Narrating Christian Ethics From The Margins

Interdisciplinary and Liberative Ethical Approach to Narratives

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The importance of narratives in our lives – especially in the way we understand the world and ourselves – has been gaining grounds in the different fields of knowledge since the past several decades. The revival of interest in the story has also found its way among theologians and has flourished into what has now become 'narrative theology'.[1] The beginning of this novel way of doing theology is being attributed to the 1941 essay, "The Story of Our Lives" of H. Richard Niebuhr.[2] Yet it was in 1970s, with another groundbreaking article of Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience,"[3] when Niebuhr's theme of narrativity gained a fuller attention in the theological scene. Discussions have generated a lot of interest among theologians who have produced an enormous amount of literature in the specific areas of "narrative hermeneutics,

1. Providing us with the different ramifications of reflections on story in theology, John Navone makes a long list of contributors to what he calls 'a Theology of Story'. See John Navone, *Seeking God in Story* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 240-59.

2. See H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Story of Our Life," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 21-44.

3. Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971): 291-312.

literary-critical readings of the Bible, narrative ethics, narrative preaching, and pastoral counseling in which counselor and client are 'living human documents'."[4]

Since the earlier stage of the many years of discussions, different proposals have been put forward as to what Narrative Theology and Ethics really mean. The long discussions on narrativity, Gary Comstock observes, have given way to the emergence of two types of Narrative Theology and Ethics.[5] One is associated with Yale University; while the other is identified with the University of Chicago.[6] The 'Yaleys' (from Yale) have Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas as their leading figures. Theologians from this camp have been categorized as anti-foundationalists, Wittgensteinian-descriptivists, cultural-linguistic, postliberal theologians, or as pure narrative theologians.[7] They believe that narrative is an autonomous literary form particularly suited to the work of theology and ethics. They reject the excessive use of abstract reasoning, and discursive prose, but insist that "the Christian faith is best understood by grasping the grammatical rules and concepts of its texts and practices. Narrative is a privileged mode of doing this."[8] The 'Chicagoans', on the other hand, have Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, Julian Hartt and Sallie MacFague as their main proponents who have been classified as 'foundationalists', 'experiential-expressivists', or as 'impure narrative

4. George Stroup, "Theology of Narrative or Narrative Theology?: A Response to Why Narrative?" *Theology Today* XLVII, 4 (1991): 424-32, 424.

5. See Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LV, 4 (1987): 687-717.

6. James Wm. McClendon is sometimes considered the third type of narrative theology because he proposes that "theology must be at least autobiography." Life stories of specific individuals "should be the theologian's primary material for investigating the meaning of the doctrines and confessional claims of Christian faith." George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1981), 76. See also James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "Biography as Theology," *Cross Currents* XXI, 40 (1971): 415-31.

7. For a short historical background of the origin of this particular school—the Postliberal theology—of Yale, see Garry Dorrien, "The Origins of Postliberalism," *The Christian Century*, July 4-11, 2001, http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2116 (access 10/10/05).

8. Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," 688.

theologians'.[9] They are of the same mind with the 'purist' narrativists that story is an important but neglected genre in which truths and practices are communicated. Arguing that Christian sacred stories are infected irreducibly with historical, philosophical, and psychological concerns, they call for the need for application of the methods of those disciplines to their interpretation. Because narrative is neither pure nor autonomous, narratives cannot claim unique theological status.

What we intend to do in this paper is to give a concise exposition of their positions in order to better locate our methodological position. The position we take—though distinct from, yet also akin to, both—has a closer affinity with the 'Chicagoans' and more critical of the 'Yaleys'. Ours is a new methodological approach in ethics that appropriates and understands stories of our Biblical tradition and of contemporary literature from the perspective of those in the margins. This approach, we call Narrative Ethics of Liberation, will support the indispensable role of narratives in the moral formation and transformation of individual and communal lives in society, but will necessarily employ the critical function of the sciences in explicating the ethical demands of the excluded and the oppressed for liberation. We shall see that at the heart of this methodological approach is the recognition of the need for a healthy tension between faith and the sciences from the perspective of the marginalized.

We shall do this in three main levels. First, we will focus our investigation on the proposal of postliberal theologians and ethicists, for the indispensable role of narratives in the moral formation of Christian life. Second, taking off from the ambiguous character of the retrieval of the narrative resources of tradition, we propose the need for hermeneutics and criticism—the use of other disciplines—as an approach put forward within the liberal tradition. Third, we will clarify our proposed new approach, we shall call it 'analectic critical hermeneutics', that is based on our critical appropriation of

9. The 'experiential-expressivists' is a category given by George Lindbeck to describe the Chicago standpoint in contrast to theirs which he classifies as 'cultural-linguistic'. See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 32.

Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer's scheme of 'normativity of the future' from the perspective of Dussel's analectic and liberative ethics of liberation. Such an approach of dealing with the narrative resources of our Christian Tradition as well as of our contemporary culture has an indispensable role in our overall scheme of 'narrative ethics of liberation'.

The Postliberal Theological Ethics and the Centrality of Biblical Narrative

One approach in ethics that has become widely known and influential, especially in the Anglo-American world, is Postliberal Theological Ethics. Reacting strongly against the modern project's dismissal of stories in ethical practice and reflection, the principal architects of this approach appeal for the centrality of the narrative resources of the Christian tradition, particularly those of the Sacred Scripture in the moral formation of individuals within the context of the Christian community.

Eclipse of Narratives in Modernity: Hans Frei's Critique of Historicism

Against the background of the story of the modern liberal project's dismissal of tradition, narrative vision and epistemology, and the importance of community, in favor of a secular humanist perspective, scientific and universal rationality, and atomized individual existence, respectively, the postliberal thinkers make a very strong critique of the modern liberal project blaming it for the sorry state of our moral landscape.[10] They also lament over the liberal theologians' attempts to reconcile Christianity with modern rationality.

10. MacIntyre's demolishing critique of the modern liberal project has been an important source of the Postliberal theologians and ethicists. MacIntyre claims that modernity's dismissal of the narrative resources of morality has rendered itself incapable of rationally justifying its pretentious claim to universality and objectivity, resulting to the irrational, relativist and emotivist ethos in our contemporary life. See especially the first six chapters of Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Gerard Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1985, [1981], 1-78.

It was Hans Frei, one of the main pillars in the postliberal tradition, who has provided the ground for such a criticism against liberal theology. In his thoroughgoing study of the eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics, Frei describes what he calls "the eclipse of biblical narratives."[11] Frei argues that the loss of (Christian) narratives happened when the 'mediating theologians' of the Christian tradition, in the effort to be apologetic for the truth-claims or meaningfulness of Christianity, allowed themselves to be heavily influenced by modern thinkers and developed new approaches in interpreting the narrative resources of Christian tradition, especially the Sacred Scriptures. What he considers the wrong turn to modern hermeneutics is the reason for the loss of the literal sense (*sensus historicus*) in the reading of the Bible.

Frei explains that the traditional realistic interpretation underwent a crisis in modernity and has given way to historical criticism. Frei speaks of three elements in the traditional realistic interpretation of the biblical stories: (a) literal reading (taking the story as a reliable historical report); (b) unity of many different stories (biblical stories fit together into one narrative); and (c) universal relevance (all human experiences can and should fit into the one and real world of the Bible).[12] Already in the seventeenth century, there came a preoccupation among Christian writers to interpret historical events using biblical typologies, a practice that started the split between the biblical world and real historical world. The earlier taken-for-granted cohesion between the real meaning – and by extension, the figurative meaning, *sensus allegoricus* – of the biblical stories and their reference to actual events is broken. With the crisis in the literal reading came also a crisis in the claim for unity and universal relevance and authority of the biblical narratives. What ultimately results is a reversal of the order of things. Frei describes the new order in the following terms, "Interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world

11. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narratives: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

12. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narratives*, 2-3.

into the biblical story."[13] What ensued in the eighteenth and nineteenth century biblical studies was biblical-historical criticism.

Identifying its roots in some new thinking during the seventeenth century,[14] Frei defines the purpose and the elements of the historico-critical method. He writes, "It meant explaining the thoughts of the biblical authors and the origin and shape of the writings on the basis of the most likely, natural, and specific conditions of history, culture, and individual life out of which they arose. It meant applying these explanatory principles without supplementary appeal to (though also without necessary prejudice against) divine causation either of the biblical history or the biblical writings."[15] As evident in this definition, one cannot easily assume that the biblical texts refer to historical reality and cannot address directly the reality of our own historical world. As a result, the connection between the biblical world and the historical world has been severed deeply. Frei found it fascinating that historical criticism reached its peak and dominance in biblical exegesis during the time when literary realism as well as realistic historiography flourished especially in France and England. Literary realism – a literary critical analysis of novels as a 'history-like' depiction of the world – could have encouraged a realistic interpretation of the Bible. Except for the different historical reality they depicted, one could speak of a strong affinity between the texts of the Bible and those of the novels. Biblical literature portrays the interaction between God and humans, while novels give account of the relationship between individuals and their socio-economic, political and cultural world. Instead of the expected literary interpretation of the Bible during this period, what happened was the contrary. With the obsession for the search of the real, which followed a set of positivistic epistemological criteria, the biblical narratives, failing to meet such standards, could only be saved by discovering a deeper level of meaning , that is, "the texts must have

13. Ibid. 1-2, also 130.

14. Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*; the Socinians' assertion that the truth-claims of the bible should be judged independently by reason and not by the dogmatic authority; and the pioneering works in critical exegesis, like that of Hugo Grotius and Richard Simon. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narratives*, 17.

15. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narratives*, 18.

meaning in some way other than literal or factual."[16] The focus shifted from the narratives themselves in favor of the context, the intention and the addressee of the author. "The historical critic does something other than narrative interpretation with a narrative because he looks for what the narrative refers to or what reconstructed historical context outside itself explains it."[17] Against this radical shift in biblical hermeneutics, Frei proposes a narrative retrieval of the realistic interpretation of the Bible in order to fit once again the narrative of our real world to the realistic world of the Bible. Hans Frei's work has become the founding argument of the postliberal movement in theology, because, as Garry Dorrien notes, "Frei observed that modern conservative and liberal approaches to the Bible both undermine the authority of scripture by locating the meaning of biblical teaching in some doctrine or worldview that is held to be more foundational than scripture itself."[18] The Bible along with its narrative resources should be the only foundation of Christian life and discipleship, a central concept in Hauerwas's Theological Ethics.

Narrative Character of Christian Morality: Hauerwas Theological Ethics

Arguing for the importance of narratives against the rejection they suffer in the hands of modern philosophers and theologians, Hauerwas thinks that "stories can do the work of argument . . . 'narrating', exactly because narration is the 'science' of the particular, 'is a more basic category than either explanation or understanding'."[19] Yet he also insists that the stories of the Sacred Scriptures, especially the events of Jesus' life as reported in the gospels, as well as the narratives of the testimonies of his witnesses, are the ones that shape

16. Ibid. 131.

17. Ibid. 135.

18. See Garry Dorrien, "The Origins of Postliberalism," *The Christian Century*, July 4-11, 2001; available from http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title-2116 (access 10/10/05).

19. Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2001), 206. Hauerwas makes a reference to Milbank's discussion on "explanation, understanding and narration." See John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 264-68.

the characters of his followers. As Christians, they understand their lives within the story of God's saving action in history that found its peak in the life-story of Jesus. "Scripture is the story that identifies God's people. It is the memory and heritage that they share. It is a story that reminds them that they are not the first to be loved by God; that he has unfolded his call and purpose over countless generations."[20] Hauerwas is convinced that it is only in the narrative of the community of faith, which lives out the biblical story, in its particularity and historicity, can Christians realize their identity and live a meaningful and integral life accordingly. Hauerwas demonstrates this in the life of Augustine who found a sense of synthesis or unity in his life when his own story found its place within the Christian story.[21] When he discovered the Gospel, he began to see the different episodes of his life—licentiousness, Manichaeism, Platonism, etc.—as a story of his soul's search for God. One's reflection on, and appreciation of, the demands of the practical living out of one's own individual and collective narratives according to the foundational story of the Christian tradition is the essence of Christian ethics. Thus Christians, according to Hauerwas, cannot but understand ethics within the horizon of Christian faith, tradition and narratives, which give them the proper theological vision of a good life.

Contrary to those who speak of narratives as incidental, accidental or merely a matter of emphasis, Hauerwas argues that Christian ethics and convictions are characteristically or intrinsically narrative. It is through the stories of God in the Scriptures that we come to Him and understand ourselves. Hauerwas stresses three fundamental claims associated with the narrative explication of Christian existence: "First, narrative formally displays our existence and that of the world as creatures—as *contingent* beings… Second, narrative is the characteristic form of our awareness of ourselves as

20. See Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, "The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, eds. S. Hauerwas and S. Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 17.

21. See Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in *Why Narrative?*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 158-90.

historical beings who must give an account of the purposive relation between temporally discrete realities… [and] Third, God has revealed himself narratively in the history of Israel and in the life of Jesus."[22] Our experience of conversion and transformation depends largely on how we allow our own personal stories to become part of the story of God's salvific action in our history. When we do that, we gain a deeper understanding of our own sinfulness and a better and more truthful vision of the world.

For Hauerwas, Christian ethics is concerned primarily with how a person faithfully lives the narrative of his life according to the narrative of his community molded by the story of God's salvific love. Rules or laws are not the most important aspects of ethics. They are appreciated only within the context of our relationship with God and with other human beings, through which we develop our character as a person. That is the reason why the question is not 'what one should do in a given circumstance?' The more basic question, upon which all other ethical inquiries depend, is 'how one should live one's life?' This radical grounding that Hauerwas has done to ethics, we think, calls for some fundamental shifts of emphasis in theological ethics. The first is a shift from abstract theorizing to practical living according to Christian narratives. The second is the shift from an ethical consideration of each singular human action to one that takes the totality of the person in his life's narrative. The third is a shift from (the letters of) the law to (the spirit of) love. The narrative account of the story of Jesus' life is considered as the foundation of a new way of life and morality, described as Christian. For Hauerwas Christian life and practice within a particular community of faith that lives the story of Jesus is like belonging to a particular language-game, a specific form of life. He draws this insight from Lindbeck's cultural linguistic model of understanding religion.

22. Stanley Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer to Christian Ethics*, 2nd Edition (Notre Dame, IN: SCM Press, 2003 [1983]), 28.

The Christian Story of My Community: Lindbeck's Cultural Linguistic Model

Thinking along with Frei's and Hauerwas's contention about the authority of the biblical stories, Lindbeck—another main architect of Postliberal Theology—claims, "It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."[23] This expression speaks of a unilateral relationship between the Scripture and human experience, something that can be appreciated within George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model for the understanding of religion. He speaks of three theoretical models in the study of religion.

The first is the cognitive-propositionalist approach that understands religion in terms of beliefs on 'divinely revealed truths' that are formulated as doctrines, which are largely external to human experience and condition. The second is the experientialist-expressivist model, which situates the essence of religion in the pre-reflective experiential depths of the self and regards the public or outer features of religion as expressive or evocative objectifications of internal experience. The third is the cultural-linguistic model, which provides us with "comprehensive interpretive schemes… which structure human experience and understanding of self and world."[24] As Emmanuel Katongole argues—against Lindbeck's own claim of a dialectical character in that relationship in his framework—"[Lindbeck's] 'intra-textual' theology tends to betray a residual Barthian foundationalism."[25] The uni-linear and 'pure' relationship between the text and the reader, according to Katongole, has made Lindbeck vulnerable to the criticism that his "cultural-linguistic model [i]s merely an inversion of the experiential-expressivist approach."[26] Lindbeck's understanding of the biblical narratives as a meta-system—'a totally comprehensive framework'—did not also escape the critical glance

23. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 118.

24. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 32, 33.

25. Emmanuel Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason: The Relation Between Religion and Ethics in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 210.

26. Emmanuel Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason*, 210.

of Milbank who identifies such an assumption as 'metanarrative realism', one that renders the biblical narrative 'ahistorical'—'artificially insulating Christian narrative from its historical genesis'—a pitfall Loughlin describes as 'Narratological Foundationalism'.[27] Milbank writes, "Yet by substituting narrative for doctrine in the articulation of the paradigmatic setting for Christian life, Lindbeck ensures that we get something more rigid and less open to revision. The doctrinal 'idea'—which is inherently vague, general, approximate, negative—is an inherently more cautious, less determinate way to handle 'setting', which stories, both 'mythical' and historical, can unfold."[28]

Narrative Witness to the Superior Christian Language: Yoder's Pacifism

The fact that experiences and their meaning and truth-claims can be appreciated only from within a particular language game does not mean that the cultural-linguistic system flourishes in isolation. Hauerwas is aware and sensitive to the many different 'forms of life' in our highly pluralistic, multicultural and multi-religious world. He believes that the differences between various cultural-linguistic groups need not give way to violence and conflicts, as we have been made to believe on the basis of some experiences in the past. Influenced by the pacifist Mennonite John Howard Yoder's commitment to nonviolence, Hauerwas is convinced that the Church should adopt only the 'language of peace', as a fundamental way of giving witness to the Jesus' story of self-effacement, unselfishness and unconditional love. The living out of our Christian life and values happens through the narrative telling of our own personal stories as

27. See Gerard Loughlin, "Christianity at the End of the Story or the Return of the Master Narrative," *Modern Theology* 8, 4 (1992): 377.

28. See John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blalckwell Publisher, 1994), 382-8, 86. It is interesting to note that Katongole uses Loughlin's concept of 'Narratological Foundationalism' to describe what, he observes, Hauerwas rejects in Milbank's framework. Milbank's account rather attributes such qualification to describe Lindbeck's theological—and by extension, Hauerwas's ethical—project. See Emmanuel Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason*, 218.

being faithful to the biblical and Christian stories that inspire them. Our theological claims are verified not by reasoning but by good witnessing. To be caught up in argumentation and even debate in order to seek a common and universal ground and foundation to our truth-claims is futile and violent. The Church is called to offer an alternative and a radical critique to the logic of violence that has characterized the dominant western tradition, particularly the modern secular politics, economics and sociology, which promote the Machiavellian scheme of self-interest, control and domination.

It should be made clear though that when Hauerwas speaks of the ontology of peace and nonviolence, he does not mean to give up the prophetic vocation of the Church in the world. The pacifism he claims to share with Hippolytus, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, etc., involves (nonviolent) resistance to evil. In the same way that Jesus entered into conflict with the principalities and powers of his time, Christians are summoned to protest against those who maintain the appearance of order through threat of violence. The denunciation of evil goes with the corollary annunciation of the good news of salvation in the Kingdom of God that Jesus gave witness to through his own passion, death and resurrection. Hauerwas claims that as prophets we tell the Jesus' story in our lives and out-narrate other competing stories in the process. All that it principally requires is to be part of the community that lives the memory of Jesus enabling each member to walk in virtue according to the 'way of the Lord'.

The Liberal Approach to Stories: The Need for Critical Hermeneutics

One can very well agree with Hauerwas and the postliberal theologians and ethicists in their claims about the indispensable role of biblical stories in the moral formation of Christian life and identity. There are innumerable evidence and accounts in the history of Christianity that attest to the fact that the stories of the Bible, especially of the Gospels, have brought about inspiration and conversion to the lives of many individuals. The biblical stories are definitely rich sources of narrative imagination that help us overcome the emptiness and meaninglessness of a life of self-deception, narcissism, and restless

competitive existence. This is especially true and relevant in the modern—liberal capitalist—world. Describing "[t]he world of work, just like private and public life, [as] becom[ing] more and more invaded by what one can describe as suffering from meaninglessness,"[29] Verstraeten appreciates the wisdom of retrieving the narrative resources of tradition. He claims that "[a]s a result of the imaginary world constituted by literary and religious texts, the fragmented, postmodern subject once more sees the possibility of stepping out of its fragmentation and, with the help of imagination, configuring itself as a narrative unity that is more than the succession of now moments. Religious texts such as the Bible can even lead to a radical reconfiguration or *metanoia*."[30] Through narrative imagination one begins to see things and the world anew, overcoming enclosed ways of thinking and old hermeneutic frames. He holds that the process of the humanization of the lifeworld (the world of business in particular) includes the task of going beyond the prevalent mores of economism, conventionalism and legalism of technocratic managerial rationality. It needs the development of the ethos of values, life of virtues and the phronetic wisdom of tradition-dependent rationality sustained by the imaginative vision and narrative telling and retelling of commonly shared practices and social responsibility. MacIntyre's discourse on tradition goes along this line of thinking, which holds that we gain a more profound sense of the unity of our life within the practice of the community to which we belong and from which we derive our identity and meaning of life.

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29. He identifies three causes of or problems associated with meaninglessness. First, the problem of interpretation has become positivistic and narrow. Second, the disconnection syndrome pervades the lifeworld: "A radical disconnection between differentiated spheres of life and between them and ultimate ends." Third, the lack of interiority: "The modern subject has become an empty subject, without interior life, a being that can only be himself or herself via external activities, such as work and the acquisition and consumption of goods." Johan Verstraeten, "Beyond Business Ethics: Leadership, Spirituality and the Quest for Meaning," unpublished essay, Course in Business Ethics (Leuven: Faculty of Theology, Catholic University of Leuven, 2001), 1-3.

30. Johan Verstraeten, "From Business Ethics to the Vocation of Business Leaders to Humanize the World of Business," *A European Review* 7, 2 (April 1998): 119.

Just as we basically agree with the postliberal appeal for the centrality of the narrative resources of tradition in the formation of our Christian character and life in our contemporary world, it is also important to be reminded of the liberal critical perspectives on tradition and the ambiguity of the role of stories in moral formation.

The Ambiguous Character of Narratives: The Liberal Critique of Tradition

Martha Nussbaum's liberal discourse on education has argued for the important role of stories and literature, particularly novels in ethics, claiming that literature develops in the moral agent practical wisdom, keenness of perception, moral imagination, rational emotion, and creative vision. Against the technocratic and abstract thinking in modern ethics, Nussbaum suggests for the remarriage of (moral) philosophy and literature, which she claims was the characteristic feature of doing ethics during the Homeric times as exemplified in the Greek tragic plays and dramas. Although such a union between philosophy and literature was put into question during the Socratic period, which became so engrossed with the philosophy's disciplined search for clarity (*techne*) and its corollary purging of the uncontrollable contingent features of life (*tuche*), Aristotle defended the role of emotion and imagination in the exercise of practical reasoning. Nussbaum, a self-declared neo-Aristotelian, has now become one of the prominent liberal philosophers who reinsert in contemporary discourses Aristotle's basic understanding of human life (as contingent, complex, singular, with plural ends) and his insight on the indispensable role of literature in the development of the moral agent. When Nussbaum speaks of stories, she does not naively appropriate them for the shaping of moral characters. She speaks of the need for the ethical criticism of literature according to the liberal values she upholds as standards for living (i.e., individual freedom, autonomy, human rights, etc.). It is in this view that she has expressed her suspicion against particular traditions which impose through their narrative resources certain standards and vision of life that do not promote the full blossoming of each person's basic human capabilities and functioning (a central concept she has

developed from or along Amartya Sen's economic-ethical discourses on basic capabilities). It is for this reason that she clarifies that when she speaks of narratives she generally refers to the novels, which advance the liberal values and develop in the moral agents practical wisdom along with their basic human capabilities.[31]

We can agree with Nussbaum that there are traditions which can impose a limited and limiting horizon through the ideological use and distortion of their narrative resources. In this sense, they become sources of unfreedoms or obstacles to the full flowering of humanity, especially of the individual human person. It is pertinent at this point to refer to the conversation between Mr. Haley and a clergy man in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852):

> "It's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants, – kept in a low condition," said a grave-looking gentleman in black, a clergyman, seated by the cabin door. "'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be,' the scripture says."
>
> "I say, stranger, is that what that text means?" said a tall man, standing by.
>
> "Undoubtedly. It pleased Providence for some inscrutable reason, to doom the race to bondage, ages ago; and we must not set up our opinion against that."[32]

The ideological uses of the Bible in order to advance a particular interest or to maintain an oppressive status quo could be found in different periods of the history of Christianity. The use of the Bible and its narratives and symbols to gain moral legitimacy for one's economic, political or cultural interests continue to operate in

31. Nussbaum's philosophical discourses on literature and ethics find some articulations in Theology. See two different approaches in the postliberal appropriation of Nussbaum and the liberal resonance of her discourse in the proposed framework of Oehleschlaeger and Brown respectively. See Frizt Oehleschlaeger, *Love and Good Reasons: Postliberal Approaches to Christian Ethics and Literature* (Durhan: Duke University Press, 2003), and David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

32. See Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Barnes and Nobles Classics (New York: Barnes and Nobles Inc., 2003 [1852]), 142.

our contemporary world. In view of this problem, we can say that Hauerwas's and Frei's rejection of the cooptation of the biblical stories in our own narrative world makes a lot of sense. Their challenge to understand our stories according to the normative stories of the Sacred Scriptures may prevent the ideological use of the canonical text. Yet their claim becomes problematic when we recognize that the biblical texts are not innocent of oppressive or sinful elements. More and more biblical scholars have realized and accepted this. In a biblical conference recently held at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Peter Schmidth makes a commentary about the ambiguity of the biblical texts and stories, which deserves mention here in great length:

> Today's bible books contain the fruit of centuries of evolution, and, just like the Grand Canyon, they consist of many layers. In consequence, we can find in it the highest outings of unselfish faith and ethical greatness only a few pages from the most startling examples of vengeance and revenge. Whoever begins the lecture of the Old Testament in the expectation of finding in it God's Word in undiminished clarity, he [sic] will be shocked by the many occurrences of violence and cruelty it contains. The immorality of some stories and the offensively primitive forms of anthropomorphism God is coated with will bewilder the believer who is looking in the bible for justice and compassion. God's instruments are often composed of war, revenge, famine, pestilence, natural disasters, death and destruction. The narrow-mindedness of the biblical mentality towards other people and cultures, the vengeance emanating from some psalms . . . all this can discourage and repel the unprepared reader. The bible often shows the same link between religion and violence eagerly accorded to other religions. The many bible stories, which are unacceptable to our perception today, are a continuous argument of ethically moved atheists against biblical—Christian and Judaic—faith, ever since the Enlightenment. One cannot ignore this just like that, for it remains a pointed challenge to all who think about what "revelation" would or could mean.[33]

33. Peter Schmidt, "A Past History for Today," delivered in a Conference, Reading the Bible, organized by the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium, 27-29 October 2005.

To draw out moral imperatives directly, literally and naively from the texts and stories of the Scripture, as Hauerwas, Frei and other postliberal theologians and ethicists suggest, may not only be unwise but dangerous. But to completely and summarily dismiss biblical narratives in our way of understanding the meaning of life and our search for a good life, in the individual and the communal level, as modern thinkers (including some modern theologians) propose, may render our ethical pursuit bankrupt and misguided. As we maintain our claim for the role (not only inspirational, but also normative) of Christian tradition and its narrative resources for ethical reflection and practice, we also acknowledge the need for discernment that includes a serious investigation of the historical and cultural context of any given biblical text and story. The task of trying to understand the real importance of the revelation of God would require the aid of hermeneutics.

We, therefore, can say that just as we acknowledge the importance of narratives in the formation of our lives and character, we also consider it indispensable to take a critical distance in order to better appreciate the ideological underpinnings of the stories. It is for this reason why, contrary to the claim of the postliberals like Hauerwas and Frei, we see the need for hermeneutics and criticism of stories in order to put them at the genuine service of freedom and of truth, overcoming false consciousness or ideologies, and allowing them to let us see reality anew. We focus on Ricouer's framework.

Critical Hermeneutics of Narratives of (Biblical and Christian) Tradition

Hermeneutics, as a science of interpretation, has its roots in biblical exegesis on the one hand and on the philological study of classical texts and literature of the Greco-Roman antiquity on the other. Developing as a universal science that could be applied in the reading of any text, "Hermeneutics was born with the attempt to raise exegesis and philology to the level of a *Kunstlehre*, that is, a 'technology' which is not restricted to a mere collection of

unconnected operations."[34] The focus shifts from the text to the interpreting subject, clarifying the processes of knowing and understanding and developing rules for correct interpretation. This assumption makes Ricoeur consider "Kantian philosophy as the nearest philosophical horizon of hermeneutics."[35] For some, the take off point of modern hermeneutics is associated with René Descartes, who in his effort to seek a universal method to arrive at the certainty of knowledge of truth, makes the thinking subject as the secure foundation of knowledge. Considering everything else, like tradition and outside authority, as dubitable, he relies only on the self-conscious *ego cogito*,[36] which, he believes, is beyond doubt and therefore can be the basis of the certainty of the reality of God and of the world. Roger Lundin creatively describes the modern (both the Enlightenment rationalists and romantic intuitionist) and postmodernist hermeneuts as 'interpreting orphans',[37] which, along with the Cartesian tradition of self-creation (or self-isolation), defines the *ego* over and against history and tradition.

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34. Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 45. Originally published as "La tâche de l'herméneutique," in *Exegesis: Problèmes de méthode et exercises de lecture*, eds. François Bovon and Grégoire Rouiller (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1975). See also English translation of this essay in *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973): 112-28.

35. Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 43-62, 45.

36. Descartes' methodic doubt that arrives at the certainty of the ego is demonstrated in the following quotation: "I noticed that whilst I thus wished to think all things false, it was absolutely essential that the 'I' who thought this should be somewhat, and remarking that this truth 'I think, therefore I am' was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the skeptics were incapable of shaking it." René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 21.

37. See Roger Lundin, "Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition," in *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, eds. Roger Lundin, Clarence Walhout, and Anthony C. Thiselton (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999): 1-64, 15.

Influenced by the critical tradition of Enlightenment and of the romantic period of artistic self-creation and self-expression,[38] Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), known as the father of modern theology, stands out as "the first, and perhaps the greatest, modern hermeneut."[39] Considering hermeneutics as the 'art of avoiding misunderstanding', he expresses his ultimate goal in what has become his most quoted expression, "to understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author."[40] He developed a method based on universal hermeneutic principles that could be applicable to the interpretation of any text. He was concerned with the dynamics of the interplay between the reader and the text (psychological interpretation), as well as with the linguistic and syntactical structures of the text (grammatical interpretation).[41]

Nineteenth-century hermeneutics further pushed itself toward the rigorous method of science and away from the presuppositions of faith. This is discernible in the work *Das Leben Jesu* (1835)[42] of another German philosopher and theologian, David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), who developed the science of literary and source criticism. The rigorous scientific inquiry is meant to purge the biblical texts of myths (like the accounts of miracles) in order to

38. Describing romanticism as a period of radicalization of the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice, with a corresponding political expression in the French Revolution, Lundin says, "[A]t its height it nourished a spirit of enormous optimism and parricidal power. Indeed at times the romantics and revolutionaries seemed eager to make themselves orphans through their own acts of murder, whether real or symbolic." Roger Lundin, "Interpreting Orphans," 18.

39. David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 84. Jasper's historical survey on hermeneutics has served us to trace and consult some important literature and thinkers in this part of our exposition.

40. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman, American Academy of Religion Texts and Translation 1 (Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), 112.

41. See further elaboration in David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*, 84-86.

42. See David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined*, trans. Marian Evans, from the Fourth German edition (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1860). A very large part of the text is available in Early Christian Writings. http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/strauss/, (access: 10/10/05).

discover the real—the truth of revelation—thus, began the interest in the search for the historical Jesus.[43]

Another indispensable figure in the history of hermeneutics, especially in the 19th century, is Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911).[44] Faced with the development in the science of history and the rise of positivism in philosophy, Dilthey dealt with the epistemological question concerning the condition of possibility of the human sciences. Such an inquiry led him to propose an important concept in hermeneutics, which makes a distinction between understanding (of history) and explanation (of nature). We can *understand* (having capacity to transpose oneself to another) other human beings but we can only grasp and *explain* the phenomena of things distinct from ourselves. Dilthey has successfully expanded hermeneutics to all of human life and experience (human sciences), thus, achieving the task of fully universalizing hermeneutics wherein every human being can participate in the commonly shared meaning of experience.

The first part of our account of the development of hermeneutics stresses that the texts of tradition—and we specifically have the biblical stories in mind—should be interpreted and freed from certain readings which are determined by doctrinal commitments. Vern Poythress describes the new way of reading in the following fashion: "The historical-critical method, as developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, represented an attempt to free the study of the Bible from doctrinal commitments and to become scientific in its study."[45] This presumes a free, neutral, objective or Archimedean point of view, which has been rejected as

43. See David Friedrich Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History: A Critique on Schleiermacher's Life of Jesus*, trans., ed. and intro. Leander E. Keck (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977).

44. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences: An Attempt to Lay the Foundation for the Study of Society and History*, trans. with intro. Ramon J. Betanzos (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988).

45. "The claim to scientific objectivity was attractive, but illusory. Scholarship never takes place in a vacuum. In particular, historical research cannot be undertaken without presuppositions; the researcher must presuppose some idea of history, of what is historically probable, and of what standards to use in weighing the claims of ancient texts. Hence there is not one way of investigating history, but many corresponding to many philosophical possibilities for one's view of history and of the possibility or actuality of God's providential control of history." Vern Sheridan

a modern pretension or illusion. Even as we acknowledge the demolishing critique against modern rationality, there is something in the modern critical approach that we consider necessary in order to raise questions against the dogmatic assumptions of the premodern rationality. The importance of the method of criticism of tradition and self-reflexivity can be upheld even as we recognize that such criticisms cannot be free from our own contextual and historical conditioning. Some philosophers of the twentieth century, who caused a paradigmatic shift from epistemological to ontological hermeneutics, have argued that the historicity of our being is prior to our thinking.

We can trace back the development of the new ways of understanding the relationship between the thinking subject and the objective world to Edmund Husserl, who proposed to make a return to 'things themselves' through his phenomenological method. Yet it was Martin Heidegger, who radicalized the intuition of his mentor, preventing a return to the transcendental subject which Husserl has not avoided. Heidegger dealt with the question of being in his ontology, which became the basis for Gadamer's theological hermeneutics. We do not intend to make an exposition of Heidegger's ontological phenomenology and of Gadamer's theological hermeneutics. The point we wish to stress here is their fundamental critique against the illusion of modern reason in its epistemological claim to objectivity and neutrality. Gadamer, following Heidegger, speaks about the foregrounding of Being. We are already shaped by our particular history and culture – 'thrown in the world' as it were (according to Heidegger's description of the *Dasein*) – even before we think and make any valuation of that world. Gadamer argues that we cannot escape our historicity, tradition or *prejudice*, which is the only possible way, in understanding the presenting reality or any given text.[46] Understanding is the 'fusion of horizons' of our

Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific Method for Biblical Interpretation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 6 (Leicester: Apollos, 1988), 18.

46. Gadamer discusses this extensively in his *magnum opus* under the subheading, "Prejudices as Conditions of Understanding," See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel, 2nd edition (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979), 277-284.

contextually conditioned (linguistic) world and the (linguistic) world of the presenting object or text. Gadamer's basic hermeneutic discourse finds resonance with MacIntyre's discourse on tradition-dependent ethical rationality which has been appropriated by the postliberal theologians and ethicists.

Even as we agree fundamentally with Gadamer's and the postliberal assertion – the reason we call our proposed scheme also as 'narrative' – we do not absolutize or dogmatize the claim of tradition and history. We affirm the basic insight of modern reason for the human agency (collective and individual) to be conscious of one's prejudice and to take a relative (not absolute) distance from the conditioning of tradition, subjecting it to criticism through the reflexive power of the mind. Such a critical posture is necessary because the claims of traditions and of authority are not ideologically innocent and are always clouded by the *interests* of those in power. We see this especially in the critical discourse of Habermas, who has challenged Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition, arguing that the main problem in our knowledge is not misunderstanding, but the hidden exercise of power. Belonging to the second generation of the Frankfurt school, Habermas stresses the importance of unmasking the underlying interest in the enterprise of knowledge and calls for the indispensable role of critical social sciences for their emancipatory interest (over the technical or instrumental interest of empirical-analytic sciences as well as the practical interest of historical-hermeneutical sciences).[47] Considering that the dynamics of power can distort the actual communication process, Habermas has turned to language and developed his 'communicative action theory' and spelled out the criteria for an 'ideal speech situation'.

What seems wiser to do is to keep a balance or a creative tension between the hermeneutics of tradition (historical consciousness of Gadamer) and the critique of ideology (critical consciousness of Habermas). We find support for this position in Paul Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics, which tries to acknowledge the contribution of the two opposing camps. Proposing a critical

47. See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972 [1968]).

hermeneutics that brings the two sides in creative tension, Paul Ricoeur states his position:

> The gesture of hermeneutics is a humble one of acknowledging the historical conditions to which all human understanding is subsumed in the reign of finitude; that of the critique of ideology is a proud gesture of defiance directed against the distortions of human communication. By the first, I place myself in the historical process to which I know that I belong; by the second, I oppose the present state of falsified human communication with the idea of an essentially political freedom of speech, guided by the limiting idea of unrestricted and unconstrained communication.[48]

Denying any aim to fuse hermeneutics of tradition and ideology-critique under one 'super-system', Ricoeur clarifies that all that is needed is to acknowledge the claim which both legitimately make. He then goes on to demonstrate that each pole cannot stand consistently without the other. Ricoeur speaks of the complementarity of hermeneutics and ideology critique in two main subsections of his essay: "[c]ritical reflection on hermeneutics" and "[h]ermeneutical reflection on critique".[49] The dialectical tension between distanciation

48. See Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," in *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 87; see also Ibid., 63-100.

49. We summarize his discussions as follows. On the one hand, he argues that a critical moment is necessary for a good hermeneutics on some grounds. First, hermeneutics includes the emancipatory concept of distanciation (temporal distance), which is implied in the material fixation of discourse (*Sprachlichkeit*) in writing (*Schriftlichkeit*)—giving autonomy to the text from the original intention of the author, the cultural and sociological conditions of the writing, and the original addressee—just as it is implied in the *saying* (that vanishes) of the *said* (that persists). Second, against the dichotomy introduced by Dilthey between understanding and explanation, as well as that of human science and natural science, the new semiological models put discourse under the category of work, displaying structure and form, the understanding of which requires not a naïve reading but a structural analysis and explanation of the 'depth semantics of the text'. Third, considering that the Gadamerian hermeneutics is concerned not so much with the backward movement to what is behind the text (as sought for in modern hermeneutics), as with the forward movement to what unfolds before it, there is a critical moment in the poetic or fictional redescription of the world according to the projection of new and imaginative possibilities. It is here where

through writing and appropriation through reading allows the text to go beyond 'the world of the author' and finds its new home in 'the world of the reader'. Such an interplay of the two worlds demonstrates as well the transformative power of the (biblical) text as it helps 'refigure' (mimesis III) the 'configuration' (mimesis II) of the narrative structure (mimesis I) of our lives by opening it up to new possibilities or new visions for a new world.[50]

The Narrative Ethics of Liberation: Analectical Critical Hermeneutics

After the above historical excursus on hermeneutics and criticism, we now clarify our approach to the interpretation and use of narratives in ethical practice and reflection. We take a more balanced position between the hermeneutics of faith (tradition) and the hermeneutics of suspicion (ideology critique). Contrary to the traditionalist and ontological hermeneutics to the Sacred Scriptures, we take a critical posture that allows new ways of interpreting the text in order to break open hermeneutic enclosures. Yet, contrary to the rationalist hermeneutics, which treats the text of the Bible as an

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we can best appreciate the subversive power of the poetic discourse. Finally, clarifying that hermeneutics does not mean projection of oneself to the text, but rather allowing oneself to be exposed to it and to the proposed world, it critically introduces 'imaginative variation of the ego'. On the other hand, Ricoeur also speaks of the hermeneutical character of ideology-critique. First, ideology critique which involves the unmasking of interest in discourse depends upon hermeneutics. Second, the project of emancipation and of unconstrained communication is only possible with creative reinterpretation of the cultural heritage. "He who is unable to reinterpret his past may also be incapable of projecting concretely his interest in emancipation." Third, the return of the theory of ideology to the hermeneutical field happens in the very concrete critique of the present (in Habermas' case, the critique of the ideology of science and technology) in order to make a creative renewal of cultural heritage. Finally, Habermas's ideology-critique, in fact, belongs to a particular tradition of *Aufklärung*—tradition of Enlightenment and emancipation—just as Gadamer's hermeneutics belongs to another which is Romanticism—tradition of recollection. See Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," 87-100, 97.

50. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

ordinary interesting work in the past, we proceed with the interpretation of the narratives of tradition, considering the text as sacred – as a window by which God meaningfully, though not exclusively, reveals Himself. Following Ricoeur, we, therefore, hold that hermeneutics and criticism should go together and complement each other so that we may constantly become more sensitive to the epiphany of God, who addresses us in our own specific historical and cultural context, especially through the texts of the Sacred Scriptures. Furthermore, the fact that stories, like the parables and other biblical narratives, are metaphorical, the revelation of Transcendence necessarily escapes both the dogmatic claims of tradition as well as the defining and objectifying grasp of the human mind. The Otherness of the transcendent God challenges both tradition and reason to be open to the interruption that comes from the 'Other" it excludes or fails to recognize. The perspective of the 'Other', which Dussel's liberative ethics holds central, brings us to a consideration of a new critical-hermeneutical approach that allows God to break into our history, manifesting his design in the eschatological vision of the excluded for a new and better world. The scheme we present here is derived from Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer's 'Vision and Normativity of the Future',[51] a hermeneutic approach we critically appropriate from the perspective of Dussel's analectic ethics of liberation. We elaborate such an appropriation in the following paragraphs.

Normativity of the Future: Discerning the In-breaking of God in History

Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer's 'Vision and Normativity of the Future' seems to have evolved from a certain interest in establishing and carefully defining the relationship between

51. See Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times in Light of the Gospel: Vision and Normativity of the Future," a lecture delivered in the International Expert Seminar on *Gaudium et spes* at the Catholic University of Leuven in 2004 in preparation for the big conference in Rome to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the document in 2005 where they also delivered a similar paper.

(moral) theology (Elsbernd's area of expertise) and exegesis (Bieringer's line of specialization). We see this as especially evident in Bieringer's earliest exposition of their proposed hermeneutic scheme.[52] Taking off from the Church's official declarations of the close connection between theology and Sacred Scriptures,[53] Bieringer dwells on the important question, "in which way the Bible, a text of the past, can be meaningful, relevant, maybe even normative and authoritative for people who live today and in the future."[54] In his effort to answer this question, he clarifies the meaning of some important terms, like inspiration, authority, infallibility, inerrancy and, above all, revelation. His analysis of the meaning of revelation and of biblical inspiration in the conciliar document *Dei Verbum* makes him reiterate the need to overcome monologue and isolation and give way to an on-going conversation between historico-critical exegesis and magisterial theologizing. The injunction to dialogue comes along with the new understanding of revelation, which Bieringer captures in the following words:

> God does not reveal a doctrine or eternal decisions, rather revelation is a process in which God's Son and God's desire to save humans are shared with us. The purpose of revelation is salvation which is characterized as communication with God. . . . Thus, the goal of the revelation event is not obedient submission, but invitation, transformation and a free, personal answer. The monologue is replaced by dialogue and encounter. The interpersonal event of encounter is central, i.e., the process of revelation itself instead of the result of revelation.[55]

52. Reimund Bieringer, "Normativity of the Future: The Authority of the Bible for Theology," *Bulletin ET* 8 (1997): 52-67.

53. The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum* 24) speaks of the deep connection between exegesis and theology. Following Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), the Council describes the sacred Scripture as 'soul of theology'.

54. Reimund Bieringer, "Normativity of the Future," 53.

55. Reimund Bieringer, "Biblical Revelation and Exegetical Interpretation According to *Dei Verbum* 12," in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, eds. Mathijs Lamberigts and Leo Kenis (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Uitgeverij Peeters, 2002), 26-27.

Understanding revelation as dialogue, Bieringer speaks of the Sacred Scriptures as a dynamic and symbolic medium of an open and ongoing personal encounter between God and humanity. The sacred texts are not 'frozen forms of encounters' or 'static semantic containers' of the dictated words of God (according to one classic meaning of inspiration) or of the intention of the author, which need to be studied along with the original context and addressee, as has been the preoccupation in the historical-critical approach. The different hermeneutic approaches that dig into the past, though valuable in their own right, have been rendered inadequate by the relatively new way of understanding inspiration, as located not just in the past, but more so in the present and in the future.

Elsbernd and Bieringer's hermeneutic approach makes an important shift of focus from the past or the present to that of the future as the source of authority in opening up the texts of the Sacred Scriptures to new and transformative (re)interpretation. This assertion becomes crucial, especially when one is confronted with certain problematic texts in the canon of the Scriptures.[56] Particular texts which see nothing wrong with the system of slavery, degradation of women, racial discrimination and valorization of war and violence, among others, are undeniably marked with sinfulness and are, therefore, questionably valid source of ethical normativity for our contemporary life. Interpretation should be able to discern the future projected by the text in order to go beyond the historical world of the past. The future spells the limits of both the claims of the past and of the present. The transformative vision of the future is not a projection or an extension to the future of the past or the present

56. One very good illustration of the problematic is the presence of anti-Judaism in the gospel of John (8:44). Bieringer and colleagues examine closely the text and make the following affirmations: "(a) the Fourth Gospel contains anti-Jewish elements, (b) the anti-Jewish elements are unacceptable from a Christian point of view, and (c) there is no convincing way to simply neutralize or remove the anti-Jewish dimensions of these passages to save the healthy core of the message itself." Reimund Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, "Wrestling with Johannine Anti-Judaism: A Hermeneutic Framework for the Analysis of the Current Debate," in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000*, eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt & F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, Jewish Christian Heritage, 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001), 3-44.

(which operates within the hermeneutic circle of temporality), but one that comes from a different horizon that breaks into the present, challenging it to change. We recall here Dussel's appropriation of Levinas's critique against Heidegger's enclosed ontological structure of the temporality of Being, which is in the 'process of becoming' within the temporal sequence of the past, present and future. The future, which Elsbernd and Bieringer speak about, goes beyond the future that is projected by the 'self'. It is rather a future that comes from the Other, which Elsbernd and Bieringer refer to as the Kingdom of God – the City of God – that is far beyond the limited horizon of our being in the world. Such eschatological vision breaks open our present system of seeing, valuing, and living in order to give way to new alternative(s), capturing our imagination and passion for an experience of interruptive change and transformation. Yet, maintaining 'continuity' in the hermeneutic experience of discontinuity or interruption, they also speak of 'normativity of the future', a seeming oxymoron, that gives way to a dialectical tension, that is, making 'normativity' dynamic on the one hand, and allowing the vision of the 'future' in all its ambiguous forms become more concrete, on the other hand.

Elsbernd and Bieringer do acknowledge their affinity with Ricoeur who affirms (a) the revelatory potential of the Bible, (b) in projecting an alternative world toward a transformative future, (c) making the Kingdom of God (and not primarily the past events of the history of Israel or the historical Jesus) as the locus of revelation. Yet they also claim to differ from him in their consideration of other non-canonical and non-written texts (interpersonal encounters, social practices, liberation movements, religious rituals, music, etc.) as possible *loci* of God's revelation. Without giving up the special status of canonical texts of the Sacred Scriptures, they argue that limiting to the canonical texts God's revelatory action in projecting the future "appears to leave little room for hope, the Spirit, and eschatology as a future which comes to meet us independently of the written text."[57] For Elsbernd and Bieringer, the new interpretative approach has some constitutive elements: First, the *City of God*,

57. Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times in Light of the Gospel," 8.

together with other end-times images, gives substance to the normativity of the future that makes us discern both its presence (in terms of lived values) and absence in the here and now. Second, providing us criteria for such needed discernment, *the Spirit* serves as the sense of continuity, the 'locus of authority', and the eschatological source of renewal, inspiration and challenge for believers to participate in the building of God's Reign of justice, community, peace, dignity, etc. Third, the most important of the virtues associated with this type of eschatological hermeneutics is *Hope*, which keeps our vision open to the transforming call from the future. Fourth, considering that the future comes to us as an invitation to a shared life and vision, at the heart of the participative process of discernment of the Spirit and of His revelation is an open disposition to *relationality and dialogue*.[58] We enter into dialogue with the Sacred Scriptures and Tradition, sensitive to the different voices of specific persons and communities, whom God addressed in different times and contexts. In so doing, we discover for ourselves what God is saying to us in and through those words so that we could take a personal stance as a way of expressing ourselves, either through questions, doubts, objections or acceptance of the authoritative texts. Finally, the hermeneutic process is open to dialogue, precisely because of the need to purify both the readers of the authoritative texts as well as the texts themselves. The task of hermeneutics includes a deconstructive reading of the authoritative texts, which are not free from sinfulness and from 'intrinsically oppressive elements', not only because of the limitation, but more so because of sinfulness of the historical world of the author[59] (we recall here the long citation of Schmidt we made earlier). God after all, according to Elsbernd and Bieringer, has the capacity of *writing straight on crooked lines* as demonstrated in the sinfulness even of some protagonists in the biblical world (Moses, David, and

58. It is important to note here that Elsbernd and Bieringer adopt participation as the fundamental way by which they understand justice. See Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, *When Love Is Not Enough* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 145-60.

59. In an earlier article, Bieringer refers to Schneiders who speaks of the intrinsically oppressive elements present in the biblical text. See Reimund Bieringer, "Normativity of the Future," 61. See also S. M. Schneiders, "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19, 1 (1989): 4.

Paul). The historical and cultural horizons of the biblical authors, plus their own experience of sinfulness, somehow limited their vision and manner of judgment.

The way Elsbernd and Bieringer relate their proposed hermeneutic approach of 'normativity of the future' with the task of reading the biblical texts or pericopes,[60] the Church documents and the concrete historical events demonstrate even more concretely the relevance of their discourses to our present consideration. First, the affirmation of the importance of the Sacred Scriptures, especially the New Testament, as a special source of vision, values and inspiration toward the transformation of life in its different spheres (social, economic, political, and cultural), resonates well with the point we have consistently asserted above, even along with the postliberal theologians and ethicists. Tradition and its narratives have an important contribution to offer to ethics, especially in the deliberation of what constitute a good life for the individuals and communities in society. Second, the recognition of other authoritative texts, aside from the Sacred Scriptures, supports our criticism of the limited horizon by which the postliberal theologians and ethicists understand ethics. Confining God and his revelation only within the horizon of biblical texts may mean failure to appreciate His on-going revelation and action in history. Third, the realization of the role of human experience and condition in understanding the signs of the times affirms our contention of the indispensable need of grounding ethics within the complex terrain of our life. Fourth, the assertion about the symbolic character of the mediated Word of God as well as the presence of sinful elements in the authoritative texts of the Scripture and of tradition, gives us a good basis for contesting the absolutist claims of tradition and Scripture. It also favors the new possibilities and alternative claims from the perspective of the vision of the future, which can serve as norm by which to judge the claims of the texts. Fifth, the affirmation of the eschatological vision resonates, on the one hand, with our appropriation of Dussel's 'transmodern

60. Bieringer, for example, applies his hermeneutic scheme to his reading of the concept of authority in the Gospel of John. See Reimund Bieringer, "Come, and you will see (John 1, 39): Dialogical Authority and Normativity of the Future in the Fourth Gospel and in Religious Education," in *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*, eds. H. Lombaerts and D. Pollefeyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

perspective' (a point we shall expound a bit in the succeeding section) which demonstrates the limits of any given system and the need to contest it to change; and on the other hand, against the postmodernist relativist claim, it maintains the need for normativity beyond our purely subjective perspectives. Finally, the importance given to dialogue and relationality, goes well with our recognition of the indispensable role of communication, a point we borrow from Dussel's critical appropriation of Habermas and Apel from the perspective of the excluded and marginalized.

Liberative Analectics: The Epistemic Privilege of the Excluded Other

Although Elsbernd and Bieringer understand dialogue more along the lines of Gadamer's concept of the 'fusion of horizons', their appropriation of Ricoeur, which brings in the critical perspective of Habermas with that of Gadamer, makes their discourse open to the future with new possibilities. We believe though that beyond Gadamer, Habermas, and even Ricoeur, Elsbernd and Bieringer's hermeneutic scheme seems to fit more with the analectic perspective of Dussel's liberation ethics.[61] Dussel brings in the horizon of the 'Other', not in a symmetrical relationship (that characterizes both the Gadamerian, Habermasian, and even Ricoeurian concept of dialogue or communication) but in an asymmetrical one (à la Levinas). The 'Other' holds the self captive, calling it to responsibility. In Dussel's

61. Dussel's ethics exposes the irrationality of the egologism and Euro-US-centrism through his transmodern *discourse on the liberation of the 'Other'*. With a comfortable grasp of philosophy, history, theology, sociology, economics and some other branches of social sciences, Dussel has developed his architectonics of liberation ethics, that advances the liberative perspective of the 'Other' within a truthful and valid communication process in the practical organization of concrete, feasible, and ever developing socio-economic, political and cultural systems in society. Basing his architectonics on the *material* (practical truth of producing life), *formal* (validity of argumentation and communication), *feasibility* (logical, empirical, technical, and ethical institutionalization) and *liberative* (critical-analectical perspective) principles, Dussel locates and criticizes the many other ethical frameworks and presents a demolishing critique of the liberal capitalist system. Enrique Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1998)

more systemic discourse, the 'Other' is the excluded and the marginalized that should be accorded with greater privilege and more attention than the self or the system, in order to correct the present asymmetry that favors the latter. This is specifically demonstrated in how the marginalized voices, like those of the poor, the women, the oppressed sectors, etc., put into question the distorted use of the text and of tradition, and reject their 'sinfulness' and intrinsically oppressive elements. Identifying the poor and the excluded as the main bearers of the Kingdom and the agents of liberation in terms of their relation to the present system, Dussel says:

> All that rises up against the idol is the Other, the Enemy. The poor who aspire to a different and 'juster' order cannot but be totally opposed to the system. This Enemy can appear at any level: at the global or international level as an oppressed nation, at the national level as an oppressed class in struggle, and at the personal level as a poor man pleading for something to eat, as a woman demanding justice between the sexes or as a child asking for truth in education.[62]

It is very important for us to note that the eschatological vision of the future and its normativity could be best appreciated from the perspective of the poor and the excluded, who enjoy the epistemic privilege of understanding and of 'belonging' to the Reign of God through their longing and practical struggle for justice and liberation from oppression.[63] We do not wish to romanticize the poor, the oppressed and the excluded, as we can recognize that they can be co-opted by the oppressive system. What we wish to acknowledge is the fact that the reality of their own exclusion manifests the limits or sinfulness of the system. Such a reality would make

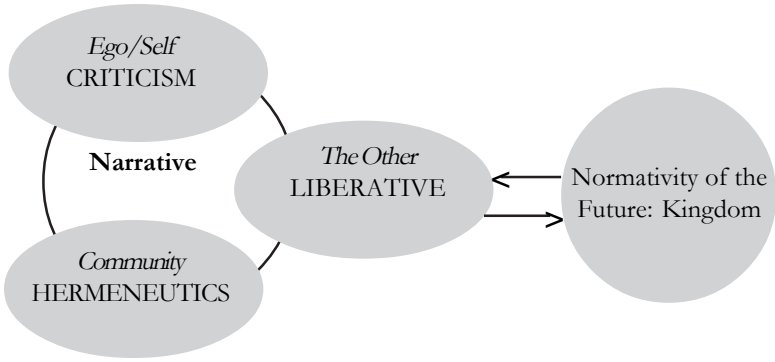
62. Enrique Dussel, "The Kingdom of God and the Poor," *International Review of Mission* LXVIII (January-October, 1979): 125.

63. Joy Gordon expounds and argues in favor of the 'privileged perspective' of the poor. Considering that all perspectives, according to critical theory, are ideological, partial, and rooted in interest, certain standpoints should be accorded the epistemological privilege in the discursive process, especially regarding some disputes as to who is right in the definition or description of a particular condition as unjust. The validity of the process in the determination of the claims of injustice and oppression would depend on how the perspective of the poor is

them go beyond it, as they long and struggle for a better world. Their struggle for life, truth, justice and peace becomes concrete manifestations of God's in-breaking into human history. Appropriated from Dussel's liberative analectics, Elsbernd and Bieringer's 'Vision and Normativity of the Future' has an important place in what we perceive as an appropriate ethical approach, we call Narrative Ethics of Liberation. Their proposed hermeneutic tool enables us to interpret the authoritative texts of the Sacred Scriptures as well as the non-canonical texts of tradition and of contemporary culture, liberating them from oppressive elements and from ideological distortions.

Conclusion

Summarizing the reflection we have put forward in this paper, we hereby claim that our proposed ethical methodology, Narrative Ethics of Liberation, is interdisciplinary in nature. It recognizes the important role of hermeneutics, criticism, normative vision of the future, and liberative analectics and allows a healthy tension between them. The diagram below illustrates the important elements in the said methodology:



given serious consideration. It is in its preferential option for the poor that liberation theology differs from the idealized models of discursive communities that Rawls and Habermas speak about. See Joy Gordon, "Liberation Theology as the Critical Theory: The Notion of the 'Privileged Perspective'," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 22, 5 (September 1996): 85-102.

First, we acknowledge along with the postliberal thinkers our historical embodiment within the particular tradition of our community, which defines our way of seeing, thinking, valuing and living (hermeneutics). We appreciate the central role of narratives that have shaped our moral vision and character. Second, aware of the reality of the dynamics of power and interest that can give way to exclusions and oppressions, along with the liberal thinkers we take also a critical distance and self-reflexivity in order to unmask the ideological distortions of communication within the particular tradition (criticism). We see the need for other disciplines in critically analyzing the function of the narratives that have shaped our personal and societal consciousness and worldview. Third, we draw the source of our ethical criticism from the normative vision of the future, which exposes the sinful elements of tradition, challenging it to change and transformation (normativity of the future). Fourth, considering the excluded and oppressed 'Other' as enjoying the epistemic privilege in allowing the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God into our history, we make a preferential option for the excluded and the oppressed and adopt their perspective in the critical (re)interpretation of tradition, along with all its canonical texts and other narrative resources (liberative analectics).

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