



Research Article

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Exploring Ethical Potentials of Christian Narrative Testimonies

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2024-0015>

received February 26, 2024; accepted June 24, 2024

Abstract: Over the last decades, the role of narratives in Christian theology and ethics has been debated controversially. In light of this, this article explores the ethical potential of Christian narrative testimonies. First, it shows that the mode of Christian testimony to God's incarnation in Jesus Christ is narratively structured. Second, it unfolds a threefold hermeneutic of these narratives: a hermeneutic of the simultaneous presence and absence of God in these testimonies, a hermeneutic of commentary and criticism, and a hermeneutic of attentive humility in the face of other narratives. Last but not least, ethical potentials of Christian narrative testimonies come into view: These narratives can bear witness to God's absent presence, especially when they reveal themselves as radical contingent, when they are open to transformation by narratives of the other and when they motivate people to question the *status quo* of any given society in order to act for a more just future.

Keywords: narrative theology, narrative ethics, Christ event, radical contingency, hermeneutic of the present-absent God, hermeneutic of commentary and criticism, hermeneutic of attentive humility

1 Introduction

At least since the 1970s the category of narrative has received much attention in Christian theology and ethics. The emergence of narrative ethics is closely linked with the endeavor of narrative theology. There are many shapes and forms of narrative theology, but they share a common thread: the idea that people give God, their surroundings, and themselves a narrative meaning.¹

In the German-speaking context, the project of narrative theology is linked with the names of Dietrich Ritschl, Harald Weinrich, or Johann Baptist Metz. Their work focused on the question of how narrative could enrich or confront doctrinal, academic theology. Since 1973 the Catholic theologian Metz argued that systematic theology had the task of explaining God and his revelation in an understandable way and in relation to biography, experience, and history. Metz's narrative approach is one sub-aspect of his political theology program. For Metz, the narrative was a form of God's speech that relates to lived experience, especially in the face of unatoned suffering. Metz represents a strong approach to narrative theology. He sees narration not only as one way of speaking about God among others, but as a potential and corrective for academic theological discourse.² Metz placed narrative at the service of the "dangerous" memory of theology after Auschwitz. For Metz, telling the story of the Christ event means refusing to remain passive in the face of

¹ For example, Klaasen, "Practical Theology and Narrative," 460.

² For example, Metz, "Kleine Apologie des Erzählens," 337–9.

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human suffering. According to Metz, people who narratively remember the Christ event are embedded in a specific storytelling community – the Church. Through interpretation and reflection narrators come into a relationship with their self-narrations and the narrations of others as well as with the painful and liberating memories these narratives entail. The memory of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection, is, for Metz, a “[...] reflection about concrete human suffering which is the point at which the proclamation of the new and essentially human way of life ... can be in.”³ According to Metz, this reflection allows anamnestic solidarity for the other. For Metz, such anamnestic solidarity must exist universally, encompassing the distant other, those whose victimization and suffering have yet gone unanswered and the dead. Anamnestic solidarity therefore entails “[...] the solidaristic hope in the God of the living and the dead who calls all persons to be subjects in God’s presence”⁴ as well as the on-going memory of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection.

While Metz argued from a Catholic background, the so-called Yale approach to narrative theology is closely connected with the names of the protestant theologians Hans Frei or James McClendon Jr and especially with Stanley Hauerwas. Embedded in the American context, the main focus for these theologians was the relevance of understanding reality through narrative in regard to a substantial relationship with God. More than Metz, Hauerwas focuses on the identity-forming power of narratives.⁵

Stanley Hauerwas is also the main proponent of an ethics that sees narrative at the center of character formation and moral actions. For him, narrative ethics is a much-needed alternative to principle ethics. He is thus being critical of the Kantian categorical approach to ethics.⁶ According to Hauerwas, narratives give orientation not in regard to what we should do but in regard to who we should be or become. Accordingly, the decisions people make and their dealing with moral issues ultimately depend on the character they possess. Character formation, for Hauerwas, takes place within particular historical communities and is shaped by their narratives.⁷ In Hauerwas’ view, the specific Christian’s community narrative is constituted by God’s calling of Israel, the Christ event, and the life of the church.⁸

Hauerwas’ strong model of narrative ethics has received both approval and criticism. His criticism usually pleads for a more nuanced approach to narrative ethics. Thus, narratives cannot substitute ethical discourse, but are nevertheless important for such discourse.⁹

One of the most prominent nuanced narrative ethicists in the German-speaking tradition is the Catholic moral theologian Dietmar Mieth. At a time when Metz and others argued for a greater consideration of the narrative roots of theology and referred more consciously to the Judeo-Christian narrative tradition, Mieth unfolded a hermeneutical and experience-related approach to narrative ethics. For Mieth, the theological–ethical relevance of the narrative is primarily based on the power of the concrete individual narrative, the basic experiences that precede all values and norms and without which theology and theological ethics would not be themselves.¹⁰ As an ethics of the model of narrative ethics attempts then to take people seriously and their sometimes strange or bewildering reality. In this view, ethics is not based only on rational concepts or deductive arguments, but it rather must remain connected to emotions, feelings, and sensations.¹¹ The model function of literary and other narratives is central for Mieth as people can use such models to reflect on, test, confirm, and change their attitudes and convictions.¹² In doing so, they might experience contrast which makes them critically reflect on their own living conditions, values, and ways of life by comparing them with other, often contrary, ways of life or situations. They also might experience the meaning of a profound,

³ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵ For example, Sandler, “Narrative Ethik und Dramatische Theologie.”

⁶ For example, Klaasen, “Practical Theology and Narrative,” 461.

⁷ For example, Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*.

⁸ For example, Pallonil, *Christian Ethics between Withdrawal and Assimilation*, 28–9.

⁹ For example, Haker, “Narrative Bioethics,” 370.

¹⁰ For example, Horlacher, “Erzählungen und ethische Bildung,” 173–5.

¹¹ For example, Haker, “Narrative Bioethics,” 357–8.

¹² For example, Mieth, *Moral und Erfahrung I*, 135–53.

personal experience discovering or learning a deeper meaning in life or in certain life situations.¹³ According to Mieth, “[...] experience in this sense contains motivation to practice, which is not easily dismissed by the subject of experience [...]”¹⁴

Mieth’s approach to narrative ethics has been taken up and further developed by thinkers such as Marcus Düwell, Walter Lesch, or Hille Haker. Haker, who teaches theological ethics at Loyola University Chicago, defines narrative ethics as “ethics that reflects on the hermeneutic, identity-theoretical and narrative-theoretical implications of lived and narrated morality as well as ethics itself with a view to its very own issues of ‘good and right’.”¹⁵ In the context of narrative-ethical reflection, according to Haker, it is about “[...] amplifying the voice of another, experiential reality.”¹⁶ In this amplification process, people come into contact with narratively mediated experiences that relate to their life reality to a greater or lesser extent and are thus confronted with their own explicit or implicit ethics. Against this background, the task of narrative ethics is, on the one hand, the interpretative commentary of narratives and, on the other hand, the critical reflection on the morals inherent and portrayed in them.¹⁷ In addition to reflecting on reasons and motivations for action, narrative ethics, according to Haker, also reflects on the narrative structure of identity, which is both constituted and continuously reconstructed in narratives.¹⁸

Already this brief, by no means exhaustive, overview highlights that the narrative turn in theology and ethics is embedded in a wider discourse on the importance of lived experiences for identity, the relation between experience and ethics, the tension between rational and nonrational interpretative traditions, the relevance of the relative in face of universal moral adoption,¹⁹ the inherent multiplicity of “God-talk,” or the crisis of religious language in phase in which narratives or forms of storytelling seem to lose their dominant role in society or at least undergo significant change.²⁰

The overview also highlights features that are often regarded as important for narrative ethical approaches. The most fundamental idea is that narratives have ethical potential and can either replace or enrich principle ethics. Narratives are also seen as a way of relating ethical discourse to the morally relevant experiences of the narrative self and its convictions and values. There is also a shared conviction that people construct their identity narratively, making narrative sense of themselves or building their character through narratives. The “voices of another experiential reality” (Haker) as represented in literary narratives (Mieth, Haker), “the memoria passionis and resurrectionis” (Metz) as well as collective narratives such as the Christian’s community narrative (Hauerwas), are interpreted as a critical ethical corrective for individual narrative life stories. The narrative of the other is also seen as a call into solidary action for the other (Mieth, Haker), e.g., a call for “anamnetic solidarity” (Metz).

In the following, I will argue that the mode of Christian testimony to God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ is narratively structured. Second, I will unfold a threefold hermeneutic of these narratives: a hermeneutic of the simultaneous presence and absence of God in these testimonies, a hermeneutic of commentary and criticism, and a hermeneutic of attentive humility in face of other narratives. This threefold hermeneutic also exposes ethical potentials of Christian narrative testimonies: Christian narrative testimonies are able to bear witness to God’s absent presence, especially when they reveal themselves as radical contingent, when they are open to transformation by narratives of the other and when they motivate people to question and transcend the *status quo* of any given society in order to envision and act for a more just future.

¹³ Ibid., 142–5.

¹⁴ Mieth, “Sozialethik als Hermeneutische Ethik,” 223.

¹⁵ Haker, “Identität erzählen,” 331.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For example, Haker, *Moralische Identität*, 270–1.

¹⁸ For example, Haker, “Identität erzählen,” 331–2.

¹⁹ For example, Klaasen, “Practical Theology and Narrative,” 457.

²⁰ For example, Mauz, “Theology and Narration,” 262 and 265.

2 The Narrative Heart of Christianity

The whole bible entails diverse narrative testimonies to human experiences with God's self-disclosure.²¹ The sentences of the Decalogue begin with narration and remembrance: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery" (Ex 20:2). To separate the ten commandments from their narrative embedment would mean that their specific function and intention would no longer be recognizable.²² Biblical narratives also reflect upon the question of how to act in response to God's liberating actions. For example, the ban on oppressing a stranger is itself justified with a reminder of the Exodus narrative: "You shall not oppress the stranger. You yourselves know how the stranger feels, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Ex 23:9). Here, the memory of the Exodus experience serves to build a narrative identity that is not too sure of itself, but leaves room for the other.²³ Throughout the Bible narrating one's self is revealed as relevant to a relationship with God: "I tell you my ways, and you hear me." (Ps 119, 26). God appears here as a listener, an answer giver, and the addressee of one's own life narrative with its highlights and failures. The impulse for orientation comes from revealing one's own way of life to God: "[...] teach me your statutes." (Ps 119,26).

One could also say: all through the Bible it is people with whom God tells his stories of liberation and salvation. His stories are alive. They are able to transform people.²⁴

The same is true for the Second Testament. The story of Christ is – from a Christian point of view – embedded in God's story with Israel: The Gospel tells, unfolds, and testifies God's free decision of love to become man in Jesus Christ and tells stories about Jesus Christ who himself narrates.²⁵ The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates that Jesus does not want to teach love of neighbor as an abstract concept. Rather, he wants to involve his listener by telling a story. It seems that the question "Who is my neighbor?" cannot be solved without recourse to a narrative. What is decisive in Jesus's narrative is the shift from a need to define an act of identification: Instead of answering the need to define who one's neighbor is, Jesus, by telling a story, asks back to the scribe and to us: "Who of these three do you think was the neighbor of the one who fell among the robbers?"²⁶ Jesus told the story in such a way that it changed something. It is impossible to say what he meant without retelling the parable. For Mieth, therein lies the indispensability of narrative in ethics. For him, the parable of the good Samaritan and its re-telling is convincing due to the concrete testimony of the model of action it contains. The parable is able to conquer and change people precisely because it involves them directly through their imagination and not more abstractly by a chain of arguments.²⁷

Many Christians took and still take part in the act of re-telling and giving narrative testimony. In their own testimonies, they tell their experiences with God's story and of their experiences with reconciliation, forgiveness, redemption, conversion, vocation..., in short: of the Christian faith that proves itself in deeds of love. They unfold their own life story in relation to their experiences with God's story.²⁸

Yet, Paul Lauritzen wonders, what the relation between such narrative testimonies and the truthfulness of Christian convictions is.²⁹ He unfolds his concern for truth in discussion with Hauerwas and Metz. As he illustrates, Metz and Hauerwas meet in their particular emphasis on the practical consequences of the "dangerous" memory of the Christ event. Both also insist that diaconia must be informed by the imitation of Jesus Christ in accordance with the biblical narratives.³⁰ However, if we take a closer look at the consequences Metz and Hauerwas draw from this common ground, according to Lauritzen, "[...] we may feel that

²¹ For example, Schneider-Flume, "Dogmatik erzählen?," 4.

²² For example, Hofheinz, "Ethik erzählen?," 3.

²³ For example, Bachmann, "Ein Ethos des Singulären," 85.

²⁴ For example, Schneider-Flume, "Dogmatik erzählen?," 4.

²⁵ For example, Wendel Niehl, "Erzählen," 11.

²⁶ For example, Bachmann, "Ein Ethos des Singulären," 87–8.

²⁷ For example, Mieth, *Moral und Erfahrung I*, 94–5.

²⁸ For example, Peetz, *Erzählte Versöhnung*, 119–99.

²⁹ For example, Lauritzen, "Narrative in Metz and Hauerwas," 338.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 336.

they are reading different stories.”³¹ On the one side, Metz argues for Jesus narratives calling us for anamnetic solidarity with the oppressed and near revolutionary social–political action, on the other side, Hauerwas insists on a life of pacifistic witness.³² The finding that Metz and Hauerwas differ so much when it comes to the point of drawing normatively relevant conclusions from their engagement with the category of narrative, is, for Lauritzen, problematic:

For if the truthfulness of the Christian story is to be judged by its practical consequences, and these consequences are as varied as Hauerwas and Metz’s writings would suggest, how does an appeal to narrative establish the truthfulness of Christian convictions, even on pragmatic ground?³³

Apart from the problem of truth, another problem for Lauritzen arises from what he sees as preference for narrative over argument: “[...] what do we do when our stories conflict? Or again: if two interpretations of the same story diverge, how do we resolve this conflict?”³⁴

3 Hermeneutics of Christian Narrative Testimonies

In response to the issues Paul Lauritzen brings forward, I would like to illustrate a threefold hermeneutic of Christian narrative testimonies:

- a. A hermeneutic of the simultaneous presence and absence of God in Christian narrative testimonies.
- b. A hermeneutic that allows for commentary as well as criticism of Christian narrative testimonies.
- c. A hermeneutic of attentive humility in the encounter with other narrative testimonies.

In the following, I will unfold these hermeneutical perspectives in more detail.

3.1 Hermeneutic of the Present–Absent God in Christian Narrative Testimonies

Referring to Paul Ricœur, Michel Foucault, and Michel de Certeau, intercultural theologian Judith Gruber argues that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as the foundational event of Christian theology suggests a radically hermeneutical approach. In her book *Intercultural Theology – Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural turn*, Gruber reflects “how, in light of the unavoidable contingency of its testimony, the universality of the Christ event [can] be described and theologically accounted for within the interpretative space of the church?”³⁵ Taking up Ricœur, Gruber describes testimony as an interpretative endeavor that is in connection to a concrete, historical event. According to Gruber it is impossible to separate the person who witnesses from his or her testimony and it is impossible to replace a witness in the testimony with another person. At the same time, every testimony implies an immediate coincidence between the event and its meaning which, for Gruber, already contains an interpretation leading to an irreducible hermeneutical rupture. “The unity of the event and its meaning, which characterizes the testimony, implies an inevitable elusiveness.”³⁶ Gruber follows Foucault’s insight that the perception of a specific configuration as an event is already an interpretative process. Therefore, any event and especially the event of God becoming man in Jesus Christ is not determined but only emerges from its interpretations.³⁷

³¹ Lauritzen, “Narrative in Metz and Hauerwas,” 336.

³² For example, Lauritzen, “Narrative in Metz and Hauerwas,” 336.

³³ Lauritzen, “Narrative in Metz and Hauerwas,” 338–9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 339.

³⁵ Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁷ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 82–8.

[...] the event ... is constituted in its meanings. The event does not offer any place of presence but refers in its meanings to the presence of meaning in the mode of hermeneutical brokenness – as an interpretative elusiveness.... the revelation of God's presence emerges from the hermeneutical rupture that constitutes the event of God's revelation. As a historical event, God's self-revelation is tied inseparably to its effacement.³⁸

From a deconstructive and radically hermeneutical point of view, narratives, *including their truth* claims, are therefore inevitably particular.³⁹ All Christian narrative testimonies are fragile and contingent⁴⁰ because they are linked to an event that in itself is radically contingent: the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁴¹ Therefore, narrative testimonies relating to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ can only claim truthfulness, if they make God “[...] present in the mode of effacement.”⁴² In other words, they can claim to be a truthful testimony of God's incarnation in Christ if they ascribe meaning to God's simultaneous presence–absence while at the same time they reveal and not conceal their radical contingency and fragility. By consequence, there will be a continuous multitude of different, possibly even conflicting, narratives that witness God's absent presence and there will be the need to resist the temptation of replacing those narratives with the absolutization of one particular, hegemonic testimony.⁴³ The testimonial capacity witnessing God's absent presence and revealing the radical contingency and fragility, for me, therefore, is a distinct ethical potential of Christian narratives.⁴⁴

So, as I understand it, Lauritzen's question: “if two interpretations of the same story diverge, how do we resolve this conflict?”⁴⁵ would be answered by a radical hermeneutical approach and specifically in regard to Christian narrative testimonies as follows: To resolve this conflict would mean to know what the “essence” of these Christian narrative testimonies really is. Yet, their essence remains elusive and “[...] is a matter of negotiation between its many interpretations, while none of them can ever claim to be or have the one absolute [...]”⁴⁶ narrative. Part of this negotiation process is, for me, the diverse practical consequences Metz and Hauerwas suggest. While the conflictive plurality of narrative testimonies to the Christ event is irreducible, this circumstance does not make the search for normative criteria obsolete⁴⁷: “There is thus not one single Christian witness but a (conflictive) plurality of testimonies that, in turn, all call for an evaluation of their validity.”⁴⁸

3.2 Hermeneutic of Commentary and Criticism

With a view to the search for normative criteria and validity, I would also like to challenge Lauritzen's assumption that an ethics that places narrative at its center implicates a “preference for narrative over argument.” After all, a narrative ethical approach is not simply about telling or re-telling stories, but about reflecting on them and making their normative potential intersubjectively debatable.⁴⁹ Narrative ethics also focuses on the relevance of these narratives for the moral life and actions of those who give these testimonies. In this regard Haker argues for a close connection of narration, life story, and identity construction. In the course of the narration of their life story, people construct their identity. For instance, they might place

³⁸ Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 89.

³⁹ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴² Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 89.

⁴³ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 120.

⁴⁴ For example, Kearney and Williams, “Narrative and Ethics,” 45.

⁴⁵ Lauritzen, “Narrative in Metz and Hauerwas,” 339.

⁴⁶ Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 26.

⁴⁷ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 44.

⁴⁸ Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 119.

⁴⁹ For example, Phelan, “Narrative Ethics,” 531.

themselves in a relation to God's story with creation and mankind. Albeit narrating one's own identity is for Haker a multifold configuration process that can never be complete due to its inherent narrative structure. She therefore speaks of the necessity to keep open the question of one's own identity, while at the same time there is always the struggle and wish to define narratively the moral (or religious) self.⁵⁰

While Gruber points to the radical contingency of the event to which Christian narrative testimonies refer, which leads to a conflict-laden plurality of these testimonies, Haker shows that such a possibly conflict-laden plurality is also inherent in the narratively structured identity construction processes of those who narratively bear witness to the Christ event. A hermeneutic that, from my perspective, does justice to these various and irreducible tensions is a hermeneutic of continuous commentary and criticism (Haker) of Christian narrative testimonies.⁵¹

The task of commenting on Christian narrative testimonies would be to uncover the ethical content of these plural and conflicting testimonies with the help of a text-immanent interpretation in order to describe it with an ethically versed terminology.⁵² Such an ethical commentary does not claim to be the only possible interpretation. However, it assumes that there are different dimensions of the testimonies that can be brought to light. It is important – so Haker – to enter into a debate with these different dimensions of the testimonies. For Haker, ethical commentary is never neutral or without context. Rather, here she takes up Martha Nussbaum, an ethical commentary aims at the question of the extent to which ideas of the good and right life appear explicitly or implicitly in testimonies of the Christ event. The ethical commentary will, according to Haker, work out the options and alternatives that emerge in narratives, including Christian narrative testimonies, and the tension between individual drafts.⁵³ For Haker, formal aspects also play an important role here, such as the question of who is speaking. In her opinion, narratives expose ethical aspects through the way they are presented. For instance, does a narrative testimony to the Christ event claim to be the only true testimony or does the knowledge of the fragility and contingency of one's own testimony shine through?⁵⁴

As the ethical commentary does not say anything about the validity of the text-immanent claims, critical judgement is also necessary. According to Haker, ethical criticism illuminates the value systems, dilemmas, and conflicts presented in narratives and confronts them with theoretical knowledge. It will also feed the narrative-immanent answers to the question of the good life into ethical theory formation.⁵⁵ This takes seriously the potential of narratives to stimulate moral imagination⁵⁶ and their ability to address aspects that remain underexposed in ethical theorizing, such as the role of morally relevant emotions.⁵⁷

On the most fundamental level ethical criticism brings into relation the narrative-immanent validity claims for one's own life or a whole community such as the Church with the question of whether these validity claims are fruitful or destructive for other life plans.⁵⁸ The guiding normative perspective of such ethical criticism is the search for “[...] a good life lived with and for others in just institutions.”⁵⁹ For instance, the enforcement of one hegemonic Christian narrative testimony would rid this testimony of its ambiguities in order to construct universal homogeneity. According to Gruber such a procedure “[...] removes the other within, it mutes divergent voices and makes internal conflicts invisible.”⁶⁰

A hermeneutic of continuous commentary and criticism therefore answers the call for an evaluation of the validity of Christian narrative testimonies. Without denying the conflictual plurality of these testimonies or

⁵⁰ Haker, “Identität erzählen,” 335.

⁵¹ For example, Haker, *Moralische Identität*, 270–1.

⁵² Haker, “Towards a Decolonial Narrative Ethics,” 12.

⁵³ For example, Haker, *Moralische Identität*, 174–5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 176–7.

⁵⁶ For example, Lesch, “Hermeneutische Ethik/Narrative Ethik,” 237–8.

⁵⁷ For example, Haker, *Moralische Identität*, 177.

⁵⁸ Haker, *Moralische Identität*, 270–1.

⁵⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

⁶⁰ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 128.

concealing their particularity, it questions and evaluates them in regard to their potential for the other and therefore in view of their contribution to seeking a good and just life for all.

3.3 Hermeneutic of Attentive Humility in Regard to Narratives of the Other

Throughout the history of narrative testimonies to the Christ event, the temptation to bring forward one hegemonic meta-narrative has always been present. Many narrative testimonies to the Christ event aimed at the exclusion and degradation of others. A famous example is the narrative of an allegedly Aryan Christ that German Catholic and Protestant theologians used in order to construct an antisemitic image of God incarnate.⁶¹ Another relevant example is the relationship between colonialism and Christian mission. More often than not the missionary work of the Church promoted internal colonization, spiritual submissiveness,⁶² and theological racism.⁶³ Colonial narrative testimonies to the Christ event regularly served the interests of colonial powers, expressing, according to Metz, a hermeneutic of domination, “[...] but not a hermeneutic of acknowledgment that is alien to all violence, every ‘will to power’ in the recognition of the others in their otherness.”⁶⁴ Colonialism, including, missionary colonialism, is as Haker aptly puts it, constituted only by conditional recognition and not by moral or mutual recognition.⁶⁵ Metz, Gruber, and Haker meet in the assessment that the colonial hermeneutics that shaped missionary theology and practice prevented “responsoric encounters of alienness”⁶⁶ that would have made people able to be responsible for the other by removing or devaluating internal and external otherness, muting dissenting voices, and concealing internal conflicts.⁶⁷

It is important to note that not only hegemonic narratives, but all narrative testimonies to the Christ event have a particular point of view and pursue certain goals and interests: “[...] Every narrative contains a masked will-to-power.”⁶⁸ Narratives are never neutral, contextless, or innocent. Haker as well as Kearney and Williams therefore insist on the necessity to apply criticism of ideology to all individual and collective narratives.⁶⁹ Such ideology criticism is sensible to perspectives of hegemonic power, oppression, humiliation, or dehumanization that are implicitly or explicitly inherent in narrative testimonies. Within a postcolonial framework ideology criticism aims at the deabsolutization of hegemonic power. Such deabsolutizing strategy not only resurfaces excluded and forgotten narrative testimonies on a descriptive level, “[...] but also simultaneously grants them (normatively) a right to exist because deabsolutization questions and subverts the epistemopolitical preconditions of hegemonic power.”⁷⁰ The ethical–critical purpose of these subversive narratives is then that they “[...] brush history against the grain and put the dominant power in question.”⁷¹ Crucial here, for Gruber, is not necessarily the specific content of a subversive narrative, but the act of subversion in itself.⁷²

From a narrative ethical point of view (subversive), narratives of the other have the ability to disclose normatively relevant dimensions of otherness to the self. If a person opens up for the unfamiliar worlds of others, be it fictional or real, others according to Kearney and Williams, his or her ego can transform into a representative subject.⁷³ The path to a representative self leads through “responsoric encounters of

⁶¹ For example, Leutzsch, “Der Mythos vom arischen Jesus.”

⁶² For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 128.

⁶³ For example, Haker, “Towards a Decolonial Narrative Ethics,” 13.

⁶⁴ Metz, “So viele Antlitze, so viele Fragen,” 61.

⁶⁵ Haker, “Towards a Decolonial Narrative Ethics,” 8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁷ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 128.

⁶⁸ Kearney and Williams, “Narrative and Ethics,” 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁰ Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 60.

⁷¹ For example, Kearney and Williams, “Narrative and Ethics,” 40.

⁷² For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 60.

⁷³ For example, Kearney and Williams, “Narrative and Ethics,” 34–5.

alienness.”⁷⁴ Haker refers here to the phenomenology of Bernhard Waldenfels and his notion of a diastasis “[...] between the passive experience and the re-action [...]”⁷⁵ that creates an insurmountable postponement in the act of experiencing, re-interpreting, precepting, and encountering the alien other and the alien in oneself. Yet, such diastasis also opens up room for the self to narratively imagine different selves and to flow from itself toward others to return to itself enlarged and enhanced as Kearney and Williams understand it. They see representative thinking as a precondition for “[...] the empathic capacity to identify with those different to us (victims and exemplars alike).”⁷⁶

From an ethical point of view, witnessing the Christ event therefore first requires a fundamental willingness to engage with every other narrative and all relevant questions.⁷⁷ However, approaching the narratives of others with an attitude of humility and openness does not mean not being critical. A limit may be reached, which then requires critical resistance despite the fundamental willingness to listen to the narrative testimonies of every other person. The will-to-power inherent in every narrative might lead to giving in into the temptation of establishing one particular and concealing internal and external contingency and particularity. Narrative testimonies might also pretend to represent an absolute truth or to be in possession of God’s presence.⁷⁸ They might also devaluate or dehumanize others.

Yet, the narratives of the other, especially when they highlight the agency and narrating ability of subaltern people in non-Western contexts,⁷⁹ are from a narrative ethics point of view an important possibility for the testifying self to develop and engage in representative thinking⁸⁰ and narrative imagination. Such processes of the other “open up alternative ways of being” and “constantly transcend the *status quo* of any given society towards possible alternatives” sustaining “a sense of ethical empathy with, and attentiveness to, others.”⁸¹ It is here where narrative ethical and narrative theological reflection meet. For Metz, narrative testimonies that keep open the dangerous memory of the death on the crucifixion, the death and resurrection of Jesus, are testimonies that motivate people to rebel against unjust conditions, while at the same time allowing the visionary hope of a world-yet-to-be to shine through in which God will make the victims just and transform injustice into justice. In his particular interpretation of “God’s universal offer of salvation, made flesh in Jesus Christ,”⁸² Metz unfolds Gott as “the end that comes to time, the end that limits it”⁸³ and as “[...] the one who does not leave the past alone,”⁸⁴ from whom even past injustice and suffering are not safe.

4 Conclusion

Looking at the narrative heart of Christianity, an ambivalence within it can be recognized – the result not only of an unequal struggle between hegemonic and subversive narratives, but also of the relation of these irreducibly particular narratives to their radically contingent founding event, God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ.⁸⁵ A hermeneutic of these narratives is one of revealing and keeping open the absent presence of God and one of revealing their particularity and contingency. It also emphasizes that their inherent deep ambivalence makes the search for normative criteria and the evaluation of validity and truth claims both

⁷⁴ Haker, “Towards a Decolonial Narrative Ethics,” 14.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁶ Kearney and Williams, “Narrative and Ethics,” 39–40.

⁷⁷ For example, Sandler, “Ethik und Dramatische Theologie,” 161–87.

⁷⁸ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 89.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.y.

⁸⁰ Kearney and Williams, “Narrative and Ethics,” 39–40.

⁸¹ For example, Kearney and Williams, “Narrative and Ethics,” 39–40. Likewise Haker, *Moralische Identität*, 339.

⁸² Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 80.

⁸³ Metz, *Memoria Passionis*, 42.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸⁵ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 164.

complex and indispensable. Seeking a normative evaluation of narrative testimonies to the Christ event, a continuous circle of commentary and criticism entails a context- and person-sensible approach, while at the same time offering a distinct ethical positionality that is oriented toward the idea of the good life for all in a more just society.

In regard to the person giving narrative testimonies to the Christ event the narratives of the other are central. First of all, this applies to the contribution of the other narratives to the necessary process of understanding “oneself as another” (Ricoeur). Yet, the complex relation between narrative and identity construction could only be hinted at here.⁸⁶ The engagement with the narrative of the other indicates various ethical potentials: From the encounter between the self’s narrative testimonies and the individual as well as collective narratives of the other, “responsory attentiveness” (Haker), “empathetic identification” (Kearney and Williams), and “anamnetic solidarity”(Metz) for the other can emerge. Such encounters might also reveal alternative visions and ways of being thus motivating people giving narrative testimony to the Christ event to act for a more just society. They also might lead to a subversion of hegemoniality making forgotten traditions, practices, and discourses “[...] visible – *and, therefore, possible.*”⁸⁷ Yet, in these encounters a limit may be reached, which then requires critical resistance despite the fundamental willingness to listen to the narrative testimonies of every other person. This is for me the case when the narratives of the others do not resist the temptation of establishing one particular, hegemonic testimony, do not unmask their implicit will-to-power, conceal their particularity and contingency, devalue or dehumanize others, pretend to be in possession of the truth or claim to provide Christian God-talk with the presence of God.⁸⁸

It remains an on-going challenge to interpret and reflect the constitutive contingency of Christianity theologically as well as ethically.⁸⁹ The access via the exploration of the ethical potential of narrative testimonies to the Christ event is one among many.

Funding information: The author states no funding involved.

Author contribution: The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of interest: The author states no conflict of interest.

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⁸⁶ Haker offers a detailed discussion of this relation in her book “Moralische Identität.”

⁸⁷ Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 60.

⁸⁸ For example, Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 89.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

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