RELIGION AND NARRATIVE

Wade Clark Roof
University of California, Santa Barbara

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As most of you perhaps know, this is the first RRA presidential address since our bylaws were changed two years ago. Prior to 1990, the president gave no address. It might be said that the role of the RRA president at our annual SSSR-RRA meeting was somewhat like that of the presence of a corpse at an old-fashioned Irish wake: it was needed to make the party, but no one expected it to say very much. Now all that has changed. The out-going president is supposed to say something.

This being the case, I wondered what I should say. If what I say here sets a good precedent, we will have more such occasions; if what I say here doesn't, then I suppose we can change the bylaws again. Because there is no contemporary precedent, I interpret this to mean that I can do just about anything I want to do. So I've chosen to do what's hard to get away with in any other setting--to talk to you about what I think religious researchers should be doing differently, about how our research might be improved.

My remarks are couched around the theme of "religion and narrative." This theme lends itself to treatment at many levels, so let me introduce a caveat at the outset. By religious narrative I have in mind simply people's own religious and spiritual stories. Don't expect to hear much about semiotics or hermeneutics or deconstruction, as intriguing as these au courant subjects might be; they are not what I am concerned with here. I'm talking about narrative in the old-fashioned sense of story-telling, people's own accounts of their lives and experiences. To be sure, story-telling has implications for the larger interpretive questions now hanging over the field, and I shall allude to them, but my focus is on the stories themselves.

There is a second caveat as well. My remarks will be on the side of the reflective and the interpretive. They arise more out of the *verstehen* tradition of understanding than out of the explanatory deductive or scientific approaches. Both types of research have a place in what we do, but I believe the two can, and should, be pulled together better in our work. But today, let's just concentrate on narrative--more on the mushy side, I suppose you might say--wand why I think this qualitative aspect of our work is important. I draw off my on own recent research on the baby boom generation and also off the writings of others who use narrative approaches. More than simply make a case for narrative approaches, I want to tell some stories.

Perhaps you are already wondering why so much attention should be given to people's stories. We're social scientists armed with theories and paradigms. We have at our disposal

sophisticated research methods. Isn't story-telling something that novelists, anthropologists, and folklorists do? Haven't we moved beyond story-telling?

Well, *yes and no.* We have certainly moved into languages of research that formulate theories and hypotheses in more abstract terms, and which are very different from stories. Pick up just about any research journal on religion including our own Review of Religious Research and you'll find a wide range of logico-scientific approaches. And please don't misunderstand me--I'm not arguing that these are not good methods. But are they more advanced than story-telling as a research method? There certainly was a time when I would have answered that question in a resounding affirmative, but I am less convinced now that they are superior, on both practical and philosophical grounds.

Practically speaking, human beings are story-telling animals. Who we are and what we become are tied up with stories. Alasdair MacIntyre puts it well:

> *It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are (1981: 201).*

As this comment implies, narrative is not to be confused with illustration. Sociological accounts of religion are filled with stories as illustrations used to underscore some point or another. And that's fine so far as it goes. But narrative has a much broader usage and function. We tell stories not so much to illustrate as to affirm who we are and what gives identity, purpose, and meaning to our existence. Ever since the times of Jesus and the Buddha, parables have been used to emphasize a point, to force an encounter with truth and meaning. Henry James once said that character is the most critical element in narrative fiction, because as he said, stories have the power to sharpen our sensitivities to virtue and truth. Narrative is motivated by a search for meaning; when people tell stories, essentially they bring order and direction to their lives. Stories liberate us from mere facticity, and take us into symbolic made-up worlds of meaning, into "webs of significance," as Clifford Geertz says (1973). Story-telling is never "just talk"; it is a creative process. "To create a sentence is to constitute reality," writes Morse Peckham; "to put two sentences together is to create the world" (1962: 33).

Some have gone so far as to say there is something fundamentally religious about narrative structure. The attempt to create "ordered time," writes Wesley Kort (1975), was traditionally a religious act. By imposing order and meaning on life's sequence of events, narrative forces questions of interpretation. The attempt to order time is an attempt to discover something other than crisis or chaos. This otherness may be expressed in many ways, as purpose in life, what's worth dying for, cosmic energy, higher self, God. It is captured in experiences as diverse as an evangelical, born-again conversion or when Annie Dillard describes her mystical moments at Tinker Creek, seeing in the movement of a waterbug or a muskrat the relation of her life to a larger story of creation and purpose.

An element of narrative is plot--which we might describe simply as movement toward some end or completion. Plot's religious significance is that plot is the prime mover toward

wholeness. Plot takes fragmented moments of action and creates order, for both "literary narrative" and "lived narrative." Narrative also involves, almost inevitably, a sense of mystery. "One of the surprising developments in contemporary communication theory," writes Barnett Pierce (1989: 80), "is a sudden sympathy for those mystics, visionaries, and poets who have claimed that their best insights were ineffable." Mystery arises out of recognition of the limits of what we know and how we know--limits not taken as confining boundaries, but a sign that there must be something beyond them. Mystery arises also out of the open-endedness of the world. If communication is the process by which we create the world, then the world is still ill the process of creation and hence open always to that which cannot be spoken. Mystery in narrative was perhaps best anticipated by Joseph Campbell. In his life-long efforts at understanding the stories with which humans have clothed the gods, Campbell concluded, very succinctly: "The best things cannot be said, the second best are misunderstood. After that comes civilized conversation" (1968: 84).

Another ways of saying all of this--in less mushy words--is to say that narrative is motivated by the drive for coherence. Stories have great capacity to bring things together, to sharpen the focus, to help us see things differently. Perhaps the best example I know is found not in the professional literature on religion but comes from Robert Coles, the Harvard psychiatrist and master story-teller. In his book *The Call of Stories* he tells about his experiences with a patient during his early days as a resident in a Boston hospital. It was his task to try to figure out what was going on with this patient, but she made it very difficult for him by refusing to talk. As a young doctor armed with the latest medical and psychoanalytic theories, he set out to analyze this woman: he studied her personal history, her family history, her social history, her clinical history. He was convinced that he had her pegged as far as the medical jargon went: he knew the name of her particular type of phobia, he knew the symptomatology and the psychodynamics that were supposed to characterize such persons. He studied her charts and lab tests and felt as if he knew her upside down--yet felt that he didn't really know her. She remained an enigma to him despite all the patient information at his disposal. Finally in his desperation, Coles writes:

> *Eventually I heard myself one morning, to my own surprise, tell my phobic patient, in a moment of frustration that I wanted to hear more about her*, *not about the "symptoms" she had learned so well to describe to me and to the nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, ward secretary, group therapists, and other patients. What did I mean? I wasn't sure how to answer her question, which she quite predictably put to me. But now that she asked, I found myself prepared to spell out answers rather vigorously. I said that we had spent a good deal of time discussing her various fears and how she tried to come to terms with them; now it would be a good idea for us to pay sustained attention to her life, to its course over a span of some thirty-five years (1989:10).*

The patient seemed irritated and confused: hadn't we been doing that all along, she asked? Hadn't he taken her history? But I want to know more, the young doctor pleaded. "Tell me about the moments you were happy or sad." She replied she'd had only one or two happy moments in her entire life. At which point the doctor took heart: she had responded to those two words, "happy moments." He wondered what to say next, how he might really get through to her. Then out of his mouth came a question--what no course in medical school or no book he had read on phobias or no hospital supervisor had ever suggested: "Why don't you just tell me a story or two?"

And with that lead, she smiled at him, asked for a cigarette, and began to pour out her story: a childhood shaped by a birth defect, an adolescence of abuse at the hands of an alcoholic father, a brush with death in an automobile accident, and finally a marriage to man who had a serious criminal record, all of which was new information that had not been told to any receptionist when she entered the psychiatric ward of the hospital. "For the first time in my short career in psychiatry," writes Coles, "I saw a noticeable and somewhat dramatic change take place in a patient-- and not in response to any interpretation or clarification of mine, but merely as a result of a procedural suggestion, as it were: how we might get on, the patient and I" (1989:11-12).

Therein, it seems to me, lies an important point for us. For sure, we aren't psychiatrists, and therapy is not research, but we, too, have to worry about those aspects of our craft that Coles describes as "procedural." What we discover in our research depends greatly on how we proceed, and sometimes we find ourselves having to switch procedures, even in mid-stream: to ask our questions from a different vantage point. We know the advantages of triangulation, the importance of looking at a phenomenon through differing lens. One such lens in the person's own story, told in his or her own words. It is a useful research procedure for one simple reason: narrative sheds light on the unity of experience. Its strength lies in its coherence. Unlike most of our research methods which abstract dimensions, sort out variables, name factors, narrative works the other way pulling seemingly disparate things together.

II

But of course, one doesn't have to make a strong case for narrative these days. Major scholarly names are making use of stories in their research. Perhaps it is fair to say that the use of narrative arises out of a reaction to the dominant social science paradigms. Logical inquiry tends to proceed in either one of two ways--the top-down approach as with deductive explanation or the bottom-up approach as with interpretive or contextual analysis. And in one after another field of study, it seems that there is a growing concern with interpretation and context--an intellectual agenda shaped in part by the influence of post-structuralist thinking and literary criticism. In sociology and anthropology, there is increasing recognition of the literary quality of so much of social-science discourse. Even in economics, where so much argument rests presumably on rigorous empirical methods, there is a similar trend. Donald McClosky, in his book *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985), explores how economists influence one another. He concludes that what economists do has much in common with poems and novels, with story-telling. In his discussion of why economists argue that demand varies inversely with price, for example, McClosky estimates that 15 percent of the persuasion comes from scientific sources like modelling and econometrics; fully 85 percent from such considerations as tradition, analogy, and introspection. For an economist to acknowledge so heavy an indebtedness to rhetoric and literary construction is indeed a telling commentary on this discipline.

And in religious and cultural studies, too, narrative and kindred approaches now have intellectual fashion on their side. All of us here know about *Habits of the Heart* and how Robert Bellah and his associates (1985) framed an analysis of contemporary American culture around the stories of four people they interviewed. The languages of moral and religious culture are expressed far better in the voices of Joe Gorman, Margaret Oldham, Wayne Bauer, and Brian Palmer than in more abstract terms. And who can forget Sheila Larson, the nurse who coined the word "Sheilaism" to describe her own style of religion? She

became a household name almost over night in sociological discussions of American religion. Why? Because she embodied so well a personal style of faith that we know is widely prevalent in our society today. We all know people like Sheila. Like the characters of a good novel, she is someone we can recognize and relate to, like or dislike. In other words, the character "communicates" with us.

Narrative communicates, but it also does more: it reveals nuance and shades of subtlety. And nuance and subtlety are important, not just for good fiction but for good religious research. Let me illustrate with several examples:

First, an example from Robert Wuthnow's work. In his book *Acts of Compassion,* he addresses the question of how Americans reconcile their individualism with a high level of altruism. On the one hand, Americans are very individualistic and self-interested, and thus seemingly uncaring about others; yet we know that Americans are among the most compassionate of peoples as judged by their giving and by their volunteer work and charitable activities. Wuthnow asks:

> *...is the question of how individualism and altruism can coexist in American culture really a nonissue because we are talking about two groups of people: the individualists in one camp and the altruists in a different camp? Or are we a complex people who, like Jack Casey, somehow try to combine individualism and altruism within the same personality? (1991: 21).*

Jack Casey is but one of many people he talked to, listening to how they describe their motives for helping others. People give reasons for helping others drawing off a variety of cultural scripts, both religious and utilitarian; our vocabularies of motives are remarkably complex. But one think is quite clear: those Americans who are the most intensely individualistic, contrary to what we might think, are no less involved in caring for others. Rather as Wuthnow argues, people formulate narratives about their motives which link their self-interests and their generosity. People find in the language of self-fulfillment ways to justify caring for others -- caring becomes a positive personal experience. People identify heros whose lives define compassion in ways they can appreciate--identification with others enhances personal, individual identity. Hence Wuthnow concludes:

> *…caring for others is not the antithesis of individualism. The two are linked narratively. It is in the framing of particularity that we imply the universal. The success of communication itself requires a blend of the two. Choice and constraint do not require separate narratives, but an account that brings them together. The very success of calculation often requires it to be concealed, at least from others, sometimes from ourselves. We define caring in our society as a behavior of choice, a special or unusual activity, one that in some way transcends or eludes rational prediction. Caring is a metaphor for our self-identity (1991: 83).*

Much the same could be said for individualism and community. Individualism is not the antithesis of community in some simple one-to-one relationship. Americans are deeply individualistic, they are also belongers. In their individualism they choose to belong; in belonging they express their individuality. Narrative reveals a rich blending of the two, far more nuanced than some commentators have suggested.

A second example comes from my own research. Let me tell you about Linda Kramer, an

evangelical Christian from Ohio we interviewed in our study of the baby boom generation. Linda is like many other religious conservatives of her generation who grew up in the 1960s but was repelled by the counterculture. She was reared in a working-class family in a small town, largely isolated from the cultural changes of the time, then moved to a large city where she was soon turned off by all the drugs and sex the "new morality" as it was then called--and by all the demonstrations against the war. For this woman, God, country, the Bible, living an upright life-- these are at the core of what she believes. She dropped out of the Methodist church in which she was reared in search of a congregation where there were firmer guidelines of faith and morality. Today she is a committed evangelical, deeply concerned about what she sees as a "downward spiral" in moral and family values in our country, an ardent pro-lifer who prays for the overturn of Roe vs. Wade. On an index of religious conservatism she scores pretty high: a woman, from the mid-West, a migrant from the small-town to the city, born-again. An 8 or 9 at least on a 10-point scale.

But there is another, far more nuanced reading on her. She was twice divorced before her present marriage, and has learned that a woman had better look out for herself. Unable to have children of her own, she has two adopted sons; becoming a mother this way seems to have strengthened her bonds with women, and with the two women especially who "carried them those nine months and gave them life even though they could not raise them." She is no flaming feminist by any means, but she has had experiences as a woman that have molded an outlook that is sensitive to women's concerns. She feels something with the sisters, at minimum a shared responsibility in giving birth and in rearing two children. This experience has mad her into something other than a whining Phyllis Schlafly. This breaking out of traditional expectations comes through in an answer to a question we asked her about whether women with young children should work outside the home. Given the symbolic significance of this issue among religious conservatives, we expected a programmed response. Her answer was:

> *A lot of women find that necessary to do for economic reasons. I am of the opinion that if there is any way possible for a mother to remain home with her pre-school children, even at a sacrifice of their lifestyle, that she should try to do that, or if the father would choose to do that. I think that one parent should be at home for pre-school children (Roof, 1993).*

"If the father would choose to do that"--whence that idea? Far from the traditional stance that mothers should be in the home, or that there are intangibles that only mothers can give children, her response signals a far more reasoned position drawing off notions of an egalitarian marriage and shared parenting responsibilities. Who would have expected that she, with all her pre-dispositions to a traditional outlook, would register the concerns of so many younger, baby boom women?

The truth is, of course, that Linda Kramer is not all that unusual. She is not unlike the working-class women Judith Stacey (1990) studied in the Silicon Valley of California, women who mix feminist and fundamentalist values as they redefine gender roles and family paterns. She is not unlike, in principle, those career Jewish women in Manhattan that Lynn Davidman (1991) studied, women who turn to the Orthodox faith but who would like husbands who believe in shared parenting responsibilities. Religious worldviews are not created in a cultural vacuum. Nor are they tightly integrated dogmatic systems. They are better thought of, in fact, as a hodge-podge of beliefs and affirmations, a set of cultural themes and elements often inconsistent in a strict cognitive sense but which blend into some meaningful coherence for

the individual believer. We do ourselves and religious study generally a disservice when we assume stereotypical unities that do not exist, and at the same time overlook phenomenological unities that do. Narratives are windows into the real worlds in which people live, allowing us to get a bit closer to the operative religious meanings by which they live.

Narrative adds to our understanding in still another context - in explaining why people who, after years of inactivity, choose to become involved again in a church or synagogue. Much is said today about people--baby boomers in particular – o are returning to congregations. The media would have us believe there is a massive return. One can almost hear the SPSS packages grinding out the regression equations, sorting out the factors that predict those who return - variables like marriage, the presence of school-age children, secure employment, settled community life.

I suggest that narrative offers insights that better account for any lasting re-commitment. There is narrative in two senses -- the stories of individuals, and also, the stories of congregations. Every congregation has its own culture -- a set of symbols, values, and histories that distinguishes it from others. As James Hopewell (1987) once put it: congregations are "thick gatherings," each with its own rich idiom and narrative combining elements of worldview, ethos, plot, and identity. Mood, atmosphere, sight, taste, smell are all involved, as well as a sense of life's unfolding drama -- from where and to where does time march.

This being the case, it would seem to follow that in today's religious consumer culture, religious activity involves a meshing of two stories--a blending of individual and congregational stories. The result is a richly textured account of an individual's life as it relates to some larger religious story. A brief example: In his autobiography entitled *Returninq,* Dan Wakefield describes the chance circumstances surrounding his becoming involved again in a congregation. He tells of dropping in on a Christmas Eve service and in a flash moment saw his life laid before him in ways he had not seen before. As if in a liminal moment, things came together for him. Writes Wakefield: "I started to see the deeper connections and more expansive framework offered by the sense of our small daily drama in relation to the higher meaning that many people call God" (1988: ix).

One of the very promising avenues for research today is exploring this narrative space--that is, how people's own stories take on meaning in relation to larger religious stories. Further research into this space offers to give us richer insights into people's religious affiliations, and of their movements in and out of religious groups. Narrative approaches also promise to move us beyond the methodological individualism that characterizes so much of our research--to push us beyond attention simply to individual attributes and to looking at cultural narrative more broadly. This would be no small accomplishment for it would integrate the study of religion with the study of culture--which in my judgment would be enlivening for the field.

III

Speaking of religion and culture, we must in the future pay more attention to the unities by which people live. And we must do so, I believe, because the unifies of experience and of interpretation are becoming more problematic in the so-called post-modem world. I refer now not to Linda Kramer or Dan Wakefield, for both of them respond as persons deeply rooted in

a religious tradition. Unity is embodied in a life which has a past, a present, and a future. As is sometimes said, such lives are "embedded," that is, made intelligible in terms of a larger and longer history.

But what about those people today who are not so deeply embedded, those who are not so deeply rooted within a community or tradition? What do we make of their religious stories? This may sound like a theological question but I'm really asking it as a researcher. People's stories are never just *their* stories. Stories connect us with the larger stories, with the cultural narratives that shape our shared meanings. But what if we are now facing as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) says, "the End of the Great Narratives," a time when the power of the great religious traditions over people's own stories has diminished?

Let's bring the question down to earth. Many of you here are familiar with the research literature on the life cycle and religion. It is generally known that religious involvement, for the past couple generations at least, has varied depending on where they are in the life cycle. Journalist Kenneth A. Briggs sums up the prevailing view on this when he writes:

> *Religious behavior has long been supposed by sociologists to follow an ingrained routine something like this: Children went to church with their parents, absorbed the particular brand of Christianity offered there, avoided church while sowing wild oats during their late teens and 20s, then married, sobered up, had a family and, having returned to their senses, came back to church with their little ones in tow (1990: 5).*

But then he goes on:

> *Many baby boomers followed that scenario to a T--up to and including the youthful rebellion part. But large numbers of them apparently abandoned the script there; they haven't come back--yet (1990: 5).*

The notion of a script, and of abandoning a script, introduces a cultural dimension. Abandonment of the script is a theme popping up in many realms today--in art, in architecture, in literature, in film. Listen to Bette Davis, the actress, someone I bet you didn't expect to hear cited at this year's annual RRA Meeting. Disgusted with what was happening to scripts in Hollywood in 1986, Miss Davis had this to say:

> *There's very little drama left and very few good scripts. Stories no longer have a beginning, middle, and end (Reported in U.S. News and World Report, 1976).*

"Stories no longer have a beginning, middle, and end." What post-modern theorist could have said it so clearly? Miss Davis' comment and that of Kenneth Briggs describe two quite different cultural domains, yet both signal ways in which stories are changing, and perhaps in drastic ways. Old cultural scripts were based on linear conceptions of life, that is, life thought of as a sequence of events, with prescribed timetables and fairly predictable outcomes. Life was pictured as a movement in a specified direction; you generally knew where the plot was going--somewhat like a Harlequin romance.

But the scripts are changing. In today's emerging world, the process of on-going change is replacing progress toward some presumed destination; linear, straight-line conceptions of life

collapse in the face of discontinuities. What dictates human development throughout the life cycle is less one's "stage" in life than one's changing commitments to fundamental human values; life is experienced less as having met and resolved challenges once and for all, and more as repeatable challenges to be resolved in different ways at differing times. The same themes keep coming up, forcing our attention--themes such as love, initiative, creativity, the search for meaning. Without a cultural master plan, there is no singular plot which unfolds as pilgrim once progressed; the old Harlequin romance is giving way to a new narrative, more open-ended, more unpredictable-somewhat like that couple in the Taster's Choice television commercial, for whom we are never quite sure what's going to happen next.

Not knowing what's going to happen next--that summarizes pretty well many of the baby boomers that I have studied. Some of them are returning to the churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, but most of them who dropped out of active religious involvement in their years growing up are still out; now in their forties, they have not come back, as Kenneth Briggs says. The script seems to have changed. And not just in this country. Our studies in England, Australia, France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries all find major alterations in the religious lives of those born after World War II (1994). In varying degrees in all these places, signs point to what political scientist Ronald Inglehart (1990) describes as a "culture shift"-- the rise of a post-materialist culture characterized by alienation 2 1 and distance from basic institutions combined with greater emphasis on self-expression, gender equality, peace, environmentalism, and quality of life. Americans know about this shift in values pretty well in this election year, for we have just come through a presidential campaign in which generational cultures were at war with one another: the youthful Bill Clinton pitted against the aging cold-war warder George Bush; Hillary the career woman and Barbara the wife, mother, and grandmother; and of course, all the sparks ignited by experiences back in the 60s having to do with drugs, opposing the Vietnam war, gender ideology, and changing moral and family values.

What I am suggesting is a shift in generational narratives, and by inference, perhaps a re-writing of some of the fundamental scripts by which Americans have understood themselves. In this respect, the Clinton-Gore election may foreshadow significant changes in American cultural sensibilities--but to enumerate them here would take us far afield from our topic. Briefly, let me describe several motifs of the post-modem spiritual narrative which now seems to be emerging:

One motif is *disorientation.* Stories are of two major types: orienting or disorienting. Disorienting stories are those that tell of shattered cultural meanings, or the breaking up of older narrative styles. The collapse of liberal faith in a gradually improving human society, the collapse of Jewish faith in a caring God after the Holocaust, the collapse of faith in the Marxian dream of the human future--all are major anti-narratives of our time. They all point to an erosion of traditional story form, the sort of thing Bette Davis alludes to when she speaks of stories no longer having a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Some might say that disruption in the continuity of narrative is the typical post-modem stance. But not just among literary elites. In the lives of common people, discontinuity often rears its head. "Who or what is God?" asks a 34 year-old woman. "I don't know if God is anything more than the good, the beautiful," she says, "but I know that He, or whatever, is not what I was taught growing up. He's not going to damn me just because I smoked pot or did something like that." The woman who speaks is a member of Religious Abuse Anonymous, a twelve-step recovery group. She and others in this group find help in overcoming their bad

experiences in religion and in re-structuring their lives. The old religious script doesn't speak to her anymore; a new script more attuned to the therapies of the self is energizing. Addiction, compulsion, and the language of victimization generally is a popular mode of discourse in our time. Whatever else might be said about such discourse, its appeal as a language of recovery and denial lies in its promise to re-script people's lives.

Another motif is *marginality.* Many in the post-war generation look upon themselves as outsiders to religious institutions. Ever since the 1960s they have felt estranged, even from the traditions in which they grew up. There is a fundamental rupture in their memories, which makes it difficult for them to link themselves meaningfully to a "community of memory," as spoken of by Bellah and his associates. Perhaps there is a nostalgia to return to a warm childhood religious experience, but as Christopher Lasch (1991) reminds us, nostalgia and memory are two different things. Nostalgia romanticizes the past, and a frozen past at that, whereas memory links the past to a living present. Lacking this linkage of the past to the present, the religious stories of many in this generation have disjointed features.

The stories have a jaundiced quality about them, and are often fiddled with ambivalence. Many having grown up in the 1960s and 1970s look upon religion as something that has to be "worked out" or "made to fit your life," simply because they experience a gap, a psychological dissonance, in religious institutions. They may relate to Christianity or Judaism -- the classic "great stories" in our culture--but they do so often from a more marginal position, as a minority member, as a woman, as a gay or lesbian, as one who doesn't feel quite at home. Their stories reveal an "on edge" quality, a feeling of being part of but not fully absorbed in the larger cultural and religious narratives. As one person told us: "it's hard to find a religion that you can believe totally in."

A third motif is *fluidity.* People move in and out of religious communities, switch from one tradition to another, explore differing versions of the same tradition. I don't have to describe the many forms of religious movement that characterizes the American religious scene. Yet all too often we go about our analyses as if religious affiliation was an ascribed identity set for life. We have yet to come to terms with the cultural forces redefining religion as a more voluntary phenomenon. As ascriptive identities have declined especially since the 1960s, the effect has been to free up the religious and to allow individual-expressive values to have a greater play in people's choices. Francis Fitzgerald's (1986:16) metaphor of a centrifuge to describe contemporary American culture is suggestive: a centrifuge is an apparatus which at high speeds sorts out elements into new groupings, and the new religious groupings today are sorted out on individual, experiential, and preferential grounds--and thus are opening up possibilities for more genuinely religious and spiritual expression.

This new sorting is important not just for how religious communities are formed, but for religious stories. If it is true as we have argued that narrative is motivated by a desire for coherence, and that there is something fundamentally religious about such motivation, then the religious scripts are being fundamentally rewritten. As people rely less upon social identities and fall back more and more upon the individual-expressive in constructing their life-meanings, the potential for rich, deeply experiential religious and spiritual stories is enhanced. The declining hold of the great narratives on the culture opens up possibilities for rewriting personal stories, and hence new opportunities for researchers to explore the elementary forms of the religious. "That I'm Presbyterian doesn't mean much to me," as one person told us, "I'm just trying to figure things out in my life." Comments like that take us back to square 1 as far as research methods are concerned.

A fourth motif is *mixing and matching.* The post-modern world is a world of interweaving many stories. What we might call "multi- layered" meaning systems are commonplace, involving beliefs and practices drawn from a variety of sources, both religious and quasi-religious--including Eastern meditation, Native American religion, psychotherapy, ecology, feminism, holistic health, as well as more traditional Judeo-Christian elements. The result is "bricolage" or "pastiche," a religious pluralism within the individual. It is a pluralism not of random elements, not a hodge-podge of anything and everything, but rather a pluralism informed by what Martin E. Marty (1967) calls the "merits of borrowing." Or put differently, the individual speaks in many religious voices and finds something in all of them that gives expression to the multifaceted quality of our selves.

This mixing of the codes is becoming more pronounced, but it is hardly new. Jon Butler's (1990) historical research demonstrates a considerable amount of religious syncretism in this country in the early to mid-1800s--an eclectic mix of Christian teachings and popular interests in magic, healing, folk medicines, nature religion, and spiritualism. He describes this melding of eclectic religious traditions as a "spiritual hothouse" in antebellum America, making the case that the period was a spiritually empowering time in this country. It may be that we are entering another era of widespread mixings and matchings, and of new and creative expressions of spiritual energies. If so, we can expect people's religious stories to become richer and more engaging, the symbolism sometimes highly eclectic and polycentric, and in other times more centered but still eclectic, as with the man who described himself to us as "primarily Catholic" but who also attends an ecumenical prayer group and frequently worships at an evangelical church because of its "good preaching".

IV

Well, I'm almost finished. Despite what Bette Davis says, my story does have an ending. But it's not a very satisfactory ending, because we haven't really dealt with the big hermeneutical questions swirling around us in the post-modernist debate. How do we interpret narrative? Do we look beneath the surface meanings in keeping with a "hermeneutics of suspicion?" What is the relation of the interpreter to the text? Obviously these are all big questions hanging over the field today.

Just to make sure you know where I stand, let me say briefly that I don't subscribe to the radical deconstructive post-modernist position. Although the world is without centers in the sense that none of the historical routes of tradition has privileged access to any center, nonetheless the world the symbolic world--is not simply the random accumulation it is often portrayed in postmodem writing. I think stories in quest of coherence and meaning are still being told--but they are also being rewritten. I hold to a more open, hopeful view of the world, still creative and promising, that may yet break in upon us as we move out of an older world of Cartesian dualism and Newtonian science. We have barely begun to grasp the post-modem vision of religion.

In the meantime, I really have only two main points: one, a plea on behalf of narrative as a method of analysis, and two, an appeal to take seriously the subtleties, the discontinuities and broken experiences of people's lives. I should add a third as well: we ought in my judgment to cultivate our story-telling skills. Part of our task as religious researchers, aside from conducting and interpreting research, is to communicate what we know. In her book, *Practicing History* (1981), Barbara Tuchman writes about three aspects of being a historian:

the investigative, the didactic, and the narrative, each of them involving skills that she says can be cultivated. Our field is no different, and in no less need of good theory, good methods, and good communication.

One final story. A couple weeks ago when I told a friend about the topic of this presentation, his response was that it all sounded pretty mushy. I suppose that's true. It made an impression on me--several times I've used that word already. But the more I've thought about it, I've come to the conclusion that while mushy isn't the way I'd like to think of it, maybe mush isn't such a bad analogy for what narrative is about afterall. Good livermush was something we used to make when I was growing up in South Carolina. We made mush at hog-killing time; it was the last thing made, after the sausages were pressed and the liver and all the other parts were cooked. To make the mush, you mixed corn meal with what was called the "essence" that was left in the pot. There was something very special about that essence. With the right amount of heat and the right thickening, you'd get a product that retained the tasty meat flavors.

I think that's what we are after in religious research--the best flavors of nuance and insight. Many new words are now seeping into our vocabulary. The French say bricolage, others speak of religion a la carte, pastiche, collage, patchwork religiosity. I say that what this field needs is good mush.

NOTES

Wade Clark Roof is J.F. Rowny Professor of Religion and Society at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

*This Presidential Address was delivered at the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association on November 6, 1992, in Washington, D.C. Its publication in the REVIEW represents an important change that is consistent with RRA's recent reorganization which, among other things, strengthens the professional leadership role of its president. RRA's new bylaws (revised in 1991) specify that a presidential address shall be given every other year, alternating with the long-established H. Paul Douglass Lecture, at the annual meeting of the Association. Publication of this first Presidential Address by Dr. Wade Clark Roof in this issue is intended to establish a precedent in which the Presidential Address and the H. Paul Douglass Lecture will be published in alternate years in the REVIEW.

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