

Truth and Christian Ethics: A Narrativial Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, I consider some of the forms that truthfulness can take in the Christian life. Drawing on the notion of storied identity, I address the following questions. In general terms, what does it take to live truthfully with respect to some narrative? More exactly, how might that truthfulness be realized in bodily terms? And, finally, how might living truthfully with respect to a narrative contribute to the further elaboration of the narrative? I examine these questions with reference to the concerns of Christian ethics in particular, by taking as my focus the kind of storied truthfulness that is embodied in the practice of neighbour love, and the question of how that truthfulness may be extended through participation in the eucharist.

Keywords

story, identity, body, neighbour love, eucharist, eschatology

Introduction

In this article, I will consider some of the forms that truthfulness can take in the Christian life. At the core of this account will be the idea of storied identity, and in the course of the discussion, I hope to throw some light on the following questions. In general terms, what does it take to live truthfully with respect to some narrative? More exactly, how might that truthfulness be realized in bodily terms? And, finally, how might living truthfully with respect to a narrative contribute to the further elaboration of the narrative? Of course, in our present context, my aim is to address these questions with reference to the concerns of Christian ethics in particular—and I shall take as my focus, therefore, the kind of storied truthfulness that is embodied in the practice of neighbour love, and the question of how that truthfulness might be extended through participation in the eucharist.

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Storied Identity

Let us begin with the idea of storied identity, and its relevance for the question of truth in ethics or, in general, the question of how we are to comport ourselves in the world in practical terms. We are all familiar with the ways in which the histories of everyday objects and places and, still more clearly, people can enter into the significance these things and people and places hold for us in the present. To take the case of places as an illustration of the phenomenon, we could think of the tradition of leaving flowers at the site of a roadside accident. On one straightforward reading of this practice, in so acting, we take ourselves to be reckoning, truthfully, with the significance of a certain event, by way of our comportment at the place where the event took place. Of course, we can also reckon with the significance of an event by recalling it in place-independent ways, as when we remember it simply in thought. But by leaving flowers at the site—and through other forms of practical engagement with storied places—we take ourselves to be able to recall the event, and the human beings implicated in the event, with a special kind of seriousness. And plausibly, that is at least in part because this act of remembrance does not take the form simply of thought, but involves the whole person, in practical and bodily as well as intellectual terms.

In the background of site-based memorial practices of this kind is the idea that a place can be imbued with something of the significance of the events that once unfolded there. To put the point otherwise, we might say that, in a sense, a place can store up its past, so that its past makes a practical and attitudinal claim upon us in the present—by inviting us and perhaps even, in moral terms, requiring us to comport ourselves in a certain way when located at the site in the present, as a condition of engaging appropriately with that history. It is the capacity of a place to store up its past in this way that explains, we might suppose, the role of sites in memorial practices such as that of laying flowers at the scene of a roadside accident. It is because the history of the site does not concern simply its past, but enters into the significance of the site in the present, that my comportment at the site in the present can be assessed as more or less appropriate relative to that history—and, in turn, it is because my comportment can be so assessed that what I do at the site in the present can count as a way of reckoning, more or less seriously, more or less truthfully, with the significance of what once happened there.

This connection between the storied identity of a site and the question of how we are to conduct ourselves when located at the site is also displayed, of course, in various explicitly religious practices—perhaps most obviously, in pilgrimage. The pilgrim to, say, Lourdes is moved, I take it, not only by the thought that events of healing continue to occur at this place, but also and more fundamentally by the thought that an event of divine disclosure once happened there—from which it follows that we can bring ourselves into an appropriate practical, as well as intellectual, relationship to the significance of that event by adopting the relevant bodily comportment when located at the site in the present. In this way, the site enables the pilgrim to acknowledge this event not just in thought, but practically—so that they can to this extent participate in its significance in bodily terms.

While pilgrimage practices seem to be universal across religious traditions, they are also of course commonly the target of theological critique, as superstitious or even

idolatrous. And more generally, there can be disagreement about when, and if so how, the storied identity of a place, or thing or person, properly makes a difference to the attitudes and demeanour we are to display in our dealings with that place in the present. Sometimes, it will be unclear whether an item's history can bear this sort of significance—even when that history carries a strong normative charge. Take, for instance, the case—admittedly this is a somewhat strange and dramatic case—where I acquire a jumper, and then at a later time learn that it was worn by a murderer at the time of the murder. Let us add that there is nothing in the appearance of the jumper in the present that would serve to distinguish it from another such jumper with an entirely unremarkable history. And perhaps we should also add that neither the murderer nor murder victim bears any special connection to me. In such a case, should my attitude to the jumper change, once I have acquired this information about its past? It is not difficult to see why someone might think that any discomfort I then come to feel about wearing this jumper must be a matter of superstition—since with respect to its sensory properties in the present, this garment is, by hypothesis, indistinguishable from another that will by any measure count as a perfectly good jumper.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are cases where it seems very clear that an entity's history ought to make a difference to our assessment of its significance in the present. To take another somewhat exotic example, suppose I am given the choice between spending the remainder of my life with the individual with whom I have lived—happily—over the last twenty years or living instead with another, newly created individual who is psychophysically indistinguishable from the first. Here, it seems obvious that I should choose a life with the first of these individuals—notwithstanding the fact that the second is indistinguishable with respect to their appearance in the present, and with respect to their psychophysical response to any future state of affairs. Since these individuals are distinguishable only with regard to their past, it seems clear that it is this difference in their histories that drives our assessment of their difference in significance.

To this point, we have been exploring the idea of storied identity—where the storied identity of an entity is defined by its past—and the idea that our practical dealings with things and people and places can be assessed as more or less fitting in the present, depending on the extent to which we give due recognition thereby to their storied identities. Or to put the matter otherwise, our comportment towards an object in the present can be deemed more or less truthful, depending on the extent to which that comportment reckons with its storied significance. Here, then, is one way—a narratively grounded way—of approaching the question of truth and ethics.

Storied Identity and Neighbour Love

I want to develop these reflections a little further by turning now to a question that is of evident interest for Christian ethics in particular: namely, the question of why Christians are required to extend to other human beings the kind of practical concern that defines the ideal of neighbour love. Of course, Christians are obliged to treat other human beings as their neighbours, in the relevant sense, for the reason simply that this is commanded by Jesus. (See Mk 12:31 and parallels.) But in his account of the rationale for neighbour

love, Thomas Aquinas develops another perspective on the practice, and his account offers a further vantage point on the question of how an individual's storied identity can enter into its significance in the present. In the following passage, Aquinas is considering whether human beings ought to extend the regard of neighbour love—or what he calls here 'the friendship of charity'—to the angels. This might seem to be a somewhat specialized sort of concern, but in developing his answer Aquinas makes the same kind of conceptual move as he does when considering whether human beings are properly the object of neighbour love—and we can read his text as offering a response to both questions. He writes:

the friendship of charity [that is, neighbour love] is founded upon the everlasting happiness, in which human beings share in common with the angels. For it is written (Mt. 22:30) that 'in the resurrection ... human beings shall be as the angels of God in heaven'. It is therefore evident that the friendship of charity extends also to the angels. (ST 2a2ae 25.10, ellipsis in the original)¹

On one natural reading of this passage, Aquinas is reasoning that, together with our fellow human beings, the angels are rightly regarded as our neighbours since they will share with us in the presence of God in heaven. As we might put the point, if our relationship to other human beings, and the angels, is to track their storied identity, then we should love them as our neighbours. This example has the same structure as those we have already discussed, to the extent that the appropriateness of our practical comportment towards an individual is here being assessed by reference to their storied identity. But there is of course this difference: in the case that concerns Aquinas, it is not a person's past that is taken to define their significance in the present, but their future, and more exactly their eschatological future. Let's consider this point a little further.

Philosophical discussion of the nature of moral reasoning has commonly focused, of course, on deontological and consequentialist kinds of perspective. The first of these approaches standardly gives a role to the past: to take a simple example, if I have wronged someone, then in the normal case, I will be obliged to make amends; and this truth about our history will, to that extent, make a difference to my moral relationship to the person in the present. However, deontological forms of reasoning do not typically seek to anchor our moral relations to others in the future. In part, this is no doubt because it can be hard to know the form that will be taken by our future relations to others. And to the extent that I anticipate that I will in the future, say, harm another person, then my responsibility in the present is presumably to do what I can to ensure that I will not after all act in this way: I should understand my duty in these terms, rather than concerning myself with the question of what duties would attach to me in the present were I one day to be the source of this harm.

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote OP, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.II-II.Q25.A10.C> (accessed 8 September 2021). This translation will be used hereafter. The same position is evident in Aquinas's reply to the first objection in this same article, where he writes: 'Our neighbour is not only one who is united to us in a common species, but also one who is united to us by sharing in the blessings pertaining to everlasting life, and it is on the latter fellowship that the friendship of charity is founded.'

Consequentialist forms of moral reasoning do of course, by contrast, give a role to the future: when reasoning in consequentialist terms, my decision about which of various actions to perform is to be guided by the prospective outcome of those actions. Here my assessment of my duties in the present is tied to my assessment of the future course of events, but in such cases, my interest is in the causal relationship between present and future: to take a simple version of this general approach, my duty is to choose that action that is apt to produce, by way of the relevant causal connections, the best outcome. By contrast, while Aquinas also appeals, in the passage we have noted, to a judgement about the future, and moves from there to an assessment of what we are to do in the present, he seems to be starting from what he regards as an already established truth concerning the future—namely, the truth that ‘human beings shall be as the angels of God in heaven’—and considering which of the forms of life open to us in the present would best acknowledge that truth. On this approach, the object of taking a given practical stance in the present is not, then, to bring about a certain future state of affairs, but to give due recognition to the already established storied identity of other human beings, where that identity is defined not by reference to their past, but their eschatological future.

If we adopt Aquinas’s account of the matter, as defined in the passage we are considering, then we should say that the fundamental ethical requirement of the Christian life, namely, neighbour love, is to be grounded not in any backward-looking, deontological perspective, nor in any forward-looking, consequentialist perspective, but in the fact that our dealings with others in the present can be assessed as more or less appropriate relative to our shared eschatological future. Or as we might put the point, neighbour love stands at the core of the Christian ideal of life because this mode of comportment towards others is truthful to their eschatologically grounded, storied identity. To distinguish this case from the case where we reason in consequentialist terms, let us say that here our object is not to causally enable a certain future, or to make that future more likely, but instead to bring our lives, here and now, into alignment with a certain conception of what the future will be—or, as I shall put the point, to live congruently with the future so conceived.

We have now sketched the beginnings of a response to the first of the three questions that I posed at the outset: what does it take to live truthfully with respect to some narrative? We have considered some of the contexts in which a thing or place or person can acquire a storied identity, and the kind of claim that such identities may make upon us in the present. Across these contexts, we may be said to live truthfully with respect to a thing or person or place to the extent that our comportment with respect to that individual in the present gives due acknowledgement to their storied identity. More specifically, here following Aquinas, I have been suggesting that where Christian ethics is concerned, living truthfully in our relations to other human beings is a matter of adopting a mode of life that is congruent with our shared eschatological identity. This account of what it is, from a Christian perspective, to live truthfully in relationship to other human beings remains somewhat abstract. So I will now take a closer look at what it would take to lead a life that is aligned with a Christian conception of our storied identity.

The Role of the Body in the Christian Life

In the passage we have been considering, Aquinas speaks of neighbour love as a kind of friendship—what he calls the ‘friendship of charity’—and elsewhere he is clear that if I am to count as another person’s friend in this sense, then it is not sufficient that I should treat them with beneficence. Hence he writes: ‘neither does well-wishing suffice for friendship, for a certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend: and this well-wishing is founded on some kind of communication’ (ST 2a2ae 23.1). On this account, if I am to relate to another person as my friend, in the relevant sense, then it is not enough that I should in fact promote, or be committed to promoting, their wellbeing: I need, in addition, to be open to reciprocal relationship with them, one that involves, as Aquinas says here, ‘some kind of communication’. Let us think a little further about the form that may be taken by this openness to ‘communication’.²

Famously, Aristotle remarks of the ‘great-souled’ or ‘proud’ person that: ‘a slow step is thought proper to the proud man, a deep voice, and a level utterance; for the man who takes few things seriously is not likely to be hurried, nor the man who thinks nothing great to be excited, while a shrill voice and a rapid gait are the results of hurry and excitement’.³ On this account, the virtuous life—specifically one informed by the virtue of ‘magnanimity’—consists not simply in a commitment to acting beneficently, or to bringing about outcomes that will count as good by some relevant scale of values, but also in a certain bodily demeanour. Here, the great-souled person’s sense of self-sufficiency in their dealings with others, or sense of their own importance, shines through the inflexions of their body.⁴ And to count as ‘magnanimous’, then, it is not enough for a person to have certain attitudes: in addition, those attitudes should be manifest in their bodily comportment.

It seems plausible that living according to the virtues as Christians conceive them, that is, living truthfully with respect to the Christian conception of the storied identity of other human beings, will also involve not only a commitment to bringing about good outcomes, but also a certain style of bodily presence. We may doubt whether we can specify in general terms what this comportment amounts to with respect to, say, gait, voice and manner of speech—as Aristotle does for the proud person—but we can at least say that this embodied style of interpersonal relatedness will connote not self-sufficiency, but an alert responsiveness to the vulnerability of other human beings, along with a ready appreciation of one’s own need of their support and forbearance. In brief, the mode of bodily presence that is appropriate to the virtuous life as Christians

2. I take ‘openness to’ communication, rather than simply communication, to be at the core of neighbour love to the extent that what is required is the relevant disposition: in this life, I cannot in fact ‘communicate’ with every human being, but I can still be said to love each human being, in the relevant sense, to the extent that I am disposed to communicate with them under relevant conditions.

3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4: 3.

4. I have borrowed the expression ‘inflexions of the body’ from Raimond Gaita’s text *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 18. The account that Gaita presents here of a nun’s mode of bodily presence to the patients on a psychiatric ward provides another way of developing these themes.

conceive it will connote, we may suppose, a commitment to reciprocal relationship, or what Aquinas calls ‘communication’—rather than one-sided beneficence, or the inflated self-regard that typifies the interpersonal style of the ‘magnanimous’ person. This sort of openness will also require, of course, the right habits of perception: for instance, if I am to be alert to the needs of others, then, to put the point crudely, it should be the sagging shoulders, and tiredness, of the person before me, rather than the colour of their socks, that is salient in my perceptual field.⁵ In this respect too, the body will be drawn into the living out of the virtuous life as Christians conceive it. And typically, it seems reasonable to suppose, bodily demeanour and habits of perception will be mutually defining.

At the outset of this discussion, I suggested that the value of practices such as that of placing flowers at the site of a roadside accident consists in part in the fact that they enable a person to reckon with the significance of an event in bodily terms, that is, by virtue of adopting the requisite practical stance when located at the site—rather than acknowledging the event simply in thought. Once we recognize the importance of bodily demeanour, including the relevant habits of perception, for the practice of the virtues, then we can see how the moral life, on the Christian understanding, similarly involves the requisite bodily comportment. These two cases are also alike, I have been suggesting, to the extent that our bodily engagement with both places and persons is to be attuned to their storied identities. The notion of demeanour, in the sense just delineated, offers a way of further specifying what it is for a given mode of bodily engagement to acknowledge the significance of a site or person. In brief, a demeanour will count as appropriate not on account of its causal efficacy, but in so far as it enables the relevant attitudes to shine through the inflexions of the body. In these ways, we can understand how the Christian life reckons with the importance of other human beings not just in thought, or by way of value-promoting action, but through the adoption of a certain style of bodily presence, and perceptual engagement, one that is attuned to their storied significance. Accordingly, we may say that, from the Christian vantage point, truthfulness in our relations to others calls not only for right thought and beneficent action, but also right perception and right demeanour. In this way, the Christian life enables a person to be fully present to the significance of others, not only in thought and action, but directly, and not only instrumentally, in the responses of the body.

We have been considering how living truthfully with respect to the eschatological identity of other human beings implies living congruently with that identity, in intellectual, attitudinal, emotional and bodily terms—where the last is not just a matter of the body serving as an instrument of relevant value-prompting projects, but of our taking up the requisite bodily demeanour. We have now said at least a little in response to the first two of the three questions that I posed at the outset of this discussion: in the Christian setting, what does it take to live truthfully with respect to some narrative, and how might that truthfulness be realized in bodily terms? In our response to these questions, the two key concepts have been, respectively, *congruence* and *demeanour*. Let’s think now about how our answer to the second of these questions may be

5. For further exploration of the point, see Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 31–33.

extended a little further, by turning to the liturgical life of Christians, and specifically the eucharist.

Storied Identity and the Eucharist

If we were to ask Aquinas: ‘why should it be that neighbour love, rather than some other manner of life, counts as a fitting response to the eschatological truth that we will one day share in a deep-seated relationship of friendship with other human beings?’, his answer would presumably be that neighbour love can play this role because it is capable—even if only imperfectly—of mirroring that eschatological condition, by virtue of being itself a form of friendship. (As Aquinas puts the point, neighbour love is the ‘friendship of charity’.) The case of past friendship provides, in general terms, a parallel for the sort of case that Aquinas builds here. If I was once good friends with someone, then my present relationship to them can be deemed more or less fitting relative to this truth about our shared past—and this will be so even if the friendship has now lapsed. As we might put the point, my conduct towards the person who was formerly my friend can be assessed for appropriateness according to its tendency to honour this truth about our past. In the same way, Aquinas seems to be proposing that we can assess the appropriateness of our relations to others in the present by reference to our future, eschatological friendship. And on his account of the matter, neighbour love constitutes an appropriate acknowledgement of that shared future, by virtue of being itself a form of friendship.

In this way, neighbour love proves to be congruent with the inter-human dimension of our eschatological condition. But, of course, on the Christian account, the eschaton involves not just a perfecting of inter-human relationships but, specifically, a perfecting of those relationships that is anchored in relationship to God: to put the point in Aquinas’s terms, in the eschaton, we will enjoy a relationship of radical solidarity with other human beings by virtue of sharing with them in the fundamental good of the vision of God. And we might wonder, therefore, whether there is open to us here and now a pattern of activity that will foreshadow not simply the perfected form of inter-human relationship that will mark the eschaton, but the God-directed basis of that relationship. If there is to be such a pattern of activity, then, we might suppose that it will need to offer a proleptic enactment of the ideal of life that will be realized in the eschaton, both with respect to inter-human solidarity and with respect to God-directedness—rather as neighbour love serves as a proleptic enactment of the ideal of human community that will be realized in the eschaton by virtue of being a form of friendship.

On the traditional Christian understanding of the matter, the eucharist seems to have precisely this significance. It is of course, most simply, a memorial meal—which looks back to the Last Supper, and thence to the passion, as well as recalling the Passover. But at the same time, it is a communal meal that looks forward to the eschatological banquet, wherein human beings will enjoy a newly intimate relationship to God, the sharing in which will in turn enable a radically deepened form of inter-human solidarity. Let us think about these matters a little further, by turning to Aquinas’s treatment of some related themes.

In his account of the eucharist, Aquinas proposes that it matters that the body of Christ should be present 'in very truth' and not 'merely as in a figure or sign'—not only because this is what follows from the plain sense of Jesus' words at the Last Supper, but also because it is a mark of friendship that friends should be present to one another in bodily form. As Aquinas explains the point: 'because it is the special feature of friendship to live together with friends, as the Philosopher says (*Ethic.* ix), He promises us His bodily presence as a reward ... Yet meanwhile in our pilgrimage He does not deprive us of His bodily presence; but unites us with Himself in this sacrament through the truth of His body and blood' (ST 3a 75.1). It is notable that Aquinas appeals here once again—as in his discussion of neighbour love—to the theme of friendship. On his view, then, friendship turns out to be integral to the Christian life along several, related dimensions. First of all, when Christians extend the regard of neighbour love to other human beings, they thereby enter into a form of friendship with them, one whose appropriateness is defined by reference to the truth that we will one day, in the eschaton, share with them in a deep-seated relationship of friendship. Moreover, in the eucharist, the Christian is related to Christ as to a friend, by virtue of Christ's bodily presence in the bread and wine. And, in turn, since the individual Christian's eucharistically mediated friendship to Christ is shared with other participants in the rite, the eucharist therefore stands as a proleptic enactment of the God-directed form of human community that will be realized in perfected form at the 'heavenly banquet'. And from this final consideration, it follows that, in the eucharist, Christians can pre-figure this shared future both along the dimension of inter-human friendship, and along the dimension of friendship with God—where the latter stands as the basis for the former. We can, therefore, say that just as neighbour love offers a way of living congruently with the inter-human dimension of the eschaton, so eucharistic practice constitutes an appropriate acknowledgement of that dimension along with its God-directed ground.

As we have seen in our earlier discussion, in the practice of neighbour love, the Christian's acknowledgement of the storied identity of other human beings is actualized not simply in thought, but in the requisite demeanour of the body, and the corresponding organization of the perceptual field. And we should add that in everyday life, this sensitivity to the storied identity of others is achieved primordially in the body. That is, in the flow of life, the Christian's responsiveness to the deep identity of other human beings is realized not by, first of all, calling to mind explicitly the truth that we will one day, in the eschaton, share with them in a deep-seated relationship of friendship, and then adjusting our behaviour and attitudes accordingly—rather, in the normal case, this attunement to the storied significance of others is realized directly in the relevant bodily comportment and associated ordering of the perceptual field. To this extent, the Christian's truthful acknowledgement of the storied identity of others is enacted fundamentally in bodily terms and is only secondarily an object of reflection.

Reference to the eucharist provides a way of extending this account of the bodily character of the Christian life. On the Christian understanding of the matter, the eucharistic elements belong to a narrative arc, running from the Last Supper, to the passion, to the eucharist itself, and thence to the eschaton—where Christ is, in some relevant sense, present at each point in the arc, so holding the narrative together. In the eucharist,

Christians are able to reckon with the import of this narrative and acknowledge the storied identity of the eucharistic elements, in bodily as well as intellectual terms—by adopting the relevant comportment of the body in the presence of the consecrated bread and wine, and of course through consuming the elements. Here again, in the standard case, we may suppose, the Christian's apprehension of the relevant storied meanings is realized not by, first of all, explicitly rehearsing the relevant story, before then reading off the implications of the story for their mode of bodily comportment, before then acting on those implications. Instead, the storied identity of the bread and wine is acknowledged directly in the relevant devotional gestures.

To this point, we have been addressing the first two questions that I posed at the outset of this discussion: in the Christian context: what does it take to live truthfully with respect to some narrative, and how might that truthfulness be enacted in bodily terms? In brief, we have answered the first question by supposing that the Christian is called to live congruently with the eschatological identity of other human beings, and the second by supposing that so living requires the Christian to display the relevant inflexions of the body and organization of the perceptual field—where, in the flow of life, this attunement to the deep significance of other human beings, and of the eucharistic elements, is not the by-product of some process of reflection, but instead realized directly in the responses of the body.

Being Incorporated into the Christian Narrative

I turn now to the third of our questions, concerning the way in which our acknowledgement of a storied identity may contribute to the further development of the relevant narrative. Again, we can take as our focus Christian narratives, but let's begin with a story drawn from another source, to see how similar themes emerge in other traditions.

As we have considered, it is not only people and things, such as jumpers, that can acquire a storied identity, but also places. Some religious traditions, in effect, extend the idea that places can bear a narrative identity by supposing that the significance of whole regions of experience can be represented in storied terms. In these traditions, the stories of the gods, or in general of sacred figures, serve to epitomize various domains of human thought and action. Here is one example of the phenomenon, presented by Keith Ward in his discussion of what he calls 'primal' religions. In this text, Ward is concerned with the role of stories in Inuit religious thought in particular.

Perhaps there may be those [among the Inuit] who take literally the story of the girl [called Sedna] who began to eat her giant parents and who was cast by them beneath the sea—the fundamentalists of Inuit religion. But just as it is clear [to the practitioners of a bear cult in the northern Japanese islands] that spirits do not really eat the food offered to them, so it is quite clear that there is no such person beneath the waves who controls the movements of whales and seals ... Sedna has a particular form, in which she appears in visions. But that form has clear symbolic significance. From her dismembered body (her fingers) the edible sea-creatures are formed; her temper is shown in arctic storms; her one eye gives her penetrating vision of all human behaviour; her home at the bottom of the sea is the realm of disobedient souls...

From Ward's account, it is clear that the stories of Sedna, and Sedna herself as revealed in shamanic experience, in effect depict the basic tendencies of the sea—and accordingly, these stories can help to orient the Inuit in their practical dealings with the sea. As Ward frames the point:

The form [of Sedna] is an eidetic representation of the harsh, often arbitrary-seeming and yet life-supporting conditions of the Arctic world. What is here represented in an image is the character of the sea itself, as a power for good and harm. What the Shaman meets in the dream quest is this internalized image of the powers which bound Inuit life, the image is a mind-produced representation of the character of the ultimate powers for good and ill which surround the Inuit ... This mystery [of the limits of human existence] is represented, not by analytical laws or explanations; but by imaginative stories which seek to express what sort of reality it is that sustains and yet always threatens human existence.⁶

On this account, Sedna plays in Inuit religion the role that is played by the Forms in Platonism and kindred traditions of thought, by presenting in storied form the basic structure of the sea. We might speculate that Sedna can play this role because there is some sort of isomorphism between her character as imaged in these stories, and as disclosed in the visions of the shaman, and the patterns that define the behaviour of the sea. (Most simply, Sedna's capricious and violent fluctuations of mood map on to the truth that the sea is both unpredictable and dangerous.) In these passages, Ward is concerned with just one example of how whole regions of experience may be represented in storied terms, but evidently the Sedna narratives reflect a habit of thought that is pervasive across religious traditions. (Think, for instance, of how the stories of the Greco-Roman gods embody human experience of, say, love and war, and indeed the sea.)

We can set Ward's account of the figure of Sedna alongside our earlier discussion of the ways in which places can bear a storied significance. While stories evidently have in each of these cases an action-guiding import, there seem to be some differences in the way in which they carry off this role. The function of the Sedna narratives does not seem to be to pick out particular episodes from the sea's past, where those episodes are taken to define the sea's storied identity, so that thereafter we can live congruently with respect to that identity. The Sedna stories seem, rather, to present, as Ward suggests, the underlying essence, or Form, of the sea, an essence that holds changelessly across times. We could say that these stories identify, in the first instance, what we might call the nominal essence of the sea: that is, its fundamental character as manifested in human experience. And just as it is important to know the nominal essence of fire or water—as, say, burning and refreshing respectively—if we are to relate to them appropriately in practical terms, so it is important for the Inuit to know the Sedna stories if they are to bring themselves into an appropriate, life-sustaining relationship to the sea. It is in this way that the Sedna stories turn out to be action-orienting—that is, by affording a new insight into the behavioural propensities of the sea across time, rather than by calling

6. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 65–66.

for a mode of life that gives due acknowledgement to the normative charge of certain events in the sea's past, or projected future.

Like the Inuit to this extent, Christians also suppose that the fundamental tendencies of the world have been disclosed in storied form. On the Christian worldview, the stories of creation and eschatological fulfilment play this role, by revealing the created order's directness across the sweep of time. And the character of that directedness is of course revealed paradigmatically, for Christians, in the stories of Jesus. On the Christian perspective, these stories display the basic structure of human experience—not now in relation simply to some relatively restricted domain such as the sea, but generally. To put the point very abstractly, they reveal that structure to be one of radically restorative love. Hence, just as Sedna can be regarded not simply as an individual being but also, as Ward puts the point, an 'eidetic representation' of the sea, so Christ can be regarded, from the Christian vantage point, not simply as an individual person but as, in a sense, the Form of the material universe—or to use another long-established, philosophically and theologically freighted way of speaking, as the Logos. And Christ has, indeed, more of a claim to be considered the Form of the material universe—if we are using the notion in a broadly Platonic sense—to the extent that, on the Christian view, Jesus' story does not simply reveal the fundamental structure of the world, but constitutes that structure, on account of the transformative effects of his life, death and resurrection. The stories of Sedna and of Christ are also alike to the extent that in both cases, clearly, it is not the material order considered simply as a set of neutral phenomena that is the focus of interest, but the world as an environment that defines the possibilities for good and for ill in a human life. It is for this reason, of course, that the Sedna stories concern the sea, relationship to which is decisive for the wellbeing of Inuit communities.

There is evidently one important disanalogy here: on Ward's account of the question, it does not matter if the stories of Sedna are not literally true, whereas on the orthodox Christian perspective, it is of course important that the stories of Jesus should be in certain fundamental respects literally true. Minimally, it is important that, historically, there should have been such a figure—and that he should have died and have been, however exactly this notion is understood, resurrected. The historicity of the Jesus stories suggests that these narratives bear a significance that is to this extent like that of the stories we considered at the beginning of this discussion—while at the same time, for the reasons I have just noted, the stories of Jesus also seem to function in some respects like the Sedna stories. But these are matters we need not pursue further here. Drawing on these reflections, let's return to the case of eucharistic practice.

As we have seen, the eucharist looks back to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, while at the same time looking forward to the telos of creation, and through their comportment in the rite, Christians can give due recognition to this overarching story. Following Aquinas's comments on Christ's offer of friendship in the eucharist, we may add that in the eucharist, the Christian does not simply acknowledge the eschatological future, by way of the relevant comportment, but in some measure helps to bring it about—since by choosing to take up this offer of friendship with Christ, they commit themselves to sharing in the heavenly banquet, and thereby contribute, in this small way, to the world's eschatological fulfilment. Of course, Christians can make such a commitment by other means—say, in purely verbal terms. But for the reasons

we have been considering, participation in the eucharist offers a singularly profound way of aligning ourselves with the eschatological future—since it is a proleptic enactment of that future, with respect to both its inter-human and its God-directed character. So here we have a further way of articulating the kind of truthfulness that is at the core of the Christian life. As we have seen, Christians are committed to living congruently with the storied, eschatological identity of other human beings, by the practice of neighbour love, and through participation in the eucharist: this is one form that is taken by truthfulness in the Christian life. We can now say that, in the eucharist, the Christian can be truthful to the narrative of the world's eschatological future in a further respect: namely, by playing their part in the unfolding of that narrative.

Building on our discussion of the stories of Sedna, and the basis for speaking of Christ as the Logos, we can draw out the significance of this account a little further. When the Christian takes this further step, of not just acknowledging but, through the eucharist, helping to realize the narrative structure of creation, their actions will then both reveal and, to this extent, give effect to that structure. And if that is so, then we should say that in this rite, the life of the Christian takes on a supra-individual identity and is thereby caught up into the action of the Logos. Or to use another traditional vocabulary, we may say, on the same basis, that the Christian will then be joined to the body of Christ, so that Christ is present in the eucharistic community, and not only in the bread and wine.

These two perspectives may appear to be inconsistent: on the first, Christians are to live congruently with a narrative identity that is grounded in the already established character of the eschaton, whereas on the second, they are to contribute to the realization of the eschaton, by electing to share in that future. I take it that while these accounts of what it takes to live truthfully with respect to the Christian narrative are indeed different, they are not incompatible: the first invites us to trust that God will bring about the consummation of all things in Christ—and then asks us to act accordingly—while the second invites us to focus on the contribution that may be made to this process by our own, divinely enabled, choices. Each of these vantage points has a part to play in the Christian life, and the actions of Christians—above all in the eucharist—can bear this dual significance.

Conclusion

We have been considering the theme of truth and Christian ethics. I have suggested that in the Christian life, truthfulness takes the form of an acknowledgement of storied identities—including those of other human beings, the eucharistic elements, and the created order as a whole. I have added that this acknowledgement is realized primordially in the responses of the body, and that in the eucharist in particular, the Christian is able not simply to recognize the narrative that constitutes the order of the world, but to be incorporated into it. I close with a short passage from Erazim Kohák's book *The Embers and the Stars*, which presents, I think, a similar vision of the storied nature of things, albeit in a rather different idiom.

For the purposes of guiding our lives, of understanding and deciding, the realities that matter are never merely material but always an intersection of matter and meaning. They are as they mean, and the meaning is not secondary to their effective presence. A home is not a synonym for a

house so that we could sell one and buy another. Humans can sell a home, but they can buy only a house. A wife or husband is not a synonym for the person I live with so that humans could, at will, divorce one and substitute another, attaching the same meaning. The meaning is not attached to autonomous matter: it is a primordial trait of reality.⁷

Truthfulness, as Christians conceive it, is the enacted responsiveness to this 'primordial trait of reality'.⁸

7. Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 203.

8. I am grateful to members of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics for their most helpful comments on a draft of this paper at the Society's 2021 conference.