Leading with Hope: Religious Education through Teaching Story
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Defending her fiction in the face of religious criticism, Southern writer Flannery O Connor once declared, The South may not be Christ centered, but it is certainly Christ haunted! Having taught in the South for seven years now, I have come to appreciate O Connor s evaluation. Presently, I teach at a college in central Louisiana, a small school of about 3000 students. These students come from the nine-parish (county) rural area surrounding the school near a city of almost 50,000. Most people in this part of the state are religious and conservative, whether or not they are involved in a local congregation. Usually, if adults do not espouse traditional theological ideas with which they grew up, they are at least haunted by them. Most of my students have had virtually no experience critically examining their inherited theological ideas. I find they basically cluster around two extremes of the theological spectrum: They accept the propositions of an unexamined faith tradition which are often exclusive if not oppressive or, knowing no other theological options, they reject their inherited faith, seeing it as irrelevant or inadequate. At this end of the spectrum, students with whom I come into contact encounter faith crises as they attempt to answer questions arising when their experience in the post-modern world does not fit the faith they were taught as children. In other words, answers their traditional faith once offered do not fit questions they now ask. At the other extreme, I encounter students who, isolated within their own story communities, have never examined their faith critically in light of the post-modern world and are therefore resistant to broader theological understandings and interfaith dialogue.

In fact, however, these students experiences illustrate one of the basic tenets of narrative theology, the assumption that human beings are storytellers and that they express their understanding of reality by telling stories.[1] In terms of time, narratives help persons understand the present in light of the past and the future (Miller and Grenz 1998). Furthermore, narrative theologian Hans Frei argues the importance of biblical narratives lies in their ability to portray a reflection of the narrative shape of reality (Frei 1974). Thus, through plot and character development, narratives offer insight into basic human condition (the present) as

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[1]It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the myriad facets of narrative theology, which are still a matter of much theological discussion. Rather, the paper s thesis stems from specific assumptions of narrative theology which the paper delimits.

well as the origins of human life (the past) and the goals of that life (the future) (Hauerwas 1977).

Moreover, narrative theology assumes that stories figure significantly in the development of personal identity. Theologian George Stroup (1981) claims human identity develops as individuals interpret personal life from the perspective of significant past events and in accordance with a personal scheme including values, ideas, and goals. Such an interpretive framework develops within a social context or tradition which recites an ongoing story that provides categories through which persons understand their lives. In short, narrative theologians posit that personal identity has a communal element; that is, personal identity is shaped by the community in which the individual is a participant (Miller and Grenz 1998). The community s recitation of common stories helps an individual form personal identity.

Such theological thinking is indebted to certain movements in literary criticism. Against formalism (New Criticism) and structuralism, which stress a focus only on the written text as if it exists apart from the world around it, cultural and contextual critics contend that knowledge of what we think is outside the text is often already implied within our understanding of the text. Derrida concludes, Nothing lies outside the text (1976, 158).

On this point narrative theology concurs: Narrative theologians assert the importance of participation in the Christian community for development of Christian identity and faith. Of course, one must also take into consideration the context in which the biblical stories were narrated and recorded, thus connecting interpretation of the present with interpretation of the past. Specifically and significantly, according to narrative theology the Christian community appeals to the biblical narrative as the fundamental resource the context for constructing its identity.

However, I find that I must take into consideration the geographical context of my students in addition. They are participants in the community of Christian faith as well as participants in the Christ-haunted culture of the rural South, and ideas of this culture are embedded in the community s interpretation of the biblical text. Starkly put, there is largely one particular interpretation of the Christian faith, or at least variations on that theme. Propositions of this interpretation include, for example, acceptance of a literal interpretation of Scripture, an image of God as exclusively a male person, a mandate for the subordination of women to men, and assent to specific doctrines in order to receive salvation.

Admittedly, however, some of my students have encountered the larger, post-modern world, and their experience is similar to those students for whom

answers provided by their traditional faith propositions are inadequate to address their faith crises. Both groups of students assume the propositional theology prevalent in the South is the only way to interpret Christian theology. For the most part, they see their options for belief as polar opposites: either they unquestioningly accept a specific propositional faith, or they react with relativity. While students grappling with the propositions of their traditional faith are sometimes inclined to take an elective religion class in an effort to deal with their questions, the post-modern students usually expect a course in Christianity to reinforce propositions they no longer accept. Quite honestly, these students are likely to take an elective course in Christianity because it is the only elective which fits their schedule, and they must have a humanities elective to fulfill degree requirements. Some of these students, however, are struggling with the bombardment of ideas, and rather than unquestioningly accept relativity, they are thrown into crisis by the sheer volume of options. These students, like those struggling with a faith crisis, may take a religion course as part of their search for faith handles on which to hold. Of course, faced with the bombardment of theological ideas, some students also some tend to cling more tenaciously to their traditional (narrow) faith. Though these students are likely less receptive to straightforward lecture about diverse religious ideas, through stories they encounter diversity in a less threatening way, much as do students who have had little opportunity to consider diversity.

The religion and literature course I have taught previously (although at another college but in the same geographical area), and that I plan to teach at my current university, rests on an assumption that we need to develop new ways of teaching faith development to offer students hope in a post-modern, globalized era, an era in which propositional doctrines do not fit. George Lindbeck (1984) suggests that uncritical adherence to propositional doctrine often hinders ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, but furthermore, propositional faith is not relevant for seekers who experience faith crises or for postmodern adults who tend toward relativism. Moreover, postmodern fiction stories are not sequentially linear; rather, these stories are fragmented without a sense of beginning, conflict, and resolution. Even if they include a traditional conflict, the resolution is open-ended. These stories represent the fragmented postmodern world we live in.

In such an age, the self is saturated so that we have an identity crisis of global proportions. The result of emerging technologies is often an overlapping of communities and thus a proliferation of hybrid identities, causing a person to negotiate several non-territorial identities within the self (Scholte 2000). This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to disconnected relationships which invite us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an authentic self with knowable characteristics is foreign (Gergen 1991). To avoid the saturated

self becoming no self at all, we need new way of understanding the self within communities. This concept of a self in relation to the community is consistent with narrative theology, but at the same time, we must recognize that postmodern communities are not defined geographically, nor or individuals members of primarily one community. Globalization has led to nonterritorial frameworks of collective identity and solidarities along the lines of gender, class, age, and the like.

New understandings of reality and epistemology are called for as well. Reality and truth are not regarded as objective; rather, both reality and knowledge are constructed socially within the context of specific geographic and non-territorial communities. Thomas Kuhn s analysis of scientific revolutions has drastically altered the concept of knowledge: According to Kuhn, what counts as fact depends on one s perspective (Kuhn 1962). As a result, knowledge in the postmodern world is not conceived of as an approximation to truth or reality but rather is seen as an interaction between the knower and the known, depending on biological, psychological, cultural, and linguistic factors. Furthermore, technology has ensured a steadily increasing exposure to a multiplicity of other perspectives.

Moreover, neither is reality objectively verifiable. For example, objects are not simply given as sense data, but actually are construed by an enormity of mental factors ranging from gestalt dynamics and learning processes to linguistic and *cultural factors* [italics mine] that determine what we see or perceive (von Bertalanffy 1969).

The shift in the concept of self, knowledge, and reality implies new way of teaching faith development, as is practically evident with types of students I encounter. Teaching traditional propositions of faith via lecture alone does not usually address questions of faith crises. However, because many post-modern students are still unaware of more than one way to define Christian faith, they may be significantly influenced by lecture as well as by narrative. Perhaps surprisingly, those students who unquestioningly accept their propositional faith are most willing to take an academic course in Christian thought, though they usually do so because they assume the course will reinforce the tenets of their faith. In contrast to students whose selves are saturated with a plethora of voices, students who uncritically accept the tenets of their faith need to be encounter different voices in order to break out of their exclusivity. Of course, many of them are unaware of the historical process of the formation of Christian doctrine; they are unaware, as well, of certain facets of church history and theology, for example, church councils, debates over Christology, formation of the canon, and the like. Simply giving students this information helps them become more open to a diversity of ideas in many cases. Furthermore, students who have little or no formal exposure to a variety of theological ideas are more able to interpret fiction from a

theological standpoint when they have the tools, that is, when they have had some classroom discussion of theology. Therefore, undergirding the discussion of fiction with lectures and dialogues about Christian theology still is beneficial in my students context. Encountering fiction, however, opens doors to examination of the broader spectrum of theology.

Specific challenges arise in working with this group of students, but along with these challenges come times of reflection and growth. In no sense does the preceding characterization of my students criticize them. They simply lack exposure to the historical story of their faith and to the future direction of theological dialogue, and their stories however narrow have been formed in context of their community. Nevertheless, because I see one aspect of my role as religious educator in the academic classroom to be facilitator of faith formation and growth, I am compelled to stretch these students. Given the nature of our storied tradition and the role of story in identity formation, dialogue about stories seems not only appropriate but essential. Through this process, I strive to offer hope hope for students encountering faith crises, whether those crises are precipitated by personal difficulties or by e00ncounter with post-modern relativity; hope for growth in personal and corporate faith; and hope for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

Most of my students do not comprehend the role of stories in shaping identity and belief, though some of them may have been introduced to the idea in psychology or sociology courses. I do not necessarily feel compelled to explain the concept, for I have found my students stories quite naturally connect with stories of others they encounter through literature. The approach also assumes a spirituality of connection among people: Despite different contexts, something about our stories rings true to others, and their stories ring true to us. In summary, I find that stories offer hope for students to embrace diversity and dialogue

One of the most successful courses I have taught previously and plan to teach in the future is Christian Thought and Contemporary American Short Fiction. The course includes reading assignments in theology as well as fiction, class dialogue, oral presentations, and written assignments. A broad topical outline includes discussion about God and revelation, human beings, good and evil/suffering and justice, Christ and redemption, spirit and spirituality, and the realm of God and end times. Following is a sketch of selected stories I have included that course and the impact of these stories. Of course, the topics overlap, and one story may fit quite will within several topics a sort of connection, so to speak, befitting for a course in which stories facilitate connection.

First, the Jewish author Philip Roth s short story Conversion of the Jews is a good way to open dialogue concerning diverse ideas about God. As the plot

of the story revolves around a young Jewish boy s questioning one aspect of his tradition, the story also provides a prelude to interfaith dialogue. After some reflection, so the story goes, the boy questions his teacher about the possibility of God s incarnation in the person of Jesus. Steadfastly, the teacher refuses to entertain the question, but the boy persists. In the past, the teacher has repeatedly struck the student for his presumably impudent questions, and even his mother, frustrated with the boy s persistence, has cautioned him about asking such difficult questions. Finally, in a desperate attempt to gain attention, the young boy climbs to the roof of the school, threatening to jump if his teacher and other onlookers do not admit the possibility of incarnation. When at last the teacher does so, the boy descends from the roof, and the story ends as he notes to his mother, You shouldn t hit anyone about God. The story quite naturally leads into a discussion of historical debates about the nature of God as well as about the way people have symbolically if not literally hit each other about God as a result of these debates. Sometimes, students relate this information to contemporary ideas about the nature and character of God. However, I attempt to stretch students beyond their largely unexamined ideas so that, realizing such a discussion is not a new phenomenon, they will be at least more open to examining diverse concepts about God.

The stories of the contemporary African-American writer Alice Walker provide further fertile ground for dialogue. Walker s works first gained acclaim when her novel *The Color Purple* was adapted to film. As the story of women s resistence, the novel explores women s spirituality, but at the same time it also explores theological concepts of God. At one point, when the main character Celie has been struggling with her white, male, even abusive image of God (her image having been influenced by the abusive men in her family), her sister-in-law informs her, God is inside you and inside everybody else. The story opens the way to discussions about the nature and characteristics of God, natural revelation, images for and language about God, and spirituality. Particularly relevant is the Celtic spirituality tradition which affirms God s presence in everything, both people and nature. Furthermore, such a discussion about spirituality coincides with interdisciplinary dialogue, particularly between religion and science, as Barbara Taylor Brown (2000) notes in The Physics of Communion.

Other Walker stories offer further insights into spirituality. For instance, Everyday Use elicits dialogue specifically about women s spirituality. The main character of the story, known as Mama, changes from a receptacle of traditional spirituality, a process which has silenced both her and her youngest and formally uneducated daughter Maggie, into a strong woman who learns to speak of the heritage that has taught her to quilt fragments into wholeness. At the story s conclusion, when Mama declares that she will give the family heirloom quilts to Maggie instead of to the refined and educated older daughter Dee, she exhibits a

spirituality of connection, and the formerly "patched" separateness of spirituality and tradition is transformed, through creating, into new unity. Mama's spirituality cannot be solitary, for quilting, sewing, and stitching are ritual bonding activities that ultimately are given as a gift toward community. As the story focuses on connection, it also illustrates one aspect of contemporary theological anthropology: an ontology of communion, in the words of Douglas John Hall (1986). In other words, being human means being with. The story, therefore, can help facilitate dialogue about spirituality which moves beyond the strictly personal and individualistic spirituality with which most of my students are so familiar.

Two stories of another twentieth-century African-American, the Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes, can lead to dialogue about Christ and redemption.[2] Salvation, set in context of an African-American church revival, is narrated by a 12-year-old boy who is pressured by his grandmother and her congregation to be saved. Along with other children his age, the narrator sits on the front row of the church while the preacher addresses his emotional remarks to them. After all the children have gone forward to the mourners bench except the narrator and his friend, finally the friend goes forward in an effort to end the ordeal. Still, the narrator refuses to budge, instead waiting and wishing for Jesus tangibly to come to him. Finally, after what seems to be an hour, the narrator goes forward just to bring an end to the wait and to satisfy his grandmother. But later that night, when his grandmother senses his crying and thinks he is shedding tears of joy, the narrator admits he is weeping because the Jesus he wished would come never did.

The story opens dialogue about students reactions when it seems Christ fails to meet personal expectations or demands. I usually begin discussion by posing the question: What image of Christ does the narrator now not believe in? One interpretation of the story is that when the Jesus he has always heard of does not meet the narrator s expectations, he experiences a significant faith crisis. Usually, some students have also undergone a similar faith crisis or have found it difficult to espouse the popular faith of their peers. Therefore, discussion focuses also on the nature of the Christ participants expect to meet them on their terms in whatever situations they find themselves. A dialogue about the nature of redemption can easily follow.

A corresponding dialogue about the Christ who comes unexpectedly can ensue after class participants have read a companion story by Hughes, Big

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[2]Though Hughes is not a contemporary American author, strictly speaking, I include his work in this course because the stories are so rich with dialogue possibilities.

Meeting, in which two boys sit outside the boundaries of a revival tent meeting. At first, the boys are present simply to watch the show, and they join with other visitors in a car, both groups poking fun at the revival meeting congregation. Yet when the people in the car become frightened and leave the scene, the boys find they are crying, begging the onlookers to return and apparently believing in the authenticity of the congregation s experience, despite their initial skepticism and lightheartedness.

As does Hughes Salvation, the short story Water Closet Vision, by Asian-American author Gish Jen, invites readers to consider their responses to a Christ who does not meet their traditional expectations. Throughout the story, the devoutly religious main character, a young girl, and her best friend respond to messages which former tenants, a young couple, have left in an apartment. During difficult times, the couple had apparently written specific prayer requests on pieces of paper, later recording an answer along with the phrase praise the Lord or simply the letters PTL. In their naivete, the girls are enamored by the record of what they consider miracles, until they are faced with a crisis of their own when the friend s father becomes abusive and eventually abandons the family. The final scene of the story portrays the main character wishing to find the prayer beads she has lost in the sewer, and when her friend remarks she doesn t think miracles occur in sewers, the girl wishes for a time when she could simply tell Jesus where she hurt and receive instant healing in return. The story is also appropriately used in discussion about good and evil, suffering and justice.

Yet another Alice Walker story, The Welcome Table, also makes accessible theological concepts of Christ and redemption. At the story s conclusion, Jesus walks along beside an old African-American woman who has been physically thrown out of a white church. As she walks down the road, the woman relies on the only form of resistance left to her, music, and the story takes on a surreal quality when, as she sings her spirituals, the image of Jesus accompanies her rather than remaining in the congregation and calling those people to follow him. Thus, the story also offers a bridge to dialogue about Christology from an African-American or liberation perspective.

Finally, the short stories of Southern author Flannery O Connor, with their sometimes violent contexts, could be equally fruitful in discussions about evil and suffering, though near the end of the semester, I employ them in a discussion of the realm of God, including exploration of realized and prophetic eschatology, the latter of which John Dominic Crossan (1986) takes to mean the reordering of worlds in any age, this one or a future one. O Connor s Revelation and A Good Man Is Hard to Find illustrate the point well, for the stories help facilitate a discussion of justice as well as dialogue which moves beyond a predominant interpretation of eschatology as entirely future. The stories can be effectively

introduced as parables of the realm of God, stories which are not concerned with linear concepts of time, but with moments when past and future are wrapped up in the present. O Connor s stories interpreted as parables, then, do not describe some future world but invite persons to a transformed way of life involving different ways of relating to each other in community in this world.

Specifically, the setting of A Good Man is the dominant consciousness of Southern culture and conventional wisdom, both of which provide guidance about how to live. The main character of the story, the grandmother who lives with her son and his family, consciously embodies the image of a Southern lady who offers advice covering everything from practical matters to the central values of the good life and of good people. Yet her assertion of the rightness of the past belies her hierarchical view of reality in which she is near the top. When The Misfit, a criminal, appears on the scene uttering the cry of the marginal, his words force the grandmother to see reality from a different perspective, and his words invite readers to do the same as well. Forced to face the ever-increasing possibility of death, the grandmother finally appeals to a religion of God s accessibility in which the world is divided into those who have faith and those who do not. But just before her death, she questions that naive faith, a point which students are led to consider as well. Though the story is violent, in the words of Sallie McFague, the grotesque forces a look at radical incongruity, at what is outside, does not fit, is strange and disturbing....They [grotesque stories] shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they involve tension, and they are implicitly revolutionary (McFague 1975, 17).

The comic counterpart to this parable, and one which can lead students into similar dialogue, is O Connor s Revelation. The world of Mrs. Turpin, the main character, is the world of the dominant consciousness, as her exaggerated hierarchical arrangement of persons into social classes based on race and affluence demonstrates. Her identity, and indeed her religious faith, are grounded in her possessions. Mary Grace, the person society has designated a freak, initiates the radical reversion of Mrs. Turpin s world, a world in which her concept of order is shattered.

Because O Connor s stories provide thought for discussions of eschatology, they are a fitting conclusion to the course. I find this course stretches students beyond the confines of their individual stories and therefore offers hope of continued mature faith development. Two former students, for instance, developed voices of their own during the course of the semester. One of these students carried that voice to other classes. At the beginning of the semester, she exemplified the student who experienced a faith crisis when she encountered diverse ideas which were foreign to the traditional religious ideas of her community. At the end of the semester, she was beginning to discover she could

continue to re-articulate a dynamic faith rather than abandon religious faith altogether.

In conversation with the other student, who graduated at the end of that semester, I discovered that before taking the course she had assumed the class would present predominantly traditional religious idea, some of which were uncomfortable to her. Thus, she was reluctant to take the course. However, she revealed that during the semester she had found more diversity in theology and had begun a personal faith dialogue with ideas she had encountered. A more traditional student, about whom I was at first hesitant, changed his major to humanities after taking the course. Eventually, he spoke of the friction he felt between indoctrination and faith development. Such thoughts, he said, were facilitated through our class discussions. Though at the conclusion of the course he remained true to many of his original theological ideas, he was genuinely more open to dialogue.

None of this presentation implies the religion and literature course is miracle course. Rather, it is an ongoing project which I will continue to re-evaluate in subsequent semesters. Quite simply, the project is my attempt to address issues of diversity and crisis, to encourage faith development, and thus, as a religious educator in the post-modern globalized world, to offer hope.

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