

*Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography.* John Shea. Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1978.

**PREFACE:**

The perennial Christian strategy:

- ◆ Gather the folks;
- ◆ Break the bread;
- ◆ Tell the stories.

**CHAPTER ONE: Exceeding Darkness and Undeserved Light**

Psychiatrist in *Equus*: "I need a way of seeing in the dark."

Human relationships:

- ◆ To self ("I'm learning to live with myself);
- ◆ To Family/friends (intimacy or isolation, love or loneliness);
- ◆ To society/institutions (which are powerfully influential);
- ◆ To the universe (nature).

Experience = the reciprocal flow between the self and its environments.

We interpret what we receive according to the mind's 'symbolic structures,' but we interpret in patterns suggested by environments.

Person = the complex of his/her relationships with self/others/society/universe.

But there is more – another relatedness – a dimension present and available in any environment: MYSTERY.

Everyday awareness: I(1) see a bird(2).

*Sacramental* awareness: I(1) see a bird(2) and in and through this interaction become aware of the dimension of Mystery(3).

Cf. G.M. Hopkins, "The Windhover."

Eliade speaks of religious language having a "double referent" – it refers to both a concrete object and the transcendent dimension which manifests itself through that object – things *mediate* transcendent reality: the thing-become-symbol.

Modern folks tend to be "entrapped in two-point awareness" – neglecting the dimension of Mystery.

But note Einstein: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious side of life. It is the deep feeling which is the cradle of all true art and science. In this sense, and only in this sense, I count myself amongst the most deeply religious people."

Scientific advance historically flowed from a religious attitude and can heighten our sense of Mystery.

But our age is tempted to a secular restriction of consciousness: reductionistic tendency."

*Ways to awareness of Mystery* are myriad – S. Weil: "We travel different paths through the forest but come upon the same clearing."

1. Experience of contingency often carries one into awareness of Mystery. Cf. the opening story of the Dutch Catechism concerning the bird flying into and out of a meeting hall on a winter's night. . . . When we meditate on our coming and going we are forced to ask the meaning of it all and the awareness is upon us.

Sometimes contingency is experienced as positive: "God, it's good to be alive!" (e.g., a mother giving birth).

But there is also the fact of anxiety – death awaits us; all is passing and precarious. We wonder what it all means; the fast answers given by our immediate environments no longer seem seductive.

2. Dialogue and Communion: a sense that the gift of human communion goes beyond itself.  
Cf. Gregory Baum.
3. Collapse: When order crumbles, Mystery rises.
4. A deepened sense of the ambiguity of our moral activity.
5. Disenchantment: e.g., Hopi rites – "the unmasking conclusion shatters this childish faith and pushes the initiate into adult life with a profound religious question."

Something similar has happened in contemporary Catholicism.

Disenchantment is an experience of Mystery reasserting itself, a freeing from idols.

Concerning such triggers of Mystery awareness, cf. Eliot, Berger, Maslow.

#### MYSTERY:

- ◆ In our midst, yet beyond us;
- ◆ Our awareness of Mystery is fleeting and unbidden;
- ◆ Ambiguous;
- ◆ Calls for response.

Facing Mystery, "We gather together and tell stories of God to calm our terror and hold our hope on high."

#### **CHAPTER TWO: World-Making**

There is a compulsive *human drive for meaning*: meaning results from the dialogic interplay of the person and what is encountered (discovery and creativity).

Mystery: meaning of "the whole."

Religion (cf. Clifford Geertz): symbols which account for and even celebrate the darkness and ambiguity.

Meaning is sought even for death.

Breakdown of systems: rejection of “the lust for certitude” (Charles Davis) – “a search for meaning which reverences the richness of experience.”

Meaning ≠ explaining away.

Meaning = “told in such a way that we can relate to it creatively and not succumb to panic and chaos.”

Isak Dinesen: “any sorrow can be borne if a story can be told about it.”

The human need for ultimate meaning generates MYTH.

There is such a thing as ‘the *myth* of evolution,’ as well as ‘the theory of evolution.’

Myth establishes the inner meaning and ultimate values of life situations and so becomes a guide for behavior.

Myth creates world by: (1) structuring consciousness; (2) encouraging attitudes; and (3) suggesting behaviors.

1. Configures experience so that certain elements are highlighted; calls attention to patterns present in encountered reality.

The ultimate home of myths are the primordial situations of human existence.

Myth seeks to become the structure of consciousness through which human situations will be appropriated.

2. To speak a myth is to adopt its attitudes.

To say “God is Creator” is to acknowledge my created/contingent status.

3. Suggestion for a general type of behavior: a broad directionality, not a guide to the complexities of concrete situations.

Myth of a liberating God = working for liberation of the oppressed.

“The working out of mythic demands in the complexities of concrete life is a process of ongoing evaluation and mediation.”

Whenever our biographies are deeply probed, a root metaphor appears, a myth which gives meaning and unity to our lives.

Myths first belong to communities – antedating individuals; it is in the intricate interweaving of community-myth and personal-experience that identity is born.

Both the communal and personal stories are transformed in the mutual process of listening and speaking.

Cf. Wiesel on Isaac (in *Messengers of God*.)

Secularized myths are applicable to certain relationships within human existence, but not to human existence as a whole.

'Constriction' can characterize God-myths as well as secular – this is true when they are about God: up *there*, over *there*, out *there* --- not about humankind.

"As long as the stories of person and God remain exclusive accounts of separated entities, reality is inevitably split and all the energies are spent on building bridges over gulfs that do not exist rather than exploring relationships which d exist."

Dorothy Emmet: When we say that the Lord is a Shepherd we do not mean the Lord himself is a shepherd but that our *relationship* to the Lord is something like that of sheep to shepherd.

Jesus-stories have a triple focus: they are about (1) God and (2) humankind filtered through (3) Jesus.

A mythic story is not one that is looked at but looked *through*.

For stories to function symbolically, there must be an element of SURRENDER.

Cf. Buber's story of a paralyzed Hasid telling a story of the Besht dancing and singing who had to dance to tell the story and thus was healed – he 'surrendered' himself to the frenzy of the story and, in turn, the story gave its healing power to the paralyzed man.

Historical inquiry into Scripture is essential, yet myth is more than history; rational/historical inquiry, however necessary, does not exhaust the mythic story.

The Question: What picture of self, others, nature, history and God does the story convey? – "The kind of world opened up by the text" (Ricoeur) – "...in front of the text."

What primordial human experience grounds the story? – "... behind the text."

In order for the sacred to "flow through" the story, the hearer/reader must give herself/himself to the story.

An ongoing and powerful experience of God generates many stories; but there are 'mega-stories,' patterns which pick up and connect common themes.

### **CHAPTER THREE: A Story of Hope and Justice**

[Rev 21.1-8] – A new heavens and a new earth: this story of hope and justice arises from an assurance that our redemptive relationship with Mystery will triumph.

Stories trigger stories, and their interaction forms a *tradition*.

There are various background stories to this one:

- a. Story of RESCUE (e.g., Dt 26.6-20): an oppressed people cries out to God who hears and delivers them.
- b. Story of COVENANT (e.g., Dt 28 passim): rescue unfolds into a pact.

Two strands of emphasis in this tradition:

- i. Earliest strand details Israel's obligations, but not Yahweh's.
  - ii. Yahweh's commitment is stated in bold images (e.g., 'Noah's rainbow,' the promise to David through Nathan, Abraham's promise).
- c. Story of JUDGMENT: this dual emphasis (above) allowed flexibility of interpretation in the vicissitudes of Israel's history.

In exile, the prophets used both emphases: Israel is being judged, but Yahweh will save (cf. Is 33.22).

Yahweh chooses Assyria for judgment, and Cyrus for salvation.

- d. Story of APOCALYPSE: discouraging events in the post-exilic period led to the foretelling of disaster – it seemed obvious that God's promises to Israel would not be fulfilled within the existing order.

Yahweh is no longer asked to bring political independence, but 'a new heaven and a new earth.'

Apocalypticism is the hope of a world-weary people, too long oppressed, too long denied, too long abandoned.

- e. Story of RESURRECTION: A Christian reconfiguration of the ploy.

'Resurrection' becomes the main metaphor for the disciples' Easter experience: the new age has arrived, but not as expected – it has not come all at once, but it has *begun* in Christ.

- f. Story of PAROUSIA: the Christian lives between the beginning of the new age and its fulfillment.

The tales of rescue/covenant/judgment/apocalypse/resurrection/parousia merge to tell a single story of Hope and Justice.

This story directs attention to the socio-political environment; personal issues are considered in this context. Central themes are "domination" and "justice."

But varying interpretations of this story and its central themes will create varying worlds.

An INTERVENTIONIST Interpretation: emphasizes the distinction between the 'mythical' and 'historical' activity of God – focuses on key moments of God's direct intervention as a separate agent of activity to redirect the course of wayward history.

The key to this interpretation is a definitive future intervention, which impends always on the present – shaping consciousness and directing activity.

This absolute and irrevocable act of God will judge and transform the alignment of the "ins" and "outs" of society.

The 'world' created is one of WAITING. There are many ways of waiting:

- ◆ Longing: attentiveness, poised but passive.
- ◆ Provoking the reluctant God to act: initiating radical change of socio-political conditions, hoping that God will intervene and finish what has been begun.

- ◆ To wait in action: in the present we are called upon to anticipate the ultimate arrival of God by engaging in activity which imitates the life of the coming Kingdom – striving for approximations (proleptic presences) of the future Kingdom.

Such activity does not 'build' the Kingdom; rather the Kingdom is an advent which is imaged but not caused by human activity.

This perspective often leads to *revolutionary* attitudes, rather than gradualist/reformist attitudes.

The story-thus-interpreted does not analyze the present situation and its emerging possibilities but projects a final perfect future against which the present is judged.

'Reversal' is a central theme; the wretchedness of society (its 'Kingdomlessness') is highlighted.

Such emphasis provides an ongoing critique; no socio-political arrangement is ever seen as a final fulfillment: the Kingdom functions as "critical negativity" on all human endeavor.

The world created in the interventionist interpretation is "interim," it is a time between better times – the past (Exodus/Jesus) is idealized and the future turns utopian.

Stress is on the spectacular; word and sacrament are celebrated not for their present nourishment but for their sharpening the taste for the future.

It provides an overall interpretation of history – what appears as 'the waste of history' will have redemptive value when it becomes meaningful in the context of the whole.

This provides hope to the suffering and courage to revolutionaries.

But it also seems to minimize human freedom by declaring it impotent; a deterministic aura pervades the story.

An attitude develops that humankind does not truly own its history but merely rents time from God.

Justice is also pictured abstractly as an absolute future, with the side-effect of making acceptable the sacrifice of present individuals to the possibility of a better future situation.

An INTENTIONAL Interpretation: This approach seeks the 'why of God's activity, its meaning; the story of hope and justice becomes a tale of God's heart, not his hands. What concerns obsess God?

The first *reason* for Israel's rescue is that she was oppressed and exploitation is abhorrent to God (Ex 22.22-23).

Positively, Yahweh rescues Israel because he is faithful to his promises.

Ernst Bloch writes of two hungers:

- i. Desires things that already exist (easily dissolving into greed and misdirecting human potential);

- ii. Desires what does not yet exist (filling people with hope and focusing their energies on the possible futures which entice them).

The commandments of the covenant are born out of the hunger for the possible – a more just world.

The prophets' criticism (Jer 5.1; Hos 4.2) of preoccupation with false gods arises from the fact that such idolatry diverted Israel's attention from the demands of social living.

This also led to criticism of an exclusively cultic understanding of Yahwism (Is 1.10,11,17).

The covenant was the declaration that God could not be worshipped apart from concrete social living and concrete social living could not be just and caring apart from worship of God.

God is compassionate, suffering with and taking unto himself the pain and oppression of every son and daughter. The claims of justice arise from within, from the zone of God in every living thing, from the overwhelming care of the Mystery for all that dwells within it. Justice is the very life of God in man, his redemptive involvement in our pain.

God delivers Israel in the name of justice; he forms a covenant with Israel for the purposes of justice; he judged Israel for its lack of justice.

Apocalyptic visions are products of a "thirst for totality" (W. Beardslee). This expresses itself in *universality*; i.e., God is faithful, not to one nation, but to the "just" of all nations.

"End-time language" also expresses this totality; it refers not so much to a future historical event as it expresses the meaning of Mystery in an escalated/absolutized way.

Apocalypse is the strident yet hopeful proclamation of God's absolute opposition to evil. Thus, Christian hope arises from God's present nature rather than from some future act on his part.

The resurrection twists/intensifies the story (in the intentional interpretation); resurrection functions as *expansion*: Resurrection reflects the same divine drive for justice that energized exodus, covenant, judgment, and apocalypse – what is new is the infinity of this drive and the variety of its manifestations.

Resurrection reaffirms and deepens the impulses of hope and justice.

"Abba:" For Jesus, the reality of God was so close and caring of each person that one could hand life over without fear.

Jesus' death questioned this trust; resurrection affirms God's faithfulness and thus trustworthiness.

'By bursting through death (end), resurrection calls into question the apocalyptic imagination which looked for *the* end; resurrection affirms that there is no end, that

what appears as end opens into new life – all categories are broken and the imagination is restructured.

The transcendence of God is seen to be at the service of concrete situations of justice. The Infinite does not swallow up the finite, but cares for it.

The abundance of God does not disvalue the least which live within him but is the source of their enduring value.

Resurrection transforms 'end-time' into "parousia," when the reality which made itself felt through Jesus will make itself felt through all creation: Mystery cares unsurpassably for all that is creative of life.

Multiplicity of images in the book of Revelation: the story of Parousia is a tale of indeterminacy and its images are the imagination breaking itself before the immensity of God and the possibilities of humankind.

The intentional interpretation creates a world of *engagement*: to tell the story is to struggle in the concrete world of justice and care – we are urged to a compassion rooted in the felt perception of solidarity.

Solidarity: the last truth is a common humanity with a common Mystery.

To labor for justice is to live in compassion.

If resurrection symbolizes the breaking open of the present, to tell a story of hope and justice is to live in a world of inventive possibility with a mission and a hope:

- ◆ *Mission*: to hear the claims of all peoples, respect those claims, and create institutions responsive to those claims.
- ◆ *Hope*: closed futures have a way of opening; the Mystery of novel and inventive impulses which surges through us will fire the imagination of justice and continue to call us beyond exploitation to fidelity.

It is a story of a God, boundless in justice, who will not go away and a people, holding in hope, who will not give up.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: A Story of Trust and Freedom**

[Cf. Phil 2.5-11.]

The disciples' experience of Jesus was too important not to symbolize and too rich to symbolize fully; they used culturally available titles/stories.

They were aware of having experienced the transforming presence of God in Jesus and were led to ask 'who he was.'

Titles suggesting themselves were:

- ◆ Servant of God;



- ◆ Word of God;
- ◆ Son of God.

Such cultural symbols attempted to communicate the experience that to meet Jesus is to encounter God.

But the full meaning of what happened in Jesus goes beyond his personal identity: the good news is not about Jesus but about God and us through Jesus – Jesus is the revelation of the always and everywhere interaction of God, self, and neighbor.

To communicate this, the Jesus-story interacts with other God-stories; through this interaction a new story of God and humankind emerges.

The combination of stories are:

- ◆ Creation;
- ◆ Fall;
- ◆ Incarnation;
- ◆ Crucifixion;
- ◆ Spirit;
- ◆ Church.

When told chronologically, Creation/Incarnation/Spirit appear only as background for Fall/Crucifixion/Church – the resulting world is a place where redeemed sinners gather around the memory of their redemption.

The symbol of sin becomes the controlling factor in this sequential telling; the power of the story thus becomes oppressive.

An alternate way of relating the symbolic components of the story is to connect them in terms of an *inner theological logic* rather than by temporal sequence.

#### CREATION, INCARNATION, AND SPIRIT:

In the mainstream of Old Testament theology, creation appears secondarily as the foundation for God's historical activity of creating the people of Israel.

But another Old Testament strand (e.g., the imposition of the Sabbath on all creation) offers an alternate understanding.

The two Genesis creation accounts have differing theological orientations:

- i. 'P' sets man within the rest of creation, within the context of Sabbath;
- ii. 'J' emphasizes the character and role of man.

By pursuing both these emphases, the story of creation/incarnation/spirit begins to unfold.

The days of creation represent an ordering of importance/purpose: all that is created in days 1-5 are for the purpose of that which was created on day 6; all that is created in days 1-6 is for the purpose of the 7<sup>th</sup> day – the presence of God.

Creation's reason for existing is to enjoy itself and glorify God whose Sabbath presence permeates it with holiness. God's Sabbath presence communicates *dignity* to all creation (Herbert Richardson).

Dignity is a precondition for both tragedy and meaning.

Since God has created the world for holiness (for dignity, worth, and meaning) and all holiness comes from God, he must be personally present in order to effect the world's fulfillment.

Richardson: "The Sabbath. . . the world's aptitude for the incarnation."

A key religious issue is at stake in the traditional dispute between Thomists and Scotists concerning the purpose of the incarnation: If Christ came only because Adam sinned, our response is one of gratitude toward our Redeemer; but if Christ would have come even if Adam had not sinned, our response to him is to welcome a friend.

He came because we were made for him and his presence makes us holy and we delight in ourselves and in him.

Incarnation: We are holy because God is with us.

In incarnation, the Son of God entered into friendship with us; friendship always seems to reach beyond the possible. At the break of death, Jesus sends the Holy *Spirit* to dwell in us, enabling us to maintain communion with him.

The Holy Spirit is one person dwelling in two persons (Christ and us).

Creation makes way for Incarnation and Incarnation unfolds into Spirit. The aim of all three symbols is the sanctification of the world through the presence and indwelling of God. They urge us to dance in the glory of God and through that glory to delight in the dignity of all created things.

In this story, the world is a place of sanctity and reverence, of holiness and wonder, where the relationship to Mystery means the unsurpassable worth of all things; we are encouraged to rest in each other and in God.

'J' creation account (Gn 2) focuses directly on humankind; the imagery of Adam's creation affirms that each breath is the affirmation of the presence of God to human life.

Humankind is both kin and master to all creation. Kinship demands reverence; lordship demands use of the universe to serve the human community ("ecological balance").

The story describes humankind in terms of: interdependency, friendship, sexuality, and healthy community.

The pervasive sense of the story is *entrustment*: humankind is entrusted by God.

Walter Brueggemann argues that 'J' looked at David and wrote of Adam; David's freedom to act in a new and creative way is seen in three incidents:

1. David and Ahimelech: David and his men eat consecrated bread, thus shattering/expanding the prevailing notion of the "holy."
2. Death of the illegitimate son of David and Bathsheba: David fasts and grieves until the child dies, at which time he gets up and eats.

He is unconcerned with conventional taboos; for him faith is about life and about what is possible within the limits of life.

His action is not one of indifference, but of freedom

3. The water from the well at Bethlehem: David does not place himself above his men – water captured at the possible cost of life is for all.

He acts beyond authority and rank

David believed that God believed in him. He celebrates life, takes responsibility, and risks decision; David is what the human person looks like who lives through the breath that God breathes into us.

That Jesus was called "Son of David" indicates that the trust and freedom which marked these Davidic episodes also permeates the story of Jesus.

Jesus recalls the Ahimelech story to counter the Pharisees' objection to his Sabbath corn-picking. This act proclaims a new understanding of the God-person relationship: God is not a law to be obeyed but a presence to be seized and acted upon.

Jesus' freedom concerning death: knowing that his words marked him for a violent end, Jesus chose death rather than abandon his commitment to the Kingdom.

Insight: life can only be enjoyed when it is not clung to.

Jesus washing the disciples feet (Jn 13.3-5) demonstrates care going beyond ego and rank.

The Lord's Spirit is the Spirit of freedom: *from* bondage to the law and the flesh, *for* a way of creatively belonging to each other.

The law and the flesh are symbols of self-preoccupation; the Spirit brings freedom from self-preoccupation by establishing humankind as the trusted creature.

The Spirit creates consciousness that our self-worth is a gift of God.

This frees us from self-justification before the law and from that anxiety expressed in endless devotion to the ways of the flesh.

The Spirit frees us to bind ourselves to each other in faith, hope, and love and so become the community who, when asked its identity, tells the story of Creation, Incarnation, and Spirit.

The Spirit's gifts (1 Cor 12.8-11) are blessings for the building up of the community; the fruits (Gal 5.22) are qualities that characterize the common life of the Church.

This story is incomplete with Fall/Crucifixion/Church; but this 'story within a story' does not being contradiction but explosion: the larger story is shattered and then painfully pieced back together.

#### FALL, CRUCIFIXION, AND CHURCH:

It is widely recognized that there is "something wrong" at the core of man; our real predicament is deeper than the oppressions of universe/society/others.

The fundamental predicament concerns the fundamental positioning of the self within the Mystery, which is expressed in interpersonal, socio-political, and ecological relationships.

Christians tell the "story of the Fall" to symbolize their in-depth experience of alienation.

The Adam-Eve story emphasizes that estrangement is the result of human freedom

John Updike: "What impresses me isn't so much human self-deception as human ingenuity in creating unhappiness. We believe in it. Unhappiness is us. From Eden on, we've voted for it. We manufacture misery and feed ourselves on poison. That doesn't mean the world isn't wonderful." (*Couples*)

The 'Fall' is more than our freedom to choose; its heart is the 'why' of our use of freedom as we do: Humankind is guilty of *overreaching their limits*, of trying to be divine and in the process becoming less than human; *Pride* is the source of our estranged experiences.

Another interpretation focuses on trust: We attempt to move outside the Mystery when we cease to trust the Mystery we are within; the core of the temptation is the panicked feeling that creation is not good.

The effort then is to control the givens of life rather than creatively relate to them: We seek to be god because we have lost confidence in being a creature.

Our created drive toward transcendence is twisted toward ourselves.

Much of life (e.g., the inevitability of suffering and the fact of death) seems to reinforce this unwillingness to trust.

Israel's Wisdom tradition emphasized that Yahweh ruled human life through an immanent order: God's presence was a pervasive wisdom which ensured the stability of the created order.

Two major responses to the mystery of suffering developed in this tradition:

1. Firm belief in cause/effect, act/consequence pattern. (Cf. Jonah's storm and the friends of Job.)

But this perspective could not handle the unevenness of experience; thus, a hope dimension developed. One could never judge until the end was seen (Pr 24.19).

2. The idea of training: God sends sufferings because they are purgative and pedagogical (Pr 3.11; Sir 2.5).

There is a limited validity to each response; they have a place as partial insights:

1. Recognition that acts do have consequences; sin spreads itself, is contagious.

2. Suffering, no matter what its origin, is a crucible.

The wise men devoted their minds and energies to the everlasting task of not allowing the experiences of suffering to eclipse trust in the good creation of Yahweh.

The Cross responds to the question: How do we trust in a world distorted by our own betrayals and filled with deliberate sin and arbitrary suffering.

God is not a heavenly king and the question is not how does he reward good and punish evil. God is a passionate present to all human life, never deserting it. The Cross is the symbol of the fellow suffering of God.

God has entered into the loneliness of our suffering and self-hatred of our sin.

God receives our lives as they are: torn and broken.

God has accepted those aspects of our lives we ourselves have denied.

If Creation is God's presence to our beauty, the Cross is God's presence to our pain and twistedness.

Knowing all we are, God accepts us; this story of God disarms us. God's acceptance of even the worst in us frees us from our fear and the need to life/hide.

We are thus freed to love in the same way that we have been loved.

This does not lead to complacency: In the deep peace that acceptance brings, there lives an imperative to change, a mission to share what has been experienced.

Symbolically, the 'Fall' is about what we do with our freedom to determine our style of interaction with our environments; it also recognizes a 'build-up' of not-trusting lives and so a real historical power which tries to force freedom in a single direction. The danger of this accumulated force of sinful precedents is that it obscures where the real decision lies. It presents 'the fallen style' as a given, something to be conformed to.

The Cross reveals the possibility of living history in another way; the Cross 'buys us back' from the fear of created existence that told us not-to-trust and how-to-lie.

We can trust created existence because there is no moment of it untouched by the presence of God.

The Cross reveals that the person to whom God wants to be related includes our weakness, the fact that we are caught in sin and overwhelmed by suffering.

To trust in created existence is to move beyond debilitating anxiety.

The birth of the Church is Cross/Easter/Pentecost; but the Cross quickly became the center of Christian piety.

The Cross so mysteriously touches who we are in relation to All There Is that it continues to evoke life and commitment.

The foundation of the Church is the experience of God symbolized in the crucified Christ; it reveals God's self-giving love which frees us from our self-serving apathy. Out of God's total acceptance comes the freedom and power to form community, to belong to each other in a life-giving way.

The law of the cross is that *evil has been transformed into possibility*.

To pursue a life of trust, friendship, and justice is to follow the discipleship of the cross: the way of community entails suffering love, love willing to give itself.

If true power hangs on a cross, it is in blatant opposition to all false power which puts people on crosses.

The story of Fall/Crucifixion/Church reaffirms the basic thrust of Creation/Incarnation/Spirit but in the face of the mystery of sin and evil.

The sanctifying presence of God to all human life does not withdraw when we spurn it; it pursues us.

We live in friendship mixed with betrayal, sexuality mixed with disrespect, community mixed with factionalism. But the God of the garden and the cross is freeing us for new life within these relationships.

#### **CHAPTER FIVE: A Story of Invitation and Decision**

Jesus' parables and (some) sayings unfold a story of invitation and decision; God is not a character in the story – rather God is what happens to the people in the story or to the people hearing the story.

God's presence (though unseen) is proclaimed by the transformed person.

The concern of the story is the *movement* of God in people and the movement of people in God; the dynamic interpenetration of God and person is crucial.

The Kingdom of God is the larger context of Jesus' parables; but the parables focus on the catalytic elements in the process rather than the larger context.

Jesus' vision of the Kingdom was of God as active in human life; this vision is the home of the parables.

There are many 'models' for understanding "divine activity" (monarchial, deistic, dialogic, agent); the most promising model is drawn from process philosophy.

In this model, there is mutuality and interdependence between God and the world; neither acts independently.

God is the 'ground' of both order and novelty.

God has an initial aim for every moment of experience; human freedom responds to and actualizes that aim to the extent that it is willing and able. God then becomes the lure, the evocation toward the increase of value.

The human person is co-creator of every moment.

John Mackay offers a fresh approach to the symbol "God acts." He argues for an acceptance of "faith" as one of the ways the human spirit relates to reality and reality relates to the human spirit; it is thus a natural and irreducible human enterprise.

"Faith" is the acknowledgment of a Creative Will in and behind empirical reality; life is recognized as an invitation we may either accept or refuse.

Events/people are encountered which startle/deepen/reconfigure one's faith; at this point s/he uses "revelational language" and says, "God is active here."

The religious person's fundamental concern is to lead his/her life in the light of faith conviction.

Language about God's activity discloses the significance of those encounters which have inspired us to believe, or to believe with a new intensity.

Many of the *parables* are about intense human activity, crisis moments of panic and resolve. The characters are 'ordinary people;' yet both the characters and the hearers of the story do not remain on the level of the 'everyday,' but rather are 'thrown back' into their fundamental relationship to Mystery.

They are stories about people. But because of what is happening to the characters and to the hearers, they are also stories of God.

This is how God functions as "plot."

The Kingdom of God symbolizes divine activity in human life which, in turn, directs our attention to those people/events which stimulate our acknowledgment of a Creative Will

God is actively present in any transition from a diabolic ('tearing apart') situation to a symbolic ('putting together') situation.

- From despair to hope;
- From exploitation to justice
- From fear to trust
- From slavery to freedom.

This is movement from sin to redemption.

The parables portray catalytic elements of grace and decision. We are gifted. Suddenly someone/something appears in our world and invites us out.

Smooth stories are interrupted by sudden possibility. In the face of this possibility, we must choose.

The full movement of God only occurs when freedom seizes it.

The redemptive process of relating to Mystery is:

- Sin;

- Grace;
- Decision;
- Redemption.

The parables explore the invitation-decision dynamic.

Metaphor-parables ("Kingdom *is* X") are unfinished until the hearer has responded; the hearer must allow himself/herself to be pulled into the story and allow it to precipitate the experience of God's gift of life.

To hear the parable is to experience the Kingdom.

Simile-parables ("Kingdom *is like* X") require the hearer to draw out the meaning and apply it to his/her life.

The parables' purpose is to invite the hearer out of his/her present destructiveness and make possible new life.

- ◆ Metaphor: the invitation happens *within* the story.
- ◆ Simile: the invitation happens *through* the story.

Every human situation/behavior is grounded in a vision of reality (a foundational structure of imagination). When this vision is too constricted/self-centered, a crippling life-style develops – destructive of both self and community.

Parables aim to subvert such destructive presuppositions; they question what we unquestioningly hold.

The result is "imaginative shock;" an invitation is issued to 'go beyond' a closed world.

Part of the power of the parable is that 'you don't see it coming.'

R. Funk proposes three theses:

1. Grace always wounds from behind, at the point where man thinks he is least vulnerable.
2. Grace is harder than man thinks: he moralizes judgment in order to take the edge off it.
3. Grace is more indulgent than man thinks: but it is never indulgent at the point where he thinks it ought to be indulgent.

The Good Samaritan, e.g., leaves the hearer shocked and disoriented, especially if he identifies with the victim: Which world is the real one – the world of his everyday assumptions or the world he has discovered in his parabolic identity as victim?

The story infiltrates prejudices and subverts them.

Many of Jesus' sayings also cause imaginative shock (e.g., Mt 5.39-42; Mk 10.42-44).



They are not literal guides for behavior, but imaginative indictments of our natural tendency to put ourselves first.

The result of such parables/savings is that the person sees herself and her situation in a new way; different possibilities are created.

The *framework* within which one thinks is changed; such perceptual shift immediately leans toward action.

The urgency to act is the message of many of Jesus' parables. The action urged is open-ended: the need to decide and act is more a general command than a series of concrete proposals.

Dominic Crossan: the call is absolute, but the content is unspecified.

The shape of action will depend on our creativity and the demands of the situation.

The treasure and pearl parables (Mt 13.44-46) show the basic parabolic pattern, the depth dynamics of the process of grace and decision:

- Finds / sells / buys;
- Advent / reversal / action.

The pattern provides a way to investigate personal experience and other stories.

They enable us to understand biography and contemporary fiction as 'stories of God' (e.g., Graham Greene's *Honorary Consul*).

The moments and carriers of grace are never what we expect them to be (cf. Flannery O'Connor).

In much of Greene's fiction, his 'samaritans and tax collectors' bear painful and laughing witness to radical grace.

At any given moment the strangest event or the most unlikely people beckon to us, lure us into new life.

Gracious ambush is a way of life in the world of the parables. Such a world is also perilous; it demands decision/action.

When through a graced person or even people are shaken from the sinful destructiveness they find themselves trapped in and are offered new life, God is present and active.