

Spiritual Autobiography: A Vehicle for Religious and Ethical Transformation

Received September 30, 2017

Accepted October 3, 2017

Key words

Autoethnography, spiritual
autobiography, narrative
writing, transformational
leadership, Harvey Cox

The purpose of this essay is to discuss spiritual autobiography in the context of the western Christian tradition as a legitimate form of religious discourse and appropriate mode of theological and ethical reflection that seeks to inform, form, and transform readers, who as a result of this process commit to the transformational task of Christianity in the world. Writing autoethnographies in general and faithful, effective spiritual autobiographies in particular is not as simple a task as may appear to those unfamiliar with the subject. This essay will introduce several important thinkers who work in the field of theology and life writing, thus providing helpful information for a deeper exploration of the issue. Appropriately for this topic, the author will share a portion of his personal story to illustrate the transformative power of the Christian narrative, maintaining that spiritual autobiography has the potential to be an important tool of transformational leadership and vehicle for religious and ethical transformation.

1 Spiritual Autobiography as a Legitimate Form of Religious Discourse

At a time when the narrative approach in theology was not as widely accepted as a form of theological discourse and most academic theologians were reluctant to share their spiritual experiences or even use personal references in their work, the renowned Harvard theologian Harvey Cox started his book *The Seduction of the Spirit* (1973) as follows: "All human beings have an innate need to tell and hear stories and to have a story to live by. Religion, whatever else it has done, has provided one of the main ways of meeting this abiding need. (...) Recently neglected, testimony deserves reinstatement as a primary mode of religious discourse" (Cox 1973, 3). Cox then unapologetically devotes the first part of his book, "Testimony," to reflecting on his own life. Ten years later, Cox's book-length autobiography was published under the title *Just as I am* (Cox 1983).

In recent years, there seems to have been an increasing number of Christian theologians who are willing to share their personal narratives. Derek R. Nelson, Joshua M. Moritz, and Ted Peters edited the book *Theologians in Their Own Words* (2013), which is a collection of twenty-three autobiographical essays by Christian theological thinkers – eighteen men and five women – representing diverse theological backgrounds (i.e. Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Evangelical). Some of these include Marilyn McCord Adams, Harvey Cox, Ernst Käsemann, Martin E. Marty, Alister McGrath, Wolfhart Pannenberg, John Polkinghorne, and Kathryn Tanner. Derek Nelson in the book's introduction briefly examines "objections to autobiography" and "possibilities for autobiography," concluding that "despite these objections [James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Martha Nussbaum, Johann von Hofmann], we see value in narrating one's life..." (Nelson 2013, 9).

Heather Walton underscores this new trend in her book *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, in which she writes: "One of the most interesting developments in recent theological thinking has been the extraordinary significance accorded to 'narrative' by conservative, radical and liberal theologians alike. This narrative turn, no doubt born of a postmodern skepticism towards abstract, propositional truth claims, is of particular importance for pastoral theologians and practitioners" (Walton 2014, 164). Walton's excellent volume builds on her earlier important work on theological reflection (Graham, Walton, and Ward 2005; 2007). She focuses on three literary approaches to reflective theological writing: autoethnography, journaling, and life writing. Each is defined, explained, and



About the author

Lubomir Martin Ondrasek, M.Div., Th.M., A.M.R.S. (1972) is the president and co-founder of Acta Sanctorum, a Chicago-based Christian non-profit that works for positive transformation in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (presently focusing on Slovakia). He holds graduate degrees from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago and is presently pursuing his D.Min. in Transformational Leadership at Boston University. He publishes, presents, and provides consultations in the areas of Religion, Ethics and Public Life, Church and State, Public Ministry of the Church, and New Religious Movements (Pentecostalism). He is currently working on his spiritual-theological autobiography tentatively titled *Answering the Call: My Surprising Journey of Faith*. His email contact is ondrasek@bu.edu.

illustrated, enabling the reader to identify the commonalities and variations between them.

Walton reminds us something that may not be obvious at first glance and is especially relevant for those considering writing their own spiritual autobiography: *"The challenge to write experiences as a means of articulating faith or values is a daunting one"* (Walton 2014, xii). At the same time, she provides careful and helpful guidance to those who may want to embark on the process of reflective theological writing. Those with an interest in life writing through a theological lens should familiarize themselves with Walton's work.

2 Transformative Power of Spiritual Autobiography: Personal Experience

From the moment I converted from atheism to Christianity at the age of 18, I never doubted that spiritual autobiography could be an important means for transforming the heart and mind. At the beginning of my spiritual journey was the personal testimony of the former leader of the Brooklyn's notorious Mau Maus gang, Nicky Cruz. The book and international bestseller *Run Baby Run* found me thanks to my close friend, and the rest is history. Until then, I was not an avid reader; I disliked books and do not remember having read more than three voluntarily. When I was in elementary school, my mother read my textbooks aloud and asked me what I remembered. My adversarial relationship to books was one of the main reasons it took me an extra year to graduate from high school; at the time of my conversion, I ranked at the very bottom of my high school class.

But I could not put Cruz's book down and after reading it asked my Christian friend to get me a Bible. Within a few days – I think exactly three – I read the entire New Testament, accepted the Gospel message, started attending my friend's church, and soon afterwards experienced the call to Christian ministry. In short, reading the stories of Cruz and those by and about Jesus became a transformational experience for me. Harvey Cox wrote about these two kinds of stories in his book, *When Jesus Came to Harvard* (2004), which again has a strong autobiographical element as it is based on his fifteen years teaching one of the most popular courses in Harvard's history: "Jesus and Moral Life." Cox told the stories by and about Jesus to his students and several thousand came to hear them, enrolling in his classes.

For about fifteen years, I belonged to a Pentecostal church, eventually becoming an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God. During those years I heard hundreds of personal testimonies and shared my own in private and public settings. Pentecostals are eager to share their experiences of God, which is one reason for its explosive global growth in the 20th century. Grant Wacker underscores the importance of "testimony" in early Pentecostalism and links this spiritual practice to ethics: *"Like countless other Christians before them, early pentecostals assumed that their personal faith stories bore normative implications for others. Consequently, they devoted much of the time in their worship services – maybe a third of the total – to public testimonies about their spiritual journeys"* (Wacker 2001, 58). Even a century after the powerful Pentecostal revival erupted on Azusa Street in Los Angeles and spread to all four corners of the world, testimony plays an important role in Pentecostal theology and practice.

These experiences undoubtedly contributed to my desire to write my own spiritual autobiography, with the initial narrow view of it becoming a vehicle of personal conversion. I have contemplated this idea for over two decades, but other than occasional personal references in my op-eds and other writings that were mostly unrelated to spirituality or theology and a scholarly paper I delivered at a conference on Pentecostalism and later had published (Ondrášek 2013, 95–112), I have not written about my life. Regardless of the reasons that delayed this project, I am grateful that I did not write that story yet. Stories can both positively transform and misinform or mislead – spiritually or otherwise. To embark on such a project, one must be prepared intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

The idea to share my life story with others in writing – family, friends, and anyone willing to read it – never left me, together with the hope that God could use my account to bring about religious and ethical transformation. I have shared a portion of my testimony numerous times, seen its positive fruit, and was encouraged by others to put it in writing. I experienced a deep sense of assurance that this is in fact what God is calling me to do after discussing the issue with my academic adviser, Harvey Cox, in his Harvard Divinity School office in 2005. Since then, the question never was "if" but "when." I consider myself fortunate and blessed as well as a part of God's providence that in January 2017, I was able to take a course from professor Claire Wolfeich at Boston University, who has been supportive and provided me with early guidance for this project.

3 Transformative Power of Spiritual Autobiography: Scholarly Observations

There seems to be little doubt that narrative writing can be an effective tool for influencing human thought and action. R. Ruard Ganzevoort, who is one of the leading proponents of narrative approaches in practical theology, cites the great medieval theologian St. Bonaventure, who in his *Breviloquium* ("Brief Discourse") recognized that *"the mind is more moved by examples than by argumentation, by promises more than by reasoning, by piety more than by definitions"* (Ganzevoort 2012, 215). Ganzevoort, after explaining "the narrative turn" (influenced by Ricoeur's work on narrative identity), discusses narrative approaches and their application to practical theology. In his informative chapter, he introduces the six dimensions of a narrative model – structure, perspective, tone, role assignment, relational positioning, and justification for an audience – before concluding with a critical evaluation of the aforementioned narrative methods. One of the alleged weaknesses of these approaches is uncritical acceptance of human subjectivity and ignorance of the normativity question – something that everyone involved in autobiographical writing needs to keep in mind.

Similarly, Harvey Cox, writing more than seven centuries after St. Bonaventure and referring to the work of American Jewish philosopher Edith Wyschogrod, remarked, *"for all their importance, neither ethical principles nor moral theories actually 'motivate' anyone. What motivates people are stories, narratives, accounts of situations in which choices must be made and stands taken"* (Cox 2004, 25). Due to space constraints, we cannot explore here why human beings seem to be wired this way, but the fact that they are is critically important for leadership studies in general and transformational ministry in particular. As a public theologian with the ambition of becoming a transformational leader, my goal is to motivate people to action, helping them become agents of positive change in society. I view a well-written spiritual autobiography as an important vehicle towards transformational leadership.

Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, practical theologians at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, also recognize that "stories are mighty," underscoring their transformative power. The authors elucidate, adding an important new element to our conversation: *"Stories are mighty, however, not only because we shape our lives through them but also because they have the power to unsettle the lives we have comfortably shaped by them. In the sense, the narrative mode itself subverts our settled social*

realities. Our self-interpretation is not the last word, because our stories are not just our stories. When we weave together the human and the divine, we are attentive to another story that is not completely our own, a narrative that has the power to transform" (Anderson and Foley 1997, 7). The most important chapter of the book for our purposes is Chapter 1, "The Power of Storytelling," which underscores the transformative capacity of narrative.

There are a number of studies and myriad examples showing the impact of spiritual autobiographies on readers. It would probably take a lifetime for a scholar to examine the widespread effects and transformational influence of St. Augustine's famous *Confessions*. Teresa of Ávila poignantly describes her experience reading this work: *"When I began to read the 'Confessions,' I thought I saw myself there described, and began to recommend myself greatly to this glorious Saint. When I came to his conversion, and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it seemed to me nothing less than that our Lord had uttered it for me. I felt so in my heart, I remained for some time lost in tears, in great inward affliction and distress"* (quoted by Janet K. Ruffing 2011, 54). It is true that people can be moved but not changed, but it seems equally true that they cannot be changed without first being moved. One of the big questions, of course, is why some people are never moved by reading a spiritual autobiography and others are never changed, or, put it in positive terms, what criteria spiritual autobiography should meet to increase its probability of becoming a vehicle of transformation.

4 Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I am not arguing that spiritual autobiography is the only or best strategic tool for religious and ethical transformation. I simply assert that it is a legitimate and effective form of religious discourse and for some the most appropriate mode of theological reflection that seeks to inform, form, and transform the reader, who as a result of this process commits to the ethical task of Christianity in the world and contributes to the creation of a "good society," which for me is the aim of transformational ministry. Whether a spiritual biography becomes a vehicle for personal transformation seems to depend mainly on the content of the narrative ("what?") and the way it gets communicated ("how?"). To achieve success in both areas, resulting in *faithful* and *effective* spiritual autobiography, one must not only attend to the practical theological and ethical tasks and integrate them within one's story, but also learn the art and science of autobiographical writing (Walton 2014, Ruffing 2011, Phifer 2002,

Leigh 2000), which includes paying close attention to the "ethics of life writing" (Eakin, ed. 2004).

In addition to the listed resources, one can learn about writing a spiritual autobiography through a careful reading of excellent autobiographies. It is difficult to select the list of the "best" Christian autobiographies, but mine would include St. Augustine, Teresa of Ávila, John Bunyan, Thérèse of Lisieux, Corrie ten Boom, C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Nicky Cruz, and Billy Graham. Although quality of effort should never be judged purely by utilitarian considerations, the kind of spiritual fruit produced matters (Matthew 7:20). Ultimately, only God can transform the human heart, but God most often does so through Spirit-filled people who respond with alacrity to God's call.

Lastly, I want to mention one deeply personal reason – again related to transformation – that I feel drawn to writing my personal story and why I would ask others to consider doing the same. Anyone who delves into the field of life writing in general and spiritual autobiography in particular will quickly become aware of the manifold benefits such writing has for authors. Classical Greek philosophers already talked about the importance of "knowing thyself," and a number of Christian theologians pointed to the link between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Aware of this connection, Heather Walton writes: *"Because of the close ties between our sense of who we are and our grasp of who God is, life writing has become a key resource in vocational exploration and formation, the development of spiritual awareness, theological research and pastoral care. In all these fields it delivers powerful results"* (Walton 2014, 91).

John-Raphael Staudte, who defines autobiography as *"a dialogue of the self with itself in the present about the past for the sake of self-understanding,"* adds along a similar vein to Walton, *"writing and reflecting on one's autobiography enhances spiritual growth and can be therapeutic, freeing people from outlived roles and self-imposed images"* (Staudte 2005, 249). I am at a point in my life in which I can sense and rationally justify the need to "stop and remember" as well as sharpen my spiritual vision, so I can see God's purpose for my life more clearly in the near and distant future. Transformative leadership requires transformed leaders, and my underlying assumption is that writing my spiritual autobiography will be a transformative experience for me, which will bring me closer to God, the source of all positive transformation.

References

- Anderson, Herbert, and Edward Foley. 1997. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Cox, Harvey. 1973. *The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Cox, Harvey. 1983. *Just as I am*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Cox, Harvey. 2004. *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Eakin, Paul John, ed. 2004. *The Ethics of Life Writing*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ganzevoort, R. Ruard. 2012. "Narrative Approaches." In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, edited by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Graham, Elaine, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward. 2005. *Theological Reflections: Methods*. London: SCM Press.
- Graham, Elaine, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward. 2007. *Theological Reflections: Sources*. London: SCM Press.
- Leigh, David J. 2000. *Circuitous Journeys: Modern Spiritual Autobiography*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Nelson, Derek R. 2013. "Introduction." In *Theologians in Their Own Words*, edited by Derek R. Nelson, Joshua M. Moritz, and Ted Peters. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Ondrášek, Ľubomir Martin. 2013. "Svedectvo ako forma náboženského diskurzu: osobná reflexia o Pentekostalizme po dvadsiatich rokoch" [Testimony as a Form of Religious Discourse: Personal Reflection on Pentecostalism after Twenty Years]. In *Pentekostalizmus v súčasnom náboženskom a spoločenskom kontexte* [Pentecostalism in Contemporary Religious and Social Context], edited by Ľubomír Martin Ondrášek and Ivan Moďoroši. Ružomberok, Slovakia: Catholic University in Ružomberok.
- Phifer, Nan. 2002. *Memoirs of the Soul: Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography*. Cincinnati: Walking Stick Press.
- Ruffing, Janet K. 2011. *To Tell the Sacred Tale: Spiritual Direction and Narrative*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Staude, John-Raphael. 2005. "Autobiography as a Spiritual Practice." *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 45 (3): 249–269.
- Wacker, Grant. 2001. *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walton, Heather. 2014. *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*. London: SCM Press.