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Brian Scott Ballard

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# CHRISTIANITY AND THE LIFE STORY

Brian Scott Ballard

Should we understand our lives as stories? Narrativism answers Yes, a view that has recently been the subject of vigorous debate. But what should Christian philosophers make of narrativism? In this essay, I argue that, in fact, narrativism is a commitment of Christian teaching. I argue that there are practices which Christians have decisive reasons to engage in, which require us to see our lives as narratives, practices such as confession and thanksgiving.

“Our graves that hide us from the searching sun,” writes Sir Walter Raleigh, “Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.” Here, Raleigh is invoking a familiar metaphor: Life is a story, and we are its protagonists. Over the last forty years, however, many philosophers have come to see this as more than a metaphor. Life really is a story, they say, and it is important that we come to see it that way. Consider a recent sampling:

What matters most to me about my life story . . . is that I get to write it. Don’t like to think I am just performing a script handed to me by history. I prefer to think of myself as the scriptwriter, inventing my life as I live it, *by living it*.<sup>1</sup>

[O]ur lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.<sup>2</sup>

[W]e are all virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behaviour, and we always try to put the best ‘faces’ on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the centre of that autobiography is one’s self.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Velleman, *On Being Me*, 44.

<sup>2</sup>Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 47.

<sup>3</sup>Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” 114. For views similar to Dennett’s, see Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*; Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*; McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story*; Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*; and Velleman, “The Self as Narrator.”



Each of these authors highlights a different good. Velleman highlights something like authenticity; Taylor, the intelligibility of one's life; and Dennett, one's sense of identity. But each author thinks the chosen good depends, in part, on our ability to *self-narrate*, to see our lives as stories and to gain some sense of how the story is going. The view that some such "existential" good is enhanced, somehow, by our self-narrating we may call *narrativism*.

Although Velleman, Taylor, and Dennett are talking about quite distinct goods, it is worth seeing their views as variants of a single emerging idea. That's because many of the objections raised against their particular views—say, the view that self-narrating is important for a sense of identity—would apply no matter which good was highlighted. For instance, Galen Strawson, a zealous critic of narrativism, argues that autobiographical memory is too unreliable for self-narrating to be ethically important.<sup>4</sup> And while Strawson is explicitly addressing the idea that self-narrating is vital to our sense of self, clearly his point would apply to whatever value we attach to self-narrating. So, narrativists, for all their differences, face many of the same objections. They also face many of the same burdens in formulating their views. For instance, what exactly is *narrativity*? How conscious must we be of our self-narratives? Is self-narrating necessary or sufficient (or both) for the relevant good? Is there such thing as *the* story of a life, or can any given life be narrated in dramatically different and even conflicting ways? On the face of it, there is no reason in principle to think the various narrativists—in spite of their diversity—will end up with different answers to these and other questions. Thus, there is good reason to shelter these scattered narrativist views beneath a single program of research.<sup>5</sup>

And scattered they are. Just consider the diverse range of goods invoked. In addition to authenticity, intelligibility, and a sense of self—the goods already mentioned—grasping life narratives has been said to be important for finding meaning,<sup>6</sup> for offering forgiveness,<sup>7</sup> for reconciling with our disappointments,<sup>8</sup> for understanding ourselves and others across our deepest divides,<sup>9</sup> for membership in a community,<sup>10</sup> and indeed for having any agency at all.<sup>11</sup>

What should Christians make of this enthusiasm for narrative? Is narrativism congruent with Christian values? Or is it perhaps a mere fad, an expression of the spirit of the age? After all, the idea that life

<sup>4</sup>Strawson, "Against Narrativity."

<sup>5</sup>But note that the questions raised here will not be taken up in the present essay.

<sup>6</sup>Fischer, *Our Stories*, Chs. 8–10; Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and time"; Nozick, "Happiness"; and Velleman, "Well-Being and Time."

<sup>7</sup>Griswald, *Forgiveness*.

<sup>8</sup>Rosati, "The Story of a Life."

<sup>9</sup>Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*.

<sup>10</sup>Hutto, *Folk Psychological Narratives*.

<sup>11</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

is a story is often one way of saying that there are no ultimate truths, only stories, where everyone has a different even if incommensurable story to tell. And I take it most Christians will find such pluralism unacceptable. Moreover, the preoccupation with self and authenticity, which we find in so many narrativist accounts, seems to reflect a distinctively modern and secular individualism, at best alien to the Christian tradition, at worst allied to our culture's self-obsession that so many critics have bemoaned. Indeed, if the ethical or broadly eudaimonistic value of self-narrating is some newfangled idea—perhaps a product of Romanticism—then any Christian committed to orthodoxy may rightly regard it with suspicion.

In spite of these initial reservations, however, the idea that there is great value in seeing our lives as narratives, and in giving those narratives some articulation, has a profound basis in Christian teaching. Indeed, not only does narrativism find support within Christianity; Christianity makes it *unavoidable*. That, at any rate, is what I wish to argue in this essay. Christians are *rationally committed* to narrativism. Call this *the commitment thesis*. By this, I do not mean that narrativism is a defining doctrine of Christianity, or even that it is logically entailed by such doctrines. I mean, rather, that if Christianity is true, then we have decisive reasons to narrate our lives, and therefore to view such self-narrating as a good thing. This, I claim, is what we should conclude in light of the biblical data and Christian tradition.

The commitment thesis is of inherent interest to Christian ethics. If the commitment thesis is right, then acquiring some sense of one's narrative is a vital part of Christian living, an insight which has so far been mostly ignored, even by so-called narrative theologians (to be discussed shortly). But there is another significance of the commitment thesis, which is simply that narrativism is a substantive commitment. Thus, if narrativism is right, that's confirmation for Christianity; if wrong, disconfirmation. This is, then, a place where Christianity sticks its neck out. And accordingly, Christian philosophers—not to mention their opponents—have a stake in an emerging debate between narrativism and what Strawson calls *episodic ethics* (the denial of narrativism).<sup>12</sup> Since this debate has been so far completely ignored by Christian philosophy, one goal of the present essay is to flag this as an area awaiting exploration.

I admit, of course, that the concept of narrative has made its rounds in Christian thought and the philosophy of religion more broadly. But the idea that narrativism can be supported *from within Christianity itself* remains entirely unexplored. For example, some have argued that the Christian narrative is meant to shape the cognitive content of our emotions;<sup>13</sup> that narrative can enrich comparative philosophy of religion

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<sup>12</sup>Strawson, "Episodic Ethics."

<sup>13</sup>Roberts, "Joys" and *Spiritual Emotions*.

by capturing lived experience within different religious systems;<sup>14</sup> that narrative can help us deal with familiar skeptical challenges such as the argument from evil;<sup>15</sup> that Christian moral teaching can be understood only in the context of the Christian narrative;<sup>16</sup> that narrative has an important role to play in Christian apologetics;<sup>17</sup> and that it's in virtue of its narrative character that Christianity renders life meaningful.<sup>18</sup> But nowhere has the concept of narrative figured more prominently than in the work of narrative theologians since the 1970s. Now, narrative theology covers a hodgepodge of ideas, but all of them orbit around the thesis that Christianity is itself a kind of narrative. For instance, Niehbur claims that the Christian narrative cannot be fully translated into abstract principles, so that attention to its narrative form is required for theologians.<sup>19</sup> Hans Frei claims that Christianity is a sort of cosmic narrative in terms of which the believer must come to experience the world and her life in it.<sup>20</sup> And Stanley Hauerwas claims that the Christian narrative is meant to shape the character of the believer in order to allow her to confront her own sin without self-deception and unite with others in community.<sup>21</sup> In claiming this, to be sure, Hauerwas has sometimes expressed the narrativist position. For instance, he says that the self *is* a narrative;<sup>22</sup> at other times, that the self *is formed* by narratives.<sup>23</sup> But he relies on philosophical arguments—appealing for instance to the work of Alastair MacIntyre—to support these narrativist theses, then applies narrativism to Christian ethics.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, I wish to consider the support for narrativism *from within Christianity*. In spite of all the buzz about narrative in Christian thought, this issue has yet to be explored.<sup>25</sup> To what extent does Christianity tell us to understand our lives as stories, and to give those stories articulation? The commitment thesis answers: to a very great extent. And it must be emphasized, this answer is logically independent of all the claims about narrative mentioned above.

This essay proceeds as follows. I will examine various Christian practices and argue they require us to self-narrate. These practices include confession (section 1), thanksgiving (section 2), the sharing of personal

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<sup>14</sup>Burley, "Narrative Philosophy of Religion."

<sup>15</sup>Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*.

<sup>16</sup>McClendon, "Narrative Ethics and Christian Ethics."

<sup>17</sup>McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*.

<sup>18</sup>Seachris, "The Meaning of Life and Scripture's Redemptive-Historical Narrative" and "The Meaning of Life as Narrative."

<sup>19</sup>Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*.

<sup>20</sup>Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.

<sup>21</sup>Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, Chs. 8–11.

<sup>22</sup>Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 228.

<sup>23</sup>Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 233.

<sup>24</sup>See, for example, Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, Ch. 4.

<sup>25</sup>Those familiar with the work of Anthony Rudd will know that he has relied on Kierkegaard to develop his narrativist views. However, far from deriving his narrativism from Kierkegaard's Christianity, Rudd has been careful precisely to distance the two. See, for instance, Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative*, 46.

testimony (section 3), and the contemplation of the afterlife (section 4). Each of these practices is a requirement of Christian moral teaching, the only exception being the sharing of personal testimony (the narrative of one's spiritual progress). But while that practice is not required, it is something Christians have reasons to do, as I shall argue. Accordingly, my argument for the commitment thesis can be understood as follows:

- (1) If Christianity is true, we thereby have reason to  $\Phi$ .
- (2) In order to  $\Phi$ , we must self-narrate.
- (3) So, if Christianity is true, we thereby have reason to self-narrate.

A little tinkering is needed to make the argument strictly valid, but that its structure is convincing can be seen by the following example which mirrors it: If its being my daughter's birthday gives me a reason to bake her a cake, and the only way to do that is to stop by the grocer, then its being my daughter's birthday gives me a reason to stop by the grocer. Thus, the only question for us is whether there are Christian practices we can plug in for  $\Phi$  in order to generate true premises. The rest of this essay is devoted to arguing there are. Note that the four practices I'll discuss are independently sufficient to establish my verdict, so someone who wishes to deny the commitment thesis will have to refute four independent arguments based on the schema above.

### 1. CONFESSION

Christianity requires that believers confess their sins, the standard means by which God's forgiveness is sought. "If we confess our sins," John the Evangelist tells us, "he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."<sup>26</sup> For most of Christian history, such confession has been practiced as verbal and habitual, and there are good reasons for this, reasons internal to Christian teaching, as I will lay out shortly. Of course, not all Christian denominations practice confession in the same way. But there remains a stable core: describing one's sins for the sake of absolution, as an expression of contrition. This is true whether the Christian is a Catholic sitting in a confessional booth, or a Charismatic evangelical speaking directly to God.<sup>27</sup>

Confession obviously has something to do with narrative. In the paradigm case, to confess is to narrate some episode of behavior or perhaps some pattern of behavior. The narrative need not be especially vivid or artful. It can be as simple as "Once, I stole some pears." Of course, to narrate *disparate episodes* is hardly to narrate *one's life*. It doesn't even require one to see one's life as a story, for the same reason that a collection of

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<sup>26</sup>1 John 1:9. See also James 5:16, Acts 19:18, and 2 Peter 3:9, just to mention the New Testament. All Bible quotes are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>27</sup>If there is any doubt that unspoken thoughts can be properly considered verbal, see Langland-Hassan and Vicente, *Inner Speech*.

folktales is not itself a folktale. However, Christian confession asks for more than the narration of disparate episodes. Christianity is telling us to adopt a narrative orientation towards our past, both near and far; to be prepared to make verbal and explicit our behaviors; to be highly reflective about the inner life that underwrites those behaviors; and crucially, to bring to bear on this narrating of behavior and inner life the concepts of the gospel—creation, fall, and redemption. Seemingly disparate episodes are thus brought together in a narrative of God’s grace and human need. And the themes of sin and redemption unify them in the mind of the believer. For, these themes give the very rationale for confessing in the first place. In every act of confession, one invokes the story of the fall, and locates one’s life within it, as one more thing in its wreckage; and in every hearing of pardon, one hears the story of Christ’s resurrection, in which sin and death were overcome, and locates one’s life in its restorative light. Confession, then, doesn’t just leave the Christian with a pile of unrelated episodes, or “a great barn of facts,” as Bernard Williams put it in another context.<sup>28</sup> It brings them together in a unified story.

Confession points us to a more fundamental sense in which the Christian must narrate her past. For, confession expresses *contrition*, that emotion in which the believer is moved with sorrow over her sin.<sup>29</sup> It is plausible that contrition, in its outlook, is always narrative. To be contrite is to see or somehow grasp one’s actions as culpable, and this requires some awareness of what has been done. But to be aware of what has been done is to be aware of an event and to have some sense of how it unfolded; and that awareness amounts to a narrative, however minimal. Further, if one is contrite, one’s action is seen as sinful, and this becomes part of the narrative. One sees one’s action in terms of its offensiveness to a God who demands right living. And thus, Christian contrition, by its very logic, narrates one’s actions using this theological backdrop. The act of confession makes this narrative explicit, and allows the believer to complete the narrative as one in which she is forgiven.

Christianity, then, gives us reasons to feel contrition, and reasons to practice confession, both of which require self-narrating. These reasons are decisive, since contrition and confession remain central to the Christian life.

Some hold there is a universal need to confess, a need “to speak openly about oppressive secrets.”<sup>30</sup> Whether that’s so, confessional practices can be found in every major religion,<sup>31</sup> and to that extent, other religions may also require their adherents to narrate their lives. This, however, does not conflict with the commitment thesis. If Christianity gives us reasons to self-narrate, that doesn’t mean no other religion does.

Is it too restrictive to require that confession is verbal? Imagine someone forms a mental *picture* of her sin, then says in her thoughts, “I am sorry

<sup>28</sup>Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 241.

<sup>29</sup>For a full analysis of the nature of contrition see Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, Ch. 7.

<sup>30</sup>Berggren, *The Psychology of Confession*, 3.

<sup>31</sup>See the essays in Etzioni and Carney, *Repentance*.

for *that*." Does this count as verbal? Of course, the demonstrative reference is verbal, but the behavior confessed is represented imaginatively. Even in that case, however, the image is still a *representation of what has occurred*. So this shows, at most, that one can narrate using imagery—hardly surprising in this age of film and comic books. And if the requirement of verbal confession is too strict, it is only because there are, in principle, non-verbal ways of self-narrating. Still, verbal self-narrating remains the most natural means of confession, because of its ability to recover the nuances of the inner life, as I will discuss shortly.

A more serious complication is that I have assumed Christian confession to be narrative and habitual. Certain debunkers, however, have claimed that confession was not practiced this way until as late as the sixth century.<sup>32</sup> Before that, confession was not verbal and did not even represent the narrative details of one's past: It was merely acted out through public self-humiliation. And it was not habitual: After baptism, the believer only got one "second repentance," and from there, it was exile from the church.

How damaging is this to what I have said so far? Certainly, the early church saw vocal defenders of the model of penance just described (Tertullian, to mention a prominent example).<sup>33</sup> But we should note there is evidence of regular, private, verbal confession—the sharing of "bosom secrets," as John Cassian puts it—much earlier than the debunkers admit, evidence they seem to be unaware of.<sup>34</sup> Further, even non-verbal, performative confession expresses contrition, which is narrative in its outlook, as I have argued. Finally, and most importantly, my claim is that Christian confession *as it is meant to be practiced* involves the believer in self-narration. I do not claim it is always practiced as it is meant to be practiced. Indeed, in spite of what recent defenders of Tertullian say,<sup>35</sup> the biblical data does seem to call for confession that is verbal, habitual, and ultimately narrative. There are numerous biblical texts we might cite here, and doubtless anyone familiar with the Bible already has some in mind. We might mention, for instance, that the Lord's prayer—which Jesus instructs us to use, and presumably more than once or twice—asks for forgiveness of "debts" or "trespasses" (*opheilēma*). But the most decisive point seems to be this. Sin is viewed in the New Testament as starting in the depths of the inner life. To murder is to think meanly of others. To commit adultery is to lust. Those two examples are particularly relevant, because Tertullian himself singles out murderers and adulterers as not to be readmitted to

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<sup>32</sup>Foucault, "Christianity and Confession"; Mortimer, *The Origins of Private Penance in the Western Church*; Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault*; Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*.

<sup>33</sup>See Coxe, *On Repentance*. See also Kimmel, "Comparative Confession," who brings out just how distinctive Tertullian's view is compared with other approaches to penance.

<sup>34</sup>See Oakley, *Celtic Penance*, "The Origins of Irish Penitential Discipline," and "The Origins of Private Penance in the Western Church." See also Watkins, *A History of Penance*, 447–448.

<sup>35</sup>Notably, Osborn, *Tertullian*, Ch. 8.

the church. But it is hard to believe that many congregants—or any, for that matter—will be able to go for long without committing such inward sins. In protecting the church, then, Tertullian merely empties it. But while the New Testament expects the church to be pure, it also expects there to be a church. Thus, confession will have to be habitual, since thoughts and desires will frequently stray into sin. And confession will have to be verbal, since there is no other viable way for thoughts and desires to be expressed with the detail and regularity that confession calls for.<sup>36</sup>

This last point is worth elaborating in light of another fairly natural objection: Must Christian confession narrate the particulars of what one has done (or thought, or felt, or wanted)? Must it even *narrate events* at all? Certainly, there are many examples of Christian confessions that are highly generic, as the Lord's prayer already illustrates. Likewise, Samuel Johnson records the following sort of confession not infrequently in his diary: "Forgive, O merciful Lord, whatever I have done contrary to thy laws."<sup>37</sup>

I grant there is a place for such confessions, which acknowledge our general status as sinners before God, and which admit to sins beyond our awareness. But two features of Christian thought, taken together, require the believer to go beyond these generic confessions and articulate the details of his moral failures, at least with some kind of regularity. The first feature is that the self is seen as *capacious*, containing hidden depths. Jeremiah writes, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"<sup>38</sup> And the Psalmist cries, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"<sup>39</sup> The second feature is that the believer is urged to examine this capacious inner life, and charged with moral responsibility for its contents. He must "take every thought captive."<sup>41</sup> He must "examine himself."<sup>42</sup> He must "test his own work."<sup>43, 44</sup> And putting these two features together, we see

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<sup>36</sup>I mention thoughts and desires, mental states rather than behaviors. But even where it is mental states being confessed, the believer is still *narrating*, since mental states are events no less than behaviors are. *Coveting* the donkey of one's neighbor is as much an event as *stealing* it. For, even when such coveting is a standing disposition, the disposition will be something to confess only if made occurrent in consciousness.

<sup>37</sup>Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 138.

<sup>38</sup>Jer. 17:9.

<sup>39</sup>Ps. 139:23–24.

<sup>40</sup>It's worth adding that this capacious self is a theme Augustine worries repeatedly in his *Confessions*, that "man is a great depth," that one can hardly number the feelings of his heart, that the self can be lost even to itself, because it is a thing more boundless than the seas and the mountains. For notable discussion of this feature of Augustine's thought, see Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 178–179; Misch, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, 633–646; and Olney, *Memory and Narrative*, 51–52.

<sup>41</sup>2 Cor. 10:5.

<sup>42</sup>1 Cor. 11:28.

<sup>43</sup>Gal. 6:4

<sup>44</sup>This Christian variant of *know thyself* would figure in Christian ethics throughout the centuries. In his *On the Trinity*, for instance, Augustine writes that the knowledge of oneself

that the Christian is made responsible for examining a complex and contoured inner world. Such examination will strive to be—it will fail, but it will strive to be—as sophisticated as the heart it searches. And when that examining turns up sinful movements in thought and desire, as it inevitably will, these will need to be confessed. Typically, that will mean a detailed rather than generic confession, given the complex nature of what is being confessed. But even if the confession remains generic—“forgive me, Father, for I have sinned”—it will at any rate be spurred on by a rich and intricate recognition of events in one’s inner life, a recognition that is narrative in its shape for the very reason that it is a recognition of *events*. That is why Christianity calls for more than merely generic confession.

Where does this leave us? Christian morality requires contrition and confession, both of which narrate the believer’s life. For, contrition requires narrative representation of one’s acts as sinful. And confession should be understood—in the typical case—as verbal and habitual, making explicit the narrative of one’s past about which one feels contrition. And since confession is habitual, it thus involves the believer in narrating many events of her life, including her inner life. But she does not merely narrate them as unrelated episodes. Rather, she narrates them *as* a sinner in need of redemption, and thus these episodes are unified thematically in a broader narrative of sin and grace.

## 2. THANKSGIVING

The Psalmist tells us:

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!  
For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.<sup>45</sup>

This call to thanksgiving can be found throughout the Bible. But if Christianity calls for thanksgiving, it is because it first calls for gratitude. Following Roberts,<sup>46</sup> we may say that to feel gratitude is to understand<sup>47</sup> oneself as (a) having received a benefit which is (b) undeserved

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is to be preferred to the knowledge of the natural sciences (Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 129). While some have argued that this is an inheritance from Stoicism (see Misch, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, Vol. 2, 404–413), what I have emphasized here is that the logic for self-examination is internal to the Christian worldview, which sees the self as both elusive yet responsible even for its hidden depths.

<sup>45</sup>Ps. 100:4–5.

<sup>46</sup>Roberts, “The Blessings of Gratitude.”

<sup>47</sup>Roberts’s preferred term is not *understanding* but *construal* (Roberts, *Emotions*), though he thinks *construal* is a kind of understanding. Other theorists of emotion prefer *perception* or something analogous. For a recent sample of this debate, see Ballard, “Content and the Fittingness of Emotion”; Milona, “Taking the Perceptual Analogy Seriously”; and Prinz, *Gut Reactions*. Presently, of course, nothing hangs on these details, although I am taking for granted that emotions involve *some* manner of evaluative outlook, rather than being brute sensations.

and (c) offered deliberately by a beneficiary who (d) has your good in mind. That is the outlook of gratitude, but gratitude involves more than an outlook, for it possesses a characteristic motivation, a felt desire to *do* something. Specifically, one wants to show or express one's gratitude, and where this can take the form of favors returned, more direct is thanksgiving—outright verbal expression. To give thanks is simply to say, more or less, "thank you for . . ." (where this utterance functions as an expression of gratitude rather than some point of courtesy).

Gratitude is the Christian emotion par excellence. The central event of Christianity—the death and resurrection of Jesus—is seen as conferring an undeserved benefit (salvation, or at least, its possibility) offered by a beneficiary (God) for our good. But aside from this momentous salvation event, the Christian also views herself as the beneficiary of many other undeserved blessings wrought by Providence. She is urged to see many things in her life as gifts from God, where this is no mere *façon de parler*. When Samuel Pepys, in his famous diaries, thanks God for his health and his marriage and the peace of England, he is doing just what James suggests, when his epistle tells us that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."<sup>48</sup>

Gratitude and thanksgiving are the positive analogues of contrition and confession. And like confession, thanksgiving involves the believer in self-narration. She is to keep watch over her life in search of God's blessings. She is to make His blessings explicit—that is to say, verbal—to herself, to others, and to the Beneficiary. And to do this, to give thanks, means narrating events, narrating the occasion of one's gratitude.

Is it possible to give thanks for something without narrating it? For one, perhaps thanksgiving can be *performed* non-narratively. In fact, that is just what the ancient Israelites seem to be doing in the thanksgiving sacrifice.<sup>49</sup> Yet, such thanksgiving is still expressive of gratitude; and gratitude, like contrition, has an essentially narrative character. This is true even in cases of gratitude apparently devoid of narrativity. Suppose I am grateful there are redwood trees on my front lawn. Here, my gratitude is about a state of affairs that involves no change, no event, and thus nothing to narrate. In that case, when I say, "thank you, Lord, for those redwood trees on my front lawn," am I really *narrating*? Quite simply, Yes, although the narrative may not be explicit. By the very logic of gratitude, one is grateful for gifts—things that have been given. Thus, if I am grateful *to God* for the redwoods, then I am seeing them—in some sense of "seeing"—as given by Him. And giving is an event. Narration of events is thus inherent in gratitude, because gratitude is always about what has been given. Thus, even where thanksgiving is merely performative, it is still expressing a narrative outlook.

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<sup>48</sup>James 1:17. Of course, the command to give thanks can be seen throughout the New Testament, as in Co. 3:17, Eph. 5:20, and 1 Thess. 5:18.

<sup>49</sup>Lev. 7:12.

Since gratitude has a narrative character, it is no accident that in the Christian autobiographical tradition, gratitude is often presented as both the occasion of the writing and its unifying theme, if we take what the authors say at face value. Augustine is thanking God from the first book of his *Confessions*, and affirms in his *Retractions* that praising God for His works was a primary motive for writing his life.<sup>50</sup> Margery Kempe tells us that her narrative describes “his wonderful works, how mercifully, how benignly, and how charitably he moved and stirred a sinful wretch to his love.”<sup>51</sup> Teresa of Ávila writes for “His glory and praise.”<sup>52</sup> John Bunyan, quoting Psalm 78, wants to tell us of the Lord’s “wondrous works,” in order that “the goodness and bounty of God towards me, may be the more advanced and magnified before the sons of men.”<sup>53</sup> Mary Rowlandson, a New England woman who survived captivity by American Indians, hesitated to publish her account, “yet her gratitude unto God made her not hardly persuadable to let it pass, that God might have his due glory.”<sup>54</sup> This list could be extended substantially.

Not only, then, does Christian gratitude require us to narrate certain goods as given by God, but it has long been recognized as the occasion for doing so, a need felt so urgently that it has literally determined the course of Western literature (speaking of autobiography, itself a major influence on the realistic novel). Of course, if some Christians have written autobiographies as acts of thanksgiving, that doesn’t mean all thanksgiving requires such intricate and demanding narration. After all, Christianity is for everyone, including—perhaps especially—the illiterate poor. But even verbal acts of thanksgiving far simpler than spiritual autobiographies are still ultimately narrative. A sentence as simple as “thank you, Lord, for this food”—if it is an expression of gratitude rather than mere routine—is an act of narration, albeit in shorthand. It says: *Here is some food, which I have not deserved but which God has provided for my good.* The object of Christian gratitude, then, even one’s dinner, is seen as part of the sacred story of God’s provision and our creaturehood.

To sum up, the Christian has decisive reasons to feel gratitude, an emotion which narrates events as given by God. And the Christian has decisive reasons to practice thanksgiving on a habitual basis, which expresses her gratitude. Further, she has strong reasons—not decisive, but strong—to practice her thanksgiving *verbally*, expressing directly the narrative embedded in her gratitude. Such narrative thanksgiving is not required, because thanksgiving can in principle be performed or acted out, as in the sacrifices of ancient Israel. But the believer does have reasons to

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<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *The Retractions*, 130.

<sup>51</sup> Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 34.

<sup>52</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, 66.

give verbal, narrative thanksgiving, because (a) it is a natural mode of self-expression, (b) it is modeled by numerous figures in the Bible and Christian tradition, and (c) it allows the believer to celebrate *the particulars* of what God has done in a way that non-verbal, performative thanksgiving cannot. And crucially, such verbal thanksgiving—and the gratitude it expresses—narrates the events of the believer's life but does not leave them unconnected. It binds them, for the believer, under the theme of God's providential care, and sets them against the narrative backdrop of an ongoing relationship with a God who made Himself providential in the very act of creating dependent animals like us.

### 3. THE SHARING OF PERSONAL TESTIMONY

One would not have to spend much time at an evangelical church in America before hearing someone "share her testimony." By this convention, the believer tells her life story, organized around her coming to know and follow God. Such stories are often formulated as conversion narratives in which a dramatic encounter with God divides one's life into before and after. But they may also be stories in which she has simply always believed in God, as far as she can recall, and what gets narrated are the challenges she has faced as a believer and the ways God has helped her overcome them. Doubtless, too, other sorts of testimonies can be heard.

Is this practice of sharing one's testimony a quirk of American evangelicalism? Tanya Lurhmann, who studies evangelicals as an anthropologist, tells us this emphasis on personal testimony is part of a "major shift" in American Christianity.<sup>55</sup> Evangelicals today, she explains, are drawn to personal testimonies and share them openly because "they are the enactment of a relationship between a creature and his creator, between a dull, cautious, skeptical human, and a loving, patient, persistent God."<sup>56</sup> Now, philosophers might wonder whether *enactment* is the right word there. But I wish instead to note that the use of personal testimony has a history far more ancient than Lurhmann suggests.<sup>57</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh, for example, identifies a similar before-and-after conversion narrative emerging by the 17<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>58</sup> And the use of personal spiritual narratives—setting aside the strictly conversion-centered—goes back much farther than that. Christians have been using hagiography for spiritual edification since the 4<sup>th</sup> c., when Athanasius penned *The Life of Saint Antony*, a work prefigured by martyr narratives such as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> c., itself prefigured by the New Testament's use of exemplary lives of faith, as in Heb. 11. It is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c., too, that we find the beginnings

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<sup>55</sup>Lurhmann, *When God Talks Back*, xvi.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid, 9.

<sup>57</sup>But to be fair, Lurhmann is aware that there have been other periods of Christianity when the personal character of faith has been emphasized, as in the various "Great Awakenings" in the American 19<sup>th</sup> c. (Lurhmann, *When God Talks Back*, 14).

<sup>58</sup>Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*.

of Christian autobiography in the work of Justin Martyr. And Christian autobiography will define life writing in the West at least until the 19<sup>th</sup> c., a thing worth emphasizing. Quite simply, Christian autobiography is the single most salient influence on life writing in the West.<sup>59</sup> And the Christian's drive to write autobiographically has thus animated a major segment of Western cultural life.

What, then, is behind this drive? It can be understood in terms of three salient motives: (a) to give thanks for what God has done, (b) to evangelize to the unconverted, and (c) to edify the church.<sup>60</sup> These three motives also seem to be salient in the contemporary practice of sharing one's testimony. Thus, the use of testimony, far from being an idiosyncrasy of American evangelicalism, is an ancient practice rooted in Christian tradition and the Bible. I will argue this by elaborating on (b) and (c), since enough has already been said concerning (a) in the previous section.

Evangelism—sharing the message of Christianity in order to effect someone's conversion—has made use of personal testimony from early

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<sup>59</sup>Of course, the beginnings of modern autobiography, shorn as it is of any spiritual motivations, can be traced to Rousseau's *Confessions*, published in 1782. But this work was met with revulsion by many critics on the very basis of its lacking spiritual motivations. Even Descartes's quasi-autobiographical works, though far from spiritual, at least used the confessional mode as a device for furthering inquiry. It would not be until the 19<sup>th</sup> c. that audiences would get used to the idea of an autobiography purely devoted to putting the self on display. Indeed, such reticence in publishing one's life for its own sake—the sense that to do so is somehow deeply inappropriate—is fairly common, even in widely differing contexts. Consider, for instance, Medieval China, where autobiographical writing was highly mediated, even obscured, by artifice designed to manage this reticence (Wang, "Medieval Chinese Autobiographical Writing"). These connections are worth noting, since, I believe, they suggest there is a sort of natural norm against publishing the self, one which Christianity offers special license for suspending, thus making possible the Western autobiographical tradition. I don't mean to suggest, as Georges Gusdorf once did, that autobiography is somehow *uniquely* Western (Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography"). Indeed, that notion is beset by counterexamples on all sides, from ancient Egypt (Misch, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, Vol. 1), or classical China (Wu, *The Confucian's Progress*), or the Arab world (Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self*), or Tibetan Buddhism (Roesler, "Between Self-Expression and Convention"). These make for fascinating comparison with Christian autobiographies—for example, some Tibetan writers narrate *their past lives*—but such comparison is of course a work of its own, as is the tracing of Christianity's influence on this genre. What is evident, however, is that the desire to write one's life is fairly widespread, as are the norms that push against that desire and whose suspension in the West is largely due to Christianity.

<sup>60</sup>I think a fourth motive can be discerned, which is simply to celebrate, to relish, what God has done in the believer's life. This is distinguished from thanksgiving because, in celebration, one's status as a recipient of an underserved gift is not salient. Rather, what is salient is simply the goodness of the gift itself. For example, Mary Rowlandson regards her account as a "memorandum of God's dealings with her, that she might never forget, but remember the same, and the severall circumstances thereof, all the dayes of her life" (Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, 65). This echoes the sentiment found in many Psalms, which exhort us to remember the "wondrous works" of God, often referring to Israel's sacred history, but other times quite clearly referring to the personal life of the Psalmist. However, since space is limited, and since this motive for sharing personal testimony is quite similar to that of thanksgiving—already discussed in section 2—I won't rely on it in my argument here.

on. Justin Martyr offers a clear example. His *Dialogue with Trypho*, written between 155 and 161, records a debate that took place in 135 between Justin and a Jewish activist. A Christian apologetic aimed at Judaism, the work begins by recounting Justin's own conversion upon realizing the inadequacy of Platonism. Here we have an early example of evangelistic testimony. And yet the earliest examples are found in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. In Acts 22, when Paul stands before the crowd of Jewish leaders who have dragged him from the temple in Jerusalem, he recounts his entire conversion narrative, from his time as Saul of Tarsus, through the road to Damascus and healing at the hands of Ananias. He does the same in Acts 26, before King Agrippa. In both cases, he is using personal testimony to reach the unconverted (King Agrippa responds, basically, "do you seriously expect me to become a Christian right now?"). Thus, to the extent that we are to treat Paul as an exemplar of the faith—and this is encouraged explicitly, for instance, in 1 Cor. 11:1 and 2 Thess. 3:7–9—we, too, have reason to make use of personal testimony in an evangelistic context, a practice which can be seen as an extension of the New Testament's general focus on first-hand accounts in the defense of Christ's messiahship.<sup>61</sup>

If evangelism has motivated the use of personal testimony, all the more has the edification of the church. Outside the Bible, the earliest example we have is from *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*,<sup>62</sup> an autobiographical account of St. Perpetua's awaiting martyrdom. Written at the start of the 3rd c., it opens:

If the old examples of the faith, which testify to the grace of God and lead to the edification of men, were written down so that by reading them God should be honored and *man comforted*—as if through a reexamination of those deeds—should we not set down new acts that serve each purpose equally? For these too will some day also be venerable and compelling for future generations, even if at the present time they are judged to be of lesser importance, due to the respect naturally afforded the past.<sup>63</sup>

While this purpose for writing is not stated by Perpetua herself—the introductory paragraph is written by a redactor—it is significant that this is how one of her Christian contemporaries understood the value of her account. Likewise, in the 4<sup>th</sup> c., Gregory of Nazianzus offers his autobiographical poem to the young

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<sup>61</sup>According to Alison Trites, "witness" and its cognates occurs over 200 times in the New Testament, the disciples bearing witness to Christ's messiahship as if a court drama were unfolding in which Christ's identity were the contested issue (Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*). We find this sort of thing, for instance, in 2 Peter 1:16: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty."

<sup>62</sup>While the historicity of this text has been disputed, it is vigorously defended in Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 5–6. If historical, it is the earliest writing we possess by a Christian woman.

<sup>63</sup>Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 125 (my italics).

as a kind of pleasant medicine,  
 an inducement which might lead them to more useful things,  
 skilfully sweetening the harshness of the commandments:  
 for a taut bowstring also needs to be relaxed.<sup>64</sup>

Similar examples abound. Augustine hopes that his *Confessions* will “rouse up the heart and prevent it from sinking into the sleep of despair,”<sup>65</sup> that it will “lift up the understanding and affection of men to Him.”<sup>66</sup> Angela of Foligno writes her life story “in order to increase the devotion of His people.”<sup>67</sup> The scribe for Julian of Norwich’s *Shewings* is sure that “in this vision are very many comforting and greatly moving words for all those who desire to be lovers of Christ.”<sup>68</sup> Margery Kempe expects her *Book* to be “a comforting one for sinful wretches.”<sup>69</sup> St. Ignatius, in dictating his life, was encouraged that “he could do nothing of greater benefit for the Society [of Jesuits].”<sup>70</sup> Mary Rowlandson writes to “enlarge pious hearts in the praises of God.”<sup>71</sup> And John Bunyan, addressing his congregation, publishes his life “for your further edifying,” in hopes that “others may be put in remembrance of what he hath done for their souls, by reading his work upon me.”<sup>72</sup> No doubt, further examples can be found. But here again, they are not limited to extra-biblical texts. Paul himself, although he doesn’t write full-blown autobiography, uses his life story for the church’s edification. In Acts 20:17–38, as he prepares to leave Ephesus, Paul reminds the elders of his ministry with them, in order to encourage them in the true faith. And in Phil. 1:12–14, Paul describes his imprisonments to embolden the church in the preaching of the gospel. And in 1 Tim. 1:12–19, Paul reminds Timothy of the grace Paul has received, so that the young disciple may “fight the battle well.” In Paul, then, we find someone who made free use of his personal testimony to build up the church wherever he saw fit.

What Paul is doing in displaying his life story, what Bunyan and Augustine and Perpetua are doing, is not something fundamentally different from what a modern-day Christian does when she stands up in church and shares how God has changed her life. The same motives of thanksgiving, edification, and evangelism remain salient across the centuries. Thus, rather than seeing the practice of testimony as an idiosyncrasy of American evangelicalism, we should view it as something with deep roots in Christian tradition. It is, I grant, not something Christians are required to do, as they are confession and thanksgiving. Nevertheless, it

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<sup>64</sup>White, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 5.

<sup>65</sup>Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 203.

<sup>66</sup>Augustine, *The Retractions*, 130.

<sup>67</sup>Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno’s Memorial*, 23.

<sup>68</sup>Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 3.

<sup>69</sup>Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 34.

<sup>70</sup>Loyola, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius*, 17.

<sup>71</sup>Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, 66.

<sup>72</sup>Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 4.

is something which they have reasons to do. And it is a practice that obviously requires robust self-narration, because it simply *is* self-narration.

#### 4. CONTEMPLATION OF THE AFTERLIFE

In one of his finest passages, Richard Baxter advises that

[t]o conceive of God and glory, only as above our conception, will beget but little love; or as above our love, will produce little joy. Therefore put Christ no farther from you, than he hath put himself, lest the Divine nature be again inaccessible. Think of Christ, as in our own glorified nature. Think of glorified saints, as men made perfect. Suppose thyself a companion with John in his survey of the New Jerusalem, and viewing the thrones, the Majesty, the heavenly hosts, the shining splendor, which he saw.<sup>73</sup>

We mustn't merely think of heaven in the abstract, Baxter says, but must imagine it concretely enough that we feel the appropriate emotions. Here, Baxter is only elaborating on a piece of the Christian life practiced in earnest for centuries and held out in the Bible for all to see, the practice of contemplating one's heavenly future. And this practice, I will argue, requires self-narration.

Christian teaching on the afterlife, in brief, is that those who trust in Christ will be raised from the dead and will enjoy an everlasting (or is it eternal?) period of bliss, dwelling with the saints and being at last restored to that union with God for which we were meant. By "heaven," I am referring to this picture, rather than some Platonic realm of disembodied harpists. Of course, in spite of an ancient tradition of universal salvation, much of Christian theology has taught that, for the many who persist in rejecting God, something far less pleasant awaits. Still, it is the Christian's heavenly future which Baxter is telling his readers to envision, for that future is the basis of a hope that has long been regarded as a core Christian virtue.<sup>74</sup>

Certainly, many Christians have done what Baxter suggests, reflecting quite deliberately on the details of heaven. Some of this reflection is literary, amplifying the biblical imagery, as we find in Dante and Milton and the Pearl poet and other luminaries.<sup>75</sup> And some of this reflection is philosophical. The early church, in spite of all its troubles, spent enormous energy in articulating the theological details of heaven—such as the nature of the resurrected body—and in defending the credibility of that picture, a project that continues today.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 316. Thanks to Wayne Alder for bringing this passage to my attention years ago.

<sup>74</sup>Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, Ch. 10.

<sup>75</sup>McGrath's *A Brief History of Heaven* offers a useful survey of literary depictions of heaven.

<sup>76</sup>For a survey of ancient attempts to grapple with this, see Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*. For a sampling of the contemporary discussion, see Davis, *After We Die*; Walls, *Heaven*; and Van Inwagen, "I Look for the Resurrection of the Dead."

This enthusiasm for reflection on the afterlife has a solid basis in the Bible, where the contemplation of heaven is seen as a vital piece of Christian living. Like Baxter, Paul urges:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.<sup>77</sup>

By *things above*, Paul does not just mean Christian ideals. He means, literally, *where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*. It is heaven, our appearing in glory, which we are exhorted *zēteite* (to seek, search for, desire, require, demand) and *phroneite* (to think, observe, direct the mind upon). And that only scratches the surface, for there are many other biblical texts that invoke heaven as something to keep in view.<sup>78</sup>

All that is to say: The believer has decisive reasons to contemplate her heavenly future. But what exactly is the believer doing, in contemplating this? She isn't just picturing some final state of the cosmos. She is picturing the final state of *her life*. She is picturing the end of her story, or at least, the story of her earthly existence.<sup>79</sup> And to do this, to see heaven as the end of one's life, is thereby to see one's life as a narrative and to have some view of its final chapter. In contemplating heaven, then, the believer narrates her life.

One's heavenly future—that final chapter—has a tight narrative connection to one's present, not only because they are causally related, but also because they are thematically related. The problems one faces here on earth, the troubles and pains that make for that “miserable condition of Man,” as Donne lamented, are promised to be worked out in that heavenly future, where every tear is wiped away, where the desires of our hearts are satisfied. And this is plausibly seen as a form of *narrative closure*. Noel Carroll argues that narrative closure is what occurs when all the questions that a narrative saliently poses are answered.<sup>80</sup> Well, one's present life poses many questions. Every problem poses the question of whether it will be solved; every wrong, whether it will be made right. And the doctrine of heaven gives an answer: Yes, by the power of God, it

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<sup>77</sup>Col. 3:1–4. Thanks to Wayne Alder for insightful discussion of this text.

<sup>78</sup>To offer just a few examples, see 1 Cor. 2:9, Heb. 11:16, Matt. 6:19–21, 2 Peter 3:13, and 1 Tim. 6:17–19.

<sup>79</sup>This qualifier is needed because some take seriously the prospect that in some sense one's narrative continues into the afterlife, that something like a journey takes place into the depths of God. This picture is given literary treatment in Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, and Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” and taken quite seriously by theologians such as Origen (Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 50). On this view, we should see our entrance to heaven as the ending of one's earthly narrative, but the beginning of a different narrative. (And there is no inconsistency there. It is well-known that a single event can play different roles in different narratives.)

<sup>80</sup>Carroll, “Narrative Closure.”

will. Not just for the world, but for the individual believer. Thus, for the Christian, not only does heaven end her story; it gives her story satisfying closure as well.

The point is worth amplifying. We are told that the blessings of this life are but a shadow of things to come.<sup>81</sup> The good of heaven in some sense *flows out of the present*. Indeed, that heaven is not just some place where things happen to be good, that it is rather where *the bad is made right*, was widely noted by early theologians. Gregory of Nyssa thought there was a yearning all people had—"a common movement in all souls"—for the life that heaven offers.<sup>82</sup> Augustine tells us that the world will be "remade" and so will we,<sup>83</sup> and elsewhere, that in reaching heaven, the Christian has finally returned to that "homeland" which he has sought in all his wanderings.<sup>84</sup> And Origen tells us that "the end is always like the beginning."<sup>85</sup> In short, as Brian Daley puts it, Christian eschatology means faith "in the resolution of the unresolved, in the tying up of all the loose ends that mar the life of the believer in the world."<sup>86</sup> Indeed, in the remarks quoted above, we may distinguish three senses in which heaven ties up the loose ends. First, in heaven, the partial goods of this earth are brought to fullness. Second, in heaven, our deepest yearnings are fulfilled. Third, in heaven, suffering and evil are set right. These are three senses in which there is a thematic and therefore narrative connection between heaven and the present life. But if heaven is a future narratively connected to one's life now, then one's life now becomes a narrative in virtue of that very connection. And to *see* heaven as the ending of one's life is to grasp one's life as a narrative in that very act of seeing.

Imagine someone who lives entirely in the present. His consciousness encompasses little of past or future; he is wholly absorbed in the demands of the day. Further, he does not experience his life as belonging to a single enduring self. That youth, that boy from thirty years ago, staring back at him from the photograph—he hardly knows him. He feels no connection psychologically to that past. But now imagine that such an "episodic," as Strawson would call him, sets his mind on things above. Suddenly, he is aware of his present, this day, this hour, this man he has become, as standing in relation to a future. And that man in the future shall be him, the same man, for it is he who shall be resurrected and who shall see the face of God. His storyless present is suddenly opened out into a narrative. For, his present is now, as he sees it, standing in causal and thematic relations to his future, a future in clear view. They are causal relations because the one leads to the other. They are thematic relations because the problems of the one are resolved in the other, the yearnings of the past man projected as fulfilled.

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<sup>81</sup>Heb. 10:1.

<sup>82</sup>Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 86.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid, 145.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid, 149.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid, 158.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid, 1.

To sum up, then, Christian moral teaching requires the believer to contemplate her heavenly destiny, not just to *think* about it but to wrap her emotions around it, to be shaped by the hope of heaven.<sup>87</sup> But, psychologically speaking, this means she is seeing her life as a narrative and getting the end in view, an ending which gives profound closure, perhaps maximal closure, to the story she has lived.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Narrativism—the view that it is ethically important, in some way, to see one’s life as a story and to gain some sense of what the story is—has emerged in moral philosophy as a matter of contention. In light of this, it is significant that Christianity, if true, commits us to narrativism. My argument for this is that certain practices, which Christians have reasons to engage in—decisive reasons, in some cases—require the Christian to narrate her life. These practices include confession, thanksgiving, the sharing of personal testimony, and the contemplation of the afterlife. Thus, the Christian’s reasons for engaging in these practices are also reasons for narrating her life in the ways these practices require.

I’ll end by suggesting four further avenues worthy of exploration, though their full treatment will obviously require works of their own. Here I merely gesture at them.

First, a further practice worth considering is the remembrance of sacred history. It is surprising just how underexplored this practice is in Christian ethics, given its centrality in scripture. All through the Bible, we are told to remember God’s works, to recall the sacred history of Israel, to bear in mind the price paid on the cross. We are exhorted not only to remember these things *but to relate them to our present*. And if we do this, we are seeing these distant events as narratively relevant to our own stories, which is to say, we are giving ourselves a far richer narrative past than we would otherwise possess, not to mention a past we share collectively. And thus we are again involved in self-narration. For just as the contemplation of one’s heavenly destiny narrates our lives by giving them a future, so the remembrance of sacred history narrates our lives by giving them a past.

Second, it’s worth considering how this might apply to recent Christian apologetics. If it really is important for us to narrate our lives, then this psychological or ethical need for narration is something Christianity provides powerful resources for dealing with, as my case so far has illustrated. For, Christianity, being itself a master narrative, gives us the terms with which to frame our own lesser narratives. We’re told to paint, yes, but we’re also given a pallet full of colors. This would be, then, one sense in which Christianity supports our flourishing. Accordingly, perhaps we

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<sup>87</sup>This distinction between *merely knowing* and *deeply feeling*, so vital to the Christian life, is explored in Ballard, “The Epistemic Significance of Emotional Experience”; Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*; and Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 53.

have the materials here for a kind of existential argument for faith,<sup>88</sup> or perhaps an argument for pro-theism in the emerging debate over the axiology of God.<sup>89</sup>

Third, there is the issue of narrativism itself. I mentioned at the outset a number of problems facing the view. Can Christianity help here? For instance, Strawson objects, as noted, that autobiographical memory is too unreliable to be ethically important. And though I have space only to be suggestive, it seems to me the Christian has something to say here. For the story of our lives is not one we alone are responsible for narrating. There is a Great Author. Thus, while we must maintain that we have, or can have, some grip on the details of our narratives, we may rest assured that God knows the true story of our lives, however it may elude us. And we may trust it is a story of redemption, for that is what has been promised, even if the faultiness of autobiographical memory prevents us from recovering its details in anything approaching fullness. There is at least one sense, therefore, in which the Christian is better positioned to endorse narrativism.

Finally, what of the worry that narrativism encourages self-absorption or reflects our unfettered individualism? We can see now that, while this may be a problem, it needn't be. For the narrative practices described here are means of aligning with God. Thus, when the Christian—by giving thanks, by confessing, and so on—grasps her life as a story, she does not merely grasp it as her own, does not tell it for its own sake, but is led through it to redemption. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," writes Joan Didion.<sup>90</sup> And she was right in more ways than she intended. We tell our stories that we may know they are His, and in such knowledge there is life.<sup>91</sup>

*University of Pittsburgh*

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<sup>88</sup>Ballard, "The Rationality of Faith and the Benefits of Religion"; Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, Ch. 2; Williams, *Existential Reasons for Belief in God*.

<sup>89</sup>Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?"; Kraay, "Invitation to the Axiology of Theism."

<sup>90</sup>Didon, *The White Album*, 11.

<sup>91</sup>For generous discussion of these issues, I thank Stephanie Ballard, Matt Frise, and Kathy Wassell. For help with earlier drafts, I thank Wayne Alder, Bob Roberts, Zoe Shah, and two anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy*. Some of this material was presented at the King's College in New York, where David Talcott impressed upon me concerns that greatly shaped the course of this essay.

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