philosophical analysis. For example, it is Schapp's thesis that the human being is 'entangled in stories' (1953). Paul Ricoeur suggests a narrative model for identity and thereby underlines the interactive origin of identity in the dialectic between self and other (1984, 1985, 1988, 1992). This has been discussed in this journal with regard to its implications for religious education by Wilna Meijer (1995). Based on Ricoeur's analysis, a 'narrative turn' for the concept of religious identity and religious education can be proposed (Streib 1994). Also, with regard to faith development (Fowler 1981), one can assume that narratives, in the form of cultural manifestations and in the form of one's own life narrative, are the context in relation to which faith is emerging, growing and developing (Streib 1991a, 1991b, 1996).

In recent years a narrative perspective has attracted particular attention in the field of psychology. In social psychology, the work of Gergen and others has been influential in suggesting a perspective on the human as 'relational self' and as constitutively relying on narration (Gergen 1994; Gergen and Gergen 1988). In developmental psychology, Freeman (1985) has explicated Ricoeur's hermeneutics and narrative analysis for a more integrative view of human development. Moreover, in moral development theory, Day and others have proposed a narrative perspective and have recently suggested a 'narrative turn' (for example, Day 1993; Day and Tappan 1996).

Akin to the narrative perspectives in psychology, especially those in social psychology, is an understanding of the human being as embedded in the life-world. The work of Schütz (1932; Schütz & Luckmann 1979, 1984) has inspired sociologists to adopt phenomenological approaches for their interpretation of the social domain (Grathoff 1995), some of them with special focus on the growing plurality of life-worlds. Also perspectives on religion – more precisely, on the relation between religion and the everyday world – have been developed. Although there needs to be further discussion over whether religion is 'smoothing' and stabilising or whether it transcends the everyday world, the common ground of these perspectives is that the religion of an individual deals with, or even emerges from, experiences of transcendence, crises, boundaries and splits in his or her life-world. The narratives, symbols and rituals of religious tradition are understood as providing the resources to integrate these experiences of crises or transcendence. Religion appears as a social construction of reality.

I would suggest naming this the 'narrative construction of reality'. This new name underscores the hermeneutical-narrative interaction of the individual and the collective narrative resources. In my view, it is possible to interpret social theories of religion in terms of the narrative perspective.

From the narrative approaches in social-phenomenological, philosophical-hermeneutical and narrative-theological theory, a multi-perspective understanding of the 'narrative construction of religion' is emerging, but it needs more attention and certainly more critical reflection. Such reflection, however, has to address an objection that is often neglected, but concerns one of the basic conditions of narrative interaction: the very way of communicating the narratives. Can we still rely on narratives, when we have to reckon with alienating or distorting effects caused by the media that communicate them? What is the impact of mass media on narrativity as it is proposed as a model for religion and for religious education? Is an interpretive and narrative approach already outmoded? Dealing with these questions I will, in the first part of this paper, go through a kind of worst case analysis and converse with some of the most critical perspectives on the impact of the mass media, especially of television. Then, returning to and re-reading theories of narrativity, I will appeal to the subversive potential of narratives. Finally I will draw conclusions for religious education in a narrative perspective.

MASS MEDIA, MYTHS, AND META-STORIES: THE ANTIQUITY OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY

An all too smooth idea of narrative identity that ignores the impact of mass media influence is challenged radically by analyses that bring to our attention the possibility of technological, ideological and totalitarian alienation.

Technological Alienation of the Narrative

'The best things of television', Postman says, 'are its junk' (1985, 16). But television is 'most dangerous', he says, 'when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as carrier of important cultural conversations', when it '. . . co-opts serious modes of discourse –

news, politics, science, education, commerce, religion – and turns it into entertainment packages' (159). The disturbing consequence of the electronic and graphic revolution is '. . . that the world as given to us through television seems natural, not bizarre' (79). Postman therefore confronts the 'electronic church' with the question as to whether, by taking religion into an *entertainment* environment, it is deceived out of, and alienated from, any authenticity of religious experience (116ff); electronic religion is anything but an authentic object of culture. Furthermore, Postman shares the concern 'that the danger is not that religion has become the content of television but that television shows may become the content of religion' (124). Regarding education, it is Postman's concern that, turned into an amusing activity, education cannot have prerequisites, perplexity and exposition (147ff). The consequence is – and Postman's key example is *Sesame Street* – that it '. . . encourages children to love school only if school is like *Sesame Street*' (143). These examples from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* explicate Postman's view that, because of television, '. . . culture-death is a clear possibility' (156).

Two conclusions can be drawn from Postman's views, one concerned with the issue of using television for communicating religion and religious education, and the other for religious education even without the direct use of mass media. The first conclusion would be to refrain from any use of television, because it cannot be used other than to distort religion. Secondly, the television revolution may have changed religious education to an extent that we are only beginning to realise. Can our preachers and religious educators keep up with TV evangelists? Can they compete with *Sesame Street*?

Postman's book is an important warning. Its success is in part due to its addressing the concern of educators, parents, psychologists and pastors about the negative effects and damage of children's watching too much TV. Postman's entertainment hypothesis, however, is as alarming as it is simple. His analysis needs to be sharpened theoretically. To be more specific, his 'Huxleyan warning' has implications beyond his simple key thesis. And when Postman says that 'our philosophers have given us no guidance' with regard to this risk, he obviously is not aware of some contributions to the philosophical debate.

An even more radical critique of mass media and television than Postman's has been developed by the philosopher Günther Anders (1956, 1980). He is one of the few philosophers who address the technological developments of our century, such as atomic means of destruction, gene technology and the mass media, especially television. *Technology*, rather than politics or economics, has become our fate, Anders contends. The speed of technological development has driven us into a situation in which our psychological and mental capacities, our souls, have not been able to keep up. Our competence to comprehend and act is not up to date with techno-logical development (1956, 15f). The 'Promethean difference' (*Das 'prometheische Gefälle'*) is the primary concern of Anders' anthropology. The human being, he concludes, is antiquated. Philosophical anthropology therefore has to revise most of its traditional concepts.

'In the beginning there was broadcasting; the world happens for it', is the variation of Anders' critique of technology with regard to the electronic mass media. Anders explains his radical criticism of pictures in his chapter on 'the antiquity of reality':

The main category, the main fate of our present existence is *picture*. I mean by 'picture' every representation of the world or parts of the world, whether they consist of photographs, posters, television pictures or films. *'Picture'* is the main category, because today pictures are not any more to be found *also* in our world, as an exception, but because we are surrounded by pictures, are exposed to a permanent rain of pictures. Formerly, there were *pictures in the world*, today we have *the world in pictures*. More precisely, we have the world *as* picture, as picture-wall that captures our view permanently and occupies it permanently; it covers the world permanently. It is obvious that, if the number of pictures (which are not only presented to us, but are forced upon us) increases to such an extent, the quantity turns into quality. (1980, 250) [my translation]

A serious consequence of the establishment of the electronic super-machine, with its vast flood of pictures as part of the second industrial revolution, is a kind of modern alienation and slavery. We have become exploited home-workers but, unlike the exploitation in the first industrial revolution, we are not paid. Here is a summary of Anders' view, focusing on the problems that affect religious education:

- Anders contends that the 'running pictures' and the machines which deliver them *replace speaking*; they take from us the necessity to speak up and make us dependent (1956, 107). In other words, 'the global flood of pictures' has produced a 'post-literary illiteracy' (1956, 3). The ability to speak up and voice one's opinion in matters of religion, a skill we try to develop and nurture as religious educators, will be jeopardised the more religion is entangled with electronic mass media.

- Another result is that *'perception'* has become problematic and antiquated. We are infantilised by machines. We are not 'seeing' and 'listening' ('perceiving') properly speaking; rather, a kind of industrially-produced orality characterises our behaviour as consumers of entertainment (1980, 54). This comes close to Postman's entertainment thesis, but sharpens it.

- Also *'experience'* is endangered; we remain un-experienced. Because of the delivery of mass media products, we do not feel the need to go out on a journey (*experire*) to make experience (1956, 114).

- Finally, and of particular importance for our theme of narrativity, Anders draws our attention to the fact that *'fictionality'* is being destroyed, when the fictional event assumes the character of a real event, because it is produced and communicated in the same way as information about real events (1956, 143). –

Anders' critique makes it necessary that we rethink the proposals for narrative identity once more. His arguments challenge its theoretical justification. Some help, however, comes from another aspect of Anders' work. Fictional narratives make up half of his writings. The radical critique seems to be counter-balanced by his other literary genre. This indicates openness towards, and it aims at, the possibility of narrative identity that emerges

from fictionality – from literary fiction, of course. Anders tells us these stories to elicit and promote non-congruency, resistance against technological alienation.

Before we look in more detail at these liberating forces, I want briefly to point to two other critical perspectives which are close to Anders' critique, but focus more on the role of narrative itself

Ideological Alienation of the Narrative

When we deal with narratives in the everyday world, we need to take into account their possible deformity – we need to talk about *myth*. A definition of myth which focuses on the everyday world of mass media has been developed by Roland Barthes (1957). His analysis is disillusioning, because it describes the process by which everyday images and stories are occupied by a 'second semiological system'. Barthes therefore distinguishes between an 'object language' and a 'meta-language'. He explains this semiological occupation with an example. A cover of a magazine shows a young black man in a French uniform looking upwards and greeting the Tricolore. It is obvious that this photograph is not only to be understood on the level of object language, but transmits something else, namely that France is a great empire and all of her sons, no matter what the colour of their skin, serve under the French flag and also that there is no better argument against all critics of colonialism than this young man's military salute. The story which the photograph also tells, the personal story of a man who has a name, a unique history and so on, is depleted, reduced, vacuated and absorbed by the second semiological system which communicates an ideological message. Barthes' analysis explains, in terms of semiology, the danger of the colonialisation of everyday narratives. This does not make them disappear or render them useless, but he warns us against ignoring the possibility of ideological occupation and distortion.

This colonialising force has been identified by Lyotard as the project of modernity itself (1984, 1986, 1988). His analysis again concerns the very concept of narrativity, since the project of modernity comes with legitimation stories that narrate the emancipation of reason and liberty, the salvation story of capitalistic progress, or Christian stories of teleology. In brief, modernity comes with meta-narratives. Meta-narratives differ from 'small' narratives in that names and all kinds of particularity are eliminated in order to form *The Story* (1988, 221). The project of modernity however, Lyotard contends, has not been forgotten or given up, but it has been destroyed or liquidated. Auschwitz is the paradigmatic name for the tragically 'unfinished' character of modernity. 'How can the big legitimation stories still sound credible?' Anyway, despite their questionable credibility, the meta-narratives continue to be told by 'techno-science', for example by visual and auditory 'gripping devices'. Here again, we come across a very critical analysis of mass media.

Is Narrative Identity Antiquated?

If narratives and other dimensions of cultural communication can be kidnapped and put into the straitjacket of an entertaining electronic super-machine, as Postman and, more radically, Anders maintain; if their meaning can be stolen by a meta-language and confined within the ideological one-dimensionality of everyday myths, as we can learn from Barthes; or if 'small narratives' are subsumed by meta-narratives, legitimising colonialisation and annihilation within modernity, as Lyotard contends, then both the concept of narrative and the concept of narrative identity are confronted with serious questions.

We cannot simply talk about narrative and ignore the danger of its ideological and technological distortions. We have to look carefully at its different meanings, its contexts, its way of communication. Both the subject – the *what* or *whom* of which the narrative speaks – and the *form* of the narrative are significant. 'Narrative' needs to be qualified; we have to re-read the theories of narrativity.

Narrative *identity* appears, to use Anders' term, antiquated. The technological and ideological forces at work have one and the same goal: they incorporate the individual into a collective and congruent identity. Individual identity thus can only be searched for and maintained as resisting the forced alignment with or conformity to the system. The search for identity, for being oneself, appears as 'remaining-behind', as outmoded (1980, 156). I agree. The concept of narrative identity is indeed antiquated, both by being overtaken and outdated by the technological developments of the second industrial revolution and in losing credibility through its alignment with the project of modernity. In our concern for narrative identity, we are left with a backward-looking view or with a post-modern perspective.

However, if we follow the other lines of thought in the work of Anders, Barthes and Lyotard, we can qualify the concept of the narrative so that, despite its antiquity, its creative and liberating potential is revealed. This means an appeal both to *reason* and *fiction*, as in Anders' work; to reckon with the possibility of a liberating unmasking and exposure of the myth, as Barthes asserts; and to focus, in Lyotard's terms, on 'small narratives' which are not aligned with the meta-narratives. We need to appeal to the non-conformity of the narrative and of narrative identity; to its obstinacy against alienation; to its potential for resistance; to its subversiveness. Fictional narratives, I maintain, could prove resistant to the distorting effects of the electronic super-machine. Therefore some theories of narrativity need re-reading.

THE SUBVERSIVENESS OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The critical analyses of technological and ideological alienation which I have outlined so far present serious challenges to the concept of narrative identity and make it appear antiquated or outmoded. I am prepared to face these challenges, but would like to pass on the task to Paul Ricoeur, one of the key theorists of narrative identity who has inspired reflections on narrative identity in religious education. Using Ricoeur's work, I will discuss a more developed concept of narrative identity that can meet these challenges. Narrative identity, in a single thesis, invites *selfhood* and *subjectivity*, it invites *particularity* and *pluralism*, it invites *subversiveness* and *difference*. I will explain these three propositions in more detail.

Narrative Identity Invites Selfhood and Subjectivity

In developing a philosophically sound concept of narrative identity, Ricoeur has introduced the decisive distinction between *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity (1988, 246).

What Ricoeur has dismissed and abandoned is a concept of collective identity in the sense of forced integration into a cultural or socio-political system. His proposal concerns subjective identity but, more specifically, subjective identity that is able to transcend the dilemma of substantialist concepts of identity. Identity, according to Ricoeur, is to be defined as identity-as-interpretation, which, by means of the distinction between *idem*-identity and selfhood, is radicalised to the point of a dynamic, open-ended identity that not only tolerates narrative variations, but 'seeks them out' (Ricoeur 1992, 148). According to Ricoeur, narrative identity means reading and re-writing one's life story in the context of a web of narratives. Identity then is based on the narrative or, more precisely, on a variety of narratives that are part of a 'vast laboratory for thought experiments' – and not based on a single meta-narrative. Therefore we can understand *selfhood and subjectivity as the aim of the narrative*, even if we would have to call ourselves, but with some pride, antiquated or outmoded non-conformists (Anders 1980, 156).

Narrative Identity Invites Particularity and Pluralism

Meta-narratives can be characterised as eliminating the names of the people. But these, as Lyotard maintains, have lost credibility. However, as Lyotard says, the 'billions of small and less small narratives' are still credible (1986). They 'weave the fabric of everyday life.' These of course are narratives with characters who have names.

Identity, if we follow Ricoeur, is characterised by dialogical relation to another, by responsiveness and responsibility, by keeping one's word in faithfulness (1992, 118). This points to the issues of relatedness in particularity. Particularity and therefore pluralism are features of narrative identity, as opposed to being incorporated into a collective myth or meta-story or into an electronic super-machine.

This view is supported by a central idea of 'narrative theology'. If 'remembering' and 'solidarity' are the categories of 'narrative theology', as Metz maintains (1977), or, as it is named by Peukert, 'anamnetic solidarity' (1976), then remembering narratives means remembering *names*. Religious communities and the church as 'communities of remembering and storytelling' are not to be identified with teleological meta-narratives, but with the subversiveness and particularity of small narratives that tell about and remember the victims of history. From this point of view, the *'small-life-world' narratives* are the ones that are important. The model of narrative identity, if qualified by social-phenomenological theory and by recent developments in social constructivism, rests on the idea of a 'relational self' that features particularity and pluralism.

Narrative Identity Invites Subversiveness and Difference

A central issue of religious interpretation of the world has been called 'Möglichkeits-Sinn', 'a sense of possibilities'. This involves an 'awareness of difference', that it could be otherwise. In social phenomenology, this is reflected by the idea of 'awareness of difference' (Grathoff 1995) which means, in the first place, transcendence within one's life-world, but indicates and aims at transcendence of the state of affairs. The subversive character of *difference* should be highlighted here. A perspective on such subversiveness has been developed in narrative theology. Metz has called the narratives that are important

for the Christian faith 'dangerous memories' and 'subversive narratives'. Their subversiveness consists in their dissent from the order of the world, in their opposition to alienation and in their aiming at 'becoming a subject'.

Here the very idea of narrativity presents us with revealing insights. According to Ricoeur, narrative provides a variety of possibilities, of 'imaginative variations' of plots which lead to the process that takes place in the laboratory for thought experiments, namely taking new plots into consideration. Therefore, *fiction* is an important narrative form for producing identity. Following Ricoeur, 'fiction has the power to "remake" reality' (1983, 185). Fictionality indicates an important obstinacy of the narrative against mass media alienation.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES, MASS MEDIA, AND EVERYDAY MYTHS

To sum up, I regard the narrative approach as one of the best we have for education in our 'communities of remembering and storytelling'. But we have come to understand this approach as antiquated, since we do not live on an island apart from civilisation and we cannot ignore the industrial revolutions of modernity. Religious education and its narrative approach are affected by, and entangled in, the modern development of mass media and myths. In discussing narrative identity critically, I have argued that it invites *selfhood* and *subjectivity; particularity* and *pluralism; subversiveness* and *difference*. So what are the implications of this for religious education? In this concluding section, I will make some suggestions.

- From the critical analyses discussed above, it may be concluded that using electronic media in religious education ends in nothing else than in captivity and distortion. Indeed I question whether we should promote religious television shows, software production for religious education, or computer games with religious themes. The danger of such productions is that they risk turning religion and religious themes into entertainment packages.

- The criteria that follow from the idea of narrative subversiveness suggest a certain kind of appreciation for electronic communication – also for the field of religion. Stories told by films and videos can be of great value, provided that they tell a narrative which contributes to selfhood, if they feature fictionality, diachronicity and particularity, if they present, as Metz would say, 'dangerous memories' and tell 'subversive narratives'.

- The key issue of mass media influence on religious education is its potential impact on the form and the content of religious education. The myths (the mythological content or signification) communicated by electronic mass media influence adults' and children's everyday world. The most influential and widespread contents and messages of these mythologies probably change rapidly from one TV generation to the next. Religious education relates to these myths, whether consciously or unconsciously, and whether it likes it or not. Therefore it is the task of religious educators to find out what kinds of mythologies students bring with them into the

process of religious education, and to relate critically to the most prevalent of them. Religious education in a narrative mode provides an opportunity to relate the narratives of the small social life-worlds to new, to *religious* stories.

- The consumerist habits that almost all of our children acquire during the vast amount of time they spend in consuming electronic mass media products, influence their approach to religious stories and the ways they interact in religious education. These habits are significant limiting factors we need to address in a narrative approach to religious education.

Thus, religious education has a critical, subversive task in form and in content. The form in which religious educators and students deal with narratives may have become as important as the content of the narratives that are selected for religious education. Religious education that adopts a narrative approach, to use Ricoeur's metaphor, is a 'laboratory for thought experiments'. As in every laboratory, people who want to work there successfully need training. Thus we need to pay special attention to the learning dimensions of religious education in times of mass media revolution. Religious education should communicate the skills of narrative interaction and narrative figuration. This means:

- Religious education should be education in *diachronicity* and in *remembering* over against the synchronicity that is the pretension of electronic mass media.

- Religious education should engage especially in remembering particular events and people who have names. It has to deal with the question, 'Whose story is listened to?' Small narratives and small-life-world narratives should be honoured and held up over against meta-narratives.

- Religious education has to refrain from a dominating, colonialising use of religious narratives as if they were meta-narratives; on the contrary, such (mis-)use should be subjected to critical discussion in religious education. It follows from this that religious education needs to promote pluralism and tolerance, rather than the streamlining and congruency of a collective religious identity.

- De-schooling from what electronic mass media consumption has taught, religious education should be education in *perception*, it should be education in *seeing* and *hearing*, a school of *fictionality* and *responsiveness*. Fictionality means to realise the *'difference'*, to realise the 'it-could-be-otherwise' in order to play imaginatively with alternatives. Responsiveness means not only to be aware of the otherness of the other, but, as we can say with Ricoeur, learning to see oneself as another.

- Finally the narrative approach to religious education should contribute, as Tillich maintains, to an 'introduction in the mystery of being' (1963), which is something different from the magic of the electronic entertainment machine.

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Christian Theology: An Introduction, Alister E McGrath, Blackwell, Second Edition 1997, pp. xix + 603, pbk £13.99, 0–631–19849–0.

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People sometimes quip that Dr McGrath writes a new book every other weekend, and the list of his publications goes far to account for this impression. Yet this *Introduction* alone would have made him a significant contributor to Christian theological education in three continents, for it is a work that could have come only from a secure scholar.

But why should this particular work be reviewed in *BJRE*? One answer is that this volume offers a significant contribution to *religious education* in Britain. Although intended as an introduction to the study of Christian theology – and it consequently offers much to students at A-level – McGrath's book is incidentally a well-organised, carefully presented resource book for RE teachers without specialist knowledge in this area. Given recent government and DfEE emphasis on the place in statutory religious education of Christianity among the religious traditions in Britain, it is helpful to have available an authoritative and accessible work which introduces not only what Christians believe, but how, over time, their beliefs have come to be what they are, in all their diversity. A bonus for readers is that this volume makes it plain that theologians can find their work exciting; that there is an identifiable, well-worked area specific to theology; that theology has both method and history; that in studying theology students will encounter some of the finest minds and largest human issues.

Basically, McGrath's book is built up in three parts, but it has a fourth 'aspect' of potential use and interest to RE teachers. Its first part, *Landmarks*, offers a general overview of the periods, personalities and issues in Christian theology; the second part, *Sources and Methods*, gets to grips with what the subject is about – God – and how people have, and still may, set about talking sense in this area. The third part, *Christian Theology*, takes up the classical Christian theological menu – it looks, for example, at the Doctrine of God, Trinity, Christology – with the addition of a chapter on Christianity and other faiths.

McGrath carefully designed his work to be an 'entry-level' *introduction* to the study of theology for new students. Simplicity of language is one way to achieve this, and McGrath has pared down the length and complexity of sentences so that readers are left with no evidence of a theological fog-machine. Further, he has produced a glossary which lists a wide range of technical terms and offers comparatively simple accounts of each. This glossary is supported by indexes which take students further into the discussion of each term; more casual readers will find the index a way of getting at what the Christian tradition has believed and believes about each major element in its tradition. Then there is an index of citations to help readers track down all major references within the volume, but, more fruitfully, it offers cross references to its companion *Reader* which is not essential to the