

Balázs Siba

**LIFE STORY AND CHRISTIAN
METANARRATION**

THE IMPORTANCE OF
THE RESEARCH RESULTS OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY
TO PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem • L'Harmattan Kiadó

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3710124 Torino-Italia
T./E.: +39.11.817.13.88

ISBN 978 963 236
ISSN 2063-3297

Kiadja a Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem és a L'Harmattan Kiadó
A kiadó kötetei megrendelhetők, illetve kedvezménnyel megvásárolhatók:

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A borítót Ujváry Jenő tervezte.
A tördelés Csernák Krisztina munkája.
A nyomdai munkákat a Robinco Kft. végezte,
felelős vezető Kecskeméthy Péter.

FOREWORD

In the spring of 2002 I had the opportunity to participate in a conference organized for religious teachers and preachers in Montreat, Appalachia Mountains. I met a storyteller who taught us the “theory” of storytelling for many days. One afternoon he said that Jesus’ parables are understandable only if we add our life stories to the biblical story, if we answer Jesus’ question with our whole lives. Since then I am very concerned with this notion to correlate God’s story to our life stories. What are the impacts of these stories, how do they interact with each other?

From this question sprang many others. Why do we find stories interesting? Is there a logic in these stories? What makes a story a good one?

In my work I often use the words narration, narrative, recital, fiction, but to understand the essence of the stories we have to understand these words in a different way than their normal, everyday meaning. These words do not refer to mere imagination, to the non-existent, but are ways to approach and understand the truth. For there are many things in life that can be best told by using symbols and metaphors. It is a special way to grasp reality, to which rational, scholarly parlance is not suitable.

In my book, I invite the reader to a journey, during which we can add our life stories next to God’s, like the Samaritan woman did when he met Jesus at Jacob’s well (John 4:5-42).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the many people who saw me through this book; to all those who provided support, talked things over, read, wrote, offered comments, assisted in the editing, proofreading and design.

I would like to thank for Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz (HEKS) and the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary enabling me to publish this book.

I want to thank Etelka Görgey for the main part of translation, and Aaron Stevens, Carolyn Otterness, Coralyn Medgyessy, Ferenczy Enikő, Marika Görömbey, Hugh Houghton, Megan van Dyke, Njeri Wagana for the proofreading.

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SUMMARY

In the postmodern age, approaching identity from a narrative prospective is not only a novel but a contemporary issue in scientific research. The main argument of my thesis is that in forming of our Christian identity this approach can be fruitful by helping our Christian practice to be more reflective and simultaneously closer to the real life of Christians.

In the first chapter I draw a picture of what living in a postmodern Eastern Europe means. The fact that our world is changing rapidly is especially true in the former communist societies where not only the economical and political systems have changed, but we can witness a gradual change in the human mind as well. Contrary to the modern age, ours is one in which people feel that they are losing control of understanding the different tendencies in our world. The family roles, the economical situation and many other things can change so rapidly that we cannot understand life through rationality. We have to face final questions and make decisions, cross borders more than in any earlier age. Not only crisis situations but even our everyday life confronts us with the difficulty of defining ourselves in the world. And this need of orientation can be a link to the Christian message in the postmodern. People need to lead a self-reflective life and this is also an aim of Christianity—to raise questions and teach people how to understand themselves, find meaning for their lives. It can be taken on as a duty of Christianity to facilitate, provide space for self-reflection.

In the second chapter I examine the *raison d'être* of focusing on human life in Practical Theology. In doing so we have to see the

need of a theology which does not leave out of view the reality in which people live. On the other hand theology cannot be satisfied by inspecting human life as social science does, but theology has to reflect on life from a higher perspective, in the light of the Christian message. Both focuses are important: knowing the people whom we want to reach with the Gospel and simultaneously we have to know the message itself as well. This means that Practical Theology should help the church to foster Christian identity in the context of the present challenges, the real-life world of the people. In doing so, dealing with life-stories can be a good device, because from a sociological aspect life-stories can help us to understand what kind of a role religion plays in people's life. From a pedagogical perspective these stories show how faith grows and from a theological perspective these stories witness God's work, *gubernatio*, in people's life.

The third chapter shows two different ways of understanding, modeling the world. The first approach is the so called paradigmatic modeling and the second is the narrative way of understanding the world. While the paradigmatic thinking makes categories and hierarchies, the narrative form does not need to frame everything in a scientific system but to a story. A story that has a beginning and an ending, a story that has an orientation. And this orientation is one reason why narratives are so important in religious thinking. In science the paradigmatic analysis tries to give answers of understanding the world, the narrative does not analyze but shows an interpretation and a model how to live. The Christian faith is not only in origin based on grand narratives but the logic of the narrative is present in the religious thinking itself. That is a characteristic of religious thinking we should re-discover in an age when the narratives play a more and more important role in creating personal identity.

In the fourth chapter we examine how our personal meta-narrative is created and what the connection is between our personal myth and the grand story of Christianity. Behind these two terms lie two inexhaustible questions: "Who am I in the world?" and "Where is God in the world?" At the first glance it seems that these two have not much in common but in reality they are inseparable, because God's presence in human life has a real effect on personal identity. The

SUMMARY

human quest for meaning and God's quest for people in concrete life-stories meet. These two intertwine and effect each other. Personal life and faith experiences of the believers show us what it means that God is present in the world. Many highly detailed stories are combined and added to each other and together form a "never-ending-story." In sharing our stories with each other in Christian setting, we share perspectives of interpretation of life as well. Christianity gives a bound of perspectives from generation to generation. From this point of view being a Christian means that someone takes on a system of perspectives, steps into a stream of stories with God. The story of God helps us to understand our own story, names our wishes, gives wordpower to our feelings.

Through the analysis of narrative interviews the fifth chapter shows three types of mythobiography. In the first type religious themes appear only in separated situations in different spheres of life. In the second type the different religious topics have clear connections to each other and the interviewee can tell a story of his/her religious self. On this level of mythobiography religion is a kind of a segment-identity which can be separated from other identity segments (work, family, spare-time activities). The third type shows another dimension of religion, because on this level religion appears not only in themes or a story of the self but a way at looking at oneself and one's life. In this case religion is not only a segment of identity but a principle that holds together all the segments. The three different kinds of mythobiography show not only how someone's religious story has developed but how religious interpretations are strongly attached to religious content. The religious self-understanding becomes a personal witness of Christian faith, when someone sees his/herself as a part of God's story with humankind.

The sixth chapter, besides summarizing all the previous chapters, shows a model for how to shepherd, foster life-stories. When we talk about explicit religiosity it is crucial that people should reflect on their lives, raise questions. In other words it is necessary to have a need for what religion can fulfill: life- and world-explanation. The special role of Christianity is not (only) raising questions but furthermore giving answers to these questions. In identity formation Christianity

offers special perspectives and concrete content. But what makes self-reflection, Christian self-reflection? First of all the context where this caring for life-stories takes place, because from a hermeneutical point of view the frame always effects the content. On the other hand in Christian setting reflection always happens in a communication sphere. Self-reflection is a communicative action, either we talk to God or to others in the Christian community. Besides the Christian setting, the Christian message is also an identity forming factor. The use of the grand metaphors, symbols, images of our Christian faith is crucial, because they have a symbolic power to involve us into the story of God, making connection between previous and coming generations, and linking our conscious to the collective subconscious dimensions of human life. From a theological approach life-coaching can be a chance to see our lives from a new perspective and understand what God wants to teach us through the story of our own life.