Narrative theology in Religious Education

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Abstract

This article advocates a pedagogy of Religious Education (RE) based upon a narratival framework informed by both narrative theology and narrative philosophy. Drawing on the work of narrative theologians including Stanley Hauerwas, the article outlines the nature of the framework, describes the four phases of learning that comprise the pedagogy, and explains how such an approach can overcome existing difficulties in how biblical texts are handled within RE. Working from the narrative assumption that individuals and communities are formed by reading, sharing and living within stories, it suggests that the pedagogy might encourage pupils to think about how the lives of Christians are shaped by their interpretations of biblical narratives, to offer their own interpretations of biblical and other texts, and to consider the stories – religious, non-religious or both – which shape their own lives. In so doing, the article moves away from a 'proof-texting' approach to the Bible towards one in which pupils are enabled to think about the significance of biblical narratives for both Christians and themselves.

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> Christian faith rests not upon universal reason or human self-consciousness, but is sustained through and as commitment to a story. The story is not supported by anything else, by another story, theory or argument. The story is simply told, and faith is a certain way of telling it, a way of living and embodying it; a habit of the heart. (Loughlin 1996, 33)

The purpose of this article is to advocate a pedagogy of Religious Education (RE) based upon a narratival framework informed by both narrative theology and narrative philosophy. It seeks to explain the four phases of learning that comprise the pedagogy, and to argue for the benefits of this pedagogy over existing methods of teaching RE, particularly in terms of studying biblical texts in relation to Christian ethics.

What is narrative?

We use stories or narratives to help us make sense of our experience of the world.[1] Storytelling is part of the process of meaning-making – of creating order out of chaos and of exploring and articulating our own intuitive knowledge. Across traditions, stories, myths and images dominate as methods of both expressing personal felt-reality and encompassing shared cultural values and ideals. As Elizabeth Bruce (2008, 323) puts it: 'We tell about our lives in story form. Stories also form us. They are important for the formation of our identity and they help us to know who we are. We learn from stories and stories help us to interpret life. Through stories we enter the meaning making of others'.

At the most personal level, it is through narrative that we become aware of our own individual self-identity. Paul Ricoeur (1994), writing on the subject of the narrative self, describes identity as the recounting of a history of experiences and interactions involving the physical self over time, and thus accounts for our perception of ourselves as more than merely a succession of isolated, momentary occurrences. Such narratives of self-identity, he maintains, are intrinsically ethical in nature, formed as they are from language that necessarily reflects our own moral awareness, and, given our ability to choose those points from which we begin to tell the narratives of our lives to ourselves,

provide an explanation for that freedom identified by Immanuel Kant as necessary for genuine moral responsibility.[2]

On a broader level, the ways in which we interact with one another to form communities and societies might also be described in terms of narrative. Jeffrey Stout (1998) refers to precisely this when he writes of modern Western liberal democracy as the 'background of agreement' for those who engage in contemporary political and social debates across the Western nations. Democracy, Stout tells us, is not a neutral entity but rather the on-going development of a particular, shared socio-cultural context, shaped by the views and actions of its disparate constituent members and thus formative of a shared narrative that, together, we inhabit and perform.

The idea of narrative identity can also be used to make sense of the lived experiences of communities of faith. All the major world religions may be understood as 'living traditions' comprising beliefs, texts and practices that are both passed down through generations and continually reinvented by the adherents of today. The ways in which faith communities tell the stories of their beliefs to themselves and to others both articulate and contribute to the formation of religious narratives (see e.g., Dahl and Thor, 2009), meaning that religion is perceived as a matter not of edicts or commands but of shared stories and worldviews held in common.

In this article, we therefore assume two foundational tenets relating to a narrative engagement with the world:

- Firstly, drawing on Ricoeur, we suppose a narrative concept both of the self and of wider society, the latter of which is formed from the multiple, overlapping and at times contradictory stories of the people of which it comprises. This is our *narrative philosophy* which is inclusive of all people irrespective of their religious or secular worldviews and which is therefore universal in scope and application.

- Secondly, informed by this narrative philosophy, and in keeping with a narrative conceptualisation of all religious and secular worldviews, we suppose a narrative understanding of both the Christian community and of the biblical texts upon

which that community is based. This is our *narrative theology* which is of relevance conceptually and analytically both to those within the Christian tradition and to those who, standing outside the tradition, enter into dialogue with it.

Based upon this narratival framework, the aim of our pedagogy will be to give pupils permission to reflect upon their own narrative identities and, in so doing, to open the possibilities of interpretation that enable them to situate themselves both *as part of* communities, traditions and worldviews perceived through the lens of narrative philosophy, and *in relation to* narrative theologies that they may or may not share.

What is narrative theology?

Before we can elaborate upon this pedagogy, we need first to explore what is meant by the notion of narrative theology and the contrast it provides with existing approaches to RE as taught in schools. Central to the concept of narrative theology is the assumption that the scriptures of the Abrahamic faith traditions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – are first and foremost narratives of faith. In terms of Christianity, this means that the Bible is perceived not as a collection of doctrinal or theological principles, but rather as a set of stories that tell about the revelation of God through history and of God's redemptive love for humankind. As David Ford (1997, 202) puts it, understanding the nature of Christian salvation is 'inseparable from the telling of a particular story' for revelation is the Word made flesh – the story made concrete and personal. While literary genres other than that of narrative, such as poetry, law codes and proverbs, also comprise the biblical canon, even these do not lie outside Scripture's over-arching narrative, for their meanings are only properly grasped when they are interpreted within the Bible's story as a whole.

It is not just the stories of Scripture that bear significance for narrative theologians, but also those 'living stories' that are formed by communities of faith. These communities, made up from individual members who together partake in the collective reading and interpreting of biblical texts, are both informed by and dwell within the Christian story of salvation that provides the foundation for their shared beliefs. As narratives, the lives of communities are available to be 'read' and 'interpreted' by others who encounter

them. The process of the collective reading of Scripture is then responsible in turn for the renewed interpretation of the Bible narratives, for the meaning that a Christian community finds within Scripture is affected by that community's perception of itself and its place in the world; different groups of Christians understand the Bible in varying ways and take different messages from its narratives. Biblical texts are thus understood as having a meaning that is not immutable but rather that is discerned in community, and the narratives of Christian communities and of the biblical texts as sharing a mutually sustaining relationship in which each shapes and is shaped by the other (Hauerwas 1983, 2001; Hauerwas and Burrell 1997; see also Loughlin 1996, Frei 1997).

At the same time it must be remembered that narrative theology is not a monochrome phenomenon but rather comprises a spectrum of differing shades that vary depending on how the relationship between reader, text and reality is construed. This is essentially a matter concerning the authority of Scripture, and whether biblical narratives are perceived as placing constraints upon the interpreter, whose task it is to 'retrieve' the intended meaning of the texts, or whether scope is given to the imaginative act of the interpreter, whose encounter with Scripture is necessarily coloured by experiences and perspectives that are uniquely their own. For the purposes of this article, we are adopting a position which assumes that the meaning of Scripture is not completely fixed but which, at the same time, acknowledges that we do not have unrestricted interpretive licence. This accords with the broad approach advocated by Anthony Thiselton (1992, 2005), who writes of how believers may read the Bible in a way that seeks both to acknowledge the integrities of the historical text and to respond to that text in a creative manner that enables it remain relevant to their everyday lives. It also locates contemporary Bible reading within the tradition of expressive permissiveness, found in Christianity as far back as the Early Church and having roots in the hermeneutics of Judaism, which anticipates the need for Scripture to be read in differing ways by different communities and at different times (Froehlich 1984; Holcomb, 2006).

Of particular interest to our project here are the insights that narrative theology affords for a re-envisioning of the relationship between biblical texts and matters of ethics. If we adopt the view that communities and texts are shaped through an ongoing process of narrative interpretation, ethics can no longer be construed along primarily Kantian lines as the generation of rationalist 'rules' or abstract moral principles. Rather, Christian ethics drawn from an engagement with narrative theology are concerned not so much

with how we act but with *who we are*. As Alister McGrath (2011, 130) puts it: '[t]he gospel is not primarily about a set of ethical principles: it is about the effect of an encounter with God upon the lives of individuals and the histories of nations'. Akin to virtue ethics, such an approach sees ethics as primarily a matter of character, which it understands as shaped by the community of which the individual member is a part. It also emphasises the importance of the imagination, personal involvement in a faith 'story' and reflection on our own experiences. Thus understood, narrative theology provides a way of reflecting on our various moral stories 'so that we better understand how they function' (Hauerwas and Burrell 1997, 170), making believers conscious participants in the interaction between God's story and the human story and, we might add, the story of non-human creation.

What are the problems with existing approaches to RE?

Narrative theology contrasts with the approaches to Christian ethics frequently adopted within RE in UK schools. Here discussion is often limited to the negotiation of moral dilemmas and the discussion of questions such as whether Christians believe that contraception may be used, that it is always wrong to lie, or that same-sex marriage should be approved. Although good teachers will always set such questions in the context of the basic beliefs of Christianity, it is nevertheless commonly the case that emphasis comes to be placed on how Christians choose between options that seem equally unfavourable, with the end result being an unsatisfactory sense amongst pupils that Christian ethics is only about irresolvable 'double binds' or quandaries that arise from the incompatibility of its requirements with contemporary life.

Engagement with the Bible as part of such an approach to Christian ethics commonly takes the form of a method generally referred to as 'proof-texting', in which the biblical texts come to be treated simply as a sourcebook for ethical principles that guides Christians in making correct moral decisions. This understanding of the Bible particularly undergirds the ways in which it is used in RE for pupils between 14 and 19 years of age, notably in terms of its usefulness for providing 'answers' to contemporary moral issues. The third edition of the GCSE textbook *Contemporary Moral Issues* (Jenkins 1997, 96), for example, when discussing voluntary euthanasia, presents a list

entitled 'Some factors influencing a Christian'. Included on this list are the following points:

- "God made man in his own image" *(Genesis 1:27).* Human life is a gift from God. It is sacred and has dignity …
- Jesus in the New Testament heals the sick and the dying.
- God gave man "dominion over every living thing" *(Genesis 1:28).* Humans have a responsibility to use God's gifts to the full.

Other verses are similarly pulled out and used to pronounce on violence, the family, drug use, suicide, racism and many other ethical issues, with little if any acknowledgement that such an approach may prove anachronistic, fail to do justice to the complexities and ambiguities within biblical texts, or misconstrue the way in which Christians understand their relationship to the Bible.[3]

The same is true of RE at more advanced stages of the curriculum, with Michael Wilcockson's *A Student's Guide to AS Religious Studies for the OCR Specification* (2008, 82), for example, noting in regard to Christian belief in the sanctity of life that 'The book of Job (1:21) states this clearly: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away"'. No further justification is given for the choice to use this text as evidence for this particular Christian belief, nor is it contextualised within the broader story of Job, and the writer of the textbook may be assuming too much theological expertise on the part of teachers if he expects them to be able to make such connections for themselves. Moreover, as Terence Copley and his team discovered in a survey of RE content at Key Stage 4 (14-16 year olds) in nineteen Agreed Syllabuses, this kind of use of the Bible is widespread: 'Passages were frequently removed from their original context and theological intention', they write, and 'The contexts within which passages appeared were not always appropriate' (Copley et al. 2001, 25).

How can these problems be addressed?

In contrast to the practice of 'proof-texting', RE that explores the Bible through the lens of narrative theology enables pupils to approach biblical texts not as a quasi-philosophical collection of answers to difficult ethical dilemmas but as narratives of how people have understood, and continue to understand, their relationship with God. It

also highlights the way in which *all* of us, whether or not we have a religious faith, are shaped by certain narratives which tell of convictions about the way the world is and where truth is to be found, whether or not we articulate them as such (Hauerwas and Burrell 1997). We therefore propose the development of an approach towards teaching Christian ethics in school RE that enables pupils to perceive the Bible as a set of stories that are particularly important for Christians and which have authority for them, to understand Christians as a storied people whose sense of community and ethical commitments are shaped not by moral rules but by participation in shared narratives of faith, and to reflect upon those stories that contribute to formation of their own narrative identities.

So what might such a pedagogy of RE look like and what phases of learning might it entail? What follows is an outline of one possible answer to these questions. The suggestions made are drawn from the recent 'Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education' project.[4] This particular example involves pupils being given a stimulus in the form of a series of contemporary paintings by Devon artist Brian J. Turner to assist them in accessing the concept of narrative. Turner's paintings show biblical scenes in a quirky, contemporary style that is both engaging and thought-provoking. Such a use of art has been shown to bring the concept of interpretation to life for pupils and, in so doing, to demonstrate that written texts, too, might function in this way (De Gruchy 2001; Engler and Naested 2002; Bruce Birch 2005). Our pedagogy is not tied exclusively to visual images, however, but may also be approached by means of alternative stimuli such as music, theatre, film or contemporary narratives that re-imagine the biblical texts.

As mentioned above, our aim is to develop a form of RE that encourages pupils to reflect upon their own narrative identities through the twin tenets of narrative philosophy and narrative theology in a way that allows them to perceive themselves *as part of* and/or *in relation to* the narratives that are discussed. This is of central importance to the appropriateness of RE within fully state-maintained schools in the UK, which can be attended by pupils of many differing faiths, including those of no religious faith at all, and where RE is taught with the intention of carrying no confessional agenda. Our pedagogy is designed to be of relevance to pupils of all religious faiths and of none and, in anticipation of the future widening of the pedagogy

to include the narrative study of faiths other than Christianity, accepts that all pupils will at some stage encounter the narratives of a faith with which they do not personally identify. It also allows that pupils' positions may change over time, for they remain free at every point to engage either as 'other to' or 'from within' the particular narratives discussed. Of primary importance is that pupils are enabled to understand themselves and others narratively, however they might construe their relationship with the narratives of the biblical texts.

Our pedagogy comprises four phases of learning: encountering narrative; interpreting narrative; understanding narrative in community contexts; and reflecting on narratives of self and others. Explained below is how these phases of learning have been explicated specifically by the 'Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education' project – that is, in relation to Christianity and through the paintings of Brian J. Turner.

Phase 1: encountering narrative

In the first phase, prioritisation is given to the pupil encountering and understanding a particular biblical narrative – for example, the story of the nativity (Matthew 1:18-25, 2:1-16) or the story of Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). Here the primary question is 'What is going on in the biblical narrative?' and, given that the conventions of story-telling – of character, setting and plot – can easily be made familiar to all, no previous knowledge or awareness of the particular stories of the Bible is necessary for pupils to engage with the text in this way. In conjunction with reading or listening to the narrative, pupils are introduced to a stimulus representing the same text – in this case, a painting of Turner's – which provides a point of focus and helps to bring the story to life. Through the use of specific, targeted questions, pupils are then encouraged to actively engage with both the unfolding of the narrative and its depiction in the painting. For example, they may ask: 'According to the Genesis narrative, what was the earth like when God first created it?'; 'What reason does the narrative suggest God gives for sending the flood?'; and 'Who do you think the figures in the painting of the nativity narrative might be?'

Underlying the activities of this phase is an encounter between the pupil's own philosophy – his or her narrative self, whether Christian or not – and an aspect of

theology, in the form of the narrative of the text. Pupils are not yet required to reflect on their concept of self, or upon how they perceive their relationship with the text, but rather emphasis is placed upon simply establishing an acquaintance, which will then be developed and explored through the subsequent phases of learning.

Phase 2: interpreting narrative

The second phase introduces pupils to the idea of the interpretation of narratives. Looking again at Turner's paintings, many of which are challenging rather than literal in their representations of the text, pupils are now asked to view them as showing Turner's own, personal readings of the biblical narratives, and thus to consider how an individual's life story impacts upon their relationship with the text. To assist with this task, pupils are presented with a series of 'talking head' video clips of Turner discussing the story of his own life and how this has influenced his Bible paintings. Key questions here are: 'How has the narrative been interpreted by Turner?'; 'Why has he painted the story in this particular way?'; and, to encourage engagement with the symbolism of the paintings, 'How has Turner used particular symbols to convey his views?'

Also, as part of this phase, pupils are enabled to partake in responding to and critiquing Turner's visual interpretations of the texts. Having studied fictional dialogues between people of contrasting views – for example, a conversation between a group of art critics regarding one of Turner's paintings – pupils are invited to discuss these opinions and to contribute thoughts of their own. Here pupils are considering questions such as 'Do you agree with the way in which Turner has interpreted the narrative? Why or why not?' In this way, pupils are drawn towards the initial stages of constructing their own interpretations of the texts, and also develop skills in engaging in respectful dialogue with the views of others.

In this phase, pupils go beyond the encounter initiated in the first phase to explore the idea of interpreting that which has been encountered. Through engagement with Turner's paintings, they are presented with an example not only of a narrative self (that of Turner) encountering a biblical narrative, but of the positioning of that self in relation to the text through the creation of an interpretation (here taking the form of a painting). Considering their own responses to Turner's visual interpretation, pupils are also placed

in a position whereby they may begin to offer their own readings of the biblical narratives – that is, to situate their narrative selves in relation to the texts.

Phase 3: understanding narrative in community contexts

Having considered Turner's interpretations of the biblical narratives, in the third phase of learning, pupils progress to thinking and talking about the significance of the texts for other members of the Christian community. In 2001, Terence Copley and his team noted that only four of the nineteen Key Stage 4 RE syllabuses they had studied 'recognised that the Bible may be approached and interpreted in different ways by Christians' (Copley, Lane, Savini and Walshe 2001, 24). By contrast, pupils are here presented with the views of different Christian denominations and of Christian theologians over time, and prompted to ask 'How are biblical narratives interpreted within the Christian community?' and 'How might the Bible be understood as a source of authority and inspiration which informs the lives of Christians?' Activities involving role-play, in which pupils take on the views of different Christian groups or individuals and engage in imaginative dialogue and debate, may be used to encourage and extend participation. There is also the opportunity for pupils to discuss the ethical 'difficulties' presented by biblical texts such as the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:1-51), which appears to condone the use of violence.

Through such discussions, pupils explore the themes of narrative theology outlined above, and are encouraged in particular to consider Christian ethics as character development through the reading and interpreting of biblical texts in community. Reflecting upon how different groups of Christians have interpreted the texts in the light of their own specific backgrounds and contexts makes clear for pupils that Christian ethics must make sense in everyday life and are inadequate when reduced to impossible-to-solve abstract dilemmas or the application of rationally-derived principles. It also ensures that the ethics presented remain genuinely Christian in character and are not reduced to aspects of a more general morality.

Within this phase, pupils are encouraged to employ skills of empathy, imagination and critical engagement in order to consider the significance of biblical narratives for Christians *from the perspective of the Christian tradition*, even though they themselves

may stand outside that tradition. This process, which will involve a temporary and explicit 'suspension of disbelief' on the part of some pupils, asks that they try to walk in another's shoes and to view the world from another's perspective. Viewing the Christian faith 'from the inside' in this way, pupils are enabled to glimpse something of what it means to live as part of a community that adopts a particular worldview and that is shaped by a certain set of narratives.

Phase 4: reflecting on narratives of self and others

In the fourth phase of learning, pupils reflect upon their own understandings of the biblical narratives, and upon those narratives that are formative of their own personal identities. Pupils are asked to consider whether they would interpret and portray the text in a way similar to or different from that of Turner, and to give reasons for their interpretations and portrayals. They are also given the opportunity to create paintings or other artworks that show their understandings of the biblical narratives. Turner's visual interpretations of the biblical narratives (as explored in phase two) thus prompt pupils not only to enter into debates about how Christians read and understand the Bible (as in phase three) but also to respond to the biblical texts with critical and imaginative insights of their own.

To assist those pupils who position themselves outside the Christian narratives in the completion of this task, examples are provided not only of Christian interpretations of the biblical narratives but also of how non-Christian communities have read and responded to the Bible. For example, the Genesis creation narrative might be read as literature that inspires reflection upon the wonder of the natural world even for an individual who does not believe that it was created by God. Developing the ability to reflect upon the significance of the narratives of others in terms of one's own personal identity and development will prove particularly significant when our pedagogy is expanded to include the narratives of multiple faith traditions, as here all pupils will at some stage encounter and respond to narratives of which they are not a part.

Also, in this phase, pupils are challenged to reflect upon the narratives that shape and inform their own characters and ethics, asking 'What religious and/or non-religious narratives influence my own life?' and 'In what traditions do I stand?' Here pupils are

encouraged to consider how certain ideas, beliefs, people and experiences have helped to make them the people they are now, in the same way that Christians are shaped by the influence of the biblical narratives and by the Christian community. For example, being an elder brother or younger sister, being born and raised in a particular country or ethnic group or supporting a particular football team are all narratives which might contribute to the formation of a pupil's own narrative self-identity, along with any religious beliefs. At the same time, this conscious articulation of their narrative selves enables pupils to also ask 'In what ways do the narratives of my own life influence my engagement with and interpretation of the biblical narratives?' In this way, a foundation of empathetic understanding is laid which could, in future lessons, lead to classroom engagement in multi-faith dialogue between those from all belief systems, including secular humanism.

Modern individuals often want to believe that they can be neutrally objective about ethics and are not bound or limited by particular stories (Hauerwas and Burrell 1997). Many pupils, too, share this belief, and it is the aim of this fourth phase of learning to challenge such assumptions through encouraging pupils to reflect upon those narratives that are formative of their lives. Such an aim resonates with the view of Trevor Cooling (2000, 161), for whom 'the primary purpose of encountering the Christian story...[is] to encourage the reader or hearer to reflect on their own way of understanding the world in the light of that being expressed by the writer'. It also serves to address the tendency of many current RE pedagogies to omit reflection on pupils' understanding of their own and others' spirituality, and to utilise instead a 'scientific' or anthropological approach to religion (Ashley 2002, 264; Pollard, Schreiner, and Kozhuharov 2006, 30).

In this phase, pupils are finally enabled to think about the narrative philosophy that forms their own unique sense of themselves. They are also given the opportunity to consider the nature of the relationship between that narrative sense of self and the narratives of the Christian tradition, whether they perceive themselves *as part of* or *in relation to* this particular faith.

Pupils' moral and spiritual development

Through these phases of learning, pupils are enabled to learn about the Bible – its content, form and importance for Christians – and to learn from Bible, both as an example of a narrative that shapes people's lives and as a stimulus for reflection on the story of which they themselves are a part and which in turn influences how and what they learn from the Bible. In these ways, our pedagogy facilitates the achievement of the two broad Attainment Targets for RE in England – 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' – contained in the *Non-Statutory National Framework* (QCA 2004). Further, through engaging with biblical narratives for themselves and discerning their own (moral) lessons rather than simply assimilating those specified in advance, pupils take an active role in their own learning process and have agency in their own spiritual and critical development (cf. Pollard, Schreiner, and Kozhuharov 2006).

This focus on character and spirituality differs slightly from that which is put forward in publications such as the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education of 2007, which states that pupils should be encouraged to develop particular moral and spiritual 'dispositions'.[5] Whilst developing dispositions might sound akin to the development of character as found in our own model, the important difference is that the Birmingham syllabus seems to suggest that all pupils, from any religious faith or none, should draw *specific* moral conclusions from the religious material encountered. In other words, engaging with a particular biblical text should lead pupils to a *particular* conclusion and inform the development of a *particular* disposition. By contrast, our pedagogy suggests that engaging with the Bible should happen not in order to meet specific moral learning objectives (e.g. 'from reading the story of Ananias and Sapphira, you will learn to share and be generous'), but rather to allow pupils to understand complex issues concerning character, community and ethics. Our narrative-based approach therefore provides the opportunity for RE teachers to draw out issues of personal and moral relevance to the developing characters and spiritualities of their pupils. This is especially important for pupils in the early stages of secondary education as it has been shown that this forms a period in the lives of pupils during which their engagement with the Bible undergoes transformation (see e.g. Loman and Francis, 2006).

A narrative approach, such as this, additionally provides the opportunity for pupils' skills of critique to be strengthened as they actively engage in the interpretation of stories. As Trevor Cooling (2000, 161) puts it: reflecting on the Christian story '...requires an ability to work with metaphor and narrative. Living in the light of a story is a creative process and demands the development of interpretative skills'. Heinz Streib (1997, 50) concurs:

> Religious education should be education in *perception*, it should be education in *seeing* and *hearing*, a school of *fictionality* and *responsiveness*. Fictionality means to realise the 'difference', to realise the 'it-could-be-otherwise' in order to play imaginatively with alternatives. Responsiveness means not only to be aware of the otherness of the other, but ... learning to see oneself as another' (original emphases).

Finally, our pedagogy resonates with work on using the Bible in RE informed by the literary approach to biblical narrative of Robert Alter (1981), who argues that the way the Bible speaks is inseparable from the message it gives. Drawing on the ideas of Alter, Elie Holzer (2007, 505) writes: 'Interpretations should not be delivered explicitly by the teacher to the pupil, since it is only in and through the learner's engagement and involvement in the interpretative process that ... experiential interpretative activity with a potential for moral effect ... can take place'. Nonetheless, he adds, rich readings will also come to be informed by knowledge from outside pupils' own direct experience such as critical reading techniques and an awareness of the larger context of the narrative. Our understanding and appreciation of a text, then, remains in part reliant upon the guidance of external stimuli, and for this reason our pedagogy entails a degree of flexibility, allowing teachers to match curriculum content to the needs of their pupils, taking account of their abilities and existing knowledge and understanding and choosing relevant activities as appropriate.

Conclusion

The pedagogy of the 'Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education' project reflects the view of narrative theologians that the Bible's relationship to ethics consists in communal readings of and participation in shared stories of faith. Within such a

practice, a variety of voices and perspectives are to be heard, with the biblical texts understood not as having given, pre-decided ethical 'meanings' but rather as remaining open to interpretation by the communities in which they are read. Through investigating these differing readings, and by putting forward interpretations of their own, pupils are enabled both to appreciate the diversity of Christian belief and to reflect upon those narratives that are formative of their own characters and ethics.

If pupils are to engage with the Bible as more than a source of proof-texts for stereotyped moral dilemmas, the phases of learning set out in this article will need to be realised in resources and reading tools that acknowledge the Bible's complexity and the way in which it is understood by Christians as a collection of narratives that inform the development of character and virtue. While the 'Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education' project makes a start towards this process, the scope for further theoretical and practical developments remains.

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[1] The Biblos Project (University of Exeter, 1996-2006) has suggested that the word 'story' can be problematic when applied to biblical narratives in RE in secondary schools because of its connotations of something 'made up' and its associations with childishness. By contrast, the word 'narrative' was considered to be '...a more neutral word that is not as value-laden as story because it is simply something presented or narrated by another' (Copley, Freathy and Walshe 2004: 8). Narrative theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, however, do use the term 'story', recognizing that it points to stories as accounts which help shape and make meaning of our lives. In this project we have used both terms, recognising that even 'narratives' cannot be value-neutral, and that the specificities of our 'life stories' shape the ways in which we view and interpret the world.

[2] For an alternative construal of the relevance of Ricoeur to the development of a narrative approach to RE see Streib (1998).

[3] In this particular textbook, the Bible's status as an ancient text is noted but not problematised: 'Obviously some of the great problems and issues that face us today are specifically modern problems, and so no direct reference to them can be found in the Bible … However, the teachings are often **guidelines** and so can be **applied** to present-day problems' (Jenkins 1997: 17) (original emphases).

[4] The 'Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education' project is currently being run at the University of Exeter and is funded by Bible Society. It aim is to develop curriculum resources for use with Key Stage 3 pupils based on the approach of narrative theology, and uses the contemporary biblical paintings of Brian J. Turner (www.bibleproject.co.uk).