

## Stories Revisited: Revelation, Narrative Ethnography, and the Story of Our Lives<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a theological method that facilitates a constructive dialogue between Christian theological reflection and narrative ethnography. It argues that the complex construction of the self in the crafting of personal narratives is a site of revealed, though always contingent, theological truth. By “personal narrative” I mean the stories that people tell about themselves that serve to construct and present an identity to an audience. The first section considers the relationship between history, story, and revelation, following the theology of revelation that H. Richard Niebuhr outlines in his book *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941). The second section applies the insights of the first to the personal narrative of an Atlanta-based community organizer who frames her political activism in terms of her Christian formation. The third section, finally, critiques theologies of revelation that use ethnographic research methodologies to protect “traditioned” conceptions of religious truth and practice.

### *Introduction*

Over nearly forty years, the category of narrative has been important in the efforts of some Christian theologians, particularly in the North American context, to explore the relationship between revelation, Christian tradition, and moral formation. Narrative emerged as the site of revelation in the theology of the Yale School.<sup>2</sup> This view holds that the stories comprising the Christian tradition are articulated in scripture, rehearsed in and through the practices of the

church, and pattern thereby a form of life that reflects and enacts the Creator's gracious reconciliation with creation.

In his earlier work, the theologian Stanley Hauerwas further explored narrative as the context of corporate and individual formation.<sup>3</sup> For him, Christians must "conform" the stories of their lives to the narrative of the Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> Christians learn that the multiple worldly narratives that have claimed their lives are insufficient, as they do not account internally for their own limitations and deficiencies. The narratives of the world inevitably tend towards violence. Only violence, Hauerwas argues, can finally secure deficient narratives against other deficient narratives. By contrast, the Christian narrative recognizes human brokenness and the need for forgiveness and therefore a kind of integrity that renders recourse to violence unnecessary.<sup>5</sup> The narrative integrity of the Christian tradition is fundamental to Hauerwas's well-known critique of modernity in general and the liberal polity in particular.<sup>6</sup>

I develop in this paper an alternative account of narrative and revelation that understands personal narrative to be a site not primarily of conformation but of disclosure. By "personal narrative" I mean the stories that people tell about themselves that serve to construct and present an identity to an audience. I am particularly interested here in the relationship between theological inquiry and a qualitative research method known as "narrative ethnography."<sup>7</sup> The latter is a social scientific analysis of narrative practice. Narrative ethnography examines a range of external conditions that structure the narration of the self, while also affirming that within these conditions, persons exercise limited agency in crafting personal narratives.<sup>8</sup> The limited agency that persons exercise in crafting personal narratives constitutes a kind of moral agency. Through personal narratives, persons construct themselves as moral agents who affirm or challenge the dominant narratives of race, class, gender, etc. that structure their social environment.<sup>9</sup>

I argue that the complex construction of the self in the crafting of personal narratives is a site of revealed, though always contingent, theological truth. The first section of this article considers the relationship between history, story, and revelation, following the theology of revelation that H. Richard Niebuhr develops in his book *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941).<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr argues that for Christians, God's self-disclosure happens when persons understand their experience in terms of patterns of meaning that are "directed to the God of Jesus Christ" and sustained in the traditions of the Christian community. Contrary to the view that Hauerwas proposes, these patterns, while certainly rooted in Christian traditions, are not illumined only from within the context of those traditions. Instead, revelation is always subject to continuing reformation, or, as Niebuhr calls it, "permanent revolution" (xxxiv). Reformation may come from extra-ecclesial sources and traditions of moral meaning that bring critique to bear on the narrative content of Christian traditions.

For Niebuhr, the relationship between personal narrative and Christian formation is not, in the first place, one of the conformation of personal narratives to the narratives of the Christian tradition, as it is in Hauerwas. It is rather a relationship of disclosure. God discloses God's presence in both of these narrative contexts. To be sure, the divine presence is disclosed when persons recog-

nize a pattern of meaning in the stories of their lives that resonates with the stories of the Christian community and its traditions. But any theology of revelation closed to the possibility of God disclosing Godself in ways the Christian tradition has not anticipated is, for Niebuhr, inadequate.

The second section of this paper applies the lessons of the first to the personal narrative of Wanda Jones, an Atlanta-based community organizer who frames her political activism in terms of her Christian formation.<sup>11</sup> In the story she tells about herself, Wanda works to understand her Christian formation in light of a variety of life experiences. While the fundamental normative commitments that motivate Wanda's work are rooted in and emanate from her formation in a particular Christian tradition, these commitments are understood in terms supplied by other sources of her moral experience, especially her experience of gender and race, and her training in the politics of community organizing. Wanda's personal narrative shows a complex negotiation of moral meaning through which she attempts to understand her story in light of the narrative of the Christian tradition in which she was formed. Niebuhr's theology of revelation, I argue, helpfully interprets Wanda's narrative in a way that acknowledges this complexity as necessary to the integrity of the narrative.

The third section, finally, critiques theologies of revelation that use ethnographic research methodologies to protect "traditioned" conceptions of religious truth and practice.<sup>12</sup> Many Christian practical theologians engaged in ethnographic research imagine ethnography to be useful primarily in ecclesial (or para-ecclesial) research contexts. This literature is often directed to an ecclesial audience, in which both researchers and participants are understood to be Christian. Some authors understand ethnographic research to be a tool for measuring the extent to which lived Christian practices hold up to theological scrutiny. I call this appropriation of ethnographic research methodologies a "regulative" one. The theology of revelation I propose here opens constructive theological reflection to extra-ecclesial points of view. Revelation can happen, I argue, when Christians draw on formative experiences external to their Christian formation to help them make sense of their Christian commitments.

I assume in this paper a moral anthropology and epistemology that would be problematic for theologians like Hauerwas who have critiqued modernist, social scientific analysis of human experience as fundamentally flawed.<sup>13</sup> In line with the qualitative research methodologies that inform my research, I think that persons actively construct themselves in and through personal narratives, exercising limited agency to craft their stories. Personal narratives are always constructed under the weight of intricate and ambient normative systems. These include: (1) the norms of particular audiences, communities, and institutional contexts that determine what counts as an acceptable narrative structure and sanction narrative content; (2) the conditions under which a narrative is occasioned, as well as the expectations attached to the occasion, such as the invitation of a researcher, a ritual in an institutional context, an informal meeting of friends, etc.; and (3) the precise patterns of narrative construction that govern how a story can be told in different social contexts, for example, a testimony in a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Gubrium and Holstein call these

conditions the “narrative environment” within which narratives are constructed.<sup>14</sup>

Under these conditions, persons work in intricate ways to present narratives that respond to different “interpretative needs.” Narrators select and omit storylines that are recognizable in different social contexts in order to foreground aspects of their narrative. They work with audiences to create discursive spaces in which storytelling is recognizable and appropriate. They also work in and through narratives to negotiate power relationships that structure their personal and professional relationships.<sup>15</sup> Gubrium and Holstein argue that “the storyteller, in effect, is an editor who constantly monitors, modifies, and revises themes and storylines.”<sup>16</sup>

Hauerwas worries that the modernist notion of the “sovereign self,” which posits the self’s autonomous, unconditioned moral agency, obscures the deeply problematic ways in which the self is formed in deficient narrative contexts.<sup>17</sup> I affirm that concern. But I disagree with his contention that the only genuinely faithful alternative to this problem recognizes the narratives of the Christian tradition as the exclusive context in which Christians are properly formed. I therefore disagree with the notion that no other narrative constellation can be a possible source of revealed theological meaning. Niebuhr’s work on revelation, which I discuss in the first section, illumines the ways in which revelation happens in the faithful negotiation of the many narratives that form us.

### ***I. H. Richard Niebuhr on Revelation and Revolution***

In *The Meaning of Revelation*, H. Richard Niebuhr argues that revelation is not simply the unveiling of a previously veiled being. Rather, revelation is the disclosure and acceptance of a reality that bears upon how persons value themselves and others, as well as their past, present, and future.<sup>18</sup>

Niebuhr explores several “dilemmas” that together account for the meaning of Christian faith in history (xxxiii). Chief among these, Niebuhr writes, is the relationship between “the relative and the absolute in history.” “Historical relativism,” the awareness of the historically and socially conditioned character of human knowing, has fundamentally reconfigured the experience of faith and threatens “a new agnosticism.” Niebuhr calls for the development of “a new type of critical idealism,” which both recognizes the relative character of human knowing and affirms, in a posture of faith, the existence of real, durable truths.<sup>19</sup> A “confessional” approach, he argues, eschews any posture of “self-defense” that apologetic methodologies take. Instead, Niebuhr’s theology of revelation assumes that “Christianity is ‘permanent revolution’ or *metanoia* which does not come to an end in this world, this life, or this time” (xxxiv).

Any theology of revelation, Niebuhr argues, must begin with the acknowledgement of both historical and religious relativity. First, faith is conditioned by “historical relativism,” the social and historical situation that shapes and limits how human beings know ultimate realities. Under the conditions of historical relativism, persons of faith must recognize that their assertions about “an independent reality of what is seen ... are meaningful only to those who look upon it from

the same standpoint.” But the acknowledgement of a historically conditioned faith doesn’t require Christians to give up on the faithful claim that there is such an independent reality. Niebuhr calls such a theology of revelation “objectively realistic” (11-12). Faith is, secondly, conditioned by another kind of relativity, “religious relativity.” Persons stand in and view God from the perspective of a particular faith community that shares fundamental beliefs. Theologies of revelation must therefore be “resolutely confessional” rather than apologetic: “As we begin with revelation only because we are forced to do so by our limited standpoint in history and faith so we can proceed only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view” (21).

Christians explore revelation from a particular point of view by telling the story of their life. Stories, Niebuhr argues, are an “irreplaceable and untranslatable” medium in which to give an account of experience. That the church relates its experience in the form of story is an “internal compulsion,” which “arises out of its need—since it is a living church—to say what it stands for and out of its inability to do so otherwise than by telling the story of its life” (25). The story of the church’s life recounts what has happened to it and provides the context in which to clarify why its religious and moral experience is meaningful (28).

Niebuhr argues that the story of the church’s life is an “inner history” or an “internal history.” He juxtaposes inner histories with “outer” or “external histories.” External histories are marked by several distinctive qualities. In external histories, historical data are marshaled and experienced impersonally. Characters are presented as “individuals,” unfamiliar to the storyteller. Value is measured by the “valency or strength” of its effect on subsequent events. Time is experienced serially. Societies are regarded as a collection of “atomic individuals related to each other by external bonds” (37). In internal histories, by contrast, the dominant interpretative frame relates history as it is relevant to particular persons and communities. Historical data are endowed with meaning. Characters are experienced as “personalities.” The narrative’s value is measured in terms of its “worth for selves.” Time is the “duration” of an experience in which a community shares and in response to which it interprets its experience meaningfully. Human association, finally, is construed in terms of “a community of selves” (37).

For Niebuhr, all human beings stand in both internal and external histories. “Faith and history” are “allied” because all persons commit themselves to some internal history. Commitment to any internal history always requires an act of faith (40). Just as human beings are “rational animals,” they are also “believing animals” who inevitably ascribe normative meaning to what happens to them (*ibid.*). The move from an external to an internal history, Niebuhr argues, always requires a leap of faith. In that leap, one recognizes a “center of value,” whether it is faith in one god or many, faith in the God of Jesus Christ or some other deity, faith in country, or faith in oneself and one’s work (*ibid.*).<sup>20</sup> Any faithful move to an internal history simultaneously constitutes a field of human experience that is not claimed as normative—a space, in other words, in which the possibility of external history is constituted. Internal history renders external history intelligible.

Because internal history necessarily exists in relationship to external history, Christians, Niebuhr argues, must learn to engage external histories of Christian experience responsibly. First, moral experience entails the capacity to incorporate external history in one's internal history (44). External history always fashions some truthful (though alone not sufficiently truthful) rendering of the experience of Christian communities. In order for Christians to have integrity about their own self-understanding, they must engage external histories of the church. Secondly, he argues, Christians must take external history as the history of non-Christian traditions seriously in order to understand God's work in history, since much of human experience is external to that of Christian communities. Thirdly, the church needs to engage external histories of itself and its traditions in order to encounter God more fully. The God of the Christian church is the one in whom both internal and external perspectives reside at once. To begin to know God, then, the church must understand external histories of itself. Finally, internal histories of the church pass away with those in whom they are embodied. External histories record and preserve the experiences of the Christian community. Thus, Niebuhr concludes, "knowledge of its external history remains a duty of the church" (47).

For Niebuhr, internal history is the site of revelation. Revelation "means for us that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible" (50). It is "that special occasion" that provides an "intelligible" pattern by which persons claim an internal history as meaningful (58). Such a pattern constitutes identity and warrants fellowship with those who ascribe similar meaningfulness to their experience. Revelation is a "rational pattern" because it generates understanding of experience. The "revelatory moment" is rational "because it makes the understanding of order and meaning in personal history possible" (58). But it is a soulful, rather than an intellectual, form of imaginative knowing. Revelation involves "the participation of our bodies" and is rooted in the "affections of the soul." Persons experience "joys and sorrows, fears, hopes, loves, hates, pride, humility, and anger" with others who acknowledge similar patterns of meaningfulness. Revelation happens, in other words, when "head" and "heart" work together to understand the world.

The revelatory moment discloses in acts of interpretation a continuity of past, present, and future. Revelation renders the past "intelligible." It induces the memory to recover once forgotten events as now meaningful and "appropriates" the past of a community that shares the same revelatory patterns of understanding and interpretation. Revelatory engagement with the past, Niebuhr writes, is a "moral event." It inevitably entails interpretation in service to self-understanding: "To understand such a present past is to understand one's self and, through understanding, to reconstruct" (62). To ascribe meaning to the past that in turn structures the present is "to achieve unity of self." And to claim "a human past" as one's own is "to achieve community with mankind [*sic*]." But such interpretations of the past are never fixed and final because human beings are finite and sinful. Interpretations are always subject to "permanent revolution" that "must go on throughout the whole of a life-time" because "problems of reconciliation" of the sins of the past "arise in every



present” (62).

In Christian theological perspective, revelation is significant also as an act of “divine self-disclosure” in which persons recognize themselves as selves known by God. Drawing on the personalism of Martin Buber, Niebuhr asserts that self-knowledge is made possible in the encounter between selves. “The committed self” is the self who knows herself “through another’s eyes.” She “can no longer retreat infinitely behind its action but is caught fast and held in the act of the other’s knowing of it.” The encounter between selves is identity-constitutive: in such encounters, persons “not only know but become what we are” (77).

Revelation, Niebuhr continues, is the self-disclosure of God “through our history as our knower, our author, our judge, and our only savior” (80). The self-disclosure of God is an event that happens in the recognition that one is known by God, who is both the source and the end of creaturely experience. From that moment, she understands her life to be patterned on the divine self-disclosure, a recognition that simultaneously confers knowledge of the self (80). The awareness of divine recognition demands a life lived in continuous response to God—the God now recognized as “the center of the story.” But such a life is open to the “permanent revolution” of “religious truth” and “religious behavior” (95). Revelation, in short, always entails revolution.

#### CRITIQUE AND RECOVERY

Like Hauerwas, then, Niebuhr is concerned to show that divine revelation calls human beings to lives oriented to God as the ultimate center of value. And like Hauerwas, Niebuhr regards the stories of the Christian tradition as repositories of God’s self-disclosure. But Niebuhr acknowledges more readily than Hauerwas that revelation relativizes the story of the church’s life before God. Precisely because revelation entails an affective, embodied, soulful knowledge, divine self-disclosure calls the church not only to new tellings of its story but also to new practices and behaviors in which those tellings are rehearsed and embodied.

Niebuhr’s work on revelation, I now want to argue, illumines in Christian theological perspective the complexities of personal narrative to which narrative ethnography is attentive. But some caveats are in order. First, there is a problem with Niebuhr’s understanding of objectivity and subjectivity. Niebuhr claims that all persons have an internal history (for to be a self is to claim an internal history in a posture of faith), and that the possibility of any external history is in some sense linked to the internal histories that motivate them. But he often suggests that external histories can be objective, rational, and scientific, while internal histories are “practical” or normative. I recognize that a different kind of moral experience is involved in claiming a narrative pattern as normative (Niebuhr’s internal histories). But I am also aware of the value-laden character of all narrative practice. A responsible study of narrative, in my view, will critically consider the researcher’s motivations for researching personal narratives, as well as the participant’s motivations for relating her personal narrative in certain ways. There is room in Niebuhr’s theology of revelation, I’ll

argue below, to revise his account of external and internal histories to permit such an awareness.

Secondly, Niebuhr is acutely aware throughout his corpus that patterns of moral meaning are rooted in historical, social, and cultural contexts. These patterns condition human experience, and they also condition one another. Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America*, for example, is a classic analysis of the mutual influence of distinctly American patterns of moral meaning and Christian conceptions of the Kingdom of God.<sup>21</sup> But he falls short of a "critical idealism" that is deeply aware of the conditioning of human experience in terms of interest and power.<sup>22</sup> Any theology of revelation must take these conditions into account.

Thirdly, Niebuhr argues that patterns of meaning making that reside in internal histories are susceptible to "permanent revolution." In *The Meaning of Revelation*, he considers this process of revision as it happens in the relationship between descriptive (external) and normative (internal) histories. External accounts of history illumine truths that persons who hold internal accounts must take into account. Niebuhr furthermore thinks that persons in their internal histories can have faith in multiple but discrete centers of value, an alternative that makes them "polytheists" (40-41).<sup>23</sup> But it isn't clear whether he acknowledges the possibility that persons who recognize one center of value may negotiate different internal histories to construct integrated patterns of meaning. The rest of this paper argues that Niebuhr's theology of revelation can be updated to account for these interpretative processes.

Despite these caveats, I think that Niebuhr's theology of revelation invites constructive engagement with ethnographic analyses of personal narrative. First, Niebuhr's notion of revelation as the patterned recognition of meaning complements the analytic strategies of narrative ethnography. The latter approach is concerned to show how persons craft meaning in intentional and complex ways out of experiences that are shaped by a host of ambient social conditions. Both framings, in other words, are interested in how persons relate a range of experiences through patterns of normative meaning.

Secondly, Niebuhr's notion of permanent revolution permits methods of narrative analysis that identify innovation in patterns of meaning. For Niebuhr, persons discover relatively durable (but not permanent) patterns and, in a leap of faith, embrace them as normative. Aside from his examination of the relationship between external and internal history, he doesn't query specifically the ways in which patterns of meaning change. But his acknowledgement of a permanent revolution of those patterns opens the door for theologians to consider how persons creatively re-imagine them in light of critical reflection on their experience. Permanent revolution means that traditions of meaning are central to but do not overdetermine theological reflection.

Thirdly, Niebuhr's distinction between external and internal history suggests a theological framing of the relationship between ethnographers and research participants. For Niebuhr, external and internal histories are mutually constitutive. All persons have an internal history. Any external history, therefore, reflects the work of a historian whose internal history demarcates an external space in which an external account is possible. Recall also that internal histories have a number of



important lessons to learn from external history. Indeed, moral experience, according to Niebuhr, is just the capacity to take external responses to internal history seriously and make them part of one's internal history. Thus, the revelatory patterning of meaning that happens in the context of internal history depends upon critical engagement with external history.

There is an important point here if we understand ethnographies of personal narrative as a kind of external history. As I mentioned above, an important awareness among researchers of personal narrative in sociology, anthropology, and psychology is that narratives are never told in a vacuum. The occasion, or the context in which the narrative is invited, as well as the narrator's skill in relating her personal narrative in ways that accomplish intentional presentations of the self, are, among others, important preconditions of personal narratives.<sup>24</sup> A pessimistic view might hold that the relationship between the ethnographer and participants in ethnographic research is a manipulative one—that each is simply trying to enforce a static agenda in light of the other's demands. But within a Christian theological point of view that expects God's self-disclosure, Niebuhr helps us to see that internal history and external history are mutually constitutive and that the negotiation between them occasions revelation.<sup>25</sup> Thus, ethnographers who research and write descriptive (external) accounts of moral meaning and research participants who hold those meanings as normative (as internal histories) together create a narrative space that invites a revelatory occasion for God's self-disclosure.<sup>26</sup>

In the next section, I examine one narrative from a set of interviews I conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, with Christians who are engaged in various forms of political activism. My semi-structured interview format included a set of questions intended to identify the fundamental moral commitments participants bring to their political activism and to explore their meaning.<sup>27</sup> To contextualize these commitments, I asked participants to situate them in terms of an account of their moral formation. My interview format was informed by an approach Steven Tipton calls "moral biography."<sup>28</sup> The semi-structured interview format pays particular attention to the categories and framings my participants thought were important.

## *II. Wanda Jones*

Wanda Jones is a professional community organizer for the Atlanta chapter of a national grassroots community organizing foundation. Wanda is employed by the national organization and is contracted to the Atlanta chapter. She grew up in the Midwest, in an African American Baptist church, which she describes as a large congregation that wasn't engaged in any form of political activism. It wasn't until Wanda graduated from college and entered graduate school that she began to think about the relationship between her faith and community organizing. An important moment came in a course in which a professor discussed Gandhi:

One of my professors started talking about organizing. And then he started talking about Gandhi and I really got kinda fascinated with learning about Gandhi and what he did and

how he was willing to die—you know, not just for himself but for others—and I was like wow that is awesome, you know. I knew a lot about King and, you know, we know that King followed Gandhi but I didn't know a lot about Gandhi. And for me the fact that he was driven by his faith, you know, so much that I'm—that I'm willing to die over something that I believe—and I'm like I wanna do that. And so that's how it all starts for me, just learning about Gandhi in school.<sup>29</sup>

What sparked Wanda's imagination was the notion that faith could generate commitments so deeply held that one would be willing to die for them. She mentioned this episode early in our interview. Towards the end, I asked her to flesh out the notion of being willing to die on behalf of one's commitments. Wanda explained that to be a "person of Christ" is to be "militant." She evoked St. Peter: "I'm like Peter; I will cut off your ear." The figure of St. Peter signifies for Wanda that Christians are committed to certain fundamental values that engender enthusiasm for working on behalf of those values. But commitment also comes at a "cost": "You know, there's a cost and I'm willing yeah—I'm willing to go to jail over something I believe. I'm willing to die over something I believe because you can have my body but you're not gonna have my spirit. But that's how I look at it so yeah."

After Wanda finished her graduate work, she moved back home. There she applied for a job as an organizer with a local interfaith organizing project. Seeing an add for the job in the newspaper, Wanda was intrigued: "And so I got on the internet and did some research on it, and I was like, oh my God, it's organizing and it's interfaith, it's working with congregations. So honestly this is what I said, 'I can be saved and get paid.'"

Wanda found that she had a lot to learn about community organizing when she began her new job. An important part of grassroots organizing in the model developed by Saul Alinsky and others stresses the importance of building relationships within and without the grassroots organization in order to build power.<sup>30</sup> Wanda said that her gregariousness made that piece of the job easy. The difficult part was learning how to diagnose complex social problems in order to facilitate organizing projects on a manageable scale. The technique prescribed by Alinsky and others calls for identifying relatively small-scale projects to address on a local level. Smaller successes, Wanda explained, build both morale and power. The hope is to scale up to more ambitious projects.

In her first assignment, Wanda was tasked with developing a project in a six-month period that was to culminate in a "public action"—a kind of public meeting on a particular issue. Community leaders and elected officials are invited to the action meeting and are expected to commit publicly to supporting the organization's response to the issue. Going from nothing to a public action is a long road, Wanda explained, "because when you look at the issues in preparing yourself for a public meeting you wanna cut your issues down where it can be winnable and concise, which means also a short campaign. I mean I had six months to do this. So you can't, you know, say, well hey, I'm gonna work on universal health care and have a victory in six months." Wanda and her colleagues settled on the issue of affordable dental care for poor youth in the community. At the end of six months, they had a commitment from four local dentists and the local school system to

support free dental services.

Wanda has come to see her work with community organizing efforts in the Midwest and Atlanta as part of God's calling: "I look at my work as a ministry. I feel that I'm blessed because I get paid to do something that I love. And to do something that I'm passionate about but this is truly ministry for me, and it's truly a calling. You know, like—I feel like God called me and placed me in this position." And God didn't just call Wanda *to* her work; God calls Wanda *in* her work as well. Wanda told me about the importance of listening for the voice of God. She does a lot of listening to her gut, and she understands gut feeling in terms of God's ongoing call to her. When I asked Wanda about how she understands her gut feeling, she said:

It's more of trusting what you feel inside. That first initial thought, that first initial reaction and beginning to trust it. It's sorta like that—you know being a Christian and hearing the voice of God and trusting that. You know the Bible says, you know, that my sheep know my voice, but trusting that you're hearing his voice and I'm gonna follow it, and I don't really know how you get to that point, but I know that my relationship with Christ has helped me to I guess realize that, you know, I do have an inner voice within that's speaking to me and trust that inner voice and go with that.

The voice of God sustains Wanda in her work—it encourages her, as she says, not to give up, even when she makes mistakes.

One of the things that struck me about Wanda was how much she drew on categories of meaning that come out of her formation in community organizing politics to make sense both of her Christian identity and her work as an organizer. Wanda described a week-long training for new organizers. She noted how difficult it was for her to come to terms with some of the new concepts and skills she was learning. I asked Wanda to describe which of those were the most difficult to learn. She told me it was difficult to come to terms with the power white men wield against African American people in general and African American women in particular, and the idea that interaction with powerful white men could be constructive:

Another, and I just started actually really talking about this, was the fact of that I had a fear of white males. You know, in the training they talked about this word called power and, you know, now, and then, I found out what power meant, but it's just the ability to act. But for me I could—I've never conceptualized it as the ability to act. For me it was power was evil and those who had power was white males and that's that. And white males don't like African-American people at all and they don't like African-American women and they are the enemy. That's how I looked at it.

So when I got that revelation of you know power's just the ability to act, and God is—and let me say this, it was a disconnect even with my faith because in my faith, it said that you know we have the power and ability to tread upon the enemy. You know, God has given us power and authority ... and that I had power because of who I serve; because of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has given me power. So the disconnect is how is it then that you can have power, Jesus Christ has given you power, but then you're afraid of power and only white people can have power or white males can have power. So it was a disconnect, it

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didn't really make any sense. So it was all fuzzy. And so—but when I got the revelation that one, I do have power, and my power is not limited to the four walls of the church.

The training was a time of empowerment and even conversion for Wanda. When she talked about listening to one plenary speaker, the Reverend Cheryl Rivera, Wanda's point of view changed: "And it was finally when I said, 'Oh! I get it!' I could connect everything that they have been talking about, power and self-interest, building relationships, even the issues, the agitation, you know, holding up this mirror, this is what you say but this is how you act and, you know, living out of passion and live also out of your anger. I had my *ah-ha* moment." This was a conversion to new ways of thinking about power, relationships, and self-interest. Wanda's "ah-ha moment" didn't happen in a church, and she doesn't frame it in terms of religious categories—in fact, this "revelation" constituted a "disconnect" with her Christian formation, since it didn't reconcile the claim that persons were empowered, with the understanding that empowerment was to be confined "to the four walls of the church."

While this key moment challenged Wanda's Christian identity, it also opened up new possibilities for theological reflection on the categories of power and action. I asked Wanda about the role of tactics in community organizing. Organizations like Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) are interested in building power through building relationships. That is, they want to advance their interests on the basis of relationships they build with people and organizations that have power. (Alinsky's own approach was more tactical than relational, and the spirit of his tactical savvy survives in organizations like the IAF that inherited his legacy.<sup>31</sup>) One kind of tactic is the action meeting. The meeting is scripted ahead of time, and the relevant leaders are briefed on what is going to happen. That invited public officials are expected to lend their support to the effort is not a surprise. But there is still a coercive element: an audience of voting constituents wait for their public official to commit to the program the organization has prescribed. And the not-so-subtle message is that there will be consequences if no such commitment is made.<sup>32</sup>

I asked Wanda how this use of power squares with her Christian commitments. She told me that actually the drama of the public meeting isn't as it seems; there's a trick to it: "We actually set down, we talk to them we let 'em know exactly this is what we're gonna ask you. Sometimes we have to tweak what we're gonna say to—so they'll feel a little comfortable or whatever. So it's a lot of work that's done behind the scenes and they're actually aware of what's gonna be asked of them."

While I could see her point about the relational work that is done to prepare public meetings, I still wanted to push Wanda on the coercive dimension of these meetings. I reformulated the question and asked again. She replied: "We look at the issues as an excuse to bring us into a relationship. There really was a key in the relationship because what we're really about is how do we create or build community." She went on to relate her experience of using power to her experience of oppression: "That's not how I operate because one that's not me and that's not how God created me and my first obligation is to be who I am as a child of God ... I mean we have a lot of people who

are oppressed, OK. I've been oppressed, you know, we talk about oppression. So how dare I come and then— 'cause I'm fighting against oppression, OK., I'm clear about that I'm fighting against oppression—so how dare do I come and then create oppression.” It is important to try to use power to create community in order to avoid reinscribing the very conditions that tear community apart, Wanda was saying. Still, she recognizes that instrumental power is in play in the public meeting: “But whatever—but how 'bout I have one thousand or more of their constituents standing behind me. That's power right there. [To] be able to say you know we can have you kicked out of office. You know, you will not be reelected the next time around, you know. That's power.”

Within a constellation of life experiences, which she didn't in every case choose for herself, Wanda has crafted an identity that draws on a number of different sources of her moral formation. This identity brings religious categories into conversation with categories that come out of a particular tradition of political practice, and intersects also with her experience of race and gender in America. While Wanda's “first obligation” is to her understanding of herself as a “child of God,” it is clear that the meaning of this obligation is thoroughly infused by categories that come out of grassroots organizing traditions. A sense of religious value holds a superordinate position in the constellation of meanings comprising Wanda's sense of moral obligation. But her case shows that the prioritization of values doesn't necessarily generate a sufficient interpretation of their meaning. Not one, but many sources of Wanda's moral formation furnish the terms in which she understands her deepest moral commitments. Thus, for example, one can't understand Wanda's Christian sense of being a child of God, and the moral obligations it entails, apart from notions of power and action. But the categories of power and action in this case do not emerge from any theological tradition. Instead, they emerge from a tradition of secular political practice.

Niebuhr's theology of revelation permits us to consider the theological significance of Wanda's personal narrative, both on the level of the structure of the narrative itself and in the space between her narrative and my retelling of it. First, Wanda has crafted in her personal narrative an internal history that interprets her Christian commitments in terms supplied by her experience. In a Niebuhrian theological perspective, this innovation can be read as a revelatory disclosure of God's presence in a narrative context in which Wanda's sense of herself also becomes intelligible. From Wanda's story, we learn something both about God's presence in the midst of efforts to build diverse communities that seek justice and something about Wanda as a participant in those efforts.

There is also something of theological significance happening between Wanda's narrative and my retelling of it, between the internal and external histories of Wanda's experience. I deployed an analytical strategy (described above) in my interview format designed to highlight certain elements of Wanda's story.. But the interview could have been differently structured. The narrative consequently would have been differently told. Moreover, Wanda is a good narrator of her own story (I suspect that persons who are deeply engaged in political activism usually are good narrators of their stories).<sup>33</sup> Wanda could work within the context of any interview structure to render a telling of her story that reflects her interests. In one more layer of interpretation, I've re-narrated

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the interview here, including parts that I understand to speak most directly to the set of interests and concerns motivating my work and leaving out others. If we view Wanda's personal narrative as a site of divine self-disclosure, it is so in part because of a complex cooperation—between Wanda, me, and, most importantly, God.

### ***III. Conclusion: Revelation and the Uses of Ethnography***

I want, finally, to depart from the category of narrative as a mode of ethnographic research and indicate more generally how Niebuhr's theology of revelation contributes to recent theological engagements with ethnography.

First, Niebuhr's theology of revelation is useful in illuminating the relevance of ethnographic descriptions of experience to Christian theological reflection. Consider the theological approach to ethnographic description that Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott have developed. Merging the insights of Barth and Foucault, the authors argue that, as they put it, "ethnography is dogmatics."<sup>34</sup> From Barth, the authors understand revelation to be a self-authenticating disclosure of Godself and God's commandment for human beings. They also heed Foucault's insight that all description is value-laden. Ethnography can be used to assist the task of theological reflection if it is understood as a value-laden form of description *of a particular sort*. For theologians, ethnography is value-laden because it is aware of and is motivated by the categories of Christian dogmatics. The authors suggest that, with an awareness of the particular way in which ethnographic description is value-laden in the context of systematic theology, theologians can use ethnographic methodologies to better describe and clarify these dogmatic categories through thick descriptions of experience.<sup>35</sup> In this way, ethnography can be used as a form of description that complements traditional "theoretical dogmatics."

Niebuhr's work on revelation clarifies from a theological point of view what is going on when theologians take thick descriptions of experience to be meaningful for theological reflection. On Adams and Elliott's model, ethnography appears to be simply an exercise in circularity: Theologians find what they are looking for in part because what they were looking for was already loaded into their practices of description. But Niebuhr's framing of revelation helps us understand how it is that thick descriptions of experience, in all of their messiness and complexity, become valuable to persons of faith. The revelatory—or in Adams and Elliott's characterization, value-laden—quality of description is what accounts for the movement from external to internal history, from an "objective" history to one that is valuable.

Secondly, Niebuhr's framing of revelation complicates recent theological engagements with ethnography that use it as a technique to secure Christian orthopraxis. Some theologians have worried that the use of social scientific methodologies in the analysis of ecclesial life are either hostile or at least ambiguously related to theological reflection as a normative discipline. In response, a number of authors, like Hauerwas, have turned to philosophical reflection on the virtues as a re-



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source for exploring the relationship between Christian practices and moral formation. The work of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has been an especially important resource in this regard.<sup>36</sup> Following MacIntyre, theologians have examined Christian practices as traditioned patterns of behavior, which, through repetition, form persons capable of exhibiting the distinctive virtues of the Christian life.

Virtue conceptions of religious practice make available a rich framework in which to explore moral formation. But they sometimes encourage ecclesial-centric conceptions of revelation hostile to extra-ecclesial contexts of moral formation. Revelation in these framings discloses the reality of God's reconciling work in the world in the event of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And revelation demands a faithful response, which is modeled and embodied in traditions of Christian practice. Ethnographic research methods are used in these models to verify and encourage the faithfulness of actual Christian practice to these traditions.

In their book, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (2006), John Swinton and Harriet Mowat argue, for example, that practical theology is done in light of "the script of revelation given to us in Christ and formulated historically within scripture, doctrine, and tradition, and the continuing innovative performance of the gospel as it is embodied and enacted in the life and practices of the Church as they interact with the life and practices of the world."<sup>37</sup> Unlike Niebuhr, revelation here does not entail a permanent revolution. Rather, as a "script," it is a patterning of creaturely experience, unfolded in a certain historical moment, which recasts all previous and subsequent creaturely experience in light of it. Revelation sets the standard for authentic human experience.

Swinton and Mowat usefully explore different qualitative methodologies and suggest what a theological appropriation of qualitative data might look like. But in their discussion of these methodologies, it is clear that their primary concern is to assess lived practices to ensure that the ways of being in the world that they reflect are adequately faithful to traditional norms. Ethnographic methodologies are used to regulate practice in light of standards set by revealed truth.

That is not to say that practical theology for these authors isn't critical. Rather, it is a critical reflection on practice since it deploys qualitative data to track the extent to which practices are faithful to the revealed script. The authors term this attitude toward the qualitative study of practice "critical faithfulness."<sup>38</sup> Critical faithfulness ensures that practice measures up to revealed Christian truth, and revelation itself sets up the regulatory standards against which practice is measured. The authors develop an interpretive paradigm that draws on Tillich's method of correlation but carefully holds up theology as the final authority in dialogue with other knowledges.<sup>39</sup>

With Niebuhr, I am not opposed to the notion that the norms of the Christian tradition set standards for Christians as they evaluate normative traditions they encounter in the world. But Niebuhr's theology of revelation opens traditions of Christian theological reflection and practice to continual revision. In this framing, ethnographic methodologies can be used not to regulate practice but to aid Christian theological reflection in the awareness that God works in and redeems all human experience.

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*Notes*

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**1** I wish to thank my three peer reviewers, all of whom offered thoughtful and constructive feedback. One reviewer pushed me to consider Adams and Elliott's article "Ethnography as Dogmatics," which I neglected in the original draft and which clarified my thinking about revelation. Another made helpful remarks and corrections throughout the text. A third shared encouraging remarks about the contribution that this piece makes to theological considerations of narrative and ethnography.

**2** For a helpful summary of narrative theology as a method of theological understanding, see Elaine L. Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), 78-108. See also Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

**3** More recently, Hauerwas explains that while he still holds onto the centrality of narrative in the Christian life, he has stopped theorizing about it, owing in part to his critique of narrative as it was developed in the context of Yale School theology. He thinks that "explanation" and "understanding" as modalities of human knowing reinscribe the priority of human agency over against God. Instead of explaining it, he has attempted to witness to the truth of the Christian narrative through his work: "I have thought it more important to do theology in a manner that displays the narrative form of the gospel. After all, recognition of the necessity of narration for any account of our lives does not save. God saves." Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 140.

**4** Hauerwas writes: "Our unity is constituted by our inability to tell our stories without one another's stories. It takes time to do that. Indeed, such unity is the way God's patience creates time by providing us the space to have our stories conformed to the story of Christ. Such a conformation does not obliterate our story, but rather it shapes how the story is told, so that it may contribute to the upholding of Christ's body—so that finally our stories will be joined in one mighty prayer. That our unity is so constituted is a great mystery, but here is even a greater mystery: what it means for our lives to confess that Jesus is Lord is that we, finally, are not the tellers of the story of our lives." Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 41.

**5** Hauerwas makes this argument in his essay "On Being a Texan and a Christian." He cites the example of his own formation as a Texan, a narrative context deeply rooted in a history of racism and violence: "Yet each of [the worldly stories that form people], like that of being a Texan, has the same difficulty—they cannot within their own framework account for their own limits and the tragedies that result from that. This becomes especially troublesome as one of them, as it must, takes the form of a central story that gives our life coherence. For such a story becomes indispensable to us, as without it we have no place to be. As a result, such stories must ultimately rely on violence to secure themselves against other competing stories in the world." Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 38.

**6** For Hauerwas, the Christian story is necessary for the world to have an identity: "[The] story Christians believe is not only true but saving. Indeed without that story we believe that the world could not have a story. For there is no world if there is no church. So our very ability to say 'In the beginning' is made possible because we are able to say 'We have seen the end.' That is what it means to say the universe is

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adequately understood only if it is understood eschatologically. There was a beginning because there is an end. We were not created for no purpose, but rather for the glory of God. That alone is the story of stories.” Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 146.

**7** For an overview of narrative ethnography, see Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, “Narrative Ethnography,” in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008).

**8** Gubrium and Holstein define narrative practice as “the broad term we use to encompass the content of accounts and their internal organization, as well as the communicative conditions and resources surrounding how narratives are assembled, conveyed, and received in everyday life.” *Ibid.* 247.

**9** Nancy Ammerman argues that narratives are “layered.” One layering comes from the intertwining of autobiographical stories and “public stories,” which “define the groups [that individuals] collectively constitute” (148). In the stories of individual lives, a number of stories come together (e.g., gender, race, class, etc.): “Every group, category, institution, and culture has its own ‘public narratives’ into which we fit our actions” (*Ibid.*). See Nancy T. Ammerman, “Religious Narratives in the Public Square” in *Taking Faith Seriously*, ed. Mary Jo Bane, Brent Coffin, and Richard Higgins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 146-174.

**10** H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006 [1941]). Hereafter cited in-text.

**11** In accordance with the informed consent agreements I signed with this interview participant, I use a pseudonym here and have altered as much identifying information as possible to protect Wanda’s identity.

**12** By “traditioned” here I mean that patterns of Christian belief and practice ought, on this view, to conform to some conception of the way these patterns have been understood in the context of the Christian tradition. A concern about the orthodoxy of belief and practice, in other words, motivates the regulative appeal to ethnographic methods, in this view.

**13** An important critique in this regard is John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

**14** See Gubrium and Holstein, 252ff. See also Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, “Narrative Practice and the Coherence of Personal Stories,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1998). Here the authors explore two elements of narrative construction: “narrative composition” and “narrative control.” Narrative composition has to do with the elements of narrative presentation storytellers shape in their telling, and narrative control has to do with the ambient conditions that structure how and in what ways narratives can be told.

**15** See, for example, Margaret R. Somers, “The Narrative Construction of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994); Deborah Schiffrin, “Narrative as Self-Portrait: Sociolinguistic Constructions of Identity,” *Language in Society* 25, no. 2 (1996); Steven Stanley and Michael Billig, “Dilemmas of Storytelling and Identity,” in *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society*, ed. Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004).

**16** James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*

(New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113.

**17** Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 137ff.

**18** In his essay “Value-Theory and Theology,” Niebuhr argues that value ought to be understood not as an inherent property but a relationship to human need. Human beings have a distinctive “religious need,” “the need for that which makes life worth living, which bestows meaning on life by revealing itself as the final source of life’s being and value” (115). Thus, religious experience is the experience not primarily of valuing but of being valued by that “final source.” See H. Richard Niebuhr, “Value-Theory and Theology,” in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh*, ed. Julius Seelye Bixler, Robert Lowry Calhoun, and H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93-116. See also Douglas Ottati’s discussion of Niebuhr’s value theory in his “Introduction” to *The Meaning of Revelation*, xiiff.

**19** In his later Cole Lectures (April 1961), Niebuhr defends what he calls “critical realism,” an epistemological view that affirms the fundamentally interpretative character of all human knowing: “The world we live in is always an interpreted world.” See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 23ff.

**20** Niebuhr elaborates the varieties of value centers in his *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960 [1943]).

**21** See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago and New York: Willett, Clark, 1937).

**22** Since the 1960s, a central theoretical focus in sociology and anthropology has explored the ways in which patterns of meaning are permeated by and work to reinforce regimes of power and privilege. For an account of developments in anthropology in this regard, see Sherry Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984).

**23** See also Niebuhr’s account of polytheism in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.

**24** The psychologist Dan McAdams writes: “A narrative account is performed before a particular kind of audience (the interviewer) in a particular kind of research setting. What results is not ‘the-one-and-only’ life story a person ‘has’—the ‘true’ story behind all the other performances—but it is not any old fleeting account either. Participants come to the setting with a wealth of images, metaphors, and accounts at their disposal—narrative resources that they have. They also have a great deal of implicit knowledge about the nature of interviews and research. They know that the interviewer wants something akin to the ‘truth’ as they, the narrator, understand it. They know that the interviewer wants to know who they are, how they came to be, and where their life may be going in the future. They see their role as that of the subject of a biography. People have read or seen biographies on television. They are conversant in the norms of the genre—that they should tell about how things began in their lives, for example, that they should tell how things developed as well as remained the same, that they should identify heroes and villains, high points and turning points, that their lives should seem to be going somewhere.” Dan P. McAdams, “A Psychologist without a Country, or Living Two Lives in the Same Story,” in *Narrative Identities: Psychologists Engaged in Self-Construction*, ed. George Yancy and Susan Hadley (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2005), 128-129.

**25** Niebuhr imagines a dialectical movement between internal and external history that Niebuhr imagines,

which resonates with Richard Miller's recent suggestion that social scientific methodologies can aid ethical reflection by bringing two perspectives into complementary relationship—what Miller calls “ethics near” and “ethics distant.” Ethics near is “the one that immerses the researcher in the vernacular moral vocabularies of individuals and institutions.” Ethics distant, on the other hand, “abstracts from moral particulars to craft impersonal principles or guides for individual or social criticism, policy assessment, and the like.” Like Miller, Niebuhr invites a critical interrogation of experience that doesn't view complexity with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Instead, it trusts that novel constructions of meaning through practice, and even failed attempts to construct meaning through practice, all finally disclose God's patterning of creation—that faith authorizes difficult dialectical negotiations within the space between close-by and farther away. See Richard Miller, “On Making a Cultural Turn in Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33, no. 3 (2005), 416.

**26** The model that I've developed here might be a useful way of elaborating Mary Clark Moschella's notion of “co-authoring” in the context of pastoral ethnographic practice. Moschella understands pastors who use ethnographic methodologies in their pastoral practice as co-authoring with their congregants and with God a future in which more holistic, healthier life is possible. See Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

**27** It is important to note the limitations of the interview format in exploring the commitments persons hold. Paul Lichterman, for example, argues that interviews need to be cross-examined with participant observation in order to render adequately the unacknowledged meanings persons attach to what they say about themselves. See Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community: American Activists Reinventing Commitment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 237-242.

**28** A moral biography is a semi-structured interview in which the interviewer situates the participant's normative point of view in terms of their moral formation. The moral biography seeks both to capture the terms in which a participant understands her own normative framing and also to push on places where the framing seems to be inadequate. In doing this, the interview seeks to reveal the complexity of normative viewpoints. See Steven M. Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), preface and appendices III and IV.

**29** All quotes in this section are from my interview with Wanda on May 1, 2008. In an effort to reflect Wanda's voice as accurately as possible, direct quotations preserve the language of the original transcript.

**30** Alinsky developed community organizing practices, which he describes in his two books *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals*. Ed Chambers, the current Executive Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, articulates in his book *Roots for Radicals* a modified version of Alinsky's approach to community organizing that takes seriously cultivating relationships on the grassroots level as an integral part of building power. See Saul David Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1946); and Saul David Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: a Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1971). See also Edward T. Chambers and Michael A. Cowan, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (New York: Continuum, 2003). These works usefully describe the methods and strategies deployed by organizations like the Industrial Areas Foundation.

**31** Here I rely on Chambers's discussion of the evolution of IAF politics since the period of Alinsky's leadership. See Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*.



**32** Richard Wood, in his ethnography of community organizing, *Faith in Action*, notes the uneasiness some participants in an interfaith IAF affiliate organization in California feel about the coercive use of power: “One pastor noted, ‘I just don’t like treating out elected officials that way. It just doesn’t sit right with me.’” Likewise a leader said after an action, “I can see he [action target] got mad about us only giving him two minutes to respond. I wouldn’t like that either. It doesn’t seem quite fair or Christian or something.” Wood goes on to say that while community organizations structured on the IAF model certainly have resources for reflecting on the balance between instrumental and absolute moral logics, they rarely do. When reflection happens, he observes, it is done “typically in an instrumental sense, to legitimize the issue being addressed and to mobilize the affective commitments and interpersonal solidarities of participants. Reflections at public actions—in the heat of the battle, so to speak—typically fit this instrumental mode.” Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 188.

**33** On the skillful ways in which political figures use personal narratives to do political work, see Alessandro Duranti, “Narrating the Political Self in a Campaign for U.S. Congress,” *Language in Society* 35, no. 4 (2006).

**34** See Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott, “Ethnography as Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 3 (2000).

**35** The authors argue that while both dogmatics and ethnography are forms of description, dogmatics “is the part of theology which clarifies the agenda of which parables are the illustrations” (Ibid. 363). Ethnography for Adams and Elliott expands the illustrative function of parables. Thus, dogmatics describes a systematic theological agenda, while ethnography describes dogmatics by way of “illustration.”

**36** See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). MacIntyre has been enormously influential in the work of Hauerwas as well as practical theologians such as Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass. These authors have appropriated MacIntyre’s understanding of the relationship between moral formation and practice (187ff.). For Dykstra and Bass’s engagement with MacIntyre, see Craig Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education,” in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after Macintyre*, ed. Brad J. Kallenberg Nancy Murphy, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 161-182. See also Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, The Practicing Our Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997) and Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed.(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

**37** John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 5.

**38** Ibid. 93.

**39** Ibid. See chapter three.