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STORIED IDENTITY: READING THE BIBLE EUCHARISTICALLY

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Abstract. In this paper, I explore two ways of understanding the moral and spiritual significance of stories, and in turn two ways of developing the notion of storied identity, and hence two ways of reading the Bible. I propose that these two approaches to the biblical text provide the basis for a fruitful interpretation of the Christian rite of the Eucharist, so that, to this extent, we can take the Eucharist to support these ways of drawing out the sense of the text. Accordingly, we can speak of reading the Bible eucharistically. The aim of the paper is not to substantially explain central features of the Eucharist as it has been understood in mainstream Christian teaching but, more modestly, to consider how these two ways of approaching the biblical text may help to bring some aspects of the rite, as depicted in Christian thought, into rather clearer focus, including its social dimension, and the relationship, on the Christian understanding, between the divine presence in the Incarnation and in the Eucharist.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I explore two ways of understanding the moral and spiritual significance of stories, and in turn two ways of developing the notion of storied identity, and hence two ways of reading the Bible. I propose that these two approaches to the biblical text provide the basis for a fruitful interpretation of the Christian rite of the Eucharist, so that, to this extent, we can take the Eucharist to support these ways of drawing out the sense of the text. Accordingly, we can speak of reading the Bible eucharistically. The aim of the paper is not to substantially explain central features of the Eucharist as it has been understood in mainstream Christian teaching but, more modestly, to consider how these two ways of approaching the biblical text may help to bring some aspects of the rite, as depicted in Christian thought, into rather clearer focus, including its social dimension, and the relationship, on the Christian understanding, between the divine presence in the Incarnation and in the Eucharist.

II. A FIRST APPROACH TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STORIES

Here, then, is a first way of thinking about the moral and spiritual significance of stories. Religious traditions commonly suppose that the history of a site can make a practical and attitudinal claim upon the person who is located at the place at later times. Perhaps most obviously, some such belief seems to be involved in some kinds of pilgrimage practice. For instance, the religious and spiritual importance of a site such as Lourdes seems to be tied not simply to the fact that this place continues to be associated with miracles of healing, but also and more fundamentally to the belief that an event of divine disclosure once took place here. In the background of such practices seems to be the idea that a place can be imbued with something of the significance of the events that once unfolded there, or that the history of a site can be as it were stored up, so that it can invite and perhaps even, in moral terms, require a person to acknowledge that history by adopting the relevant bodily comportment when located at the site in the present.

Of course, similar attitudes are displayed in many other contexts. Think for instance of the tradition of placing flowers at the scene of a roadside accident. This practice does not appear to be rooted in, say,

the thought that if the flowers are left at this place in particular, then it is more likely that others will realise that they are intended to recall *this* accident, namely, the one that occurred here: the significance of the practice is not fundamentally, in this respect, epistemic. Rather, the practice seems to involve the thought that the storied identity of this place, as the site of this event, invites practical acknowledgement in the present, at least on the part of those who stand in some relevant relation to the person involved in the accident — and accordingly, such a person's comportment at the site in the present can be assessed as more or less appropriate with reference to that history, so that they can be said to reckon more or less seriously, more or less truthfully, with the significance of that history by way of their practical engagement with the site in the present. Of course, we can reckon with the significance of an event in purely intellectual terms — as when we remember the event in place-independent ways — but we also seem to think that, in certain cases, it is possible to recall an event with a particular kind of seriousness when located at the site where it took place, and plausibly, this is because in this way we can address the event's significance in practical and bodily terms, rather than simply in thought.

The idea that a thing's significance, and in turn the practical demands it makes upon us, can be fixed, in some measure, by its history is of course evident not only in our relations to places, but also in our dealings with everyday material objects and, still more clearly, other people. If given the choice between sharing my life with the individual with whom I have lived — happily — over the last two decades and another individual who in psychophysical terms is indistinguishable from the first but who has been, let us suppose, newly created, I would have a compelling reason, presumably, to choose to continue to live with the first individual — despite the fact that if the second were, unknown to me, to be substituted for the first, then my experience of the world would unfold in subjective terms in precisely the way that it would have done had there been no such substitution. Here, by assumption, the only point of difference between these two individuals is their history — and it is clear, then, that in this case, it is the difference in history that grounds our judgement that these otherwise indistinguishable entities are to be assigned a very different significance.¹

Similar considerations play out in our relations to inanimate objects, although here our intuitions seem to be, in some cases anyway, less clear. Suppose for instance that you are given a choice between two physically indistinguishable jumpers, one of which, you are informed, was worn by a murderer at the time of the murder, while the other has an entirely unremarkable history. Should you prefer the second of the jumpers? From one point of view, it may seem like mere superstition to display any preference between them: after all, they are in the present empirically indistinguishable, so they would appear to satisfy equally well whatever functional requirements we may wish to associate with being a good jumper. But others may be inclined to suppose that here too, storied identity rightly makes a difference.

This is the first of the two ways of thinking about narratives that I would like to introduce. In brief, on the account we have been considering, in certain cases, the history of a thing or place or of a human body can make a practical claim upon us in the present, especially when that history carries a strong normative charge, or bears some intimate relation to us. In such cases, a person's behaviour, and their attitudes and feelings, towards the thing in the present can be assessed as more or less appropriate with respect to that history. The examples I have given suggest that while the histories of places and inanimate things, and not only of persons, may invite acknowledgement in the present, the kind of recognition we afford places and things in such cases seems to be, at least in some measure, if only indirectly, a way of addressing the significance of persons: for instance, by laying flowers at the site of a roadside accident, I can reckon with the significance of the fact that someone lost their life here. And similarly, if we think of

¹ What exactly we make of this example will depend somewhat on our theory of personal identity. For instance, given substance dualism, it will be in principle possible that the person (that is, strictly, the immaterial soul) with whom I have shared my life to this point should now be attached not to their former body, but to a newly created, empirically indistinguishable body. On this formulation of the example, I would have good reason to prefer to live out my life with this new body, as a condition of continuing to share my life with the person with whom I have lived. But here again, it is storied identity that matters: I should choose to live with the individual who shares my history, even if doing so should mean sharing my life with a different body from the one to which I have been related hitherto.

divine action as at least analogous to personal action, then through our comportment at a pilgrimage site, we can reckon with the significance this site has acquired by virtue of the role it has played as an instrument of the divine purposes. In these ways, then, being truthful to the significance of the lives of persons can invite us — and perhaps sometimes it will require us — to take up a certain practical stance in our dealings with the places and things that have been touched by the lives of those persons, so that, to this extent, non-personal entities come to be imbued with something of the significance of persons — with the result that, as we might put the point, our apprehension, and acknowledgement, of the significance of the lives of persons spills over into our relations with the material order in general.

III. A SECOND APPROACH TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STORIES

Let's turn now to a further way of understanding the moral or spiritual importance of stories. Some religious traditions in effect extend the idea that the significance of places can be presented in storied form by supposing that whole regions of experience can bear a storied identity. In the following passage, Keith Ward develops this idea by reference to the example of Sedna, a figure drawn from Inuit religious mythology. He comments:

Perhaps there may be those [among the Inuit] who take literally the story of the girl [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...²

So on Ward's account of the matter, the stories of Sedna are not, fundamentally, about an individual who inhabits the sea and directs its movements, but a way of talking about the propensities of the sea itself. As he puts 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.³

It would not be difficult to multiply examples of this kind, where the stories of some, as we would say, mythological figure serve to epitomise a certain region of life. The Greco-Roman gods of love and war, and indeed of the sea — and so on for other spheres of experience — provide one ready illustration of the same tendency of thought. But for ease of reference, let us keep our focus on the case of Sedna.

On Ward's reading, the capricious and hazardous, yet also life-sustaining, character of the sea, is imaged in the Sedna narratives, and in this sense the Sedna stories confer a storied identity upon the sea. Minimally, the thought is presumably that Sedna's traits of character map on to the behavioural tendencies of the sea, so that her unpredictable and violent mood swings correspond to the truth that the sea's behaviour can be hard to anticipate and dangerous. As Ward intimates, we might therefore say that, to this extent, the Sedna stories play for the Inuit something like the role that is played by the Forms in Platonism and kindred traditions of thought: the essence, or fundamental nature, of the sea is presented in these stories. We might add that the Sedna stories seem, in the first instance, to embody the "nominal" essence of the sea, that is, they represent the sea's tendencies as they are made manifest in human experience, rather than the intrinsic character of whatever basic principles account for its behaviour.

2 Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 65.

3 Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 65–6.

At the same time, Ward seems to be open to the possibility that while they are not to be read literally, these stories point to the ultimate source of the sea's behaviour as manifested in human experience, rather than simply offering generalisations about that behaviour. As he says, the stories play a kind of explanatory role, albeit not an analytic kind of explanatory role — and perhaps this is because the Inuit understand the fundamental source of the sea's behaviour to be, if not simply an individual person, a principle whose agency is in some way analogous to that of persons. In any event, for our purposes, there is no need to settle the question of what kind of ontological status, exactly, the Inuit assign to the storied figure of Sedna. It seems clear enough that on the Inuit view of the matter, the visionary, or shaman, encounters the essence of the Sea in the form of Sedna — and in this way is able to reckon not just with particular manifestations of the sea, but with the Sea itself. To this extent, the Sedna stories serve not just as a way of referring to individual episodes of marine behaviour, or even to general patterns of such behaviour, but to pick out, if only by way of reference to the sea's nominal essence, whatever it is that stands as the source of those patterns.

So here is a second context in which we can think about the notion of storied identity: in brief, not only is it the case that material objects, including human bodies, can acquire a storied identity on account of their history, so that their past can be presented to us in the present, in such a way as to make a practical and attitudinal claim upon us in the present; it is also true that whole regions of experience can be assigned a storied identity. And if we follow the perspective of what Ward calls “primal” religious traditions, as he expounds them anyway, then we should say that the storied personification of a relevant domain of experience will enable us not only to, in some sense, explain the phenomena that constitute this domain, but also to bring ourselves into a lived relationship to the unitary power that stands as the source of these phenomena.

In each of these ways, the storied identity of a place or region of experience can play an action-guiding role. However, there seems to be this difference in the way this effect is secured. In the first kind of case, the normative charge of certain events is, as it were, stored up in the place where those events occurred, in such a way as to make a practical and attitudinal claim upon us in the present. By contrast, in the second kind of case, stories regulate our relationship to the relevant domain of experience by revealing its nominal essence. Compare the case where a child comes to learn that fire can burn, or that water can be refreshing — and thereafter knows how to comport themselves with respect to fire in general or water in general. Similarly, the Sedna stories help to orient the Inuit in their practical dealings with the sea, by disclosing the enduring propensities of the sea, for good and for ill — rather than by recording particular episodes from the sea's past, whose normative charge calls for acknowledgement thereafter.

Having introduced two ways of developing the idea of a narratively constituted identity, I want to consider next how we might draw out the import of this idea for our reading of the biblical text — and in turn for our understanding of eucharistic practice. Here is a first connection, building on the first of the two accounts I have just presented. I am going to begin by considering how the ideal of neighbour love may be grounded in a certain reading of the Bible, before turning to the case of the Eucharist.

IV. A BIBLICALLY GROUNDED READING OF THE RATIONALE FOR NEIGHBOUR LOVE

For Christians, neighbour love is of course an ideal of life for the reason simply that it is commanded by Jesus. (See Mk 12:31 and parallels.) But in his discussion of neighbour love in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas suggests that the practices and attitudes that constitute neighbour love also count as appropriate, and indeed as required, for Christians for another kind of reason. And here he seems to appeal to the storied identity of human beings. Let's consider how he develops this case.

In the following passage, Aquinas is considering whether the angels are to be counted as our neighbours. This may seem like a somewhat recondite concern but, in general form, the response he develops here is the same as the response he offers when considering whether we are to regard other human beings as our neighbours, and we can take his account as offering an answer to both questions. For our

purposes, it is worth emphasising that, here, Aquinas grounds the ideal of neighbour love in his reading of a biblical text concerning our eschatological future. Aquinas 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.⁴

The claim developed in this passage appears to be that we are to extend the “friendship of charity” — or neighbour love — to the angels, as to our fellow human beings, for the reason that they will share with us in the “everlasting happiness” of the beatific vision. So as in the other cases we have discussed, so here, an individual’s narrative identity is taken to make a moral and practical claim upon us in the present. But notably, in this passage, this identity is grounded not in the individual’s past, but in their future, and more exactly, in their eschatological future.

We are all familiar with the kind of moral reasoning that moves from the nature of our relations to another person in the past to an account of how we ought to relate to them in the present. To take a simple example, if I have harmed someone, then, in the normal case, it will be appropriate for me to offer them an apology in the present. Aquinas’s text makes a different kind of move, by grounding our moral relations to others in the present in a truth concerning our future relationship to them. Of course, in ordinary moral reasoning, we commonly appeal to the future when considering how to act in the present, but typically we do this when reasoning in consequentialist terms. And Aquinas’s case is not, I take it, consequentialist in form: his thought is not that we should relate to other human beings (and the angels) in certain ways in the present because thereby we will promote, or raise the probability of, certain outcomes, by virtue of the relevant causal connections. That is, he is not appealing to the causal, or instrumental, efficacy of the ways of acting that we associate with neighbour love. The proposal seems, rather, to be that in relating to others, here and now, as our neighbours, we can give due acknowledgement to their storied identity — because hereby we can recognise in practical terms the truth that they will one day, in the eschatological future, stand in a certain relationship to us.

The particular future relationship that concerns Aquinas seems to be friendship: in his terms, in the eschatological future, we will share with others in the fundamental good of the beatific vision, and thereby enjoy an especially profound kind of fellowship with them. We can make ready sense of the idea that if my relationship to another human being was once one of friendship, then my relationship to that person in the present can be held accountable to this truth about our shared past — and this will be so, at least in some measure, we might suppose, even if the friendship has now lapsed. And similarly, Aquinas seems to be proposing, if my relationship to another person will one day involve the uniquely profound form of friendship that consists in sharing in the beatific vision, then my relations to that person in the present are open to assessment as more or less appropriate relative to this truth about our shared future. If we were to ask Aquinas, why is it that neighbour love counts as an appropriate way of acknowledging this truth about the storied identity of other human beings, he would say, I take it, that the pattern of life that we associate with neighbour love gives due recognition to the storied, eschatological identity of others by virtue of being itself a form of friendship: it is, as he says, “the friendship of charity”.⁵ Hence neighbour love acknowledges our eschatological future by foreshadowing that future.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 2a2ae 25. 10, ellipsis in the original. 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”.

⁵ We might wonder how this picture is supposed to work if we are not universalists about salvation, since neighbour love is meant to extend, clearly, to all human beings. This is not a question we need to consider in any detail here, but one response would run as follows: even if I should believe that not all human beings will participate in the beatific vision, I cannot be sure, presumably, that this particular individual before me now will not do so. And in that case, it seems that I ought to apply a precautionary principle, by acting on the assumption that this person will participate in the beatific vision, since it would be a more serious failing not to treat them as my neighbour when they will share in the beatific vision, than to treat them as my

In sum, on Aquinas's account, in the practice of neighbour love, we recognise the forward-looking, storied identity of other human beings in so far as we will one day, in the eschatological future, share with them in a perfected relationship of friendship; and as practised in the present, neighbour love gives due acknowledgement to this eschatological truth concerning our relations to others by regarding them already in the present, even if still imperfectly, as friends. So on this account, neighbour love constitutes a response to the forward-looking identity of other human beings in, we might say, the ethical mode: hereby we recognise the depth of our solidarity with them in the eschaton, by subjecting our relationship to them in the present to a radical ethical demand. It's worth noting how this reading of the significance of the idea of the beatific vision differs from a related approach. It might be said: shouldn't we think of the beatific vision as simply a regulative ideal? That is, shouldn't we think of it as offering simply an idealised picture of the human community, to which our existing forms of social life should, therefore, approximate, so far as they can? This proposal resembles the one that I have been developing to the extent that it takes the idea of the beatific vision to provide a pattern against which we are to measure our relations to others in the present. But there remains this difference: on the account that we have been giving — here following Aquinas, I take it — it matters that the beatific vision should be realised, since the object of neighbour love is to measure up to, or give due acknowledgement to, what is in fact the storied identity of other human beings, and not simply to approximate to some picture of what that identity might, ideally, be.

V. A NARRATIVELY GROUNDED ACCOUNT OF THE EUCHARIST

As we have seen, on Aquinas's view, our eschatological future consists not only in a perfected relationship of friendship with other human beings, but also in the vision of God, where these two states of affairs are of course connected: this future friendship runs deep because it involves a sharing in the unsurpassable good of the vision of God. If we follow Aquinas's account, as I have understood it here, then we should say that neighbour love constitutes a fitting response in the present to the first of these elements of the storied identity of other human beings — namely, the fact that we will one day share with others in a perfected relationship of friendship; and we might wonder whether there is a pattern of life open to us in the present whereby we can also give due recognition to the second element of their forward-looking storied identity — that is, to the fact that this friendship will take the particular form of a sharing in the beatific vision.

As we have seen, for Aquinas, neighbour love constitutes a fitting response to the truth that we will one day share with others in a perfected relationship of friendship for the reason that it is itself, even if only imperfectly, a form of friendship. And we might wonder, similarly, whether there is an activity open to us in the present that will allow us, in some fashion, to enact proleptically the truth that our relations to others in the eschatological future will be founded upon a sharing in the vision of God. That is, we might ask: is there a mode of relating to others, available to us in the present, that will anticipate the truth that we will one day share with them in the beatific vision or, in general, in some radically renewed mode of life with God, in rather the way that neighbour life as a way of relating to others in the present foreshadows the truth that we will one day share with them in a deep-seated relationship of friendship?

On the traditional Christian account, the Eucharist bears, I take it, precisely this significance: it is most simply, of course, a memorial meal, looking back to the Last Supper, and thence to Christ's passion, as well as recalling the Passover, but it also looks forward, to the heavenly banquet, wherein we will enjoy a newly intimate relationship to God, and thereby a new kind of solidarity with other human beings. This understanding of the proleptic significance of the rite can be grounded very directly in the biblical text. On the Christian understanding, the Last Supper looks forward to the day when Jesus will be reunited

neighbour when they will not share in the beatific vision. Why? Because in general, treating a person better than they deserve is a less serious failing, if a failing at all, than treating them worse than they deserve, since only the second involves any breach in what the person is owed.

with his disciples, where this reunion is imaged in terms of his once again sharing a meal with them. Hence in Matthew's account of the Last Supper, Jesus remarks: "I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom".⁶ And for Christians, this understanding of the proleptic significance of the Last Supper, as a meal that anticipates the heavenly banquet, which is to be shared with Christ as the incarnate God, is of course transferred to the Eucharist, which also looks forward to the day when the Christian community will be reunited with Jesus. Hence when summarising the teaching on the Eucharist that he received, Paul comments: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes".⁷

We can take another route into this question of how we are to understand the eschatological significance of the Eucharist — and the relationship between the Eucharist and the Last Supper — by turning to Aquinas's reading of Jesus's words "This is my body" and "This is my blood".⁸ In his account of the Eucharist, Aquinas maintains that it matters that the body of Christ should be present "in very truth" and not "merely as in a figure or sign" — both because this is what follows from the plain sense of Jesus's words at the Last Supper, and 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.⁹

It is notable that as in his discussion of neighbour love, so here, Aquinas appeals 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, thereby they 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, according to the passage I have just cited, 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 realised 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, or what we might again call the ethical dimension, and along the dimension of friendship with God — where the latter stands as the basis for the former.

We can say, therefore, 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. In sum, eucharistic practice, on this reading, gives due recognition to the eschatological, storied identity of other human beings, by foreshadowing both the inter-human and God-directed strands of that identity, and the relationship between them. In this way, with the help of the notion of storied identity, we can ground eucharistic practice in a certain reading of the action-guiding import of various biblical passages concerning the eschaton, and of the Last Supper treated as an anticipation of the eschaton.

One merit of this account is that it brings out very directly the significance of the Eucharist as the act of a community: on this understanding, the rite is not fundamentally a matter of Christians assembling in the same place and then, individually, engaging in an act of worship, or enjoying some new-found intimacy with God in Christ. It is, rather, inherently social, because in the Eucharist, the Christian takes up a certain practical relationship to their fellow human beings — one that gives due recognition to their

6 Mt 26: 29. See too Mk 14:25 and Lk 22:18. Here and elsewhere, I am following the New International Version translation.

7 1 Cor 11: 26.

8 See Mk 14: 22–4 and parallels.

9 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a 75. 1.

shared storied future. Following the account we have been developing, we could say that this recognition has three strands, the later of which deepen or explain the basis for the earlier: first, hereby I acknowledge the fact that others will one day stand, in the eschatological future, in a deep-seated relationship of friendship with me; secondly, I acknowledge that this friendship will be founded upon the fundamental good of our sharing with God in the “heavenly banquet”; and lastly, hereby I also acknowledge that this fundamental good will take the form of friendship with God, where that friendship can be enacted proleptically here and now by virtue of the fact that Christ is present “in very truth” in the eucharistic elements.

VI. A SECOND NARRATIVELY GROUNDED PERSPECTIVE ON THE EUCHARIST

So far, we have been exploring the notion of storied identity, and the idea that such identities may concern not only the past and the conventional future, but also the eschatological future. We have also noted how storied identities, of these various kinds, can make a practical and attitudinal demand upon us in the present, and considered how the notion of storied identity, or some closely cognate notion, seems to be in play in Aquinas’s account of the grounds for neighbour love. And lastly, we have examined how this account can be extended, arguably, to the case of the Eucharist, allowing us to read the Eucharist as a mode of relationship to other human beings that gives due recognition to our shared eschatological future. Here, then, is one way of understanding the connection between the notion of storied identity, and an associated way of reading the Bible, and the question of how to understand the significance of the Eucharist. I want to turn now, rather more briefly, to the second strand of our earlier account of the moral and practical significance of stories. Here we can take up again the idea that whole regions of experience can be assigned a storied identity, in the way that is evident in, for instance, the Inuit stories concerning the figure of Sedna.

As we have seen, on Ward’s reading, as well as providing a storied representation of the sea’s basic propensities, the Sedna narratives set the Inuit in relationship to the unitary power that explains the behaviour of the sea across times and places. And following Ward, we considered the possibility that these stories are concerned not simply with the nominal essence of the sea, but with its real essence, to the extent that they involve the idea that the agency of this unitary power is at least analogous to that of persons. In principle, these two kinds of significance can come apart. For instance, according to John Hick, while fundamental religious reality, or what he calls “the Real”, can be encountered in human experience, in ways that reflect the storied concepts that are operative in different religious traditions, we have no epistemic access to the Real “in itself”, which is radically transcendent with respect to its manifestations and, accordingly, cannot be said to be, strictly speaking, good or evil, one or many, or personal or nonpersonal.¹⁰ So as we have interpreted them here, the Sedna narratives carry, potentially, a deeper significance than religious narratives as represented by Hick.

Granted this understanding of the significance of Sedna, what sense can we make of the role she plays in ordering the lives of the Inuit in religious terms? Of course, to grasp Sedna’s religious import, we need to appreciate that, for the Inuit, the sea is not just any domain of human endeavour and experience, but the environment relationship to which defines their possibilities for wellbeing, since it is of course the source of their livelihood. So in epitomising the sea, Sedna displays, as Ward puts the point, “the character of the ultimate powers for good and ill which surround the Inuit”. Hence, we could say that Sedna provides a focus for Inuit religious practice because she both reveals and enables the fundamental tendencies of the sea, so that in their encounters with her — realised in their story-mediated experience of the sea, and in shamanic visions of Sedna herself — the Inuit are brought into relationship to the powers that bound their lives and fix what it is for a human life to be lived well.

Like the Inuit to this extent, Christians also suppose that the basic propensities or fundamental pattern of the sensory world can be recorded in storied form. In Christian thought, the biblical stories of

¹⁰ J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), chap. 14.

the creation and eschaton play this role, of course, by disclosing the directedness of the whole sweep of history. And for Christians, it is naturally, above all, the stories of Jesus that bear this significance, since his life is taken to be transparent to the character of the source of the world, revealing that character to be one of radically restorative love. Moreover, on the Christian understanding, Jesus's life, as recounted in the New Testament stories, does not simply reveal the directedness or fundamental pattern of human experience, but establishes that pattern — on account of the transformative effects of his life, death and resurrection. So in these ways, the Jesus stories present a sort of parallel for the stories of Sedna, to the extent that in each case these stories concern a figure who embodies in storied form the fundamental pattern of human experience, and at the same time generates that pattern.

Of course, there remain important differences: notably, the Sedna stories are concerned simply with one relatively limited region of experience, namely, the sea, whereas the Jesus stories are taken to reveal the deep pattern of the entire domain of human experience, and whereas, on Ward's account of the matter, the religious import of the Sedna stories does not depend on whether there is in fact an individual who lives beneath the waves and controls the movements of the sea, for Christians, it is of course important that Jesus should have existed as a historical figure, and that he should have died and have been, however exactly this notion is to be understood, resurrected.¹¹ These differences suggest that the biblical stories of Jesus have a dual significance: in some respects, they function like the stories of Sedna, in so far as they reveal the basic pattern of human experience, and in other respects they function like the stories that we considered at the beginning of this discussion, in so far as they concern events that actually occurred, and which thereby call for practical acknowledgement in the present.

Allowing that the events that comprise Jesus's life, as recorded in the Gospels, both reveal and establish the fundamental pattern of the created order, we have some reason to follow standard Christian usage by speaking of Christ as the Logos — that is, as the one who discloses authoritatively the divine purposes in creation, and the one who gives effect to those purposes, by opening up the the possibility of restored human relationship to the fundamental power that bounds human lives. Of course, the claim that Christ is the Logos has been variously understood, and the conditions of its possibility have been explored in terms of a range of conceptual vocabularies. But for our purposes, it is enough to note, I think, that in affirming that Christ is the Logos, Christians are maintaining, most fundamentally, that in the life of this individual, the ultimate character of reality, as regenerative love, is revealed — and not only revealed but realised or given effect. For Christians, the sense of Logos language is of course fixed paradigmatically in the opening lines of John's Gospel, and here it is clear that this language is intended to pick out precisely this truth that the divine plan or purpose for creation is present decisively in Christ.¹²

We have been recalling the second of our perspectives on the moral and spiritual importance of the idea of storied identity — and noting how the sea, as a region of experience, can bear a narrative identity for the Inuit, and how the creation as a whole can, similarly, bear a narrative identity for Christians, in so far as the story of Christ discloses and establishes the fundamental pattern of the material order. Given this understanding of the import of the Jesus stories, and the associated idea of Christ as the Logos, let's turn our attention once again to the Eucharist.

As we have seen, the Eucharist looks back to the Last Supper, and thence to Jesus's passion, and at the same time forward to the consummation of all things in Christ at the heavenly banquet. Accordingly, when set within the narrative framework provided by the rite, the actions of the individual Christian in

11 We should not overemphasise the first of these points of difference. Compare Ward's remark: "Religious images are products of the imaginative attempt to express the character of being, as it is experienced in human consciousness": Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 66. Sedna fits this description, we might suppose, because while she epitomises just one region of experience, the sea is crucial in determining the possibilities for Inuit wellbeing overall.

12 See René Kieffer's description of the role of Logos language in the Prologue: "The whole creation is marked by God's Word and reveals God, in opposition to later Gnostic speculations where the world is created by an evil demiurge. The Word in John is both an instrument and a model, similar to Col 1:16, 'all things have been created through him': John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible commentary* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 962. On this account, the Word "reveals God", and is also the "instrument" for the realisation of God's purposes in creation.

the Eucharist serve to disclose the narrative structure of the created order as that has been revealed in the biblical texts, including the transformation in the human condition that has been wrought by Christ's life, death and resurrection, and our eschatological future. Moreover, if we take up Aquinas's suggestion that in the Eucharist, the Christian can enact, here and now, a relationship of friendship with Christ, one that will find its fulfilment in the eschaton, then we should say that through their participation in the rite, the Christian can, in this localised way, step into the fundamental narrative that governs the creation, and play their part in its realisation. Of course, Christians can commit themselves to the realisation of the eschatological future in other ways too — for instance, by way of simple verbal profession. But if we follow Aquinas's reading of the deep import of Jesus's words "This is my body", then we should say that it is in the Eucharist above all that the Christian can take up the offer of renewed relationship with God in the eschaton. And from the Christian perspective, it is also true, for the reasons we have discussed, that participation in the Eucharist offers a singularly powerful way of aligning ourselves with the eschatological future, for here we act in a way that gives due recognition to that future, with respect to both its inter-human and God-directed dimensions. Accordingly, it is in the Eucharist above all that we can enact that future, proleptically, in the present, and thereby commit ourselves to its actuality, so far as that depends on our choices.

If all of this is so, then we can say that just as Jesus's life reveals and gives effect to the basic pattern of creation, so that he is rightly regarded as the Logos, so the actions of the Christian in the Eucharist have some claim both to reveal and, in some small measure, to realise the basic pattern of creation — so that in this localised way, we can speak of the Logos as present in those actions too. And if that is so, then we have some reason to say that Christ as the Logos is present not only, as Aquinas proposed in his discussion of Christ's offer of friendship in the Eucharist, in the consecrated bread and wine, but also in the eucharistic community, in so far as the Logos is present in the actions of each member of that community, for the reasons we have just discussed. We could make the same sort of point in a more familiar idiom, I take it, by saying that it is in the Eucharist above all that the Christian community is constituted as the body of Christ.¹³

The two perspectives on the significance of the Eucharist that we have been exploring may appear to be hard to reconcile: on the first, Christians are to live congruently with a narrative identity that is grounded in the already established truth of the heavenly banquet, whereas on the second, they are to contribute to the realisation 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 contrasting, they are not incompatible: on the Christian view, 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, on a local scale, 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 in the Eucharist can be assigned this dual significance.

VII. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this discussion, I have proposed two ways of drawing out the sense of various biblical narratives concerning our eschatological future and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: first of all, by reference to the idea that places, things and people can bear a storied identity, so that their past, and sometimes their future, can make a practical and attitudinal claim upon us in the present; and secondly, by reference to the idea that whole regions of experience can take on a storied identity, and that stories of a figure such as Sedna, in Inuit religious mythology, can thereby play a religious role, in so far as that figure reveals and effects the fundamental pattern of human experience. Drawing on the first of these accounts, I have

¹³ Hence St Paul remarks: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf": 1 Cor 10: 16–17.

suggested that through their participation in the Eucharist, Christians are able to give due recognition, in the present, to the biblical depiction of their eschatological future, and in this way to radicalise the commitment of neighbour love; and by appeal to the second account, I have sketched a way of understanding the idea that Christ is the Logos, and in turn the idea that the Logos is present in the eucharistic community. To the extent that the Eucharist is rightly assigned these two kinds of significance — as the context within which Christians can, decisively, acknowledge the eschatological future, and as the context within which, definitively, the Logos is present in the Christian community — and to the extent that a certain way of drawing out the sense of the Bible is required to support this construal of the deep import of eucharistic practice, then we can speak of a eucharistic reading of the biblical text. On this reading, the Bible's storied depiction of the past and eschatological future is not concerned simply with the past and future, but points to an expansive vision of the kind of sense that a human life can bear here and now, in the present.¹⁴

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¹⁴ My warm thanks to Eleonore Stump and Judith Wolfe for their kind invitation to contribute to this collection — and to all members of the Tantur group for their most helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

