

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Need for a Narrative Public Theology

Narrative as a Resource for Historicizing Theology

History emerged as a major category in twentieth-century Christian theology. It has received considerable attention both as a subject of theology and as an aspect of the human condition that affects every act of theologizing. This focus on history (and on historicity) is likely to continue in the twenty-first century as well, since various forms of contemporary theology are committed to engaging these issues, including especially the many liberationist and political theologies that claim specific historical contexts as their loci for interpreting Christian faith. Insisting on the theological importance of our historical situatedness, these theologians directly engage the question of how the sociopolitical actions and events through which we participate in history relate to a Christian account of the history of redemption.¹ Thus we have returned with renewed vigor to the ancient theological question of the relation between human history and Christian hope.

At the same time, public discourse in the United States evidences a deeper awareness of the political implications of religious faith and is exercised by questions of the proper role of religion in the public life of our pluralistic society. There is considerable disagreement not only over what particular political guidance our religious traditions provide, but also over the possibility of a religiously neutral government, and whether we should develop and encourage official governmental acknowledgments of the importance of Christianity (or perhaps of an amorphous “Judeo-Christianity”) as the basis of our polity. Is the construction of a

secular state inherently prejudiced against those who profess religious belief? Should we declare that this country is officially “under God,” or perhaps at least endorse the Ten Commandments as the foundation of our law and morality? The question of how to understand religious freedom, once we recognize that religious beliefs cannot be relegated to our private lives and set aside when we act as citizens, is currently engaging the attention not only of the general citizenry, but also of sociologists, historians, legal theorists, philosophers, and theologians.

One might expect that these two developments, a focus on theological context along with increased attention to the public role of religious beliefs, would have led to a thriving U.S. political theology. Yet despite a rich American tradition of theological concern for the political implications of Christian faith, especially evident in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries in the Social Gospel Movement, the theologies of the Niebuhr brothers, and the work of such Catholic thinkers as John K. Ryan and John Courtney Murray, discussion of the need for political theology on the national level in the United States has been rather sporadic. Instead, many important liberationist theologies have arisen in the United States that focus on the experiences and oppressions of particular groups, such as black, feminist, latino/a, and queer theologies. This work of theologizing from the perspective of specific groups remains important, but there is also a need for political theologies that address the national context as a whole, such as has been initiated by those arguing for a “public theology” in the last few decades.

Perhaps one reason that a national political theology has been slow to arise here is that many dispute the continued relevance of the nation-state, calling for a cosmopolitan emphasis on our global responsibilities or for a more local politics. If, in the words of the bumper sticker slogan, we should “think globally and act locally,” where is there any room for national politics? Yet, sufficiently important political decisions are made on the national level (with regard both to domestic and to international affairs) that we cannot leave this level of political activity unevaluated. As Linell Cady argues, “nations today are the social units that wield primary power within the global arena. Because military, economic, social, and political decisions are made at the national level . . . it is essential to have a public life within which such decisions can be debated and held accountable.”²

To be sure, this project of a national political theology should not devalue or displace theologies that address other concerns. The national focus advocated here is not intended as an alternative to particular liberationist projects, but rather as the basis for a public discourse in which

such liberationist projects can be pursued more vigorously and as matters of concern to all.

Achieving the necessary balance between the particularity of any perspective, on the one hand, and the desire for an inclusive conversation about the good of the whole, on the other, is a challenge that a national political theology will require complex strategies to meet. One necessary and too often overlooked resource for this endeavor is narrative, especially as it construes a unified whole through attention to particularities. Indeed, it is the contention of this book that we need a political theology consistent with American religious freedom, and that this political theology must attend closely to the category of narrative as a specifier of historical identity and possibilities. If we would take history seriously, we must attend to the narrative structure through which history is emplotted, both when we define the history of a particular community and when we describe ultimate, or religious, hopes for the history of humanity as a whole. Despite considerable discussion of the theological significance of history and of the theologian's historical context, much of the work in contextual theology has paid little attention to the narrative structure of the historical imagination, focusing instead on the theological importance of analyses of culture and economy.³ Yet, without attention to the narratives through which historical identity and destiny are envisioned, we cannot adequately engage the temporal dimension of our identities or our hopes, and hence we cannot further the project of giving theological meaning to "obscured and oppressed hopes and sufferings" in history, as J. B. Metz, among others, advocates.⁴ At least, such is the argument of this book.

When narratives are mentioned in connection with issues of religion and public life, however, too often they are appealed to as the basis for a restorationist agenda seeking to perpetuate a previously established identity in the face of threats of change. This is an unfortunately truncated use of narrative, since careful attention to the structure and function of narrative suggests that it not only provides and reinforces a communal identity but is also a source of critique and transformation, enabling us to imagine possibilities for the future that are appropriate to the specific historical contexts providing the conditions and the limits of our praxis. Paul Ricoeur's work in particular demonstrates that narratives so interweave past, present, and future that expectations for the future and experience in the present are inseparable from reception of the past. Goals for the future are embedded in historical narratives in such a manner that, if we intend to effect real political change, "we have to re-open the past, to revivify its unaccomplished, cut-off—even slaughtered—possibilities," as

Ricoeur insists.⁵ Or, as Abraham Lincoln earlier argued, “if we could first know *where* we are and *whither* we are tending, we could better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it.”⁶

This study thus intends to contribute to the bridging of what have developed as largely separate, if not opposing theological approaches—political theology and narrative theology. Each of these conversations has recovered an essential aspect of Christianity: political and liberation theologians remind us that Christian belief and practices have implications for all aspects of our lives, including the way we structure our social and political institutions, while narrative theologians have recovered a focus on the particularity of those beliefs and practices, grounded as they are in the stories of Israel, of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of the beginnings of the Christian Church. If, as political and liberation theologians argue, the central stories of our faith cannot be properly understood as less than universal in import, it is also the case that those political and universal claims cannot be divorced from the particular religious faith in which they are rooted, as the narrative theologians proclaim. Yet few in political theology have paid adequate attention to the genre of narrative, and much of narrative theology has been deeply critical of political and liberation theology, which it accuses of betraying the specificity of Christianity in its eagerness to influence public policy and discourse.

This opposition between political and narrative theologies must be overcome, I argue, since neither side can fully realize its agenda without some of the insights of the other. Without attention to narrative, political and liberation theologies cannot do justice either to the historical dimensions of their sociopolitical contexts or to the specificity of Christian revelation. At the same time, narrative theologians need to broaden their focus to account for the various narratives that form our identities, and to acknowledge that, despite their historical particularity, narratives are not immune to external evaluation and critique. The false dilemma demanding that we either accept that public life consists in an unnegotiable clash of narratives or engages in a discredited search for a universally accepted rational foundation must be rejected; only then will we develop a narrative theology adequate to the universal significance of Christian claims about the conditions for human flourishing.

Our task here is to explore the feasibility of a multifaceted and public role for narratives in contemporary theology, one in which narratives function not only as a politically significant source of shared identity and common projects, but also as a means through which theologians can realize their task of relating sacred and secular histories. Without reject-

ing the importance of synchronic analyses of a particular context, which Latin American liberation theologians have pioneered with their attention to social and economic sciences, we need to develop also the diachronic analysis that attention to history and to its narrative structure provides, as black liberation and womanist theologians have insisted. For all of the recent work done in contextualizing and historicizing theology, there has been surprisingly little attention to the following questions, for which we still lack adequate answers: What would it mean for theologians to be involved in analyzing, critiquing, and reconstructing the narratives through which people make sense of their temporal lives? How might we do this with specific attention to the narrative dimensions of Christian beliefs about the goal or end of history?

The Public Theology Project

Primarily since the late 1980s, theologies concerned with addressing the United States as a whole have indeed begun to develop. Parker Palmer, Linell Cady, Max Stackhouse, Ronald Thiemann, Robert Benne, and Michael and Kenneth Himes are among those who have undertaken to relate the meaning of Christian faith to an interpretation of the social and political life of this country.⁷ James Cone and Victor Anderson have also taken up this task from their perspectives as an African-American theologian and an African-American philosopher of religion, respectively, while more recently Benjamin Valentin has argued for a Latino public theology.⁸ Despite their considerable differences, these thinkers have all chosen the term “public theology” to describe this endeavor, a term whose contemporary use originated in Martin E. Marty’s 1974 article “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion.”⁹ Important contributions are thus being made to the creation of the national political theology that has been lacking in this country, a project that my argument here for the public and theological significance of narrative is intended to further.

Since the name “public theology” arose within a discussion of American civil religion and is too often confused with it, it may be helpful to clarify the differences between these two related but quite distinct approaches. There is, to be sure, an area of overlap insofar as civil religion is understood to be the “apprehension of a universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in, or . . . as revealed through the experience of the American people.”¹⁰ Insofar as public theology also seeks to articulate the religious implications of our American experiment, it then shares this task with civil religion. However, public theology differs from civil

religion in at least two major ways. First, whereas civil religion has come to be identified as the practice of invoking religious beliefs and symbols in *support* of a country's values and practices, public theology's goal is not simply to provide support but to engage in *critical reflection* on the nation's culture, plans, and actions. As Robert McElroy nicely states, a truly public theology involves "acknowledging God's participation in the life of the nation, while at the same time using religious truth to critique the policies and direction of the nation."¹¹ Second, civil religion consists of the public use of religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals that are thought to be commonly held by or acceptable to the majority of the people, a sort of religious "least common denominator"; the majority of those identifying their work as public theology, on the other hand, seek to address concerns of national public life with the resources of their specific religious traditions. Public theology, as I will defend it here, thus involves the development of particular theologies of our common public life although, as I will argue below, these particular theologies must also engage in critical analyses of American "spiritual culture" and must offer their perspectives not only to their own religious communities but to the entire public.¹²

This particularity of public theologies leads to yet a third difference from civil religion, which has begun to emerge in the public theologies that have carried through the project to the point where they issue in reinterpretations of Christian beliefs. These public theologies are genuinely contextualized theologies, providing reformulations (and not simply applications) of major themes of Christianity developed through attention to the demands of the American social and political context. For example, Cady interprets the doctrine of the Trinity in relation to the creation, redemption, and sustenance of our common life; Palmer understands Christian reconciliation to include the overcoming of social and class divisions; and Stackhouse articulates a political and economic vision of Christian stewardship. Thus, while continuing civil religion's interest in the public presence of religious beliefs and symbols, public theology differs from civil religion in that, as a political theology for the United States, it is committed to providing a reformulation of the beliefs and practices of particular religious traditions developed through critical engagement with the ideas and practices of national public life.

To be sure, much of the agenda of developing a religious discourse addressing public life has recently been pursued by neoconservative thinkers, many of whom may not describe their work as "public theology."¹³ Some of this group will perhaps also object to my characterization of this project of public theology as a form of historicized theology in the

same family as political and liberationist theologies, which are usually at least liberal and often quite radical, theologically and politically. Nevertheless, I maintain that the project of historicizing theology, of reinterpreting Christian beliefs through a critical address of issues of national life, is common to the neoconservative theology of George Weigel, for example, and to the considerably more radical theology of James Cone.¹⁴ Indeed, a close look at the theology supporting a Christian neoconservative political agenda indicates that even those who intend only to “apply” their beliefs to political issues are in fact engaged in theological reinterpretation: to understand Christian faith as centrally preoccupied with opposition to abortion and homosexuality has theological effects no less significant than does a focus on Jesus as liberator from the sin of economic oppression. Further, as I hope becomes clear in what follows, the project of developing a U.S. public theology did not originate as, nor is it now solely, a neoconservative project; the task of rethinking the meaning of a specific religious tradition in light of its implications for our national life can be undertaken from a variety of perspectives and may result in different and even opposing conclusions.¹⁵ While I insist that there is a methodological relation between public theology (whether issuing from the right, the center, or the left) and the various political and liberationist theologies, the project of contextualizing theology is not predicated on commitment to any specific interpretation of Christianity or of American public life.

Why Call It Public Theology?

It has become commonplace to recognize that the various intentionally contextual theologies are quite distinct because of the different realities they grapple with and so properly have different names. Thus, Latin American liberation theology is not simply a variant of German political theology (or vice versa), and *mujerista* and womanist theologies must be named as such and not subsumed under the title of “feminist theology.” I contend that a political theology for the United States will also be to some degree specific to its context, and that the name “public theology” has been well chosen to represent this specificity insofar as it designates two key issues especially important in the United States: 1) the difficulty of reconciling a public role for religion with the reality of our pluralistic society historically committed to the disestablishment of religion, and 2) a currently widespread suspicion (at least, widespread in the national debates) of public projects and purposes, which are seen as less worthwhile than individual pursuits and less efficient than privately funded undertakings.

The first problem, that of defining and defending a public role for theological discourse in a religiously pluralistic society, is quite complicated and increasingly contentious. In the conversations of daily life, on media talk shows, and in newspaper op-ed pages, one commonly encounters the view that religious beliefs have no place in the political discussions of a people committed to a “separation” of church and state: any religious influence on legislative decisions or public policies is thought to be tantamount to legislating a particular religion. However, perhaps even more commonly, one finds the opposing assertion that recognition of the “Judeo-Christian” character of our nation is properly basic to any political discourse in the United States. With increasing recognition of the fact that Christian beliefs have public implications and that laws have religious presuppositions, neutrality is proclaimed impossible. We must declare ourselves to be a nation “under God,” we are told, or through silence implicitly acknowledge that we are not “under God”; no middle course is thought to remain.

Interestingly, this is not a simple matter of disagreement between believers and non-believers, as fervent Christians (as well as people of other religious creeds) can be found on both sides. Nor does this disjunction seem to involve an inherent philosophical difference between conservative and liberal interpretations of Christianity or of U.S. politics, since within the past thirty-five years conservatives and liberals in this country have virtually exchanged positions on this issue. When religious leaders publicly participated in the civil rights movements and Vietnam War protests, some conservative Christians (notably the Rev. Jerry Falwell) decried the sully of a truly spiritual (i.e., private and internal) faith with this-worldly politics. With the more recent development of a politically active Christian Right, liberal Christians can now be found condemning the “political” use of religion by such people as the Rev. Jerry Falwell! Nor is it the case that only the liberal side must explain its shift on this issue, as Eldon Eisenbach has suggested. The conservative side, too, and indeed all of us, must be able to proffer a coherent account of the public role of religion in relation to religious freedom and the First Amendment.¹⁶

The reality of our situation is that, despite our more than 200 years of experimentation and a plethora of publications and forums devoted to the role of religious discourse in a pluralistic society, we still lack consensus on how (or if) religiously informed political action can be allowed without infringing on the religious freedom that many of us believe our religious faith requires and that the Constitutional disestablishment of religion guarantees. The viability of any political theology for the United

States depends on our ability to justify its public role as consistent with religious freedom (or, if we decide otherwise, we ought clearly to acknowledge that religious freedom is being compromised and explain why this is justified). If we fail to do either, we will simply add to the confusion and indeed the suspicion and rancor that mark this debate.

The second public issue that no American political theology should ignore is our lack of societal commitment to maintaining the quality of our public life and to pursuing a common good. This absence of what may be called “public virtue” (an interest in, and willingness to sacrifice for, the good of the larger society) is, I believe, particularly evident in the lack of support for the taxes needed to provide adequate public services, even when the market for luxury goods is flourishing. Michael Lind and Christopher Lasch, among others, have incisively described the irony of our situation, wherein governmental agencies find their financial resources severely strained, while those who resist tax increases to maintain the quality of public services are willing to spend lavishly to purchase education, police, and even garbage collection privately. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, an astute observer of the American scene, has aptly noted that this preoccupation with “privatization” in the United States is more accurately termed the “commercialization” of life here, as more and more aspects of our lives, public and private, are submitted to the dictates of the market.¹⁷

Many suspect that an exaggerated American emphasis on the individual is at the root of this failure of concern for the common good. For example, Robert Bellah, who initiated the interest in civil religion in 1967, has more recently joined those arguing that our individualistic approach to economic well-being (in which success or failure is the responsibility of the individual) has significantly blinded Americans to structural injustice. This individualism, Bellah concludes, is an important factor in our tolerance of the appropriation of the benefits of economic wealth by the top 5 percent of wage earners.¹⁸ To be sure, some public theologians on the right salute this privatization and economic individualism, and call for more rather than less of it.¹⁹ Yet even these theologians join Bellah in criticizing the individualism that undermines concern for public morality.

These challenges to our hyperindividualism have been especially evident in the “liberal-communitarian” debate that has underscored the insufficiencies of, on the one hand, an extreme liberal proceduralism that reduces politics to a process of adjudication between competing personal agendas, and, on the one hand, a communitarianism prescribing a shared cultural vision that seems rather more appropriate to a homogenous

community than to our pluralistic society.²⁰ Despite the various attempts to propose solutions that move “beyond” these two options, perhaps through a revival of “civic republicanism,” no clear resolution of this debate has yet been reached in our public life. However much we may insist, as does Bellah’s associate William Sullivan, that society is a cooperative endeavor with a good of its own surpassing “the sum of individual wants and desires,” there is little evidence that we retain a clear public commitment vigorously to pursue an adequate understanding of what this societal good is.²¹

It might be argued that the “events of September 11” changed all of this, as people in the United States have developed a deeper appreciation of this country and its institutions through the experience of being violently attacked. We are indeed experiencing a renewed commitment to public displays of patriotism, and thus we may have a particularly opportune situation for revising the widespread suspicion of the political processes that common action requires. However, even if this newfound concern for the nation should turn out to be more than ephemeral, there is little evidence thus far that we have also identified or are willing to pursue any greater common purpose than our own survival and the continuation of our dominance. The evidence suggests instead that the threat of terrorism will be used primarily to enforce greater homogeneity and to stifle rather than to invigorate public debate. When the most patriotic thing the president can call for from the American people is to further indulge our national addiction to recreational shopping, we are scarcely justified in concluding that there is widespread willingness to sacrifice our personal interests for the common good. (Shailer Mathews once observed that people find it easier to die for the political ideals of their country than to pay taxes to support them; recent events confirm at least that the former remains a more publicly palatable policy than is the latter.²²)

To be sure, a lack of public virtue is only one of the many issues a national political theology is properly concerned with, so it is arguable that it need not be a defining issue for a U.S. political theology. However, I judge that the quality of our public life is indeed a major issue determining the context of a political theology for the United States: those who are proffering religious evaluations of national purposes cannot avoid engagement (if not explicitly, then at least implicitly) with the lack of public interest in clarifying a common good and with the widespread tendency to seek private resolutions for all public problems. Thus the work of those many social and cultural critics who have explicitly addressed this public disinterest is an important resource for public theologians,

whether they envision a “revised liberalism,” as Ronald Thiemann has proposed, or criticize the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality as has David Tracy.²³

I submit that “public theology” is therefore an appropriate name for an American political theology, since the revitalization of public life and the development of a role for theology in public discourse are especially problematic issues in the United States, for the reasons suggested above. As Kenneth and Michael Himes have pointed out, the term “public” is of further value in that it signals a breadth of concern with issues of our common life, including not only policies of the state but also matters of society and culture.²⁴ In Robert Wuthnow’s helpful distinction, “politics refers to all the formally organized or institutionalized ways in which a society governs itself,” while “public” is generally understood as referring to “something broader than either politics or public policy, namely, the ongoing discourse that takes place in any society about its collective values.”²⁵ The subject matter of public theology is not, then, limited to governmental decisions or to particular issues of public policy (although these are certainly important), but also encompasses issues of social attitudes, institutions, and cultural practices. This is a point worth noting here, because much of our discussion in chapter 2 will focus rather narrowly on issues of governmental and legislative processes. While specific attention to the role of religious beliefs in governmental actions is necessary because of questions raised by our American tradition of separating church and state, our concern for these issues should not lead to the conclusion that public theology’s only interest is in influencing the state.

Of course, a theology that is not simply concerned *about* the public but intends to contribute to the reconstruction of public discourse must itself *be* public. Public theologians have also taken this aspect of their project seriously if less than successfully, arguing that the claims of a public theology should not be defended in terms comprehensible only to those who share a religious creed, but rather should be proffered in public forums and should attempt to persuade all involved in the public conversation.²⁶ This is the point at which those who share Stanley Hauerwas’s perspective reject the project of public theology, arguing instead that to accept a role in this public conversation (at least in principle) compromises the specificity of the Christian perspective. Yet even Hauerwas does not deny that Christianity has public implications and intends to transform public life; while I will discuss Hauerwas’s position in some detail in chapter 4 below, it will suffice to mention here that in my view we cannot influence a conversation about the public good if we do not enter that conversation, nor can we expect people to listen to our

criticisms of their proposals if we refuse to entertain their criticisms of ours. However particular in origin, any worthwhile position should be proffered to the general population, and for this reason public theologians have argued against an unnecessarily restrictive professionalism that addresses itself only to academic audiences and in jargon that is incomprehensible to nonspecialists.²⁷ The term “public” therefore specifies not only predominant aspects of the national context that this theology is concerned with but also the breadth of the audience addressed.

In carrying out its project, public theology as thus envisioned engages three major and converging issues in our public life. These are: 1) What purpose(s) ought we to pursue as a people? 2) To what extent is a common vision and purpose possible or even desirable if we are to foster a heterogeneous and open society? 3) Perhaps most problematically, what is the role of particular religious understandings of the good in a society fundamentally committed to religious freedom?

Narrative, as I will argue below, has a special role in resolving these questions because narrative is the form in which historical identity and direction are imagined, and because narratives comprise a whole out of particular events and characters without denying their individuality. I also argue that, while these questions about our common purpose and vision can and are being engaged from many different perspectives and with the resources of various academic disciplines, a theological perspective has its own contribution to make and should be included in these important conversations about our common life. Drawing on the nuanced arguments of Franklin I. Gamwell and of John Courtney Murray, I will defend in chapter 2 an alternative to the extremes of banning religion from public life, on the one hand, and legally establishing religion, on the other hand. This alternative depends not on governmental support for a generic “God” but on our willingness as citizens to publicly defend our particular religious beliefs, if and when they are relevant to the public order.

Achievements in Public Theology Thus Far

Borrowing from and expanding the schema developed by Benjamin Valentin, I categorize the contributions in public theology to date as divisible into five major (though interrelated) areas: 1) the public role of the Christian churches; 2) the public nature of theological discourse; 3) the problem of religious freedom in a pluralistic society; 4) constructive theological assessments of public life; and 5) the need to attend to the

importance of diversity within our theologies as well as in public life.²⁸ To be sure, each of these topics has been subject to theological debate for some time and continues to be pursued by thinkers who do not identify their work with the public theology project. While public theology does not proceed apart from these broader theological conversations, it takes up these issues with a specific interest in overcoming the deterioration of public life, the privatization of religion, and the parochialization of theology in the United States.

The Public Role of the Christian Churches

Martin E. Marty made one of the earliest contributions to the development of public theology with his argument for the public role of the church. Responding to the waning of Christian enthusiasm for social activism and to the growing tribal belligerence that emphasizes group particularity over societal cooperation, in *The Public Church* Marty outlines a strategy of ecumenical cooperation among Christian churches, so that they might better fulfill their call to witness to the world. Parker Palmer, in his *The Company of Strangers*, similarly argues that the Gospel demands a concern for the world such that Christian churches have an ineluctable obligation to concern for and action in public life. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow has also furthered our understanding of church congregations as public bodies that form us for participation in the even more public life of our pluralistic republic. These scholarly contributions join an ongoing body of ecclesial statements addressing various aspects of the public witness of the Christian churches.²⁹

Interestingly, the conversation today has only moderately shifted from the parameters Marty sketched over twenty years ago. Few Christian theologians now defend a privatized Christianity (though much of our preaching and church life does continue, perhaps unintentionally, to encourage a privatized faith focused on personal salvation). Instead, theological debates in this area remain largely centered on the alternatives of a church in opposition to a non-Christian public (which Marty describes as tribalism) or a church engaged in public life and cooperating with larger social movements. More recently, arguments for a new Christendom in which the church marshals its resources to shape public life according to a Christian model of society have also gained credence, especially through the academic arguments of John Milbank and Oliver O'Donovan.³⁰ Nevertheless, all three major options (opposition, engagement, Christendom) accept that Christianity has political implications such that the church has

a proper and political mission to the world, even while they differ considerably on the terms of that mission.

In the broadest sense of the term, all three of these stances are public theologies, since they are rethinking Christianity and especially the Church's role in the world in light of questions raised by our current sociopolitical context. For the most part, though, the task of public theology is claimed only by those who both address the American situation and are seeking engagement in public life through an approach that is neither oppositional belligerence nor a new Christendom. This may be because those who favor an oppositional stance are highly suspicious of Christian involvement in public discourse, while those who seek a new Christendom tend to be less concerned with maintaining the diversity and openness that the word 'public' implies.

While I will not here address issues of ecclesial roles as such, the argument of this book is intended to further the public role of the church as described by Marty and to do so largely by contributing a theological method for relating our Christian hopes for history to the specific possibilities presented by our particular historical context in the United States.

The Public Nature of Theological Discourse

The task of defending the church's mission in a pluralistic society is inseparable from the current debate over the public accessibility of specifically religious languages, texts, and ideas. The tenability of public theology is challenged by liberal rationalists, who oppose the inclusion of specifically religious beliefs in public policy debates on the grounds that religious beliefs lack the basis in shared rationality necessary for civil debate. (This position is, of course, remarkably similar to that held by those Christian theologians who insist that Christians involved in civil debate are required to translate their claims into publicly accessible terms that implicitly deny the distinct Christian perspective that gets lost in the translation.) Public theologians must then find a way to avoid the horns of the following dilemma: if we speak our distinctly religious perspective, our voice is too particular to be comprehensible beyond our religious community, whereas when we adopt commonly accepted terms, we seem no longer to have anything distinct to contribute.³¹

Many different solutions to this dilemma have been proposed by those who refuse to withdraw their specific religious views from the public discussion. Some insist that while religious beliefs provide the motivation, we ought to enter public life (or at least policy debates) with

arguments presented in purely secular terms. Others, including public theologians Linell Cady and Benjamin Valentin, insist that secular arguments alone lack the rhetorical power and at times insight of religious traditions; thus, they maintain that religiously informed positions can and should be introduced into the public debate with their religious roots clearly intact, provided that these positions can also be defended in secular terms. Still others, such as William Dean and Victor Anderson, argue that theologians should take up the task of religious criticism, attending not to the beliefs and practices of specific religious communities but to an implicit spiritual culture shared by the majority of Americans.³²

While these debates over how to navigate between religious specificity and public accessibility continue, David Tracy's work on the public character of religious discourse has established a basis for moving the conversation forward. Along with his careful analysis of public forms of rationality, Tracy defends the public character of highly specific religious texts. Reminding us that these religious texts provide answers to common human questions, Tracy concludes that the particularity of origin should not distract us from the universal applicability of the insights gained. Anyone who shares the question of what a truly human life consists in, for example, can engage the particular answers disclosed in religious texts and traditions. If we determine that it is our religious perspective itself (and not merely the efficacy of the policies derived from this perspective) that is the source of our differences, then religious beliefs can and should be submitted to public examination and argument.³³

Of course, debates will continue over the grounds for public evaluation of religious beliefs, especially insofar as Christians differ over how well those who lack the grace of faith (or, in the terms of Yale theologian George Lindbeck, those who have not been adequately formed by the community's narrative) can truly grasp the meaning of Christianity. Yet we must not lose sight of the common Christian experience (rooted in our two millennia of evangelization) that in some manner people outside of the Christian community are capable of a level of comprehension that (through grace) enables them to accept or to reject the offer of Christianity. We should not overlook the fact that this capacity for at least a basic comprehension of different religious views is presumed to some extent both by those who insist that we should speak our distinctly religious perspective publicly and by those who seek in public conversations to emphasize the points of commonality that make such understanding possible. How much to defend our views on the basis of non-Christian argumentation and how much to speak a distinctly Christian idiom have always been and will remain a judgment call subject to debate (as it has

been throughout the history of Christianity). However, our real disagreements on this topic should not be exaggerated; more will be gained by careful attention to how and in what ways specific formulations may distort Christianity or fail to be comprehensible to non-Christians than has been achieved in the considerable broadsides for and against the general project of accommodating our language to public life.

Given our focus here on the role of narrative in public theology, the discussion below will be primarily concerned with the grounds for the public evaluation of theological and historical narratives. However, this conversation will be pursued from a general perspective that I take to be consistent with that of David Tracy: while we will often find common values to appeal to in defending public policies and political positions, we cannot preclude the possibility on occasion that our differences “go all the way down” and will need to be engaged as the fundamental disagreements over religious beliefs that they are.

The Problem of Religious Freedom

Efforts to include religious perspectives in public debate in the United States inevitably raise questions about how (if at all) this public theology can be consistent with the robust religious freedom protected by our official disestablishment of religions. Much of the resistance to the introduction of religious positions in public debate, whether the arguments are proffered in specifically religious terms or are translated into general philosophical principles, is rooted perhaps more in the desire to protect a meaningful religious freedom than in actual experiences of the incomprehensibility or the unfalsifiability of religious beliefs. Thus, those of us who advocate the inclusion of religion in public debate will need to clarify the meaning of religious freedom and the parameters it sets for public theology.

Too often, our public conversation simply presumes that religious freedom precludes religious perspectives in public life or, conversely, that it guarantees the right to legislate our beliefs. Currently, we find many insisting that disestablishment applies only to particular Christian denominations but not to Christianity as such (we are a “Christian nation,” it is said), and others who seem content as long as religious authorities do not rule directly but allow lay Christians to determine the policies and laws to be pursued in accordance with Christian beliefs and practices. Given this state of confusion, public theology cannot responsibly ignore the need for a nuanced account of how and to what extent a

religiously informed politics is consistent with the American Bill of Rights. A considerable amount of work has of course been done on this important and contentious topic, especially by historians clarifying the intentions of the Founding Fathers, by legal scholars seeking insight and coherence in the jurisprudential record, and by theologians who have engaged John Courtney Murray's now classic arguments. The position I will defend below draws primarily on the work of Franklin I. Gamwell, who contends that a robust religious freedom does not require a secularism that bans religion from public life.

Developments in Constructive Public Theology

A fourth area in public theology has been developed by those few who have produced substantive theologies reinterpreting Christian resources in a manner that affirms the value of public life and the importance of public virtue. Linell Cady, Max Stackhouse, Robert Benne, and Parker Palmer have made notable contributions to this discussion, deepening our understanding of Christianity and at the same time challenging the contemporary lack of public spiritedness and concern for the common good. Perhaps the most thorough analysis yet of this type has been developed by Kenneth and Michael Himes in their systematic assessment of the implications for public life of Christian doctrines on original sin, the Trinity, grace, creation, incarnation, and the communion of saints.³⁴

Yet another type of specificity has been achieved in William Dean's pioneering engagement in discerning a common American spiritual culture centered on improvisation, violence, and fantasy (or imaginative reinvention), as these are evident in jazz, football, and the movies, respectively. His "religious critic" approach to public theology differs significantly from the above theologies, since Dean focuses on a common American spirituality rather than on the resources of distinct religious communities. Further, Dean distinguishes between "religious" and "social" critics in ways that the above public theologians would not, concerned as they are to determine the social implications of religious beliefs (or, in Dean's terms, to function as social critics on the basis of their theological perspectives). The differences between these approaches should not, however, be overestimated: after all, Dean would agree that the spiritual culture has sociopolitical implications, and the public theologians working with specific Christian beliefs are also concerned with and intend to influence the common culture that informs our policy-making.³⁵

An approach similar to Dean's has been developed by Victor Anderson in his *Pragmatic Theology*. Like Dean, Anderson is concerned less with the resources of a particular tradition of religious creeds and practices than with a commonly acceptable form of religiosity. Where Dean engages sociocultural analyses to reveal an American "spiritual culture," however, Anderson endeavors to bridge theology and philosophy of religion and to elucidate the contributions of pragmatic naturalism as a public theology.³⁶

The degree of constructive contribution exemplified by these various thinkers is beyond the scope of my argument here, though the narrative method I propose is intended as the basis for a politically specific public theology. We need to move beyond general affirmations of the importance of public life and the common good, and begin to engage the particular ideals that we as a nation are pursuing and should (or should not) continue to pursue. While I share the above public theologians' commitment to a specific and even doctrinal religious tradition, my approach is also consistent with Dean's (and to a point, Anderson's) insofar as the narrative public theology I defend seeks to engage widely shared presuppositions about transcendent values and to contribute to the transformation of our common culture.

Diversity in Public Theology

New voices challenging us to take more seriously the exclusionary configuration of public discourse have recently joined those claiming the project of public theology. Cornel West has, of course, for many years championed a democratic and pluralistic public life, while calling attention to the obstacles that public conversations present to the inclusion of African-Americans as equals in the discussion. More recently, Dwight Hopkins, James Cone, and Victor Anderson have reminded us that the black churches in America have a long tradition of functioning as public churches and that black theology (especially black liberation theology) has always been to some extent a public theology, speaking to the wider public about the need to transform our common culture and institutions.³⁷ Black theologians are especially important for my approach to public theology because, in addition to challenging public theology to attend to issues of race and power both in the topics it addresses and in whose voices count among public theologians, they also defend a combination of diachronic and synchronic analyses, pointing to the importance of history as well as of current social structures.

Benjamin Valentin has also decisively interrupted the domination of public theology by white Anglo-Americans with his recent argument for a Latino public theology. While affirming the ongoing importance of efforts in Latino/a theology to defend their communities' distinct cultural heritage, Valentin warns that Latino/a theology needs a complementary commitment to the task of building up civil discourse in public life. Only then will Latino/a theologians be able to form the coalitions necessary to secure the well-being of the Latino/a communities within a just civic order, he argues.³⁸

A truly liberating public theology cannot, then, be captive to a white and middle-class vision of the common good, but must itself become the diverse and open conversation it envisions for our public life. Those of us who are white, middle class, and/or from mainstream religious traditions must find a way to contribute our voices without reinforcing a hegemonic discourse that stifles others. As I will argue below, there are resources in the Christian tradition for welcoming otherness and respecting diversity, and these should be a part of any theological contribution to public life.

The Public Character of Narrative

The defense of a narrative approach to theology may seem to be in some conflict with the project of public theology, as it has emerged through this discussion. Should a project so concerned with fostering open, public discourse appeal to narratives that, after all, are about specific people and events, and are rooted in particular communities? This community-specific character of narrative (and its opposition to common discourse) is precisely the point emphasized in the postliberal (or narrative) theologies that have developed in this country under the influence of Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. George Lindbeck, for example, argues that religions are best understood as particular narratives through which we interpret the world and ourselves; he insists that a neutral or universal framework able to adjudicate between the claims of differing religions would entail yet another particular narrative encompassing the others, so that its neutrality is a charade.³⁹ Thus it is commonly presupposed that an interest in narrative and an interest in public theology are at cross-purposes.

It is certainly the case that for many the United States is more evidently a multiplicity of communities with particular traditions, narratives, and beliefs than it is a single unified community with a common tradition. Religious plurality has expanded far beyond varieties of Judaism and

Christianity to include adherents of a multitude of traditional and new religions (as well as those who reject religion altogether), and we are less homogenous ethnically and racially than we are religiously. If public theology already raises the suspicion that it is yet another attempt to stifle dissent and diversity in the name of a common religiosity, will not the inherent particularity of narratives reinforce this suspicion?

William Dean, in his *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, nevertheless argues for the important role of a national mythic narrative in a vital public life. Such a myth, arising from what Dean calls “an empirical sense of the whole” of our nation’s history, would indicate the direction and purpose of America’s role in history and would enable us “to speak positively about American responsibilities” as a basis for evaluating public policies. Without a mythic narrative, he warns, we will be left with an understanding of national history as being nothing more than a plurality of competing private interests, a “veritable myth of cacophony” that encourages people to support public policies that serve selfish ends.⁴⁰ Thus in his more recent work, *The American Spiritual Culture*, Dean has proffered a common narrative of displacement as the basis of our spiritual culture.⁴¹

As I have indicated above, I share Dean’s concern for the role of the mythic and narrative imagination in establishing identity and purposes for the nation as a whole. He is, I believe, quite right to warn us against emphasizing our differences to the point where we can no longer imagine our shared participation in a common historical project. However, my approach differs from his in part because I place more emphasis on the fact that the exercise of the narrative imagination will always reflect the partial perspectives and particular judgments of those constructing the stories. This does not mean that we need be content with a clash of particular groups’ stories and their competing interests; rather, I argue that we should attempt stories of the whole, even while recognizing that every version of this story will be partial. No narrative of national life can hope to be the final word, but insofar as our narratives strive for relative adequacy to the whole and are offered to the public for further critique and revision, we might yet achieve that common discourse (and perhaps even genuine disagreement) about our national purposes that is the very opposite of mere cacophony.

This project of developing and debating national narratives is vulnerable not only to the criticism of those who think that it is not possible (that is, that we do not have enough in common for a national story), but also to the perhaps more compelling criticism that such a common story is not desirable. “Grand narratives” suffer considerable disfavor currently,

on the grounds that they disregard the perspectives and experiences that do not appear in or are marginal to the story.⁴² While this criticism must be taken seriously, I will argue below that the proper response to this potentially oppressive aspect of narrative is not to give up on national narratives but rather to be open to the criticisms that challenge us to attempt to construct more inclusive ones, for if we can no longer even narrate an account of our relations to each other as members of a larger whole, the result is likely to be even greater division and indifference to those marginalized or rendered invisible by our particular perspectives.

I also concur with Dean that a narrative conveying the purpose of national history cannot be divorced from a religious “sense of the whole”; that is, the way in which the identity and purposes of a people are construed reflects whatever is taken to be of ultimate value. However, my approach again differs from Dean’s in that I am interested in encouraging critical perspectives on American culture and practices that are informed by particular religious traditions. In my view, one of the tasks of a Christian public theology is to offer a narrative of U.S. history within the context of a Christian perspective on the ultimate or comprehensive purpose to be pursued in history. A Christian national narrative will be differentiated from other national narratives not by the fact that it includes value judgments in its interpretation of American history, since all historical interpretations do so (at least implicitly), but rather by its use of an explicitly *Christian* point of reference for those value judgments.

Some model must be found for bringing together national history and a Christian perspective on history. As I am persuaded that narrative is a privileged form of historical understanding, I will argue that one promising approach to bringing these two together is through the construction of a double narrative, a story-within-a-story, that narrates an account of American history as a moment within a larger Christian story of our hopes for, and God’s actions in, the history of humanity. Such a double narrative would be a contribution to the Christian community, providing an account of the religious significance of participation in public life and resulting in a more specific understanding of the political implications of Christian faith. God’s providential direction of history as understood by Christians remains abstract and indeterminate if not related to our particular historical experiences and possibilities, while, conversely, an understanding of any particular history requires a value judgment about the purpose of history as a whole.

This double narrative should also contribute to the transformation of public life through its proposal of a narrational interpretation of American history as a collective project to be fulfilled, a project related to yet not

itself the ultimate purpose of history. It is not likely (or perhaps even desirable) that there would be a single common story of American history, since such a story can be developed only from a specific perspective and through particular judgments about the inclusions of events and the strategies of emplotment, judgments that can be disputed and a perspective whose partiality should be challenged by other views. I will argue nevertheless that consideration of public policies would be enriched by attempts to formulate an acceptable national narrative since, without a story of our nation's place in history, the ability to think concretely about the possibilities and opportunities specific to the United States is impeded and a motivating vision able to sustain the struggle is lacking. We need to encourage thought and debate about our shared identity and common project as Americans; we do not need to curtail such debate by insisting on allegiance to any single account of the American project.

This will add to other work being done in public theology by drawing attention to the need more seriously to engage our historical identity and our future hopes and possibilities from a Christian perspective. Though important work has been done on particular Christian doctrines and on specific policies, sufficient attention has not yet been paid to theological analysis of our national history as determining our current situation and possibilities. In particular, an adequate Christian perspective should enable us to face our past history in all of its shame and glory with more honesty, with gratitude for the achievements and repentance for the failures; we might thus avoid the immature and distorted politics that sees our history as either wholly good or thoroughly evil. At the same time, other narrative accounts told from other perspectives will have their own corrective resources to offer our public life, so a Christian double-narrative must be proffered in a manner open to the challenge of other such narratives.

The narrative approach that will be defended here is not, of course, the only method that public theology needs. Although historical narratives allow theology to engage the specific historical context, without the various social scientific analyses we will be unable to make informed judgements about public policies. Political attitudes and ideals may be influenced by theological narratives, but structural as well as attitudinal changes are necessary, if we are to create a just society. As Cornel West has reminded us, in revitalizing public life we must attend especially to the social and cultural realities that prevent us from meeting as equals in public debate.⁴³ Further, as Dean himself points out in his advocacy of mythic narratives, an emphasis on narratives may focus on human history

to the exclusion of nature, resulting in a theology ill-equipped to respond to the environmental crisis. A narrative approach to public theology must, then, recognize its limitations and allow for other methods as well.⁴⁴

How This Argument Will Proceed

Since this study is devoted to exploring the contributions narrative can make to an American public theology, it will be necessary first to demonstrate that public theology is both appropriate to Christianity and consistent with religious freedom. Chapter 2 of this work will defend this properly public character of Christian theology, beginning with an examination of Hannah Arendt's intriguing (if at times puzzling) account of the public realm. Investigating her claim that a pluralistic public life is an important human good, I will conclude that it is also therefore of value to Christians, and that there are theological grounds for resisting the devaluation of public life in our society. Having determined that Christians are properly concerned with public life, in the second part of this chapter I will further argue that religious beliefs are properly public claims that can and should be included in public debates in a manner consistent with religious freedom. This is an especially important point of discussion given that many "narrative theologians" reject engagement in a pluralistic public life, if this requires that the Christian perspective functionally serve as one narrative among others; public theologians cannot then assume but must defend the claim that religious freedom in a diverse and pluralistic public life is consistent with the Christian faith they espouse.

Chapter 3 will evaluate Dean's proposal for a national narrative in public theology by defending both attention to the nation and the importance of narratives for this project. After providing a qualified defense of the continued significance of national politics, I will focus especially on Paul Ricoeur's contributions to clarifying the nature of narrative and its role in understanding history, in forming identity, and in envisioning new possibilities for our future. Ricoeur's work also suggests standards for the public evaluation of narratives (thus demonstrating that narratives have a place in public debate) and establishes a basis for delineating the limitations of narrative in a public theology.

Having explored the nature of narrative and its role in historical understanding, a critical examination of three currently influential yet quite different proposals for the use of narrative in Christian theology will follow in chapter 4. I will focus here on the methodologies of Johann

Baptist Metz, Stanley Hauerwas, and Ronald Thiemann: each of these theologians not only develops a distinct argument for the role of narrative in Christian theology, but also is centrally concerned with relating this Christian narrative in some manner to sociopolitical issues. Through a critical analysis of the ideas of these three theologians, I will sustain their insistence on a narrative interpretation of Christian faith while critiquing the limitations in their approaches to narrative, especially as these compromise their understandings of Christianity as well as their contributions to public life. Through a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these three theological methods, as evident particularly in light of the theories of public life and of narrative defended in the previous two chapters, I will defend the necessity of relating Christian and national narratives through the construction of a double narrative in which the national story is set within the context of a broader Christian story of the purpose of history. I will also return here to the question of whether and how we might debate the adequacy and the implications of such a double narrative, and will analyze the coherence and appropriateness of the standards for evaluation proposed by each of these three theologians along with those proffered by Paul Ricoeur.

The concluding chapter (chapter 5) will concretize this proposal for a narrative public theology by demonstrating the complexity of the narrative imagination as developed in three examples of interweaving sacred and secular stories in a manner that interrupts and redirects our public life. Abraham Lincoln's construction of a narrative of national history in light of his understanding of God's historical purposes, Virgil Elizondo's interpretation of Christian faith and of the colonization of the Americas from the perspective of the story of Juan Diego's vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Delores Williams's reading of the biblical story of Hagar along with the stories of African-American women who have suffered and resisted on behalf of themselves and their communities are each important instances in which the power of multilayered narratives as means of resistance and as sources of new possibilities for public life can be seen. While thus providing examples of what a narrative public theology might look like, they also challenge any attempt to provide a single narrative sufficient for either U.S. history or the Christian faith, and remind us instead of the wealth of resources available to a narrative theology that eschews the comfort and clarity of such closure.

The complexity of narrative theology as defended here will, I hope, make possible more specific theological contributions to public discussions by expanding rather than limiting our narrational strategies. Working

toward more honest, accurate, and inclusive national narratives may contribute to the sense of common identity and purpose necessary for public debate without silencing or excluding the voices that must interrupt any simple account of our identity or purpose. We might then yet achieve the revitalized public life that I argue ought to be valued by those committed to Christianity as well by those committed to American democracy.