

# The narrative turn in practical theology: A discussion of Julian Müller's narrative approach

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The importance of narrative for practical theology is today widely recognised, both nationally and internationally. There is, however, disagreement amongst practical theologians regarding the scope and role of narrative in practical theological methodology. The practical theologian Julian Müller made, and continues to make, an important contribution to the methodology of practical theology through his narrative approach. The aim of this article was to contribute to the ongoing methodological discussion about the scope and role of narrative approaches in practical theology. Müller's narrative approach was discussed against the backdrop of the narrative turn in the human and social sciences. It was concluded that Müller's narrative approach reveals some of the key tensions in practical theological methodology. His metaphorical narrative approach, as a representative of the poetic pole in the methodological debate, helps to guard practical theology from losing its transformative orientation and its vital connection with religious practice. Embracing a variety of approaches could help practical theologians to steer between the Scylla of a one-sidedly scientific practical theology and the Charybdis of the triumph of the immediacy of praxis.

## Introduction

It is a privilege to contribute to this 'Festschrift' for our colleague Julian Müller. He has contributed much to the field of practical theology in South Africa over the years as lecturer at the University of Pretoria (Büchner & Müller 2009), as editor of the journal *Practical Theology in South Africa*, as chairperson of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa, as researcher and as supervisor of many master's and doctoral students.

In this article, I focus on one area of practical theological scholarship where Julian Müller made, and continues to make, an important contribution, namely the methodology of practical theology.<sup>1</sup> It is in particular his narrative approach to practical theology and his work on postfoundationalism that stands out in this context. Although his ideas on postfoundationalism and narrative are closely related, I focus in this article specifically on his views regarding narrative and a practical theological methodology.

The importance of narrative for practical theology is widely recognised today, both nationally and internationally. The recently published *Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology* (Miller-McLemore 2012) includes, for example, a chapter by the Dutch practical theologian Ruard Ganzevoort (2012) on narrative approaches. He starts the chapter by referring to the importance of narrative for practical theology:

Although in some sense narrative approaches in practical theology have been developed only recently, one could claim that there is a long and intrinsic history of their relationship. Religious practices that form the core material for theological reflection in practical theology are often directly related to narratives. In one way or another human stories are connected with stories of and about God. (p. 214)

Most, if not all, practical theologians will agree with Ganzevoort that narratives and narrative approaches are important in practical theology. It is especially in the practical theological fields of pastoral care and counselling (narrative therapy), preaching (narrative preaching) and religious education<sup>2</sup> that the work on narrative has gained prominence in recent years (Ganzevoort 2012:218–219). Hopewell (1987) also gave us an excellent example of the use of narrative in congregational settings in his book *Congregation: Stories and structures*.

Agreement regarding the importance of narrative for practical theology, however, does not mean that there is agreement on the meaning of narrative for the theory and practice of practical

1.This contribution of Müller to the methodology of practical theology is specifically mentioned in the review by Büchner and Müller (2009:3) on the history of the Department of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria: 'Since 2000, Müller expanded his narrative approach to pastoral therapy towards a research methodology for practical theology. More recently the concept of a postfundamental [sic] practical-theological methodology was also discussed in publications.'

2.See for example the recent publication by Reed *et al.* (2013).

theology.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Mauz (2009:281) we can say that the ‘scope and locus of narration’ in practical theology is much disputed. Practical theology is not alone in this regard. The use of the word ‘narrative’ has in recent years become so widespread, and its meaning so diffuse, that is very difficult to reach a common understanding. Lamarque (2004:394–395), in a discussion on the difficulty of defining narrative, says that this is further complicated by a ‘three-way product-act-object ambiguity’. The word is used to refer to the product of narrative (i.e. the story told), the act of narration and the object (e.g. reading a narrative). The meaning of the construction ‘narrative approach’ is equally slippery. Moen (2006:2) writes that a narrative approach could be ‘a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, and a mode for representing the research study’. Even in narratology, the field that studies narrative as its object, it is hard to come to an agreement on a definition of narrative (Pier & García Landa 2008).

In a recent article ‘Practical Theology as part of the landscape of Social Sciences and Humanities – A transversal perspective’, Müller (2013) makes a distinction that helps us to understand his narrative approach:

In my own approach to the discipline, I make the distinction between the narrative metaphor according to which I practice practical theology and narratology. The latter is based on the knowledge of narratives as a phenomenon and the ability to analyse and interpret the narratives. It therefore also works with stories, but is structuralistic and analytical in the analysis thereof. (p. 4)

It seems to me that Müller uses this distinction between narrative as metaphor and narratology to draw a clear line between his ‘arts-based’ approach to narrative (Müller 2012) and empirical-analytical approaches to the study of narrative. This distinction makes even more sense against the background of the various descriptions of his (evolving) narrative approach in the last decade. However, it also raises important questions regarding the scope and role of narrative in the methodology of practical theology. Is there a clear-cut distinction between a ‘metaphorical’ and a ‘narratological’ narrative approach in practical theology? What is meant by a metaphorical narrative approach? If narrative is only a metaphor, does that imply that stories are not to be studied, analysed and interpreted as narratives? What is Müller’s understanding of narratology? Is a narratological approach necessarily structuralistic and, if so, is there no place in the methodology of practical theology to study and interpret narratives in an analytical and/or empirical way? Do practical theologians have to choose between these alternatives – either a ‘metaphorical approach’ or a ‘narratological approach’, or is there perhaps another approach to narrative in practical theological scholarship?

The conflicting positions regarding the scope and role of narrative in practical theological methodology<sup>4</sup> establishes

3. Ganzevoort (2012:214) refers to different dimensions in narrative approaches that ‘blend together and make it impossible to render a simple description of narrative approaches’.

4. The focus here is on the role and scope of narrative regarding the methodology of practical theology as an academic discipline and not in its use as a particular approach or practice (e.g. narrative therapy in pastoral care and counselling and narrative preaching in homiletics).

the research problem for this article. The aim of this article is to contribute to the ongoing methodological discussion (Dreyer 2010) about the scope and role of narrative in practical theology through a critical discussion of Julian Müller’s narrative approach.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section I briefly describe Julian Müller’s narrative practical theology. This ‘narrative turn’ in practical theology has to be seen against the broader background of the narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences. In the following section I thus give a brief overview of this narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences. Two main approaches to narrative in the human and social sciences, namely metaphorical and narratological, will be distinguished and discussed. Next we return to Müller’s narrative approach and it will be argued that Müller’s metaphorical approach to narrative is firmly rooted in the metaphorical family approach of the human and social sciences. The article ends with a discussion of the contribution of Müller’s narrative approach to the methodology of practical theology.

## Julian Müller’s narrative approach

In order to understand Julian Müller’s contribution to the methodological debate in South Africa, we have to go back to the practical theological methodology scene in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, the buzzwords were ‘action or operation science’ and ‘empirical approaches’ to practical theology. It was a time of lively methodological debate. There was much excitement about the new practical theological approaches and the use of empirical research methods. By the end of the 1980s a methodology group had been established. During our monthly meetings at the University of South Africa (UNISA), which Julian Müller attended regularly, we enthusiastically discussed these new methodological developments.<sup>5</sup> It was also a time when many practical theologians in South Africa embraced the model of ‘intradisciplinary’ (Van der Ven 1993:101–112), according to which practical theologians have to do their own empirical research. Regarding research methods, the main debate at that stage was whether we should use quantitative or qualitative methods, or perhaps both.

The methodological debates in South Africa received an important stimulus in the second half of the 1990s, when questions were raised regarding the ‘action scientific’ approach to practical theology from Postmodernism, systems theory, eco-hermeneutics and so forth. It was during this time that a narrative approach appeared on the methodological scene. This approach, inspired by postmodern ideas, social constructionism, and later also postfoundationalism, challenged the dominant action theoretical approach to practical theology and many of the research conventions and practices associated with this approach. Julian Müller was one of the leading figures who put the idea of narrative firmly on our methodological table.<sup>6</sup> As early as 1996, he had

5. This was a time in which a number of methodological books in the field of practical theology were published.

6. Another key figure in this development was Dirk Kotze, who started the Institute for Therapeutic Development in the 1990s. Many students at the University of South Africa followed his courses and adopted a narrative therapy approach.

called for a practical narrative theology in his book *Om tot verhaal te kom: Pastorale gesinsterapie*, published in the series *RGN-studies in praktiese teologie* (Müller 2006). Over the past decade, he has revised and refined his ideas regarding a narrative approach to practical theology and has published or co-published (mostly with his postgraduate students) numerous articles in which he explains or illustrates his view of a 'narrative practical theology'.<sup>7</sup>

True to his emphasis on reflexivity, Müller always strives to be transparent regarding his philosophical commitments. He writes, for example: 'The philosophical framework is found in an integration of two paradigms, namely social-constructionism and postfoundationalism' (Müller 2003a:293). The implications of this combination of social-constructionism and postfoundationalism<sup>8</sup> for his view of the world, knowledge and research methodology and also for his theology are discussed in many of his publications (Demasure & Müller 2006; Müller 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013). They give the philosophical rationale for the choices regarding contextuality, local knowledge, seeing participants as co-researchers and so forth.

Müller was strongly influenced by the work of Freedman and Combs (Müller 2011b) and the narrative therapy movement, but he developed his own approach to narrative. A particular stimulus for this was his discovery of the work of Wentzel van Huyssteen, in particular his ideas on postfoundationalism and interdisciplinarity.<sup>9</sup> These insights were creatively integrated into his narrative approach to practical theology. Many of his master's and doctoral students adopted this narrative approach in their dissertations and theses and some of them continue to do so as 'postdocs' and newly appointed lecturers in practical theology. His metaphorical approach to narrative thus played a very important role with regards to the narrative turn in practical theology both in South Africa and in the international context (Ganzevoort 2012:218).

What makes this approach to the methodology of practical theology so different from other approaches? Let me try to summarise some of the main ideas of Müller's narrative practical theology. Müller (2005:73) states that a narrative practical theology should be developed from a very specific

7.The importance of a narrative approach for practical theology in Müller's work is also mentioned in an article that tells the story of the development of the Department of Practical Theology (Büchner & Müller 2009): 'Since 2000, Müller expanded his narrative approach to pastoral therapy towards a research methodology for practical theology.'

8.'In previous publications I have argued for the concept of a narrative Practical Theology, based on a social constructionist paradigm. The introduction of the concept of postfoundationalism [sic] to Practical Theology is no diversion from that position. It is the same line of thinking, but at the same time a very important enrichment. *Postfoundationalist Practical Theology* includes the ideas of social constructionism and the narrative approach, but provides us with the apparatus to better position ourselves within a theological world. It also helps us to better position ourselves against the relativistic tendencies in some approaches within social constructionism and the narrative approach ...' (Müller 2005:80).

9.The role of postfoundationalism in Julian Müller's approach came more to the fore in his later work. He makes a very interesting combination between narrative and postfoundationalism. In a public lecture at the end of 2012 he refers to 'Postfoundational Practical Theology as Narrative Theology' (Müller 2012:9). In a recent article, 'Practical theology as part of the landscape of the social sciences and humanities – A transversal perspective' (Müller 2013), he refers to 'the narrative and postfoundational approach to practical theology'. Narrative and postfoundationalism are thus closely linked.

and concrete 'moment of praxis' that is always local, embodied and situated. Practical theological knowledge is local knowledge, dealing with specific persons in their particular contexts. The formulation of a theory for praxis is seen as being too far removed from the real world. Hence, the task of the researcher is to assist the 'co-researchers' (research participants) to develop their own interpretations of their stories and to help them to create alternative (life-enhancing or 'preferred') stories. Müller (2005:74–76) is sceptical about a hermeneutical approach to practical theology owing to its inadequacy 'in situations where there is a continuous distortion of communication through the use of language', its 'lack of emphasis on the socially constructed nature of knowledge and knowledge-systems' and 'the seeming inadequacy of the hermeneutical approach to provide Practical Theology with real contextual outcomes'. Regarding this last point he continues: 'In spite of good theory, it seems to leave Practical Theology only with theoretical abstractions. The "theories for praxis" which are created, often remain distant from the real world' (Müller 2005:75–76).

With regard to research methodology, Müller (2005) developed a practical theological research process consisting of seven moments:

- Describe context.
- Listen to and describe in-context descriptions.
- Make, describe and develop interpretations of experiences in collaboration with co-researchers.
- Describe experiences in the light of traditions of interpretation.
- Reflect on the religious and spiritual aspects, especially on God's presence, as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation.
- Describe experience as thickened through interdisciplinary investigation.
- Develop alternative interpretations that point beyond the local community.

He also mentions specific methods that are to be used in each of these moments. This is clearly a very interesting and sophisticated research model. From a research methodological perspective one can ask questions about each of these seven moments. However, for the sake of my argument in this article, I would like to make two comments.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, there is little reflection on the narrative aspect in this research model. There are some references (Müller 2005:83) to narrative in relation to social constructionism and postfoundationalism and methodology ('The team of researchers does empirical research, based on the narrative approach. '), but no reflection on what a narrative is, why it is used and so forth. The article (Müller 2005) ends with a few references to 'narrative' and 'story', but nothing more.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, very little information is given on how the 'stories' are to be analysed and interpreted. Müller (2005) states that according to this research approach:

10.It is of course not possible to give a fair reflection of all the nuances in this approach, or to give a thorough evaluation of this approach in this article. There are many aspects of this narrative approach that we applaud. There is a real concern for people and their well-being. One of the core principles of this research approach is that it is not research *on* people or *of* people but *with* people.

11.'This practical theological narrative is not only a paradigm-story, but also a method-story. It is an integrative narrative, which allows the practical theologian to participate with integrity in processes of both "story-telling" and "story-development"' (Müller 2003a:305).

the researchers are not only interested in descriptions of experiences, but also and foremost in their (co-researchers') own interpretations. The researcher in this phase does not, in the first instance, look for data, but for meaning/*interpretation* given by the co-researchers. (p. 84)

One of the methods to be used is interpretation conducted in 'constant feedback loops and in collaboration with "co-researchers"' (Müller 2005:84). How this is to be achieved is not discussed. Müller (2005) does mention that the development of an alternative interpretation:

will not happen on the basis of structured and rigid methods, through which stories are analysed and interpreted. It rather happens on the basis of a holistic understanding and as a social-constructionist process in which all the co-researchers are invited and engaged in the creation of new meaning. (p. 86)

How a holistic understanding could be achieved and how they will arrive at this 'new meaning' is not explained.

This newcomer on the methodological scene of the 1990s has, since those days, become very influential, at least in our South African context.<sup>12</sup> In summary, we can say that Müller's narrative approach is characterised by strong ontological claims regarding the relation between narrative, identity and selfhood, a social constructionist epistemology and a rejection of conventional empirical research methods and procedures. The strong emphasis on narrative in his approach has to be seen in the context of the so-called narrative turn in the human and social sciences. In the next section we thus briefly reflect on this narrative turn in the human and social sciences.

## The narrative turn in the human and social sciences

The idea of stories is of course not new. Stories have been with us since time immemorial. The French linguist, Roland Barthes (in Czarniawska 2004), famously said<sup>13</sup>:

The narratives of the world are numberless ... All classes, all human groups, have their narratives ... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (p. 1)

The study of narrative also has a long history.<sup>14</sup> Biblical scholars made an important contribution through their study of biblical texts and helped to lay the foundations for textual interpretation and the literary study of narrative.<sup>15</sup>

12. Many postgraduate students in practical theology, having been trained in this narrative practical theology approach, use it for their master's or doctoral research.

13. Riessman (2008:5) warns that the concept of 'narrative' has become so popular that it has lost its specificity.

14. 'The beginnings of narrative analysis can well be placed in the hermeneutic studies of the Bible, Talmud and Koran' (Czarniawska 2004:1).

15. Many different traditions of the literary study of narrative developed over the years, with the Russian school, French structuralism and poststructuralism as some of the important schools in narratology.

It is, however, not the literary study of narrative that concerns us here. What is important is the sudden interest in narrative and narrative theory in the human and social sciences since the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> This 'narrative turn' is quite significant if we consider it against the backdrop of the *Methodenstreit* between the natural and human sciences.<sup>17</sup> The idea of narrative became popular in a vast array of disciplines in the human and social sciences, professions such as counselling, law, medicine and also in popular discourse (Spector-Mersel 2010:204–205). The story of narrative is that it has moved from the margins to take centre stage in human and social scientific research!<sup>18</sup> This spectacular rise of the use of narrative as a concept, method, approach or paradigm has become known as a narrative turn in the human and social sciences. In the words of Herman, Jahn and Ryan (2005), the editors of the *Routledge encyclopedia of narrative theory*:

The past several decades have seen an explosion of interest in narrative, with this multifaceted object of inquiry becoming a central concern in a wide range of disciplinary fields and research contexts. The 'narrative turn', as it might be called, gained impetus from the development of structuralist theories of narrative in France in the mid to late 1960s ... (p. ix)

This interest in narrative is reflected in the growth of research and teaching activity focused on narrative, interdisciplinary book series, internationally recognised journals and the number of international conferences (Herman *et al.* 2005:ix–x; Terrell & Lyddon 1996:27–28). An analysis or overview of the different narrative approaches falls outside the scope of this article, but we can note that the field of 'narrative' today is complex, fragmented and in some cases highly specialised.<sup>19</sup>

The reception and integration of narrative in the human and social sciences is thus far from uniform. Narrative, as a 'travelling concept' (Hyvärinen 2006), has been appropriated in numerous ways in the disciplines and research traditions of the human and social sciences. Hyvärinen's (2006) distinction between 'two relatively independent families of narrative theory', namely a metaphorical family (typically found in the 'narrative-turn' literature) and a narratological family (a 'literal' or theoretical approach to narrative), is particularly helpful here. We briefly consider these two narrative families.

Hyvärinen (2006) maintains that the epistemological crisis in the human and social sciences was an important factor in the origin of the metaphorical family. Referring to the work of Ryan, he writes:

The acute epistemological crises in human and social sciences were an obvious reason for interest in these new metaphors: narratives and stories seemed to provide scholars with more

16. Kreiswirth (2000) presents a very interesting overview of four different 'turns' that made the narrative turn possible.

17. The success of the natural sciences research, with its emphasis on quantification, objectification, et cetera has, for a long time, been the dominant model of scientific research in the humanities and social sciences. The early Chicago School of empirical theologians also emulated the model of the natural sciences and set out to discover laws regarding religion (Heimbrock 2007:134).

18. 'With surprising speed, the loosely defined field of narrative studies has moved from its early marginal status in the human sciences to a robust legitimacy' (Mishler, in Spector-Mersel 2010:205).

19. For example, the field of cognitive narratology (Herman 2009).

complex and less objectivistic forms of knowing than the previous laws, experiments, and abstract theories ... (Hyvärinen 2006:22)

Although stories and narrative play a role in the metaphorical approach, narrative refers in this approach not in the first place to the use of stories as research material to be analysed and interpreted, but to the epistemological positioning of the researcher. This research is sensitive to power issues, especially the power of so-called academic knowledge and discourses (Foucault's knowledge and power), and rejects any 'big narratives' (Lyotard). The metaphorical family is thus closely associated with Postmodernism and deconstruction. The stories of the marginalised and oppressed have to be told and heard. The particular stories of the 'co-researchers' are more important than abstract theorising. A high premium is placed on the subjectivity of the co-researchers as the authors of their own life stories.

This epistemological positioning regarding narrative was combined with new developments regarding a narrative ontology. The works on narrative by renowned philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (cf. Holquist 2011) and Paul Ricoeur (1984–1988) were chiefly important in this regard. Hyvärinen (2006) states that:

MacIntyre's remarkable contribution to the conceptual history of narrative resides almost entirely on the level of radicalizing the range of reference of narrative. Narratives became something to be lived out individually and collectively; became something attached to our very identities. (p. 26)

Paul Ricoeur's ideas regarding time, narrative and identity also provided an important philosophical base for the narrative turn (Demasure & Müller 2006). Narrative came to be seen as a condition for meaning-making and identity formation. The writings of scholars such as Bruner (1987) and Sarbin (1986) were very influential in the field of education and psychology and provided a further stimulus for the narrative turn in the human and social sciences. The work of Jerome Bruner in particular proved to be very influential in the development of the metaphorical family.<sup>20</sup> His use of the metaphor 'life as narrative' (Bruner 1987) and his distinction between paradigmatic and narrative knowing linked the epistemological and ontological claims regarding narrative. This resulted in strong ontological claims regarding the relation between narrative, life and personal identity, such as that narrative constitutes reality (Bruner, in Tammi 2006:20). Researchers in the metaphorical family thus tend to see all of social reality as a narrative reality (Spector-Mersel 2010:211–212).

Despite the key role of the concept narrative in this new narrative paradigm in the human and social sciences, it is interesting to note that it remained a relatively undeveloped concept. Hyvärinen (2006) gives an interesting explanation in this regard. He maintains that the 'narrative-turn' proponents did not import the concept of narrative from literary theory

20. Hyvärinen (2006) gives a very interesting overview of the main authors and texts that sparked the metaphorical turn.

but from its everyday use. The metaphor family, with the exception of Paul Ricoeur, is thus not really interested in the debates in literature theory about narrative and the criteria for narrative. Attention is paid to the content of narratives, but without taking the form of narratives seriously.<sup>21</sup> This at least partly explains the relatively unsophisticated use of the term narrative in the 'narrative-turn' literature:

Where then is the problem? Paradoxically, right in the middle of the new wave of narrative studies, the concept of narrative has remained principally un-theorized or under-theorized for a long time. Story has provided a new heuristic perspective on life, psychology, identity, and action, but oddly enough the narrative itself has been left in shadow, out of theoretical considerations. (Hyvärinen 2006:32)

In contrast to the firm emphasis on the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the metaphorical approach to narrative, little attention is given to research methodology. This seems to be a deliberate choice, as attention to research methods and data analysis strategies are seen as structuralist and remnants of a positivistic approach in which method was often seen as a 'royal road' to knowledge. The epistemological and ontological positioning of the metaphorical family thus leads to a very different view of the role of research and research methods, knowledge and the academy. The primary beneficiaries of research are the co-researchers and not the academic community. This reinforces the close link between Postmodernism and the 'narrative turn' in the human and social sciences.

The metaphorical approach to narrative was, however, not the only approach to narrative in the human and social sciences. The empirical research traditions in the social sciences in particular challenged the narrative as metaphor approach. In order to study narrative, it is important to conceptualise and operationalise the concept of narrative. This approach thus made specific use of narrative theory. Despite many variations, we can say that a key distinguishing feature of a 'narratological' approach, at least in the social sciences, is that narrative is seen as the object of research. In contrast to the metaphorical approach, this approach makes use of narrative theory in order to conceptualise and to operationalise narrative. Most followers of this approach will probably agree with the definition of narrative in the Routledge encyclopaedia of narrative theory, namely that narrative is 'a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change' (Herman *et al.* 2005:ix).

The stories of research participants are typically collected via qualitative research methods such as interviewing. This does not imply that there is no difference between narrative research and other qualitative research strategies. Riessman (2008:12), for example, takes pains to explain why the focus on storytelling makes narrative research different from other interview-based qualitative research (except perhaps case studies). The focus is on exploring the life of an individual or group. This requires expertise in eliciting 'stories'. One

21. In most cases, the narrative-turn literature focuses more on the content of the stories, even to the point of illustrating naiveté as regards the narrative form (Hyvärinen 2006:37).

technique that could be used to encourage the telling of story, especially regarding sensitive topics, is the use of a timeline (Guenette & Marshall 2009). The data in narrative research can be written documents (e.g. diaries), oral data (interview data) or even visual data. Regarding written documents one can distinguish between 'documented' narratives (e.g. autobiographies, reports) and those that are constructed through interviews. The techniques used for collecting or constructing the data 'are taken from the familiar toolbox of qualitative research (observation, interview, focus group, archival examination etc.), yet in employing them they focus on stories' (Spector-Mersel 2010:213).

The narrative analysis of data has also received much attention in the 'narratological' research tradition. Tohar *et al.* (2007) propose, for example, the use of five codes (hermeneutic, semic, symbolic, proairetic, cultural) from Roland Barthes' theory. Riessman (2008) discusses four strategies for narrative data analysis, namely thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic performance analysis and visual analysis, which seem promising in this regard. These analysis strategies are appropriate for different kinds of texts, for different types of questions, for keeping sequences of action in mind and for making conceptual inferences.

It is important to note that the distinction between metaphorical and narratological narrative approaches does not overlap with the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research on the research methodological level. Although quantitative research is clearly situated on the side of a narratological approach, many qualitative research projects in dominant and mainstream research are seen by exponents of the metaphorical approach as part of a narratological approach.

It is evident that the metaphorical and narratological approaches are embedded in different research traditions with different ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions.<sup>22</sup> A big divide thus exists between the metaphorical and the narratological approaches. The 'relatively independent families of narrative theory' (Hyvärinen 2006:37) sometimes do 'border-crossings', but this seems to be quite rare. The narratological family does not really take note of developments in the narrative-turn literature,<sup>23</sup> and vice versa.

In recent years, we see a growing uneasiness regarding the strong ontological claims about narrative in the metaphorical camp. Critics point out that metaphorical approaches generally only have a weak conceptualisation of the concept narrative and that it tends to over-interpret the narrative metaphor. Titles such as 'Against narrativity' (Strawson 2004), 'The limits of narrative: Provocations for the medical

22. Ontology refers to beliefs about the nature of phenomena or reality, epistemology to beliefs about what might represent knowledge or evidence of this reality and methodology to all the choices regarding the research process such as research design, methods and techniques for the collection, construction and analysis of data, and the communication of research findings (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

23. Hyvärinen (2006:36) mentions the work of Hannah Arendt on narrative as an example.

humanities' (Woods 2011),<sup>24</sup> 'On not expecting too much from narrative' (Lamarque 2004), 'Why narrative?' (Bamberg 2012) and 'Frankie, Johnny, Oprah and Me: The limits of narrative' (Sartwell 2006) are indicative of this reaction. The assumption that life is a narrative has been heavily criticised and some started to point out that narrative also has the potential to mislead.

The epistemological positioning (social constructivism or constructionism) of the metaphorical family has also not found much favour amongst empirical researchers in the social sciences. After all, the metaphorical family has its origins in a critique of the dominant (neo-)positivist approaches in the social sciences. The lack of methodological rigour and the disregard for academic conventions has further fuelled the scepticism. The critical response of Atkinson and Delamont (2006:169) to the use of narrative where generation of 'own narratives of experience under the rubric of autoethnography' is done without a 'commitment to an analytic stance', is an example of this scepticism. They see this as a 'celebratory stance' towards narratives that mirror the general culture of 'the interview society'. Their call for adopting an analytical stance is polemically formulated as follows: 'Despite its considerable popularity, however, we believe that the analysis of narrative needs to be "rescued" from many applications in contemporary social research' (Atkinson & Delamont 2006:164).

The narrative scene in the human and social sciences is thus inhabited by two distinct families: one focusing primarily on narrative as a particular approach to empirical research or as a research method that could help us to gain insight in human experience (i.e. narrative inquiry); the other using narrative primarily as a metaphor for the construction of the self and identity on an ontological level and as a different way of knowing on the epistemological level.

## Müller's metaphorical approach: A discussion

This brief overview of the narrative turn in the human and social sciences helps us to understand the narrative turn in practical theology. It also helps us to see where Julian Müller's narrative approach fits into the different narrative approaches in the human and social sciences. It is clear that Müller's narrative approach is firmly rooted in the 'metaphorical' tradition in the human and social sciences. He agrees with the ontological assumptions regarding 'life as narrative' that are characteristic of the metaphorical family, he shares the postmodern epistemological positioning of the 'researcher' and the distrust of scientific knowledge and he is deeply distrustful of the role and place of 'research methods' regarding methodology.

24. Woods (2011) writes about the important role that narrative plays in medicine as a way to access subjective experiences of illness because of its therapeutic value. She mentions some problems regarding narrative: the lack of a clear definition of narrative and the relation between narratives, stories and events, the truth-value of narrative, narrative coherence as harmful phenomenon, overinflating what counts as narrative, the lack of distinguishing between different narrative forms and contexts and of accounting for different genres, overlooking the cultural and historical dimensions of narrative and the model of the self as an 'agentic, authentic, autonomous storyteller'.

Müller's narrative approach to practical theology has much to offer to a practical theological methodology. I just mention a few aspects that stand out for me. Firstly, it takes the research participants ('co-researchers') and their life-world seriously. It is a thoroughly human-centred and participatory approach. It thus seeks to do research *with* rather than *for* or *on* people. This approach stresses the importance of subjectivity, embodiment, context and the richness of experience. Secondly, it places a very high premium on ethical research practices. It is respectful of the research participants and on high alert regarding the abuse of power in research practices. Thirdly, it highlights the importance of praxis-based research and never loses sight of the practical aims of research. Its emancipatory concerns and its conscious choice to give a voice to marginalised groups and individuals are valuable contributions to a practical theological methodology. These are aspects that can easily disappear from the horizon in more conventional 'scientific', analytical and structuralistic approaches. Practical theologians working in the new bureaucratic research environments, such as the 'entrepreneurial university', can easily lose sight of the fact that practical theological research is not an end in itself. The pressure to 'publish or perish' and to conduct research for career advancement cannot be underestimated. Practical theologians also face the burden to constantly demonstrate their academic standing amongst peers who are keen to ridicule their 'practical' theologies.

The strengths of a metaphorical narrative approach should, however, not blind us to the many questions regarding its ontology, epistemology and methodology. Firstly, the strong ontological claim regarding 'life as narrative' is much disputed. The narrative metaphor certainly provides an important perspective on identity and personhood. However, identity issues cannot be reduced to narrative as critics of the narrative metaphor point out. It is perhaps more appropriate, as Ryan (2005:347) suggests, to distinguish between 'being a narrative' and 'possessing narrativity'. Narrative approaches that engage more specifically with narrative theory could provide important contributions in this regard.

Secondly, the epistemological positioning in the metaphorical (postmodern) approach raises new questions. Researchers following this paradigm tend to take the stories of research participants at face value. The question is whether stories do not also deceive and distort 'the truth'. Furthermore, the modernistic faith in rationality and 'the scientific method' is easily replaced by an equally one-sided faith in the autonomy of the person and a radical subjectivity. From a theological perspective this also raises questions regarding the relation between divine and human action (Root 2012:411–413). Is truth only to be found in the subject's story? Boer (2009:36–37), in response to a contribution of Müller (2009c) on a narrative approach to poverty, refers in this regard to the possibility of distorted interpretations and 'false' narratives. He maintains that human experience, in the form of narrative, is an important source of normativity for theology, but it constitutes only one of the discourses in our search for theological truth (Boer 2009:38–43). The stories of our 'co-

researchers' cannot be the exclusive source of theological normativity and truth.

Thirdly, regarding methodology we noticed the reluctance to use conventional qualitative and quantitative research methods. The systematic analysis of narratives, as is typical of narrative inquiry, is quickly dismissed as structuralistic and generalisation and abstraction are seen as obstacles that diminish the subjectivity of the co-researchers. Analytical thinking and theorisation are seen as representative of a paradigmatic mode of knowing (Bolivar 2002:7–13) that put a narrative mode of knowing at risk. Müller's narrative approach thus raises important questions about our research practices.

Although this metaphorical approach to narrative has found much favour amongst practical theologians, especially amongst pastoral therapists, it has to be pointed out that this is not the only narrative approach in practical theology. The narrative approaches of some practical theologians are much closer to Hyvärinen's (2006) 'narratological family' than to the metaphorical family. The Dutch theologian Ruard Ganzevoort (1998, 2001; Ganzevoort & Bouwer 2007; Tromp & Ganzevoort 2009) provides some good examples of using narrative research, in particular biographical and life narrative research, in practical theology.<sup>25</sup> The divide between the 'metaphorical' and 'narratological' families that Hyvärinen (2006) describes is thus also present in practical theology.

Müller's narrative approach is an example of an approach that favours concrete experience over generalisation, the local over the global, the particular over the abstract, 'lived experience' over 'high theory' (Graham 2012:198). The divide between those who favour the 'immediacy of praxis' and those who prefer a more 'systematized, analytical mode' (Graham 2012:198, with reference to Miller-McLemore) is an enduring and striking feature of practical theological discussions. This divide is also clearly evident in many of the chapters on method in the *Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology* (Miller-McLemore 2012). Schipani (2012:99) refers, for example, to the 'tension between particular reality and generalization' and Ganzevoort (2012:215) distinguishes between those who aim for 'general, objective, and absolute knowledge' and those who 'develop local, particular, and in a certain sense subjective understandings'. The division is perhaps most clearly visible in Walton's (2012) chapter on poetics, in which she discusses the importance of poetics, aesthetic reasoning, 'praxis-based theologies' and prophetic modes of reflection and states that 'recently there have been an increasing number of voices warning against an over-reliance upon epistemological traditions that focus our vision upon what can be conceptually objectified and reasonably analyzed ...' (Walton 2012:174). Her discussion on the poetics of church, practice and testimony strongly resonates with Müller's narrative practical theology.

25. It is therefore unsurprising that he presents a narrative model with six dimensions (structure, perspective, tone, role assignment, relational positioning and justification for an audience) that could be used 'to observe and analyze the narrative process' in the chapter on narrative approaches in practical theology in the section on methods in the influential *Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology* (Ganzevoort 2012:220–221).

Other practical theologians, in turn, warn against the dangers of privileging the 'immediacy of praxis' over the 'systematized, analytical mode' (Graham 2012:198). Schilderman (2012:130) reminds us that it is 'one thing to highlight the significance of experience for theology and quite another to draw scientific inferences from this insight'.<sup>26</sup> Nieman (2012:136–137, 139) in similar fashion warns against 'an overly individualistic treatment of religious practices', 'the presentist and localist tendencies in practical theological scholarship' and 'methodological naïveté in its study of living human situations, one that relies too much on personal biases, hunches, and anecdotes'. Nieman (2012) concludes:

Critically testing our work by following disciplined procedures, triangulating the methods used, and rigorously questioning the results garners greater credibility and value for what we do, without pandering to a crude scientism or diverting from the transformative aims upheld by many practical theologians. (p. 139)

## Conclusion

### Is there a way forward?

The discussion of Müller's narrative approach thus reveals some of the key tensions in practical theological methodology. His metaphorical narrative approach, as a representative of the poetic pole in the methodological debate, helps to guard practical theology from losing its transformative orientation and its vital connection with religious practice. However, his preference for the 'immediacy of practice', his rejection of theory and his reluctance to use analytical procedures for data construction and analysis raise serious questions regarding the contribution of such a narrative approach to a 'full-grown theological discipline that is academically integrated in the scientific framework of the university' (Schilderman 2012:131).

How do we deal with these different paradigms and approaches in practical theology? Is there a way forward? In a previous article (Dreyer 2012), I discussed three different responses to intradisciplinary diversity, namely unitary, pluralist and dialogic pluralist. I argued that a dialogic pluralist response to intradisciplinary diversity implies that diversity is neither viewed as a stumbling block on the way to disciplinary integration (a unitary response), nor just passively accepted and tolerated (a pluralist response), but seen as an opportunity for 'productive intellectual dialogue' as Joas (2004:308) describes it. Such a dialogic pluralist approach to intradisciplinary diversity requires that we enter into a dialogue with other approaches, practices and discourses. This entails, I concluded, that we do not only need to respect the variety of approaches, but that we have to learn to listen to and learn from everyone who joins the conversation. Practical theologians could, by reaching across the divide of the 'metaphorical' and 'narratological' families, by truly listening to and learning from each other in a critical dialogue, learn to steer between the Scylla of an one-sidedly

scientific practical theology and the Charybdis of the triumph of the immediacy of praxis. I am convinced that Müller, in the spirit of dialogical pluralism, will also affirm this.<sup>27</sup>

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27. Müller (2013:4), in a similar spirit, writes: 'Different contexts and fields of research ask for different approaches. The result is a practical theological approach that does not look the same everywhere. Sometimes it is similar in nature and methodology to the quantitative and qualitative methodology of the social sciences. At other times, it is narrative in nature and more oriented towards the arts.'

26. 'Who vouches for the validity of empirical facts – the wholeheartedly involved participant of the professionally disengaged theorist?' (Schilderman 2012:126).



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