

*Construing Culture as Composition—Part 1:
The Narrative Nature of Truth*

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Abstract

This is the first of three articles that attempts to repurpose an exegetical/hermeneutical methodology primarily designed for the study of the biblical text, with a view toward analyzing a particular cultural scene in West Java, Indonesia. By doing so, I attempt to illustrate the way in which methods in theological hermeneutics can cast light upon cultural hermeneutics. In this first installment, I take a close look at the narrative (as opposed to propositional) nature of all knowledge and knowing. I also illustrate that narrative nature by way of a look at a well-known anthropological methodology, one with its own strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses of this methodology will offer to us space for suggesting an alternative in future installments.

Key Terms: anthropology, theology, ethnography, social and cultural anthropology, hermeneutics, biblical studies, cultural anthropology, and biblical hermeneutics

Introduction

We are a meaning-seeking species, a simple realization that carries with it substantial implications. I unpack a few of these in this series of ar-

ticles on hermeneutics and the quest for a widened application of Robert A. Traina’s interpretive methodology. Bruce J. Malina gets us started with this observation:

All human beings carry on an interpretive enterprise. As a rule, people carry in their heads one or more models of “society” and “human being” which greatly influence what they look for in their experiences, what they actually see, and what they eventually do with their observations by way of fitting them along with other facts into a larger scheme of explanation. In this respect, every human being, tutored or not, is no different from any trained observer in our society.¹

For me, this realization initially presented itself concretely and specifically. When I was in seminary, I made the hike from one end of the campus to the other several times on any given day. Typically, biblical studies classes would let out at twenty past the hour, which meant that I would make my way across campus to the School of World Mission and Evangelism—from the “biblical” to the “anthropological” end—often just in time before my next class began some ten minutes later. I have always thought it revealing that the disciplinary rift sometimes found between theological studies and anthropology on many a seminary campus seemed to be so dramatized by the actual physical layout of my alma mater.

More instructive, though perhaps less semiotic, was the resemblance in course content I frequently noticed at both ends of campus; a congruity which, ironically, often coincided with a disturbing lack of personal and relational affinity between the two departments. Much to my confusion, I would regularly walk out of an exegesis class, having

¹ Bruce J. Malina, “Reading Theory Perspective: Reading Luke–Acts,” in *The Social World of Luke–Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 3–23, 15.

just been privy to a penetrating—and not infrequently moving—discourse on the fundamental principles of biblical interpretation and their application, only to find essentially these very same principles—albeit in social science dress—proffered in my next class by an anthropology or missiology lecturer. Yet, despite this seeming conceptual similarity, there appeared to be no love lost between individuals occupying chairs in each of these respective disciplines. Those involved seemed entirely unaware of their kinship to colleagues in other “competing” departments. I lived with this tension for my first few years of formal theological training. It troubled me then and it troubles me still, due both to its cognitive incongruity and to the unnecessary dissension it produced on campus.²

One day, toward the end of my seminary program, I stumbled upon a new spin on an old word that ultimately developed into a profound heuristic template for me. A guest speaker, a distinguished biblical scholar from another academic institution on the east coast, conceded in her presentation that the task at hand in exegeting a biblical text was that of *hermeneutics*—an involvement in the art and process of interpretation. This, of course, was not a new idea for me; on the contrary, it was simply common seminary knowledge. The topic of biblical hermeneutics was part of standard seminary fare virtually anywhere one chose to study. Instead, it was what she went on to claim that forced me to sit up and take notice. As an underpinning of *all* of life’s activities, she said, from chatting with a neighbor to functioning on the local school board, from reading a newspaper to struggling for a promotion, in *all* these situations we are constantly involved in the inevitable undertaking of encoding and decoding. We are meaning-givers and meaning-seekers in every one of our daily affairs and thus, she said, hermeneutics can never be for us some removed-from-reality pro-

² Here I am reminded of the (possibly apocryphal) comment made by an eminent lecturer of missiology at a large North American seminary lamenting that the only thing connecting their school of theology and their school of world missions was the plumbing.

cess—a hermetically sealed-off, cabbalistic enterprise exclusively reserved for theologians reinforced by Greek and Hebrew scholars. The hermeneutic task—whether we realize it or not—embraces the very stuff of life itself.

This provided me much fodder for thought that so many of my lecturers overlooked—the very element that caused me to hear remarkably corresponding theories issue forth from members of two such sharply segregated parties! While one could find a lecturer from each of these disciplines championing principles of hermeneutics peculiar to his or her individual field, each, in fact, often unwittingly succeeded in mirroring those self-same ideas also being brandished as unique by his or her rival across campus. Thus, the two groups ended up sounding curiously (and revealingly) alike—a fact which would have been most disconcerting for those involved.

Consequently, hermeneutics came to occupy a special place in my thinking and since that time I have kept my eyes and ears open for its reappearance. My attentiveness was intended to test the hypothesis that a hermeneutically astute method aimed at probing biblical meaning applies to contexts wider than those normally supposed—it offers insight into the living of life itself. What follows will bear this out.

Of course, many more insightful people than myself have also come to advocate similar versions of this tenet, such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and Clifford Geertz, who have offered their own calls for a widening of the hermeneutical terrain. But I do not intend the thesis here to be a mere echoing of their ideas. For another thought has also puzzled me since my seminary days: Why is it that those who are cognizant of the conceptual bridge between hermeneutics in the social sciences and hermeneutics in biblical studies seem only to want to traverse the trestle in one direction?

Note that it is not uncommon to come across studies in which social science constructs are applied to the biblical text as a means for gaining a deeper grasp of its import. I only need to mention Malina³

³ Bruce J. Malina, “Why Interpret the Bible with the Social Sciences,” *ABQ* 2

or Jerome H. Neyrey,⁴ both members of “The Context Group,”⁵ in order give example. One of the fruits of their endeavors, *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, is a fine contribution toward gaining insights from the social sciences to yield needed cultural cues for interpreting the biblical text. Or Kenneth Tollefson, the Christian anthropologist/missiologist at Seattle Pacific University, has examined the Old Testament book of Nehemiah more than once with a view toward providing guidelines for community organizers and cross-cultural missionaries.⁶ Further examples are legion.

But once again, notice the traffic heads in only one direction. One is obliged to ask: where are all the biblical scholars enlisted in the task—those reputed to have the most experience with hermeneutically astute methodologies designed to quarry meaning from the biblical text? Would not their expertise be put to good use if employed in the analysis of cultural scenes as their hermeneutical foci? Where are those of similar ilk willing to set their sights on present-day cultural phenomena, savants sporting an array of finely-honed interpretive skills previously cultivated? Do these persons shy away from the task since culture as presently lived and experienced is so radically different from events encrypted in ancient codices? Is interpretation of written material a process so peculiar that it calls for an entirely different approach? By hearing from Dilthey, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Geertz, I show this to be a false dichotomy.

(1983): 119–33; Bruce J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986).

⁴ Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

⁵ According to Neyrey, in 1986 this group of scholars “formed a seminar to apply the social sciences for interpretation of biblical texts” (*Social World*, ix).

⁶ Kenneth Tollefson, “Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents: A Social Science Approach to Scripture,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 15 (1986): 107–24; Kenneth Tollefson, “The Nehemiah Model for Christian Missions,” *Missiology* 15 (1987): 31–55. In the second installment of this series of articles I also will look at Nehemiah to illustrate a biblical hermeneutical method that is transferable to the discipline of anthropology.

In this first article, we will take a short look at the history and development of the notion of hermeneutics. By broadening the term's utility, we will then be poised to analyze the interpretive process outside of biblical studies. Next, we will examine a representative example of this broadened interpretive process by looking at the social sciences—namely, that represented by anthropologist James Spradley's *Development Research Sequence Method*.

In the second article (the one that follows the present one), I will more fully explore a fruitful methodology that was birthed from within biblical exegetical studies—Robert A. Traina's methodology that he called “Methodical Bible Study.”⁷ Since this method is not widely known, I will offer there an illustration of Traina's procedure as applied to the scriptures, so that the reader might be clear as to what it includes. Features of striking similarity will be apparent between these two approaches.

Finally, in the third article of this series, given the paucity of cases in which the interpretation of a cultural scene borrows from biblical hermeneutical methodologies, I will employ Traina's method to interpret a specific cultural scene: small-scale peddling in West Java, Indonesia. Even this modest, brief, and solitary example will show that interpretive approaches in anthropology are impoverished if scholars continue to neglect their sister discipline, narrative biblical criticism.

The Notion of Hermeneutics

In discussing the origins of hermeneutics, Bernard Ramm makes the following observation:

⁷ What Robert A. Traina called “Methodical Bible Study” is now known as “Inductive Bible Study.” I will also be drawing from notes gleaned from Traina's class lectures during his tenure at Asbury Theological Seminary (1966–1988), from his book that first laid out his methodology (Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002]), as well as the book he coauthored with David R. Bauer toward the end of his life (*Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014]).

Arbitrary interpretation may be a wrenching of the truth of the text or it may be the overapplication of a legitimate procedure (as in typological interpretation). The conscious setting up of rules is hermeneutics (from the god Hermes, messenger of the gods, hence *hermēneuein*, to interpret; *hermēneia*, interpretation, commentary; and *hē hermēneutikē technē*, the skill or art of interpretation).⁸

The term *ἐρμηνεύω* (*hermēneuō*) and its cognates, from which we derive an array of related English words, enjoy a lengthy history in classical and biblical Greek. In classical sources, they have three primary meanings: (1) to speak or speak plainly, (2) to express or articulate, or (3) to translate.⁹ In the Septuagint (LXX), the terminology relates to translation (e.g., Gen 42:23; Esth 10:3; Ezra 4:7), although at times “describing” is also present (e.g., Job 42:18).¹⁰ In the New Testament over half of the 20 or so occurrences of this word group carry the idea of translation. In Luke 24:27, *dihermēneuō* clearly involves exposition or interpretation. The remaining seven occurrences are all connected to the interpretation of tongues.¹¹ Thus, with etymological inspiration from the Greek mythological messenger Hermes, the term hermeneutics and its cognates as found in these ancient documents denote translation or the conveyance of meaning from one realm to another with a view toward comprehension.

Consequently, clustered around the term hermeneutics there arose a distinctive theological discipline concerned with the interpretation of sacred texts, primarily those of the biblical corpus.¹² A corresponding attempt was made to establish rules or principles which would prevent the process of interpretation from degenerating into a completely arbitrary discipline.¹³ As G. H. Schodde states,

⁸ Bernard Ramm et al., *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 7.

⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, “Explain,” *NIDNTT* 1:573–84, 579–80.

¹⁰ Thiselton, “Explain,” 580.

¹¹ Thiselton, “Explain,” 581–82.

¹² F. F. Bruce, “Hermeneutics,” *NBD*², 476.

¹³ Ramm et al., *Hermeneutics*, 7. Of course, Midrashic hermeneutics has been in

In nearly all cases, interpretation has in mind the thoughts of another, and then, further, these thoughts expressed in another language than that of the interpreter. In this sense it is used in Bib. research. A person has interpreted the thoughts of another when he has in mind a correct reproduction or photograph of the thought as it was conceived in the mind of the original writer or speaker. It is accordingly a purely reproductive process, involving no originality of thought on the part of the interpreter. If the latter adds anything of his own it is *eisegesis* [reading into the text] and not *exegesis* [culling from the text].¹⁴

A Broadening of the Term's Utility

Many now realize that the focus of hermeneutics must be expanded. Rouse makes the point well:

Many of the objects of interpretation in the human sciences are not themselves texts, of course. But actions, artifacts, social relations, and individual lives are analogues of texts in an important respect. The terms in which we understand them, as clear or confused, significant or insignificant, are the same ones that guide our interpretation of texts. These various components of human life have a sense that can be expressed in words, even when not originally articulated this way. We interpret an action or artifact by saying what it means. This description proceeds with the same circular structure of presupposition and interpretation that characterizes the reading of a text. We interpret actions by using words; we interpret texts by using words different from the origi-

existence since before the time of Christ. See Thiselton's discussion of the Midrashic tradition and its bearing upon contemporary understanding of biblical hermeneutics in general ("Explain," 580–81).

¹⁴ G. H. Schodde, "Interpretation," *ISBE* 3:1489–90.

nal ones. In either case, we understand them as already meaningful, and we take that same meaning to be expressible in a form different from the original.¹⁵

Thus, in response to statements like Schodde’s just above wherein the hermeneutical task is envisioned as simple one-to-one correspondence (often deemed a “mirroring” approach to interpretation), the last couple of centuries have witnessed a wholesale deepening and widening of what is thought to be involved in the process.

The *deepening* has come about due to a realization of the naïveté of postulating interpretation as a mere detached “reproductive process.” It is now realized that, in the enterprise of hermeneutics, the undertaking is far more than a mere indifferent clarification of the technical difficulties and challenges found in texts (often the German term *Erklären* is employed here—descriptive, technical explanation). Instead, the exegete must attempt to grasp the import of the communication event at its deepest levels (*Verstehen*—discerning comprehending or understanding).¹⁶ Hence, Thiselton maintains:

[I]f the interpreter is to understand a text adequately and correctly, due account must be taken of his own subjectivity. His own presuppositions, cultural orientation, and psychological capacities will shape his understanding of the text. Some of these presuppositions may act as a barrier to understanding; yet it is more important to note that they also serve as an indispensable point of contact with the subject-matter of the text, at least at the commencement of the ongoing process of understanding.¹⁷

¹⁵ Joseph Rouse, *Knowledge and Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 44.

¹⁶ Ramm et al., *Hermeneutics*, 7, 134.

¹⁷ Thiselton, “Explain,” 583.

The one sitting before the text—the interpreter—is no mere spectator; she or he undeniably figures in the equation. Remaining oblivious to this fact will not only distort the interpretive process but, as alluded to above, it will also deprive the exegete of a crucial realization that can prove quite helpful in the hermeneutical process: the awareness of “historicality.”¹⁸ Both the text and the interpreter are historical entities, each possessing a unique context. Hence, a meeting of these two entities can serve to engender a whole range of new insights. Thiselton argues, “the horizons of the interpreter and the horizons of the text must be brought into a relationship of active engagement and dialogue, until the two sets of judgments, or of question and answers, become eventually fused into one.”¹⁹ This view relates to an entanglement that philosophers deem “the hermeneutical circle.” Its influence can be felt not only in biblical studies, but indeed it colors the entire quest for human understanding. We will examine its impact in more detail below.

The *widening* of the discipline of hermeneutics involves its purview being broadened beyond the confines of theological studies. Hence, the present-day science of hermeneutics now designates “the interpretation of or the search for meaning in texts, in human existence, in society, and so on.”²⁰ This came about primarily by way of the realization that any cultural event or artifact seems virtually to cry out for interpretation. *Homo sapiens* is a meaning-giving creature attempting to make sense of life. Tellingly, the sociological phenomenon of communal meaninglessness has been labelled by Émile Durkheim, *anomie* (i.e.,

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Wolfhart Pannenberg are mainly responsible for developing the concept of “historicality” or historical relativity. Cf. Thiselton, “Explain,” 583; Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

¹⁹ “Explain,” 583. This is reminiscent of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” (*Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. [New York: Continuum, 1998]; Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* [Oxford: Polity, 1987]).

²⁰ Charlotte Seymour-Smith, *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 136.

the lack or present irrelevance of a publicly accepted, socially-functioning set of interpretive principles).²¹

The collective endowment of cultural elements with public meaning is most generally a tacit process. This is due to its functioning by means of a socially agreed-upon constellation of implied standards and statutes, what sociologists and anthropologists call *Weltanschauung* (i.e., world view). However, whenever a crossing of world view channels between two or more social actors or groups of social actors arises, communicative dissonance occurs, whether it is due to temporal distance (generational variance), geographical distance (locality variance), philosophical distance (ideological variance), or any other potential distance. And if an increasing amount of dissonance is apparent, a person will become acutely aware of the interpretive process (i.e., the demand for and the process of interpretation will become exceedingly manifest as a conscious one). To philosophers and social scientists alike, this fact serves only to underscore the ubiquitous, hermeneutically-steeped enterprise latent in everyday affairs. For the average person, society is ultimately a text in need of exegesis.

Historically, the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first to call attention to this fact:

[He] argued that many nontextual features of human life, such as actions, tools, social roles, and individual lives, can and should be taken as meaningful in the same way as texts are.... Dilthey thought that only by taking meaning seriously could we have any

²¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). Lesslie Newbigin links the diminution of biblical hermeneutics and the resulting appearance of anomie in the Christian community: “[In the biblical vision,] if there is no point in the story as a whole, there is no point in my own action. If the story is meaningless, any action of mine is meaningless. The loss of a vision for the future necessarily produces that typical phenomenon of our society which the sociologists call anomie, a state in which publicly accepted norms and values have disappeared” (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 91).

hope of understanding human beings and the social milieu in which they—we—live.²²

Embracing this line of thinking, philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and others have pushed the point even further.²³ Developing the science of hermeneutics into an all-encompassing philosophical system, these thinkers have sought to gild the very act of living with the paradigm’s impressive analytical power. Thus, they have ardently opposed the

traditional accounts of hermeneutics as the epistemology of a particular region of knowledge (the *Geisteswissenschaften*) [which] distinguish[es] sharply between the artificial language of the natural sciences and the ordinary language of human interaction.... [Instead, the broader form of hermeneutics] collapses both of these distinctions by insisting that everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge are not different in kind.²⁴

This is a step that even Dilthey, a product of his age, was not yet prepared to take. For, while it is true that Dilthey was a pioneer in opposing an empiricist model of knowledge for what we today would term the social sciences, he still “conceded the adequacy of empiricist accounts

²² Rouse, *Knowledge and Power*, 42. Cf. Bruce, “Hermeneutics.”

²³ Martin Heidegger *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962); cf. Stanley Rosen, “Squaring the Hermeneutical Circle,” *Review of Metaphysics* 44 (1991): 707–28; Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1968); Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow and W. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press), 73–102; Thiselton, *New Horizons*; and David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 350–51.

²⁴ Rouse, *Knowledge and Power*, 51. Robert N. Bellah et al. make a similar appeal for a dissolving of the division between the humanities and the social sciences (*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [New York: Harper & Row, 1985], 297–307).

of the physical and biological sciences but [simply] insisted that extending empiricism to account for the scholarly investigation of human life and culture was illegitimate.”²⁵ With this step taken by Dilthey’s successors, however, all of life has become subject to interpretation. Like breathing, they say, humans need to exegete to maintain life.

The Hermeneutical Circle

Picking up on Dilthey’s analogy of life as a text to be explained, philosopher Paul Ricoeur has framed the interpretive process as a three-phase hermeneutical dialectic in which human inquiry moves (1) from understanding as a guess about the whole (2) to explanation as a moment of testing and structuring one’s guesses and (3) back to understanding as comprehension.²⁶ Something like this three-fold mechanism has historically been labelled “the hermeneutical circle.” Rosen describes it well: “The traditional version of the hermeneutical circle goes something like this: whereas the parts must be understood in terms of the whole, the whole can be understood only by way of the parts.”²⁷

With such a circuitous movement appears two terms briefly mentioned earlier: *Erklären* (to explain or interpret) and *Verstehen* (to understand), labels corresponding to Ricoeur’s second and third movements above. In Ricoeur’s thought, these two components which constitute the interpretive enterprise—explanation and comprehension—do not stand in opposition to each other since they serve together to dialectically illuminate and provoke the interpretive process. Here is how he lays out the process.

The initial phase, “naïve grasping,” involves a revelatory moment in which insight dawns upon the interpreter at the commencement of

²⁵ Rouse, *Knowledge and Power*, 42.

²⁶ Mark Kline Taylor, “Symbolic Dimensions in Cultural Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 26 (1985): 167–85, 168.

²⁷ Rosen, “Squaring the Hermeneutical Circle,” 707.

the attempt to interpret.²⁸ As we will see below, it is the legitimacy of this very point that provides a base to spur the process on, thereby keeping interpretation from degenerating into thorough-going relativism. Thus, Rosen can say:

What has been traditionally called the hermeneutical circle is not circular. We do indeed understand the parts in terms of the whole, and the whole in terms of the parts. In each case, namely, with respect to the whole as well as to its parts, *what initiates interpretation is understanding, which I am willing to call insight or even intuition, to say nothing of the many other names that this everywhere accessible but impossible to analyze phenomenon has been assigned.* Understanding becomes either circular or regressive when we attempt to explain it on the basis of a conceptual analysis of pre-understanding. But pre-understanding, after all is said and done, is just understanding.²⁹

And this is just what Ricoeur calls it: “*understanding* as a guess about the whole.” Ricoeur’s “naïve grasping” constitutes a veritable “first principle” out of which everything else springs.³⁰ This points to the fundamental faith commitment which he believes is inherent in the entire process of living; faith being the crucial (and unavoidable) element.³¹ Newbigin echoes this same idea, “[C]ircularity is ... the mark

²⁸ Taylor, “Symbolic Dimensions,” 168.

²⁹ Rosen, “Squaring the Hermeneutical Circle,” 727, emphasis added.

³⁰ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 286.

³¹ Cf. the underscoring of this principle by Thomas Kuhn as it relates to the physical sciences: “The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem-solving. *He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed* with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few. *A decision of that kind can only be made on faith*” (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd. ed. [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970], 158, emphasis added). Kuhn’s work, of course, has been of primary importance in the recent widespread repudiation of the fissure purportedly separating *Geisteswissenschaften* (humanities) from *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences).

of all fundamental thinking. One can stand outside the circle, declining to accept the starting point. But then, if one is to make any sense of things at all, one has to work in another circle.”³² Thus, a satisfactory hermeneutical approach will be forced to “recognize *belief* as the source of all knowledge and consciously embrace a ‘fiduciary framework.’”³³ Or, in time-honored Augustinian terms, “unless one believes, one shall not understand.”³⁴

This is not the end of the issue. We will return to the hermeneutical circle momentarily. But following on with Ricoeur’s logic we see that the second movement involves an attempt to arrange, organize, and validate based upon the aforementioned initial intuition. “It orders the whole and fills it out, identifying and relating its parts in ‘systems’ or ‘structures,’ in an effort to ‘verify’ or ‘validate’ the guess.”³⁵ Hence, *Erklären*—the term that points to descriptive, structured, and analytical explanation—follows on from the intuitive hunch as a means of appraising its veracity in a tactile world. And in the third phase of this construct,

[E]xplanation has led to comprehensive “understanding” of a possible whole world and a preferred “mode of being-in-the-world.” ... Departing from a naive guess, explanation makes it possible for interpreters to “comprehend” [*Verstehen*] the fundamental “boundary situations” and “existential conflicts” of human being-in-the-world. Explanation is, therefore, a mediation between the two stages of understanding [i.e., between intuition and comprehension].³⁶

³² Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 94.

³³ Michael Polanyi as cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 359, emphasis original.

³⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 359. The Latin phrase is *nisi crederitis, non intelligitis*.

³⁵ Taylor, “Symbolic Dimensions,” 168.

³⁶ Taylor, “Symbolic Dimensions,” 169.

As Ricoeur himself puts it, “understanding precedes, accompanies, closes and thus *envelops* explanation. In return, explanation *develops* understanding analytically.”³⁷ Within Ricoeur’s framework, then, the hermeneutical circle is an ever-expanding spiral leading on to greater clarity in the evolving process of comprehending. This is very similar to the type of progressive dialectic movement found in Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutical philosophy:

Not to be confused with the kind of circular reasoning that consists in begging the question, [Heidegger’s] hermeneutical circular [*sic*] way of thinking involves a continual interpretation and re-interpretation in which understanding of Being that is already given with human existence itself is rounded out and corrected while, correspondingly, human existence becomes progressively understood in the light of Being.³⁸

However, remembering I promised to return to the earlier discussion concerning the more circular form of the hermeneutical circle, there does remain a problem. Whether we call upon Ricoeur’s “naïve

³⁷ Cited in Taylor, “Symbolic Dimensions,” 168.

³⁸ John Macquarrie, as cited in Frank N. Magill, ed., *Masterpieces of World Philosophy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990). Cf. John Macquarrie, *Martin Heidegger* (Richmond: John Knox, 1968). Although in this series of articles I will exploit this three-fold dialectical pattern by using slightly different nomenclature, it must be realized that *verstehen* (to understand) is not actually so much a step in the process itself as it is an evolving disclosure brought on by the first two phases. It parallels what Traina, whose hermeneutical method we will take up in the next article in this series, designates “application”: “Theoretically, the application of a passage represents the sum total of [its] preceding two steps [observation and interpretation]. For once one has discovered the universal truth of a passage as well as the contemporary situation which falls within its province, then one may bring the passage to bear on the situation, and the result is application” (*Methodical Bible Study*, 215; Bauer and Traina later shift the terminology to “appropriation”; cf. *Inductive Bible Study*, 319–35). Thus, the verb *verstehen* can (and probably always should) shift from emphasizing the process of understanding as comprehension (the third moment) back to understanding as a guess about the whole (the first moment), only to begin the interpretive process all over again. This is what is meant by continual interpretation and reinterpretation which rounds out and corrects.

grasp” or upon Heidegger’s “pre-understanding,” we are still operating at an *a priori*, individualized, parochial level, reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s language games. The problem is that this hooks all understanding (including any endowment of interpretive insight) into a privatized, self-fabricated process. Consequently, reality can easily degenerate into a mere by-product of a self-indulgent, cloistered mental process with all universal meaning finally left up for grabs. Where, then, is the arbiter in this quest for understanding? Are all attempts to interpret equally valid? Are all “naïve graspings” equally satisfactory? What about the world we experience every day? What prevents us from mistakenly reifying our idiosyncratic cognitive models and treating them as if *they* were reality?

Rosen suggests,

If the process is entirely constructive, if in other words the sense of the perceived entity is entirely produced by the act of perception, then cognition is not world-construction (which requires subordination of cognition to general laws that cannot themselves be the products of a given and contingent world-horizon); it is an act of radical arbitrariness, and therefore it is not at all the production of senses but senseless or chaotic flux.

Since we cannot evade this lapse into chaos by the construction of transcendental structures of spontaneity, there remains only one method for assessing and regulating the insights of the living intelligence, and this, not surprisingly, is by checking them against our experience, both discursive and silent. The traditional method for determining whether one has understood a ... text is two fold: first, we attempt to explain all parts of the text as integral to a whole; second, we discuss our interpretations with other persons, whose competency we determine, not by rules and conformity to models, but on the basis of the understanding their words exhibit.³⁹

³⁹ “Squaring the Hermeneutical Circle,” 725.

Thus, the key to disarming a “vicious” (read: circular) form of the hermeneutical circle is by means of (1) an appeal to everyday life which is (2) lived out collectively amid others.

First, we will consider the “everydayness” of this proposal. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz attests, “common sense, or some kindred conception, has become a central category, almost *the* central category, in a wide range of modern philosophical systems.”⁴⁰ One need not search far for validation of Geertz’s statement. The view is so widely embraced that authorities in an array of disciplines echo this similar conviction.⁴¹

Geertz himself, in a chapter entitled *Common Sense as a Cultural System*, offers five seemingly universal “quasi-qualities” of common sense “as an everywhere-found cultural form”:⁴²

1. Naturalness An air of “of-courseness,” a sense of “it figures” being cast over all things;
2. Practicalness The quality of being able to know what’s what;
3. Thinness The belief that the world is what the wide-awake, uncomplicated person takes it to be;
4. Immethodicalness A shameless and unapologetical “ad hoc-ness”;
5. Accessiblensness The belief that any person with faculties reasonably intact can grasp the conclusions reached.

⁴⁰ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 76.

⁴¹ As representative here, see Robert N. Bellah, “Social Science as Practical Reason,” in *Ethics, the Social Sciences, and Policy Analysis*, ed. Daniel Callahan and Bruce Jennings (New York: Plenum, 1983), 37–64; Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*. Especially note Appleby and associates’ focus on “practical reason” and “pragmatism” and the role each has in the hermeneutical enterprise (247–53; 283–91). In fact, directly related to its rightful position in the interpretive task, Rouse contends that “the various versions of pragmatism that have emerged as responses to the collapse of empiricism can usefully be regarded as an attempt to universalize hermeneutics” (*Knowledge and Power*, 41).

⁴² Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 85; these are discussed in 85–91.

While the entirety of Geertz's article is an attempt to illustrate the parochial nature of common sense as a cultural artifact (hence, his title: *Common Sense as a Cultural System*), the concept as discussed in the article itself is freighted with an overwhelming "pan-cultural" quality. Even speaking of common sense as a "system" and ascribing it five generally universal "quasi-qualities" implies something all-encompassing. Thus, Geertz claims for this phenomenon (or more correctly, "suggests") "an ingenerate order ... capable of being empirically uncovered and conceptually formulated."⁴³

For my purposes, the most striking feature of this sort of knowledge is not simply its affinity to Ricoeur's concept of insight emphasized above but also the fact that we are here speaking of a brand of knowledge accessible to all persons everywhere. This is no esoteric knowledge hidden away—scientific mantras stowed in private information caches to be scrutinized by an élite, privileged few. Instead, this is the sort of wisdom accessed by average communities of ordinary folk found everywhere (thus, *common* sense).

This appeal to proximal, everyday life corresponds nicely with Alfred North Whitehead's corrective for what he calls "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (i.e., the elevating of the ancillary to the primary).⁴⁴ The answer to this "very subtle fallacy—more a general limitation of conceptual thought than an error in logic"⁴⁵—is a "recurrence

⁴³ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 92.

⁴⁴ Per Whitehead, this fallacy involves "neglecting the degree of abstraction involved in thought when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought" (Whitehead as cited in Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, 2nd. ed. [Boston: Beacon, 1994], 36). Daly and Cobb summarize it this way: "it is the fallacy involved whenever thinkers forget the degree of abstraction involved in thought and draw unwarranted conclusions about concrete actuality. [In other words,] ... neglecting the extent to which our concepts are abstract, and therefore also neglecting the rest of the reality from which they have been abstracted" (*For the Common Good*, 36). Ultimately, this is simply another way of rechristening the vicious form of the hermeneutical circle.

⁴⁵ Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 41.

to the concrete in search of inspiration.”⁴⁶ It is instructive that what Ricoeur presented above as the initiating element in the interpretive process (i.e., *insight*) corresponds quite nicely with that which, being found concretely tucked away in the hard-tack vicissitudes of everyday life, seems to function as our surest safeguard against excessive interpretive abstraction (i.e., *inspiration*). Hence, this same insight *qua* inspiration which initially serves to kick-start the interpretive process on its way also essays to anchor major concerns as major.

Consequently, if we combine this with Ricoeur’s “naïve grasp,” it now seems conceivable that there is a basic “common sense” correspondence between what we see and what actually exists and that it is this correlation which is the basis for our initial insight.⁴⁷ As Hiebert has said, “we see through a glass darkly, but we do see. We are not totally blind.”⁴⁸ This being the case, it is now clear that alert participation in everyday life is what serves to set us on the path destined for comprehension.⁴⁹ Emulating Ricoeur, the process begins with insight—or, if you will, a naïve grasp—and continues through analysis and description (*Erklären*) to an ever-unfolding state of comprehension (*Verstehen*).

⁴⁶ Whitehead, as cited in Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 36, cf. 41–43.

⁴⁷ Of course, a Christian understanding assumes this point from the start. First, the Incarnation signifies a primary correspondence between the uniquely transitory and the supremely universal and it blesses, sanctifies and employs this very correspondence. Second, a primary source (per Barth, seemingly the *solitary* source!) of biblical knowledge is imparted by means of oracle or prophecy; namely, via revelation—what could just as easily be labelled insight. For the Christian, the existence of the Scriptures in their entirety testifies to this fact.

⁴⁸ “Beyond Anti-Colonialism to Globalism,” *Missiology* 20 (1991): 263–81, 274.

⁴⁹ This call for “alert participation” bears a striking resemblance to what in anthropology—especially since Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead—has come to be called “participant observation.” Cf. Julia G. Crane and Michael V. Angrosino, *Field Projects in Anthropology: A Student Handbook*, 2nd. ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1984), 64–75; James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980); and Seymour-Smith, *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, 215–16.

Yet, of course, we cannot travel this path alone. It must be admitted that the interpretive task is (or at least should be) a decidedly communal undertaking. In fact, the consensus is that any sort of ethically-oriented legitimate interpretation is literally impossible outside of a community structure. As Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen assert, “*homo ethicus* is *homo socius*.”⁵⁰ And of course, this applies regardless of whether the interpretive significance rendered flows normatively (i.e., ethically) or descriptively. For, as development studies ethicist Muhammad Anisur Rahman reminds us, even “the scientific character of objectivity of knowledge rests on its social verifiability.”⁵¹ And, as if to reinforce Rahman’s claim, Thomas Kuhn maintains that “a [scientific] paradigm governs, in the first instance, not a subject matter but rather a group of practitioners. Any study of paradigm-directed or of paradigm-shattering research must begin by locating the responsible group or groups.”⁵² Of course, while reinforcing my focus on communities of interpretation, this statement like those of Geertz’s above could still simply shift us from an individual to a communal solipsism, with thorough-going relativism following quickly on its heels (a sort of communal or cultural relativism). Once again, we must ask ourselves, what forestalls this (now collective) tumble into ultimate uncertainty? What keeps our interpretation from becoming a thoroughly relativized undertaking? Besides our (now communal) common sense safeguard, there is yet one additional factor capable of coming into play.

This factor is intra- as well as inter-community dialogue, which together help to give rise to emerging, transcendent, cross-cultural interpretation. This is analogous to Paul Hiebert’s call for the evolution

⁵⁰ Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 125.

⁵¹ Muhammad Anisur Rahman, “The Theoretical Standpoint of PAR,” in *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action-Research*, ed. Orlando Fals-Borda and Muhammad Anisur Rahman (New York: The Apex Press), 13–23, 15.

⁵² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 180. The entirety of this book by Kuhn is focused upon the presence of scientific paradigms as hermeneutical devices and the historical role these have played in the natural sciences.

of a transcultural theology (issued with the world-wide Christian community in mind).⁵³

The critical hermeneutics that involve a dialogue between ... different cultures can help us all to develop a more culture-free understanding.... On the one hand, it keeps us from the legalism of imposing foreign norms upon a society without taking into account its specific situations. On the other, it keeps us from a situational ethics that is purely relativistic in nature.⁵⁴

Of course, the cultural gaps spanned here need to be of a wide variety, including those dividing peoples synchronically as well as diachronically. Speaking of exegesis as it applies to the biblical text, Ramm clarifies the point well:

In that the interpreter is separated from his materials in time there is a historical gap; in that his culture is different from that of his text there is a cultural gap; in that the text is usually in a different language there is the linguistic gap; in that the document originates in another country there is the geological gap and the biological gap (the flora and fauna). In that usually a totally different attitude towards life and the universe exists in the text it can be said that there is a philosophical gap (German: *Weltanschauung*, the metaphysical manner in which the universe is put together; *Weltbild*, the

⁵³ Hiebert uses the word “metatheology” for what I am here calling “transcultural theology.”

⁵⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 103, cf. 216–17. The only amendment needed to Hiebert’s claim relates to his assertion that out of such a process will emerge a transcultural understanding “that transcends cultural differences” (Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 217). It is perhaps more accurate to state that transcultural comprehension of any given topic will not simply emerge definitively but will always be *in the process of emerging* in an exponentially evolving epiphany. This is the dialectic I examined above, the one I am now saying is at work in community. Hermeneutics is, by definition, a dynamic, never-ending, on-going process.

physical manner [scientific or pseudo-scientific] [*sic*] in which the universe is put together).⁵⁵

In other words, what has been sensed, interpreted, and comprehended by others in the annals of history must also have considerable bearing upon our present-day hermeneutical endeavors. Not only those beyond oceans and over mountains removed geographically, not simply communities possessing linguistic styles quite different from our own, but also persons from bygone eras—individuals found on the other side of the historical gap—these, too, must continue to be given voice in the hermeneutical community.⁵⁶

A transcultural hermeneutical community intently concerned with meaning quarried from the detritus of everyday life will serve to safeguard interpretation in the face of parochialism and narrow-mindedness. Ricoeur's insight-initiated dialectic will then begin to take on a more universal quality due, in part, to the wide variety of individuals, communities, and perspectives involved in the process.

In what follows, I will attempt to dive into this ever-unfolding hermeneutical circle, assuming the above dialectic to be operative as I go. This is the very reason I have given space to the above discussion. For, without a clear understanding of Ricoeur's dialectic view of the interpretive process—and the critical role he gives to *insight* within it—the thesis of this essay will surely be rendered dubious at best.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ramm, *Hermeneutics*, 7–8.

⁵⁶ Historically removed persons (and communities) may also have lived out their days in places yet geographically divorced as well as linguistically separated from us. As Ramm implies above, the overarching element here is the distinctly different *Weltanschauung* brought about by a differing community. Note this from Birch and Rasmussen: “The ‘seeing’ so critical to the moral life is not something we can provide for ourselves by ourselves. It is almost wholly dependent upon relationships with ‘significant others,’ whether friend or foe, persons near or far, even real or imaginary. ‘Seeing’ is, in the end, a *community* achievement and gift, whatever the indispensable role of the ‘I’ in attaining sight” (*Bible and Ethics*, 102, emphasis original).

⁵⁷ The communal safeguard highlighted above, of course, is underscored and acknowledged by the public accessibility of my analysis as presented here.

The Narrative Nature of Truth

If, as has been claimed above, “society is ultimately a text in need of exegesis” and, therefore, “humans . . . need to exegete to maintain life,” then what we are principally dealing with here is a view of society (and the history of that society) which is analogous to narrative. Of course, this assertion has already been hinted at above.

In this series of articles, I will look at the application of this principle in relation to what are typically taken to be two distinct disciplines—the theological and the anthropological. Accordingly, it would amount to the better part of wisdom for us to first test the heuristic value of the concept of narrative as a hermeneutical vehicle in each of these fields. Clearly scholars like Appleby et al. take story as the very building blocks of human comprehension and understanding when they assert that “rejecting all meta-narratives cannot make sense, because narratives and meta-narratives are the kinds of stories that make action in the world possible. They make action possible because they make it meaningful.”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, if neither biblical nor cultural materials are ultimately found to be compatible with a narrative understanding of truth, then my present effort to apply this premise as a principle will certainly yield for us obscurity as opposed to clarity.

The Narrative Nature of Biblical Truth

Since the Christian Scripture is made up of a vast collection of stories incorporating one grand, over-arching drama, or *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history) as Cullmann classified it, it might at first seem unnecessary to call for an adoption of the concept of narrative as the basis for a Christian understanding of truth. This is even more clearly the case when we consider how the discipline of hermeneutics originally derived from an on-going communal encounter with the biblical text, an

⁵⁸ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 236.

encounter with a story that stretches across the pages of the biblical text. As Stanley Hauerwas affirms, “Christian convictions constitute a narrative, a language, that requires a transformation of the self if we are to see, as well as be, truthful.... To be Christian is not to obey certain commandments or rules, but to learn to grow into the story of Jesus as the form of God’s kingdom.”⁵⁹

Yet, since the Enlightenment, scholars have not considered a narrative approach to Scripture as a legitimate focus for the discipline of hermeneutics until relatively recently. Instead, Robert Alter argues,

[V]irtually all [hermeneutical] activity has been what we might call “excavative”—either literally, with the archeologist’s spade and reference to its findings or with a variety of analytic tools intended to uncover the original meanings of biblical words, the life situations in which specific texts were used, the sundry sources from which longer texts were assembled.⁶⁰

Perhaps this offers yet one more answer to my question posed above concerning the whereabouts of experienced biblical scholars who (it was hoped) could be enlisted in the task of analyzing cultural scenes as their hermeneutical foci. For if all cultural scenes in need of analysis are analogous to narrative and yet biblical interpreters have not historically approached the text as narrative, it naturally follows that these persons will not be as well-equipped as was perhaps previously assumed. But we might ask ourselves: How could this be? How could

⁵⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 30.

⁶⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 13. This is, however, changing. As biblical scholar David Gooding admits, “forty years ago study of the literary structure of biblical books (or rhetorical criticism as it is called in some circles) was but a trickle; in the last decade or so it has become a flood” (*According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 7). For a probe into this type of biblical hermeneutical methodology under a different heading, see Mark Allan Powell’s thoughts as found in the series, *Guides to Biblical Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) and *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1993).

biblical scholars miss all the rich narrative material so conspicuously arrayed in the Bible? How could the Scriptures' very substance not be manifest beyond doubt to them?

The answer seems to be that, ever since the Enlightenment, biblical exegetes (along with their secular counterparts) have tended to relegate to cellars of triviality the concept of “story” in most of their intellectual pursuits (with the rest of us generally following their lead). This seems due to the fact, with the dawn of the Enlightenment, “a different mode of rationality began to predominate. Reason supplanted faith as point of departure. Theology now differed from other academic disciplines only in its “object,” not in its method or point of departure. It was basically comparable with other disciplines.”⁶¹

Hence, in order to maintain respectability in this age of reason, theology—and as a result biblical studies—was forced to yield to the newly reigning paradigm.⁶² Science, as the logic went, was certainly not based upon anything as arbitrary and fictive as story; all thinking persons should concede that insight worth having must be based upon “objective,” cold, hard facts. Thus, most exegetes felt that

they could no longer, as their predecessors were prone to do, ignore the [span of centuries between biblical times and the present] and [thus] enjoy direct access to the biblical story. They believed, rather, that their task was to re-create, as far as possible, the original story and glean a message from it for today's church.⁶³

And of course, this resulted in the “excavation” activities that Alter spoke of above. What the biblical scholars were mining for, both in the soil and in the text, were facts—which all knew to be at loggerheads with story since in the reigning paradigm story is arbitrary and fictive. Persons such as Tillich, Bultmann, Jeremias and others attempted to

⁶¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 275.

⁶² Cf. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 277–78.

⁶³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 277.

distil from the narrative materials that truth which most pertinently spoke to the modern woman or man.

One of the problems with this approach, however, is that it simply does not do justice to the nature of the biblical text itself. As Hauerwas says, “[I]t is crucial for us ... to see that [biblical truth] is not accidentally narrative.”⁶⁴

Narrative is not secondary for our knowledge of God; there is no “point” that can be separated from the story. The narratives through which we learn of God *are* the point. Stories are not substitute explanations we can someday hope to supplant with more straightforward accounts. Precisely to the contrary, narratives are necessary to our understanding of those aspects which admit of no further explanation, i.e., God, the world, and the self.⁶⁵

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann seems to agree:

The rhetoric of the [biblical] narrative invites the listener out beyond the world of predictability into another world of thought and risk and gift, a world in which the unexpected happens, in which connections surprise us, and in which new life is miraculously given. The purpose and intent of these narratives is to break life open beyond our prosaic reductions, to subvert our domesticated expectations, and to evoke fresh dimensions of identity and faith.⁶⁶

The primary reason for this breaking free into “another world of thought and risk and gift” is due to the heart of the hermeneutical quest itself: what we wish for in the process is an encounter with the very person of God himself. And as Donald Bloesch reminds us,

⁶⁴ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 25.

⁶⁵ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 26.

⁶⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 114–15.

our language about God can be at the most analogical, not univocal, for there can be no direct or exact correspondence between human ideas and the veritable Word of God. It is also imperative for us to reaffirm the mystery of the accommodation of the Holy Spirit to the deficiencies and limitations of human language.⁶⁷

Or, as Hauerwas says, “‘God,’ we must remember, is a common name, to which we can ascribe attributions only as we learn of God through history.”⁶⁸

“[D]octrines” are themselves a story, or perhaps better, the outline of the story. Claims such as “God is creator” are simply shorthand ways of reminding us that we believe we are participants in a much more elaborate story, of which God is the author. Doctrines, therefore, are not the upshot of the stories; they are not the meaning or heart of the stories. Rather they are tools (sometimes even misleading tools), meant to help us tell the story better. Because the Christian story is an enacted story, liturgy is probably a much more important resource than are doctrines or creeds for helping us to hear, tell, and live the story of God.⁶⁹

The above should make us mindful once again of Whitehead’s caution concerning “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” While the excavation spoken of above⁷⁰ might at first blush seem simply an attempt to, in Whitehead’s words, “recur to the concrete in search of

⁶⁷ As cited in Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 196.

⁶⁸ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 26.

⁶⁹ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 25–26.

⁷⁰ E.g., searching for the historical Jesus, analyzing texts using form-criticism, speculating as to the nature and content of *Q*, synthesizing and molding the above concepts into elegant (or at least provocative) doctrines pertaining to the nature and work of God, etc. While these activities certainly have their place, the argument here is against their pre-eminence—their being treated as concrete and ultimate.

inspiration,” it instead flirts dangerously with a “neglecting of the degree of abstraction involved in thought when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought.” For in this case, instead of being some reified version of factual reality exhumed, the concrete happens to be the text itself—not the speculative encrustation of biblical criticism surrounding it.⁷¹

The important point to be emphasized, to theologians especially, is that this story, however enigmatic, is the true story, the only story Christians have to tell, and that it has no unstoried form. If it sometimes seems so incredible as to strain the imagination and offend the reason, the wise theologians will attempt no defense beyond a reminder (paraphrasing 1 Cor. 1:25) that the fictions of God are truer than the facts of men.⁷²

Unless we heed this counsel, Whitehead’s warned-against “categories of thought” will most likely end up being none other than the distinctively Enlightenment influenced abstractions of “rationality” and “objective truth.”

Finally, it is not merely to avoid corruption of the biblical text or to avert an abstraction of its contents that we celebrate the narrative form of the Scriptures. It is also owing to the narrative nature of the world itself and our place in it. Based upon the conviction that life is constantly lived out narratively, I will examine in the next article a bib-

⁷¹ Literary critic Northrup Frye argues that when idolatry is discussed within Scripture, it “is often regarded as a ‘literal’ projection into the external world of an image that might be quite acceptable as a poetic metaphor” (*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* [San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1982], 61). What we have here is the reification of narrative device as the essence of idolatry. Daly and Cobb, after characterizing idolatry as the act of “formally . . . treating as ultimate or whole that which is not ultimate or whole,” go on to underscore the degree of correspondence this has with Whitehead’s concept. As they say, “everyone commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. All of us are idolators [sic]” (*For the Common Good*, 389).

⁷² Garrett Green as cited in Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 5–6.

lical hermeneutical methodology which takes seriously the literary nature of the Bible. In turn, the third article in this series will represent an attempt to apply this to a selected cultural scene. For the latter process to be viable, that is, for any utilization of a biblical hermeneutical methodology dependent upon the narrative nature of the Scriptures to bear fruit when applied to a real-life cultural scene, it stands to reason that the personal appropriation of the concept of narrative will have to have meaning for us. But for this to happen Christianly, the narrative quality of the Scriptures must first be seen as being of consequence. However, if the narrative timber of the Bible is deemed irrelevant then our hermeneutic will be rendered useless, not only in relation to interpreting the text but also as it relates to our own contexts. This is due to the contingent nature of our story in relation to the story of God. Hauerwas explains,

we are provided with a truthful account of reality that enables us to see our life as more than a succession of events when we learn to locate our story in God’s story. That does not mean our life has a singular goal or meaning; rather, the story of God we learn through Christ gives us the skills to go on even when no clear goal is present. We rightly seek neither happiness nor pleasure in themselves; such entities are elusive. Rather we learn happiness and pleasure when we find in a faithful narrative an ongoing and worthy task that is able to sustain our lives.⁷³

Hence, for the Christian, not only reality with a small “r”—objective, detached, impersonal truth (the normal focus of hermeneutics)—but also reality with a capital “R”—our personal, lived-out, everyday experiences (what might be called existential interpretation)—finds its ultimate significance in the story of God. Life now comes clothed in meaning by way of personal embrace. And of course, meaning not embraced is ultimately no meaning at all.

⁷³ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 68.

The Narrative Nature of Anthropological Truth

I have already pointed to the emerging concept of “society as text” as found in the social sciences at-large. But what about anthropology—the field which I have chosen to look at in this series of articles? Is this discipline compatible with such an understanding?

While there certainly are dissenters, more and more anthropologists are now taking a hermeneutical approach to cultural analysis seriously. They are realizing that, quite frequently, “complex concepts elude current investigative [anthropological] techniques; and, at least for a while, more interest and importance may be learned through approaches informed by literary sensibility.”⁷⁴ Thus, Gardner points out, “There has been at least a partial return to the view that anthropology ought to re-embrace the holistic methods of the in-depth case study, and perhaps align itself more with the humanities and less with the sciences.”⁷⁵ Bellah seems to agree with this in respect to the social sciences as a whole, especially given the importance of the notion of story, as we saw above.

[W]hat we need from history, and why the social scientist must also, among other things, be a historian, is not merely comparable information about the past, but some idea of how we have gotten from the past to the present, in short, a narrative. Narrative is a primary and powerful way by which to know about a whole. In an important sense, what a society (or a person) is, is its history. So a Habermas or a MacIntyre gives us his story about how modern society came to its present pass. Such stories can, and must, be contested, amended, and sometimes replaced.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 358.

⁷⁵ Gardner, *The Mind's New Science*, 226.

⁷⁶ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 302.

And with this has arisen a school of thought within the discipline known as *symbolic anthropology*. While at once embracing a wide and varied spectrum of views and theories, this way of thinking, overall, lays greater stress upon communication of purpose and symbolic meaning.⁷⁷ It shares much in common with the project in the field of cybernetics known as *semiotics*, “the science of signs and sign-using behavior.”⁷⁸ And we are already acquainted with the anthropologist most normally associated with this approach: none other than Clifford Geertz himself.⁷⁹ For it is Geertz who frequently calls for a literary view of anthropology. He says,

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.⁸⁰

And since there are many who have joined his program,

the casting of social theory in terms more familiar to gamesters and aestheticians than to plumbers and engineers is clearly well under way. The recourse to the humanities for explanatory analogies in the social sciences is at once evidence of the destabilization of genres and of the rise of the “interpretive turn,” and their most visible outcome is a revised style of discourse in social studies. The instruments of reasoning are changing and society is less and less represented as an elaborate machine or a quasi-organism and more as a serious game, a sidewalk drama, or a behavioral text.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Seymour-Smith, *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, 273.

⁷⁸ Seymour-Smith, *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, 255.

⁷⁹ Cf. Gardner, *The Mind's New Science*, 243–44, 250, 355–59.

⁸⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

⁸¹ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 22–23.

As a natural outworking of the above, Geertz readily (and, for us, not surprisingly) looks to Paul Ricoeur for insight into the ethnographic task. He cites Ricoeur's concept of "inscription," a fixation of meaning in "some established recording process," which gives opportunity for the interpretive enterprise. Hence, doing ethnography assists the anthropologist to train her hermeneutical eye upon the symbols in question—it functions as "the key to the transition from text to text analogue, from writing as discourse to action as discourse."⁸² Ethnographic activity thus serves as the inscription of social discourse—the fixation of meaning which allows for interpretation.⁸³

The great virtue of the extension of the notion of text beyond things written on paper or carved into stone is that it trains attention on precisely this phenomenon: on how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events—history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior—implies for sociological interpretation. To see social institutions and social changes as in some sense "readable" is to alter our whole sense of what such interpretation is and shift it toward modes of thought rather more familiar to the translator, the exegete, or the iconographer than to the test giver, the factor analyst, or the pollster.⁸⁴

However, the issue is not as simple as all that. For, the procedure now being cast in hermeneutical terms can once again be easily infected by that very malady we attempted to stave off earlier: thorough-going (individualized or communal) relativism. Geertz makes mention of this

⁸² Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 31.

⁸³ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 19.

⁸⁴ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 31.

risk as well as its engendering cause: the lack of a suitable hermeneutical methodology.⁸⁵

The besetting sin of interpretive approaches to anything—literature, dreams, culture—is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment. You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, see the point of it or you do not, accept it or you do not. Imprisoned in the immediacy of its own detail, it is presented as self-validating, or, worse, as validated by the supposedly developed sensitivities of the person who presents it; any attempt to cast what it says in terms other than its own is regarded as a travesty—as, the anthropologist’s severest term of moral abuse, ethnocentric.⁸⁶

Buttressed by Ricoeur’s hermeneutical dialectic previously examined, I will attempt, in articles following this one, to deal with this problem. By utilizing Robert Traina’s hermeneutical methodology, it is hoped an interpretive program which can provide an ample amount of conceptual articulation and systematic modes of assessment can be formulated. By then applying it to a cultural scene I hope to show that the conceptual bridge between hermeneutics in the social sciences and hermeneutics in biblical studies need no longer be traversed in simply one direction.

The Interpretive Process Examined

To hammer out an operative methodology for cultural hermeneutics it will be helpful for us to recognize that human beings exhibit a far

⁸⁵ It should come as no surprise that this is the same complication one also finds when engaged in interpretation of the scriptures.

⁸⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 24.

greater degree of cognitive similarity than difference. As anthropologist Colin Turnbull has noted, “despite the outward appearance of almost irreconcilable difference between the way we and others do the same things, there is often much more similarity than might first have been supposed.”⁸⁷ If these similarities—what some anthropologists call “world view universals”—could be isolated,⁸⁸ we could then hang our interpretive endeavors upon something far more credible than a mere thin-air approach. Put more simply, with an over-all idea as to how the human mind sorts and categorizes, we might “establish a framework with which we can describe and compare world views. The basic requirement of this framework is that it be applicable to any human world view without greatly distorting it. It is in this sense analogous to the diagnostic categories of doctors.”⁸⁹

Along with others in the cognitive sciences, Gestalt psychologists offer something akin to just such a framework. After having “examined a whole raft of ‘form qualities,’ whose phenomenal appearance could be explained in terms of analogous brain processes” they then

put forth laws purporting to explain how perception is organized. For instance, they showed that objects that are close together tend to be grouped together (*the law of proximity*); the more symmetrical a closed region, the more it tends to be seen as a figure (*the law of symmetry*); and the arrangement of figure and ground seen is the one featuring the fewest changes or interruption in straight or smoothly curved lines (*the law of good continuation*).... Though usually referring initially to visual demonstrations, versions of these

⁸⁷ Colin M. Turnbull, *The Human Cycle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 17.

⁸⁸ It must be admitted that isolating world view universals in any indisputable fashion is not the goal of this essay, since asserting what those might look like would be nothing more than a highly contentious claim. The good news is, we are in no need of doing that here—instead, all we need do is identify a collection of likely, would-be postulates in order that we might illustrate my primary thesis, namely, that around something like these a robust interpretive model can be rooted.

⁸⁹ Michael Kearney, *World View* (Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp, 1984), 65.

laws also applied to auditory sequences—for example, rhythmic patterns.⁹⁰

In each of the chosen methodologies that follow we will witness an amazing affinity to these Gestalt groupings. A similar collection of “structural relationships” will ultimately be at the heart of what I offer as my own general interpretive methodology.

However, a caution is in order here. Even though the hermeneutical technique from anthropology examined below—a procedure known as the *Developmental Research Sequence Method*—derives from James P. Spradley, one of the key leaders in the cultural idealist branch of anthropology known as ethnosemantics, utilization of his categories certainly does not ipso facto lock us into his cultural idealist approach to anthropology. My utilization of his assortment of interpretive axioms—or, as he calls them, *semantic relationships*—is due far more to the similarity these share with Traina’s structural relationships—whose ideas, once again, I will utilize in the third article in this series—than to any a priori spin on how anthropology must be done.⁹¹ It is surely clear that my preference is for a Geertzian “text analogue” form of symbolic anthropology—where “culture is likened to a text or language.”⁹² But this does not preclude the possibility of others using the constructs I am promoting in a manner contrary to that presented. The reason for this, of course, is that Spradley’s semantic relationships are broad, analytical patterns of logic not in themselves presupposing any *specific* content or meaning. Even the self-styled historical materialist Michael Kearney acknowledges that, alongside the content of a person’s world view, “the description of which is the basic empirical ethnographic task,” there is also “the *structure*—the basic categories of

⁹⁰ Gardner, *The Mind’s New Science*, 112, emphasis added.

⁹¹ Cf. James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, *Anthropology: The Cultural Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), 360–61 and James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 107–12.

⁹² Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, 224.

thought—which it has in common with all human world views.”⁹³ I am simply suggesting that something like Spradley’s (or, ultimately, Traina’s) groupings be taken as the basic components in that universal structure.⁹⁴

⁹³ Kearney, *World View*, 3. By employing the expression “categories of thought” echoes Kant who, in the tradition of Aristotle, took these “elementary concepts of the pure understanding—such as *quantity* (unity, plurality, and totality); *quality* (reality, negation, and limitation); *relation* (substance and accident, cause-and-effect, and reciprocity); *modality* (possibility, existence, and necessity)—[to] constitute the mental equipment, the pure synthesizing concepts with which human understanding is endowed. These alone allow the individual to make sense of his experiences” (Gardner, *The Mind’s New Science*, 58).

Cognitive linguist Steven Pinker says, “The universal plan underlying languages, with auxiliaries and inversion rules, nouns and verbs, subjects and objects, phrases and clauses, case and agreement, and so on, seems to suggest a commonality in the brains of speakers, because many other plans would have been just as useful. It is as if isolated inventors miraculously came up with identical standards for typewriter keyboards or Morse code or traffic signals” (*The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* [New York: William Morrow, 1994], 43). It always piques the interest of the theist when a person such as Pinker—probably an agnostic evolutionist at best—essays to explain the agent of a “miraculously” appearing universal characteristic by personifying it. I, for one, invariably find myself asking, “At what (or at whom) is he pointing?”

⁹⁴ Kearney echoes a dilemma about which I am keenly aware: “With respect to . . . universals, two issues persist: whether or not they are the most appropriate categories for describing, analyzing, and comparing world views, and whether or not they are truly universal. It is possible that these questions cannot be resolved absolutely. This indefiniteness results from an unavoidable relativism inherent in the selection of the world-view universals. Any attempt at world-view study can utilize only categories that are historically available to it at the time of analysis. At different periods, different choices are possible” (*World View*, 207–8). It must be remembered that, even though I will propose (or more accurately, borrow from Traina) my own list, the goal in these articles is not to isolate a definitive inventory of universal hermeneutical categories of thought. I am simply attempting here to illustrate the feasibility of applying a biblical hermeneutical methodology to a cultural scene. The fact that “at different periods [and in different places], different choices are possible” simply points to the need for the safeguard already called for above: an ongoing intra- and inter-community hermeneutical dialogue. With this, the appropriateness and actual existence of any proposed group of categories (including Traina’s that I will essay to use) can be weighed and tested against that truly experienced by a wide variety of individuals and communities.

An Example from Anthropology—Spradley’s *Developmental Research Sequence Method*

While identifying semantic relationships is an integral step in the ethnographic procedure James Spradley labels the *Developmental Research Sequence Method*, this is certainly not its only aim.⁹⁵ In fact, the cycle can be broken down into two somewhat overlapping steps: (1) identifying and analyzing cultural domains, which then serve as matrices for (2) identifying and analyzing cultural themes.⁹⁶ Central to this two-step process is the utilization of interpretive questions to plumb the depths of the domains and themes. Not coincidentally, identifying questions germane to the hermeneutical enterprise will also prove to be the chief objective of the general interpretive methodology I will offer in the two articles that follow. In fact, all three of these elements—cultural domains, cultural themes, and interpretive questions—will hold significant sway there. Thus, it should now be helpful for us to look at these three facets one by one.

Cultural Domains

Spradley makes it clear that

any symbolic category that includes other categories is a domain. All the members of a domain share at least one feature of meaning. In the process of discovering domains we will look especially for the similarities that exist among folk terms. Domains are the first and most important unit of analysis in ethnographic research.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 41–204; Spradley and McCurdy, *Anthropology*, 355–69.

⁹⁶ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 94.

⁹⁷ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 100.

He then continues by listing four features of every cultural domain.⁹⁸

First, every domain can be categorized by means of a *cover term*. As the expression implies, this classification points to any category which itself embraces many other terms and concepts, with the possibility that these too might function as cover terms for yet smaller domains. Hence, within domains one frequently finds domains. Which of these finally become the object of study simply depends upon one's focus.

Second, as already suggested, “all domains have two or more *included terms*. These are folk terms that belong to the category of knowledge named by the cover term.”⁹⁹ Again, from a different angle, these included terms may themselves function as cover terms.

Third, all domains exhibit a collection of semantic relationships. “When two folk categories are linked together, we refer to this link as a semantic relationship.”¹⁰⁰ We should be especially mindful not to confuse semantic relationships with cultural themes—a concept we will examine rather closely in the third article of this series. The former refers to the way ideas and artifacts relate one to another whereas the latter refer to a general meaning or idea implied by the existence of these relationships. Domains are the fruit of observation and interpretation (*Erklären*); themes, the fruit of unfolding comprehension proper (*Verstehen*) based upon observation demarcated by domains. In other words, while cultural themes are distinguished by taking note of and interpreting semantic relationships within domains, the two are not identical.

Finally, domains are always delineated by means of *boundaries*, with “some folk terms belong *inside* the domain and others belong *outside* the domain.”¹⁰¹ Consequently, domains can be and are isolated from one another.

⁹⁸ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 101–2.

⁹⁹ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 100.

¹⁰⁰ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 100.

¹⁰¹ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 101.

Spradley and McCurdy state that one of the best ways to identify cultural domains is by means of trying to locate cover terms. Furthermore, “a helpful way to find cover terms is to recognize the semantic relationships that organize a domain.”¹⁰² Hence, as already stated above, identifying semantic relationships serves as a fundamental step in the *Developmental Research Sequence Method*. Citing several studies in which “investigators have proposed similar types of semantic relationships,”¹⁰³ these two gentlemen offer a list of “universal semantic relationships” as an aid to isolating cultural domains.¹⁰⁴

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. Strict inclusion | X is a kind of Y |
| 2. Spatial | X is a place in Y, X is a part of Y |
| 3. Cause-effect | X is a result of Y, X is a cause of Y |
| 4. Rationale | X is a reason for doing Y |
| 5. Location for action | X is a place for doing Y |
| 6. Function | X is used for Y |
| 7. Means-end | X is a way to do Y |
| 8. Sequence | X is a step (stage) in Y |
| 9. Attribution | X is an attribute (characteristic) of Y |

Looking curiously like the Gestalt groupings commented upon above, this list provides an example of what universal hermeneutical constructs might look like. Spradley himself realizes that “the ethnographer can take any proposed list of universal relationships and use

¹⁰² Spradley and McCurdy, *Anthropology*, 360.

¹⁰³ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 109.

¹⁰⁴ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 111; Spradley and McCurdy, *Anthropology*, 361. Slight differences are evident when the lists in these two cited publications are compared. Spradley’s list contains nine relationships as opposed to the eight that appear in Spradley and McCurdy (the category Attribution does not appear in the latter). In addition, the nomenclature utilized in each is somewhat different. The point I am making here, however, is simply that these types of universal groupings are widely thought to exist. Once again, in the next article in this series I will make use of a different collection (those borrowed from Traina) for identifying a general interpretive methodology.

them to search for domains.”¹⁰⁵ Most important for our purposes is the fact that, by utilizing relationships akin to these, the conceptual articulation Geertz deplores as so often lacking in interpretive approaches to culture can in this way be supplied. In my attempt to offer such in my next article, I will lean rather heavily upon a grouping quite like Spradley’s.¹⁰⁶

Cultural Themes

The concept of cultural themes was first advanced by anthropologist Morris Opler when he claimed, “a limited number of dynamic affirmations . . . can be identified in every culture and that the key to the character, structure, and direction of the specific culture is to be sought in the nature, expression, and interrelationship of these themes.”¹⁰⁷ Others have since acknowledged the existence of such axioms.¹⁰⁸ Michael Kearney sees E. Adamson Hoebel’s *postulates* of the Cheyenne culture, Francis L. K. Hsu’s contrasting *postulates* concerning the cultures of China and the United States, and George Foster’s concept of *Image of Limited Good* as being like Opler’s.¹⁰⁹ In fact, in work centering upon the Mexican village of Ixtepeji, Kearney himself “also derived a set of interrelated propositions that organize sociocultural behavior and beliefs.”¹¹⁰ He gives to all of these similar constructs the designation *logico-structural integration*: “It is in this study of Ixtepeji, in Opler’s discussion of how themes balance one another, in Hoebel’s corollaries, and in Foster’s ‘cognitive orientations’ . . . that we can see a suggestion

¹⁰⁵ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 110–11.

¹⁰⁶ It will later be evident that the list I propose, borrowed from Traina, more closely parallels the Gestalt listing than it does the list put forward by Spradley.

¹⁰⁷ Morris E. Opler, “Themes as Dynamic Forces in Culture,” *American Journal of Sociology* 51 (1945): 198–206, 198.

¹⁰⁸ As representatives here, cf. Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 18; Kearney, *World View*, 30, 62; and Seymour-Smith, *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, 65.

¹⁰⁹ Kearney, *World View*, 30–31.

¹¹⁰ Kearney, *World View*, 30.

of what I refer to . . . as *logico-structural integration*.”¹¹¹ But regardless of nomenclature, one strand remains constant throughout: a shared, integrating premise or group of premises embraced by a people which resound(s) repeatedly throughout their world view concerning a certain aspect of life lived out individually or together.

Moreover, for the purpose at hand a more interesting feature stands out. Returning to Opler’s original term, if we seek dictionary definitions most relevant to our use of the term *theme*, what we find encompasses “the subject of a talk, piece of writing, exhibition, etc.; a topic” as well as “an idea that recurs in or pervades a work of art or literature.”¹¹²

The connection to the notion of narrative here is obvious. The definition suggests that synonyms for the term *theme* could quite easily be a piece of writing, subject, or topic, each bearing a literary or aesthetic connotation by way of its recurring appearance. In like manner, Opler, in the portion of his article cited above, refers to “the character, structure, and direction of the specific culture,” as if pointing to a piece of literature in need of review.

Hence, the resemblance to Geertz’s literary spin on culture is not difficult to discern. It appears that as we take note of and interpret semantic relationships within domains, we are brought closer and closer to comprehending those domains’ themes as they function comparable to literary leitmotifs whereupon culture as text analogue should begin to bear fruit in understanding.

Interpretive Questions

Any parent can attest to the power of the question. Even though children have a limited range of psycho-linguistic capabilities allowing them to verbalize their intended meaning, they are sufficiently equipped at least by age three to begin using questions as a meaning-

¹¹¹ Kearney, *World View*, 30–31, cf. 123–45.

¹¹² <http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/theme>.

seeking device—and often to the point of driving parents mad! But is it any wonder that when humans are at this stage of unprecedented personal growth and development (ages 0–5) the medium most frequently called upon just so happens to be this ever so puissant one? For, as was alluded to above, strategically broached questions provide the key to the hermeneutical process, or the “making-sense-of-the-world” process.

However, the preferred procedure here is not some superficial, rapid-fire discharging of any old set of questions (something a beleaguered parent often feels is happening when caught face-to-face with an inquisitive three-year old.) In attempting to get at the meaning of someone else’s world view, questions must be posed which take seriously those beliefs and categories accepted by first-hand participants in the context in question. This is even more so for the ethnographer.

It could be said of ethnography that until you know the question that someone in the culture is responding to you can’t know many things about the responses. Yet the ethnographer is greeted, in the field, with an array of *responses*. He needs to know what question people are *answering* in their every act. He needs to know which questions are being taken for granted because they are what “everybody knows” without thinking. . . . Thus the task of the ethnographer is to discover questions that seek the relationship among entities that are conceptually meaningful to the people under investigation.¹¹³

Development theorist Robert Chambers echoes this same sentiment as it relates to that most question-oriented of all devices: the survey questionnaire.

Unless careful appraisal precedes drawing up a questionnaire, the survey will embody the concepts and categories of outsiders rather

¹¹³ Black and Metzger as cited in Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 84.

than those of rural people, and thus impose meanings on the social reality. The misfit between the concepts of urban professionals and those of poor rural people is likely to be substantial, and the questions asked may construct artificial chunks of ‘knowledge’ which distort or mutilate the reality which poor people experience.¹¹⁴

Hence, a battery of inductively-discovered, strategically-framed questions can serve as the ideal underpinning for the entire ethnographic process.

Spradley agrees with all of this when he underscores that “the ethnographer’s main tools for discovering another person’s cultural knowledge is the ethnographic question.”¹¹⁵ In his *Developmental Research Sequence Method* he lists three main types of ethnographic questions: descriptive, structural, and contrast.¹¹⁶ The first type attempts to “elicit a large sample of utterances in the informant’s language.”¹¹⁷ It essentially asks the *What* question (i.e., it solicits definitions). The second variety, structural questions, are intimately tied to the make-up and arrangement of given domains. Hence, these seek to answer how information is organized on the part of informants—how their world “hooks and eyes” together. Finally, contrast questions, the third type, “enable the ethnographer to discover the dimensions of meaning which informants employ to distinguish the objects and events in their world.”¹¹⁸ Also, “the meaning of any folk term depends on what it does not mean. Whenever we use language we call attention to what things *are*; but we also call attention to what they *are not*.”¹¹⁹ Spradley believes that, armed with these three general types of questions, the ethnog-

¹¹⁴ Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London: Longman Scientific & Technical, 1983), 51.

¹¹⁵ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 60.

¹¹⁶ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 60, cf. 78–91, 120–31, 155–72.

¹¹⁷ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 85.

¹¹⁸ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 60.

¹¹⁹ Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, 158, emphasis original.

rapher can attempt to analyze cultural domains, thereby arriving at cultural themes which offer a window into the world view in question.¹²⁰

It is here, in discussing the use of ethnographic questions, that Spradley's cultural idealist tendencies seem to me most evident. His questions appear entirely based upon verbal responses elicited from "informants." Hence, there is an assumption commonly embraced in ethnosemantic circles that "the naming of things is an important indicator of cognition" and, in fact, that cognitive mapping functions as *the* causal element in all indigenous world view fashioning.¹²¹ This being the case, the goal is to get the informant to talk about his or her situation and then, based upon answers given during interviewing, reconstruct a rationalized, ideal model of the informant's perceived picture of reality.

Historical and cultural materialists have challenged this mental model of cognition on the premise that it does not take into consideration the impact a person's material surroundings and its accompanying vicissitudes can (and, they say, will!) have upon the world view embraced.¹²² Consequently, with this feedback ignored, mere mental categories can easily become reified due to an over reliance upon a theory concerning cognition which historical materialists say is overly influenced by structuralist linguistics.¹²³

¹²⁰ As has already been stated, Spradley lists these categories as his three main groupings of questions. Each grouping encompasses its own collection of types and subtypes (cf. *Ethnographic Interview*, 85–91, 126–31, 160–72). Thus, it would certainly be erroneous to give the impression that he recommends the use of only these three varieties of questions.

¹²¹ Kearney, *World View*, 32. Without denying that cultural participants influence the ongoing formation of culture, framing it this way makes it sound as if a world view is something consciously tailored by cultural participants—analogueous to a favorite set of clothes worn. Of course, this neglects the fact that world views are: first, tacitly operative and thus not consciously chosen at all; second, significantly shaped by external factors and not simply internally arranged. This last point, as we are about to see, is the primary assertion of historical and cultural materialists.

¹²² E.g., Kearney, *World View*; Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979).

¹²³ Kearney, *World View*, 33–34.

In a following article, in order that I might have opportunity for illustrating the viability of Traina’s hermeneutical model when applied to a cultural scene, I, too, will concern myself primarily with information provided by informants elicited by questions. However, these types of questions are quite different from those we will later classify as interpretive questions (adopting Traina’s terminology). The latter are employed in the interpretive process which best fits in the second phase of Ricoeur’s three-phase hermeneutical dialectic, what was called *Erklären* above, (i.e., that phase of interpretive honing which serves as a moment of testing and structuring one’s initial guess).¹²⁴ In contrast, Spradley’s compendium of questions more appropriately serve to poise the interpreter for the “naïve grasp” phase—that point of preliminary understanding functioning as a guess about the whole.¹²⁵ Of course, we too will venture a guess as to which unique structural relationships are found operative, thus making our attempts ostensibly like Spradley’s array above.¹²⁶ The difference, however, is that our interpretive variety is directly affixed to specific structural relationships identified at the time of the intuitive hunch (only Spradley’s *structural* questions seem to display a similar tethering—and then only in relation to informants’ *verbal* responses).¹²⁷ Being thus employed differently than Spradley’s semantic relationships, these structural relationships are not as critically reliant upon verbal responses from informants. Instead,

¹²⁴ This occurs *after* the ethnographer interviews or engages in participant observation and the semantic or structural relationships are tentatively isolated.

¹²⁵ In contrast to those mentioned earlier, these are the questions posed *during* interviewing or participant observation. These are very like what Traina calls *observational questions*. They do not ask the meaning of something, instead they inquire as to presence or existence.

¹²⁶ In Traina’s methodology as I experienced it, he also put forward three overarching categories of questions; namely, the definitive, the rational, and the implicational. However, the nature of these, as we shall see, are quite different from Spradley’s variety. In addition, the sequentially progressive relationship existing between these three types of questions—which I will give attention to below—also seems to be unique to Traina. All of this will become more obvious in our forthcoming discussion.

¹²⁷ This design element will be more evident once explained and illustrated in our subsequent analysis.

they might just as easily present themselves straightaway by means of non-mediated community involvement.¹²⁸ This is due to the fact that their engendering methodology, originally designed with the biblical text in mind, is more intentionally literary and aesthetically-oriented and thus better equipped to handle non-verbal as well as extra-verbal cultural events.¹²⁹ In short, it is more in keeping with Geertz's text analogue approach. The methodology suggested in this series of articles exploits the advantages of this sort of approach as over and against other methods, such as the method of Spradley, not particularly germane to a narrative understanding of culture.

Conclusion to Part 1: The Narrative Nature of Truth

This look at Spradley's *Developmental Research Sequence Method* has assisted us in several ways. First, we have seen that his approach is based upon (1) identifying universal semantic relationships by means of (2) accompanying ethnographic questions to (3) isolate cultural themes useful for constructing a world view model. This method and its three resulting movements are very like what we will see in the next article when we

¹²⁸ To be fair to Spradley, his *Developmental Research Sequence Method* above has been taken exclusively from his book entitled *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979). Hence, it only stands to reason that he would focus upon interviewing and informants there. However, as a glance at one of his other works makes clear, his is still a (conspicuously) cultural idealist approach, see *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980). Hence, what appears overtly in his methodology of ethnographic interviewing also asserts itself in his other works.

¹²⁹ In fact, as we will see as we delve deeper into this discussion, the shape and content of Traina's structural relationships were greatly influenced by the English writer, art critic, and reformer John Ruskin and what has come to be called his *Essay on Composition*, a tract taken from "the latter half of Letter Three in his *Elements of Drawing*, published in 1857" (Howard T. Kuist, *Scripture and the Christian Response* [Richmond: John Knox, 1947], 160). Hence, Traina's constructs find their source in writings initially focused upon artistic composition.

more closely examine Traina's methodology. Hence, the affinity between hermeneutics in anthropology and hermeneutics in biblical studies has been underscored once again.

Second, the now widely-accepted search for cultural themes evident in much of anthropology points us to a methodological *modus operandi*: theme identification in a culture patterned after the way a literary critic searches for leitmotifs in a story. Hence, Geertz's call for a "recourse to the humanities for explanatory analogies in the social sciences" also rings true.¹³⁰

Third, given that the Gestalt groupings of cognitive universals as well as Spradley's (and McCurdy's) universal semantic relationships both bear a striking resemblance to Traina's structural relationships, and given that Traina's methodology promises to provide the conceptual articulation so sorely needed (and so often lacking) in interpretive approaches to culture, the way is now cleared for us to endorse the use of Traina's structural relationships in the analysis of a cultural scene. In fact, with culture understood as text analogue, appropriation of Traina's method seems an obvious next step. First, however, we must know what this step entails. The next article in this series (Part 2) will take a closer look at Traina's methodology, which should then poise us for the final installment where I will attempt to apply something like Traina's hermeneutical method to a cultural scene.

¹³⁰ Cf. n. 87 above.