

THE POWER OF THE STORY TELLER IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Terence Copley
University of Exeter

Abstract

This paper considers the role of the storyteller of religious narrative or religious subjects, not as presenter, but as custodian of the narrative. Case studies are examined. It is argued that more attention needs to be paid to the power of the storyteller and the issues that arise from its use and abuse.

INTRODUCTION

There were three men went down the road
As down the road went he,
The man he was,
The man folk saw,
The man he wished to be.

[Source unknown, quoted in Kearney 2003: 113)

But the fourth line implies that there might be many more than three...

For purposes of this paper a storyteller is deemed to be someone who tells or re-tells a story, whether the medium is oral or written. A story is deemed to be an account or narrative, whether fictional or based on knowledge (the latter phrase is used to embrace the stories of personhood, history and science). In the ancient world the storyteller was a visible figure; in the modern world the storyteller is less often seen. Yet just as the chairperson is highly influential in drawing up agendas and conducting – even controlling – a meeting, the storyteller shapes the audience's perception of the story.

Much western literature on story has focused on the nature of story or its effect on the audience. There are whole collections on the nature of novels, the art of biography, story as a tool in therapy, the role of story in culture etc. When attention has been paid to the storyteller, it has usually been in relation to techniques for presentation, eg by Baker and Green (1977). Pagnucci argues that education holds an anti-narrative bias that significantly shapes dissertations and graduate study. Yet, he argues, story is a vital tool for meaning making. One might add that science, too, is dependent on stories, to account for how things are in the universe.

This paper, while giving due attention to story, focuses on the power of the storyteller and how this can be used or abused. Appropriately, a story lies behind this choice of direction for the paper. Writing a biographical study of the 19th century English theologian and Christian educator Thomas Arnold (Copley, 2002), I became acutely aware that as the research progressed, a point was reached where I probably knew more about Arnold than any other living person. I thus had the potential to 'make' Arnold whom I chose. This statement is anecdotal evidence for the daunting power of the storyteller, at least in biography. The historian is always the custodian of the dead and necessarily their spokesperson. Working with living biographical

subjects brings a different set of problems and opportunities (eg Maher J., in Kirschstein, B (ed.), 2001).

Another reminder not only of the power of story but also that of the storyteller came out of what became known in the UK as '7/7' (the July 2005 London Tube and bus bombings). One of the victims was sitting only three feet away from the bomber. Amazingly, this victim, a media studies professor, survived. Seconds after the bomb he stood up and began to look amid the darkened wreckage for his missing spectacles. He has told his own story of how he became a victim not only of bombing but of story – the media's presentation of the events of that day (Tulloch, 2006). It is relatively easy to recognise the media as a manipulator of story. But are we aware of how story might be manipulated in other spheres?

THE STORYTELLER AS EDITOR

In a chapter devoted to the nature of story, the first research report of the UK Biblos Project (Copley, 1998: Chapter 5 *passim*), identifies various possible stages in the formation and transmission of religious narrative. First is the originating event or experience. Story arises as 'a narrative symbol of ...the meaning we give our experience' (Holmes, 1976: 166). There is usually oral telling; then writing (at which point stories become more embedded into their contemporary culture); editing within later tradition (eg those gospels that adapt Mark); translation into different languages and possibly translation into different media (eg film). At each of these points the originating experience or event can be re-shaped (is inevitably re-shaped?) to demonstrate its 'relevance' to a new generation or a different language or an alien culture. At each phase in this process from the first oral telling to, say, the animation of the narrative for the cinema perhaps several millennia later, there is a storyteller. If written religious narrative is later defined as scripture, as in the case of the various documents that comprise the Hebrew Bible, its written form at that point becomes immutable. But there is still the living editing undertaken by the public reader in church, synagogue, mosque etc, or by the teacher or preacher, whose use of pause, inflection, emphasis provides the latest 'edition' of the story. With scripture, written or oral 'commentary' becomes an acceptable post-textual form of editing an unchangeable text. But although preachers sometimes declare that a text 'speaks to us', texts do not speak. Like the dead for whom the historian speaks, texts are silent. We speak for the texts, but the language we use ('the text speaks to us') implicitly downgrades the power of the storyteller in the process, ascribing all power to the text. Storytellers in RE edit a received narrative (eg from scripture), sometimes consciously, often unconsciously. They have to do this to relate the narrative to their audience, crossing time and culture gaps along the way. Editing is part of the very nature of storytelling. A bore, in contrast to a good storyteller, may be defined as one who lacks the edit filter. The bore cannot select what is of interest or relevance to their hearer or reader and the result is audience alienation.

It can be helpful to see the role of the editor as a series of complementary actions. The editor includes and omits; emphasises and makes minimal; preserves the narrative but risks changing it to make more 'relevant'; finds meaning for the audience, but eclipses earlier 'meanings' by so doing. John Wesley, writing dryly in a preface to the Methodist hymnbook of 1779, says:

Many Gentlemen [sic] have done my Brother and me (though without naming us) the honour to reprint many of our hymns... But I desire they would not attempt to mend them – for they really are not able. None of them is able to mend either the sense or the verse.

Storytelling editors sometimes operate as anonymous menders.

Kearney, writing about researching living subjects and their narratives wants to diminish the power relationship between researcher and subject if possible (2003:75), with the researcher as a participant and not merely a participant observer, acting responsibly to prevent their research into the lives of others becoming either voyeurism or careerism. Berger and Quinney take an optimistic view of storying. It is about extending ‘the reality of our experiences’ (2005:8) – but they do not concede that the ‘wrong’ story can be harmful, limiting rather than extending. Berger and Quinney’s storyteller ‘is willing to relinquish control over the story’s meaning and to trust readers to bring their own interpretative and emotional sensitivities to bear on the tale being told (ibid: 9). But is this relinquishing control over the meaning in reality abdication? It is temptingly post-modern to assert that story has whatever meaning we choose to impose on it. But our choices are influenced by culture and history, by our own experiences and presuppositions. The narrative of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22) might appear to be ritual child abuse to a 21st century hearer presented with the unexplained story. Similarly we could not imagine teaching the plays of Shakespeare in Arabic translation in Iraq, offering no background or commentary whatsoever, without leaving the Iraqi readers or hearers with an impoverished understanding. We abdicate the editing role of the storyteller at our peril. But what legitimates editing in storytelling? We might immediately posit:

- The interests and needs of the audience
- The context of the story in the originating situation and subsequent editing
- The nature and origin of the story – its culture
- The detail of the story with its nuance, sub-plot etc
- The qualification (authority) of the storyteller

CASE STUDY 1: THOMAS ARNOLD STORIES

Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) rose to fame as the headteacher of Rugby School (a fee paying boys’ boarding school in the Midlands area of the UK) from 1828 until his sudden death on the eve of his 47th birthday. He was also part-time Professor of Modern History at Oxford from 1841. He published in the field of ancient history and theology. His sermons preached to the boys in the school chapel were later published. Many of Arnold’s letters survive, along with a collection of table talk preserved by his wife Mary, and some of his diaries. Members of his family went on to distinguished careers connected with education. What are simplistically called the ‘facts’ about Arnold are therefore easily established.

No sooner was Arnold dead than an admiring former student, Arthur Stanley (1815-81), with some consultation with Arnold’s widow, began a definitive biography (Stanley, 1844). It was more a hagiography and issues that might show Arnold in a bad light were omitted from the text. This re-telling of Arnold’s story did two things. It cemented his position as a leading Christian educator and establishment figure in education. At the same time it repressed his reputation in theology as a *bête noire* of very radical views. Stanley’s biography of Arnold became so influential that by 1901 the Board of Education presented an abridged edition to every trainee teacher in England and Wales. It was amazing that the biography of a headteacher of a private school who had by then been dead for 59 years should be presented to every teacher destined for a career in public schools, and in a society that had become both industrial and imperial largely after Arnold’s death.

But Arnold's story was by no means done. In 1857 appeared one of the most enduring novels in the English language, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Hughes, 1857) by another former student, Thomas Hughes (1822-96). It is about the life of a boy passing through Rugby school under Arnold's headship. It is a sometimes thrilling mixture of romantic fiction and expurgated fact, but it has remained in print ever since, passing through at least 136 English language editions alone. Hughes maintained that although it is a novel, the portrait of Arnold in it was true to life. But Hughes was reminiscing a distant childhood and rekindling a passion for an idealised rural England that he felt was disappearing. (He attempted to re-create it in Rugby, Tennessee). The Stanley-Hughes presentation of Arnold himself is consistent. As two former students, they believed that heroes were necessary and important and that Arnold should be admired as a prophetic and godly leader of boys and young men.

The Arnold story was ripe for iconoclasm. This came in 1918 in the form of a book of four essays, entitled with some sarcasm *Eminent Victorians*, by Giles Lytton Strachey (1880-1932). The subjects were Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, 'Dr Arnold' and General Gordon. Victoria had died in 1901. Millions died in the First World War. There was disillusionment with old values. In the Bloomsbury literary and artistic set, among whom Strachey moved, there was a feeling of antipathy towards institutional Christianity. For Strachey, the Victorians were hypocrites with a certain baroque charm, a strait-jacketed morality, and an adherence to values that killed millions of people who had been trained to 'serve', 'obey' and 'lay down their lives' for their country. He used no primary sources and provided no references. He writes charmingly that 'ignorance is the first requisite of the historian – ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits... I have sought to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy...' (Strachey 2002 [1918]: 4f). He is thus a self-confessed dilettante historian, if historian at all, toying with fragments.

What Strachey did with Arnold was to produce a caricature of an inadequate and tormented man who imposed his will on small boys by brute force (flogging) and in the name of Christianity. Strachey's Arnold is manic, insecure, permanently perplexed, perhaps sexually phobic, sanctimonious, scarcely human, 'a self-righteous blockhead' as Strachey wrote elsewhere. Arnold is an unstable personality let loose on a Midlands school. It is a well-crafted verbal cartoon, Yet Strachey had done no 'research' than to read all or part of the Stanley-Hughes corpus and talk to a couple of people who knew Arnold. He ignores Arnold's theology (perhaps misled in this by his written sources).

It is hard to imagine the shocking effect of this book in 1918. It might be akin to a narrative attacking President Kennedy a few days after his assassination or to glorify al Qaeda in a speech at Ground Zero. The notion of heroes was debunked, possibly permanently. The Victorians were gleefully laid to rest as over-serious hypocrites. A fashion of cynicism was re-instituted into British life not present since the 18th century. From then on it was assumed that nobody was what they purported to be, that greatness is hollow. Arnold was eclipsed as a figure everyone had heard of. Yet what Strachey told was a *story*, just as much as *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. It was not history in any modern sense and he derided history as it was then conducted, sycophantically. So Strachey demonstrates not only the power of story but, more remarkably, the power of the storyteller. By insinuation, by concealed misrepresentation, by sarcasm, by apparent praise, he is able to preach his own sermon extremely well. Strachey's essay is a brilliant, damaging, false trail in the Arnold story.

CASE STUDY 2: MARGARET THATCHER AND THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Strachey's excesses raise the question of authorisation or legitimation of a particular telling of a story. Is denominational legitimation of, say, a particular telling of a biblical narrative what the outsider might perceive as censorship? The question applies more widely. The British premiership of Margaret Thatcher from 1979 to 1990 provides examples. Her appearance at the national assemblies of various denominations – by no means automatic for a British PM – had a ring of papacy about them. She made no secret that she believed that Christian leadership in the 1980s UK leaned too much towards the left. So when she appeared at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) in May 1988 it gave her chance to make her views clear.

Nevertheless, the Tenth Commandment—Thou shalt not covet—recognises that making money and owning things could become selfish activities. But it is not the creation of wealth that is wrong but love of money for its own sake. The spiritual dimension comes in deciding what one does with the wealth. How could we respond to the many calls for help, or invest for the future, or support the wonderful artists and craftsmen whose work also glorifies God, unless we had first worked hard and used our talents to create the necessary wealth? And remember the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment.

No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions - he had money, too.

[Last sentence attributed to an earlier interview on London Weekend Television, 6th January 1980]

Clearly in this abbreviated storytelling, the woman with the ointment and the Good Samaritan have been used as evidence or argument for wealth creation, for capitalism, for material success. Money enables their actions. They validate the importance of money. The question this raises is not whether or not Christian acquisition of big time wealth is defensible, but whether this is a valid interpretation of two gospel narratives, which in turn underlines the question of authority: who is to say? New Testament scholars? The church as the community of guardians of the Jesus tradition? A prime minister's speechwriter?

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that in religion as in other spheres, story has power. The loss of innocence in Eden, the waters of the Red Sea parting, a baby laid in a manger, a man changed forever on the Damascus road. These are compelling stories. It is equally evident that the storyteller adds, alters, deletes and in that sense becomes part of the story in its present form. This is much more than a matter of hermeneutics, or an awareness that there are ethical issues in presenting history. For although all stories must be edited and interpreted, it is clear that some can be transformed, even hijacked, into something quite different from the experience or event that led to them or the first telling.

This much might be obvious to scholars, although it does not feature prominently in the literature around story. But it is rarely obvious to readers and audiences. It has not been acted upon. It would be better if storytellers made both their 'telling position' clear and also points of divergence from, or addition to, received narrative. In training storytellers we must focus at least as much on their role and

responsibilities towards the narrative as on presentation ie their responsibilities towards their audience. Storytellers stand at the hour glass middle, between the complexities of the narrative and the diversity and concerns of their audience. They are custodians, sometimes ventriloquists (giving voice to created characters), but they should take care not to become violators.

REFERENCES

- Baker, A., and Green, E (eds.). 1977. *Storytelling: Art and Technique*. New York: R.R.Bowker.
- Berger, R.J. and Quinney, R. 2005. *Storytelling sociology: narrative as social inquiry*. Boulder, Co: Lynee Rienner publishers Inc.
- Copley, T. 1998. *Echo of Angels*. Exeter: School of Education, University of Exeter.
- Copley, T. 2002. *Black Tom: Arnold of Rugby, the Myth and the Man*. London & New York: Continuum International.
- Gunn, D.M. and Fewell, D.N. 1993. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmes. U. 1976. *Ministry and imagination*. NY: Seabury Press
- Hughes, T. 1004 [1857]. *Tom Brown's schooldays*. London: Penguin
- Kearney, C., 2003. *The monkey's mask: identity, memory, narrative and voice*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham
- Kirschstein, B.(ed.). 2001 *Writing Lives*. Florida: Krieger
- Pagnucci, G.S. 2004. *Living the narrative life: stories as a tool for meaning making*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann
- Stanley, A.P. 1844. *The life and correspondence of Thomas Arnold, DD*. London: Fellowes.
- Strachey, G. L. 2002 [1918] *Eminent Victorians*. London: Continuum
- Thatcher, M. 1988 speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.
- Thatcher Foundation web site:
<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/Speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=107246>
- Tulloch, J. 2006. *One Day in July: Experiencing 7/7*. London: Little, Brown.
- Wesley, J. 1932 [1779]. *The Methodist Hymn Book*. London: Methodist Conference Office